SOCIAL SCIENCE

with Professor Michael Rosenfeld

Talking *points*

KNOWLEDGE
1. In 1988, what percentage of Americans supported marriage equality?
2. When did the US achieve marriage equality?

COMPREHENSION
3. How did the Stonewall riots and the AIDS crisis influence gay rights activism?
4. During the 1990s, an increasing number of gay people started coming out to their friends and family. How and why did this influence public attitudes towards gay rights?

APPLICATION
5. Imagine you are investigating attitudes towards unisex public toilets. What questions would you ask (in the style of the General Social Survey, see the gay rights timeline figure caption), and who would you ask them of, to determine public opinion?

ANALYSIS
6. Why is marriage equality important for everyone in society?
7. Why do you think the 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy made the situation worse for gay people in the US military?
8. What are the similarities and differences between the struggles of gay people in the late 20th century and the struggles of transgender people in the 21st century?
9. What role did social science play in achieving marriage equality?

SYNTHESIS
10. Think of a societal issue that you would like to influence. It could be anything from climate change to gender equality to transgender rights. How would you go about changing public opinion towards this issue?

EVALUATION
11. Think about modern-day public attitudes towards gay people and their rights, both in your country and around the world. How effective do you think gay rights activism has been over the last few decades?
12. What social change do you hope to see in the next decade? To what extent does the story of marriage equality in the US give you hope that this change can be achieved?

Activities

Explore the General Social Survey data

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a semi-annual survey that asks Americans their opinion on a huge variety of different topics, from whether they support marriage equality to whether they like jazz music. The survey began in 1972, and many of the questions have been repeated regularly since then, providing a rich dataset about how public opinions have changed over time. Politicians, policymakers and academic researchers, like Michael, use the GSS data to explore the changing attitudes, behaviours and characteristics of the American population.

How to use the GSS portal

The following link takes you to a portal called SDA, hosted by the University of California, Berkeley, where you can freely access the GSS data: **sda.berkeley. edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=gss21**

On the left side of your screen, you will see a window called 'Variable Selection'. This is where you can select topics to explore. There is a long list of folders containing questions related to specific categories, such as 'RESPONDENT BACKGROUND VARIABLES' or 'PERSONAL CONCERNS'. Open these folders to see more specific categories, such as 'Age, Gender, Race and Ethnicity' or 'Health and Happiness'. Each of these categories contains the specific variables that respondents were asked about in the survey, such as 'age – age of respondent' or 'happy – general happiness'. You can also type words into the 'search' box and see if the GSS has ever asked questions relating to those words.

Select a variable of interest and, under 'Variable Selection', click 'Copy to: Row'. In the middle of your screen, under the 'Tables' tab, you will see a box labelled 'row' and a box labelled 'column'. Your variable of interest will now be in the 'row' box. In the 'column' box, type 'year'. This will extract the data showing how the variable of interest changed with each year that the question was asked (note that not every question was asked every year, so some variables will have more data than others). Under 'Weight', select 'No weight'. Under 'Output options',

ensure 'Percentaging' is set to 'Column' and select 'Question text' under 'Other options' so the wording of the survey question is exported in your results.

Click 'Run the Table'. This will open a new window in your browser that displays all the data relating to your chosen variable and how it changed by year. In this window you will see:

- A 'Variables' table that gives details of the variables you have selected.
- A 'Frequency Distribution' table that shows how respondents answered the survey question about that variable. Each row corresponds to one of the possible answers to the question. For 'general happiness', for example, Row 1 = very happy, Row 2 = pretty happy, Row 3 = not too happy. Each column represents a year in which the question was asked. The bold numbers in each cell are the percentage of respondents that selected a specific answer, the non-bold numbers are the actual number of respondents (A note on sample size: Although the GSS surveys thousands of people, some cells may represent a very small number of respondents. If the number of respondents to a question is very small, the percentage may not be informative - 50% of four people is only two people! It is important to consider sample size limitations when analysing survey data.). The colour of each cell represents whether that number is higher or lower than the average response across all years.
- A graph that displays the 'Frequency Distribution' data in a visual format. This can make it easier to see how your chosen variable has changed over time.

Spend some time exploring the GSS data. There are lots of variables to explore, so have a look through them and find some that interest you.

Create your own graphs

Choose a variable and enter it into the 'Row' box as before, with 'year' in the 'Column' box. This time, instead of clicking 'Run the Table', open the 'Create and Download CSV File' option. Under 'CSV table format', select 'Separate statistics into multiple tables'. Choose a relevant name for your data file (it must end in '.csv'), click 'Create CSV file' and then 'Download CSV file'. This will download the data into a csv file on your computer, which can most easily be opened and manipulated in an Excel spreadsheet or a Google sheet (you could also analyse the data and create graphs using a programming language such as Python).

What type(s) of graph best displays the data? You could also download data for another variable and create a combined graph to show how these two different variables changed with time. In the GSS portal, you can use the 'Control' box to generate subsets of your tables and graphs according to other variables (e.g., age, sex, religion, income, etc.), enabling you to explore complex hypotheses. If you chose a variable with many values, such as age, you will need to collapse it into categories, e.g., AGE(r:18-39; 40-59; 60-100).

Play around with different graphs showing different variables to explore how American public opinions towards different topics have changed over time. Can you see any patterns or trends? What might have caused these changes?

"YOU CAN'T CHANGE OPINIONS OVERNIGHT, BUT IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW THAT, OVER THE YEARS, YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD."
Professor Michael Rosenfeld