

THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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For years, as a faithful Catholic social scientist, I have experienced embedded, irrational opposition to the expression in scientific settings of evidence and truths that support the Catholic faith or the natural law. Like today's often-noted two-tier system of justice, more permissive for progressives and more rigorous for conservatives, there are two tiers of academic review for scholarly research.

Studies whose findings advance the progressive causes favored by today's trenchantly liberal scholarly associations, especially issues of sexuality and gender, are put on a fast track to publication. For these studies, the standards of normal science are often relaxed or overlooked altogether. The result is a body of weak, biased research published under color of science but without the credibility and rigor usually ascribed to scientific findings. Nevertheless, they are typically lauded as definitive scientific evidence, with favorable commentaries and many citations and popular publications. More propaganda than science, I call this the Propaganda tier.

In direct contrast is the Challenge Tier, studies whose findings challenge or obstruct one or more points of the dominant progressive orthodoxy. The same processes that encourage the appearance of Propaganda studies work in reverse to present a gauntlet of opposition to Challenge studies. Editors often dismiss them out of hand, without even sending them to peer review, because they don't want the findings to become more widely known or cannot imagine that the findings could be correct. Reviewers amplify minor weaknesses or limitations to reject the study. If they do get published,

they are ignored and rarely cited, or are met with angry scholarly denunciation and specious calls for their retraction, which increasingly are successful.

Increasingly, the scholarly world is moving from merely discouraging and impeding Challenge studies to openly censoring them altogether. I am going to illustrate this trend with two stories from my own experience.

In May 2016 I published an analysis of late-onset depression among children with same-sex parents using data that interviewed the same individuals at age 15 and age 28. Three Propaganda studies had used the age 15 data to show that such children were not more depressed than those raised by man-woman parents. I found that although there was no difference at age 15, by age 28 such children had developed three times the risk of depression as the general population. A gay activist who ran a website promoting the idea that children were no worse off with same-sex parents wrote a negative editorial full of falsehoods about the study in Slate magazine, and some pro-family media ran positive stories about the study. In August the gay activist submitted his editorial as a letter to the journal editor, to which I wrote a response refuting the multiple false statements therein.

There things sat until August 2017, over a year after initial publication, when my article was unexpectedly cited by a lurid anti-gay poster during the referendum debate on gay marriage in Australia. The poster pictured an abused child, used a pejorative term for gay persons, and referenced a data table in the article that the rate of all-cause child abuse, meaning the sum of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, reported by the children raised by same-sex parents was very high: 92%. Although notably high, this statistic was a minor point that did not figure into the main argument of the article, and had not been mentioned by any previous commentary on it pro or con. It appeared for only a few hours at a single location in Melbourne before it was taken down, but not before some photos

of it had been posted on social media. (It came out later that the unsigned poster had most likely been placed by pro-gay sources in an attempt to discredit my study. Think about it. How many street posters include detailed academic citations?)

Within 24 hours I was contacted by several Australian news organizations and the journal publisher for comment. I made a statement denouncing the use of my scholarly findings for anti-gay bigotry, and I offered to join in such a statement with the publisher. But on one point I could not satisfy them: I was unwilling to retract the finding itself. As unattractive as it may be, the poster accurately cited my paper, which in turn accurately reported the finding in the data. The publisher then issued an official notice of concerns about a scholarly study, which implies some form of dishonesty and is usually a prelude to retraction. This statement, however, recounted an earlier attempt by the publisher, in June 2016, to have the study retracted amid concerns from "some readers" over several features of the study, including "the potential conflict of interest implied by the author's position as a Catholic priest." At that time, however, the journal editor pushed back, telling the publisher that he "believed that the article's reviewers addressed these concerns, and the author made sufficient revisions to the article to address these flaws." This was why, the notice explained, the publisher had subsequently invited the negative editorial, so that "the criticisms of this study [could] become part of the scholarly record."

This treatment, of course, was patently unfair. The notice was entirely unwarranted, unfairly stigmatizing my study as if it had involved some misconduct. It did not seem to matter to anyone that I had no knowledge or control over how my published results were used or misused in public debate. No one was willing to publish or even acknowledge my statement denouncing anti-gay bigotry. I had not been made aware of the initial effort to retract my study, what the concerns were and

from whom: all of which violates publication ethics.

No one from the publisher was willing to explain exactly what conflict of interest was implied by being a Catholic priest. This didn't surprise me. This was little more than thinly disguised religious bigotry, which they were unlikely to admit or perhaps even recognize. The "conflict" was simply that the Catholic faith upheld a view—the importance of a child being raised by his or her own biological parents (see *Donum Vitae* 2; *Amoris Laetitia* 176)—which they could not tolerate. In their eyes, my challenge to a point of progressive orthodoxy itself constituted a form of misconduct, stemming from my Catholic faith commitments, which they were barely restrained by a stalwart editor from erasing. By the time of my second story six years later, however, the censorship of scientific findings simply because they may affirm Catholic teaching rather than the politics of progressive orthodoxy was openly advocated.

In late 2022 I published a rebuttal to a series of studies by LGBT scholar-activists who were attempting to establish that therapies to help persons sexually attracted to persons of the same sex try to reduce or avoid acting on those attractions, commonly called "sexual orientation change efforts" (SOCE), increased the lifetime risk of gay suicide and therefore should be banned by law. Due in part to the effect of these studies, SOCE has already been banned in over 20 U.S. states, in prohibitions drawn so broadly they could also inhibit Catholic pastoral care. Titled "Sexual orientation change efforts do not increase suicide: correcting a false research narrative," my study re-analyzed the strongest of these studies, using the same data it had, and pointed out a disabling error: in its measure of "lifetime suicidality," the study had included suicide attempts and thoughts that had occurred before the subject had undergone SOCE therapy.

This was not an inconsequential error. Obviously, to avoid overstating harm from an intervention, a study must find out

whether the harm may have already been there before the intervention. When I took suicidality before SOCE into account, the effect was dramatic. For persons undergoing SOCE, it turned out, not just a little, but the majority of reported suicidality happened before undergoing the therapy. Almost two-thirds (65%) of suicidal thoughts preceded the therapy, with the result that the rate of suicide ideation following therapy was lower than for persons who had never undergone SOCE. Predicted suicide attempts were strongly reduced, under real life conditions, following SOCE. My corrected results suggested that the LGBT activist scholars had confused the cause of the problem with what was, at least in part, a cure for the problem.

As my study's conclusion put it:

Imagine a study that finds that most persons using anti-hypertension medication have also previously had high blood pressure, thereby concluding that persons "exposed" to high blood pressure medication were much more likely to experience hypertension, and recommending that high blood pressure medications therefore be banned. This imagined study would have used the same flawed logic as [the studies claiming that SOCE caused suicide], with invidious consequences for persons suffering from hypertension.

In normal scientific discourse, the exposure of such a serious error would lead to the reconsideration or restatement of the flawed studies involved. Instead, my study was met with a series of angry editorials by the most prestigious scholars of the topic calling for its retraction, even suppression. The authors of the study I critiqued, who were affiliated with the Williams Institute, a research center formed to advance gay rights, doubled down on their false reasoning, refusing even to acknowledge that an effect cannot logically precede a cause. Others resorted to conspicuous falsehood about their own earlier research findings. One commentary clearly illustrated the anti-science bias involved.

Two European public health scholars wrote that, even if my findings were true, their publication was “egregiously problematic ... for the simple reason that the problem with SOCE is not just about outcomes and well-being but primarily about rights and autonomy so that a methodological analysis seeking to undermine causation is just irrelevant.” Regardless of their effect on suicidality, for these theorists the mere attempt to change someone’s sexual orientation violated their bodily autonomy and sexual rights. Thus “the potential for these conclusions drawn by Sullins to be used nefariously in political and legislative debates can put sexual minority individuals in real danger if legislation allowing for these harmful practices is implemented or just debated.”

“Or just debated.” For these scholars, the assertion that sodomy is as morally acceptable and normal as heterosexual relations is not simply an opinion with which others may reasonably disagree, but has the status of a rigid article of faith, the denial or even debate of which cannot be tolerated. Evidence that may impede the advance of the gay rights agenda is “nefarious” and must be suppressed, even if it is true, by preventing its publication and dissemination.

Unlike the Catholic faith, which welcomes doubt and debate from all quarters because it believes its teachings to be demonstrably true and wants persons to come to believe them, the secular articles of faith are not open to question or debate. For a long time now, those who dare to question them have risked being ignored or discredited. Increasingly they risk being censored outright.

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