

“The Heart of the Social Metabolism”: A Cultural Theory of Social Generations

By Peter Hart-Brinson

University of Wisconsin-Madison

The 104th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 8-11, 2009

Abstract

After two decades of sociological research, the broad socio-cultural concept of “generation” largely disappeared from social scientific literature in the mid-1980s. This occurred because of widespread confusion about the meaning and use of the term, and because the term “cohort” more clearly distinguished the idea of a temporally-defined social group from the kinship-descent meaning of the term “generation.” Since that time, a handful of scholars outside the U.S. have argued that the socio-cultural meaning of the term “generation” should be revived, though empirical studies have been limited. In this paper, I discuss the intellectual history of the term “generation” and argue that the time has come to bring the socio-cultural meaning of the word back into scholarly analysis. The “cultural turn” in the social sciences supports this effort at retheorization and provides methodological techniques for empirically identifying patterns of “social generational” stability and change. Provisional empirical evidence of the cultural conception of “social generations” is presented, and implications for the theoretical understanding of “generations” and social reproduction are discussed.

Introduction

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the road less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
--Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”

As embarrassed as I am to begin a paper with such a tired cliché, this is how I imagine David I. Kertzer and other sociologists might have felt 25 years ago. In the mid-1980s, sociologists studying “generations” reached a crossroads. Sociologists, led by David Kertzer, took one path, and the rest of society took the other. Unsatisfied by the conceptual confusion and empirical imprecision of the generation concept, Kertzer (1983) proposed eliminating the broad, socio-cultural meaning of the term (e.g. “Generation X”) from systematic study and retained the word “generation” to refer to biological-kinship relations of descent. After that point, the broad socio-cultural meaning of the term generation largely disappeared from scholarly research, with a couple of significant exceptions (Delli Carpini 1986; Schuman and Scott 1989; Scott 2000). The decision paid tremendous dividends, as quantitative research in cohorts, cohort effects, and cohort replacement have increasingly shown *how* society can change over time when older cohorts die off and are replaced by younger cohorts with different values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Fortunately or unfortunately, sociologists took the road less traveled. The rest of society did not follow the lead of the sociologists and continued to use the word “generation” in its broad, socio-cultural meaning. Even social scientists in casual conversation use the term repeatedly in this fashion, when we discuss the “new generation of scholars” or the rise of a “new generation of Christian evangelicals” and their differing political priorities; only in peer-reviewed journals and monographs did this meaning of the term “generation” fall into disuse. In one sense, this is a story of the endurance of cultural meanings: the meanings and use of words cannot be changed at will, despite what “experts” know to be for the best. In another sense, this is the story of unintended consequences: far from solving the problem, the elimination of the socio-cultural meaning of the term generation may have exacerbated it, because the term

continued to be used in the absence of rigorous scrutiny by the one group of people best situated to make the term theoretically valid and empirically useful. As a result, the term generation is now used more like a sledgehammer than a scalpel. What we are left with are overwrought stereotypes (“Generation X’ers are apathetic”) rather than nuanced demarcations of differences among cohorts. Indeed, while the vocabulary of cohort effects and cohort replacement is useful for showing *how* groups of people are different from one another, we have no vocabulary for explaining *why* groups of people develop those differences.

In this paper, I argue that the two roads are now reconverging. Or rather, sociologists have the opportunity to forge a path back to the other road. The Kertzer-led divergence may have been exactly what was needed—but only if sociologists reconnect with society. I add to arguments made by a small group of scholars outside the U.S. that the broad, socio-cultural meaning of “generation” be revived and retheorized. The cultural turn in academia provides the theoretical and methodological basis for developing the concept of “social generations” (Esler 1984; Pilcher 1994). Doing so is important, not only because the socio-cultural meaning of the term “generation” is still widespread, but also because the “social generation” concept is necessary to explain *why* cohort effects occur and *how* society changes over time due to cohort replacement.

In the argument below, first, I survey the intellectual history of the generation concept, beginning with Mannheim’s original formulation of “The Problem of Generations” (Mannheim 1952) and continuing through the research on generations through 1985. Second, I develop an argument that Mannheim’s notion of “generation as an actuality” provides the basis for making the “social generation” concept theoretically rigorous and empirically meaningful. This argument is based, on one hand, on the successes and failures of the elimination of the socio-cultural

meaning of the term generation from academic study; and on the other hand, on the theoretical and methodological advances brought about by the “cultural turn” since the mid-1980s. Third, I comment briefly on the methods and preliminary results of my own empirical research on social generations. Finally, I propose eight important characteristics of the “social generation” concept based on available theorizing and empirical studies, and I argue that the concept should be added to our analytical “tool-kit” for understanding patterns of social reproduction and social change.

Karl Mannheim’s Poly-vocal Generation Concept

The seminal sociological essay on the generation concept is widely considered to be Karl Mannheim’s (1952) “The Problem of Generations.” The importance of Mannheim’s formulation lies in his distinction between the “generation location” (p. 290), the “generation as an actuality” (p. 303), and the “generation unit” (p. 305). Drawing from the Marxist tradition, Mannheim uses “class” as an analogy for understanding “generation.” The social significance of a class depends upon more than sharing a common location in the class structure with other individuals; it also depends upon the identification of these individuals with one another: class consciousness. So it is with generations: “generation location” refers to the biological and temporal reality of being born in a particular place at a particular time, whereas “generation as an actuality” refers to “a concrete bond [that] is created between members of a generations” (p. 303). This “concrete bond” does not refer to face-to-face relations, but rather to the idea that this cohort of people came of age in the same socio-historical conditions. It refers to the “*participation in the common destiny* of this historical and social unit” (p. 303, emphasis in original). The actual generation may then be further subdivided into “generation units,” groups within the generation who “work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways” (p. 304). Generation

units are akin to the groups of a particular class, like Marx's Communists, that are real social groups sharing a common orientation to the society, based on their shared location in the social structure. Mannheim describes the distinction among the three distinct phenomena this way:

“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)

What Mannheim termed the “generation location” is what we today call a “cohort.” What Mannheim termed the “generation unit” is an identifiable social group of individuals who think and act in similar ways (e.g. a social movement or a subcultural group). Mannheim’s “generation as an actuality” refers to how people of a particular cohort develop a distinctive cultural understanding of society based on their particular temporally-defined encounter with it as youth “coming of age.” Not everyone in a “generation as an actuality” will have the same attitudes, but they may have similar ways of “making sense” of society based on a temporally-shared encounter with the social structure.

Mannheim’s theory at once provides the essential distinctions for studying the significance of generations sociologically and an explanation for why the concept has been used in such varied and convoluted ways. When someone uses the term “generation,” they might use the term in a variety of ways. To speak of the Baby Boom Generation, the meaning is that of the

cohort, the generation location: those born in the United States between roughly 1945 and 1963. By contrast, academic works about the “Generation of 1914” (Wohl 1979), “Sixties Generation” (Whalen and Flacks 1989) or the “Vietnam Generation” (Wyatt 1993) are about generation units, particular groups that responded to historical events in particular ways.

Especially regarding the “generation as an actuality,” Mannheim’s distinctions are somewhat vague and abstract. The “generation as an actuality” does not refer to an existing social group, nor is it simply defined temporally. It is this category of “generation as an actuality” that is the source of much frustration and confusion. For example, stereotypes about members of “Generation X” as apathetic under-achievers are attempts at delineating a “generation as an actuality,” because they “are trying to show that all these generations have different life cycle connections with history, giving them different collective personalities and making them interact with each other in peculiar ways” (Howe and Strauss 1993, p. 41). Such characterizations, however, are obviously too monolithic and inadequate for meaningful social research.

Generational Analysis Through 1985

The rapid social change of the 1960s appears to have inspired scholars to take up research on generational politics, and generational analysis was a thriving area of research in the 1960s and 1970s. Mannheim’s essay and Eisenstadt’s (2003 [1956]) structural-functionalist approach to youth rebellion and generational change provided scholars with fertile theoretical grounds on which to base empirical studies of the youth counterculture and social movements of the time. Reviews of the literature from that period (Bengtson, Furlong and Laufer 1974; Braungart and Braungart 1986) demonstrate significant advances in theorizing the relationships among cohorts,

aging, politics, and social change, but also pointed out persistent difficulties. For example, how to define the boundaries of generations, how to distinguish between cohorts and generations, and how to disentangle cohort or generational effects from other types of effects were questions that posed significant problems for empirical study.

Empirical attempts to measure (usually quantitatively) significant differences among cohorts or generations yielded only mixed results: those effects were typically better accounted for by measures of political ideology or activism (Roberts and Lang 1985) and education (Cutler and Bengtson 1974; Wadsworth and Freeman 1983). These findings actually supported Mannheim's notion of the "generation unit," a concept that receives convincing empirical support and theoretical development in this literature precisely *because* it presupposes an interaction between cohort and some other variable, like political ideology or educational attainment (Laufer and Bengtson 1974; Wuthnow 1976). Demartini (1985) correctly argues that generation units do not presuppose youth rebellion against their parents, and that distinctive characteristics of generation units can be due to parental socialization.

Thus, with the exception of studies finding the generation unit concept useful, empirical studies of generations were not convincing. And even the generation unit concept appears to fit comfortably in the burgeoning field of social movement research. So when David I. Kertzer, in an important (1983) review essay on the generation concept, reiterated Ryder's (1965) argument that the term generation should be restricted to a narrow meaning of kinship descent (parent-child relations), the critique appears to have stuck. Kertzer argued that the flurry of social science research on generations from roughly 1970 to 1982 suffered because the term was used in four different, but related, ways: to "the principle of kinship descent," to differences among cohorts, to stages in the life-course, and to unique historical periods. In Kertzer's view, the conceptual

confusion was an impediment, both theoretically and methodologically, to further scholarly understanding of generational processes broadly defined. Careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water, he insisted that the distinction is merely terminological, required for greater analytical precision, and that it should in no way be viewed as a limit on sociological inquiry. Evidently inspired by Ryder's (1965) eloquent functionalist metaphor, Kertzer writes, "Generational processes will remain of great importance to sociology, for they are at the heart of the social metabolism.... What is crucial to the future of such study, though, is that the generational processes be firmly placed in specific historical contexts—i.e. that they be analyzed in conjunction with the concepts of cohort, age, and historical period" (p. 143).

Kertzer's argument appears to have resonated, at least to a degree, because scholarly interest in "generations" as a socio-cultural phenomenon—and its associated muddled usage—largely disappeared only a few years later, with a few prominent exceptions (Delli Carpini 1986; Schuman and Scott 1989; Scott 2000). After that, the generation concept was used predominantly by scholars of aging and the life course (e.g. Hareven 1994). Studies of how society changed over time because of different attitudes, values, and orientations of successive cohorts were carried out under the rubric of "cohort analysis," not generational analysis (e.g. Alwin 1990; Brewster and Padavic 2000; Brooks and Bolzendahl 2004; Loftus 2001; Treas 2002; Wilson 1994). And scholars used quantitative techniques in increasingly sophisticated ways to distinguish among the various types of age, cohort, and period effects (e.g. Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Ciabattari 2001; Harding and Jencks 2003; Weil 1987). In each of these areas of research, impressive gains have been made in our understanding of how society changes over time, and Kertzer's prescription appears to have been successful.

Social Generations

Now, having gained conceptual and methodological clarity, I argue that it is time to bring the larger meaning of the generation concept back in. To reiterate, Kertzer viewed the restriction of the meaning of the term “generation” to be merely terminological; in reality, the many different meanings of the term “generation” are inextricably linked. Following the lead of a number of (mostly European) scholars, I draw from Mannheim’s notion of “generation as an actuality” to argue that the “social generation” concept (Esler 1984; Pilcher 1994) should be developed and added to the social scientific repertoire. There are, in essence, five inter-related reasons for this: (1) Empirical evidence from cohort analysis research provides consistent evidence that the replacement of an older cohort by a younger cohort with different attitudes, beliefs, and orientations is an important mechanism of social change, (2) but they leave unanswered the question of *why* cohort effects are observed. (3) The broad socio-cultural meaning of the term “generation” provides one answer to this question, but the term “generation” is used in this way only outside formal scholarly research. As a result, problems continue to plague the use of the term “generation” that can be addressed by rigorous theoretical and empirical study. (4) The “cultural turn” that has occurred in sociology in the last 30 years or so provides a more sophisticated theoretical orientation to the “generation” problem than was previously available, (5) and it has provided a new methodological approach for empirically studying the socio-cultural generation concept.

The literature on cohort analysis cited above shows significant evidence of society-wide attitude change that is the result of cohort replacement: as individuals from older cohorts die, they are replaced by individuals in younger cohorts with different attitudes, values, and beliefs. Many of these studies empirically differentiate attitude change across cohorts from attitude

change within cohorts. For example, many studies demonstrate that attitudes toward homosexuality and non-marital sexuality have become more liberal since the 1960s, and that these changes are due to a combination of cohort and period (within-cohort) effects (Harding and Jencks 2003; Loftus 2001; Treas 2002). A similar liberalizing trend is occurring in regard to gender ideologies (Brewster and Padavic 2000; Brooks and Bolzendahl 2004; Ciabattari 2001).

Thus, quantitative studies have demonstrated quite clearly that social change is occurring because younger people with more liberal attitudes are replacing older people with more conservative attitudes, but these quantitative techniques cannot fully explain *why* such cohort effects are occurring. One partial answer suggested by these studies is education: the younger cohorts have higher levels of educational attainment than the older cohorts, and people with higher education levels are more tolerant of difference (Ohlander, Batalova and Treas 2005). I would argue, however, that much of this liberalizing effect of education is not due to education per se, but rather due to the more liberal and tolerant social environments at most college and university campuses.

A more compelling answer to the question of why such cohort effects are occurring brings us back to Mannheim's notion of "generation as an actuality." The answer, in short, is that younger cohorts develop a different cultural understanding of society because of their unique temporally-defined encounter with the social structure. The society that individuals encounter—through socialization, social networks, institutions, and culture—when they are "coming of age" in late adolescence shape their definition of society, their taken-for-granted understanding of what is "normal." Thus, the attitude changes measured in cohort analyses are manifestations of deeper changes in the belief systems: attitudes are changing *because* people's cultural understanding of society is changing. For example, younger cohorts have more liberal attitudes

about homosexuality than older cohorts because their “definition” of homosexuality is different. Individuals born in the 1980s, for example, are more likely to think of gays and lesbians as “normal” and deserving of equal rights because they grew up in a society in which gays and lesbians have been increasingly “out” in media, politics, popular culture, and in real life. They have never lived in a society in which homosexuality was regarded as a mental illness, like individuals born in the 1950s. In short, members of younger cohorts are more likely to take homosexuality for granted, as part of “normal” social reality, than are members of older cohorts.

To use an analogy, few people now doubt that individuals who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s are, on the whole, more adept using computers, than members of older cohorts. Why? Because these individuals grew up with computers and video games and developed the skills for using them during their formative years. Fluency in computer technology was a “first language” for many people in this cohort, whereas most members of older cohorts had to learn to use computers later in life. Obviously, this is not true for everyone: certainly a child growing up without a computer is not going to have the same skills of a child growing up with a computer; and older adults working with computers in their occupations will be more skilled than those who do not. But in a probabilistic sense, the claim that younger people are more skilled with computers than older people because of their experience growing up with them rings true. People perceive this difference in generational terms (McMullin, Comeau and Jovic 2007).

Two inter-related problems present themselves to the interpretation above. First, it is clearly *not* true that all young people approve of homosexuality or think of gays and lesbians as “normal.” Simply because one was born during a certain time period does not mean that they will think in a certain way. This problem is precisely the one that has plagued the use of the term “generation” for decades: use of the term tends to result in over-generalizations and stereotypes

that are obviously and demonstrably false. This has been especially true of the use of the term in popular culture and media. The case of “Generation X,” the cohort born after the Baby-Boom generation (roughly 1964-1979), is the most obvious example of this. This cohort of individuals was given unflattering stereotypes of being apathetic and disaffected, despite the obvious falsehood of the generalization. Despite intelligent attempts to link this stereotype with actual changes in society (Howe and Strauss 1993), the over-generalization and negative stereotypes stuck. The lack of subtlety and nuance in this meaning of the term “generation” has thus been a major problem and a major impediment to use of the term in the rigorous manner demanded by social science. I would argue, however, that this meaning of “generation” is useful, and that only by reclaiming the word, rather than avoiding it, can the subtlety and nuance of meaning be achieved.

Second, a more fundamental objection is that this does not have to do with “generations” at all. To answer this objection, I refer to the work done by a number of scholars outside of the United States that has served to revive Mannheim’s notion of “generation as an actuality.” These scholars have clarified Mannheim’s meaning in light of theoretical developments in sociology since the “cultural turn.” In short, the phrase “social generation” is a cultural concept, along the lines of “collective mentalities” (Esler 1984), the “collective consciousness” (Durkheim 1984), or the “commonsense knowledge” from which reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1980). The cultural concept of the “social generation” is thus different from the demographic concept of the “cohort” or the kinship-descent concept of “generation.” Cognitively, the social generation is marked not necessarily by difference in attitudes, but by difference in cultural assumptions about society, commonsense beliefs about the world, or value orientations (Thomas 1974).

Jane Pilcher (1994) was the first scholar after Kertzer's (1983) review essay to propose a differentiation between the generation (Kertzer's definition) and the *social* generation (defined in relation to "cohort related phenomena" [483]). Though Pilcher revisited Mannheim's formulation, she did not explicitly develop the concept as a cultural one. Later scholars developed the "generation" concept culturally in Bourdieuan terms of "habitus, hexis, and culture" (Eyerman and Turner 1998), "cultural fields" (Gilleard 2004), and in terms of "cultural circles" (Corsten 1999). Taken together, this theoretical revisioning is simply an updating of what Mannheim termed the "generation as an actuality" in the language of recent cultural sociology. Both Mannheim and these later scholars agree that this meaning of generation, which I shall call the "social generation," following Pilcher and Esler, has to do with *how cohorts encounter a particular, temporally defined configuration of the social structure and in turn develop, typically in young adulthood, a particular cultural definition of reality that they use in the further development of attitudes and actions*. It is appropriate to quote Mannheim again on this issue: "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" (Mannheim 1952, p. 306). A "social generation" is mutually constituted by a particular configuration of the social structure, a particular age cohort of people, and a particular cultural construction of reality by a subgroup of that cohort.

Relatively little empirical work exists that draws from this meaning of the "social generation," and the empirical evidence in favor of this concept is quite limited (Edmunds and Turner 2002; McMullin, Comeau and Jovic 2007; Vincent 2005). However, a great deal of work in cultural sociology provides the methodological and theoretical tools for conducting a more direct assessment of the social generation concept. First and foremost in this literature is a

rapidly expanding literature on collective memories. Schuman and Scott (1989) show that people of all ages, when asked to name important events in the past 50 years, tended to name events that occurred when they were in their late teens and early twenties. They argue that a type of “generational imprinting” occurs where history intersects biography early in the life-course, a finding that is consonant with studies showing that attitudes and values formed early in life are longer lasting and more difficult to change than those formed later in life (Alwin and Krosnick 1991). Other works have shown that people’s memories and understanding of the past is shaped by their subjective experiences and the social context of the present (Roberts and Lang 1985; Schwartz 1996).

Research methodologies such as qualitative interviewing and focus group interviews have also been used effectively to empirically study people’s cultural worldviews and other aspects of their belief systems. Qualitative interviewing allows for a sustained discussion to develop between the subject and the interviewer about the cultural foundations of the subject’s attitudes: their life experiences, values, beliefs, and meanings they use to understand the world (Rubin and Rubin 2005). For example, Swidler (2001) used in-depth interviews to show how people draw from different cultural understandings of “love” in response to different situations. Likewise, Lamont (1992) compared interviews of American and French upper-middle class to show how symbolic boundaries are constructed in different cultures. Similarly, focus group interviewing is a particularly effective method for gaining insight into the shared values and cultural understandings of a group because they approximate the communicative contexts of people’s everyday lives (Bloor et al. 2001; Delli Carpini and Williams 1994; Lunt 1996). For example, Gamson (1992) used focus groups to show how people draw from experiential knowledge, common sense, and media discourse to make sense of social issues. Likewise, Press and Cole

(1999) used focus group methods to demonstrate the complexities of people's attitudes about abortion.

In sum, the theoretical and methodological advances of cultural sociology have provided scholars with new tools to retheorize Mannheim's concept of "generation as an actuality" and to empirically assess the utility of the "social generation" concept. Sociology is no longer well-served by continuing to restrict the word "generation" to its meaning of kinship descent, because the broader idea of "generations" is so central to our understanding of aging, the life course, social reproduction, and social change. If we distinguish "social generations" from "generations" and "cohorts," sociologists can begin to bring analytical precision to the use of the word "generation" and at the same time shed light on why cohort effects are occurring and how cohort replacement is changing society.

Social Generational Differences in People's Understanding of Same-Sex Marriage

Previous case studies of generational phenomena have focused on dramatic events or "cultural traumas" because the magnitude of the change and the easily defined time period of change make it more likely to be able to detect attitude change (Alexander et al. 2004; Eyerman and Turner 1998; Schuman and Scott 1989; Weil 1987; Wyatt 1993). However, there is no *a priori* reason why studies of social generational differences should focus on dramatic events or cultural traumas; whether sudden or gradual, the effects on underlying cultural worldviews are qualitatively the same. There have been, after all, a number of successful studies of long-term attitude and value change (Abramson and Inglehart 1986; Inglehart and Baker 2000).

My current research utilizes in-depth interviews about the controversial issue of same-sex marriage as an avenue for assessing the merits of the social generation concept. This issue was

selected because it is an indicator of how much American society has changed since the Baby-Boom generation came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. In a single generation, when the children of Baby-Boomers were coming of age in the 1990s and 2000s, the U.S. had witnessed dramatic changes in structure and moral significance of marriage, family, gender, and homosexuality. Our society has undergone dramatic increases in tolerance of homosexuality, a decided shift toward more egalitarian gender attitudes, and significant changes in divorce rates, cohabitation rates, birth rates, and attitudes towards premarital sex. Women are much more equal with men in the workforce and in educational attainment than in 1970, and gays and lesbians are much more likely to be “out” in media, politics, and everyday life. Politically inconceivable in the 1960s, same-sex marriage and civil unions are now legal in several states.

Public opinion studies and polls consistently find significant age-related differences in attitudes about same-sex marriage and homosexuality, even controlling for other relevant variables (Brinson 2008; Faith in Public Life 2008; Olson, Cadge and Harrison 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003; Wilcox and Wolpert 2000; Wood and Bartkowski 2004). It is possible that such differences in attitude are due to the changes in marriage, family, gender, and sexuality that have occurred in U.S. society between the time that Baby Boomers and their children reached early adulthood.

I conducted 97 interviews with college students in northern Illinois and their parents (which includes 32 student-parent pairs) to determine what patterns of similarity and difference exist between the two generations. In essence, I am looking for evidence of *social* generational differences between two *biological* generations. Students were recruited from Northern Illinois University and Rock Valley College, a community college, by posting ads that offered \$30 in exchange for an interview “about what people in America think about current social and political

issues.” Permission to interview one parent is obtained upon completion of the interview. The sampling strategy was selected to obtain adequate variation in participants’ religiosity, political beliefs, gender, and socio-economic status, while controlling for educational attainment, age, and area of residence to the extent possible.

College students in this study are U.S. citizens born 1978-1990 who attended high school in Illinois and are currently enrolled at their school. Parents are U.S. citizens born 1945-1963 and currently living in the Midwest. The students in this study grew up in a society in which divorce and cohabitation was more common, premarital sex more accepted, and homosexuality a regular feature of nightly news broadcasts and TV sitcoms. By contrast, the parents in this study grew up in a society in which divorce was less common, sexual attitudes were more conservative, and homosexuality was considered a mental illness, or at best, a deviant lifestyle. In short, whereas the students likely take the rapid changes in marriage, family, gender, and homosexuality as “just the way society is,” the parents all grew up in a society where “that’s *not* normal.”

I began each interview with a lengthy conversation about the person’s background and life history, focusing especially on their childhood and high school years. This section of the interview included probes for basic demographics and a discussion of the informant’s current media consumption habits. The heart of the interview was a semi-structured set of questions about the informant’s feelings about marriage and relationships, immediately followed by discussions of same-sex marriage and homosexuality. The interview protocol was designed to require participants to draw from their cultural stores of knowledge in response to specific questions or probes. Examples of such probes include “What does the word ‘marriage’ mean to you?” and “Why do you think some gays and lesbians want the right to marry?” Respondents variously drew from their personal experiences, their cultural “common sense,” and knowledge

of the world attained from media to answer such questions. Thus, the data collected do not necessarily represent the informant's "true" attitudes, but rather their attempts to offer culturally acceptable explanations, justifications, and imaginations about these topics.

An informal, impressionistic analysis of the data so far reveals some evidence of social generational differences between the two cohorts. As one would expect, many students had decidedly more liberal attitudes towards homosexuality and same-sex marriage than their parents, a finding that confirms the general pattern of younger cohorts being more tolerant of homosexuality and more supportive of civil rights for gays and lesbians (Loftus 2001). However, a simple comparison of whether or not a person is in favor or opposed to same-sex marriage hides the most revealing evidence of social generational differences. Patterns of similarities and differences appeared at multiple levels in respondents' belief systems, patterns which would likely go undetected by the standardized questionnaires used in public opinion research.

Even between parents and children who agree with each another about whether or not same-sex marriage should be legal, there were significant areas of disagreement between the two biological generations that I interpret as evidence of social generational differences. In particular, liberal parents and conservative Christian students showed evidence of inconsistency and attitudinal conflict when talking about homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Liberal parents who at least were not opposed to same-sex marriage, expressed support only with trepidation. For example, Matthew, a 51 year-old self-identified liberal Democrat, when asked about same-sex marriage, replied, "I don't really approve of it, but whatever floats your boat." Like many parents, Matthew expressed discomfort with the idea of homosexuality but seemed unwilling to say that it is okay to limit one's personal freedom or civil rights. A "live and let live" ethos seemed to dominate his talk about homosexuality, and he said he was okay with it as long as they

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." In a stark contrast with most students, including his own son, who described same-sex marriage as "a great idea," Matthew was clearly uneasy talking about the subject. He observed how different his hometown is now compared with when he grew up. Even though it was a small rural town, he knows of students in high school who are gay and who are more accepted than they would have been when he was growing up. He said homosexuality was more stigmatized in the 1960s and 70s, when Matthew was growing up. Thus, liberal parents had a much greater difficulty expressing support for same-sex marriage than their children, partially due to the changing moral evaluation of homosexuality in society.

Among conservative Christian students, social generational differences are evident in the extent to which they feel that homosexuality is wrong. Because of the power of their religious ideologies, most students who identified as conservative Christians agreed with their parents that same-sex marriage should not be legal and that homosexuality is a sin. However, some of them disagreed with their parents over the magnitude of the "sin" of homosexuality and whether or not gays and lesbians should have equal rights with heterosexuals. For example, Bethany, a 22 year-old Lutheran student agreed with her mother that homosexuality was a sin, but equated it with over-eating and alcoholism, denying that it was a reason to withhold equal rights. This was a common argument among young conservative Christians, who viewed homosexuality as sinful but not serious, like "telling a little white lie." As a Republican, she disagreed that the government should have the power to prevent gays and lesbians from gaining the right to marry, saying that the government should not define morality for people. This seemingly contradictory combination of views is partly explained by her experience with gays and lesbians. Recalling the

first time she learned that someone she knew was gay, a high school teacher, she spoke very positively about it:

I didn't know gay people were so cool.... I was more like excited to see 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. Because 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.

The fact that her first encounter with a gay person was positive contradicted her religious upbringing, where she learned that homosexuality was wrong. Throughout the interview, she spoke comfortably about homosexuality and premarital sex. She did not seem to think of homosexuality as something unusual or strange; by contrast, she spoke of it as if it were completely normal. Thus, even though their religious upbringings influenced their views on homosexuality, many conservative Christian students differed from their parents to the extent that they felt that gays and lesbians still deserved equal rights as human beings.

Both of these patterns should be interpreted as evidence of social generational differences between the Baby-Boomers and their children. Fundamentally, the two cohorts' definitions of homosexuality seem to differ to the extent that homosexuality is seen as "normal." Young conservative Christians acknowledge that homosexuality is sinful but seem to think that gays and lesbians constitute just another status group in society that has historically been marginalized, and thus deserving of equal rights. These students, like the liberal students, grew up with gays and lesbians in popular culture and as an acknowledged, if controversial, identity group in society. By contrast, liberal parents and conservative parents alike were brought up in a society where homosexuality was highly stigmatized and before gays and lesbians gained widespread visibility as a status group fighting for equality. "Being gay" was not understood as an identity but as a

perverse behavior. Liberal parents, by virtue of their political ideology or because of empathetic personal relationships they have developed with someone who is gay or lesbian, have changed their attitudes as they have gotten older. But many of them seem to struggle with earlier feelings that gays and lesbians simply made distasteful choices with their lives.

In short, the social circumstances governing the formation of one's belief system changed in the space of one biological generation. Because the mainstream cultural understandings of homosexuality have changed, different cohorts manifest different patterns of attitudes and different beliefs about homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Cohorts who came of age in the new "social generation" encountered a different definition of what is "normal" compared with cohorts who came of age in the previous "social generation." The controversy surrounding same-sex marriage illustrates the ways and the extent that society has changed.

Characteristics of the Social Generation Concept

To conclude, I want to underscore eight important characteristics of the social generation concept. First, social generations are cultural, analytic concepts and must be empirically identified and studied using techniques of cultural sociology. The social generation is similar in many ways to notions of the "lifeworld" (Habermas 1987), "collective mentalities" (Esler 1984), and the "collective consciousness" (Durkheim 1984). As Berger and Luckmann (1980, p. 15) might put it, the social generation concept is based upon "what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives." Qualitative interviews and focus group interviews are methodologically suited for empirically discovering evidence of social generations.

Second, social generation is a different concept from that of the generation, which refers to relations of kinship descent, and that of the cohort, which is simply any group of people

defined temporally (what Mannheim termed the “generation location”). Including the social generation concept in sociological research therefore does not require redefining other concepts; it simply means bringing the socio-cultural meaning of “generation” (Mannheim’s “generation as an actuality”) into the scholarly lexicon. At best, the “social generation” concept provides an explanation for *why* cohort effects occur.

Third, following from the previous point, the social generation concept incorporates, rather than marginalizes, the life-cycle perspective in several important ways. One’s formative years in which an individual “comes of age” appear to be crucial in shaping people’s worldviews; it is perhaps because of this phase in the life course that it is meaningful to speak of social generations (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Schuman and Scott 1989). In addition, cycles of birth, death, and reproduction are implicit in the concept of social generations, just as they are in the concept of biological or kinship generations. Whereas generations have to do with individuals and reproduction, social generations have to do with cohorts and social reproduction. Lastly, the concept of social generation calls our attention to the importance of socialization generally, not just primary socialization (Demartini 1985; Ryder 1965). Generational relations are shaped by the socialization of children by parents, but we must not forget that other influences, like one’s peers, the mass media, and schools, are also involved in the socialization of individuals.

Fourth, the social generation concept does not assume that people of the same social generation have similar attitudes, behave similarly, or even have direct personal contact with one another. That is what Mannheim had in mind when he described “generation units.” By contrast, members of a “social generation” may never meet, may have different attitudes, and may behave differently from one another. What they do have in common is an encounter with a particular,

temporally-defined configuration of the social structure in their formative years, and thus a similar social definition of reality. From that common basis, people might develop any number of diverse attitudes or orientations in reaction to it, but they still belong to the same social generation.

Fifth, as suggested by the previous point, the social generation concept requires scholars to empirically and analytically distinguish among various components of individuals' belief systems. Attitudes, beliefs, and values are different things, and there are many different types of attitudes, different types of beliefs, and different types of values. And all of these must be differentiated from worldviews and from ideologies. Social generations might be defined in terms of one component of a belief system but not another. Having individual differences in attitude, for example, does not automatically mean that those individuals do not occupy the same social generation.

Sixth, the concept of social generation is inherently relational. A social generation is defined always in relation to other generations, in relation to a particular subject of interest, and in the relations of similarities and differences among people. A social generation can only be identified and made sociologically meaningful by comparing it with another social generation. In identifying this social generation, the scholar must pay attention to both patterns of similarities and patterns of differences (Esler 1984). While we tend to think of generations as being marked by differences, as suggested by the previous point, similarities among people are also markers of social generations. Moreover, social generations are defined and identified in relation to different topics; as a result, the temporal boundaries of a social generation are not of a fixed length and must be determined inductively. The temporal markers of a social generation will be different if one is interested in attitudes towards homosexuality than if one is interested in aptitude with

computers. In retrospect, previous research that has been concerned with identifying the uniform temporal length of “generations” has not born fruit because the effort was fundamentally misguided. From this, it follows that each individual is a member of a potentially infinite number of different social generations, and common members in one social generation may not be common members in another.

Seventh, the social generation concept is inherently interactional. The concept does not compete with other variables, like race and class, to explain social difference; rather, the concept is premised upon stratification in the social structure and takes it for granted. One’s social generation depends upon one’s location in the social structure—not only the place of different age groups in the social structure, but the place of different classes, races, genders, and other social groups in the social structure (Bengtson, Furlong and Laufer 1974). For example, the “social generation of the 1960s” would mean something entirely different, depending on whether one was talking about white Americans in the South or black Americans in the South. The “lifeworlds” (Habermas 1987) of these two groups of people were very different, as were their location in the structure of American society. Certainly, one’s cultural construction of reality is dependent upon one’s class, race, and a host of other “variables.” What the social generation concept adds is the dimension of time—how the historical period in which one came of age shapes people’s cultural constructions of reality. The analysis of social generations, therefore, cannot neglect other forms of stratification; it must, by definition, include them in the analysis.

Lastly, the social generation concept has important implications for the study of social reproduction, the patterns of stability and change as society moves through time. As Kertzer (1983, p. 143) so eloquently put it, “Generational processes... are at the heart of the social metabolism.” The persistence of the socio-cultural meaning of the term “generation” long after

sociologists stopped using the word in that way is a testament to how fundamental the idea of “social generations” is to our understanding of social change. I do not propose that the social generation concept should be the only, or even the primary, concept that sociologists use to understand social reproduction. However, I do think that it is an important analytical “tool” to add to our tool-kit. Further empirical study and theoretical development of this cultural concept should help scholars gain a more complete understanding of how cohort replacement acts as a mechanism of social reproduction and social change.

References

- Abramson, Paul R., and Ronald Inglehart. 1986. "Generational Replacement and Value Change in Six West European Societies." *American Journal of Political Science* 30:1-25.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. 2004. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Alwin, Duane F. 1990. "Cohort Replacement and Changes in Parental Socialization Values." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 52:347-360.
- Alwin, Duane F., and Jon A. Krosnick. 1991. "Aging, Cohorts, and the Stability of Sociopolitical Orientations over the Life Span." *American Journal of Sociology* 97:169-195.
- Bengtson, Vern L., Michael J. Furlong, and Robert S. Laufer. 1974. "Time, Aging, and the Continuity of Social Structure: Themes and Issues in Generational Analysis." *Journal of Social Issues* 30:1-30.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1980. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Irvington Publishers.
- Bloor, Michael, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas, and Kate Robson. 2001. *Focus Groups in Social Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Braungart, Richard G., and Margaret M. Braungart. 1986. "Life-Course and Generational Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology* 12:205-231.
- Brewster, Karin L., and Irene Padavic. 2000. "Change in Gender Ideology, 1977-1996: The Contributions of Intracohort Change and Population Turnover." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62:477-487.
- Brinson, Peter. 2008. "Why do People Support Civil Unions but Not Same-Sex Marriage?" in *American Sociological Association*. Boston, MA.
- Brooks, Clem, and Catherine Bolzendahl. 2004. "The Transformation of US Gender Role Attitudes: Cohort Replacement, Social-Structural Change, and Ideological Learning." *Social Science Research* 33:106-133.
- Ciabattari, Teresa. 2001. "Changes in Men's Conservative Gender Ideologies: Cohort and Period Influences." *Gender & Society* 15:574-591.
- Corsten, Michael. 1999. "The Time of Generations." *Time and Society* 8:249-272.

- Cutler, Neal E., and Vern L. Bengtson. 1974. "Age and Political Alienation: Maturation, Generation, and Period Effects." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 415:160-175.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X. 1986. *Stability and Change in American Politics: The Coming of Age of the Generation of the 1960s*. New York: New York University Press.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X., and Bruce A. Williams. 1994. "Methods, Metaphors, and Media Research: The Uses of Television in Political Conversation." *Communication Research* 21:782-812.
- Demartini, Joseph R. 1985. "Change Agents and Generational Relationships: A Reevaluation of Mannheim's Problem of Generations." *Social Forces* 64:1-16.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1984. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Edmunds, June, and Bryan S. Turner. 2002. *Generational Consciousness, Narrative, and Politics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel N. 2003. *From Generation to Generation*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Esler, Anthony. 1984. "'The Truest Community': Social Generations as Collective Mentalities." *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 12:99-112.
- Eyerman, Ron, and Bryan S. Turner. 1998. "Outline of a Theory of Generations." *European Journal of Social Theory* 1:91-106.
- Faith in Public Life. 2008. "The Young and the Faithful." in *The Faith and Public Life Survey*.
- Gamson, William A. 1992. *Talking Politics*. Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilleard, Chris. 2004. "Cohorts and Generations in the Study of Social Change." *Social Theory and Health* 2:106-119.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Harding, David J., and Christopher Jencks. 2003. "Changing Attitudes Toward Premarital Sex: Cohort, Period, and Aging Effects." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 67:211-226.
- Hareven, Tamara K. 1994. "Aging and Generational Relations: A Historical and Life Course Perspective." *Annual Review of Sociology* 20:437-461.
- Howe, Neil, and Bill Strauss. 1993. *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* New York: Vintage Books.
- Inglehart, Ronald, and Wayne E. Baker. 2000. "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values." *American Sociological Review* 65:19-51.
- Kertzer, David I. 1983. "Generation as a Sociological Problem." *Annual Review of Sociology* 9:125-149.
- Lamont, Michele. 1992. *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Laufer, Robert S., and Vern L. Bengtson. 1974. "Generations, Aging, and Social Stratification: On the Development of Generational Units." *Journal of Social Issues* 30:181-205.
- Loftus, Jeni. 2001. "America's Liberalization in Attitudes Toward Homosexuality, 1973-1998." *American Sociological Review* 66:762-782.
- Lunt, Peter. 1996. "Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communications Research." *Journal of Communication* 46:79-98.
- Mannheim, Karl. 1952. "The Problem of Generations." Pp. 276-320 in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, edited by Karl Mannheim. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- McMullin, Julie Ann, Tammy Duerden Comeau, and Emily Jovic. 2007. "Generational Affinities and Discourses of Difference: A Case Study of Highly Skilled Information Technology Workers." *British Journal of Sociology* 58:297-316.
- Ohlander, Julianne, Jeanne Batalova, and Judith Treas. 2005. "Explaining Educational Influences on Attitudes Toward Homosexual Relations." *Social Science Research* 34:781-799.
- Olson, Laura R., Wendy Cadge, and James T. Harrison. 2006. "Religion and Public Opinion about Same-Sex Marriage." *Social Science Quarterly* 87:340-360.
- Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. 2003. "Republicans Unified, Democrats Split on Gay Marriage; Religious Beliefs Underpin Opposition to Homosexuality." in *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.
- Pilcher, Jane. 1994. "Mannheim's Sociology of Generations: An Undervalued Legacy." *British Journal of Sociology* 45:481-495.
- Press, Andrea L., and Elizabeth R. Cole. 1999. *Speaking of Abortion: Television and Authority in the Lives of Women*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Roberts, Carl W., and Kurt Lang. 1985. "Generations and Ideological Change: Some Observations." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49:460-473.
- Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin. 2005. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ryder, Norman B. 1965. "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change." *American Sociological Review* 30:843-861.
- Schuman, Howard, and Jacqueline Scott. 1989. "Generations and Collective Memories." *American Sociological Review* 54:359-381.
- Schwartz, Barry. 1996. "Memory as a Cultural System: Abraham Lincoln in World War II." *American Sociological Review* 61:908-927.
- Scott, Jacqueline. 2000. "Is it a Different World to When You Were Growing Up? Generational Effects on Social Representations and Child-Rearing Values." *British Journal of Sociology* 51:355-376.
- Swidler, Ann. 2001. *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thomas, L. Eugene. 1974. "Generational Discontinuity in Beliefs: An Exploration of the Generation Gap." *Journal of Social Issues* 30:1-22.
- Treas, Judith. 2002. "How Cohorts, Education, and Ideology Shaped a New Sexual Revolution on American Attitudes Toward Nonmarital Sex, 1972-1998." *Sociological Perspectives* 45:267-283.
- Vincent, John A. 2005. "Understanding Generations: Political Economy and Culture in an Ageing Society." *British Journal of Sociology* 56:579-599.
- Wadsworth, M.E.J., and S.R. Freeman. 1983. "Generational Differences in Beliefs: A Cohort Study of Stability and Change in Religious Beliefs." *British Journal of Sociology* 34:416-437.
- Weil, Frederick D. 1987. "Cohorts, Regimes, and the Legitimation of Democracy: West Germany Since 1945." *American Sociological Review* 52:308-324.
- Whalen, Jack, and Richard Flacks. 1989. *Beyond the Barricades: The Sixties Generation Grows Up*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Wilcox, Clyde, and Robin Wolpert. 2000. "Gay Rights in the Public Sphere: Public Opinion on Gay and Lesbian Equality." Pp. 409-432 in *The Politics of Gay Rights*, edited by Craig A.

- Rimmerman, Kenneth D. Wald, and Clyde Wilcox. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, Thomas C. 1994. "Trends in Tolerance Toward Rightist and Leftist Groups, 1976-1988: Effects of Attitude and Cohort Succession." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 58:539-556.
- Wohl, Robert. 1979. *The Generation of 1914*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wood, Peter B., and John P. Bartkowski. 2004. "Attribution Style and Public Policy Attitudes Toward Gay Rights." *Social Science Quarterly* 85:58-74.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 1976. "Recent Pattern of Secularization: A Problem of Generations?" *American Sociological Review* 41:850-867.
- Wyatt, David. 1993. *Out of the Sixties: Storytelling and the Vietnam Generation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.