

Small Indignities and Large Empirical Mistakes: Another View on So-Called “Research” into Gay Parenting

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By Tey Meadow

Ana Samuel’s September 25th opinion piece in the Daily Princetonian, “Understanding gay parenting: research or romanticism” contains an awful lot of politics, and very little empiricism. There are literally dozens of published critiques of the Regnerus study, from those that suggest he didn’t really capture gay parents at all, to others that argue he was motivated by purely political, rather than intellectual, goals.

Let’s look at the facts: Regnerus didn’t study “gay parents.” He amassed a sample of children who answered in the affirmative to a question that asked them if their mother or father had any “same sex relationship” while they were growing up. This is hardly the same population as LGBT people who deliberately parent, either alone or together with their partners. What he seemed to capture, instead, was a hodgepodge group of families, many of whom had some sort of relationship transition, which could include divorce, separation, affairs, or anything else we can imagine. Most of them, it seems, never even cohabitated with their same-sex partner.

This is an apples-to-oranges comparison: On one side, we have always-married, heterosexual co-parents; and on the other, we have a group of families that included some form of same-sex “relationship.” Since sociologists already know that family instability of any kind is predictive of various childhood struggles, this study was destined, even *designed*, to find worse outcomes among that second group. How can we square these findings with all the many studies showing no differences in the quality of life of children raised by gay and lesbian parents? Or those that might even demonstrate that the sort of deliberative parenting processes undertaken by gay men and lesbians may, in some cases, even produce *better* outcomes for children, since it’s rare for same-sex couples to accidentally procreate? Finally, what of the studies that show that, actually, it’s the discrimination and disregard LGBT families face from others that most threatens the self-esteem and emotional security of young people?

None of this is terrifically surprising, when we examine the funding streams that enabled this work to be done. Ana Samuel is a postdoctoral fellow at the Witherspoon Institute, one of the study’s major funders, an organization that shares its leaders with some of the most trenchant, powerful, anti-gay political groups in the country. She neglected to tell you that her employers make it their business to engage in public political campaigns against LGBT people and their families. This sounds less like the “descriptive social science” Samuel prescribes than it does political and moral posturing.

I’ll avoid making that same mistake. I’ll tell you openly that I’m a sociologist *and* a gay parent. After spending solidly 15% of my annual income on lawyer’s fees this summer, I subjected myself to the humiliating process of having my biometrics collected by the

U.S. Government, sustaining a full background check and appearing in court to testify under oath about my career, family life, and (yes, it's true) sexual history. Today, I will stand before a judge in family court in Trenton, New Jersey, to legally adopt the child I wanted, planned, conceived, and presently wake up multiple times each night to hold, feed and console.

The lack of legal and social protections for LGBT families, and, indeed, *all* families that fall outside the conventional heterosexual, dyadic, always-married standard Ms. Samuel is touting is a social problem about which we should *all* be concerned. If what we want is better child outcomes, and more solid and enduring connections between parents and children, our energies would be better spent studying different questions. Questions like: How do we ensure that students succeed in school when their parents must work double-shifts simply to support them? How can we ensure that children receive the medical care, nutrition and social supports they need to thrive? How can we, as a culture, nurture people through difficult life transitions, like divorce, so they can keep their relationships to their children intact? These are the inquiries that promise some hope of improving the lives of children.

I'm going to ignore Ms. Samuel's strange, irrelevant and utterly revealing conjectures about the sexual habits of gay men. Much like her close reading of the TV sitcom "The New Normal," such depictions have more to do with entertainment than they do with the realities of LGBT people's families and parenting practices. I'm also not going to fall for her baiting call to argue that LGBT people are "just like" heterosexuals, that we arrange our romantic lives, households and parenting practices in precisely the same ways straight people do. I'm sure some of us do, and others of us don't. That's hardly the point. The bottom line is that I'd prefer Ms. Samuel and her colleagues keep their "normative judgments" out of my personal life altogether.

Tey Meadow is the Cotsen-LGBT Postdoctoral Fellow in the Society of Fellows at Princeton University and a lecturer in the Departments of Sociology and Gender & Sexuality Studies. She is also the devoted, enthusiastic and capable parent of a beautiful, healthy 3 month-old baby.