



The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies

Scientific Integrity, Debates About

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Most professional associations, including the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), and the American Sociological Association (ASA), have codes of ethics, each offering similar guidelines for their members to follow. For example, the ASA Code of Ethics outlines five principles that should guide sociologists: (1) professional competence; (2) integrity; (3) professional and scientific responsibility; (4) respect for people's rights, dignity, and diversity; and (5) social responsibility.¹ This entry reviews some issues related to these principles of ethical conduct and provides some examples to illustrate ethical issues that may arise while conducting research on LGBTQ populations.

Five Principles of Ethical Research

Scholars should consider the previously named ethical principles as they teach, conduct research, interact with their colleagues, and represent their research to the public. At face value, these principles seem transparent; however, ethical dilemmas may arise for which there are no easy answers. These dilemmas also may be more likely to occur when addressing a controversial or politicized topic or conducting research on a topic in which the researcher has strong political views. Having an ideological stance, however, does not inevitably result in unethically produced research. What is essential is that the researchers and the scientific community remain critical of their own and other research, regardless of the finding and one's personal views on the topic. No specific procedures can be instituted that will prevent all unethical practices; however, social scientists can strive for the utmost integrity by considering the following ethical principles when conducting their own research and reviewing the research of others.

Professional Competence

Scholars should be competent in their fields of study, continually educate themselves, keep up with emerging issues, adhere to the scientific standards of their discipline, and consult with experts in their field to produce high-quality research and course materials. To do otherwise is incompatible with the ethical standards of social and behavioral disciplines and increases the likelihood of questionable methodological decisions and low-quality research. As an illustration, consider a study that argued that the adult children from same-sex families experience disadvantages relative to two-biological-parent families. This study, by sociologist Mark Regnerus, was criticized on multiple methodological grounds: for example, the survey questions used in the study made it difficult to accurately identify lesbian and gay parents and, in turn, same-sex family households. He relied on a measure of relationship history to categorize respondents as being raised in a same-sex family and did not sufficiently consider whether respondents had actually lived with parents who identified as lesbian or gay for any amount of time. This resulted in children from very different backgrounds being categorized as raised in a same-sex family. His inattention to measurement issues, along with other methodological problems, led some scholars to question the ethics of this research endeavor.

Integrity

Social scientists should be honest, fair, respectful, and sensitive to the welfare of others as they teach, research, review their peers, and speak to the public. Their work should

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inspire confidence, and they should never knowingly deceive the public either in their own work or in how their work is represented in the media. For example, while scholars may disagree as to whether it is unethical to publish in journals with little or no peer review (e.g., open-access journals or pay-to-publish journals), most scholars would agree that media reports should more heavily rely on articles published in journals with more stringent review standards and that researchers whose work is not subject to stringent reviews should be more cautious in promoting their work in media. This is among the reasons that scholars who study LGBTQ issues often question the ethics of the media representation of some articles that, unlike most peer-reviewed studies, claim that there are notable negative outcomes for children from same-sex families or that there are serious psychological consequences for identifying as LGBTQ. The public—and, in some cases, the media—is unlikely to distinguish between rigorously and minimally reviewed articles. Presenting minimally refereed articles as comparable in quality to studies that have adhered to the norms of the discipline would be misleading to the public and, in the views of some, potentially in violation of ethical standards.

Even if scholars do not misrepresent their research, social scientists should also consider the extent to which it is their responsibility to correct the ways in which other individuals share their research with the academic community and with the public. For example, some scholars question whether Mark Regnerus, the sociologist mentioned earlier, was sufficiently diligent in preventing others from using the results from his study on children's outcomes to claim that lesbians and gays make poor parents or to advocate against same-sex marriage. In his article, Regnerus claimed his results did not shed light on the same-sex marriage debate, but it is possible that he made little effort to correct individuals who overstated the results of his study, or it is possible that he did make this effort but did not make other academics aware of this effort. This example illustrates the complexity of defining which practices are ethical and which are not.

Professional and Scientific Responsibility

Scholars should abide by the highest scientific and professional standards and respect each other regardless of their different theoretical, methodological, and professional approaches to science. They have a shared responsibility to ensure that public trust is not compromised and that scientific knowledge is not distorted. Scholars' reactions to research show how they share the burden of producing scientifically responsible research. For example, several scholars critiqued Regnerus's study because it was funded by two organizations with clear ideological stances, the Witherspoon Institute and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, which some believe may have influenced his conclusion. In addition, a recent book titled *No Differences? How Children in Same-Sex Households Fare*, published by one of the same organizations, only includes papers from authors who have a single ideological view and does not seriously consider how the authors' data analysis strategies shaped the book's claims. Some critics contend that research funded by partisan organizations is more susceptible to biased accounts of social phenomena, which could distort the production of scientific knowledge. The possibility of bias has led some to question whether such studies should even be seriously considered in the body of the literature on LGBTQ-parent families. Although funding organizations do not inevitably impact a study's findings, if they have a clear political view (whether liberal or conservative), scholars should consider this possibility.

Other issues that can raise concerns about professional responsibility are the research timeline and the relationships among data, methods, and findings. At minimum, researchers should not rush the research project and instead should spend whatever time is necessary to thoroughly conducting data analyses once all of the data have been collected. In the Regnerus case, questions were raised about his analysis procedure because his paper was submitted to the journal before all of the data were collected. To some critics, the abrupt timing of the submission of his paper for review appears inconsistent with scientific protocol to carefully and methodically analyze the data, which usually takes a large amount of time.

Respect for People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity

Social scientists should make every effort to eliminate or, at minimum, reduce bias in professional activities. They should be aware of differences in power and resources between themselves, their colleagues, their research subjects, and their students and should not tolerate any status-based discrimination related to age; gender; race; ethnicity; national origin; religion; sexual orientation; disability; health conditions; or marital, domestic, or parental status. Scholars' and their funders' personal beliefs, attitudes, and values could represent a conflict of interest, but such views should not prevent them from questioning their own research. For example, scholars should not design research in such a way that it tells them what they expect or want to find—a criticism that has been launched at Regnerus.

Journal editors should also work to obtain balanced critiques of an article by identifying appropriate, knowledgeable reviewers. Reviewers should refuse to review an article if they have conflicts of interest. In the Regnerus study, for example, several scholars were concerned that (1) some of the apparent reviewers were affiliated with organizations with political views that aligned with the conclusions of the study and (2) some of these apparent reviewers had collaborated with the author in the past. While these factors may or may not have prevented the reviewers from objectively evaluating the research by scientific criteria, even the appearance of conflict of interest can reduce others' confidence in the review process.

Social Responsibility

Scientists should advance knowledge for the public good. For example, they should design research that will allow them to identify the social support children need to thrive in a diverse array of family situations and identify what institutions can do to protect vulnerable populations from experiencing discrimination. While some scholars believe that one way to identify factors that will improve individuals' lives is to compare the experiences of people raised in different family structures, sociologist Tey Meadow disagrees. Meadow advises us to consider whether asking some empirical questions is unethical. She has argued that comparing family structures implies that one of these groups is socially desirable and reconstructs the dominance of the more powerful group and that this type of research cannot improve the lives of the individuals living in any of these family structures. Meadow's argument suggests that social scientists should look beyond the perceived advantages of their research to seriously consider any potential disadvantages of their studies. Considering that many scholars see more benefit than harm from making family comparisons, her stance against comparing family structures to one another demonstrates, once again, the complexity of researching ethically.

Conclusion

To produce rigorous scientific knowledge that inspires confidence and improves the lives of individuals, social scientists should adhere to the ethical principles outlined previously during research design, data collection, analysis, review, and presentation phases of the research process. These ethical principles apply regardless of the scholars' orientations and political beliefs, or the conclusions of a study. This entry illustrates how social scientists have questioned the ethical practices of a study that reported negative outcomes from being raised by gay and lesbian parents. It is important, however, to emphasize that scholars should expect the same quality of research even if the study concludes that children from same-sex families fare just as well as or better than others.

Social scientists should make a good faith effort to produce high-quality, honest research that does not harm the welfare of individuals; however, it is not always clear whether social scientists have violated any ethical principle. No person is ever privy to the motivations of scientists and the decisions behind their practices, and scholars can only interpret others' intentions. In other words, research may result in flawed methods and findings, even if a scholar has made a good faith effort to produce research competently. For example, scholars who claim to have not been conflicted by the ideological stances of their funding agencies may truly believe that that is the case. Still, it is crucial that scientists take a critical stance on their own research and that of others and that they make an effort to amend any flaws once discovered.

See also [Children With LGBTQ Parents, Academic Outcomes](#); [Children With LGBTQ Parents, Psychosocial Outcomes](#); [Ethical Research With Sexual and Gender Minorities](#); [Methodological Decisions by Researchers of LGBTQ Populations](#); [Population-Based Surveys, Collection of Data on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity](#)

Note

1. The APA ethical code consists of five similar principles: (1) beneficence and nonmaleficence, (2) fidelity and responsibility, (3) integrity, (4) justice, and (5) respect for people's rights and dignity.

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Further Readings

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