

The Gay Marriage Generation

How the LGBTQ Movement Transformed American Culture

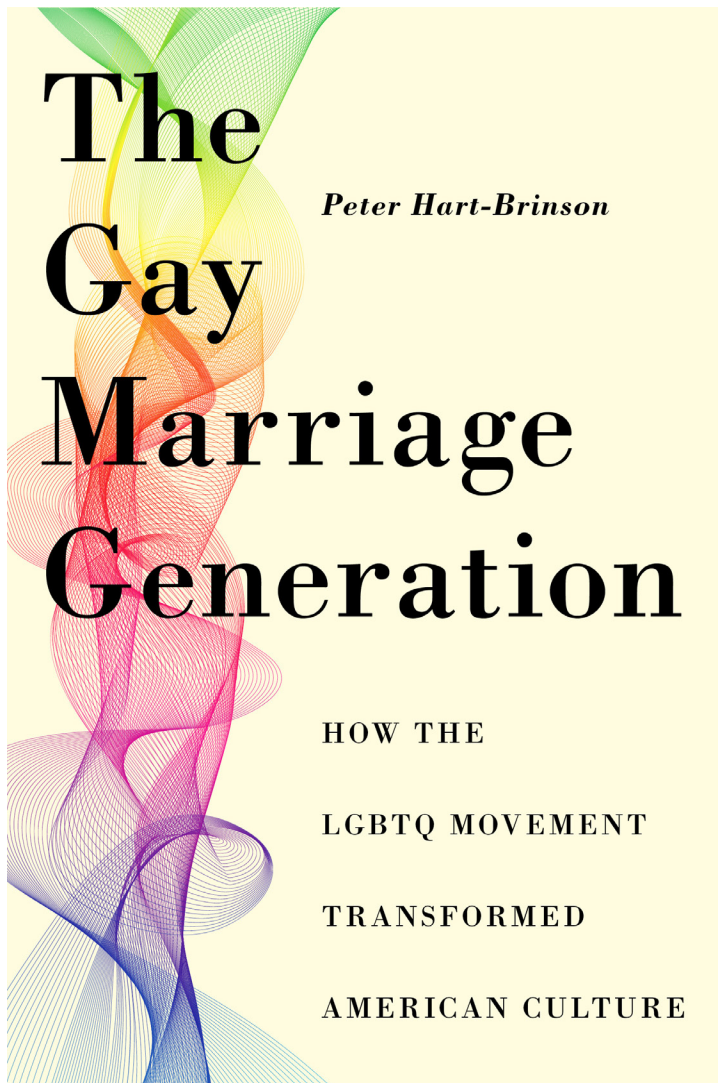
Instructor's Guide

THE GENERATIONAL AND SOCIAL THINKING CHANGES THAT CAUSED AN UNPRECEDENTED SHIFT TOWARD SUPPORT FOR GAY MARRIAGE

How did gay marriage—something unimaginable two decades ago—come to feel inevitable to even its staunchest opponents? Drawing on over 95 interviews with two generations of Americans, as well as historical analysis and public opinion data, Peter Hart-Brinson argues that a fundamental shift in our understanding of homosexuality sparked the generational change that fueled gay marriage's unprecedented rise. Hart-Brinson shows that the LGBTQ movement's evolution and tactical responses to oppression caused Americans to reimagine what it means to be gay and what gay marriage would mean to society at large. While older generations grew up imagining gays and lesbians in terms of their behavior, younger generations came to understand them in terms of their identity. Over time, as the older generation and their ideas slowly passed away, they were replaced by a new generational culture that brought gay marriage to all fifty states.

Through revealing interviews, Hart-Brinson explores how different age groups embrace, resist, and create society's changing ideas about gay marriage. Religion, race, contact with gay people, and the power of love are all topics that weave in and out of these fascinating accounts, sometimes influencing opinions in surprising ways.

An intimate portrait of social change with national implications, *The Gay Marriage Generation* is a significant contribution to our understanding of what causes generational change and how gay marriage became the reality in the United States.



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WHY CONSIDER THIS BOOK FOR YOUR CLASS?

- Written specifically with undergraduate students in mind: use of in-depth interviews make the analysis accessible and engaging, history of the LGBTQ movement is wide-ranging, and all theories and concepts are explained simply with minimal jargon
- Shows the power of young generations to change the world through the interplay of media, politics, culture, and social movements
- Combines an empirical case study of gay marriage with a deeper discussion of generational theory
- Mixed-method approach shows how qualitative data analysis can extend enhance our understanding of public opinion data and historical analysis

GENERAL SUMMARY

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Through revealing interviews, Hart-Brinson explores how different age groups embrace, resist, and create society’s changing ideas about gay marriage. Religion, race, contact with gay people, and the power of love are all topics that weave in and out of these fascinating accounts, sometimes influencing opinions in surprising ways. The book captures a wide range of voices from diverse social backgrounds at a critical moment in the culture wars, right before the turn of the tide. The story of gay marriage’s rapid ascent offers profound insights about how the continuous remaking of the population through birth and death, mixed with our personal, biographical experiences of our shared history and culture, produces a society that is continually in flux and constantly reinventing itself anew.

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| GENERAL SUMMARY |

INTRODUCTION: FROM NON-SENSE TO COMMON-SENSE IN A GENERATION

In the Introduction, Hart-Brinson introduces the key empirical problem to be explained in the study: how public opinion about gay marriage in the United States shifted so quickly and the role that it played in its eventual legalization. The chapter introduces key concepts—cohort, generational change, generational theory, schema, and the social imagination—and describes how they can help us understand the evolution of public opinion about gay marriage in the United States. In broad outline, Hart-Brinson describes the book's thesis: that the changing social imagination was the key cultural and cognitive development that led young cohorts to develop more supportive attitudes about gay marriage, while also causing older cohorts to rethink their prior opinions. The chapter explains how the imagination both produces and draws from the cultural schemas that we use to make sense of the world and why different groups can develop different cultural schemas. It concludes by describing the overall plan of the book and the author's standpoint.

Discussion questions:

1. What are the two different meanings of "generation"?
2. Given the meaning of "cohort," can you name two cohorts that you are a part of?
3. What is the difference between cohort replacement and generational change?
4. What is a mental schema? Think of a common, everyday object (Hart-Brinson uses the example of fruit); can you list some mental associations you have with it that help you imagine it?
5. What make schemas cultural, not just mental? For the everyday object you just identified as a mental schema, can you think of how someone from a different culture or a different part of the world might have different associations than you?
6. List some associations you have with the word "marriage," and compare them with those of your classmates. To what extent do you have similar or different associations, and why do you think they are similar or different?

CHAPTER 1: IMAGINING GENERATIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Chapter 1 is theoretical in nature. While parts of it are difficult and will be most relevant to advanced students, it also provides the essential discussion of what makes a generation and why social scientific studies of generational change must be so different from popular discourse about Millennials, Generation X, and other broadly-defined cohorts. This chapter explains the generational theory of Karl Mannheim and enumerates five challenges that scholars face when studying generational change. It shows how these challenges have impeded social scientific research on generations and spawned the flawed discourse in American society about generations; it also describes how these challenges can be overcome. Recent scholarship on the “social generation” provides a theoretical and methodological opening for finally solving Mannheim’s problem of generations. Building on cross-disciplinary scholarship on the cognitive and cultural dimensions of the process of imagination, this chapter argues that the “social imagination” is the key concept that helps explain how public opinion about gay marriage changed.

Discussion questions:

1. What are Mannheim’s four different generation concepts, and how are they related to one another?
2. What is the problem of “intra-cohort variation,” and why is it important?
3. What are the three different perspectives on the problem of generations, and how do they each contribute something unique to the study of generational change?
4. What is the difference between the imprint paradigm and the pulse-rate paradigm? Why do social scientists prefer the imprint paradigm, and what does the imprint paradigm tell us about the boundaries of generations?
5. What is the social generation, and how does it relate to the different generation concepts defined by Mannheim?
6. How does Hart-Brinson define the social imagination? How is this concept similar to what we usually mean when we talk about someone’s imagination, and how is it different?

CHAPTER 2: CONTESTING HOMOSEXUALITY'S IMAGINATION, 1945-2015

Chapter 2 is a historical, narrative description of how homosexuality in the American imagination changed during the lifetimes of contemporary Americans. It traces the history of political battles over gay rights and the evolution of media representations of lesbians and gays from the end of World War II until the legalization of gay marriage in all fifty states. It therefore provides important background for students who are unaware of the history and politics of LGBTQ rights. At the same time, it makes a theoretical argument about how and why the social imagination of homosexuality changed. The interactions among lesbian and gay activists, opponents, members of prominent epistemic communities (psychiatrists and journalists), and producers in the culture industries caused the social imagination of homosexuality to shift twice; both times, the change followed a similar pattern. This historical narrative fits into the broader argument of the book because it lays out the temporal boundaries of generational change and argues that Americans growing up during different historical periods therefore came of age imagining homosexuality to mean different things.

Discussion questions:

1. What is the public sphere, and who are the “privileged communicators” within it?
2. How was homosexuality understood in American society prior to 1969, and how did lesbians and gays manage to demedicalize homosexuality?
3. What happened during the “Resistance Period” (1974-1986) that caused the American public to remain intolerant of lesbians and gays and opposed to gay rights?
4. How did the actions of LGBTQ movement between 1987 and 1992 affect the way the media portrayed lesbians and gays in the news and in popular culture—both at the time and in later years?
5. Who is part of the Illness Cohort, the Lifestyle Cohort, and the Identity Cohort, and why does it matter which cohort you are in?
6. Do you think the year markers for these periods and cohorts are accurate and meaningful? Why or why not?
7. Why does Hart-Brinson say so little about specific battles over gay marriage and instead focus so much on older historical events? Do you agree or disagree with his rationale, and why?

CHAPTER 3: THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT GAY MARRIAGE

Chapter 3 presents the quantitative analysis of public opinion data about gay marriage, focusing mainly on descriptive results and reserving the more advanced methodological discussions and tables for the footnotes and the Appendix. Using data from the General Social Survey and the Pew Research Center, this chapter analyzes the extent to which the change in American public opinion about gay marriage between 1988 and 2014 is due to age, cohort, and period effects. It also examines the extent to which people's moral judgments, attitudes, and beliefs about homosexuality account for the change in public opinion over time. The analyses show that cohort and period have effects on support for gay marriage, independent of ideology, worldview, and other demographic variables, but they leave unanswered questions about how and why cohort and period affect public opinion as they do.

Discussion questions:

1. What are the differences between age effects, cohort effects, and period effects, and why are they so hard to tell apart?
2. Look at Figure 3.1 on page 80. Describe how public opinion about gay marriage changes from year to year. Then describe how public opinion about gay marriage appears to be related to age.
3. What does the analysis of data from the General Social Survey teach us about how age, cohort, and period are related to public opinion about gay marriage?
4. What does the analysis of the data in this chapter teach us about how public opinion about gay marriage is related to other aspects of people's worldviews?
5. What are the three main conclusions Hart-Brinson draws in this chapter?
6. Do you think the data in this chapter support the argument that generational change was the cause of Americans' changing attitudes about gay marriage? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 4: YOUNG AND OLD IN THE CROSS-FIRE OF THE CULTURE WARS

The first of four chapters featuring the analysis of qualitative interview data, this chapter describes the main discourses articulated by young and old cohorts to talk about gay marriage and isolates the effect of cohort on discourse. Discourses are a product of cohort and ideology, such that the culture war discourses of support and opposition were produced primarily by young liberals and older conservatives. Young conservatives and older liberals produced “middle-ground” discourses that show the tension created by the polarized discourses: their ideology pushed them toward one position on gay marriage, while their age cohort pushed them toward the other. Controlled comparisons of the discourses of ideologically identical parents and children show that cohort affects discourse via the attitudes they express about lesbians and gays. Theoretically, the chapter shows that the culture war should be understood and measured dialogically in communicative interaction, not monologically in public opinion data. This chapter also lays the groundwork for Chapter 5, which digs deeper into the question of how and why cohort affects people’s attitudes about lesbians and gays.

Discussion questions:

1. How is the culture war fueled by discourses about gay marriage, and who articulates these discourses?
2. How are the discourses of libertarian pragmatism and immoral inclusivity related to cohort and ideology, and to what extent does the idea of a “culture war” help or hinder our understanding of those discourses?
3. Which of the four discourses described in this chapter resonate with you the most, and why? The least?
4. Why is it important to compare the discourses of parents and children who are ideologically similar to one another if we want to understand how cohort affects the way people talk about gay marriage?
5. Do you think there is a culture war going on in society today? Why or why not?
6. Are there issues other than gay marriage that have the character of a culture war? Who or what might be responsible for making those issues into a culture war?

CHAPTER 5: THE IMAGINATION AND ATTRIBUTION OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Chapter 5 picks up where Chapter 4 left off in the search for a satisfying explanation of why cohort is related to people's attitudes about lesbians and gays, and ultimately to their opinions about gay marriage. This chapter asks whether people's beliefs about what causes people to be lesbian or gay can explain attitudes about gay marriage and why public opinion changed. Attribution theory appears to offer a promising explanation for the rise of gay marriage, but it is flawed in several respects. Instead, analysis of the metaphors and analogies that people use to talk about gay marriage shows that it is the imagination, not the attribution, of homosexuality that explains the cohort-related variation in attitudes and discourses. Young cohorts use metaphors and analogies that characterize homosexuality as identity more often and in ways that construct homosexuality as morally equivalent to heterosexuality. By contrast, older cohorts use metaphors and analogies that characterize homosexuality as behavior more often and in ways that construct homosexuality as deviant. The cohorts' implicit imagination of homosexuality, as measured in metaphors and analogies, therefore shapes their explicit attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about gay marriage.

Discussion questions:

1. What does attribution theory say about why people support gay marriage? Why does the theory fail to explain the shift in public opinion about gay marriage?
2. According to metaphor theory, why is it that metaphors can teach us about the culture and society of the people who articulate them?
3. Thinking about the metaphors of sexual orientation and sexual attraction, to what extent do you think they help us understand our sexuality, and to what extent do you think they cause us to misunderstand our sexuality?
4. Of all the metaphors and analogies that characterize homosexuality as identity, which one seems the most important, and why?
5. Of all the metaphors and analogies that characterize homosexuality as behavior, which one seems the most important, and why?
6. Are you persuaded by Hart-Brinson's argument that metaphors and analogies express a person's imagination of homosexuality? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 6: THE IMAGINARY MARRIAGE CONSENSUS

Chapter 6 examines how people’s attitudes about marriage shape their discourses about gay marriage. On one hand, supporters and opponents disagree fiercely about the legal definition of marriage and whether or not marriage requires an opposite-sex couple. On the other hand, people of all ages and ideologies share a commonsense understanding of what marriage means in practice. The surface-level disagreement about the legal denotation of marriage therefore rests on a deeper consensus about the social connotations of marriage, and the characteristics of that imaginary understanding of marriage ultimately legitimate the battle over gay marriage for both supporters and opponents alike. The legalization of gay marriage may therefore hasten the reinstitutionalization of marriage, not its deinstitutionalization.

Discussion questions:

1. Why is it important to distinguish between the legal denotation of marriage and the social connotations of marriage?
2. What issues pertaining to the legal denotation of marriage are important for the gay marriage debate?
3. What are some of the key elements of the “imaginary marriage consensus”?
4. How does sexuality fit into the “imaginary marriage consensus”?
5. Do you agree with Hart-Brinson’s conclusion that marriage is being “reinstitutionalized” in a way that is both heteronormative and homonormative? Why or why not?
6. To what extent are your own feelings about marriage similar or different from the imaginary marriage consensus described in this chapter?

CHAPTER 7: NARRATIVES OF ATTITUDE CHANGE AND RESISTANT SUBCULTURES

The fourth and final chapter that analyzes qualitative interview data deals with the exceptional cases—the people who appear to contradict the predictions of generational theory with respect to their discourses and attitudes about gay marriage. The chapter begins by discussing three significant challenges that such exceptions pose to generational theory, and it uses Glaeser’s “sociology of understandings” as a framework for analyzing the discourses of people who are out of step with their peers. Young conservatives who oppose gay marriage and old liberals who have always supported gay rights are parts of resistant subcultures that insulated them from generational change. Similarly, older liberals who changed their attitudes about gay marriage illuminate the process by which generational change can cause period effects. It is argued that these exceptions are compatible with Mannheim’s generational theory, as described in Chapter 1, because of the crucial difference he identifies between the generation location (cohort) and the actual (social) generation.

Discussion questions:

1. What are the three challenges to generational theory that are posed by the fact that many young people oppose gay marriage and many old people support it?
2. What are Glaeser’s three types of validation, and how does each one help a person maintain their understanding of a given issue?
3. What causes many young people to be just as opposed to gay marriage as their parents?
4. Among older liberals who have always been supportive of gay marriage, what kinds of factors caused them to be supportive of gay rights long before it became mainstream?
5. What are some important themes in the narratives of attitude change that older liberals tell about why they changed their mind about gay rights?
6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Hart-Brinson’s argument that the exceptions are consistent with generational theory?

CONCLUSION: MOVING BEYOND GENERATIONAL MYTHOLOGY

The conclusion considers the implications that the book has for the issue of gay marriage and for our understanding of generational change. First, it discusses the likely future of gay marriage, given the pattern of generational change documented in the book. Second, it describes three lessons that the book teaches about generational change, which can help debunk the existing generational mythology and foster renewed efforts to understand the reality of generations.

Discussion questions:

1. On p. 215, Hart-Brinson writes that “the future of gay marriage in the United States looks secure.” What is his rationale for making that argument? Do you agree or disagree?
2. What are the three lessons that this book teaches about how we can do a better job of studying and talking about generational change?
3. To what extent do you think that the labels of Generation X, Millennial, Generation Z, etc. help or hurt our understanding of generational change?
4. Do you think the idea of generations having distinct “worldviews” still makes sense, given what this book has discussed? Why or why not?
5. To what extent do you think we have to change how we think about time and history if we want to understand generational change?