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Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Measurement, methods, and divergent patterns: Reassessing the effects of same-sex parents [☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 October 2013

Revised 24 March 2015

Accepted 8 April 2015

Available online 23 April 2015

Keywords:

Children

Family structure

Methodology

Same-sex parenting

Sexuality

ABSTRACT

Scholars have noted that survey analysis of small subsamples—for example, same-sex parent families—is sensitive to researchers' analytical decisions, and even small differences in coding can profoundly shape empirical patterns. As an illustration, we reassess the findings of a recent article by Regnerus regarding the implications of being raised by gay and lesbian parents. Taking a close look at the New Family Structures Study (NFSS), we demonstrate the potential for misclassifying a non-negligible number of respondents as having been raised by parents who had a same-sex romantic relationship. We assess the implications of these possible misclassifications, along with other methodological considerations, by reanalyzing the NFSS in seven steps. The reanalysis offers evidence that the empirical patterns showcased in the original Regnerus article are fragile—so fragile that they appear largely a function of these possible misclassifications and other methodological choices. Our replication and reanalysis of Regnerus's study offer a cautionary illustration of the importance of double checking and critically assessing the implications of measurement and other methodological decisions in our and others' research.

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1. Introduction

Research communities in the social sciences have long been aware that methodological decisions can potentially affect the inferences of survey research (Firebaugh, 2008). This threat to the validity of research inferences is particularly challenging for studies that focus on a very small group of interest, such as some racial minority groups, atypical families, and same-sex couples (Cheng and Powell, 2005, 2011). In such research, even a tiny percentage of measurement errors for the small subsamples could powerfully distort patterns from the surveys, and other methodological choices can similarly affect empirical results. When research findings from these analyses are used as policy guidelines, the threat goes even beyond scientific communities. It therefore is incumbent for scholars to critically assess the implications of these decisions in their own work as well as that of others.

In this paper, we use a recent article by Regnerus (2012a) in *Social Science Research* as an example to illustrate these points. In "How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study," Regnerus (2012a) introduces the New Family Structures Study (NFSS) and, with these data,

[☆] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2013 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association. We appreciate the suggestions of Kathryn Lively and Michael Yacavone.

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compares the outcome profiles of 236 adult children whose parents reportedly had a same-sex romantic relationship with the profiles of those who grew up in other family types, including “intact biological families,” stepfamilies, and single-parent families. Examining 40 social, emotional, and relational outcomes, Regnerus concludes that adult children of same-sex parents generally fare less well than those from intact two-biological-parent families.

It is an understatement to describe this article as eliciting a great deal of interest. This is one of the most visible and controversial articles to appear in this journal—or, more broadly, social science journals—in recent history. It has been vigorously defended and critiqued in this journal (Amato, 2012; Barrett, 2012; Eggebeen, 2012; Gates et al., 2012; Schumm, 2012), other academic journals and forums (Perrin et al., 2013), the courts (Brief of Amicus Curiae American Sociological Association, 2013; Brief of Amici Curiae Social Science Professors, 2014), and the public sphere (Davidson, 2012; Gallagher, 2012; Luscombe, 2012). Defenders often point to what they see as the high quality of the data, which, they argue, “deserve[s] to be considered the gold standard in this field” (Sprigg, 2012). Osborne (2012), identified as “key collaborator” on the NFSS website, praises the study for being “one of the most comprehensive and rigorous studies that has been conducted in this field to date” (p. 779). In contrast, critics call into question, among other things, the study design, the quality of the data, review process, and even the motives of the author and funders of this project (Cohen, 2013; Perrin et al., 2013; Sherkat, 2012). Both sides of the debate often characterize the other side as non-scientific and overly political.

We take a different approach in evaluating the NFSS and the findings reported by Regnerus. We agree with Smith (2012) who, in challenging critics of Regnerus, contends that “science already has its own ways to deal with controversial research results. Studies should be replicated. Data sets should be made public and reanalyzed. . . Eventually the truth comes out. By those means, Regnerus might be shown to have been wrong or perhaps be vindicated. That is how science is supposed to work.” To his credit, Regnerus has made his data publicly available and, in fact, notes that a goal of his original article is to “serve[s] as a call” (2012a, p. 766) to analyze NFSS. We have accepted this invitation to reanalyze these data. In this article, we report on the results of this reanalysis.²

The fact that Regnerus’s findings are so markedly different from those reported by previous studies suggests that scholars and policymakers should more carefully scrutinize his analysis before reflexively accepting—or rejecting—its conclusion. To explain his different findings, Regnerus suggests that, “[t]he answer lies in part with the small or nonprobability samples so often relied upon in nearly all previous studies—they have very likely underestimated the number and magnitude of real differences between the children of lesbian mothers (and to a lesser extent, gay fathers) and those raised in other types of households” (2012a, p. 756).

We are hesitant to accept this explanation without further examination of the data because, as others have noted in their reanalyses of other national surveys (Bearman and Parigi, 2004; Fischer, 2009), findings from empirical analyses often are also affected by other factors, including the conceptualization and operationalization of key concepts and other methodological decisions made by the researcher in the research process (Firebaugh, 2008). These considerations are directly relevant to the comparison of same-sex parent families and other family forms because analyses of small-population groups using large survey data are particularly sensitive to different analytical decisions (Black et al., 2007; Cheng and Powell, 2005, 2011; Gates and Steinberger, 2009; O’Connell et al., 2010). In the case of Regnerus’s study, the NFSS data are new, the measures of family types and respondents with same-sex parents are somewhat novel and potentially problematic, and the analytical decisions made by Regnerus arguably are not entirely consistent with the general practices in the field. In revisiting the Regnerus article and reanalyzing the NFSS, we ask one fundamental question: *To what extent are the patterns reported by Regnerus attributable to the conceptualization and operationalization of family types—in particular, gay/lesbian/bisexual families—and other analytical decisions?*

Our empirical reexamination of Regnerus’s analysis is designed to answer this question. More broadly, it underscores the importance of, in the words of Firebaugh (2008), “build[ing] reality checks into your research” (p. 64)—in particular, “internal reality checks” (p. 65), checks on “dubious values and incomplete data” (p. 65), and checks on “consistency in conceptualization and measurement” (p. 69)—and the serious implications of not attending to these concerns (Bearman and Parigi, 2004; Cheng and Powell, 2011; Fischer, 2009). In addition, it highlights the general challenges that social scientists continue to face in our examination of same-sex parent households and other emerging family forms using nationally representative datasets (Cheng and Powell, 2005).

Below, we first discuss the NFSS and Regnerus’s measures of family types using the data, and then highlight the difficulties in using the NFSS to accurately distinguish between family types, using adoptive households and intact biological families as illustrations. We then discuss the challenges in accurately identifying same-sex families. We follow this discussion with a closer look at the NFSS survey and demonstrate the potential for misclassifying a non-negligible number of respondents as having been raised by parents who had a same-sex romantic relationship. Finally, we assess the cumulative implications of these possible classification errors and other methodological considerations from various stages of the research process by reanalyzing the NFSS in seven steps.³

These reanalyses provide a “reality check” regarding the conclusions from the original Regnerus study. The patterns from these reanalyses offer evidence of the fragility of these conclusions—so fragile, in fact, that they are due primarily to the methodological choices made by Regnerus. Or to put it another way, when equally plausible and, in our view, preferred

² In the spirit of full disclosure: one of the authors declined an invitation by Regnerus to participate as a paid consultant on the NFSS sampling strategy and measurement.

³ For an insightful, complementary reanalysis that focuses primarily on same-sex couple households, see Rosenfeld (2012).

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