

FEATURE: GENERATION GAP

# Oops! Your gap is showing

Throughout history we have rebelled against the dictates of the generation that raised us. But rapidly changing technology means the generational differences have never been so stark. By Sue Grant-Marshall



Nelson Mandela being sworn in as South African president in Pretoria, May 10, 1994. Children born post 94 are known as 'born frees'

**HE JERKS INTO YOUR**

office, eager to sort out your computer problem quickly. Not out of concern for your nerve-shredded state. Quite the opposite. He's sure you've done something stupid and wants to show you how silly you are, then make a nimble departure to make more money out of another befuddled BC (before computers) twit.

This is a typical Boomer and Generation X situation.

Paul has had only a few hours sleep, working round the clock to finish a project spec for his boss. He stumbles into the office around 10am, drops the disc containing his work on his boss's desk, informs him the job is done and that he's off home to sleep. Mr Boss, 53, looks astonished, and says he can't remember giving him the day off.

"You didn't. I'm taking it," responds Paul and disappears. This is also a typical Gen X and Boomer scene.

In these daily scenarios that occur in offices and homes around the world, the players are left angry and feeling misunderstood. Something happened and they don't know why. It's called the generation gap.

There are five generations which American theorists William Howe and Neil Strauss created about 20 years ago and wrote up in an academic tome which sold like wildfire. Realising they were on to a good thing, they wrote several more books. Now, they are among many who are trying to help people understand why their kids/parents/employees/teachers, behave so differently from them.

There have always been generation gaps. It makes sense and is healthy that each generation rebels against the rules their parents and society lay down for them.

But in the past tumultuous 100 years with two World Wars, a great depression, massive technological advances and the rise of a multifaceted media, the generational differences have never been so stark.

Each generation has certain characteristics because kids are born and grow up in an era in which they share common and therefore bonding experiences. Think of the Boomers listening to The Beatles in the Sixties and watching Neil Armstrong step on the moon. Or the Born Free-of-Apartheid (Millennial generation)



At the funeral of John F Kennedy, US president assassinated in 1963 - a defining moment for the boomers



On July 16, 1969, American astronauts Neil Armstrong, (right) Edwin Aldrin, and Michael Collins lifted off from Kennedy Space Centre, Florida, in the Saturn V rocket on their way to the moon during the Apollo 2 mission



A booming moment



The day the world stood still: On September 11 2001, two hijacked planes smashed into the World Trade Centre in New York City, killing nearly 3 000 people. An event that recorded strongly with the 'born frees'

never experiencing Pass laws. That's bonding.

Generational theory is a generalisation, and there are always exceptions, but it is interesting how often you can see yourself or your child in an action typical of your and their generations.

The hero generation is just that, the heroes who fought and died in trenches in their millions in Europe. Today they're in their 80s and 90s and disappearing fast. This was a visionary generation, the first to have vitamins and be Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. They were cosseted and loved. They introduced a military approach to the workplace as thousands left the land in the great depression to work in offices. Heroes are typified by Sir Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, Helen Suzman and Walter Sisulu.

The Silent generation spent their childhoods growing up in the dark shadows of World War 2. Many endured food rationing. In Britain and Europe kids faced the daily fear of death. The Silent generation's ranks include President Thabo Mbeki, Queen Elizabeth II, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Neil Armstrong.

The Baby Boomers are so-named because when their fathers returned from the war the birth rate shot up. Schools and universities had to be enlarged or built for them. They were given everything their Silent parents said they never had. They were spoilt and loved. They are the echo of the Hero generation's childhood. The arrival of the Pill in the 60s gave them sexual freedom; they made "love, not war", wore bell bottoms and minis and both sexes grew their hair long.

Today Boomers run and dominate the media, business, politics, the arts, just about everything. They're the first generation to refuse to grow up. They gym, Botox and swallow age-defying food supplements. They are fitter and younger-looking than any previous generation.

Famous Boomers include Madonna, Richard Branson, Tony Blair, Bill Gates, Cyril Ramaphosa, Patrice Motsepe.

The Xers are an enigmatic generation who get their label from "X" the symbol for the unknown in maths. In South Africa they are old enough to remember apartheid and although part of it, few white Xers fought on the border, and few black Xers were old enough to join the 1976 Soweto student uprising. The same applies to the Vietnam war and Xer Americans. Yet they grew up in the shadow of these events sensing something had gone wrong.

This sense of alienation was reinforced by a feeling of abandonment. It was their mothers who rebelled against

domesticity and swept into the workplace, leaving their children behind. As they grew older, they moseyed off down to the ever increasing number of shopping malls, looking for entertainment. It's this generation who first felt the effects of the divorce boom as their economically liberated mothers felt free to leave unhappy marriages.

It is the echo of the Silent generation's sad childhood, for many were teenagers when Aids hit the media spotlight. They came into their own with the Dotcom boom when some, like Mark Shuttleworth, made millions working from their garages. Sadly, the bubble burst and many of them, even in their late 20s, moved back home to the despair of their parents.

**TODAY THEY'RE BUSY**

redefining the military mode workplaces they inherited from their grandparents. They are the children of the IT revolution which made it possible to work from anywhere. Not for them the physical constraints of an office.

They move jobs every two/three years, attracting the "mac job" label. Any potential sense of loyalty to "the firm" was scotched as they saw their Boomer parents retrenched as companies downsized worldwide. They demand a balanced working life that gives them the time to spend with their children, unlike their parents.

Some high profile Xers include Shuttleworth, Lance Armstrong, David Beckham.

The Born Free or Millennial generation (the first school leavers in this new millennium) has, generally speaking, not suffered under apartheid laws. Few understand fully the evils of apartheid and that's how they like it. "Get over it," they tell their parents. Many of the black Born Frees have walked away from their culture and language. They don't know the Struggle heroes' names and couldn't be bothered to vote. Their white generational cohorts are much the same, and as indifferent to current politics.

This generation has never known a world without cellphones and computers. They are spoilt, cosseted. Their parents hover over them in a style known as "helicopter parenting". This irritates them almost as much as their Boomer parents' inability to cope with the latest cellphone technology. No wonder they regard themselves as smarter than their parents.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead was one of the first persons to identify generational theory. "In the past there were always some elders who knew more than any children in terms of their experience in having grown up within a cultural system. Today there are none," she wrote presciently 40 years ago.

The Born Frees, as their name suggests, will resist even more than the Xers, being stuck in an

office. They expect to be listened to. A Boomer, 60, said, "We wanted what they want. We just felt we couldn't ask." Born Frees have the confidence to ask. They're also principled, community oriented and determined to save whales and the planet.

Their heroes include Angelina Jolie, Greenpeace, Prince Harry, Bono, Brad Pitt, Drew Barrymore.

The next time your Silent generation grandmother gathers birthday present wrappings to use again, or your status symbol obsessed Boomer father insists on keeping his BMW in spite of having been retrenched yet again, you'll understand better where they're coming from. And when your Gen Xer son turns down a CEO position in favour of "quality of life" at home or your Born Free, 13, daughter demands her own laptop, you'll have some insight into why this makes you feel so upset. It's the generation gap.

Sue Grant-Marshall is the author of *Mind the Gap* and *Mind over Money* (Penguin Books).

## South Africa's generation table

**Hero generation:**

Born 1900s into 1920s

**Silent generation:**

Born 1920s into 1940s

**Boomers**

Born 1940s into 1960s

**Xers:**

Born 1960s into 1980s

**Born Free:**

Born into the new South Africa

**For each generation there is a "where were you when . . . ?"**

**Hero:** First World War ended on November 11, 1918

**Silent:** Britain declared war (WW2) on Germany, September 3, 1939

**Boomer:** John F Kennedy assassinated, Dallas, November 22, 1963

**Xer:** Berlin Wall came down, November 9, 1989

**Born Free:** 9/11



U2s Bono takes up the cudgels on global warming