Introduction

From Nonsense to Common Sense in a Generation

On Friday, June 26, 2015, the US Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in all fifty states. In the controversial five to four decision (Obergefell v. Hodges), the Court not only ruled that same-sex couples are protected by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and that they cannot be denied the right to marry, but also sounded a ringing endorsement of marriage as an institution that should be open to all, gay or straight. That night, to celebrate the resounding victory for lesbians and gays, the White House was bathed in rainbow-hued floodlights as if draped by a glowing, translucent pride flag.

The image was—and still is—breathtaking. For both supporters and opponents, it was a powerful symbol for everything that transpired—though it carried drastically different meanings. Speaking of the hundreds of supporters who gathered outside the White House that night, President Obama described the lighting as symbol of validation: “To see people gathered in an evening outside and on a beautiful summer night, and to feel whole, and to feel accepted, and to feel that they had a right to love, that was pretty cool.”1 By contrast, to the more than 133,000 religious conservatives who shared Reverend Franklin Graham’s post on Facebook, it was a symbol of how much America had lost its moral compass: “God is the one who gave the rainbow. . . . Only those who are found righteous will be able to escape His judgment.”2

To me, there was no better symbol of how quickly and dramatically the United States had changed. The ruling capped a titanic shift in public opinion, virtually unprecedented in modern polling.3 In 1996, when President Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) defining marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman, only 27 percent of Americans supported gay marriage. Over the next nineteen years, support for gay marriage grew by 30 percentage points—a
big change for any political issue, let alone one involving such intimate matters as gender, sexuality, and religion.4  

The shift looks even more dramatic if we travel back to 1988. That year, for the first time, researchers at the National Opinion Research Center asked Americans how they felt about gay marriage; only 11.7 percent supported it. How low is that number? It falls squarely in the range of conspiracy theories and congressional approval ratings: about 6 percent of Americans believe the Apollo moon landing was staged, 11 percent of voters believe the US government allowed 9/11 to happen, and 14 percent of voters believe in Bigfoot.5 At the time of the Supreme Court ruling, 17 percent of Americans approved of Congress.6  

In other words, back in 1988, the idea of gay marriage was nonsense. The idea was more or less equally ridiculous to young and old, liberal and conservative, religious and secular. Andrew Sullivan, one of the earliest public advocates for gay marriage, notes just how absurd the idea seemed at the time:

> I remember one of the first TV debates I had on the then-strange question of civil marriage for gay couples. It was Crossfire, as I recall, and Gary Bauer’s response to my rather earnest argument . . . was laughter. “This is the looziest idea ever to come down the pike,” he joked. “Why are we even discussing it?”  

Twenty-seven years later, the “loosiest idea ever” became the law of the land.  

How did this happen? How did gay marriage become accepted? And not just accepted, but enthusiastically embraced by the sitting president and a majority of the population? These are the questions this book answers. I tell the story of how what was once nonsense became common sense—how in the space of a single generation, the institution of marriage was revised in a fundamental way. In the process, we will address some more fundamental questions, beyond the case of gay marriage. How does social change happen? What are generations, and how are they made? Where do our worldviews come from, and how do we express them?
The Gay Marriage Generation?

Although gay marriage was not legalized in the United States by popular vote or legislative act, public opinion still affected the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize it. Writing for the majority, Justice Kennedy devotes a full paragraph to explaining why he thinks there had been ample democratic debate on the issue, which “led to an enhanced understanding of the issue—an understanding reflected in the arguments now presented for resolution as a matter of constitutional law.” Had public opinion not evolved so much since 1996, the Supreme Court would not have heard the arguments that it did.

In an especially evocative passage, Kennedy writes, “changed understandings of marriage are characteristic of a Nation where new dimensions of freedom become apparent to new generations.” In one short sentence, Kennedy invokes three powerful ideas: that sexuality and one’s choice of intimate partners are matters of personal freedom, that our understandings of marriage have changed, and that the emergence of new generations is part of the change. Kennedy implies that time was implicated in the Supreme Court’s decision to legalize gay marriage because young people led the population as a whole to rethink its views on homosexuality and to remedy the injustice of excluding same-sex couples from marriage.

Over the course of this book, we will examine all of these issues, but the point about generations deserves special attention. Many Americans—especially those who lived through the battle over gay marriage—may already have an intuitive sense that generational change is a key part of the story. When I began studying gay marriage in 2006, commentators and public opinion analysts already had determined that the two key indicators of generational change were present: young people were more supportive than their elders, and public support for gay marriage was gradually growing. Whenever we see this pattern in public opinion data, there is a good chance that generational change is the cause.

So, is there a gay marriage generation, and was it the cause of the change? These simple questions turn out to be surprisingly complicated. To start out with, we have to clarify what we mean by “generation.” Strictly speaking, social scientists use the term to refer to relations
of kinship descent (grandparents to parents, parents to children, and so on). By contrast, a cohort is a group of people who experience the same event at the same time (e.g., people born during the Baby Boom, people who graduate from high school the same year). Hence, most social scientists would call the gay marriage generation the “gay marriage cohort.”

But even if we allow ourselves to use the term generation casually to mean cohort, there are still other issues to resolve. Sometimes we use generation to refer to broad cohort groupings that roughly divide a society’s entire population (think Baby Boomers, who were followed by Generation X, who were followed by Millennials, and so on). At other times, we use the term to refer to specific groups who come of age during a particular historical event or phenomenon (think of youth during the Great Depression or the Vietnam War). The idea of a gay marriage generation belongs in this category, and this is not a trivial point. As we will see in Chapter 1, these two kinds of cohorts-as-generations come from different theories and imply radically different things about how generational change happens.

Beyond the difference between cohort and generation, we also need to distinguish between cohort replacement and generational change. Cohort replacement is the inexorable process of population turnover—the continual remaking of the population through births and deaths. Sociologist Norman Ryder memorably called cohort replacement the “demographic metabolism” of society because young people, through birth, continually supply the society with new energy to keep it going, while old people, through death, continually leave the social body, their energy spent. Until we stop having babies and learn how to cheat death, cohort replacement is inevitable.

To the extent that the young cohorts entering the population differ systematically from older cohorts leaving it, we can speak of generational change. To some extent, generational change also seems inevitable because it is hard to imagine young cohorts not differing from their elder counterparts; but many things don’t change with cohort replacement because forces like parental socialization and religion reproduce old norms and values in the young. Essential to the study of generational change is therefore the study of how and why young cohorts develop attitudes or behaviors that differ from those of their elders.
If Justice Kennedy is right that a new generation (read: generational change) caused public opinion to shift in favor of legalizing gay marriage, then we must both count the numbers of people who changed and explain why they changed. We have to determine how much of the change came from cohort replacement, how much of it came from people changing their minds, and what would have caused either of those changes to happen in the first place. In Chapter 3, I provide a quantitative estimate of how much change in public opinion about gay marriage happened due to cohort replacement, but the real questions that this book answers have to do with how and why generational change happened: How and why do young people develop different attitudes about objects of profound social importance, like marriage and sexuality? How do historical forces cause generations to emerge, and why are some affected but not others?

Many readers may already have decent answers to these questions because we all intuitively know something about generational change. We all know about youth rebellion and about the potential significance of experiencing world-historic events firsthand. We are aware that our biographical experiences while we are “coming of age”—typically during late adolescence or early adulthood—shape our worldviews in enduring ways. We remember where we were on 9/11 or when we heard about President Kennedy’s assassination, and we have all been caricatured as Millennials or Generation X or something else.

Generational theory is this body of thought concerning the intersection of history, biography, and social change: it blends the study of the demographic metabolism with the study of the cultural and psychological processes that make cohorts think and act differently from one another. As it turns out, generational theory is as alluring and evocative as it is puzzling and stubborn. We intuit that there is a kernel of truth to the generational labels but know that they are still stereotypes. We know that our formative years really were formative but that our attitudes and beliefs are not set in stone; we change as we age. It’s intuitively obvious that our biographical experience of history shapes us, but we are hard-pressed to specify exactly how.

Generational theory was the underlying academic interest that drove me out into the fields of northern Illinois to interview college students and their parents about gay marriage in 2008–2009. Although it is much
more common in the social sciences to study generational change by quantitatively measuring cohort replacement (for reasons explained in Chapter 1), I was more interested in trying to identify what cultural forces might be causing young cohorts to think differently about gay marriage. I wanted to compare how two cohorts of Midwestern Americans talked about gay marriage and (using the parent-child relationship to control for the influence of socialization) to listen for evidence of just how the process of generational change might be working.

The heart of this book comes from these interviews. The voices of these Midwestern Americans come from a pivotal moment in time—a time of transition when a significant change was under way but the outcome was not yet clear. When I began my interviews, gay marriage was legal only in Massachusetts, but my informants also sensed that change was coming. The discourses I document in this book therefore provide a snapshot of the change as it was unfolding: of how people talk about a contentious issue that was once settled as nonsense, but had become unsettled and was on its way to being resettled as a new common sense.

As we will see, the gay marriage generation is not a cohort; to the extent that the label can be applied to a group of people, it is that fraction of the cohort who came of age after 1992 and imagined homosexuality in a way that was very different from their elders. In reality, though, the gay marriage generation is the decades-long process, involving people of all ages, by which our whole society collectively redefined what homosexuality is, and thus what the idea of gay marriage means. Fully understanding the gay marriage generation therefore means understanding the process by which new worldviews emerge in the first place.

Homosexuality and Marriage in the American Imagination

It took me many years of study to fully understand the voices of my Midwestern informants. The key to explaining how gay marriage was so quickly transformed from nonsense to common sense—and the process by which young people’s generational encounter with history shapes their worldviews—is the social imagination. Not your imagination, like the unicorns and fairies of fantasy; our imagination—our “collective representations” of reality and how they influence our thought and behavior. The social imagination of homosexuality in American
society has changed twice during the past half century, such that young cohorts imagine gay marriage to mean something different than older cohorts; at the same time, older cohorts are being challenged by the youth and a rapidly changing culture to reimagine these same concepts.

This thesis builds on a cross-disciplinary body of research in anthropology, communication, philosophy, psychology, and sociology that shows that the imagination is a crucial component of our social mind. In purely psychological terms, we exercise our imagination whenever we create mental images of things that are not present in our current sensory envelope—the time and space in which our body experiences the world through perception (sight, sound, and so on). Sometimes, our imagination builds purely on our memory (I can imagine what my parents look like, even though I can’t see them right now); at other times, it builds on our mental schemas—a type of cognitive structure in which a concept is defined by a collection of cultural associations we have with it. To take a trivial example, if I ask you to think of eating a piece of fruit, you will probably imagine eating a prototypical one, like an apple or a banana, rather than a botanical fruit, like an eggplant or a zucchini. This is because our schema for “fruit” includes associations with “tastes sweet” and “good in a pie” and “eat it raw.” Mental schemas are resources that our imagination uses to process information and act in the world.

Although all human minds operate by creating and using mental schemas, the exact pattern of associations—the content of a schema—varies by culture and social experience. We call them cultural schemas to signify this. Fruit is one example of how schemas are affected by culture, but stereotypes of people are probably the most important type of cultural schema for sociologists. Our stereotypes are based on our cultural experiences in a society (as shaped by media representations and socialization), and the network of mental associations we develop over time become lodged in our minds as a schema, which we then draw on either consciously or unconsciously when we encounter individuals we perceive as members of that group. Importantly, although the imagination can cause us to perpetuate a stereotype, we can also use our imagination to counter a stereotype—intentionally breaking the cultural schema and its effects.

The above observations illustrate the importance of asking two questions: How do our schemas come to consist of one set of associations
rather than another? And how can we break the pattern of associations and create a cultural schema with different content? I argue that the social imagination is the process that produces and modifies the content of our cultural schemas. Formally, we can define the social imagination as the process by which collectives jointly create or modify the cultural schemas that individuals encounter and internalize through social experience and that provide the cognitive foundation for future action. It is this collective, cultural process of imagination that creates the stereotypes and schemas that individuals inevitably encounter when they come of age, and it is by engaging in the process of social imagination that we challenge, modify, and replace them for new generations.

This book shows how our attitudes and discourses about gay marriage are premised upon how we imagine homosexuality and marriage, and that our cohort-related differences in support for gay marriage both reflect and affect the generational change in the social imagination. At the macro level, I trace the changing American imagination of homosexuality in politics and media representations; at the micro level, my interviews show how different cohorts express their various imaginations of homosexuality in communicative interaction. I argue that the rapid shift in public opinion about gay marriage is therefore due to a generational change in the social imagination of homosexuality in American culture that unfolded at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Plan of the Book

The seven chapters of this book expand upon this argument in greater detail using three kinds of evidence and analysis. Chapter 1 is primarily theoretical in nature; readers exclusively interested in the issue of gay marriage may safely skip this chapter, but it is essential reading for those who want to know what generations are really made of. In it, I explain generational theory in detail, describe five interrelated problems that the theory poses to students of generational change, and explain the theory of social imagination to which I have just alluded.

Chapter 2 is historical in nature, drawing primarily upon secondhand accounts of the rise and evolution of the LGBTQ movement and their representations in mass media since 1945. The history shows how the
social imagination of homosexuality evolved over time and thus distinguishes different periods in American history; it further suggests why cohorts who reached adulthood in each period would develop different cultural schemas of homosexuality based on how it was constructed in the public sphere. Chapter 3 presents the quantitative analysis of public opinion data, which show the existence of cohort and period effects in attitudes, along with the ways in which people’s opinions about gay marriage are shaped by gender, education, politics, religion, and their views about homosexuality.

Chapters 4 to 7 present my analyses of the interviews I conducted with two cohorts of Midwestern Americans. Chapter 4 describes the discourses of the culture wars, along with the ways in which ordinary Americans who were caught in the crossfire talked about the issue. It shows how people were influenced by both cohort and ideology in interactive, dialogic ways, thereby producing an array of discourses about gay marriage that was more varied than the culture war rhetoric usually suggests. Chapter 5 shows how people express their imagination of homosexuality through metaphors and analogies and thus accounts for the influence of cohort on discourse described in Chapter 4. Chapter 6 uncovers the existence of a paradoxical consensus about the practical, everyday meanings that marriage has for people—paradoxical because it exists beneath the surface-level disagreement about definitions of marriage and implicitly legitimates the battle for gay marriage, even for opponents. Finally, Chapter 7 examines the reasons why many older Americans are just as supportive of gay marriage as their younger counterparts and why many younger Americans are just as opposed to it as their elders. In the conclusion, I consider the practical implications of this study for the future of gay marriage and draw out the bigger lessons we learn regarding generational change.

Terminology and Standpoint

Before we begin though, I want to briefly address the terminology I use in this book and my standpoint. For the sake of readability, I have tried to excise as much academic jargon from this book as possible, at the risk of sacrificing precision. Although I have used “same-sex marriage” in my research and academic publications, here I use the popular term
gay marriage because it rolls off the tongue more easily. Similarly, in my academic publications, I have used the phrases social imagination and social generation and insisted upon particular meanings; in this book, I frequently drop the word social from the front. Thus, in most cases, imagination, generation, and generational change should be read to emphasize their social, collective nature.

Different readers may find this book’s focus and representation of homosexuality, lesbians, and gays objectionable for a variety of reasons. In the historical chapter, I try to represent cultural understandings accurately in the context of their times, which means laying bare the contested stigmas, prejudices, and values. In my interviews, I intentionally shifted my language when discussing homosexuality to meet the cultural norms and conversational styles of the people I was talking to. Academics and activists are right to emphasize the importance of labeling and word choice because of how language can frame issues and exclude people, but I made the choice as an interviewer to strive to be more conversational and to avoid making informants feel defensive about their own language. I believe this had the effect of encouraging them to open up to me in ways they might not have otherwise and thereby helped me to understand their worldview more fully.

Beyond my standpoint as a researcher, I made it a point to never inquire about my informants’ sexual orientations or reveal my own (a few informants asked me about my sexual orientation during their interview). I do not know to what extent interviewees assumed anything about my own sexual orientation. I have often been mistaken for gay, but most Americans tend to assume people are straight unless given evidence to the contrary. I had gotten married the summer before I began my interviews, so some informants noticed the wedding ring on my finger. Thus, my standpoint as a straight, married researcher associated with a prominent university put me in a position of power and privilege, which certainly affected the things people said to me. Readers should keep in mind that another researcher might have asked different questions about gay marriage and elicited different answers; though as a social scientist, my sincere hope is that the overall story of generational change would be the same.