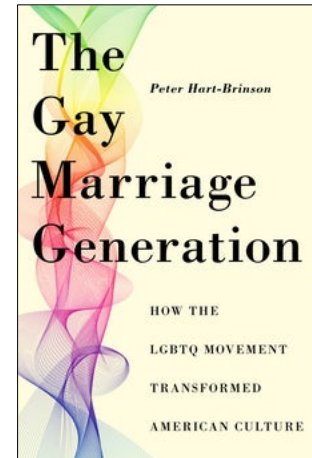


Peter Hart-Brinson, **The Gay Marriage Generation: How the LGBTQ Movement Transformed American Culture**, New York, NY: NYU Press, 2018, 320 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Lik Sam Chan
University of Pennsylvania



“After all, generations are not born; they are made. And they are made by young cohorts through interaction with each other, with other cohorts, and with the bigger constellation of social structures that surround them” (p. 217). This is one of the many beautifully written and theoretically profound paragraphs in Peter Hart-Brinson’s book **The Gay Marriage Generation**, a study focusing on the same-sex marriage debate in the United States. In this paragraph, readers should notice the distinction between “generation” and “cohort,” a critical difference Hart-Brinson makes throughout the book in explaining the influences of decades of LGBTQ rights activism on Americans. Following Karl Mannheim (1952), a renowned sociologist in the early 20th century, Hart-Brinson starts off his investigation by differentiating four related concepts: generation location (i.e., people who are born in the same historical time and social space), actual generation (i.e., people in the same generational location who share a common experience), generation unit (i.e., people in the same actual generation who react similarly to the common experience), and generation entelechy (i.e., people in the same generation unit who come together as a social force). What we now commonly refer to as a “cohort” is the “generational location” in Mannheim’s framework. This book traces the formation of a particular “generation entelechy,” whose members were not only born roughly in the same historical time but also have experienced and reacted positively to the same LGBTQ movements and are supporters of same-sex marriage.

Hart-Brinson argues that our typical way of classifying cohorts (roughly 15 years in length) is arbitrary and does not reflect critical social changes that shape the attitudes and behaviors of a generation. Instead, based on a historical review of discourses about homosexuality, he identifies three major cohorts in relation to the issue of homosexuality. The Illness cohort was born before 1950. They came of age when homosexuality was still considered a sickness and when LGBTQ activism was mainly about community connection. The Lifestyle cohort, who was born between 1951 to 1974, grew up when homosexuality was framed as deviant behavior that was connected to HIV/AIDs. Finally, the Identity cohort was born after 1975. They came of age when the Democratic party and the mass media slowly began supporting the rights of sexual minorities. These various sociopolitical atmospheres predisposed each cohort toward a very distinctive set of imagination—“what we use to comprehend reality” (p. 30)—about homosexuality.

After this theoretical and conceptual clarification, Hart-Brinson brings his readers to his mixed-method research, which starts with the analyses of the data collected in the General Social Survey (from 1988 to 2014) and by the Pew Research Center (2003 and 2013). What I am particularly impressed by is Hart-Brinson’s meticulousness in data analysis: He analyzed the same sets of data with several advanced statistical techniques and different ways to calibrate cohorts. These analyses show consistent results.

Copyright © 2019 (Lik Sam Chan, sam.chan@asc.upenn.edu). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

Because Hart-Brinson's writing is extremely accessible to readers without advanced statistical training, I point readers to pages 93 to 95 of his book for an excellent summary. That said, let me identify one crucial result. While the Identity cohort is more favorable toward same-sex marriage compared to the older cohort, political affiliation and religious ideologies have independent effects on opinions about same-sex marriage, regardless of cohort. This observation is one of several reasons motivating the qualitative component of Hart-Brinson's project.

If statistical analyses offer a bird's-eye view, in-depth interviews provide the narratives on the streets. Hart-Brinson interviewed 65 students who belong to the Identity cohort and their parents who belong to either the Illness cohort or the Lifestyle cohort. His interviews were conducted in 2008 and 2009, many years before the federal legalization of same-sex marriage. Because he is interested in exploring his informants' attitudes toward same-sex marriage, his interview data arguably provide a more "unrefined" view on this issue. I believe had he conducted the interviews after the legalization of same-sex marriage, that timing would have affected people's views and the data he collected.

Using three chapters, Hart-Brinson explores the cohort differences and similarities with respect to views on homosexuality, marriage, and same-sex marriage. Quotes from his informants are well selected, vividly demonstrating both the reasons and emotions his informants had during the interviews (after all, discussing same-sex marriage, a controversial topic back in 2008 and 2009, is highly emotional). Because of the changing discourses about homosexuality, the older and younger informants hold different imaginations and attributions of homosexuality. Older informants (who belong to either the Illness cohort or the Lifestyle cohort) tend to consider homosexuality as a behavior, and thus can be changed, while younger informants (who belong to the Identity cohort) tend to believe that homosexuality is an identity. On marriage, all cohorts actually share a strikingly similar conceptualization of marriage—"it is about love, friendship, commitment, and sexual attraction, but not procreation" (p. 216). With these observations, Hart-Brinson argues that the difference found in the attitudes toward same-sex marriage between the two cohorts is due to the different ways these cohorts understand homosexuality, not marriage per se.

Chapter 4 and chapter 7 are perhaps the two most significant chapters in this book. In chapter 4, Hart-Brinson proposes a typology to capture the four different discourses about same-sex marriage, namely unambiguous support, unambiguous opposition, libertarian pragmatism, and immoral inclusivity. People who articulate the discourse of unambiguous support tend to be politically liberal and younger, whereas people who articulate the discourse of unambiguous opposition tend to be Christian and older. These are rather expected, so what is more interesting are libertarian pragmatism and immoral inclusivity, what Hart-Brinson calls "middle-ground discourses." The discourse of immoral inclusivity is often articulated by younger Christians, whose faith backgrounds have geared them toward the opposition camp, yet their peers, education, and personal contacts with gay men and lesbians have cultivated their tolerance toward sexual minorities. These people often come up with justifications to support same-sex marriage even though their religious "self" is against it. On the other hand, the discourse of libertarian pragmatism is often articulated by older individuals who have negative views on homosexuality but truly believe that society should not discriminate against minorities.

Chapter 7 discusses two set of outliers—younger people who resist same-sex marriage and older people who support it. These people are outliers because their attitudes and imaginations are inconsistent with those of their cohort fellows. This is also why Hart-Brinson emphasizes that a cohort does not equal a generation, because the term “generation” implies a common view on an issue. Based on cultural sociologist Andreas Glaeser’s (2011) work exploring how an individual’s understanding of an issue is changed and reinforced, Hart-Brinson explains how some younger Christians resist same-sex marriage because of their unpleasant interactions with gay men and lesbians and how some older Christians have turned supportive of same-sex marriage because of, for example, their children.

Pure quantitative research on same-sex marriage has often left this question unanswered: How did public opinion toward same-sex marriage in the United States evolve so quickly, apart from cohort replacement? Hart-Brinson’s mixed-method approach not only has successfully answered this question but also offers several methodological insights for studying the legalization of same-sex marriage in other countries. For instance, how would I classify a cohort, say, in Taiwan in the context of same-sex marriage? Hart-Brinson’s approach suggests that in order to correctly identify different cohorts, researchers must pay attention to the local development of a relevant debate. Therefore, his cohort typology in this study cannot be uncritically adopted in other countries and regions. In considering issues beyond same-sex marriage, I wonder how social discourses have shaped the inter-cohort and intra-cohort differences regarding the support of and opposition to China in the series of recent protests in Hong Kong.

To be sure, there are also limitations in this book; some readers will certainly hope Hart-Brinson provides a concise answer to the question set in the book’s title and wonder if “gay marriage generation” is the best term for this significant work given the gendered connotation of “gay marriage.” My concerns are two-fold. First, with Hart-Brinson’s explanation of the middle ground discourses about same-sex marriage, I am interested in knowing what the category “other middle ground” (besides libertarian pragmatism and immoral inclusivity) entails since this category is the second-largest category as measured by percentages in the interview data. Second, almost all of the informants who oppose same-sex marriage are Christian. But I found that Hart-Brinson seems to have downplayed this fact. Even in the conceptual diagram where he depicts the relative position of the four discourses, he names the axis as “ideology” rather than simply “religiosity.” As he himself pointed out, both political and religious ideologies, independently, influence opinions about same-sex marriage; therefore, it would make sense for him to distinguish these two dimensions.

References

Glaeser, A. (2011). *Political epistemics: The secret police, the opposition, and the end of East German socialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mannheim, K. (1952). The problem of generations. In P. Kecskemeti (Ed.), *Essays on the sociology of knowledge* (pp. 276–320). London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.