

THE DIRTY SCIENCE

MARK REGNERUS

MY **FORMAL** introduction to the costs of inquiry into sensitive matters began at 6:30 Eastern time on the morning of Sunday, June 10, 2012. Seven hours earlier, the publisher of *Social Science Research* had lifted the media embargo on my article about the outcomes of adult children who report a parent's having been in a same-sex relationship and put the article in front of the pay-wall. Immediately, the first critique went live. The

Mark Regnerus is professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and president of the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture.

criticism was detailed, suggesting that it had been in development for some time. In other words, my study had been leaked. A campaign was in motion. A veteran of the debates over same-sex marriage had been right when he put it plainly to me a few days earlier: “Mark, your life is about to change.”

I will never forget what followed, though I don’t like to think about it. It’s taken me twelve years to put it into print. The saga has a lesson for us about the ideological capture of the scientific community: No one is trusted to collect and evaluate social science data on LGBTQ topics who does not assent to certain analytic decisions and the conclusions that flow from them. That’s not science, of course. That’s collusion.

Email harassment, mixed with a few genuine inquiries, commenced immediately. Eleven days after the study’s publication, a letter circulated calling for its withdrawal, citing “serious concerns.” (This letter was composed and signed before anyone had seen the data.) A mere three weeks after publication, my university informed me that I was under “inquiry” for scientific misconduct. Why? Because a pseudonymous blogger, novelist, and gay rights advocate had succeeded in intimidating my university’s administration. His tactics included stalking my wife on Facebook, filing open-records requests with my university, and group-emailing administrators and my colleagues to ask how a respectable university could account for my presence on its faculty. The administration caved. I was required to turn over my university computers, hard drives, and memory sticks, and to make my email available for scrutiny—even my personal email. If I had used an account to conduct any business related to the study, it was fair game.

The blogger persuaded my university’s research integrity officer (or scared him into thinking) that *something* had to be done. When I was informed of the inquiry, I was told that a faculty member’s being accused of scientific misconduct by a journalist was unfamiliar territory for the university. The inquiry would proceed, despite the fact that a set of peer consultants had signed off on the research methodology. For I had reached a controversial conclusion: The optimal environment for children is a stable home headed by their married mother and father. My evidence showed that children fared better in such homes than in unions marked by a parental same-sex relationship. To suggest that the opposite conclusion would have brought me under such hostile scrutiny beggars belief.

A few weeks later, I was in a small conference room, directed to answer eight questions posed by my blogging accuser. My responses were heard by a group of university administrators and several departmental chairs, whose task was to advise the provost—the university’s chief academic officer—on the case. In the end, he elected to drop the matter.

Elsewhere, efforts continued unabated. The editor of the journal that had published my article asked one of the article’s critics to oversee an “audit” of the publication process. To the editor, this seemed a protective move toward transparency. But he selected a decidedly partisan critic for the job, someone with a known history of slandering my work—a man who had called me an “ideologue” and an “asshat,” and the study itself “propaganda,” *before* being asked to audit it. The result was predictably one-sided. The auditor concluded that the study should not have been published, even as he noted that the publication process “revealed that there were no gross violations of editorial procedures.” He simply disagreed with the editor’s decision on substance. The media barrage continued.

ALL THIS TOOK place in the first six weeks after the study’s publication. By then I had ceased to discuss the study in public and was ignoring hostile emails. I instead reviewed the data so as to answer the most legitimate questions and concerns in a response-to-critics article to be published in the same journal in November 2012. It was then that I released the source data—the New Family Structures Study survey—for public scrutiny and reproducibility. The release of source data is not required of privately-funded data collection efforts, but it was the right thing to do. Unfortunately, dozens and dozens of published studies in this domain draw upon data that have never been shared outside a tight-knit network of authors. This practice may be permissible, but it’s wrong—just one of many double standards on this topic.

Two years later, in 2014, it happened again: the same questions about the same study. This time a department chair was seeking to reverse a three-person panel’s commendation of me on a post-tenure review. The college dean took the opportunity to appoint an associate dean to investigate the earlier controversy. (The dean had already approached the research integrity office to gauge its interest in a re-review. The office was not interested.) Soon enough, a forty-page report, which included a shout-out on page 33 to the blogger who had launched the first investigation, was presented

to me. The dean suggested I consider responding. I loathed being tried twice for the same “crime,” but I was committed to answering every question posed by the report. And I did. Sadly, the task swallowed most of my first semester off since 2005. The dean then washed his hands of the matter, without taking sides.

Easy for him; not so easy for me. I was now widely reputed to be a homophobe, a bigot, a conservative hack, and an all-around horrible human being. I had been accused of politicizing data by teeing up conservative funding to underwrite an attack against same-sex marriage at the Supreme Court. In truth, I hadn’t even known what an amicus brief was when I commenced this study. I am a data collector and analyst. I want to know the truth about things. That is why I can say that I love the discipline of sociology to this day, though I am sad to see what has become of it. But I learned what amicus briefs were soon enough, and I contributed to them in both same-sex marriage cases, *Windsor* and *Obergefell*, in no small part because I knew that my study, whose effects I had not anticipated, would be maligned and misrepresented by others in their own briefs.

There were further costs. I was surprised when an antagonistic letter from my department chair was read aloud in a Detroit courtroom before my testimony in the *DeBoer v. Snyder* case, a forerunner of *Obergefell v. Hodges*. I was surprised, as well, by the cavalier manner in which the judge’s decision in that case mischaracterized the testimony of all four of the defense’s expert witnesses. To lose a case is common, and I knew the odds were against us. But the judge attempted to ensure that our testimonies would compromise us going forward. In every case since then, the opposition has always attempted to tar me with that judge’s remarks.

The story concludes with a five-year delay in my promotion to full professor. That interval appeared to have changed my colleagues’ minds concerning my professional merit. (The 2017 publication of *Cheap Sex*, an exploration of mating-market dynamics that impugned the pill, pornography, and app-based dating, didn’t improve their opinions of me.) My promotion, slated to come a year early in 2013, squeaked through for 2018 only by a presidential rejection of the departmental and college votes against my candidacy.

There were glimmers of humor. There was the crestfallen Twitter foe who celebrated my reported death, only to learn that the deceased was actually an aged member of the Regnery family of

publishers. One early well-wisher wrote to congratulate me, hoping I would cash in on all the attention, write a book about it, and “make a mint.” I smiled, knowing it wouldn’t work out like that. The faster way to pecuniary gain is to keep your mouth shut.

Economics may be the dismal science, but the study of sex and gender—whether we are talking about the act itself, attraction, orientation, or now even the existence of male and female—is the dirty science. I don’t mean that every piece of evidence in the study of sexuality and gender identity is tainted, but that every part of the scientific process employed to generate evidence is touched by bias, politics, and idealism. I have had colleagues who spent a great deal of Buffett Foundation money on abortion-access research. They are congratulated and rewarded. It’s the norm—one of many such double standards. There is no value-neutrality here, no measure that does not reflect some interest, no analytic practice that does not favor a particular conclusion, no statistic that is impervious to accidental or intentional misuse, no scholar who does not know the cost of betraying the guild.

You would not know it, however, from the scientists themselves, who regularly appeal to “consensus” and talk blithely of “settled” science. For example, the “no differences” mantra concerning the children of gay and straight couples is taken as fully proven, in spite of competing evidence. My intellectual opponents know perfectly well that raw data almost always reveal face-value differences (for instance, in levels of depression), which can be disappeared or explained away by the addition of more and more “control” variables (such as the degree of household stability or the quality of the parent-child relationship). Statistics can as easily mask reality as reveal it, as the old saying about lies and statistics conveys. This is why I begin any research study with basic knowledge acquisition—learning *what is going on*—before venturing more complicated and perilous explanations that depend (perhaps entirely) on the statistical tool being employed.

NOTWITHSTANDING THE “NO differences” dogma, plenty of information documents the divergences of LGBTQ populations from statistical norms. LGBTQ populations remain consistently more physically and emotionally vulnerable, and more in need of social support, medical awareness, and political protection. This vulnerability is characterized by the social sciences as fundamentally external, attributable to “minority

stress,” the theory that stigma creates stress, the accumulation of which leads to poorer outcomes. Intrinsic or patterned behavioral explanations need never apply. I have observed little effort on the part of researchers to discover other causes of these poor outcomes. The conclusion drives the data, not the data the conclusion. Since 2019, the publication of academic papers concerning LGBTQ experiences of minority stress has exploded, growing at annual rates of 32 percent (in 2020), 25 percent (2021), 24 percent (2022), and 16 percent (2023), and comprised nearly 3,250 scholarly publications in 2024 alone. Sixteen years ago, in 2009, the theory was mentioned in fewer than fifty scholarly publications.

Minority stress is now central to woke dogma, and it’s held with passion by the field. That my peers objected to my 2012 study was a window into what was coming. I had compared “marginalized” to “dominant” groups, now an unforgivable sin. Moreover, my approach was “heteronormative,” based on assumptions that monogamous relationships and parenthood are normal behaviors. I had privileged monogamy as an outcome worthy of study and linked marriage to children—two themes that are cringeworthy today in the academy. Critics of my approach demanded a new model, a form of politicized research they call “compensatory work,” which would deliver justice to groups that had historically been “erased” or oppressed, such as LGBTQ families. Some even instructed the academy that those groups should be shielded from data analyses and interpretations that could be construed as threatening. This position is dangerous, above all because “affirming” scientists and clinicians control access to much of the data they have created, collected, analyzed, and published.

In summer 2022, the journal group *Nature*, owned by the academic media conglomerate Springer, issued new editorial ethics guidance for its massive portfolio of science journals. Traditionally, research ethics has focused on the protection of persons who participate in research, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and that their participation will not harm them. That may not be enough anymore. From the editorial:

For example, research may—inadvertently—stigmatize individuals or human groups. It may be discriminatory, racist, sexist, ableist or homophobic. It may provide justification for undermining the human rights of specific groups, simply because of their social characteristics.

Note the verb “may,” which is treacherous in social science. It is weak and vague, like “could,” “can,” and “might.” It is employed by those who lack the evidence to convince or convict. The editors aren’t worried, though:

[T]he guidance helps in considering whether it is ethically appropriate to question a social group’s right to freedom or cultural rights, above and beyond any considerations of scientific merit.

The criterion of “a social group’s right to freedom or cultural rights” is to take precedence over the empirical accuracy of research itself. This new standard denies researchers the right to discern and describe social reality except through politically acceptable lenses. No bad news is permitted without a proper explanation. What will the editors do if they have tough judgment calls to make?

We commit to using this guidance cautiously and judiciously, consulting with ethics experts and advocacy groups where needed.

Which advocacy groups? Whose ethics experts? I think you know.

If these norms stick, a study like mine may well be retracted someday. The fact that nothing is empirically wrong with it will cease to matter. Editors may modify, amend, or “correct” articles *after* publication, or may retract them on the grounds of “objectionable” content, including—as the *Nature* editorial articulates—for “be[ing] anti-LGBTQ+.” Though the guidance favors groups characterized by race or ethnicity and sexual orientation or gender identity, the master list includes other criteria, such as “national or social origin, sex, religion, political or other beliefs, age, disease, (dis)ability or socioeconomic status.” How many advocacy groups sense an opportunity here? To add a layer of irony, the new guidance claims to borrow from the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document heavily influenced by Christian thought. The irony doesn’t lessen the danger. One critic observes that the guidance “opens the door” to all manner of mischief, for “there is not much that can’t be framed as a right, a harm, or an infringement of dignity—all notoriously difficult concepts to define.” It is hard to deny the truth of this.

Unless it is mere pabulum, the new guidance—should it become the new norm—poses a terrible threat to the conduct of science. Don’t like a study

for the way it makes your favored group appear? Appeal to the new guidance. Maybe the measures weren't optimal. Maybe the authors p-hacked their way through the data, analyzing it in different ways and with alternative procedures until the desired outcome was obtained. Complain to the editors. After all, who doesn't feel stigma sometimes? Everybody is a minority in some context. (I should know.) The whole thing is madness, threatening to inject a bigger dose of politics into the conduct of science than was already present.

ALL THIS COMES amid an explosion in peer-reviewed research on gender and sexuality. At least one new peer-reviewed journal in this domain has been launched every year for the past thirty years, on average. The supply of scholarly journals is in part a function of demand—a response to the surge in popularity of sex-and-gender research. But it is also the case that

where opportunities for publication are plentiful, the path to publication is easier, and the overall quality of published work declines. And as the publication of affirming content gets easier by the year, the publication of research that challenges LGBTQ paradigms—never easy—gets ever harder.

I don't have a chip on my shoulder. Nor would I relish political payback with a new administration. I just want to know the truth, complex though it may be and painful to articulate. I'm at peace, perhaps because I managed to retain my job without issuing apologies or being silenced. Or perhaps because a measure of struggle and marginalization fosters creativity and is good for the soul. Or because I believe that, even if freedom of speech is someday to be found only around the kitchen table, others have gone before us. They show that regimes, political or intellectual, cannot last. The appreciation of reality must return in time, **F** if only we have fortitude.



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