

## Quack gay marriage science. Perverted

BY NATHANIEL FRANK

**O**N ONE LEVEL, there was nothing especially surprising about the radio ad campaign launched in March by the group Your Catholic Voice to denounce gay marriage. Following a three-month period in which the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court deemed the state's ban on gay marriage unconstitutional, and local officials from California to New York began handing out marriage licenses to gay couples, it would have been far more surprising had social conservatives *not* taken to the airwaves and news pages to express their opposition. But there was at least one surprising feature of the Your Catholic Voice campaign: The lay Catholic organization claimed its opposition was rooted in evidence from Scandinavia, where, according to the ad, "marriage has almost totally disappeared."

After years of being derided as bigoted or crackpot, it appears the right has discovered a new weapon in its fight against gay marriage: seemingly legitimate social science. Over the last several months, anti-gay-marriage activists have increasingly invoked work by a handful of scholars claiming that gay marriage is bad for children and that it undermines the institution of marriage altogether. In January, the conservative Christian group Focus on the Family placed a newspaper ad featuring a prominent scholar's claim that "we should disavow the notion that 'mommies can make good daddies'" and asserting that its opposition to gay marriage was rooted in "conclusive social science data." The website of Concerned Women for America currently cites the "vast body of social science research" that militates against allowing same-sex couples to marry and raise children. In February, Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, a fierce opponent of gay rights, cited the Scandinavian example to argue that same-sex unions undermine traditional marriage.

In a debate that has been dominated in recent years by either dogma or raw emotion, this newfound interest in analytical rigor should be refreshing. And it would be, except for one small hitch: The social scientific evidence that scholars are feeding conservatives has literally nothing to do with same-sex marriage.

**P**ERHAPS THE MOST prominent scholarly argument against same-sex marriage comes courtesy of Stanley Kurtz, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution. Since February, Kurtz has taken to the pages of *The Weekly Standard*, *National Review Online*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Boston Globe* to argue that evidence from Scandinavia shows that recognizing same-sex

unions has nearly destroyed the institution of marriage there. The "evidence is in," Kurtz concludes. "Marriage is dying in Scandinavia," where "de facto same-sex marriage" has existed for over a decade.

Kurtz offers statistics showing that rising proportions of children in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark are now born out of wedlock. Although he concedes that many factors have contributed to this development, he insists that the creation of "same-sex registered partnerships" has "locked in and reinforced the separation between the ideas of marriage and parenthood, thereby accelerating marital decline" by weakening the cultural imperative to wed before giving birth. Kurtz's argument is not that gay marriages would prompt existing straight couples to end their marriages, just that the symbolic damage done to the institution by letting gays join it would deter younger couples from bothering to wed: "By getting Americans used to a strong separation between marriage and parenthood, gay marriage would draw out these trends and put us firmly on the path to the Scandinavian system."

Alas, Kurtz's conclusions are suspect on their face—for the simple reason that Scandinavia *does not have gay marriage*, merely a marriage alternative available only to gays. (Kurtz clearly knows this, because at times he correctly calls them "registered partnerships." But, then, inexplicably and inaccurately, he slips into calling them gay marriages.) That complication aside, he offers zero evidence suggesting that gay partnerships have driven down marriage rates among heterosexuals in Scandinavia. At best, Kurtz struggles to show a correlation, much less a causative effect, between gay partnerships and the "disappearance" of marriage. Cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births, we are told, "closely track the movement for [what Kurtz calls] gay marriage." In one liberal county in Norway where "gay marriage has achieved a high degree of acceptance" (never mind that it remains illegal), marriage rates are in decline.

But to suggest these correlations prove that recognizing gay unions has hurt marriage is simply shoddy social science. If gays are to blame for Scandinavia's marital decline, how do we explain another trend closer to home: In the United States, the number of unmarried, co-habiting couples increased tenfold from 1960 to 2000. And all of this with no gay marriage, no registered partnerships, not even civil unions, which only came into existence in a handful of states after the 40 years of data in question. If anything, the emergence in the West of both registered partnerships for gays and the possibility of gay marriage itself are more likely a result, not a cause, of liberalizing attitudes toward marriage, themselves a product of evolving views toward women, divorce, and contraception, along with a host of social issues (including a vibrant social safety net) that have made being single a more attractive option. But, however you feel about that proposition, Kurtz's claim that he can

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now “answer the key empirical question underlying the gay marriage debate” is utter nonsense.

Worse, Kurtz’s conflation of gay partnerships and gay marriages is hardly a trivial mistake. Kurtz begins from the premise that co-habitation undermines marriage by offering an alternative arrangement for child-rearing, thus removing the social stigma of out-of-wedlock birth and severing the link between marriage and parenthood. He then argues that “gay marriage” further erodes the link between marriage and parenthood, making a bad situation even worse: “Scandinavian gay marriage,” we are told, has sent the message that “virtually any family form, including out-of-wedlock parenthood, is acceptable.”

But, once again, there is no gay marriage in Scandinavia, only registered partnerships. And these arrangements by definition sever the link between marriage and parenthood, not because gays don’t have children—they do—but because they are denied the right to marry and are thus consigned to co-habitation. If they have kids, this means they’re sentenced to unmarried parenthood. By contrast, if gays could marry, many of the children living with out-of-wedlock gay parents would instead be living in married households, and the link between marriage and parenthood would be restored. The only thing Kurtz’s data really show is that formalizing a new arrangement of co-habitation is correlated with increased co-habitation rates.

**K**URTZ IS NOT the only scholar who relies on dubious social science to make the case against gay marriage. Others point to the potential harm inflicted upon children, arguing that a household involving a married mother and father is the optimal child-rearing environment and that gays should not be allowed to wed since they can’t provide it. This is the line favored, for example, by Douglas Kmiec, a professor of constitutional law at Pepperdine University, who in a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed last month cited research suggesting that children who grow up in gay households “are more likely to be confused sexually” and to “face a heightened chance of being the victim of sexual abuse.” Maggie Gallagher, president of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, sounded still louder alarms in a December 2003 *Weekly Standard* article, pointing to “a consensus across ideological lines, based on 20 years’ worth of social science research” that children do better with a married mother and father. And though David Blankenhorn, the founder and president of the Institute for American Values, has stopped short of opposing same-sex marriage, he nevertheless insisted, according to a February *Washington Post* article, that “children deserve, as a sort of birthright, mothers and fathers— preferably the mothers and fathers who brought them into this world.”

But there’s a huge flaw in the claims of all three scholars: They rely on divorce and father-absence studies, which compare two-parent with single-parent homes, not heterosexual parents with homosexual parents. The whole basis of Gallagher’s 20-year “consensus across ideological lines” is

that two parents are better than one, not that both parents must be different genders. Kmiec concedes the dubiousness of this leap when he writes that “scientific attempts to study homosexual parenting are incomplete and conflicting.” Nevertheless, he concludes, “It would seem logical to expect that children with same-sex couples would face a similarly increased chance of behavioral difficulty or lesser achievement in school.”

No, it wouldn’t. One of the most commonly cited studies actually assessing the effect on children was published in 2001 by University of Southern California Professors Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz, who favor same-sex marriage but nonetheless set out to critique studies suggesting there were no differences between children raised in gay and straight families. Their research concluded that children of gay couples did exhibit moderate differences from children of heterosexual parents in that they appeared “less traditionally gender-typed and more likely to be open to homoerotic relationships.”

In the hands of conservative scholars like Kmiec, who begin with the assumption that homosexuality is pathological, this turns into children being “confused sexually.” But Stacey and Biblarz’s conclusions decisively rebut the idea that growing up with gay parents is harmful: Such children “display no differences from heterosexual counterparts in psychological well-being or cognitive functioning,” they write. In addition, Stacey and Biblarz find that gay parenting “has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on children’s mental health or social adjustment.” This, as it happens, was also the determination of the American Psychological Association (APA) after an extensive 1995 review of the literature on gay families. Children raised by gay parents, the APA concluded, are not “disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to the children of heterosexual parents.” The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry echoed this finding in its 1999 statement opposing discrimination against gay parents. Ditto the American Academy of Pediatrics in a 2002 policy statement, saying children of gay parents have “the same advantages and the same expectations for health, adjustment, and development” as those of heterosexual parents. Indeed, not a single reputable study shows any harm whatsoever to children living in same-sex-headed households.

**B**UT THE RESEARCH that is least disputed in the budding marriage movement is that married people are happier, healthier, wealthier, and in a better position to raise kids. They are less likely to commit suicide, to have fatal accidents, or to suffer from alcoholism and depression, and they earn more money and report better sex lives than singles. And, not only are married people happier individuals, they are more productive citizens. All the data, in other words, point toward extending the benefits of marriage to as many people as can fulfill its social function. If the United States leads, perhaps Scandinavia will one day follow. ■

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