Discourse of Generations: The Influence of Cohort, Period, and Ideology in Americans' Discourse about Same-Sex Marriage

Abstract

How does cohort affect discourse about same-sex marriage? Existing research using a demographic perspective shows that cohort replacement and intra-cohort attitude change are causing public opinion to liberalize, but a cultural perspective that analyzes social generational processes is needed to explain how and why cohorts develop distinct attitudes and discourses. Moreover, attention to multiple levels of intra-cohort variation can illuminate how the influence of cohort and period varies within cohorts. Analysis of qualitative interviews with two cohorts of Midwestern Americans shows, first, how discourses emerge based on the interaction of cohort and ideology in an informant's cultural repertoire. Further analysis shows that cohort shapes attitudes about homosexuality because of the mainstream cultural construction of it that informants encountered when they came of age. Finally, in an analysis of the exceptions, I show that countercultural networks can insulate cohort subgroups from social generational change and that period effects are causing older liberals to change their preexisting worldviews. All three analyses are consistent with Mannheim's generational theory, and I argue that the analysis of social generational processes, which distinguish the "generation as an actuality" from the cohort, is an essential complement to the demographic perspective in generational theory.

Keywords: generations, cohorts, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, culture, public opinion

Introduction

According to polling from Gallup[1] and the Pew Research Center[2], in the 16 years between 1996 and 2012, opposition to same-sex marriage in American public opinion fell 22 points (Gallup: 68%-46%; Pew: 65%-43%). This rate of change is exceptionally fast for a moral issue involving gender and sexuality, and it has prompted debate about the cause. Many explanations center on cohort replacement—that young supporters of same-sex marriage are replacing the old opponents in the population—but the speed of change also implies period effects. Some scholarly research supports this view: not only do young cohorts express more positive attitudes regarding homosexuality and gay rights, but older liberals are also changing their prior opposition to same-sex marriage (Lewis and Gossett 2008; Sherkat et al. 2011).

Mannheim's (1952 [1928]) theory of generations—which posits that people's biographical encounter with history while "coming of age" creates a unique and enduring worldview distinguishing that cohort from others—can explain why cohort and period effects are occurring, but its utility is hindered by two problems: of analytic perspective and of intra-cohort variation. First, generational theory implies both demographic and cultural perspectives simultaneously: the demographic analysis is required for distinguishing age, period, and cohort effects, while the cultural perspective is required for explaining how different cohorts' encounters with history shape their worldviews. The different methodological requirements of these two perspectives so vexed earlier research on generational theory (for reviews, see Bengtson, Furlong and Laufer 1974; Kertzer 1983) that American sociology separated the two

[1] http://www.gallup.com/poll/117328/marriage.aspx, accessed 5/22/13.

[2] http://www.pewresearch.org/data-trend/domestic-issues/attitudes-on-gay-marriage/, accessed 5/22/13.

lines of inquiry, effectively banishing the cultural perspective on generations to the margins of the discipline and defining the term narrowly in terms of kinship-descent (Kertzer 1983). Unfortunately, defining the research agenda in terms of "cohort" deepened the problem of intra-cohort variation: all members of a cohort are not alike, so analysis must distinguish those cohort subgroups who are socially located in such a manner that they are uniquely affected by history, as generational theory predicts, from those who are not; and it must further explain why members of the same "generation" react differently to their shared encounter with history.

This study asks how cohort affects discourse about same-sex marriage in an effort to overcome these problems in generational theory and to deepen knowledge of how and why public opinion about same-sex marriage is liberalizing. I analytically distinguish the demographic phenomenon of *cohort replacement* from the cultural and social psychological processes of *social generational change*, and I measure the latter in the discourse of two cohorts of Midwestern Americans in individual qualitative interviews. I confront the problem of intra-cohort variation by comparing discourses simultaneously between and within cohorts. In doing so, I show how the effect of cohort varies by how it interacts with religious and political ideology to produce a pattern of discourses that is more complex than the simple cohort replacement explanation implies. I argue that the interaction of cohort and ideology in discourse illuminates the social generational processes that mark the boundaries between the cohort and the "generation as an actuality," and further, among generation units.

First, I show that supportive, oppositional, and two middle-ground discourses—*libertarian pragmatism* and *immoral inclusivity*—are produced based upon how cohort interacts with political and religious ideology to shape the cultural repertoires of informants. Second, I isolate the influence of cohort on discourse through a controlled comparison of parents and

children, which allows me to control somewhat for the influence of parental socialization, political ideology, and religious ideology. Cohort influences attitudes about homosexuality because of how homosexuality was understood in mainstream American culture during the period in which each cohort came of age: younger cohorts are more likely to think of homosexuality as *collective identity*, while older cohorts are more likely to think of homosexuality as *deviant behavior*. These two analyses demonstrate the existence of what Mannheim calls the "generation as an actuality," those cohort subgroups that articulate social generational change in their discourses. In a third analysis of the exceptions to this pattern, I show how counter-cultural networks can insulate other cohort subgroups from social generational processes, and I show how period effects cause older liberals to change the attitudes that they carried over from a previous period.

I argue that all three analyses are consistent with Mannheim's theory of generations and show how qualitative and cultural research can contribute to more robust theories of social generational change. In order to understand how social generational change occurs, not only must we complement demographic analyses of cohort replacement with cultural analyses of social generational processes, but we must also deal with the problem of intracohort variation by distinguishing the cohort from the actual generation, and the actual generation from the generation units. Regarding same-sex marriage, this study shows that the influence of cohort varies by a person's social location within the cohort, such that attitude change is happening unevenly within the population. It further suggests that the convention of measuring public opinion only in terms of support and opposition obscures other meaningful attitudes.

Public Opinion about Homosexuality and Same-Sex Marriage

It is well known that attitudes about same-sex marriage in the United States are liberalizing (Brewer and Wilcox 2005), a trend that accelerated after 2009. Although scholarship explaining this trend is still relatively new (McVeigh and Diaz 2009; Powell et al. 2010), evidence from longitudinal studies of public opinion shows that both cohort and period effects are occurring (Lewis and Gossett 2008; Sherkat et al. 2011). This replicates findings regarding the liberalization of attitudes about homosexuality (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Loftus 2001; Treas 2002; Wilcox and Wolpert 2000) and gender ideology (Brewster and Padavic 2000; Brooks and Bolzendahl 2004; Ciabattari 2001).

Two types of changes in public opinion are thus happening simultaneously. First, cohort replacement is occurring, such that young supportive cohorts are replacing older, oppositional cohorts in the population. Second, this slow process of demographic turnover is complemented by intra-cohort attitude change, in which older liberals are changing their attitudes about the issue. Both processes can be attributed to a single historical event or set of historical changes, which causes younger cohorts "coming of age" during this period to develop a distinctive set of attitudes and orientations to same-sex marriage, while also challenging members of older cohorts to alter their pre-existing attitudes.

Although longitudinal, quantitative studies of public opinion, using techniques to disaggregate age, period, and cohort effects, are necessary for establishing the existence of cohort and period effects, these methods must be complemented by a theoretical explanation and/or methodological intervention that can explain how and why these effects are occurring (Winship and Harding 2008). In other words, the macro-level demographic analysis of public opinion must be complemented by a cultural and historical account of how and why a historical period shapes attitudes about same-sex marriage in different ways. Such a cultural and historical

analysis aims to uncover the “social generational” (Esler 1984; Pilcher 1994) processes that cause cohort and period effects to become manifest in public opinion.

The changing social construction of homosexuality is central to any cultural and historical explanation of why cohort and period effects are affecting public opinion. Cohorts who came of age before 1969 grew up in a society in which homosexuality was defined as a *mental illness*. After the gay liberation movement replaced the homophile movement, in the wake of the 1969 Stonewall uprising and the 1973 elimination of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, homosexuality was culturally constructed as a *deviant lifestyle*. Although gays and lesbians began mobilizing for equality and publicly asserting their collective identity, homosexuality remained stigmatized and marginalized in mainstream American culture (Bernstein 2002).

This construction of homosexuality was further challenged in the 1990s; cohorts coming of age after 1992 grew up in a culture in which homosexuality was constructed as a *collective identity*. In the wake of the AIDS crisis, the election of President Bill Clinton, and the escalating electoral battles with religious conservatives, gay rights tactics and discourse replaced gay liberation tactics and discourse within the LGBTQ movement (Fetner 2008; Gallagher and Bull 2001; Rimmerman 2000). Movement activists began to assert their fundamental sameness with heterosexuals to gain equal rights, “normal” gay characters became increasingly prominent in mass media and popular culture, and gays and lesbians became increasingly open about their sexual orientation in public life (Gross 2001; Seidman 2004; Walters 2001).

In sum, between the time that the Baby Boom cohort and their children came of age, the social construction of homosexuality in American culture had shifted significantly. Younger cohorts became more likely to express tolerance for homosexuality, to support equal rights for

gays and lesbians, to know gays and lesbians personally, and to view television shows and movies that portrayed gay and lesbian characters sympathetically. In short, young cohorts were more likely to think of homosexuality as a normal, taken-for-granted feature of American society. Meanwhile, older cohorts had their previous views of homosexuality challenged by this cultural shift.

This study aims to contribute to the explanation of how and why cohort and period effects are occurring in attitudes about same-sex marriage by measuring the influence of cohort on discourses about same-sex marriage. By examining variation in discourses both between and within cohorts, it is possible to show how cohort and period shape the ways that people talk about same-sex marriage and homosexuality. Like other qualitative research on cohorts (Small 2002; Whittier 1997), this study aims to show how the social encounter with historical time can influence long-term patterns of social reproduction and social change.

Cohort and Generation

When studying cohort effects in attitudes, special attention must be devoted to distinguishing two inter-related processes: cohort replacement and social generational change. Whereas *cohort replacement* refers to the macro-level demographic process whereby the population continually changes through the death and birth of individuals, *social generational change* refers to the cultural and social psychological processes whereby a young cohort's encounter with social structures during the historical period in which they "come of age" shapes their worldviews. Each process requires different analytic procedures, but they each imply the other; the foundational statements of both generational theory (Mannheim 1952 [1928]) and the

cohort concept (Ryder 1965) illustrate the theoretical connections between these two concepts, as do some paradigms in aging and the life course (Elder 1994; Riley, Foner and Riley Jr. 1999).

This distinction between cohort replacement and social generational change builds on, and attempts to preserve, the related distinction between cohort and generation. Whereas a *cohort* is defined simply as a group of people defined by a point in time (and space), the term *generation* has multiple meanings (Alwin and McCammon 2007; Kertzer 1983). As a result of the conceptual confusion generated by the numerous meanings of generation, Kertzer (1983) recommended that the term be restricted to its kinship-descent meaning. Following Esler (1984) and Pilcher (1994), I use the term "social generation" to refer to the cultural and social psychological processes implied in generational theory, leaving the narrow definitions of both cohort and generation intact.

Mannheim's (1952 [1928]) generational theory underscores the importance of these distinctions. Mannheim identifies four distinct generation concepts: the generation location, generation as an actuality, generation unit, and generation entelechy[3]. The *generation location* is synonymous with cohort: a temporally-defined group. Sharing the same generation location is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for being part of a *generation as an actuality*, a subgroup of a cohort that "*participat[es] in the common destiny* of this historical and social unit" (p. 303, emphasis in original). To be part of an "actual generation," one must share a common generation location and a common social location within that cohort, such that one experiences history in a similar way. However, such shared experience does not mean that everyone will react in the

[3] I do not discuss "generation entelechy" because it is unnecessary for the conceptual exposition here.

same way: there are multiple *generation units*—social groups who "work up the material of their common experience in different specific ways"—within the actual generation (p. 304).

Mannheim's model of generations is a nested model. Scholars frequently conceptualize intra-cohort variation in terms of generation units (or "political generations") (Alwin and McCammon 2007; Klatch 1999; Larson and Lizardo 2007; Laufer and Bengtson 1974; Rintala 1963), but Mannheim actually distinguishes between two separate levels of difference within the cohort. In a key passage, Mannheim describes the differences thusly:

> Whereas mere common 'location' in a generation is of only potential significance, a generation as an actuality is constituted when similarly 'located' contemporaries participate in a common destiny and in the ideas and concepts which are in some way bound up with its unfolding. Within this community of people with a common destiny there can then arise particular generation-units. These are characterized by… an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experiences. (p. 306)

Not all members of a cohort are part of the actual generation, and not all members of the actual generation are alike. *Social generational* processes are those processes that distinguish the "generation as an actuality" from the cohort because of their unique cultural experience of temporally defined social structures; the formation of "generation units" within the actual generation depends upon other factors, such as political and religious ideology and social networks.

A prominent empirical example illustrates these distinctions. Schuman and Scott (1989) examine evidence of "generational imprinting" in the collective memories of different cohorts

and find that people are more likely to remember important historical events that happened during the period in which they came of age. However, when they failed to find the expected patterns of collective memory regarding the Civil Rights Movement, Griffin (2004) showed that it was because they did not differentiate between those who lived in the South and those who did not. Griffin confirms a logical expectation: that memory of the Civil Rights Movement will be more pronounced the more intimately one experienced it. Living in the South was an indicator of being part of the "actual generation," because they participated in the "common destiny" of that group; among those Southerners, different generation units formed, such as the whites who resisted the Civil Rights Movement.

This example illustrates the importance of attention to the cultural and social psychological processes of social generational change that distinguish the actual generation from the cohort. Without such an analysis, scholars may produce null findings and broad, inaccurate stereotypes of an entire cohort because they fail to distinguish among differences within cohorts. Social generational processes only affect certain subgroups of a cohort who are socially located in a way that gives them "fresh contact" (Ryder 1965) with the historical *Zeitgeist*.

The existing literature provides insight into the nature of the social generational processes that distinguish the actual generation from the cohort. First, according to the *impressionable years hypothesis,* late adolescence/early adulthood is the phase of the life cycle in which a person "comes of age," developing foundational attitudes and orientations about public issues (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Schuman and Scott 1989). Second, according to the *aging-stability*, or *persistence, hypothesis,* the attitudes and orientations formed early in life will remain relatively stable over the life course, once major life course transitions are accounted for (Glenn 1980; Jennings and Niemi 1981; Miller and Sears 1986; Sears and Funk 1999). Third, generational

theory presumes a *historical causality*: that attitude differences are caused by significant historical events or societal changes (Alwin and McCammon 2004; Firebaugh and Chen 1995; Weil 1987). Finally, cohort analyses of attitude change attribute greater power to *experiential knowledge* in shaping cognition than to knowledge acquired from secondary sources. Having experienced a historical event first-hand is presumed to be of primary importance in shaping one's worldview (Ryder 1965; Schuman and Scott 1989).

Together, these propositions describe the social generational processes by which a person's cultural outlook is shaped by their historically-located encounter with social structures; however, there is no scholarly consensus on what are the exact social generational processes. Constructs like socialization (Demartini 1985), generational imprinting (Schuman and Scott 1989), cohort norm formation (Riley, Foner and Riley Jr. 1999), and historical participation (Alwin and McCammon 2007) have all been proposed. In recent European theory, these processes are theorized in Bourdieuian terms of habitus, hexis, field, and doxa (Eyerman and Turner 1998; Gilleard 2004; Stevenson, Everingham and Robinson 2011), or in terms that derive from cognitive, linguistic, performative, and queer theories (Cavalli 2004; Corsten 1999; McDaniel 2004; Plummer 2010).

In this paper, I measure social generational processes in the production of discourse. Social generational processes are measurable in discourse because language is shaped by social structures and power relations (Foucault 1972; Williams 1976); as those structures change over time, patterns of talk change accordingly. By analyzing individual interviews and comparing discourses between cohorts, we should observe differences in how different cohorts draw from their cultural repertoires (Swidler 2001) to construct attitudes and opinions about same-sex marriage. Some components of a cultural repertoire are shaped by a person's cohort-related

encounter with social structure while coming of age, just as other elements of a cultural repertoire are shaped by socialization, mass media, etc. Because the elements of a repertoire and their patterns of use vary by a person's social and historical location, differences in discourse distinguish the "generation as an actuality" from the cohort and can be interpreted as manifestations of social generational change.

Case and Methods

To the extent that the debate over same-sex marriage is ideologically predicated upon the structural changes regarding gender, sexuality, marriage, and family that have reshaped American society since 1969, the liberalization of attitudes about same-sex marriage is an ideal case for studying social generational change. The bulk of these changes occurred roughly within the space of a single biological generation and thus make social generational processes measurable through cohort comparison.

I conducted 97 individual interviews with college students (n = 65) and their parents (n = 32) in northern Illinois between September 2008 and April 2009. The college students were born in the United States between 1978 and 1990, while their parents were born in the United States between 1945 and 1963. The parents reached adulthood in the 1960s and 1970s when homosexuality was culturally constructed as a *mental illness* or *deviant lifestyle*, and they lived through the rise in the divorce rate, the struggles of the gay liberation and second-wave feminist movements, and the liberalization in attitudes regarding sexuality. By contrast, the students all reached adulthood after 1996—after the ascent of gay rights discourse, after the major victories of the feminist movement had been consolidated, and when gays and lesbians were increasingly "out" in their personal lives and in mass media.

I recruited students at a four-year public university (Northern Illinois University, in DeKalb) and a two-year community college (Rock Valley College, in Rockford). I selected these colleges as recruitment sites to obtain variation in class and educational background, religious and political beliefs, ethnicity, and city size; while at the same time maintaining a common regional culture to the extent possible. These two colleges draw students primarily from the northern Illinois region, which includes a large metropolitan city and suburbs, a mid-sized city, and numerous small towns and rural areas. My comparative strategy was inspired by that of Lamont (1992) insofar as the site selection was intended to facilitate the comparison between cohorts rather than to make generalizable claims about public opinion. Upon completion of an interview with a student, I asked for permission to contact one of their parents. Demographic characteristics of the informants are listed in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Interviews lasted between 70 minutes and three hours. They were intended to elicit the cultural foundations of the informant's attitudes about same-sex marriage by posing questions and prompts that would require them to draw from elements in their cultural repertoires to formulate a response. My interview techniques combined the "responsive interviewing" approach (Rubin and Rubin 2005) with Swidler's (2001) techniques of using interviews to find out how people "use" culture. Thus, in addition to asking questions about a person's experiences and opinions, I also included hypothetical scenarios, intentionally vague questions (e.g. "What does the word 'marriage' mean to you?"), and questions that required respondents to take the role of the other (e.g. "Why do you think some gays and lesbians want the right to marry?").

The interview guide contained six sections. I began each interview with an extensive "getting to know you" conversation, focused primarily on the present and on their teenage years.

I then asked a variety of questions about their media consumption habits. The heart of the interview consisted of one section about marriage and relationships; one section about same-sex marriage and civil unions; and one section about homosexuality and bisexuality. I wound down the interview with a discussion of the 2008 presidential election.

All interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. In the open coding period, I coded both inductively (e.g. keyword codes) and deductively (e.g. statements expressing an attitude about particular topics); further axial coding was inductive (e.g. what exactly was their expressed attitude). Analyses also included memos comparing each matched student-parent pair, annotations of important passages, and fieldnotes for each interview.

Same-sex marriage discourses are operationalized as combinations of explicit statements about same-sex marriage with more general beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding the topics of homosexuality and marriage. My initial classifications of discourse were based on fieldnotes, open coding, and memos about each matched student-parent pair. Based on the axial coding of informants' expressed attitudes and opinions about same-sex marriage, I revised the classifications, noting fine-grained distinctions in discourse that were not initially apparent.

I also classify informants according to *religious ideology* and *political ideology*. For the purposes of this analysis, I categorize each informant in one of three categories for each dimension of ideology. For religious ideology, the categories are: "Secular/Atheist/Progressive," "Mainline/Moderate" (which includes institutionalized religions like Catholicism and Judaism) and "Evangelical/Orthodox." For political ideology, the categories are: "Liberal/Libertarian," "Moderate/Mixed/Non-partisan," and "Conservative." Libertarians are indistinguishable from political liberals in my interviews because my interview guide ignored economic issues. All of my classifications were interpretive; I included self-identification, life history information, and

other indicators from informants' discourse (e.g. how they talked about the 2008 election) in an effort to classify each informant according to actual ideological similarities rather than idiosyncratic understandings of labels.

The majority of the analysis below focuses primarily on the 33[4] matched pairs of students and parents because I use the parent-child relationship as a control, attempting to isolate the effect of cohort from the effect of generation. I compare matched pairs of parents and children who essentially agree with one another on issues related to politics, religion, marriage, and sexuality in order to show how cohort shapes discourse. By controlling somewhat for the influence of parental socialization and the power of political and religious ideologies, comparing the discourses of students and parents who otherwise have similar views shows stronger evidence that observed differences in discourses are due to cohort-related attitudes and understandings of homosexuality.

Descriptive Results

Contrary to the culture war imagery that the same-sex marriage debate typically conjures, patterns of talk failed to polarize into two irreconcilable discourses because of the numerous ways in which people's beliefs, attitudes, values, and experiences with homosexuality interacted with their views on marriage, religion, and politics. After coding the discourses inductively, a variety of "middle-ground" discourses between *unambiguous support* and *unambiguous opposition* emerged. Table 2 shows that the two cohorts differed in how frequently they constructed certain discourses.

[Table 2 about here]

[4] I count one parent twice for each child.

Consistent with existing research, members of the younger cohort were more likely to construct unambiguously supportive discourses, while members of the older cohort were more likely to construct unambiguously oppositional discourses. These two polar discourses are the most common among my sample for numerous reasons; yet these discourses also contain an ideological coherence that makes them easy to articulate. Specifically, these discourses emerge when an individual's political and religious ideology is consistent with their attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality. Supportive discourses were articulated primarily by people with socially liberal political views and with non-negative attitudes about homosexuality; oppositional discourses were articulated primarily by religious conservatives who believe that homosexuality is immoral. In each case, the logical implications of each factor for their opinion about same-sex marriage are consistent.

By contrast, middle-ground discourses feature an incongruence between ideology and attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality. Although not every middle-ground discourse is related to cohort[5], below I describe the two discourses that are: *immoral inclusivity* and *libertarian pragmatism*. These two discourses were articulated most often when a person's religious or political ideologies seemed to push them to take one position in the debate about same-sex marriage, while their attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality seemed to pull them towards the opposite position. The people most likely to use libertarian pragmatic discourses were socially liberal parents with implicit negative attitudes about homosexuality, although a few students with this same combination of ideology and attitudes also produced this discourse. The discourse of

[5] For example, one discourse was produced when informants expressed support for same-sex civil unions but refused to use the label "marriage," either because of Catholic ideology or because of a belief that all marriages recognized by the state should be called civil unions.

immoral inclusivity was produced exclusively by religious conservative students with non-negative attitudes towards homosexuality.

Libertarian Pragmatism

Libertarian pragmatism is a discourse that combines the value of individual liberty with a refusal to judge the morality of another person's action, as long as that person's action has no negative consequences for others. The discourse is libertarian because the speaker refuses to cast a moral judgment on actions or behaviors that are considered private; it is pragmatic because this libertarianism is predicated upon a specific outcome: that the action cause no harm to others. Informally, the discourse declares, "It's a free country; you can do what you want, as long as you're not hurting anybody."

Applied to same-sex marriage, informants constructed this discourse by affirming that gays and lesbians can live their lives any way they choose, by denying that homosexuality is a sin while also expressing some negative attitude about homosexuality, and by either denying that their opinion about same-sex marriage mattered or by expressing mixed views on the issue. People used libertarian pragmatic discourse to affirm a person's freedom to love who they want to love, even though they might not approve of homosexuality:

> I see [same-sex marriage] on TV and stuff like that, like everybody else, but I can't judge them people either. They, that's their lifestyle, that's what they love. They love somebody just as well as somebody else. I'm not, I don't go one way or the other. If that's what they want, then that's what they should have, you know. (Jillian, age 49)

> I don't know, I really, what's their business is their business. I honestly don't really care too much for it, but I'm not going to have a biased point of view and say it's wrong. That's that person's life, it's not mine. It's not affecting me in any way. (Dylan, age 23)

Because these informants do not think a person's sexual preference affects them personally, they do not think that it is their place to judge them.

Those who constructed the libertarian pragmatic discourse refused to state an opinion about same-sex marriage, even when directly asked:

> Q: Would you support legalizing same-sex marriage in our society?
>
> R: You know, I don't know that I would actively go into it, honestly, because it's just not an issue I really care about. It doesn't affect me, and I'm being honest about that. Maybe it's because I don't have anybody close to me that I know, you know…. I wouldn't be opposed to it, but I wouldn't be active towards it either. (Maria, age 45)

This discourse contains within it a justification for not taking sides in a conflict. Rather than say they support or oppose same-sex marriage, it allows informants to avoid getting involved.

Libertarian pragmatic discourse is premised upon an implicit or explicit negative evaluation of homosexuality. For example, throughout my conversation with Harvey, age 23, it was clear that he felt uncomfortable with homosexuality. At one point, he expressed his discomfort by recalling an incident in one of his classes:

> A gay guy was sitting there looking across the class, looking at me across the room, looking at me like this [makes face]. Like that's uncomfortable, you know what I mean?

> Okay, maybe a girl, but that's what we do as far as guys, but when a guy does it, then it's like, I want to beat him up. (Harvey, age 23)

The negative attitudes expressed in this statement are unusually explicit. The same look he gives to women, when used on him by a man, makes him uncomfortable to the point of violence. But he did not use this feeling as the basis for opposing same-sex marriage. When I asked him if he personally had an opinion about same-sex marriage, he responded:

> Like I said, I just don't really even care…. It just really doesn't affect me so I really can't just, you know, downplay somebody else who goes there. Like if I go to a club and like somebody sees me talking to like a white female, and then it's like, "oh you can't do that," it's like what am I doing to hurt you?... I got my own things to worry about. Same-sex marriage really isn't one of the things on the table at the moment. (Harvey, age 23)

Harvey, who is African American, uses the example of interracial dating as an analogy to explain his refusal to state an opinion. Simply because one does not approve of another person's behavior does not mean it is appropriate to pass judgment on them.

It should not be surprising that libertarian pragmatism was used by individuals with socially liberal political beliefs because the ideas contained in this discourse are typically associated with libertarian political ideology: tolerance, cultural relativism, and rejection of prejudice. But the discomfort and negative attitudes about homosexuality that informants expressed prevented them from supporting same-sex marriage. While this discourse might be interpreted as a product of social desirability bias, it is so firmly embedded in American culture

(e.g. concerning motorcycle helmet laws) that it is unlikely to be solely the result of efforts at impression-management.

Immoral Inclusivity

In contrast to the libertarian pragmatic discourse that was constructed primarily by older liberals, the discourse of *immoral inclusivity* was constructed exclusively by conservative Christian students to reconcile religious teachings about homosexuality with their feelings of tolerance and support for gay rights. I refer to this discourse as immoral inclusivity because it defines heterosexuals and homosexuals as equally immoral beings—albeit for different reasons—and that it therefore would be wrong to treat gays and lesbians differently.

The informants who constructed this discourse often did so with difficulty, using the interview to "talk out" their feelings on the issue. For example, Elizabeth, a 19-year old conservative Christian told me that she is against same-sex marriage because of how *The Bible* defined marriage and homosexuality. However, on the day that I interviewed her, in a debate activity in one of her classes, she learned about the rights and benefits that are denied to gays and lesbians because they are not allowed to marry:

> As far as gay marriage, I don't know a lot about the topic from the other point of view, so it's interesting to hear the person's speech in support of it. I found out things like, you know, they aren't given a lot of the rights that they should be. So, I see that to be kind of upsetting… (Elizabeth, age 19)

Elizabeth accepts the premise that gays and lesbians should be accorded rights they do not have. But when I asked her whether or not gays and lesbians deserved equal rights, she contradicted herself:

> I don't, not as far as marriage. I just don't like the idea that a man and a man can get married and then raise children…. As far as rights for people, I don't like that they're discriminated against. I think that they should be viewed as people. I mean, don't discriminate against them just like you wouldn't discriminate [against] someone because of their race. But then I guess I'm kind of contradicting myself when I say that I don't think that they should have the right to get married. So, I don't know, it's kind of a confusing issue for me. (Elizabeth, age 19)

Elizabeth acknowledges the apparent contradiction in her views and admits that she is not really sure how she feels about the issue. She describes gays and lesbians as human beings who deserve equal rights; but she consistently drew upon her religious upbringing to justify why she does not think gays and lesbians should have the right to marry.

Even students with well-formed opinions combined their religious ideology with their desire to be tolerant and supportive of gays and lesbians in complex ways. Some students spoke confidently about the inerrancy of *The Bible* and the sinfulness of homosexuality, while maintaining that gays and lesbians should be accorded equal rights under the law. For example, Carl, age 19, argues that same-sex marriage should be recognized on legal grounds, even though he personally disagrees with it. He dislikes the strong anti-gay rhetoric that he hears in church:

> I mean, their sin isn't any worse than anyone else's, so… that's why I think it's horrible when some people just go on this tirade about gay marriage and stuff. There's no room whatsoever for someone to act like that. (Carl, age 19)

Despite these feelings, Carl said he would vote *against* same-sex marriage because of the religious conception of marriage that he finds meaningful.

Bethany, age 22, constructs a similar discourse using her beliefs about sin to justify her support for gays rights. She is sympathetic to the cause of same-sex marriage because she believes that homosexuality is no more of a sin than other sins:

> God says that marriage is between a male and a female. You're right, he does say that. You're right, I do believe that. However, just as much as I really can't cast stones at people who get divorced or people who overeat or people who are alcoholics, God says all of those things are just as much of a sin…. You want to get married, go right on ahead, it really doesn't bother me. And they want to be entitled to the same views because their level of commitment is more or greater or as equal to the happiest married heterosexual couple and that, you know, I think that's really important when it comes down to it. I mean, heaven forbid if my significant other got into a car crash or something; I wouldn't want it to fall on his great aunt who he never talks to, who is his only surviving family member; I would want that decision to be up to me, and I understand why they're fighting for those rights. (Bethany, age 22)

Bethany empathizes with same-sex couples who love each other and who want to commit to each other, imagining a scenario in which one person cannot take care of their partner because

the relationship is not legally recognized. In doing so, she affirms the legitimacy of gays' and lesbians' fight for same-sex marriage.

Thus, students used the discourse of immoral inclusivity to construct a variety of opinions about same-sex marriage. Elizabeth wasn't sure how she felt about it; Carl said he would ultimately vote against it, even though he thinks it should be legal; Bethany said she would support same-sex marriage, even though she disagrees with it. It is difficult to classify any of these discourses as being entirely supportive or oppositional; rather, the discourse is a manifestation of the conflict between conservative religious teachings and their positive, tolerant attitudes towards gays and lesbians.

Analytic Results

Thus far, I have argued that four main discourses—supportive, oppositional, libertarian pragmatism, and immoral inclusivity—are produced because of how an individual's religious and political ideology interacts with their cohort-related attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality. The claim that religious and political ideologies shape discourses about same-sex marriage is uncontroversial, but it is not clear that cohort, rather than some other variable, such as education[6] (Ohlander, Batalova and Treas 2005), should account for people's attitudes about homosexuality. In this section, I restrict my analysis to the 33 matched pairs of children and parents, which allows me to isolate the effect of cohort on discourse somewhat by controlling for the influence of ideology and of generation. Among ideologically-matched pairs of students and

[6] The fact that all students have relatively equal, and incomplete, educational attainment makes a test of a competing explanation impossible with this data.

parents, any difference in discourse may be plausibly attributed to their cohort-related views on homosexuality.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 locates each of the 65 individuals, classified by their political and religious ideologies, in a three-by-three table; it also displays the kinship ties of each informant and whether each informant articulated a supportive, opposing, or middle-ground discourse of some type. If one reads Figure 1 spatially, like a two-dimensional plane, the ideological proximity of matched pairs suggests several notable findings about the relative power of cohort to shape discourse about same-sex marriage.

First, the importance of ideology in shaping discourse is clear. Not only do supportive and oppositional discourses cluster as expected, but even middle-ground discourses are most common among moderates. Second, the conventional cohort replacement story is also supported in this figure. Only one of the thirty-two parents articulates a discourse that is more supportive than that of the student's (an unusual case, in which the student supports same-sex marriage but opposes the rights of gays and lesbians to adopt children)[7]. Third, the power of parental socialization is clear in how ideologically similar most children are to their parents; in only four cases does the kinship tie cross more than one ideological "line." Indeed, in my qualitative memos comparing each student to their parent, I identified only six pairs in which some ideological influence probably accounts for a difference in discourses.

[7] A second student-parent pair seems to follow this pattern, but does not because of a semantic disagreement. In this case, a student fails to articulate an unambiguously supportive discourse only because he insists that marriage is a religious institution and that all marriages should be called civil unions. He is supportive of equal rights for same-sex couples.

In this paper, however, I wish to focus on a fourth pattern in the data: the cohort-related difference in same-sex marriage discourse that exists among ideologically similar kin. Among the eight student-parent pairs who share political and/or religious conservative ideologies, four students articulate middle-ground discourses rather than oppositional ones like their parents. Similarly, five of the sixteen parents who share a liberal/libertarian and/or secular/progressive ideology with their children articulate a middle-ground discourse. In-depth examination of the similarities and differences of these matched pairs can illuminate how cohort influences discourse, apart from any other ideological or generational influence.

The influence of cohort in libertarian pragmatism becomes clear when one compares liberal parents and children to one another. Older liberals are like their liberal children in that they deny that homosexuality is immoral and argue that discrimination is wrong; however, they are like their more conservative age-mates when they express discomfort with homosexuality or refuse to support same-sex marriage. Parents who constructed middle-ground discourses to talk about same-sex marriage did not accept homosexuality unproblematically, like their children, but instead talked about homosexuality as a stigmatized, unnatural lifestyle. Because homosexuality was culturally constructed as a *deviant lifestyle* during the period in which they came of age, they continue to hold negative associations with it.

Consider, for example, Matthew, age 51, and his son Nate, age 19. Matthew raised Nate in the same small town in rural Illinois in which he himself grew up; they are both politically liberal atheists who have supportive attitudes about cohabitation, premarital sex, and divorce. Despite the similarities, they spoke about same-sex marriage in very different ways.

Matthew's discourse exemplified libertarian pragmatism. When asked about same-sex marriage, Matthew responded with few words: "I don't really approve of it, but whatever floats

your boat." Like many parents, Matthew expressed discomfort with homosexuality, but he seemed unwilling to say it is okay to limit someone's civil rights. Ultimately, he said he was okay with homosexuality as long as he didn't have to see it: "I'm not completely for [it], but I'm not really completely against it either. As long as they stay away from me and mine, that's fine. I just don't want to get involved in it."

By contrast, Nate is very explicit that he supports same-sex marriage, and he strongly rejects arguments against it:

> It's mostly religious organizations combating the gays, which in my opinion, from a legal standpoint is extremely contradictory to what this country was founded on, you know. We have freedom of religion in this country, and to take the legal standpoint that says the two people of the same sex cannot be married—that's ridiculous because you have no real argument to stand on other than God, and God says, "no"… So I'm really curious to hear somebody else's argument about that, about why it's bad rather than just from a religious standpoint. I personally think it's a great idea. I think it should happen, you know, because people should be allowed to pursue their freedoms. (Nate, age 19)

Not only is Nate supportive of same-sex marriage, he has trouble even imagining a legitimate reason that someone would give for opposing it. Like other liberal students, Nate expresses tolerant attitudes toward gays and lesbians, denies that there is anything immoral about homosexuality, and rattles off a list of people he knows who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

In contrast with Matthew's understanding of homosexuality as a *deviant lifestyle*—as evidenced by his desire that "they stay away from me and mine"—Nate seems to take homosexuality for granted as a *collective identity*, like race or ethnicity. When Nate recalled

learning that someone in his high school came out as gay, his memory of the conversation conveys how unremarkable the news was:

> I heard somebody mention that he was gay, and it was like, ‘Oh. That’s news to me.’ ‘Yeah, he came out a couple months ago.’ ‘Oh really? Great. Good for him.’ But I don’t think he was necessarily looked down upon… People were like, ‘Okay.’ I think people had their suspicions earlier anyway. (Nate, age 19)

Nate tells this story as though other students already anticipated his coming out, and he describes the act as an achievement worthy of recognition: “Good for him.” Although Nate acknowledges that many people in society still label homosexuality as deviant, there is no indication in his discourse that either he or his friends think in those terms.

As with libertarian pragmatism, comparing simultaneously between and within cohorts can show how cohort shapes the discourse of immoral inclusivity. Young religious conservatives are like their conservative parents in that they draw from a common set of religious beliefs to talk about the immorality of homosexuality; however, they are like their more liberal age-mates when they say that people should be more tolerant of gays and lesbians. Like young supporters of same-sex marriage, many young conservatives seem to simply accept homosexuality as a person’s inherent sexual orientation, and they do not problematize gay and lesbian identities. Because they came of age in a society in which gays and lesbians are culturally constructed as a legitimate status group, like African Americans and Hispanics, they say it would be wrong to deny equal rights to gays and lesbians, just as it would be wrong to do so to other minorities.

Comparing Bethany (age 22) with her mother, Andrea (age 45), shows how the two cohorts draw from different understandings of homosexuality in order to talk about same-sex

marriage. Both are evangelical Christians, and both identify themselves as politically conservative. Their religious faith is extremely important to them, and they both disapprove of divorce and cohabitation. They even agree that homosexuality is sinful. However, Bethany constructed a discourse of immoral inclusivity, whereas Andrea constructed an unambiguously oppositional discourse.

As described above, Bethany argues that gays and lesbians should have the same rights as heterosexuals because, in her mind, the sin of homosexuality is no different than any other sin. While she believes that there is an element of choice involved in pursuing one's sexual desires, she argues that that is no reason to deny them equal rights. Moreover, she expresses positive attitudes toward gays and lesbians. When I asked her about her memories of the first time she encountered someone who is gay, she told me about a teacher she had in college:

> Oh, I didn't know gay people were so cool…. It was almost like, "Really? One up for you." I mean, so I was more like excited to see someone, to be subjected to someone, who I thought was intelligent, knew what they were doing, had their stuff together, you know. They weren't a bad person, you know, cause I, just as much as I was raised by *The Bible*, I mean, God, your gut instinct tells you a whole lot about people before you even know it. (Bethany, age 22)

It is striking that, given her conservative religious and political background, she would describe such a positive reaction to the first gay person she ever met. She never admits to questioning her teacher's gay identity or feeling uncomfortable with his sexuality. This may be because she grew up during a time when gays and lesbians were beginning to be portrayed sympathetically in popular culture and mass media. When I asked her about homosexuality's portrayal in mass

media, she responded by mentioning *Ellen* and *Will and Grace*, two television shows that are historically significant for their casting of gay characters in lead roles:

> *Will and Grace* portrayed it, you know, did they have some deep episodes? Yeah, I wasn't a faithful watcher, but as someone who doesn't have, like growing up in high school, I mean that show was like a popular show, and seeing it and having that be my only connection with the homosexuality world, I think it portrayed it in a really light-hearted, not a serious [way]. (Bethany, age 22)

Although Bethany does not think the portrayals of gays and lesbians in the media represent reality, she describes how they gave her "light-hearted" contact with gays and lesbians even when she didn't know anyone personally. Consistent with the parasocial contact hypothesis (Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes 2006), such mediated contact should reduce prejudice against gays and lesbians.

Bethany's mother, Andrea, also regards homosexuality as a sin that is no worse than her own sins. However, she drew very different conclusions about homosexuality and same-sex marriage:

> Absolutely, you choose to act upon your impulse. I don't classify it any different than a pedophile or… a nymphomaniac, you know. I believe that in your heart and in your mind and your soul, you can be driven to commit and perform and act against another person that is improper, and it's up to you to not proceed with those acts. Specifically, I think that God tells us, if your right hand is going to offend you, better that you cut off your right hand than be damned to hell because you can't stop stealing. (Andrea, age 45)

Rather than accepting that person's sexual orientation as part of who they are, Andrea talks about homosexuality as a behavior from which one must refrain. By comparing homosexuality with pedophilia, nymphomania, and stealing, Andrea emphasizes the behavioral dimension of homosexuality. Even if it were proven that one's sexual orientation is innate or genetic, Andrea would insist that it is still deviant:

> If [a gay male] looked at me and said, 'I feel that I was born—all my life—more attracted to men,' I would say, 'I believe you, but I feel that you should turn away from this act.' (Andrea, age 45)

Because Andrea understands homosexuality as a sinful behavior and deviant lifestyle, the solution to homosexual feelings is to repress them, and she believes that the institution of marriage should not be altered to accommodate immoral behavioral choices.

As these comparisons demonstrate, the tolerant attitudes expressed by young conservatives in immoral inclusivity discourse and the negative attitudes implicit in libertarian pragmatism appear to be rooted in how homosexuality was constructed in mainstream American culture when each cohort came of age. I argue that the cohort differences in how informants talk about homosexuality can be traced to the changing cultural construction of homosexuality. Parents came of age during the 1960s and 70s, when homosexuality was considered to be either a mental illness or a *deviant behavior*, akin to gambling. By contrast, students came of age after gay rights discourse had replaced gay liberation discourse in politics and after gay and lesbian characters had become normalized in popular culture. They were thus more likely to develop, in their cultural repertoire, an understanding of homosexuality as *collective identity*, akin to

ethnicity. Cohort thus shapes attitudes about homosexuality because of the mainstream cultural construction of it that they encountered during the period in which they came of age.

Exceptions

What about the other parent-child pairs who are similar in all respects, including their discourses about same-sex marriage? How can we account for the liberal parents who are just as supportive of same-sex marriage as their children and for the conservative students who are just as opposed as their parents? An examination of these cases shows that the effect of cohort can be overridden by period influences or immersion in countercultural networks. Because generational theory attributes cohort and period effects to the same underlying social encounter with history, I argue that these are exceptions that prove the rule. Period influences affect people of all ages, and the existence of cohort effects does not preclude intra-cohort attitude change. Likewise, social generational processes imply contact with and acceptance of mainstream cultural constructions of reality; so people who are immersed in countercultural networks are often insulated from or resistant to the influence of mainstream culture.

The way that period effects can cause attitude change during later stages of the life course is evident in the narratives of attitude change that older liberals constructed to talk about why they changed their attitudes about homosexuality and same-sex marriage. These individuals' positions are consistent with generational theory because they all report growing up in a society in which homosexuality was constructed as deviant. They encountered and accepted the dominant cultural construction of homosexuality from that period, and they remark how different it is now:

> I think society has changed, has been more accepting. I mean, from when I was a kid, if you tell somebody was homosexual or gay, it was like the end of the world… And nowadays, I think its much more accepted. (Tom, age 47)

> [Homosexuality] was never mentioned in our household. And again, back then, that wasn't something that was as open as it is now. So you really didn't know, or it was kept in the closet. (Rochelle, age 47)

Many individuals who reported how different homosexuality was considered to be when they grew up constructed narratives of attitude change. Most narratives attributed the changing attitudes to significant personal contact with gays and lesbians:

> I gotta admit, the first time I met people like that, I was very uneasy. But I was brought up to think that it was wrong…. I didn't even know it existed until I was hit upon by a woman, and it just blew my mind because I didn't know what the heck was going on, and I was appalled. But that's because it was like an experience out of the blue that I didn't know would ever exist, you know. As I got older, you know, and as my kids grew up, I got a lot more accepting of it because they had a lot more homosexual friends. And actually, I've gotten along with every one of them I've ever met better than a lot of the straight friends. (Bonnie, age 46)

It is noteworthy in this quote that Bonnie gained her personal contact with gays and lesbians through her daughter. This shows how the same cultural process that shapes young cohorts' worldviews can also cause attitude change among older adults.

Whether or not personal contact is a correct explanation for attitude change is less important than the fact that the narrative is constructed in the first place. After entering a new historical era characterized by a different popular understanding of homosexuality, these parents feel they must modify (or struggle to modify) their existing beliefs. For example, Laura reported that the moral disapproval of homosexuality that was ingrained in her still affects her, even though she rejects it:

> I remember I used to think, "Oh, that's wrong." But that was somebody else's idea planted in me. And so now I try not to think that way. And I'm not going to lie, it comes up. You know, but I tell myself, "Whoa, I can't be the judge of that"… So yeah, there are times sometimes I think it's wrong, but I catch myself. (Laura, age 49)

The fact that parents who both support and oppose same-sex marriage report persistent negative attitudes regarding homosexuality is strong evidence that the cultural construction of homosexuality that they encountered when they came of age has had lasting effects on their attitudes regarding homosexuality.

Other exceptions show that immersion in countercultural networks can insulate individuals from the cultural change that causes cohort effects. Just as many older liberals rejected the dominant construction of homosexuality as *deviant behavior* in the 1960s because of their liberal families or their participation in the New Left countercultures, many younger conservatives today reject the dominant construction of homosexuality as *collective identity* because of their religious families, churches, and friendship groups.

Many liberal parents who support same-sex marriage rejected the dominant cultural construction of homosexuality that they encountered when they grew up. For example, David, a

50 year-old social worker, reported that his upbringing in a liberal household taught him that he should not judge people who are different. Even though he didn't know any gays or lesbians growing up, he applied the lessons learned from the political controversies of the 1960s to issues that arose later, such as homosexuality and mental illness:

> My parents, they just, back in 1968 and 1970, you didn't really talk about homosexuality. It just wasn't talked about. Mental illness wasn't talked about. But you had this understanding that you accept people for who they are. It's you know, the content of their character, not the color of their skin. (David, age 50)

In this quote, David paraphrases Martin Luther King Jr. to explain why he has been supportive of gay rights since he was young. His family background shaped his political beliefs, and he draws from that aspect of his cultural repertoire to explain why he has long rejected the notion that homosexuality is wrong.

The situation with young conservatives is analogous to that of older liberals. Students who oppose same-sex marriage do so because they have rejected the dominant cultural construction of homosexuality as collective identity. It is not ignorance or a lack of personal contact with gays and lesbians that causes these students to oppose same-sex marriage; rather, it is a strong religious identity, combined with *negative* personal contact and/or social networks that are overwhelmingly conservative, that allow them to construct an oppositional cultural definition of homosexuality.

Some students who oppose same-sex marriage report negative experiences with gays and lesbians. For example, Taylor, age 20, has had significant contact with gays and lesbians through work and school. But he reported having several unpleasant experiences with his gay coworkers:

> One time, because somehow we got on the topic of what kind of girl I like, and then for some reason, he told me what kind of guy he liked.... And everything he said was kind of what I looked like that day, and I was like, "You're sick." (Taylor, age 20)

Taylor said he felt uncomfortable about this incident, and that he had been made to feel like an outsider by his coworkers. These types of negative experiences, along with his conservative Christian identity, enable Taylor to construct an oppositional discourse to same-sex marriage.

If young conservatives are immersed in social networks that are overwhelmingly conservative, even positive personal contact with gays and lesbians will be neutralized and interpreted according to that ideological worldview. For example, Renee, age 19, reported having a gay cousin whom she likes very much. But because her intimate social networks are composed almost exclusively of religious conservatives, she interprets her encounters with her cousin through that lens. Her mother and her siblings are evangelical Christians; she went to an evangelical Christian school and attends church there; even her college friends are all evangelical Christians. Thus, when I asked her about same-sex marriage, she repeated much of the conservative Christian discourse. She said that she believed humans "were created" to marry someone of the opposite sex, and she qualified her opposition to same-sex marriage, saying that it wasn't personal:

> I don't have anything against them as a pers[on]—Like, I can be friends and love someone when I don't support their way of life-style. 'Cause one of my cousins is gay, but I love him to death. I just don't support his way of life. (Renee, age 19)

The insistence that one hates the sin but loves the sinner is an element in the conservative Christian repertoire that was used frequently in my interviews, and it is an indicator of how religious ideology has shaped Renee's views. Thus, Renee rejects the dominant cultural construction of homosexuality, despite her positive contact with her gay cousin, because her immersion in religious networks provide her with an alternative view.

Discussion

In sum, the preceding analyses show how the influence of cohort on discourse about same-sex marriage varies by how it interacts with political and religious ideologies, and more generally, on the extent to which cohort subgroups are situated within social networks and social structures that expose them to the historical changes in the mainstream American cultural construction of homosexuality. By analyzing how informants use their cultural repertoires to produce discourse, I show how the cultural processes of social generational change, caused by an individual's biographical encounter with history, helps to explain why cohort effects are occurring in public opinion. This study also shows how qualitative and cultural analysis of social generational processes can complement the demographic perspective that is essential for identifying cohort and period effects in order to produce more thorough explanations of generational change.

The first analysis showed that discourses about same-sex marriage are produced by how the influences of cohort and ideology interact in the structure and use of the informant's cultural repertoire. Beyond the unambiguous discourses of support and opposition, the middle-ground discourses of *libertarian pragmatism* and *immoral inclusivity* are constructed based on the relative compatibility between the individual's political and religious ideologies and their cohort-

related attitudes about homosexuality. The second analysis isolated this effect of cohort on discourse by comparing parents and children who agree ideologically; it showed that informants produce different discourses about same-sex marriage because their attitudes about homosexuality are rooted in the cultural construction of homosexuality that was dominant during the period in which they came of age. Some younger conservative Christians produce discourses of immoral inclusivity, rather than unambiguous opposition, because they think of homosexuality as a collective identity and support equal rights for gays and lesbians. Similarly, older liberals produce discourses of libertarian pragmatism, rather than unambiguous support, because they think of homosexuality as deviant behavior and have negative associations with it.

The main pattern of how cohort shapes discourse illustrates what Mannheim calls the "generation as an actuality," the cohort subgroups who are socially located such that they are exposed to the cultural construction of homosexuality that was dominant in the period that they came of age. Within each of these two "actual generations," the varying influence of religious and political ideologies cause multiple "generation units" to form. Among the younger cohort, for example, one generation unit articulates the discourse of immoral inclusivity because they attempt to reconcile their cohort-related understanding of homosexuality as a collective identity with their ideological definition of homosexuality as a sin. Most certainly, other generation units exist within each cohort, and future research should attempt to identify them: for example, by analyzing how cohort interacts with race, class, area of residence, etc.

The third analysis of exceptions to this pattern bolsters the social generational interpretation of the data in two ways. Some of the exceptions illustrate the difference between the actual generation and the cohort (or "generation location," in Mannheim's terms). Not all members of a cohort experience history in the same way, and cohort subgroups who are

immersed in countercultural networks are thereby insulated from social generational processes. This is the case for young religious conservatives who articulate oppositional discourses and for many older liberals who articulate supportive discourses. Just as participation in the counterculture of the New Left taught older liberals to reject the cultural construction of homosexuality as a deviant behavior, so too does immersion in the conservative Christian counterculture cause those young conservatives to reject secular understandings of homosexuality as a legitimate collective identity.

Other older liberals who articulate supportive discourses illustrate the power of period effects to cause attitude change later in the life-course. Many informants constructed narratives of attitude change to explain how their previous understanding of homosexuality as a deviant behavior has been challenged. Thus, the same cultural and historical influences operating in the current period that have caused young cohorts to develop liberal attitudes about homosexuality are also causing some older liberals to change their previous views. While some perspectives treat cohort and period effects—attitude persistence vs. attitude change—as opposites, the results of this study, interpreted according to social generational theory, show that they are both products of the same cultural and historical processes.

Broadly, this study shows how qualitative and cultural research can serve as a complement to quantitative and demographic analyses that are required to disentangle age, period, and cohort effects. Specifically, qualitative and cultural methods can be useful at showing how social generational processes cause young cohorts to make "fresh contact" (Ryder 1965) with social structures and develop unique cultural worldviews as a result; they also can show how period effects cause older cohorts to modify their previously established worldviews. With an analysis of these social generational processes, studies of social reproduction and social

change can produce a fuller understanding of how the numerous intersections of history and biography, of temporal location and social location, continually reshape social structures in uneven and complicated ways.

This study also shows how the problem of intra-cohort variation is more complex than is typically acknowledged in empirical studies and how further attention to Mannheim's conceptualization of "the problem of generations" can help scholars move beyond broad claims about whole cohorts. Although many studies acknowledge the existence of multiple generation units within a cohort, few studies attempt to simultaneously distinguish the generation as an actuality from the cohort on one side and from the generation unit on the other. The fact that Mannheim's conceptualization of generations implies three distinct levels of intra-cohort variation means that we cannot dismiss the problem of intra-cohort variation with a methodological caveat about the probabilistic nature of statistical analysis without seriously compromising the theory as a whole. Scholars should devote renewed attention to the distinction between the cohort and the generation as an actuality in order to prevent both academic studies and popular commentaries from constructing crude stereotypes of whole cohorts based on the distinctiveness of only a subgroup of the cohort. Here again, the "fuzziness" of qualitative research can provide a useful—though admittedly inconvenient—complement to the parsimony of quantitative research.

Lastly, this study has two main implications for studies of public opinion about same-sex marriage. First, the interaction of cohort with religious and political ideology in the production of discourses suggests that regression models of attitudes about same-sex marriage should include one or more interaction terms for cohort. The influence of cohort on attitudes about same-sex marriage should vary depending upon political ideology, religious ideology, or other measures of

beliefs about homosexuality. Second, the existence of middle-ground discourses, like libertarian pragmatism, suggests that the conceptualization of opinion in binary terms (support/agree vs. oppose/disagree) neglects opinions that are both theoretically and empirically meaningful. An informant who constructed the libertarian pragmatism discourse, when confronted with such a dichotomous survey choice, would likely be counted as "don't know" or "refused to answer"—and thus eliminated from further analysis. My study shows that these are meaningful responses for both the respondent and the analyst. To the extent that public opinion studies exclude such attitudes from measurement or analysis, our understanding of public opinion and theories of social change are weakened.

There are clear geographical and temporal limitations of this study, because it is likely that discourses vary considerably across regions of the United States and may have changed somewhat in the years since 2009. Moreover, this study is limited because my argument is interpretive in nature: I have interpreted differences in discourse through the lens of generational theory, although there are likely other confounding influences, such as education, that are unmeasured in the discourse. Further studies should test the limits of the claims about same-sex marriage discourse presented here. Finally, my argument about the nature of social generational processes in relation to Mannheim's theory of generations is supported in this case, but it may not be in others. Application of this theoretical perspective to other cases is essential for refining our understanding of how societies change over time through the complex interactions of history, demography, and political action.

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Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Informants

		Students (n = 65)	Parents (n = 32)
Student's School	NIU	55%	62.5%
	Rock Valley	45%	37.5%[a]
Age (median)		21	50
Gender	Female	40%	69%
	Male	60%	31%
Ethnic Identity	White non-Hispanic	72%	81%
	Black	11%	3%
	Hispanic white	12%	6%
	Mixed (white/other)	5%	10%
Parent's Education	High school diploma	--	31%
	Associate or professional degree	--	28%
	Bachelor's or Master's degree	--	41%

a. One parent had two students in the study, one at NIU and one at RVC; the student from RVC contacted me for an interview first.

Notes: Not all percentages sum to 100 due to rounding. Although I purposefully refrained from asking about sexual preferences or behaviors, one student voluntarily identified as gay and three students voluntarily identified as bisexual. Two heterosexual-identified parents admitted having homosexual feelings and/or experiences in the past.

Table 2: Percentage of Students and Parents using Discourses about Same-Sex Marriage

	Students (n)	Parents (n)	Total (n)
Unambiguous Support	57% (37)	38% (12)	51% (49)
Libertarian Pragmatism	5% (3)	13% (4)	8% (8)
Other Middle Ground	18% (12)	16% (5)	18% (17)
Immoral Inclusivity	11% (7)	0% (0)	7% (7)
Unambiguous Opposition	9% (6)	34% (11)	18% (17)
Total	100% (65)	100% (32)	100% (97)

Notes: Not all percentages sum to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 1: Same-Sex Marriage Discourses of Parent-Child Pairs in Two-Dimensional Ideological Space