THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY DATABASE

Patrick Fagan

Introduction

Pat Fagan, a member of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists and the William H.G. FitzGerald Fellow at The Heritage Foundation is directing a database project at Heritage that will be of keen interest to many other members of the society.

The Family and Society Database is an Internet based searchable database of social science findings on the family and religion (www.familydatabase.org). It is free to all users of the Internet and as of November 2000s had 1,200 discreet empirical findings. These are continually being added to, and over time the database will grow in size.

Database Unit

The key unit used in the database is an empirical finding, not a summary, nor an abstract from an article. The main sources will be peer-reviewed journals, though books by leading academics will be used, as well as government research publications.

The jargon language of the social sciences is translated into ordinary English while staying true to the empirical description of the original finding. Where available the finding reference carries an Internet link to the original article. (Where that is not available there is at least a link to the journal web site.) Where possible there will also be a description of the sample size and the population from which the sample is drawn, as well as the year of sampling.

Here is an example of a “finding” as it appears in the database:

This finding looks at the relationship between parental divorce and behavioral factors that contribute to offspring divorce.

Finding: Parental divorce had a direct impact on children's interpersonal behaviors that make marriage less rewarding and increase the risk of divorce. “Compared with peers from intact families, adult children of divorced parents are more likely to have an interpersonal style marked by problematic behavior (problems with anger, jealousy, hurt feelings, communication, and infidelity), and these interpersonal problems in turn increase the risk of divorce.”
Sample or Data Description 1,118 adults married in 1980

Intended Audiences

The primary audiences for all of Heritage's works are Congressmen, their staff, and journalists. However this database will also be marketed to students to accomplish an “end run” around professors who are so ideological in their work they do not expose their students to the literature on family and religion that the database makes accessible.

Students will find the database useful. For term papers and essays they will be able to search by key words and print out the findings they want to use. These give them the facts on which to build their personal work.

Other audiences will receive attention also: clergy, teachers, home-school parents, high school students and debate teams. And when the database grows in size graduate students and academics will be drawn to it also.

Internet Collaboration

The Heritage Foundation intends to cooperate with other institutions and specialist scholars to make the database grow. Scholars and institutions can contribute to the database from anywhere in the world, because it is Internet-based. (They get special password entry to the ‘back-end of the database.) With such collaboration the database can become a world wide, “common-good” project with many contributing and all benefiting. The more this happens the greater the number of findings and the more powerful the database will become.

The Rockford Institute was the first to join in the cooperative effort. Rockford, under the guidance of Dr Allan Carlson, has been producing monthly digests of key findings on the family from the social science literature for 15 years. The findings it has used were a significant portion of the original findings used to launch the database.

Negotiations are underway with at least one major university that had planned to build its own database, but seeing this one decided to cooperate rather than compete.

Civitas, the Institute for the Study of Civil Society in Great Britain and producer of many fine studies on the family, has also begun to contribute findings. Other institutions in Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand are already indicating that they want to become partners in the project, and should that happen it will expand the data being fed into the database and help illustrate the universal good of marriage and religious worship, to name but two of the major themes being tracked in the database.
The Heritage Foundation makes the database available to other institutions interested in carrying it on their web site.

While cooperation by many others will lead to a much bigger database, The Heritage Foundation will maintain quality control of all aspects of the database: fact-checking, editing, key word indexing, and computer management of the database. This will ensure continuity and quality control.

**Philosophy Behind the Project**

The aim of the database is to illustrate natural law from the findings of the social sciences and in so doing to correct the relativist bias and promote a more reasoned appreciation of the family, marriage and religion among college faculty, students, journalists, researchers, legislators and other policy-makers.

If natural law is a reality, then the social sciences well done cannot but illustrate divine natural law. And the more robust the methodological developments of the social sciences the more clearly will the social sciences so illustrate natural law. One can say that the role of the social sciences is to illustrate divine natural law and to stimulate the philosophical discourse on the relationship between man’s behavior and man’s nature. In this manner the database will help correct the relativist pattern so frequent among social scientists.

These developments point to an optimistic future for the relationship between the quantitative social sciences, philosophy and the continuing public discourse.

**Future Extensions of the Database**

As the database grows, each major area of study will need synthesis papers, papers that integrate these myriad findings. Such papers are akin to mosaics which are made from thousands of chips of marble. In this case the discreet empirical finding is akin to the chip and the synthesis paper is the mosaic—a mosaic that illustrates natural law in action in this area.

**How to Collaborate**

The simplest form of collaboration is as an Internet, remote contributor to the database. This involves occasional entries of findings that are significant and which the social scientist judges worthy of bringing to the attention of the world at large.

A more intense collaboration would be a review of a particular literature to make the database robust in that particular area. Such collaboration could involve the use of interns or graduate students under the direction of the academic. Computer programming permits the supervision of such entries by students before the academic forwards them to the database.
For those interested in exploring modes of collaboration, contact Pat Fagan at Pat.Fagan@heritage.org.