

Generations and Culture around the world

*article by
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Article at a glance

Generational theory has provided a whole new lexicon for the popular media and pop psychologists. Labels such as, “Boomers”, “Gen X” and “Generation Y” are used to explain all sorts of behaviour at work and at home. But is it all true, and does it apply beyond the suburbs of America? Dr Graeme Codrington has spent the last ten years studying generational theory, with two post-graduate degrees, numerous research articles and hundreds of clients around the world. In this article, he draws on his international experience to explain that generations can be seen around the world, in many different countries and cultures.

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Generational theory attempts to explain some of the differences between young and old people, and how they act, react and interact in different environments. Our value systems are shaped by factors such as culture, religion, gender, personality, class and socio-economics. But they are also shaped by the era in which we are born, and moulded by our peers and the world events that define our formative years. But can generational theory apply equally across different cultures and in different countries? Best selling author of “Mind the Gap” and an international, award winning presenter on the issue of the generation gap, Dr Graeme Codrington, provides his personal perspective.

It will probably be useful to you to know some of my credentials right at the start. My company, TomorrowToday is one of the world’s leading generational consultancies. An important part of our suite of services to clients is an understanding of the generation gap. Our approach is based on multiple sources of research and practical application, including access to the originators of generational theory, Neil Howe and William Strauss, who work out of the USA. We have also done our own extensive research, and have access to country-specific data for South Africa, New Zealand, Mauritius, England, Russia, Hungary, Estonia, Iran, Chile, Australia, China, Japan, the USA and an increasing number of other countries. Our application to different countries is constantly expanding as our team of experts is invited to present and consult around the world - in over 20 countries every year. We have presented in over 50 different countries, covering all the continents.

Almost without exception they have found our approach helpful, and expressed how well it fitted their experience in their own country and culture.

We lecture at some of the world’s top business schools, including the London Business School, the Gordon Institute of Business Science, WITS Business School, The Asia-Pacific Leadership Programme and Duke CE, and have interacted with students from almost every country in the world. Almost without exception they have found our approach helpful, and expressed how well it fitted their experience in their own country and culture.

Introduction to generational theory available at: <http://tr.im/gensintro>

There is general global acceptance of the tenets of generational theory (for a detailed introduction, see a white paper I wrote on the issue at: <http://tr.im/gensintro>). Unfortunately, there are many proponents of generational theory, with hundreds of books and blogs being churned out. And many of these self proclaimed “experts” have jumped on the Web 2.0 bandwagon and have blamed everything on “generation y” (see the Twitter #geny hashtag if you want to know what I mean). A lot of this is nothing much more than pop psychology

and gives those of us who have worked hard to develop generational theory a real headache.

But my concern in this paper is not so much the bad application of generational theory. Rather, I want to address some specific questions I have been asked by international delegates at our workshops. One of the most frequently asked questions about generational theory is whether it applies to non-Western cultures, especially to people living in developing countries. In Africa, for example, there are some people who question the theory's applicability to black cultures. Many question its applicability in China, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

There are a number of responses to these concerns.

A sociological and anthropological model - not a psychological predictor

1. The theory of generations is a **sociological and anthropological model**. As such, it deals in generalisations, not specifics. It is in the same style as, "Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus", or Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" - overgeneralisations that are nevertheless filled with truth, and provide a helpful starting point for discussions and understanding.

As with all such models, it has a bell curve distribution of applicability. There are people who do not fit this (or any other) such model of general human behaviour. So, we should not expect the theory to be perfectly predictive in every situation. It provides a high level overlay that can assist us to predict general behaviour patterns, but not individual reactions in specific situations.

A helpful analogy may be that of a forest. Each tree in a forest is unique, with its own colour, height, growth rate and health. To know how a specific tree will grow, you need to analyse that specific tree. However, you can take a group of trees together in a certain part of the forest and make general comments about them. They will receive the same rainfall, grow in the same richness of soil, and receive similar amounts of sunshine. This is similar to psychological models. Then, you can drive 100 miles away from the forest to a mountain vantage point and look back over the sea of green. You will notice certain areas of darker and lighter green, of higher and smaller trees and of dense and sparsely grouped regions in the forest. You can make maps of the forest, and identify areas of interest, and then go back down into the forest. Guided by your high level analysis, your detailed analysis of specific areas will be much more fruitful. This is what generational theory can help you to do - to know where to start looking for defining characteristics within a small group of people, such as a team, office, home or church.

Less applicable in rural environments and in very poor areas of the world - mostly applicable in middle class environments

2. We are happy to concede that the model is **less applicable in rural environments and in very poor areas of the world**. Where people have limited access to media and global influence and/or where people are living with daily struggles for mere survival, most sociological models will fall short. People at the lower ends of Maslow's hierarchy of needs will not be focusing on self-actualisation issues where generational theory will be most applicable. Therefore, you should probably expect generational theory to be mostly applicable in "middle class"> communities. By this, I do not mean "American suburbia" - almost every country in the world has its own form of middle class. It is in these middle classes, however they are constituted, that generational theory will find its best expression.

There are a few researchers doing work on "at risk" communities, and their work is likely to be more helpful in rural areas and areas of vast unemployment. However, most research into "at risk" people show that they fit very few sociological models except those that are specifically focused on "at risk" issues.

Having said that, however, the pervasive influence of digital and communication technologies is bringing an homogenisation of cultures to the world. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not just so-called "Western" culture that is being exported to the developing world (although this is a dominant and continuing mega-trend). The developing world has an increasing impact on the developed nations. India refused foreign aid in the 2004 tsunami disaster, and was itself a donor in the region. Indian technology gurus are set to be the rising stars in the next decade or so. Hyundai's Getz was recently voted the most reliable car in the UK, and Toyota is leading the way in bringing hybrid cars to the USA. LG and other Asian brands are pushing for global marketpace - and getting it - with a combination of innovative technology, design and marketing savvy.

Poor nations of the world are now connected - to each other and to the world!

The poor nations of the world are now connected. While their banking and economic systems may need more time to fully integrate, global communications have opened up considerably in the past 10 years. In fact, developing nations have been able to leapfrog developed nations, by putting in the latest technology, and not inheriting any legacy systems (such as the USA's creaking electricity infrastructure and its out of date analog, "tri band" cellphone networks). Many African countries have many more mobile phone users than fixed line users, and are far more advanced in mobile banking solutions. This is a trend that will continue. It is the younger generations that benefit most, and are affected and influenced most by this rapid leap from pre-technology to post-digital world.

As this impacts their connection with the world, it will also highlight a generation gap between themselves and their more traditional parents. In many of the world's poorest areas, I expect to see

evidence of a generation gap emerging. It may not be on the same time scale as other parts of the world, but it is happening nevertheless, and what we know about managing different generations will be useful in these regions.

3. In 2001, TomorrowToday did some **detailed research** with Ogilvy & Mather, Johannesburg (an advertising agency, linked in with the world's largest WPP group). The research was sponsored by Tholoana Qhobela, a senior executive, and conducted by Kathryn Robinson, O&M's top researcher. Using data from South African sociomonitor studies stretching back over 20 years (these studies test certain value statement sets over time to plot changes in values), we identified certain key indicator questions that could be used to validate the generational theory. Kathryn analysed the data according to age (groupings of ten years) and race (the four general categories recognised by most South African research). At the same time, TomorrowToday made predictions about what the answers to certain questions were likely to be, according to the age (generation) of respondents. The predictions were tested against the actual data, and a remarkably high correlation was discovered.

In fact, the data indicated that, especially amongst the younger generations, two young people of different racial backgrounds were more likely to be like each other on value issues than either of them was likely to be like their own parents.

Multiple studies have concluded that generations is more important than race or culture in explaining the attitudes and actions of young people around the world

This research was developed into a report that won a prize at the SA Market Research Association annual convention, and a Merit Award for research from the global WPP group. One of the reports developed from the research was related to advertising literacy, and is available on request.

Similar studies have been conducted around the world. My own Masters research looked at generational theory in South Africa, using the original research methodology. My thesis applied the results to local churches, but the general research is applicable across many different aspects of life and society. Howe and Strauss host a website that encourages global research based on their theory and generates discussion from different countries and cultures. Follow these discussions at <http://www.fourthturning.com>

You may also be interested in a study done by Kelly, the staffing solutions company based in South Africa. In November 2003, they sent out a press release entitled, "Manage the age group, not the race group," in which they argue that the younger your employees are the more important age/generations is. In fact, it becomes more important than race as a predictor of behaviour.

At present, TomorrowToday is engaged with GFK, one of the world's

largest market research companies, to study generational values in the United Kingdom. The results of this research will be available in mid 2010. While not looking at race as an issue, it has tried to take class issues into account, and should provide us with a model of understanding how generational theory links in with other stratification models. Our early research results show strong correlations and verify the generational model as a useful and practical tool for market segmentation.

Your local history is not as unique as it might feel - it happened in a global context

4. Most countries tend to view their history as being unique. I grew up in South Africa, for example, where the history of apartheid played out in so many horrible ways. South Africans think of their story as unique in the world, and dislocated from global trends. This is not so. In the early 1970s, students protesting against the government caused mayhem on school campuses. The government sent troops onto these campuses, and some students were shot dead. The date was 4 May, 1970. The place was Kent State University, United States of America. A few years later, South Africa's Baby Boomers did something similar, with similar results, starting in Soweto on June 16, 1976.

1989 - the year the whole world changed, all at once, all together and altogether

From the beginning of the 1970s to the end of the 1980s, the world was in chaos. Everywhere. And then a major tipping point. In 1988 Gorbachev came to power in Russia and announced perestroika and in 1989, he banned the communist party. In South Africa, de Klerk came to power and announced the ending of apartheid, the release of Mandela (he was eventually released on 11 Feb 1990) and unbanned the communist party. In Romania, the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was overthrown and Eastern Europe opened up. In Germany, students punched the air with the global clenched fist "power salute" as the danced on the Berlin Wall and smashed it to pieces. In China, students did the same on Tiananmen Square, as tanks rolled over them. And the very next day, Iran saw riots as the Ayatollah was buried. And America invaded Panama in one of their early "pre-emptive strikes". There was a "Velvet Revolution" in Prague, and a singing one in Estonia. All this in 1989 - a tipping point in recent global history.

A few moments of thought, and a cursory knowledge of your own country's history may assist you to align the generic generational theories with your own country's generational history. Certainly in recent decades, global trends have exerted an influence on all countries, including the world's developing countries. The younger a person is, the more likely that generational characteristics will fit, regardless of their culture or country.

Having said that, however, older generations also display many similar characteristics across different countries, consistent with the predictions of generational theory. In black cultures in Africa, for instance, the older generations are very traditional and conservative. They expect to be respected simply because of their age and social

position, and prefer hierarchical structures of control. These, and other characteristics, are consistent with the Silent generation around the world.

5. It is also important to understand that **different countries have experienced similar influences, but at slightly different times**. In particular, the United States has led most global trends in recent decades, and therefore the effects of those trends would be seen first in the generations in the USA.

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. Millennials are considered to be those born 1983-2000. The 1983 year is selected as anyone born in 1983 or later graduates High School in the new millennium. Xers are simply the Generation between the Boomers and Millennials, and their start year of 1963 simply identified as being the mid point between 1943 and 1983.

In South Africa, it's simpler. South Africans can simply look at the decades, with Boomers being those born 1950-1970, Xers from 1970-1990, and Millennials from 1990 to present. The Millennials are linked to the ending of apartheid and Mandela's release. The oldest Xers would possibly remember June 16, 1976, and the Boomers are defined from the start date of the National Party's ascent to power and implementing of separate development policies in 1949. There is no doubt that Mandela and his cohort have GI generation characteristics. Neither is there any doubt that Cyril Ramaphosa and his cohort are Boomers. It was their generation that initiated the 1976 student riots, and their generation that is now really cashing in and catching up with the world's Boomers in unprecedented wealth creation. The current teenagers and university students display very clear Xer characteristics. However, it might be argued that the white Afrikaans Xers have only just recently entered the generational arena, and are a few years "behind" the cycle. It could similarly be argued that many young black people in the 1960s were disaffected and cynical, and displayed Generation X characteristics earlier than their white counterparts.

In Iran, however, 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, which ended in the death of the Ayatollah in 1989.

Somewhere in the late 1960s or early 1970s almost every country will find an era defining moment

Typically, we would assert that the Baby Boom generation started in most countries at around the time of the ending of the Second World War. It would be tough to argue that this was not a culture and societal defining event experienced around the world in similar ways.

We would also assert strongly that 1989 should be seen as an era-defining turning point. We see Generation Y or the Millennial generation as those born after 1989. Somewhere between 1945 and 1989 there needs to be a dividing line between Boomers and Generation X. In some countries there are clear events that give us a date to hook this change to. In Portugal it's the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974. In Australia, I'd argue it's Gough Whitlam's government of 1972-1975. In America, it is probably 1968, the year of assassinations, Vietnam souring and preparing for the moon landing. France might also choose 1968, with Paris riots and joining the nuclear club.

But somewhere in the late 1960s or early 1970s almost every country will find an era defining moment. That might make the Boomer cohort small, with more Gen Xers, or the other way around. But the theory still works. The theory is not watertight, nor predictive at every level. It provides a general framework that must still be wisely applied in different countries and cultures.

6. Finally, we have presented the generational theory to people from every layer of society in over 50 countries. In some countries, like South Africa, Uganda, England and Iran, we have been able to present in rural areas to lower class audiences (I mean that in the technical sense, not as a value judgement). We have presented it on every continent, and in these venues, have been exposed to people from almost every country in the world. On anecdotal evidence from these participants, we have total confidence that the generational theory, and our particular approach to it, is useful and applicable across multiple cultures and countries, in developed and developing worlds.

Read more about generational theory in our book, "mind the gap!", by Graeme Codrington and Sue Grant-Marshall, published by Penguin in July 2004.

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Dr Graeme Codrington is a business strategist, keynote presenter and thought leader on the future of work, and attracting, retaining and engaging talented staff and clients, across the generations. His inspiring keynote presentations and workshops get teams inspired to immediate action and long-term business improvement. Contact him at graeme@tomorrowtoday.uk.com.

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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