Letter to the editors and advisory editors of Social Science Research

As researchers and scholars, many of whom with extensive experience in quantitative and qualitative research in family structures and child outcomes, we write to raise serious concerns about the most recent issue of Social Science Research and the set of papers focused on parenting by lesbians and gay men. In this regard, we have particular concern about Mark Regnerus' paper entitled “How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study.”

LGBT parenting is a highly politicized topic. While the presence of a vibrant and controversial public debate should in no way censor scholarship, it should compel the academy to hold scholarship around that topic to our most rigorous standards. We are very concerned that these standards were not upheld in this issue or with this paper, given the apparently expedited process of publication and the decision to publish commentaries on the paper by scholars who were directly involved with the study and have limited experience in LGBT parenting research. We also have serious concerns about the scholarly merit of this paper.

In this letter, we detail the specific concerns that lead us to request that you publicly disclose the reasons for both the expedited peer review process of this clearly controversial paper and the choice of commentators invited to submit critiques. We further request that you invite scholars with specific expertise in LGBT parenting issues to submit a detailed critique of the paper and accompanying commentaries for publication in the next issue of the journal.

We question the process by which this paper was submitted, reviewed, and accepted for publication. The paper was received by the journal on February 1, 2012. A revision was received on February 29, and the paper was accepted on March 12. This suggests that the peer review process and substantive revisions occurred within a period of just five weeks. According to the peer review policy of the Social Science Research website hosted by Elsevier, the first step of the review process is an initial manuscript evaluation by the editor. Once deemed to meet minimum criteria, at least 2 experts are secured for a peer review. The website states that, “Typically manuscripts are reviewed within 2-3 months of submission but substantially longer review times are not uncommon” and that “Revised manuscripts are usually returned to the initial referees upon receipt.” Clearly, Dr. Regnerus’ paper was returned to him very quickly, because he had time to revise the manuscript and get it back to the journal by February 29th. Further, it appears that a second substantive peer review may not have occurred as the paper was accepted just two weeks after the revision was submitted.

The five-week submission to acceptance length was much shorter than all of the other articles published in the July 2012 issue. The average period of review for papers published in this issue was more than a year and the median review time was more than ten months. As we note below, there are substantial concerns about the merits of this paper, and these concerns should have been identified through a thorough and rigorous peer review process.

We further question the selection of commenters for the Regnerus paper. While Cynthia Osborne and Paul Amato are certainly well-respected scholars, they are also both active participants in the Regnerus study. According to her curriculum vitae, Dr. Osborne is a Co-Principal Investigator of the New Family Structure Survey. Dr. Amato served as a paid consultant on the advisory group convened to provide insights into study design and methods. Perhaps more importantly, neither Osborne nor Amato have ever published work that considers LGBT family or parenting issues. A cursory examination of this body of literature would reveal a wide range of scholars who are much more qualified to evaluate the merits of this study and were neither directly involved in the study design nor compensated for that involvement.

We have substantial concerns about the merits of this paper and question whether it actually uses methods and instruments that answer the research questions posed in the paper. The author claims that the purpose of the analysis is to begin to address the question, “Do the children of gay and lesbian parents look comparable to those of their heterosexual counterparts?” (p. 755). He creates several categories of “family type”, including “lesbian mother” and “gay father” as well as “divorced late,” “stepfamily,” and “single-parent.” But, as the author notes,
for those respondents who indicated that a parent had a “same-sex relationship,” these categories were collapsed to boost sample size:

That is, a small minority of respondents might fit more than one group. I have, however, forced their mutual exclusivity here for analytic purposes. For example, a respondent whose mother had a same-sex relationship might also qualify in Group 5 or Group 7, but in this case my analytical interest is in maximizing the sample size of Groups 2 and 3 so the respondent would be placed in Group 2 (LMs). Since Group 3 (GFs) is the smallest and most difficult to locate randomly in the population, its composition trumped that of others, even LMs. (There were 12 cases of respondents who reported both a mother and a father having a same-sex relationship; all are analyzed here as GFs, after ancillary analyses revealed comparable exposure to both their mother and father).

By doing this, the author is unable to distinguish between the impact of having a parent who has had a continuous same-sex relationship from the impact of having same-sex parents who broke-up from the impact of living in a same-sex stepfamily from the impact of living with a single parent who may have dated a same-sex partner; each of these groups are included in a single “lesbian mother” or “gay father” group depending on the gender of the parent who had a same-sex relationship. Specifically, this paper fails to distinguish family structure and family instability. Thus, it fails to distinguish, for children whose parents ever had a same-sex relationship experience, the associations due to family structure from the associations due to family stability. However, he does attempt to distinguish family structure from family instability for the children of different-sex parents by identifying children who lived in an intact biological family. To make a group equivalent to the group he labels as having “lesbian” or “gay” parents, the author should have grouped all other respondents together and included those who lived in an intact biological family with those who ever experienced divorce, or whose parents ever had a different-sex romantic relationship. That seems absurd to family structure researchers, yet that type of grouping is exactly what he did with his “lesbian mother” and “gay father” groups.

It should be noted that the analyses also fail to distinguish family structure from family stability for single mothers; this group included both continuously single mothers and those single mothers who had previously experienced a divorce.

The paper employs an unusual method to measure the sexual orientation of the respondents’ parents. Even if the analyses had distinguished family stability from family structure, this paper and its accompanying study could not actually directly examine the impact of having a gay or lesbian parent on child outcomes because the interpretation of the measurement of parental sexual orientation is unclear. The author acknowledges as much when he states:

It is, however, very possible that the same-sex romantic relationships about which the respondents report were not framed by those respondents as indicating their own (or their parent’s own) understanding of their parent as gay or lesbian or bisexual in sexual orientation. Indeed, this is more a study of the children of parents who have had (and in some cases, are still in) same-sex relationships than it is one of children whose parents have self-identified or are “out” as gay or lesbian or bisexual.

Respondents were asked whether their parents had ever had a same-sex relationship. The author then identifies mothers and fathers as “lesbian” or “gay” without any substantiation of parental sexual orientation either by respondents or their parents. Given the author’s stated caveats, it is both inappropriate and factually incorrect for him to refer to these parents as “gay” or “lesbian” throughout the paper.

We are very concerned about the academic integrity of the peer review process for this paper as well as its intellectual merit. We question the decision of Social Science Research to publish the paper, and particularly, to
publish it without an extensive, rigorous peer review process and commentary from scholars with explicit expertise on LGBT family research. The methodologies used in this paper and the interpretation of the findings are inappropriate. The publication of this paper and the accompanying commentary calls the editorial process at Social Science Research, a well-regarded, highly cited social science journal (ranking in the top 15% of Sociology journals by ISI), into serious question. We urge you to publicly disclose the reasons for both the expedited peer review process of this clearly controversial paper and the choice of commentators invited to submit critiques. We further request that you invite scholars with specific expertise in LGBT parenting issues to submit a detailed critique of the paper and accompanying commentaries for publication in the next issue of the journal.

**Sociologists and Family Studies Scholars**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silke Aisenbrey, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Yeshiva University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine R. Allen, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Anderson, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Sports Medicine, University of Winchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nielan Barnes, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Sociology, California State University, Long Beach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda K. Baumle, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Houston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie Becher</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Barnard College, Columbia University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Bernstein, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Sociology, University of Connecticut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie Boero, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Sociology, San Jose State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.M.W Bos, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Amsterdam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa D Brush, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neal Caren</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Ann Clawson, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Sociology, Wesleyan University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Clawson, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Sociology, University of Massachusetts Amherst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Cohen, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Sociology, University of Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D'Lane Compton, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of New Orleans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelley J. Correll, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Sociology, Stanford University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David H. Demo, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine Donovan PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Social Relations, University of Sunderland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinikka Elliott, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Sociology, North Carolina State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis Edgar Esparza, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Sociology, California State University, Los Angeles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurie Essig, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies, Middlebury College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myra Marx Ferree, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina Fetner, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Sociology, McMaster University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica Fields, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Sociology and Sexuality Studies, San Francisco State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa M. Forbis, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology, SUNY Stonybrook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gary J. Gates, PhD  
Williams Distinguished Scholar, Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law

Naomi Gerstel, Phd  
Distinguished Professor of Sociology, University of Massachusetts

Katherine Giuffre, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology, Colorado College

Gloria González-López, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin

Theodore Greenstein, PhD  
Professor and Director of Graduate Programs for Sociology, North Carolina State University

Jessica Halliday Hardie  
NICHD Postdoctoral Fellow, Population Research Institute, Pennsylvania State University

Mark D. Hayward  
Professor of Sociology and Director, Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

Melanie Heath, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Sociology, McMaster University

Amie Hess  
Assistant Professor of Sociology, Meredith College

Melanie M. Hughes, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh

Shamus Rahman Khan, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, Columbia University

Michael Kimmel, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, SUNY

Sherryl Klienman, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, University of North Carolina

Charles Q. Lau, PhD  
Survey Research Division, RTI international

Jennifer Lee, PhD  
Professor, Department of Sociology, University of California - Irvine

Jean Lynch, PhD  
Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology and Gerontology, Miami University

Gill McCann, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, University of Vermont

Tey Meadow, PhD  
Cotsen Fellow, Princeton University

Sarah O. Meadows, PhD  
Social Scientist, RAND Corporation

Eleanor M. Miller, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, University of Vermont

Debra Minkoff, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, Barnard College, Columbia University

Beth Mintz, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, University of Vermont

Dawne Moon, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Sociology, Marquette University

Mignon R. Moore, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles and Chair, Race, Gender & Class Section of the American Sociological Association

Chandra Muller  
Professor of Sociology and Faculty Research Associate, Population Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Nancy A. Naples, PhD  
Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies, University of Connecticut

Peter M. Nardi, PhD  
Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Pitzer College, The Claremont Colleges

Alondra Nelson, PhD  
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Columbia University

Jodi O'Brien, PhD  
Professor and Chair of Sociology, Seattle University

Katherine O'Donnell, PhD  
Senior Lecturer, School of Social Justice, University College Dublin

Ramona Faith Oswald, PhD  
Professor of Family Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Joseph M. Palacios, PhD  
Adjunct Professor of Social Sciences, Georgetown University
C.J. Pascoe, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Sociology, Colorado College

Dudley L. Poston, Jr., PhD  
Professor of Sociology, Texas A&M University

Nicole C. Raeburn, PhD  
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of San Francisco

Kimberly Richman, PhD  
Professor of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of San Francisco

Barbara J. Risman, PhD  
Professor and Head of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago

Sharmila Rudrappa, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin

Stephen T. Russel, PhD  
Professor of Family Studies and Human Development, University of Arizona

Virginia Rutter, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology, Framingham State University

Natalia Sarkisian  
Associate Professor of Sociology, Boston College

Saskia Sassen, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, Columbia University

Liana C. Sayer  
Associate Professor of Sociology, Ohio State University

Michael Schwalbe  
Professor, Department of Sociology, North Carolina State University

Michael Schwartz, PhD  
Chair and Professor of Sociology, Stony Brook University

Christine R. Schwartz, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Pepper Schwartz, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, University of Washington

Denise Benoit Scott, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, State University of New York at Geneseo

Richard Sennett, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, New York University

Eve Shapiro, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, Westfield State University

Eran Shor, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Sociology, McGill University

Wendy Simonds  
Professor of Sociology, Georgia State University

Sarah Sobieraj  
Associate Professor of Sociology, Tufts University

Judith Stacey, PhD  
Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, New York University

Arlene Stein, PhD  
Department of Sociology, Rutgers University

Verta Taylor, PhD  
Chair and Professor of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara

Debra J Umberson, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin

Suzanna Danuta Walters, PhD  
Professor of Sociology, Northeastern University

Jacqueline S. Weinstock, PhD  
Associate Professor of Human Development & Family Studies, University of Vermont

Amy C. Wilkins, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Colorado

Cai Wilkinson, FHEA, PhD  
Lecturer in International Relations, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University

Kristi Williams, PhD  
Associate Professor of Sociology, Ohio State University

Kerry Woodward, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Sociology, California State University, Long Beach

---

**Psychologists**

Nancy Lynn Baker, PhD, ABPP  
Diplomate in Forensic Psychology, Director, Forensic Concentration, Fielding Graduate University and Past President of the Society for the Psychology of Women

Meg Barker, PhD  
Senior Lecturer in Psychology, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK
Joel Becker, PhD
Prof., Dept. of Psychology, UCLA and Assoc. Clinical Prof., UCLA, Medical School

Steven Botticelli, PhD
Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychology, NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis

Petra M Boynton, PhD
Social Psychologist, Lecturer in International Primary Health Research, UCL Medical School, University College London

Mark Brennan-Ing, PhD
Senior Research Scientist, AIDS Community Research Initiative of America

Alice S. Carter, PhD
Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts - Boston

Carol A. Carver, PhD
Licensed Psychologist and Past President of the Oregon Psychological Association

Armand R. Cerbone, PhD, ABPP
Board Certified Psychologist

Kirstyn Y.S. Chun, PsyD
Tenured Faculty, Counseling and Psychological Services, California State University, Long Beach

Victoria Clarke, PhD
Associate Professor in Sexuality Studies, Department of Psychology, University of the West of England, UK

Gilbert W. Cole, PhD
Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Study Center Guest Lecturer, Union Theological Seminary

M. Lynne Cooper, PhD
Associate Editor, American Psychologist and Curators' Distinguished Professor, Department of Psychological Science, University of Missouri - Columbia

Howard H. Covitz, PhD, ABPP
Board Certified Psychologist

Dennis Debiak, PsyD
Adjunct Associate Professor, Institute for Graduate Clinical Psychology, Widener University and Secretary, Division of Psychoanalysis, American Psychological Association

Rachel H. Farr, PhD
Postdoctoral Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Herb Gingold, PhD
Co-Founder, Noir Institute

Abbie E. Goldberg, PhD
Associate Professor of Psychology, Clark University

Carla Golden, PhD
Professor of Psychology, Ithaca College

Robert-Jay Green, PhD
Executive Director, ROCKWAY INSTITUTE for LGBT Psychology & Public Policy Distinguished Professor, California School of Professional Psychology (CSPP) at Alliant International University

Beverly Greene, PhD, ABPP
Professor of Psychology, St. John's University

Harold D. Grotevant, PhD
Rudd Family Foundation Chair in Psychology, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Sarah A. Hayes-Skelton, PhD
Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston

Stacy S. Horn, PhD
Associate Professor of Educational and Developmental Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago

Sharon G. Horne, PhD
Associate Professor, Counseling Psychology, Department of Counseling and School Psychology, The University of Massachusetts Boston

Harm J. Hospers
Endowed chair Health Psychology and Homosexuality, Dean University College Maastricht, Dean Faculty of Humanities and Sciences, Maastricht University, The Netherlands
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title/Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steven E. James, PhD</td>
<td>Chair of Psychology &amp; Clinical Mental Health Counseling Programs, Goddard College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren Langridge, PhD</td>
<td>Head of Department of Psychology, The Open University, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chet Lesniak, PhD</td>
<td>Core Faculty, Counseling Specialization, School of Psychology, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Walden University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi Levitt, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William D. Lubart, PhD</td>
<td>Faculty and Supervisor of Psychotherapy, The William Alanson White Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carien Lubbe-De Beer, PhD</td>
<td>Senior Lecturer, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Pretoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasim Martin-Berg, CPsychol</td>
<td>Lecturer, Glasgow Caledonian University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James P. Maurino, MSW, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Human Development and Community and Human Services, SUNY-Empire State College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ximena E. Mejia, PhD, LMHC</td>
<td>Director, Counseling Services, Parton Health and Counseling Center, Middlebury College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger Mills-Koonce, PhD</td>
<td>Center for Developmental Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin S. Myers, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Psychology, California State University - Stanislaus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo Oppenheimer, MA</td>
<td>The Counseling Center for Women, Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan M. Orsillo, PhD</td>
<td>Professor, Department of Psychology, Suffolk University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Pantalone, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Psychology, Suffolk University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey T. Parsons, Ph.D</td>
<td>Professor of Psychology and Public Health, Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maureen Perry-Jenkins, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Psychology, University of Massachusetts - Amherst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madelyn Petrow-Cohen, LCSW</td>
<td>psychotherapist in private practice in NYC &amp; Maplewood, NJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd R. Poch, PSYD, MALD, BCFM</td>
<td>Assistant Professor in Psychology, Florida Institute of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott D. Pytluk, PhD</td>
<td>Professor, Illinois School of Professional Psychology, Argosy University, Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damien W. Riggs</td>
<td>Editor, <em>Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review</em>, Senior Lecturer in Social and Policy Studies, Flinders University, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizabeth Roemer, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Psychology, University of Massachusetts - Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritch C. Savin-Williams</td>
<td>Professor, Developmental Psychology and Director, Sex and Gender Lab, Cornell University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. Greg Serpa, PhD</td>
<td>Clinical Psychologist, Department of Veterans Affairs and Assistant Clinical Professor, UCLA Department of Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Bordeaux Silverstein, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Psychology, Yeshiva University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie R. Strickland, PhD, ABPP</td>
<td>Emeritus Professor of Psychology, University of Massachusetts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen Suyemoto, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Psychology and Asian American Studies, University of Massachusetts - Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lance P. Swenson, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Psychology Department, Suffolk University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona Tasker, PhD</td>
<td>Department of Psychological Sciences, Birbeck University of London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus C. Tye, Ph.D</td>
<td>Professor of Psychology, Dowling College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard G. Wight, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Researcher, UCLA School of Public Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position/Institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paula Amato, MD</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Oregon Health and Science University and Board Member, Gay and Lesbian Medical Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen Ann Andersen, PhD</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Political Science and Women's and Gender Studies University of Vermont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Barber, MD</td>
<td>Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and Co-Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Bradford, PhD</td>
<td>Co-Chair, The Fenway Institute and Director, Center for Population Research in LGBT Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert P Cabaj, MD</td>
<td>Associate Clinical Professor in Psychiatry, University of California, San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Cabaj, PhD</td>
<td>Research Associate, Faculty of Medical and Human Sciences, University of Manchester, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher Conti, MD</td>
<td>Assistant Clinical Professor, New York University Medical Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russel W. Dalton, EdD</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Religious Education, Brite Divinity School Texas Christian University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John D’Emilio, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of History, Gender and Women's Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Douglass, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education and Human Development, University of Massachusetts - Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Drescher, MD</td>
<td>Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science, New York Medical College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliva M. Espin, PhD</td>
<td>Professor Emerita, Department of Women's Studies, San Diego State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanette Gartrell, MD</td>
<td>Distinguished Visiting Scholar, Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patti Geier, LCSW</td>
<td>Therapist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan Gilbert</td>
<td>John Evans Professor, Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann P. Haas, PhD</td>
<td>Senior Project Specialist, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Professor (ret.) Department of Health Sciences, Lehman College, CUNY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen Haller, PhD</td>
<td>Professor of Clinical Psychiatry, University of California, San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Heilbron, PhD</td>
<td>Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Duke University School of Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonda Hughes, PhD, RN, FAAN</td>
<td>Professor and Head of Health Systems Science, College of Nursing, University of Illinois at Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Hurewitz, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, History Department, Hunter College, CUNY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse Joad, MD, MS</td>
<td>Professor Emerita, Pediatrics, University of California - Davis and Vice President for Education, Gay and Lesbian Medical Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra Kaysen, Ph.D</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Psychiatry, University of Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sang Hea Kil, PhD</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Justice Studies, San Jose State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha Kirkpatrick, MD</td>
<td>Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry, UCLA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Holning Lau, JD  Professor of Law, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Arlene Istar Lev, LCSW  School of Social Welfare, SUNY Albany
Lisa W. Loutzenheiser, PhD  Associate Professor of Curriculum and Pedagogy, University of British Columbia
Michael F. Lovenheim, PhD  Assistant Professor of Policy Analysis and Management, Cornell University
Catherine A. Lugg, PhD  Professor of Education, Rutgers University
Gerald P. Mallon, DSW  Julia Lathrop Professor of Child Welfare, Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College
Laura Mamo, PhD  Associate Professor of Health Education, San Francisco State University
Sean G. Massey  Associate Professor, Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies Program, Binghamton University
Kenneth J. Meier, PhD  Charles H. Gregory Chair in Liberal Arts, Department of Political Science, Texas A&M University
Stephen O. Murray  El Instituto Obregón, San Francisco, CA
Douglas NeJaime, PhD  Associate Professor of Law, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles
Henry Ng, MD, MPH, FAAP, FACP  Assistant Professor, Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine Center for Internal Medicine and Pediatrics, MetroHealth Medical Center
Julie Novkov, PhD  Chair, Department of Political Science, Professor of Political Science and Women's Studies, University at Albany, SUNY
Loren A. Olson, MD  Des Moines, IA
Donald L. Opitz, PhD  Assistant Professor, School for New Learning at DePaul University
Katherine Parkin, PhD  Associate Professor of History, Monmouth University
Jessica Peet, PhD  School of International Relations, University of Southern California
Victoria Pollock  Adjunct Faculty at the Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto.
Jesus Ramirez-Valles PhD, MPH  Professor of Public Health, University of Illinois at Chicago
Nancy J. Ramsay, PhD  Professor of Pastoral Theology and Pastoral Care, Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University
Paul J. Rinaldi, PhD  Clinical Director, The Addiction Institute of New York, Department of Psychiatry, St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center
Barbara Rothberg, DSW, LCSW  Therapist
Esther Rothblum, PhD  Professor of Women's Studies, San Diego State University
Ralph Roughton, MD  Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry, Emory University
Leila J. Rupp, PhD  Professor of Feminist Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara
Shawn Schulenberg, PhD  Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Marshall University
Ken Sherrill, PhD  Emeritus Professor of Political Science, Hunter College, CUNY
Vincent M. B. Silenzio, MD, MPH  Associate Professor, Departments of Psychiatry, Community & Preventive Medicine, and Family Medicine, University of Rochester
Stephen V. Sprinkle, PhD  Director of Field Education and Supervised Ministry, and Professor of Practical Theology, Brite Divinity School
William J. Spurlin, PhD, FHEA  Professor of English, Brunel University London
Carole S. Vance, PhD, MPH  Assoc. Clinical Professor, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University
Angelia R. Wilson, PhD  Politics Discipline, University of Manchester, UK