

Recent Research on Parenting

It has been long established that a two-parent, heterosexual, married couple provides the best parenting. Their relationship provides greater stability and consistent social benefits for the upbringing of their children, when compared to single, adoptive, co-habiting, step, divorced or any other parenting arrangement.

Successful parenting can be measured in educational achievements, behavioural problems, health and emotional well-being and, as we shall see, in numerous other measurable factors.

However, over the past ten years, numerous studies appeared to undermine the benefits of heterosexual marriage, showing there are “no differences” in the parenting outcomes of various, diverse family structures.

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In particular, gay and lesbian parenting was seen to be as successful as natural parenting. Bizarrely, some studies have shown even better results. In the British Parliamentary debate on “Equal Marriage”, medical scientist Lord Winston referred to the work of Professor Susan Golombok of Cambridge, which he said showed that “on average such children do better than children who are born in the normal way of current marriage...There is no evidence at all that children are worse off as a result of having parents who are in a gay partnership,” adding that the

evidence she had produced was “incontrovertible.”ⁱ Baroness Stowell, in summing up for the Government said: “Research shows that (*the children of same-sex couples*) do better than children of opposite-sex couples.”ⁱⁱ

Now this research is surprising! But to say such findings are incontrovertible is brave indeed. After all, science is provisional. Its discoveries are always open to rebuttal, modification, and continuing change. What was going on here that inspired such confidence?

These studies have, it seems, four major faults. Firstly, their sample sizes are too small to show any significant differences. Secondly, they are not representative samples of the population at large. Thirdly, they do not compare these alternative family structures, including lesbian and gay parenting, with stable, married, natural parenting. Fourthly, they seek only the views of the parents and not those of the children.

Sample Size

When I did a presentation of this material at a conference in London earlier this year, I had the uncomfortable experience of finding the audience unaccountably laughing (always a

stressful moment for a public speaker!). I looked up to check my power-point slides to discover the reason. This educated audience burst out laughing when they saw the sample sizes appearing on the screen behind me. They were obviously absurd! The slide showed that Golombok's 2003 study only had only 33 respondents.ⁱⁱⁱ Wainwright et al in 2006 had 44 respondents,^{iv} while Fulcher et al. in 2008 had only 18.^v

Such small samples cannot reveal statistically significant variations. They lack statistical power. And if the researchers were for any reason hoping to show that there was "no difference" between the different family structures being studied and demonstrate the "null hypothesis", a small sample is just what they needed! Here lies a very real danger of an ideological distortion of science.

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An recent opinion piece in the London Times (8th December 2014) asserted that "Scientists must not put policy before proof". Atheist Matt Ridley wrote that he was losing faith in science. "Recent examples of bias and corruption in science are bad enough. What is worse is the reluctance of scientific leaders to criticise the bad apples. Science as a philosophy is in good health; science as an institution increasingly stinks."

The president of the Royal Society was quick to respond in the correspondence columns, "Science has a powerful self-correcting mechanism, in that scientific evidence and argument are constantly reviewed, updated and challenged. That is why science is such a reliable way to generate knowledge about the natural world and brings great long-lasting benefits to us all."^{vi}

To say, therefore, with Lord Winston that anything in science is "incontrovertible" is a very rash and prejudicial judgement to make. So let us now look at this research more closely.

Recruitment

How are recruits for these parenting studies gathered? They depend on two methods: "convenience sampling" and "snowballing". Convenience sampling is carried out, for example, by putting advertisements in lesbian and gay newspapers, distributing flyers at lesbian and gay social events, emailing LGB community lists, and by researchers attending LGB events. "Snowballing" means that those who are recruited are in turn urged to recruit others among their friends.

Representation

Such an approach cannot produce a sample that can be compared to a random selection, which represents the population at large. There is no attempt to recruit from a random sample of the general population, so generalisations about the wider population cannot be

drawn. Their appeal is usually to better educated respondents, who in turn can be expected to have exercised more deliberative parenting. They are more likely to have greater wealth and a greater concern for health matters. They will be more motivated about their children's education and more aware of educational possibilities. Furthermore, they are more likely to be urban dwellers and to be white, upper/middle class.

This last point was demonstrated by the 2010 US census data. It showed that some 37% of children in lesbian households were Black or Hispanic. The large random population sample, at which we are about to look, showed a similar proportion of 43%. Yet, a "convenience" survey for the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study showed only 6%.^{vii}

Such convenience samples then are used to compare children of divorced, lesbian mothers with the children from the general population, which includes many single or divorced heterosexual mothers. They do not compare them with those who were brought up in stable, biologically intact, married families.

Parental Reporting

A further difficulty is that such small studies are liable to attract recruits who want to document their success at parenting. As one researcher admitted, "Parental self-report may be biased. In a prejudicial social climate, lesbian and gay parents may have more at stake in presenting a positive picture."^{viii}

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This bias may be reflected in the way they report on division of labour within the household, the parent-child bonding, the daily interaction patterns in the home, the different gender roles and disciplinary procedures. Such studies record the experience of parents who have children - not the experiences of the children who have parents. So the parents are asked to assess their own parenting, when the children are too young to speak for themselves. (In Golombok's 2003 study, the children were 7-year-olds.)

You cannot predict how a young child will develop. He may seem fine at seven, have an array of emotional problems at 14 and be a drug addict at 21.

Making Generalisations

Significant differences in outcome may only be noticeable when you compare large groups. If 5% become drug addicts, you may not find one in a sample of 20, but you would expect several to be revealed in a group of 500.

So looking at a small group tells you little or nothing about the general population. To get reliable data about the population at large, you need a large number of respondents selected at random from the population.

If even a large group of children brought up by homosexual parents is only compared with another group of children from families broken by separation, death or divorce, the outcomes may be all too similar with no real differences observed.

Again, the views of the parents may be quite unaware of the deeper, and possibly masked feelings, of their children.

Better Research

How then can these very real research difficulties be overcome? Only by a very large and expensive investigation! Prof. Mark Regnerus of the University of Texas had the opportunity and the funding to do just that.^{ix} He has addressed all these issues by investigating the children themselves when they had grown up. He initially screened a large, random sample of over 15,000 young adults aged 18-39 years. From this number, he performed full surveys on 2,988 of them, asking them about their upbringing and current well-being, before assigning each of them to one of eight groups.

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The largest group was of children who had spent the first 18 years of life with their intact biological families (919). The other groups were brought up by single parents (816), step-parents (394), divorced parents (116), adoptive parents (101), children who knew their mother had had a lesbian affair (163) and children who knew their father had had a homosexual affair (73). The final grouping was of those (406) children, who did not fit easily into any of the above categories (family life does indeed get quite complicated!)

The survey covered 40 outcome variables. These included marital status, welfare dependency, employment status, educational attainment, whether or not they took part in political voting, suicidal thoughts, psychotherapy, sexual identity, same-sex relationships, extra-marital affairs, STIs, sexual abuse, closeness to biological parents, physical health, happiness, depression, impulsivity, household income, current relationship quality, drug use, TV use, alcohol use, arrests, convictions for minor offences and the number of male and female sexual partners.

For all its ambition, the study suffered a number of limiting factors. The data was collected at just one point in time. There was no follow up study. The study could merely establish correlations between upbringings and outcomes, but could not assess the causes of those outcomes.

While 919 respondents spent 18 years with both their natural parents, only two respondents were found who spent a full 18 years with a mother who had a same-sex relationship. None were found who had spent 18 years with a father who had a same-sex relationship. The study was looking back at the upbringing of children, who aged 18-39 at time of the study, had been born up to 39 years previously. Presumably, over the next generation, there will be many more children brought up by gay or lesbian parents.

The Findings

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The children who fared best in this study were those brought up for 18 years by both their natural parents. They showed statistically significant, better outcomes in 25 of the 40 variables, compared with worst group, which was the children whose mother had had a lesbian relationship.

The significant measures included less welfare dependency in childhood, less welfare benefits as adults, better employment records, better educational attainments, greater household income, they were more likely to be heterosexual, they had fewer affairs, they were less likely to cohabit, less likely to have been sexually abused, had better family security, better physical health, less depression, fewer relationship problems, used less marijuana, less smoking, watched less TV, had fewer arrests and fewer convictions.

A very encouraging feature of these research findings was that adopted children were seen to be the next most successful category.

The Firestorm

This research has attracted massive opposition. Initially the paper was withdrawn in (February 2012) and submitted to an audit panel. It was republished in July 2012 having been given an “all clear” verdict. Regnerus published a rebuttal of the main criticisms in August 2012.^x

Serious concern was raised by the fact that the funding was provided by conservative bodies, the Witherspoon Institute and the Bradley Foundation. Regnerus contends that they had no role in the design or conduct of the study, no role in the analysis or interpretation of data and no role in preparation of the manuscript. Certainly, they were keen for the research to take place and had high expectations that its findings would be politically significant; that is why they funded it!

A further prominent concern was that while they found a large group, who had lived for 18 years with their natural parents, they were compared with much shorter periods for children brought up by parents who had same-sex relationships. Indeed, it is argued that it was not established whether any of the natural parents in the former group had also had same-sex experiences.

Whatever the truth about that, the single most significant conclusion is that the children brought up by parents who stayed together “come what may”, did vastly better than all the other family structures. Perhaps in the future there may be many children brought up in stable gay and lesbian households. Time alone will tell. But we can be sure that if that happens, the reality will be that all such children have been denied the possibility of being brought up by both their natural parents.

Conclusion

In the words of Mark Regnerus, “The New Family Structures Study clearly reveals that children appear most apt to succeed well as adults – on multiple counts and across a variety of domains – when they spend their entire childhood with their married mother and father.” Therefore, “the empirical claim that no notable differences exist must go.”^{xi}



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ⁱ Lord Winston. Lords Hansard text for 08 July 2013 Column 28
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/130708-0001.htm#13070811000872>

ⁱⁱ Baroness Stowell. Lords Hansard text for 08 July 2013 Column 33.
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/130708-0001.htm#13070811000872>

ⁱⁱⁱ .Golombok et al.2003.Children with lesbian parents:a community study.Developmental Psychology 39,20-33

^{iv} Wainwright J,Patterson C. 2006 *Delinquency, victimization, and substance use among adolescents with female same-sex parents*. Journal of Family Psychology 20 (3), 526-530

^v Fulcher M et al. 2008. *Individual differences in gender development: associations with parental sexual orientation, attitudes and division of labour*. *Sex Roles* 57,330-341

^{vi} Sir Paul Nurse, Letter to the Times, 10 Dec. 14

^{vii} National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study. <http://www.nllfs.org>

^{viii} Tasker F 2010 *Same-sex parenting and child development: reviewing the contribution of parental gender*. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, 35-40

^{ix} Regnerus M. *How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study*. *Social Science Research* 41 (2012) 752-770

^x Regnerus M. *Parental same-sex relationships, family instability, and subsequent life outcomes for adult children: Answering critics of the new family structures study with additional analyses*. *Social Science Research* 41 (Nov 2012) 1367-1377

^{xi} Regnerus M. *How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study*. *Social Science Research* 41 (2012) 766