

The APA Does it Again

*Psychologists who say fathers are not necessary
prove the limits of social science.*

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First the journal of the American Psychological Association printed an article that maintained children are not harmed by having sex with adults (see *WORLD*, April 10). Since the implication was that sexually abusing children is not so bad after all, the credibility of the APA, the professional organization of the nation's psychological counselors, was badly shaken. The article, written by scholars who had long championed homosexual causes, was denounced by everyone from Dr. Laura to the U. S. House of Representatives, which passed unanimously a resolution condemning the article-to the point that the APA backed down from what it had published (see *WORLD*, June 26).

But now it is happening again. Another of the APA's journals, *The American Psychologist*, in its June 1999 issue, includes a piece called "Deconstructing the Essential Father." Its authors, Louise Silverstein and Carl Auerbach, sum up its thesis: "We do not believe that the data support the conclusion that fathers are essential to child well-being and that heterosexual marriage is the social context in which responsible fathering is most likely to occur."

Not only are fathers not necessary to a child's well-being, neither is "heterosexual marriage" (as opposed, presumably to homosexual marriage).

What does it mean when America's psychological establishment keeps hammering away at the primal human institution of the family? Though the notion that children don't need fathers flies in the face of common sense and universal human experience, if these social scientists say they are proving scientifically that "family values" don't matter, don't we have to pay attention?

Natural scientists can study how chemicals interact with great confidence. A hydrogen atom and a culture of pond scum behave in consistent, predictable ways. The dream of social scientists has been to study human beings in the same way. Just as science has unlocked the secrets of chemistry, physics, and biology, surely science can also unlock the secrets of human beings.

The problem is, human beings do not fit into a test tube. Despite social scientists' attempts to devise controlled, empirical experiments to study human behavior, their findings never attain the certainty of chemists and botanists. Studies keep contradicting each other.

In terms of the APA's latest controversy, study after study has shown that fathers are, in fact, crucial to a child's well-being. This abundance of evidence, however, does not settle the matter or inhibit a journal from publishing something contrary. In the social sciences, nearly every issue remains an open question.

Despite their projection of scientific certainty, the array of psychological theories-not all of which can be right-justifies the distinction between the "hard sciences" that study nature and the "soft sciences" that study human behavior.

In social science research, the researcher's worldview stands in high relief. For example, Ms. Silverstein and Mr. Auerbach built their case against fatherhood by studying the behavior of non-human primates, particularly a little big-eyed relative of the monkey called the marmoset. The assumption is that human beings are mere animals, just another primate, so that what holds true for marmoset behavior is valid for human families. If human beings are nothing more than animals, one would expect the social sciences to have the same certainty as zoology, but it doesn't seem to work that way. If human beings are more complex than marmosets-if we have, say, a spiritual nature-the whole research findings fall apart.

Furthermore, this article is also an example of postmodernist research. The title is "Deconstructing the Essential Father." According to the worldview of postmodernism, truth is not a discovery but a construction; there are no absolutes or "essences," only social constructions that impose the society's power relationships. Scholarship exists to "deconstruct" what people take for granted as being good and true, unmasking an artifact, truth-claim, or institution as an act of cultural oppression.

If fatherhood is nothing more than a social construction designed for the exercise of power, then fathers can easily be "deconstructed" in terms of male dominance and "heterosexism." Contrary evidence about the benefits of stable families can be similarly dismantled as "social constructions" reflecting our standards of economic success and our "oppressive" desire for obedience and conformity. But if fatherhood is grounded in nature and in a moral and spiritual order (which, being nonempirical, are not admissible in social science research), then the whole house of cards collapses.

There was a time-in the classical Christian universities-when theology was the Queen of the Sciences, the foundation and justifier of every other kind of knowledge (*scientia*). For modernists, natural science was the Queen of all the rest, imposing its empiricism and materialism on every subject. For postmodernists, the social sciences are Queen-reigning supreme and unquestioned in every field from literary criticism to education, determining business practices and dictating how churches should try to grow.

But human beings are more than passive objects of laboratory scrutiny. With our wills, our intellects, our sinfulness, and our conscience, we have a spiritual identity that confounds the reductionists.

Though the social sciences sometimes provide a forum for addressing human and cultural problems, strictly speaking, they are not “sciences.” And when they presume to undermine the family, they are not even “social.”