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## One Thousand and Forty-Nine Reasons Why It's Hard to Know When a Fact Is a Fact

Andrew J. Cherlin

When is a fact a fact? If you are a postmodernist, the answer is clear: never. Postmodern critics of standard social science argue that the conclusions we draw are not, and cannot be, genuinely objective. Rather, they say, our findings are contaminated in several ways. First, the questions we ask and the point of view we take often reflect our values, whether those are an enthusiasm for feminist or civil-rights-inspired activism or a belief in the importance of marriage and premarital chastity. Even the categories and labels we use often reflect values-based assumptions.

Here is an example from my field, family demography: In 1941, Paul Glick, the Bureau of the Census demographer who virtually created the field, wrote a pioneering article entitled "Types of Families: An Analysis of Census Data."<sup>1</sup> Glick divided American families into three groups: (1) normal families, a category that consisted of all two-parent families; (2) other male-headed families; and (3) other female-headed families. The implication, of course, was that all single-parent families were abnormal.

Or consider contemporary debates over immigration, which may be shaped by whether one uses the term *illegal alien* or *undocumented immigrant*. The first conjures up an image of a law-breaking invader from outer space; the second conveys an image of a striving newcomer who merely lacks the right papers.

Recognizing that most researchers draw upon particular values when they choose what categories to use and what questions to ask does not mean that all data are suspect or that all interpretations of data are equally valid. But it does drive home the importance of treating so-called facts critically and of questioning

their origins and purposes. When we read facts, we should ask ourselves a few key questions: Who produced this fact? Was it a person or an organization that promotes a particular point of view? What was the purpose of making this fact known? What do we know about the relationship of this fact to other facts or trends?

Consider [familyfacts.org](http://familyfacts.org), a website operated by the Heritage Foundation. It publicizes findings from social scientific research on family life. On its home page, [familyfacts.org](http://familyfacts.org) presents itself as a neutral clearinghouse for family research: "The Heritage Foundation's [familyfacts.org](http://familyfacts.org) catalogs social science findings on the family, society and religion gleaned from peer-reviewed journals, books and government surveys. Serving policy makers, journalists, scholars and the general public, [familyfacts.org](http://familyfacts.org) makes social science research easily accessible to the non-specialist."

In 2008, this site featured a "top ten" list of findings about how children in different kinds of families fare in school. According to each finding, children living with two parents were doing better than children living with one parent or with stepparents. Here are two of the findings: "Kindergartners in intact families have higher average reading scores than peers in stepfamilies or cohabiting families" and "First-graders whose mothers were married when they were born are less likely to engage in disruptive behavior with peers and teachers than those whose mothers were single or cohabiting." In fact, virtually all of the thousands of findings on the site support the view that marriage is best for children and that religion improves family outcomes.

These findings are not falsified. They are taken from reputable studies published in well-regarded journals such as the *Journal of Marriage and Family* and, by and large, are described accurately. A naive user might think that this is all social scientists know. But the facts reported on this site have been selected to support a particular conclusion, while facts that modify, complicate, or challenge that conclusion are not reported.

For example, the site quotes a 1998 article that I co-wrote about a study showing that children whose parents had divorced had a higher risk of emotional problems in adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Yet that same article also showed that some of the emotional problems had been visible in childhood before the parents even divorced, but this additional finding was not mentioned. Nor does the site mention a 1991 article that I co-wrote that also suggested that some of the problems experienced by children from divorced families might have occurred even had the parents stayed together.<sup>3</sup> This is not a fact that [familyfacts.org](http://familyfacts.org) thinks you need to know.

Which findings are included and which are excluded make sense if one knows that the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, promotes the values of institutions such as "traditional" marriage and religion. This is not to say that

one should disregard the findings on [familyfacts.org](http://familyfacts.org); in fact, much evidence does suggest that growing up with two parents is beneficial to children. But the informed reader will know that it is necessary to go elsewhere to see whether the kinds of findings that are cataloged at [familyfacts.org](http://familyfacts.org) tell the whole story.

Conservatives are not the only ones who use facts in ways that reflect their values. In the 1980s, when homelessness was first being recognized as a social problem, many news stories included the information that 2 to 3 million Americans were homeless. Soon this figure became an accepted fact. Yet it subsequently came to light that this fact had been provided by a leading advocate for the homeless, Mitch Snyder, who basically made a guess. He said in a television interview:

Everybody demanded it. Everybody said we want a number. . . . We got on the phone, we made a lot of calls, we talked to a lot of people, and we said, "Okay, here are some numbers."<sup>4</sup>

Snyder was just doing what advocates usually do: providing the largest credible estimate of how many people are affected by the problem they want to alleviate or by the disease they would like to cure or by the injustice they want to remedy. In counting the homeless, as in estimating the number of women who have been raped or who experience eating disorders, advocates often take the most expansive definition of the problem and adjust for underreporting. But such estimates are especially susceptible to manipulation for dramatic effect.

More recently, we have heard much in debates over same-sex partnerships about the 1,049 federal benefits and rights that marriage supposedly confers on husbands and wives. This number appeared in the late 1990s and was soon cited everywhere as a fact about the legal benefits of marriage. In 1999, advocates of same-sex marriage, while welcoming the Vermont legislation that created the nation's first civil unions, noted that state-level recognition of gay unions would not provide the partners with the federal benefits of marriage. Hanna Rosin reported in the *Washington Post*:

The plaintiffs in the Vermont case documented a long list of benefits granted to married couples but denied to gay ones. The 300 state and 1,049 federal laws cover such matters as the right to pay taxes jointly, and social security benefits.<sup>5</sup>

Ever since, reputable newspapers around the country and politicians on both sides of the political spectrum have accepted this claim as fact, derived from a federal study conducted by the General Accounting Office. The precision of this fact—not 1,048 or 1,050 but exactly 1,049—gave it such verisimilitude that no one challenged it. And its magnitude suggested an overwhelming bias in favor

of marriage, making it an attractive “fact” that could be used by proponents of same-sex marriage, just as the people who constructed the Heritage website were attracted to only some of the “facts” reported by family researchers on divorce. But in hindsight, its precision and size are the very factors that should have suggested caution in using this fact.

The source of this “fact” was indeed a federal study, but the study did not establish what these and many other news reports have since claimed. In 1996, when Congress enacted the Defense of Marriage Act, Representative Henry Hyde requested that the General Accounting Office identify all federal laws that involved benefits, rights, and privileges that depend on being married. As the GAO staff discussed this request with Hyde’s staff, they agreed to broaden the scope of the study to include “all those laws in the United States Code in which marital status is a factor, even though some of those laws may not directly create benefits, rights, or privileges.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the GAO counted all laws that involved marriage, including those that *penalized* married couples.

One of the 1,049 laws, for example, is a statute that limits the amount of certain crop support payments that one person can receive. For this purpose, a married couple is considered to be one person. But an unmarried couple can apparently escape this restriction and each receives the maximum amount. Another law mandates that a candidate may not spend more than \$50,000 of his or her own money, or the money of his or her immediate family, on a political campaign and still be eligible for federal funding; but there’s nothing to prevent the candidate’s unmarried partner from kicking in additional funds.

Many of the so-called benefits of marriage, furthermore, are trivial. It is true that one law discriminates against cohabiting couples by making it a federal crime to try to influence United States officials by threatening to kill their spouses, whereas it seems not to be a federal crime to threaten to kill their cohabiting partners. But this “benefit” of marriage applies to very few couples.

It did not take weeks of research in dusty government archives to get to the bottom of this; rather, I found the information on the Internet in less than an hour. That so many people had quoted the number without checking it shows how easily a “fact” can become part of the dialogue about social and political issues.

What happens to a fact of this kind is that it becomes a symbol of the issue in dispute. Clearly, marriage does provide some important federal benefits. Only married couples can file their federal tax returns jointly; and only married people can continue to receive part of their partner’s Social Security benefits after the partner dies. But the figure of 1,049 benefits became a dramatic, and at first glance convincing, stand-in for the general privilege of being married in American society. It was this general privilege that really was the point of the debate.

This was the reasoning of the Massachusetts Supreme Court in ruling that restricting marriage to heterosexuals was unacceptable even if same-sex partners were given the same legal status. Marriage, the judges wrote, is more than a collection of benefits; rather, it is a “status that is specially recognized in society.” Denying same-sex couples that special status, the justices argued would create a “stigma of exclusion.”<sup>7</sup>

Debating the abstract notion of social status is, however, more difficult than debating legal benefits. Advocates therefore focused on the 1,049 benefits as a way of building support for their more general position. Many debates over social and political issues revolve around symbols such as this one, and it is in the interest of each side to define the symbol in the largest or the smallest terms possible to bolster their case.

Whether everyone knows where the supposed facts come from, as is the case with the findings displayed on the familyfacts.org website, or whether no one seems to know, as with the apocryphal 1,049 benefits, the careful user of facts will not take them at face value. At the least, the user must examine (or uncover) the source and determine its position on the issues. Even your most trusted friends probably care about the social and political issues they discuss, which makes it difficult for them to be truly balanced in the facts they tell you about. And as a rule, no organization that takes sides in a public debate will provide facts that should be considered fully objective and balanced. To be sure, some organizations may be more transparent and balanced, and others more opaque and one-sided, in their use of facts. But even the fairest will have made choices about what questions to ask, what counts as good research, and on what basis one draws conclusions. Unless you understand where the source is coming from, it's hard to evaluate the information it provides. And that's a fact.

## NOTES

1. Glick (1941).
2. Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae (1998).
3. Cherlin et al. (1991).
4. Snyder in Jencks (1994).
5. Rosin (1999).
6. U.S. General Accounting Office (1997).
7. *Goodrich v. Department of Public Health* (2003).