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Detailed Introduction to Generational Theory in Asia

*article by
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Article at a glance

Dr Graeme Codrington is the author of the best-selling and award-winning book, "Mind the Gap" on different generations and how they engage with each other in the workplace, at home, at schools and university, and in many other life settings. The book has been a great success since being published by Penguin in 2004, and Graeme and his colleagues at TomorrowToday have travelled the world presenting the informing and entertaining presentation of the same name. Now, in preparation for the updated edition of "Mind the Gap" (due in late 2011), Graeme and the TomorrowToday Research team have turned their attentions to showing how the theory applies in countries across the world.

This detailed white paper shows how the theory can be applied to a variety of countries in the Eastern hemisphere of the world. Historical, political, economic, social and cultural analyses of a variety of countries highlight some illuminating trends that help us understand how - and why - a new generation of young people are approaching life in significantly different ways to their parents. Even so, generational theory is not just about understanding younger and older people - it is a real insight into the new world of work that is emerging in subtly different ways all around the globe.

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Each of us acts and reacts to the world around us based on our attitudes and values systems. These 'worldviews' or 'paradigms' that govern how we see the world and respond to it are developed in fairly predictable ways as we grow up. The first fifteen years or so of our lives are critical in shaping who we will become. We can gain insight into our own - and other people's - attitudes and actions by understanding the forces that shaped - and continue to shape - our value systems. These include our religion, culture, gender, personality, education, economic status and social class.

One key factor that must also be considered is the era in which each of us is born. Historically, we have all been hugely influenced by the expectations and the norms of the society in which we grew up. Generational theory states that people born at a similar time in history, experiencing similar political, social and economic realities, educated in similar systems with similar curricula, and influenced by similar popular culture will develop similar worldviews. The theory looks for significant historical events in a country or region's history, and identifies the impact these have on existing social orders and value systems. Sometimes these events result in the dawning of a new era, and therefore of new generational cohorts (see Inglehart on how societal values change - reading list in *appendix* below).

Defining a generation

Generational theory is based on two primary assumptions. First, the *socialization hypothesis* suggests that adults' values were formed during childhood and the early teenage years and that these basic values stay relatively stable through life. Secondly, *social constructivist theory* suggests that reality is socially constructed by individuals and groups engaged in social interactions.

A 'generation' is therefore typically defined as a group of people with a set of shared experiences that exhibit a shared worldview, and continue to exhibit the characteristics of that worldview as they grow up through life. A generation tends to be about 20 years in length, representing roughly the time from the birth of a cohort (or group) of people to the time they come of age and start having their own children.

Although in some countries, there are very specific moments in time when one generation ends and a new one starts (see below), most generations do not have precise start and end dates. There is also a fair amount of "overlap" between two generations, producing a "cusp" generation between the each successive generational cohort. These "cusps" exhibit characteristics of both the overlapping generations.

The generally accepted generational categories

Generational theory was first popularized in the United States, and picked up quickly by consultants and the media in much of the Western world. The tags "Boomers", "Generation X" and "Gen Y" are now widely used - if not that always correctly

understood. In any consideration of the generations, it's therefore easiest to begin with a generalization based on Western culture and experience. This will allow us to see how the theory works. We can then apply it to other countries, regions and cultures.

At the risk of over simplifying the generational characteristics, here is a brief summary of the living generations. Look especially for the defining features and of each generation and the forces that shaped them - we will return to these as we develop the theory and relate it to different countries and regions.

G1 Generation (born 1900s - 1920s)

The oldest living generation have far exceeded the 47-year life expectancy expected of them at birth. Families were large then, with many children not surviving their first five years and about a fifth of women dying in childbirth. It was the norm in developed countries for birth to take place at home, and 90% of all American physicians had no university education - this was true in many other parts of the world too. This was the world before antibiotics, insulin, penicillin, nylon and many other things we would consider essential today. Marijuana, heroin and morphine were all available over the counter in pharmacies.

The dominant characteristic of the G1 generation is their civic mindedness. Society determined early on that this new generation of youth would grow up clever and cooperative (Scouts, youth groups, and even the word "teenager" itself, were all created for them), and they were driven together to rebuild the world as they grew up with the images of The Great War (World War 1) etched in their minds. They have always liked predictability and stability, bringing military discipline to their homes, workplaces, schools and even places of worship.

The G1s formed the manpower component of the engine that beat the combined crises of World War 2 and the Great Depression. They worked as teams, obeyed hierarchal chains of command, and stuck to their task without complaint. No wonder they still believe that it's "good" and "normal" for people to all agree, to work the same way and even to all look the same.

Defining and guiding values:

- Never give up
- Civic minded
- Conformity
- Seek stability and predictability
- Gallantry
- Hierarchical chains of command
- Frugal (save their money)
- Male and female roles clearly defined
- Geographically stable (have lived in one area most of their lives)



Silent / Traditionalist Generation (born 1920s - 1945)

They were influenced in their youth by the Great Depression and the Second World War. They grew up in serious times, when everyone had to do their duty (whether you liked it or not), and when children “should be seen and not heard.” They are conservative, hard-working and structured, preferring rules, order and formal hierarchies. They have a “waste not, want not” mentality, and hate getting into debt. Their idea of progress is slow, incremental advancement, while minimising risk. They also believe that it’s “good” and “normal” to work hard - in fact, they believe they can achieve anything by sheer hard work. They are suspicious of those who make money by luck or by gambling.

Today, they are entering elderhood, facing the future as fairly well adjusted older people, able to connect reasonably well with new technology and with young people. Their youth prepared them for a lifetime of pragmatic adaptation (even though they do harbour suspicions about change, and almost always resist it at first). They continue to work hard, even in retirement, are frugal and save every cent they can, even though they may have considerable savings.

Defining and guiding values:

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Dedication | • Delayed reward |
| • Duty before pleasure | • Sacrifice |
| • Adherence to rules | • Conformity |
| • Hard work | • Modesty |
| • Law and order | • Patience |
| • Respect for position | • Reticent to express emotion |
| • Cautious | • Hate debt |
| • Self sufficient | • Waste not want not |

Baby Boomers (1946 - early 1960s)

Baby Boomers are the postwar generation, the drugs, sex, and rock ‘n’ roll set who grew up during a time of grand visions. The idealistic visions of politicians and those fighting for freedom - or of those putting people into space - all served to energise a generation of young people who were simultaneously being culturally and socially revolutionised. TV and Hollywood did a lot to provide shared cultural experiences - all around the world.

The 1960s and 70s were a turbulent time as young adult Boomers went to university and into the workplace, rebelling against the GI and Silent generation dominated institutions they found there. They initiated anti-Vietnam rallies and were the foot soldiers of the IT revolution. Their moralistic outlook spurred them on to activism against the establishment, although their rebellion was not aimed so much at toppling the system *per se* but rather at removing the perceived corruption within the system and installing themselves as the leaders of it. The 1990s saw Boomer politicians in most democratic countries around the world become the youngest ever Presidents and Prime Ministers, and bring sweeping changes to the world stage. They are destined to hold onto power - in politics, corporates and religion - for quite a few more decades yet.

They love conspicuous consumption and have created more wealth (and accumulated more debt) than any other generation, ever. They are a workaholic generation, driven,

goal oriented and bottom line focused.

Boomers are passionately concerned about participation in the workplace, motivated by vision, mission and strategy, and care about creating a fair and level playing field for all who agree with them. They have no difficulty legislating against the excesses of their own youth and their rallying cry is a greater sense of morality and social standards. Their inner-directed approach, so typical of the “Me Generation” lends itself well to their style of leadership which does not consult much with other generations. They’re not going to be put out to pasture before their time. They intend, in years to come, to morph into revered silver heads, who will lead their nations and industries through dangers to a better world beyond, as a result of their principled, optimistic outlook on life.

Defining and guiding values:

- Idealism
- Image
- Optimism
- Team orientation
- Personal growth
- Personal gratification
- Group together by similarity of belief
- Self-expressive
- Media savvy
- Excellence
- Big talkers
- Youth
- Work - be seen to be working
- Involvement
- Health / wellness
- Nostalgia

Boomer-Xer cuspers

A “cusp” is the point at which two parts of a curve meet. In generational theory, this is the group of people who fall into the overlap between two generations, born in a time between eras and influenced by both eras. Interestingly, most cuspers tend to choose characteristics of one or other of the generations they straddle, rather than displaying characteristics of both.

There is obviously a cusp generation between each of the main generational types. In this overview, we will highlight only this Boomer-Xer cusp group, as they are now becoming quite influential in the workplace and society. Barack Obama and David Cameron, along with a number of younger political candidates around the world, are good examples of this mixture of Boomer and generation Xer mindsets. In many companies, new senior management are increasingly these cuspers. They are able to fit into the Boomer world. They know when to wear a suit and tie and have a sense of how to behave appropriately so they don’t irritate Boomers in the way that full-on Xers do. They know it’s necessary to “play the game” by attending the office party so that they are seen there even though they don’t enjoy it. But, when they get home, off comes the suit and ripped jeans are pulled on. They put their ear rings back in and spike up their hair. These cuspers have hair that can be slicked down or gelled up. They wear beaded necklaces under their collar and tie, bracelets under their shirts and tattoos where nobody can see them.

Because of this, cuspers have a hugely important role to play in the world, bridging the divide that so often exists between Boomers and Xers. Cuspers also make great generational mediators and may not feel the discomfort that people who are really typical of a one generation experience with another. This makes them extremely valuable in multi-generational workplaces.

Xers (late 1960s - 1980s - in many countries this can be pinpointed as 1989)

Generation Xers grew up as “latchkey kids”, children of divorce, experiencing an era of crises - from Watergate and Vietnam, to the energy crisis and the collapse of communism, it was clear the adults didn’t know what was going on. But the adults largely left them alone, with parents seeing themselves as enablers rather than disciplinarians (Boomer parents were having a strong reaction to their own childhood memories). Adults had also become busier - Mom and Dad were both working - and Xers were the first children in history that mothers could take a Pill *not* to have. As young adults, they maneuvered through a sexual minefield of AIDS and blighted courtship rituals as the legacy of the 60s revolution and feminism lives on. They have therefore been slow to marry and have children of their own.

Once labeled the “slacker generation” and considered wild and “out there”, Generation X has turned out to be quite calm after all. Now in their thirties and early forties, individuals belonging to this generation put family values first but are much more cognizant of the cost associated with having children. They spend less time focused on work, choosing instead to spend more quality time with their children and friends. They are also redefining traditional gender roles marked by a more equitable division of labor when compared with their parents. They are often accused of not respecting the older generations, and of moving away from the traditional values of their cultures and communities.

They work hard (if they’re incentivized correctly) and save money. But they’re also prepared to volunteer and get involved in their communities and global projects. They’ll quite easily leave their jobs to go. They have very little interest in politics. They’re skeptical of corporations, realising that long-term commitment is unlikely to pay the dividends it did to their parents and grandparents. They are, therefore, opposed to paying their dues the way their Silent grandparents did and they look for quick, short-term rewards, are prepared to embrace risks and work hard for themselves. This entrepreneurial, selfish and individualistic attitude is often mistaken for the rebelliousness displayed by Boomers and many of the older generation simply ignore it, believing that Xers will soon grow up and move out of this phase. However, Xers are not rebelling against authority, the way Boomers did (and still are in some cases). They’re simply asserting their individuality: one of their defining characteristics.

Today, they need options and flexibility; they dislike close supervision, preferring freedom and an outputs-driven workplace. They love change so much they actually need it. Xers strive for balance in their lives - they work to have a life; they don’t live to work. They want rules but from the right authorities only; their “now” matters more than their future; they don’t want to know “is it true?” they want to know “does it work?”

Defining and guiding values:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change • Choice • Global awareness • Techno-literacy • Individualism • Lifelong learning • Immediate gratification | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity • Survivors • Informality • Whiners • Thrill seekers • “Experiencers” • Pragmatism • Not scared of failure |
|--|---|

Generation Y / Millennial Generation (1990s - 2000s)

This generation are defined as the generation growing up after the Cold War and in the new era of globalisation, communication technology and wireless connectivity. They are living in an age of unprecedented diversity and exposure to other cultures. They are growing up quickly - too quickly, some would say. As some of the most protected children in history, this generation is confident - almost arrogant in their confidence. They have grown up helping their parents navigate new technology, believing that their parents need a lot of their help.

Eric Chester, in “Employing Generation Why?” writes that Gen Y have, more than any other young generation, an ability to “filter out every command, every request and every instruction that is not bundled with acceptable rationale... they demand reasons and rationale, so the traditional ‘because I said so’ isn’t going to cut it with them.”

They are growing up in a world that is creaking under the strain of our lifestyles, and they are daily made aware of the fragile environment. So, it is no surprise that they are emerging as ethical consumers who want to change the world. But this is just one symptom of a much bigger change. In almost every country in the world, this generation is growing up in an age when social values are shifting faster than they ever have. This means that these young people are making different - new - life choices. These new choices are fuelled by new forms of communication, greater connectedness, personalised and portable media and the need for better filters for the flood of information they must deal with on a daily basis.

Defining and guiding values:

- Optimism
- Confidence
- High self-esteem
- Media & entertainment overloaded
- Street smart
- Diversity
- Conservative
- Networkers
- Civic duty
- Ethical consumption
- Achievement
- Morality
- Naiveté
- Change
- Techno-savvy
- Global citizens

Different countries, different generations: Looking for patterns

Given that different countries - and different regions - experienced different nationally significant events at different times, it might seem an impossible task to develop a single generational theory that applies around the world. And yet, it is possible to see a pattern in how nations progress through history.

There are very few countries in the world that were unaffected by the Great Depression and Second World War. For over a decade the world found itself in difficult times. This provides a helpful marker, and most people around the world recognise the impact of these difficult years on the generation born in the 1930s and 40s.



Another significant global marker occurred at the end of the 1980s. Specifically, 1989 was a momentous year all around the world. Starting in late 1988, with the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie (21 December), a number of era-defining events occurred: Tiananmen Square (Beijing, 5 June), Ayatollah Khomeini's chaotic funeral (Tehran, 6 June), the Baltic Way (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania; 23 August), the Berlin Wall comes down (9 November), the Velvet Revolution (Prague, 17 November), the execution of Nicolae Ceausescu (Bucharest, 25 December), and the banning of the Communist Party in Russia (26 December) - all political revolutionary moments that changed their countries and the regions around them. And resonated around the world. On 11 February 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from jail and on 11 March 1990, Augusto Pinochet peacefully stepped down from power in Chile. 1989 was also the year that saw the invention of HTTP - the foundation of the world wide web as we know it today. Incidentally, in popular culture it was also the year of the debut of *The Simpsons*.

The worlds before and after 1989 were very clearly different: north, south, east and west.

Interestingly, almost precisely midway between these two significant markers we also see another cluster of powerful era-defining events. In almost every country in the world, something happened in the late 1960s and early 1970s that changed the political, economic and/or social environment.

It is these events that provide the clues for the generational framework as we attempt to apply it to different countries. The specific events differ but the transitions between eras seem to cover common territory in most countries (admittedly not all). Different countries have experienced similar influences, but at slightly different times.

So, for example, in the USA, the Boomers are considered to be those people born from 1943-1962. The 1943 year is often cited as it represents the cut off year for the Vietnam Draft. Gen Y are considered to be those born 1983-2000. The 1983 year is selected as anyone born in 1983 or later graduated High School in the new millennium. Xers are simply the generation between the Boomers and Gen Y, and their start year of 1963 simply identified as being the mid point between 1943 and 1983.

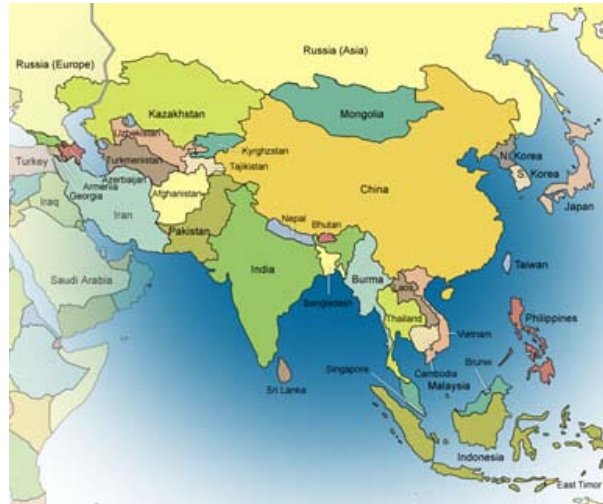
By contrast, in Iran, it seems that the Boomer period only started in 1953 after the failed CIA coup, and the settlement of a government and ruling power in Iran. The 1979 Iranian revolution saw an end to this era, and the beginning of a brief Gen X period (often referred to as the 'burnt generation' in Iran, and the driving force between the current anti-government sentiment and 'green' movement), which ended in the death of the Ayatollah in 1989. Today's Iranian children and teenagers show real Gen Y characteristics. Iran provides an excellent example of an extended Boom era, and a shortened Gen X generation.

Turning to Asia, Michael Stanat, author of "China's Generation Y" made these comments on his blog:

[In China, there is] a significant generation gap between Gen Y's parents, who grew up under the cultural revolution, and today's youth who are in a peaceful consumerist country that has only seen growth. My research showed that young people would not speak to their parents about many things ... to avoid criticism

from their protective parents.

In India, [parents] described how it wasn't the transitions to a new marketplace or the new technologies that bother them. It was that young people were abandoning their culture for Western ideals. That is not to say they were particularly angry or condescending about Western culture. Rather, it was the abandonment of the Indian collectivist ideals to more individualist ideals which concerned them.



In the Gulf states of the Middle East, I had the opportunity to be involved with research projects with young local Arabs. Indeed the collectivist culture is just as strong as in China and India. To my surprise, the same generation gap applies. Young people have remarkably distinguishable rules and perceptions on what they can and cannot say to their parents. Now, young women who would wear burqu'as in public are even likely to play playstation at home. While Arab youth are far less likely to follow the same trajectory as Chinese youth (e.g. consumerist, increasingly Western), they still watch Western media and partake in activities with their friends that put them at odds with elders.

These experiences and the corresponding market research on young people lead me to believe that the Generation Gap is a more global phenomenon, heavily impacting Asia due to the impact of traditional culture with a new global culture. The result is that young people are bridging the gap and thus creating a palpable generation gap, which far exceeds those in developed countries.

Generations in the Asian Region

Here, then are a few considerations for some key countries across the entire Asian region:

Japan: The tough times associated with the Great Depression and Second World War were enhanced in Japan by the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945). After the Second World War, Japan experienced a time of peace and political, economic and social reforms were introduced, including an elected Japanese Diet. From the late 1950s to 1980s economic growth was called a "miracle" - with slow but consistent growth initially, accelerating rapidly from the late 1970s. The 1950s and 60s were a time of uncertainty, when Japan felt very weak and relied almost entirely on America for military support. This boom age propelled Japan onto the global stage as a major manufacturer and exporter, and yet many of the generation from the 1950s and 60s still see Japan as a mid-size power with a low profile in international politics. At least two major research projects have identified Japan's



Generation X (termed *Shinjinrui*) as being born from 1965 to 1978 - their young adulthood was during the boom of the late 1970s and 80s. As the Gen Xers were growing up they experienced increasing protectionism abroad and serious pollution problems at home - this paradox of growth with consequences is typical of the Gen X experience around the world. The events of 1989 provide a good marker of change in Japan as in other parts of the world: 1989 saw a collapse of share prices on the Tokyo Stock Exchange and the loss of the LDP's Upper House majority. And in January 1989 Akihito succeeded his father Hirohito as Emperor. Two years later, the economic bubble burst and Japan went into a protracted decline that it has not yet escaped from (the 1990s are often termed the *Lost Decade*). It may very well be that Japanese Generation Y - around the world a generation that grew up during relative economic growth and stability - actually were born in the late 1970s and 80s, and that 1989 marked the start of a new generation characterised by austerity and financial difficulties. In this way, Japan's generations may be ahead of the trends elsewhere in the world, and may have a lot to teach us about how today's young generation will grow up elsewhere.

China: The period from the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 through World War I and World War II included a bitter and bloody war against Japan (1937-1945) and ended with the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949). The economy was unstable and disrupted, with only the military industries really advancing. Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, and started a new era for his country. The Great Leap Forward was an ambitious plan to quickly convert Chinese agrarian economy into a modern industrial one. The methods used to achieve this resulted in many millions of deaths, and did not bring economy growth as planned. Mao Zedong responded in 1966 by setting in motion the 'Cultural Revolution', which effectively lasted until his death a decade later. This led to further instability, hardship and social stress. Unlike many other parts of the world, therefore, China did not experience a 'Boomer-like' period during the 1950s and 60s. Deng Xiaoping brought many reforms as Paramount Leader of China from 1976, and economic growth and stability began. Deng's reforms vastly improved the standard of living of the Chinese people, the competitiveness of the Chinese economy. It can be argued that China's boom period was from 1976 to 1989, and that teenagers and young adults in China today (born around 1989 and into the 1990s) share many characteristics with Generation X in other parts of the world. It may very well be that with the advent of the Internet a 'Generation Y' is emerging quickly in China, and that we will see a fairly small 'Gen X' cohort, with a large group of Baby Boomers dominating society for some time to come. One of the characteristics of Gen X in other parts of the world is that their mothers could "take a pill not to have them" (birth control pills were invented in the early 1960s). The same is true in China, but due to the one child policy that came into effect in 1979.



India: After the Second World War, India gained independence and had a period of unrest including the Indo-Pakistan war and violence and mass migration related to Partition. The Nehru administration (1952-1964) can be considered India's "boom era" as it was during this time that significant political, economic and



infrastructure programmes were enacted. Major industrialisation occurred during this time. But much of this slowed down in the second half of the 1960s, amid border wars, rising commodity prices, government control, a food crisis and the deaths of two Prime Ministers. The 1970s were turbulent years in India, just as they were in many parts of the world. And the 1980s saw more political chaos with successive assassinations of Indira Gandhi (1984) and her successor and son, Rajiv (1991). This was India's Generation X era. The 1990s and 2000s have seen significant economic growth and development, largely on the basis of economic reforms put in place by then Finance minister, Manmohan Singh. In urban areas, India's young people have propelled their economy into many skilled areas. It appears that there was a small Generation X era in India (largely drawn into the IT sector), with the Generation Y's coming through quickly now fuelled by the growing middle class and global prospects for educated Indian young people.

South Korea: From the establishment of the Republic in 1948 until the April Revolution student protests in 1960, the country continued to experience difficult times. But after a brief military coup, a new government took control in 1963 with the slogan, "Development First, Unification Later" - and oversaw strong economic growth and development. Standards of living improved (particularly in urban areas), as did education and infrastructure. This was Korea's boom era. Starting with a change in constitution in 1972, the 1970s and 80s were a turbulent time of demonstrations and protests culminating in the assassination of the President in 1979. This is Korea's Gen X era. The democratic elections in 1987 included a direct election for President, and with the 1988 Seoul Olympics in 1988, ushered in a new era for South Korea which has seen the nation become an international force and the base of many new multinational companies and global brands. Today's young people in Korea show many of the characteristics of Generation Y.



Vietnam: After the Second World War, Vietnam never had a chance to recover and experience a "boom" era. But the country did have a transition experience at the end of the 1980s, as their protracted wars came to an end with the final withdrawal of troops from Cambodia in 1989. Children between the end of the American war in the mid 1970s and the end of the 1980s do exhibit many of the characteristics of Generation X. In the last two decades, Vietnam has been integrating with the global economy and building a base for growth. The young people in Vietnam today exhibit many of the Generation Y characteristics discussed above.



Singapore: Having been bitterly disappointed by the British inability to protect them during the Second World War, Singapore became a Crown Colony in 1946 overseen by a Governor but spent the next decade working towards fully independent government. In 1959 the People's Action Party came to power amid great fear - many foreign companies moved from Singapore. Yet the



next few years were boom times, with sweeping economic and social changes that lay a solid foundation for the nation. From 1963 to 1965 Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia, but after increasing tensions (highlighted by the Race Riots on 21 July 1964) Singapore exited the Federation and became an independent Republic. The 1970s were a period of growth and political stability for Singapore (in contrast to many countries around the world during that period). Singapore does not seem to exhibit some of the classic historical moments that mark the transition of one generational era to the next in many other nations. However, the significant shift to becoming an open, internationally focussed sovereign nation after 1965 does seem to mark a cultural change that is evident in the attitudes of young and old in Singapore today. The worldview divide between the older generations (Silent and Boomer) and younger (Xer and Y) is quite marked in the island nation, although this is slightly masked by the multi-cultural growth of the last two decades.

Malaysia: The Second World War was a particularly difficult time for the people of Malaya, as Thailand repatriated a number of provinces with support from the invading Japanese. The Chinese population were killed or sent back to China, with those remaining forming a resistance army that continued to fight against the government until independence in 1957. Thus, the crisis period that characterises the Silent generation was extended in Malaysia until the end of the 1950s. The First and Second Malayan Plans (1956-60 and 1961-65 respectively) stimulated economic growth through state investment in industry and repairing infrastructure such as roads and ports, which had been damaged and neglected during the war and the Emergency. Malaysia's short boom period was interrupted in May 1969, with riots, martial law and political crisis. A new political and economic dawned after 1971. Only marginally impacted by the Asian economic crisis of 1997, Malaysia continues to grow economically, but is very centrally controlled. There is no clear distinction between a Gen X and a Gen Y era in Malaysian history.



Philippines: The Great Depression was not only an economic crisis but also delayed the achievement of independence for The Philippines (eventually achieved in 1935). They were then dragged into the Second World War by Japan's attack just days after they attacked the USA in Pearl Harbour. The US eventually ceded sovereignty in 1946. The Philippine boom era came through their connections with the USA in the 1950s and 60s, and in the early years of the Marcos government. In 1972, Marcos declared martial law. The economy continued to grow, but lawlessness, corruption and civil unrest were also rife throughout the 1970s - a 'Generation X' age of turbulence and uncertainty. A new era was ushered in with the People Power Revolution of 1986. The 1990s were characterised by a series of crippling natural disasters and the slow but sure spread of peace and the beginnings of economic development.



Indonesia: Indonesia was also invaded and occupied by Japan during the Second World War, and after the war declared their independence (from the Dutch and Japanese). Conflict continued until 1949 until the Dutch (backed by the British) recognised their sovereignty. Unlike other nations



in the region, though, Indonesia did not experience a boom era following the war. By the time of the failed coup and subsequent purging of the PKI in 1965-66, inflation was at 1,000%, export revenues were shrinking, infrastructure crumbling, and factories were operating at minimal capacity with negligible investment. Severe poverty and hunger were widespread. Military president Suharto's New Order era (1967-1998) saw significant (if uneven) economic growth (a boom era based on oil discoveries saw GDP per capita grow 545% from 1970 to 1980) and sweeping social changes, particularly The Transmigration program. It seems that Indonesia has had all of its generational eras delayed. The boom came in the 1960s and 70s, and continued even though tarnished by corruption in the 1980s. Whereas many countries around the world experienced significant change at the end of the 1980s, Indonesia had to wait until 1998 for riots and uprisings (sparked mainly by the Asian Economic Crisis of mid 1997) to bring about political change. This was Indonesia's Generation X era. Today's children may very well be growing up in a 'Gen Y' type period, as Indonesia is increasingly recognised alongside the BRIC nations as a major developing nation.

Australia: More closely linked with popular culture of the West, Australia nevertheless has experienced clear shifts from one generational era to another. They were obviously very involved in the Second World War, and experienced difficult times during the 1930s and 40s. But the post war era was a period of sustained economic boom and the start of sweeping social change with the arrivals of rock and roll music and television in the 1950s. Standards of living rose quickly during this Boom era. The turning point came with the Gough Whitlam government (1972-1975) that shook up politics, economics and society.



Immigration, economic stagnation and discontent characterised the Generation X 1970s and 80s, with unemployment peaking in 1992 (at 11.4%). The turning point to a Generation Y can probably be linked to John Howard's election in 1996, with the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney as an early national highlight. The Gen Y era may be slightly extended as Australia has avoided recession in the late 2000s and more closely aligned its future with Asia.

New Zealand: Similar to Australia, New Zealand was impacted by the Great Depression and World War II, and then experienced growth and development during the next two decades, especially by providing exports to Britain. But when Britain joined the European Economic Community in 1973, this all stopped and New Zealand as forced to not only find new markets, but also re-examine its national identity and place in the world. Robert Muldoon's conservative government (1975 -



1984) created an atmosphere of conflict and uncertainty in the country, punctuated by protests such as Dame Whina Cooper's land march (1975) and violent protests (most notably in 1981 at the Springbok rugby tour). This produced New Zealand's Generation X. Successive governments from 1984 enacted sweeping economic and social changes, until the whole political system was changed in 1996. Today's young people display many characteristics of Generation Y.

Analyses of other countries in the region are available on request. But the general pattern is clear. A period of difficulty, including political and economic instability and uncertainty, is followed by a period of grand visions and growth. This is followed by significant social, economic and political change that influences society and has an impact on the younger generations who begin to look to other countries (and especially the West) for cultural markers. The last decade has seen significant technology advances, globalization and social change, with the emergence of a 'Generation Y' across the region.

Ethnographic Dazzle

There is an inherent danger with such an appealing theory. Because it is simple to understand and apply, users of generational theory can easily be drawn into "ethnographic dazzle". This term was coined by British anthropologist, Robin Fox to explain blindness to underlying similarities between human groups and cultures because one is dazzled by the more highly visible surface differences.

In her 2006 book, "Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground", Jennifer Deal of the Center for Creative Leadership in the USA, rightly pointed out that an over emphasis on generational differences can lead managers and leaders to miss the common human traits that connect all people.

This is an important point to make. Although the underlying premise of generational theory is simple enough, the understanding and application of it can take quite some time to master. Just like any profiling tool, care should be taken not to abuse the theory or to apply it as a "blunt instrument". If you have become interested in generational theory while reading this article, please continue to investigate and read some of the follow up articles we have written, applying the theory in a multitude of areas, from marketing and sales, to training and education; from parenting to team dynamics; and from leadership and management to recruitment and retention of staff. You will find all these resources and more at the TomorrowToday websites (see <http://www.tomorrowtoday.uk.com> as a starting point).

In order to ensure that we do not succumb to ethnographic dazzle, here are a few additional considerations that will add to your understanding of the generational theory.

Generations and lifestages

Human beings grow up through distinct and predictable lifestages. These relate to physical changes in their bodies (infant, childhood, puberty, teenagers, adulthood,

menopause, old age, etc), their relationships (child, single, married, divorced, widowed, etc) and their economic circumstances (dependent, part-time worker, student, employee, manager, owner, etc), and a few other factors normally considered when creating lifestyle segmentation models.

Life-stage has a lot to do with behaviour in the workforce and in society in general. People in their 30s and 40s, for example, tend to show greater organisational loyalty and stability than they did in their 20s because they have children and commitments (such as mortgages to pay). Many Boomers heading into their 60s aren't workaholics anymore as they look for ways to wind down their careers.

Having said this, generational theory correctly predicts that each new generation entering a specific lifestyle will redefine that lifestyle and change it - often dramatically. There are definite differences in the ways that the generations approach their various life-stages - usually by attempting to correct what they see are the errors of their parents and immediate elders. Generation X parents, for example, tend to take more time off of work to be with their children. Paternity leave has only become really popular in the last decade, and the parenting practices that were common in the 1970s would probably lead to a visit from Social Services today. Boomers are starting to change retirement, as they do not head out of the workplace completely. They seem to be "retyring" - coming back to their old companies as highly paid, part-time "consultants".

Strauss and Howe, the generation gurus, summarise it this way: "History creates generations, and generations create history. The cycle draws forward energy from each generation's need to redefine the social role of each new phase of life it enters. And it draws circular energy from each generation's tendency to fill perceived gaps and to correct (indeed, overcorrect) the excesses of its elders." Using generational theory, we can actually predict how each generation is likely to tackle the next lifestyle they face. This is incredibly helpful just now, as many generations are facing significant lifestyle shift moments (Gen Y are heading into the workplace, Gen Xers have children and mortgages, and the Boomers are starting to retire).

Of course, there are always exceptions to every rule. There are many young old people in the world: people from the older generations who have adapted and changed their attitudes and outlooks to be more in line with younger generations. The same is true vice versa. There are young people who have the attitudes and expectations of much older generations. This can also be influenced by personality, gender, culture and especially religion. All of these factors must be considered when trying to understand, predict and influence the behaviour of a particular individual.

Generations and socio-economic issues

One of the most common questions about generational theory is whether it is applicable to people living in poverty. Does the theory apply equally to rich and poor, and upper and lower classes?

It would be foolish to claim that any theory could



have such a broad reach and applicability, and certainly generational theory suffers the same weaknesses that all sociological models would suffer when faced with these questions. The majority of the research has been in middle class, developed nations, and so this is where the theory is most obviously applicable. Research is still sparse in some parts of the world, yet, anecdotally, TomorrowToday can confirm that as we have done presentations on this issue around the world - literally on every continent, and to delegates representing at least 100 countries - we have found audiences to be enthusiastic in their acceptance of the theory and affirming of its applicability.

My country of birth, South Africa, might be a good example to consider. The theory has been tested in South Africa in a number of studies. Kelly SA, a personnel company, did research in 2005 called the "Workplace Satisfaction Survey". One of their major conclusions was that the younger the person, the less race and the more age became a predictor of attitudes and behaviour. In other words, today's young South Africans have more in common with each other than any of them have in common with their own parents. In 2002, I did research with Ogilvy & Mather SA, in which we looked at the stratified data of sociomonitor studies, using a longitudinal study sample that spanned the last 25 years of their data. We compared people of different ages and different race groups, and found age (generation) to be a much more powerful predictor of attitude and values (that's what sociomonitor tries to identify) than race was. This study received a Global WPP merit award for market research. This approach was mirrored by Hachtmann and Kitagawa in their 2007 study of generations in Japan, with similar outcomes and conclusions.

It is probably fair to say that the theory is mainly applicable to those who are higher up Maslow's "hierarchy of needs". Many sociological theories battle to be applicable to children at risk, or to those who live in extreme poverty. Nevertheless, we see massive value shifts taking place amongst the younger generations of all cultures and economic classes. In the case of the newly affluent (this applies as much in Russia and Eastern Europe as it does among Polynesian immigrants in East Australia and the middle class of Nairobi's suburbs), the children often portray the characteristics of second generation immigrants. When parents move countries, the first generation of children (often born in the old country, but with very little memory of it) are caught in between cultures. At home, they may follow very closely the rituals and traditions of the original culture (including speaking the language, wearing the clothes, fulfilling rituals). But, away from home (at school, work, etc), they very often pick up the language (and even accent) of the host culture, wear those clothes and participate in those rituals. They've been called the "one-and-a-half generation" by researchers.

We can therefore confidently apply generational theory in different countries and contexts. In each new country, work needs to be done to identify unique, local defining events, and show how these events specifically influenced the generations in that country. This requires a knowledge of the country and region's history, as well as some time to investigate generational cohort attitudes. TomorrowToday has done this work in nearly 30 countries, and in each case have found the generational age bands to be fairly similar, and quite closely aligned to the general age ranges provided in the overview of the living generations above.

A Repeating Cycle

A final consideration will show the deep-rooted value of generational theory as a predictor of values, attitudes and expectations. Most generational theorists (but most notably Howe and Strauss in “The Fourth Turning”) have identified a repeating cycle in historical generational values. Typically, four different generational archetypes are identified, alternating between active and passive types.



The concept is that over an 80-year period of human history, we start with a crisis period, when society has to stop and deal with an issue that actually changes institutions and structures. Children born during such a time grow up to be like the Silent generation of today. This is followed by an outer directed and driven period of rebuilding, with grand visions and big dreams, giving rise to a Boomer-like generation. This idealistic world cannot be sustained, however, and a period of disillusionment and breaking down follows, with society being reconfigured and adjusted. The children of this era grow up to be like Generation X is today. This era is followed by an inner-directed era, where leaders, institutions and society itself focuses on consolidating and building new foundations, rebuilding institutions and protecting the young. This era gives rise to the type of people who are from the GI generation and Generation Y today. Finally, this inner-directed focus cannot be maintained, and a crisis occurs, sparking a new cycle.

Generational theory therefore predicted a major “era defining” event would be due sometime in 2008. I don’t think anyone would argue that the global financial crisis was the catalyst for many other significant shifts, including political, social and values shifts around the world. This type of era defining event is something that causes society to stop, reconsider and reconstitute itself. That is certainly one way to describe the world of the early 20-teens - it has the feeling of a world that is trying to end one thing and start another. The effects of this straining to change are being felt from Washington to Beijing, throughout the Middle East and Europe, in the BRICS and throughout Africa: change is coming. What it is we don’t yet know, but a new era is dawning.

The Sociological Research

Finally, before considering the practical uses of generational theory, you may be interested in a brief overview of the sociological research behind the theory.

Young people learn values from parents and communities, and often share similar core ideals through life. However, as they become aware of the world around them, members of the younger generation experience society differently, leading to what Mannheim described as a “visible and striking transformation of the consciousness of the individual ... a



change not merely in the content of experience, but in the individual's mental and spiritual adjustment." Mannheim referred to "fresh contact", explaining that as young people grow up and experience and process their surroundings for themselves, rather than merely through their parent's eyes, they adapt the value systems they have received for the realities they experience. Mannheim explained how a person develops meaning based on personal experiences within a social context, "which is necessarily different from other generations."

Mannheim explained that a generation is a social location that has the potential to affect an individual's consciousness in much the same way as social class or culture does. Driven by the imperatives of biology and social context, "individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process", and a generational consciousness is formed. This involves the development of "collective mentalities that mirror a dominant view of the world, reflecting similar attitudes and values and providing a basis for shared action." These mentalities lead to "continuing practice," meaning that the defining values that formed collectively by a generational group will continue to influence the behaviour of individuals throughout their lives.

The anthropologist, Margaret Mead, in her controversial studies of the Polynesian cultures, referenced generational theory particularly showing examples of islanders making contact with the "outside world" for the first time. When doing so, they developed through a predictable series of stages of value development similar to the value shifts between generations.

Morris Massey was a legend in academic circles in the early 1970s for identifying the arriving Boomers in his lecture tour, "Who You Are Is What You Were When". The primary European contributors to generational theory in the 20th century have been Pierre Bourdieu, José Ortega y Gasset, Julius Peterson, Wilhelm Pinder and Julián Marías.

Generational theory was probably most popularised by the works of Neil Howe and William Strauss in the 1990s. Since then, a veritable tsunami of books has been released. The best and most well researched authors on the topic include Bruce Tulgan, Claire Raines, Ken Dytchwald, Warrin Bennis, Don Tapscott, Mike Regele & Mark Schultz, Walt Mueller, Christian Smith, George Barna, Bob Mayo and Peter Sheahan.

The best up-to-date research into generations seems to be emerging from sociology and practical theology departments of top universities, with an emphasis on understanding how these value shifts will impact societal institutions, including religious institutions. You can track references to these research projects and their reports via TomorrowToday's blog, <http://www.newworldofwork.co.uk>

Modern research notwithstanding, the concept of generations is much older than any of these recent studies. Historically, philosophers who have attempted to describe generational theory include Auguste Comte, Maximilien Littré, John Stuart Mill, Gustav Rümelin, Ottokar Lorenz, Wilhelm Dilthey and Emile Durkheim. A 14th century Bedouin, Ibn Khaldun, was the first philosopher to describe a four-generation cycle in detail. Greek historian, Cicero; Greek writers, Heraclitus and Homer; Chinese philosopher, Lin Yü-t'ang, and the writers of the Old Testament (especially the book, Judges), show that this cyclical nature of history and generational development has not just been recently noticed.

Why this is important



Generational theory has an elegant simplicity to it. Unlike more complex segmentation tools, generational theory is immediately applicable. In the corporate environment it is often used to help front line staff adjust the way they interact with clients - face to face, by phone or in written formats. The attraction for business is that just by knowing someone's age, you can adjust your approach to them and have a greater chance of connecting with them, and therefore influencing them.

This understanding of different generations and the "gap" between them has many applications in all areas of life, from parents interacting with children, to sales people selling to younger or older clients, to managers who work with teams of people of different ages. By understanding the impact of different generations, inside and outside your organisation, you can improve customer relationships, and the productivity and interactions of your teams.

This is useful because it helps us deal with one of the biggest challenges that leaders in all sectors of business and society currently face. In an increasingly globalized world of turbulence and change, leaders are facing more and more "clashes of civilisations": a collision of values, expectations, ambitions, attitudes and behaviours. Many of these clashes are caused by generational differences.

There is no doubt that the human factor is increasingly important for maintaining a competitive advantage in business. In virtually every industry, the competitors are becoming indistinguishable on the basis of product or service. What a company sells is becoming less and less of a competitive advantage. Competing companies offer the same stuff at about the same price and quality, to the same people, delivering through similar channels and advertising in the same media using similar techniques. And they even swap staff every few years. Innovation is not the competitive edge it used to be either. Even if one company comes up with the industry's "next big thing", their competitors will copy it within a matter of days (without the R&D costs).

Competitive advantage is therefore found less and less in *what* a company sells, and more and more in *who* a company is, and *how* it sells. In this environment, talent is the primary commodity, and the ability to attract, retain, nurture and motivate talented staff (young *and* old) is a critical success factor for any company in any industry. It is vital to create an internal environment that allows people to individually and collectively create far more value than they could if they were employed elsewhere. Generational theory provides a powerful framework for creating such an environment, where multiple generations interact effectively.

Conclusion

Generational theory is a sociological, rather than psychological theory. It does not claim to be able to explain the individual actions of individuals, nor to be able to predict an individual's behaviour. But, combined with personality profiles, understanding of gender, culture, religion, race, etc, it can be a very helpful additional “layer” or “lens” of analysis of people’s behaviour drivers.

For more information and a detailed look at different generations, look at “Mind the Gap” (by Graeme Codrington and Sue Grant-Marshall, Penguin, 2004 and 2011), or the information and resources available from www.graemecodrington.com.

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About TomorrowToday

TomorrowToday is a consulting company focused on the new world of work. We use keynote presentations, workshops, training, consulting and the provision of resources to help our clients understand the key trends shaping the world, and show them the keys to success in four critically important areas:

- Strategy development and execution
- Leadership and team development
- Attracting, retaining & engaging talented staff
- Improving customer experience and retention

Our core skill is our ability to track trends and map the world of tomorrow, especially trends related to people - their needs, desires and expectations, and how they will shape the new world of work. Our core business is to help our clients gain tomorrow's competitive advantage today, by understanding the drivers of people's behaviour and attitudes and showing them how to influence others.

People are central to business success, but often the connection between management and staff or customers falters. We have processes that strengthen the connection that companies have with people and are able to deliver immediate value and performance improvement.

With ten years experience in these areas we can show you how to get more from less - more productivity, more sales, more profitability.

Please contact us to request an appointment with us - we'd love to meet with you and tell you more about who we are and what we do.

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