

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249920018>

Gendered roles, images and behavioural patterns in the soap opera Generations

Article in *Journal of African Media Studies* · December 2009

DOI: 10.1386/jams.1.3.429/1

CITATIONS

11

READS

1,334

1 author:



[Gilbert Motsaathebe](#)

United Arab Emirates University

3 PUBLICATIONS 22 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Journalism education and practice, film and TV star system in South Africa [View project](#)

Gendered roles, images and behavioural patterns in the soap opera *Generations*

Gilbert Motsaathebe *Cape Peninsula University of
Technology, South Africa*

Abstract

This article evaluates gender stereotyping in Generations, South Africa's leading soap opera. Making use of the results of an analysis and survey method, the article examines subtle areas of denigration and other negative connotations in the speech, emotions and habits of the characters that are highlighted as displaying typically male or female behaviour. The article explores whether male and female characters featured in Generations display the same level of positive behavioural patterns, and tries to establish whether the general image of either sex is in any way denigrated or compromised to the benefit of the other – with a view to stimulate actions in improving the portrayal of both males and females in popular South African television programmes. The article reveals that whilst both males and females are generally fairly portrayed, males are portrayed as more dominant when compared to their female counterparts. The last part of the article suggests that (1) the research division of Generations should ensure constant viewer feedback; (2) preview sessions should include communication experts, regulation experts and women's lobby groups; (3) Generations should consider having its own in-house guidelines on the portrayal of women, men and children; and (4) the soap opera should consider having more women actively involved as writers, directors and producers.

Keywords

gender stereotypes
soap operas
Generations
SABC
feminism
gendered images

Introduction

Equality between women and men is regarded as a central part of the broader struggle for liberation in South Africa. Former President Nelson Mandela's 'State of the Nation' address in 1994 served as a clear example of the country's commitment to gender equality. Mandela told parliament then that freedom cannot be achieved if women are not emancipated from all forms of oppression. For this reason, an investigation of the different dimensions and manifestations of gender issues is necessary.

This article reports on a larger academic study conducted between 1999 and 2008. Using the soap opera *Generations* as a reference, this article looks at the way television programmes in South Africa handle the issue of gender stereotypes through their portrayal of women and men. The article is grounded in the continuing debate about how the media (the press, television and radio) address issues of gender stereotypes. According to Baker and Raney, 'research concerning the prevalence of gender-role stereotyping is imperative as we work towards a more understanding and equitable

society' (Baker and Raney 2007: 39). *Generations*, which is a major soap opera in South Africa in terms of viewership (South African Advertising Research Foundation 2009), is one of the examples of media programmes affected by the issue of gender stereotyping. The South African TV Authority (TVSA)'s weekly analysis of primetime viewing figures supplied by SAARF, for the five top soap operas for the week of 31 August – 6 September 2009, pegged viewership for *Generations* at 5,060,000; followed by *The Bold and the Beautiful* (2,266,000); *Muvhango* (2,079,000); *Scandal* (1,901,000); and *Rhythm City* (1,849,000). *Generations* is also not only the most watched soap opera but also by far the most watched TV programme in South Africa.

The purpose of this article is to survey gender images and roles portrayed in *Generations*, and to find out whether female characters successfully occupy roles that were traditionally regarded as male-only roles, and whether female characters have the same occupational distribution as their male counterparts. The article pays attention to subtle areas of denigration, trivialization, satire and other negative connotations in the speech, emotions and habits of the characters that might be highlighted as typically male or female behaviour in *Generations*. *Generations* has, among its actors and actresses, its darlings of the people, its witches, its crooks, its manipulators, and within the vast viewing audience, its admirers and its detesters. According to an avid viewer, 'people already use characters' names in households, as nicknames for family members, friends and foes' (Montsho 1999, personal communication). Baker and Raney suggest that

the ways that the characters on television are stereotyped should be brought to the attention of writers and producers, because it is only when they understand the implications of what they are doing that they can make an effort to minimise these portrayals.

(Baker and Raney 2007: 39)

Soap operas are known for their stereotypical portrayal of women. For instance, Barrat found that,

If a working person is portrayed it is almost always a male image and those working women that are depicted are shown to be incompetent and inferior to male workers; men are doctors; women are nurses and secretaries; men work in corporations; women tend boutiques.

(Barrat 1990: 46)

Another media researcher, Gunter (1986) complains that women are generally denigrated as people who are too emotional to handle anything constructive on their own, without the intervention and support of men. 'The emotional woman is believed to become flustered in the most minor crisis; she is seen as sensitive, often fearful and anxious, and generally dependent on male help and support in all kinds of personal and professional situations' (Gunter 1986: 11). If viewers emulate the image they see on screen, as indicated elsewhere in this article, then such a portrayal is problematic and needs to be addressed. By uncovering overt as well as covert stereotypes in *Generations*, it is hoped that this article will stimulate

actions in improving the portrayal of both males and females on popular South African television programmes.

Background of *Generations*

Generations is one of the first locally produced soap operas in South Africa. The term 'soap opera' derives from the fact that these types of serials were sponsored by a soap manufacturer when they first started in the United States of America. While the word 'soap' in 'soap opera' alluded to the sponsorship by manufacturers of household cleaning products, the word 'opera' suggested an ironic incongruity between the domestic narrative concerns of the daytime serial and the most elevated of dramatic forms (Cantor and Pingree 1983: 1). In South Africa, soap operas were first introduced in 1953. They were broadcast on Springbok radio (one of SABC's radios) and their popularity with female audiences was repeatedly mentioned in the SABC annual reports (Tomaselli et al. 1989: 197). Soap operas were only introduced on television in South Africa around 1984 when *Santa Barbara* and *Dallas* were broadcast on Bop Television (a television station for the former Bophuthatswana homeland in South Africa), both of which became a hit in South Africa, watched by most people in the Bop Television reception area. Sources from the Bop Broadcasting veterans indicate that several hotels in South Africa began erecting satellite dishes to receive the Bop TV channel to attract customers due to the popularity of these soap operas.¹ *Dallas* and *Santa Barbara* were thus money-spinners for Bop Television; however, this trend was reversed when a former Bop Television producer, Tim Ellis, was headhunted by the SABC to start the new channel 4 to compete against Bop. According to Mosime, Tim Ellis had the inside story on Bop Television's buying secrets, and he introduced the American soaps to the short-lived SABC's channel 4 from 1986.

Until 1993 all soap operas broadcast on the SABC were not produced locally. However, South Africa's transformation agenda after 1994 meant that the broadcasting industry, which had been instrumental in perpetuating all kinds of stereotypes including racial and gender stereotypes, had to be transformed to cater for all sectors of the population. As a result, a regulatory body, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), was set up to oversee the restructuring and transformation of the broadcasting industry. At the time more than 60 per cent of programmes on the SABC were acquired overseas and had little or no relevance to the local populations, particularly Blacks, Indians and Coloureds. The IBA then recommended the prioritization of local programming. As a result of the transformation imperatives, veteran television producer Mfundi Vundla was approached to create a soap opera for the SABC and *Generations* was produced.

Generations was premiered on the SABC in 1994 as a weekly one-hour show but was soon introduced as a daily soap opera due to its popularity. Vundla revealed his objective with the soap opera in an interview published in 2005:

Generations made its debut on public broadcaster SABC after apartheid ended in 1994, aiming to show blacks in a positive light after years of television drama cast Africans as unsophisticated, superstitious idiots who visited witch doctors to solve problems.

(Esipisu 2005: accessed 2009)

1. Interview with Sophia Mosime, former Bop TV Education Broadcast Researcher, in 1999.

Indeed *Generations* reflects strongly on the demographics of the new South Africa. As one of its cast, Sophie Ndaba who plays advertising executive Queen, puts it: 'the show is itself black economic empowerment. I mean our top boss is black, 90 per cent of the cast is black and we talk about black issues and how to respond to them' (Esipisu 2005: accessed 2009).

Generations is currently screened on SABC 1 at 8pm from Monday to Friday. It is one of the four locally produced soap operas transmitted on the public broadcaster SABC. The other three are *Isidingo/The Need*, *7de Laan /Seventh Lane* and *Muvhango*.

***Generations'* narrative**

The running themes in *Generations* encompass a wide range of issues including feminine values, abortion, homosexuality, rape, prostitution, child abuse, family violence, women in politics and business, illegal smuggling, workplace demographics and the pursuit by women of such worthy courses as fighting for animals' rights. Through its multiracial characters, *Generations* established itself as a fairly progressive genre strongly reflecting contemporary South Africa – with children, women and men of all races featuring in a variety of roles and performing a variety of tasks.

The storyline in 2009 revolves around two lucrative companies, namely Mashaba Media which is headed by Dineo Mashaba(female) and Ezweni Communications under S'busiso Dlomo (male) and Karabo Moroka (female). Dineo (played by Katlego Danke) took over control from her husband Kenneth Mashaba (Seputla Sebogodi) after he suffered a severe stroke. Under Dineo, Mashaba Media appears certain to be headed for disaster and has become the laughing stock of the industry. Dineo has plunged the company into financial troubles and is clearly unable to cope with its management. This can be deduced in a scene where the crying Dineo finally confides to Kenneth's brother, Paul Mashaba (Siyabonga Twala), about her inability to cope with running the company and turns to him for help: 'I am destroying Kenneth's company and I don't know how to fix it. I need you more than Kenneth. Please stay and help me turn things around. I am begging you.' Moreover, Dineo is implicated in infidelity, cruelty, selfishness, egotism and manipulation. She becomes pregnant with the child of her stepson, Thomas, while her husband is fighting for his life in hospital.

The storyline in *Generations* is constantly evolving. In earlier episodes (between 1994–2003) the storyline revolved around two middle-class families, the Morokas (a black family) and the Naidoo's (an Indian family), who ran two powerful advertising companies – namely New Horizons, which was at the time headed by Archie Moroka (male), and Isis, managed by Shaan Naidoo (female). Isis (women-managed) has since closed down while New Horizons continued profitably until Karabo Moroka (female) took over the reins. She was unable to cope and eventually enlisted the help of her lover, Tau Mogale (male), to run the company. This is typical of the soap's tendency to portray women as people who are incapable of running businesses without the help or support of men. For instance, when Tau (Rapulana Seiphemo) leaves the company, Karabo (Connie Ferguson) is again unable to steer it amid stiff competition

from another advertising company, Afri-media, headed by S'busiso Dlomo (male). Karabo eventually join hands with S'busiso (Menzi Ngubane) to form Ezweni Communications. At this time the villain of the story is Anne De Villiers (female), a greedy woman who unscrupulously coerces people into selling her their shares so that she becomes part of the management of the company. Before Anne (Camilla Waldman) joined *Generations*, the villain was Ntsiki Lukhele (female) played by Pamela Nomvete. As an antagonist, she was portrayed as an embodiment of jealousy, betrayal, greed and manipulation.

We also see a young man, S'phiwe Phosa (played by Mandla Hlatshwayo), who enters the advertising profession and soon faces some serious trouble. He has been caught up in one of Ntsiki's wicked traps after providing confidential information about New Horizons, a company he worked for. The disclosure of confidential information makes his chances of ever working in the media and advertising industry very slim. But contrary to the portrayal of Ntsiki, who is equally implicated in the scam, he is depicted as being calm and not as hopeless and helpless. The audience is assured of his competence when he says 'I will take it like a man'. Another character, Queen, is plainly presented as being dull, irrational and ignorant, as opposed to being tolerant, inquisitive and versatile.

Most of the characters from the original cast have since left. For instance, Sello Maake ka Ncube, known to viewers as Archie Moroka, left the show after complaining of its stereotypical storylines. Another performer, Lillian Dube, who played the character Masebobe, left the show claiming it was too western. The only characters remaining from the original cast are Queen (Sophie Ndaba) and Karabo Moroka (Connie Ferguson).

Context of study

The article analyses gender roles and stereotyping in *Generations*. The main concern leading to this investigation was the continuous negative portrayal of female images on television. The issue of gender stereotyping and misrepresentation in the media warrants attention because people tend to imitate what they see in the media without questioning it and this reinforces certain stereotypes, including gender stereotyping. According to Curran, 'their [media] mediations determine what gains prominence and what recedes into the background, what is included and what is excluded' (Curran 2002: 163). As such the media provide depiction behaviour that can be imitated by the audience. This view is supported by De Fleur and Dennis, who suggest that 'members of an audience may imitate or reproduce behaviour they find modelled in media sources' (De Fleur and Dennis 1998: 470). Sharing this concern, Baker and Raney caution that 'when individuals view televised portrayal as statements about how everyone should look and behave, then misrepresentations of different people and groups will continue to hinder our society' (Baker and Raney 2007: 39). Ogunleye echoes the same sentiments by arguing that through such stereotypical portrayal, television and films reinforce the negative socialization of women: 'If a female, a girl child, in particular, sees herself portrayed in such negative stereotypes on a consistent basis, she begins to believe that the filmic image is the appropriate portrayal' (Ogunleye 2005: 132). The foregoing illustrates the extent of

the potential damage the media could impose on societies that they bombard with information on a daily basis.

In mass communication literature it is widely accepted that television and films are the products of a sexist society, and that they frequently present a biased and stereotyped depiction of women's roles. According to Greenfield (1984: 33), television generally represents highly stereotyped views of male and particularly female roles. Judging by the number of people who watch television every day, one can predict that gender relations would never be normalized in South Africa if this powerful medium continues to depict negative and inaccurate gender images. One central feature of the media as articulated by Barrat (1990) is that they are designed to allow a one-way flow of information whereby a small group of media professionals transmit messages to a large audience, which has little opportunity to reply. Hence it is necessary to raise an awareness of the effect that media productions such as *Generations* might have on their viewers with regard to gender stereotyping. It is hoped that the research results will stimulate media practitioners to approach the issue more carefully.

Although a substantial number of women have begun entering professions in the media, biased and stereotyped depictions of gender roles on screen are still evident. Even though *Generations* has attempted to portray women in more responsible roles, there still seems to be a picture of the emotional and weak woman in the background, despite all the surface glamour. A proper balance between the activities, behaviour and manners that both male and female characters are made to display will constitute improved behaviour patterns. For example, having a male receptionist or secretary on the set will be a positive step up from the traditional portrayal of females as receptionists and males as managers. 'Today's women are better educated and participate in diverse spheres of society hitherto regarded as male preserves. Therefore, it has become important that the image of the stereotyped woman be dropped' (Ogunleye 2005: 128). The research that this article reports was necessary as gender stereotyping is undoubtedly South Africa's biggest challenge following the eradication of apartheid in 1994 (Commission on Gender Equality 2003).

Feminism and its centrality to this research

The research on which this article is based is situated within feminist communication theory. According to Littlejohn (1992), feminist communication scholars challenge the prevailing gender assumptions of society in order to accomplish more liberating ways for women and men to exist. This article challenges the existing unequal representation of males and females and other negative and stereotypical connotations in *Generations* with a view to stimulating action in addressing these stereotypes and achieving a more balanced portrayal of males and females in the media.

Feminism represents an ideology based on women's liberation. The position of feminists with regard to the media is that the mass media is in the hands of male owners and producers who use the media to elevate the position of men in society at the expense of women. They argue that because men are dominant, they use their power to block women's aspirations, which they see as threatening or challenging the status quo. Feminists in

general believe that gender roles have been constructed by a male-dominated society at the expense of the women whom the society exploits. Gender roles (stereotyping) form part of the variables that this article analyses. Richmond-Abbott defines gender-role stereotypes as 'beliefs that men possess certain traits and should do certain things and that women possess other traits and should do other things' (Richmond-Abbott 1992: 7). For instance, some duties such as cooking and needlework were in the past perceived to be suitable for females, while other duties or tasks were deemed suitable for males.

Gender-role stereotyping therefore emanates from the perception society tends to have about a particular sex group and the subsequent attitude it often has regarding the activities associated with this group. For instance, in the past women have generally not been considered fit for physically demanding or skilled manual work and thus attitudes against women entering the job market (and the kind of work opportunities open to them) have been strongly influenced by views about their physical attributes. These attributes are often demeaning and portray women as being entirely dependent on men, which leads to stereotyping that manifests itself in media programmes such as *Generations*.

Since feminists believe that the mass media are in the hands of male owners who use them to marginalize females, their argument ranges from calling for reforms within the media to a total revolution where women should create their own media of mass communication. It is, however, important to note that 'feminism's central insight that women are generally disadvantaged does not thereby mean that women and men cannot interact in happy, fulfilling and meaningful ways' (Bennet 2006: 11).

Feminists are not of the same mind and as such they have generally been classified in the following broad categories: radical, socialist and liberal feminism.

Radical feminists maintain that all men dominate and oppress women. This group maintains that in order to free themselves completely, women have to cut off all ties with men. They strongly advocate that women should have their own media. Women's magazines, women's newsletters, television programmes produced by women on issues relating to gender and feminist writing are some of the examples that this group encourage. Radical feminists however have many weaknesses as they tend to presuppose a woman-only world – a position which is realistically problematic. Another major problem with radical feminism is "its assumption that all women are the same, thus ignoring the way in which different classes or groups of women oppress and exploit others" (Kitunga and Mbilinyi 2006: 46).

Socialist feminists draw their inspiration from the theories of Karl Marx and therefore attempt to incorporate an analysis of the class and economic conditions of women. They thus recognize the way socio-economic environments entrench male dominance. Issues of wages, inequitable representation of women in leadership or managerial positions, and unfair labour practices are some of the concerns raised by this group. With regard to the media, this group advocates mainstream media reform as opposed to women forming their own exclusive media as advocated by the radical feminists.

Liberal feminism on the other hand argues that the supposedly natural role of women as mothers and wives accounts for the unequal position of women in society. They encourage women to take up non-traditional roles and occupations. The position taken by liberal feminists seems to resonate more with current developments in South Africa since it argues for equitable representation of women and men. According to Kitunga and Mbilinyi, liberal feminism's 'main focus is on promoting equality by advancing women to be on a par with men within existing structures, for example, in education, in employment, in politics, and so on' (Kitunga and Mbilinyi 2006: 46). This is a key priority in South Africa where, for instance, gender affirmative action, the general advancement of women and transformation are promoted to reflect the demographics of the country.

Although liberal feminism seems to be a fairly progressive branch, it has its own weaknesses. Kitunga and Mbilinyi find that 'The problem with this approach is that it takes the status quo as given, which would mean that other forms of oppression and exploitation would persist, thereby dividing and exploiting some women by other women, and men' (Kitunga and Mbilinyi 2006: 46). Indeed, foregoing strands of feminism have not gone unchallenged, leading to the formation of other branches such as *African feminism*, *postcolonial feminism*, *Third-World feminism*, and *black feminism*, which attempt to respond to the weaknesses and ambiguities in mainstream feminism.

Postcolonial feminism negates the over-generalization of women's experiences. It stresses the historical experiences typical to a particular period. Obviously, the experience of women during the colonial era would be different from their experience during the postcolonial era. Thus, postcolonial feminists want the cause of women to change progressively to reflect the historical circumstances around which women's battle for liberation has been fought. They argue that some aspects of the old agenda are no longer relevant and need to be either abandoned or renewed.

Third World feminism seeks to account for the experience of women in developing countries. The argument of this branch is that women in the so-called 'Third World' countries have a completely different experience that cannot be equated to the experiences of women elsewhere and therefore need to stand on their own to articulate their aspirations. It is thus clear that the various feminist branches are simply necessitated by the diversity of women themselves as their experiences are not in any way homogenous. Their attempt to remain under the same mainstream category was thwarted by an array of factors, which include the hegemony of ideas primarily articulated by the dominant group within this movement; this makes the 'feminist agenda' a futile project as it was then representative of a single group and neglected other women's struggles for liberation from the pertinent oppression unique to their situation.

Black feminism argues that until race and class are eradicated women's oppression and discrimination will continue to affect society. While identifying male domination as a problem, black feminism highlights racism as a major problem for black women who are not only oppressed by men but also exploited on the basis of their colour. However, the problem with this branch is that black women themselves are not homogenous; they differ in terms of background, geography and experience.

African feminism argues that African women have a unique experience rooted in Africa, as opposed to black feminism for instance which tends to liken all black women to each other, irrespective of their geography. Akatsa-Bukachi describes an African feminist as follows:

She is not just fighting for political space or social space; she is fighting for justice that goes right to the core of male egocentrism, the fallacy of male superiority and female subordination. She is fighting to eliminate the root cause of women's oppression. The African Feminist must be ready to endure criticism, humiliation even pain, in order to overcome.

(Akatsa-Bukachi 2005: 12)

Although gender development in South Africa is mainly situated in a liberal feminism stance (as in many countries), an analysis of liberal feminism indicates that it is too limited to deal adequately with gender issues in South Africa. This is because the country is a multiracial and multicultural society whereas liberal feminism tends to treat women as if they are of the same background, same experience and same status/class within their respective communities. According to Akatsa-Bukachi (2005), African feminists are unique in that they 'see themselves performing traditional roles [...] without traditional resources [...] while at the same time undertaking modern activities [...] while being denied access to modern support systems' (Akatsa-Bukachi 2005: 6). This assertion seems to resonate more with African women in urban areas, who are now entering the traditionally 'male world' but does not seem to account for the majority of women in rural areas. The most interesting point about Akatsa-Bukachi's claim is that it speaks against liberal feminists' standpoint, which has largely sought to level the playing field without giving women special support or resources to help them get on the same level as men.

Africa itself is a diverse continent of 54 countries, with each and every one of these countries having women of different cultures, classes and colour. Nonetheless the cultural gap in Africa is very minimal and the experience of Africans are not exactly but relatively the same, as correctly adduced by Scott: 'Feminism in Africa is not as stratified as feminism in the United States because cultural similarities among African women, in spite of their particular groupings, create a standard agenda, although specifics often differ' (Scott 1996: 2). For Scott, 'White feminists in Africa, who are descendants of exploitative European settlers, separate themselves from the large African feminists' consciousness because of their privileged position in society' (Scott 1996: 2). This observation indicates that it will be implausible to talk about African feminism as inclusive of all feminists operating in Africa.

Method of research

The research approach adopted in this study was mainly quantitative, although a qualitative analysis was used to arrive at the personality attributes which were used as key variables in the subsequent questionnaire. Two methods were used in this research, namely an analysis of video recordings and a survey. The analysis was useful in identifying hidden stereotypes while the survey was necessary to explore some of the

areas that the analysis found difficult to penetrate. The key data on which this research is based were obtained through the following procedure which was performed in three stages: (1) selection and recording of episodes; (2) analysis of recorded excerpts; and (3) questionnaire development and administration (based on key interactive variables that emerged from analysing the content).

Rotated sampling was used to select the episodes analysed for this study. Episodes were recorded every Wednesday during a period of six months (1 September – 31 October 1999; 01 February – 31 March 2003; 1 September – 31 October 2008). After the data were gathered, the researcher looked at gender images in the recorded episodes, as manifested in gestures, conversation content, grooming, mannerisms, and weaknesses depicted as typically female or male. From this analysis, the following key variables/indicators (around which key issues appeared to cluster) were identified: professionalism, independence, success, power, intelligence, responsibility, personality, exploitation, arrogance, selfishness, emotion, and negligence. These categories were then operationalized and classified in affirmative and negative attributes and a questionnaire was constructed based on these categories. The aim was to determine whether there were any hidden stereotypes and muted values in *Generations* from a viewer's perspective.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections with a total of 38 questions. The first section captured demographics, the second focused on the perceived status of women and men in *Generations*, while the third consisted of open-ended questions seeking respondents' general perceptions of the production. The questionnaires focused on how the programme depicts women and men using the attributes which formed key indicators of stereotypical portrayal as inferred from the characters' overt expression of language and behaviour. These variable-attributes were then used in the questionnaire to shed light on stereotypical images and roles, and to categorize the manner in which gender roles and images were portrayed and illustrated. They were also used to determine the extent to which the portrayal was carried out, for example whether it was done realistically, or in a demeaning or exaggerated manner. Before the questionnaire was administered, the researcher conducted a pilot study to make sure that all the instructions were clear and easy to understand. This pilot study revealed that some instructions were confusing or ambiguous. This was rectified, with the instructions being rephrased to avoid confusion and double meaning. The pilot study also revealed that more women than men watched *Generations*.

Sample

One hundred and fifty respondents participated in the study through self-administered questionnaires. One hundred and eighty initial questionnaires were distributed. Determining a sample to be used in this study posed two problems. Firstly, the nature of the study required participants with basic education, i.e., people who could read and write, in order that they could respond to the questionnaire. Secondly, ensuring representativeness was an issue since, as emerged during the pre-testing of the questionnaire, not everybody watched *Generations*. Both these concerns posed a problem of diversity. In addressing this concern, the researcher obtained area maps of

Cape Town (Western Cape Province) and Mafikeng (Northwest Province) and randomly selected suburbs from the research areas. This proved to be effective because all the areas within the map had an equal chance of being selected. The questionnaires were then taken to schools, universities, police stations and clinics within the areas selected.

Results
Biographical information

Of the 150 respondents, 81 were between 16 and 24 years of age, 35 were between 25 and 34, while 34 were 35 years of age and upwards. With regard to gender demographics, 63% were females and 37% were males. The lower number of males here could be attributed to the fact that, at the time the research on which this article is based was conducted, soap operas were more popular with women than with men as revealed in the pilot phase. Regarding race demographics, blacks accounted for 54%, coloureds 33%, whites 8%, and Indians 5% (see Figure 1, 2, and 3).

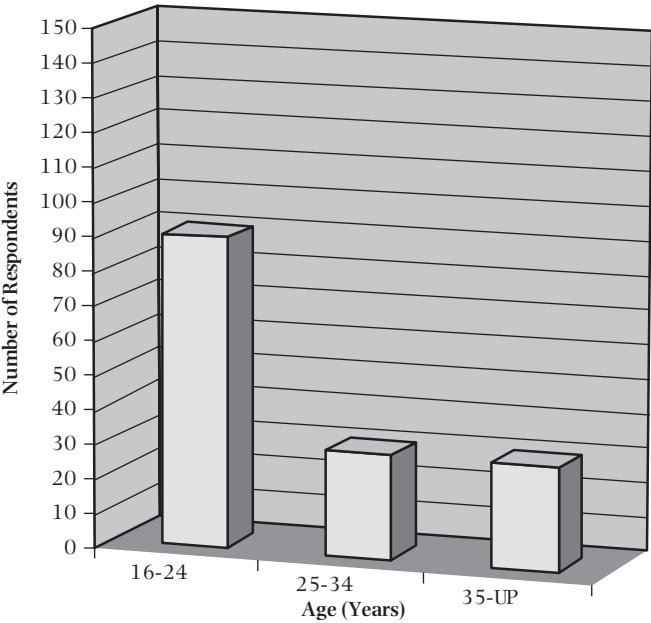


Figure 1: Age demographics.

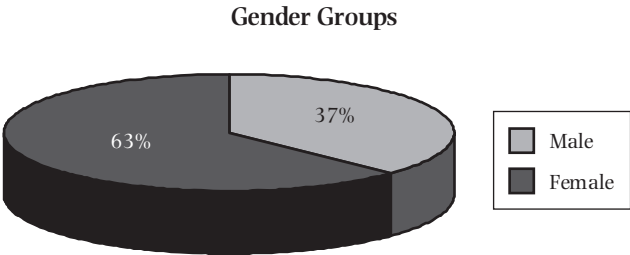


Figure 2: Gender demographics.

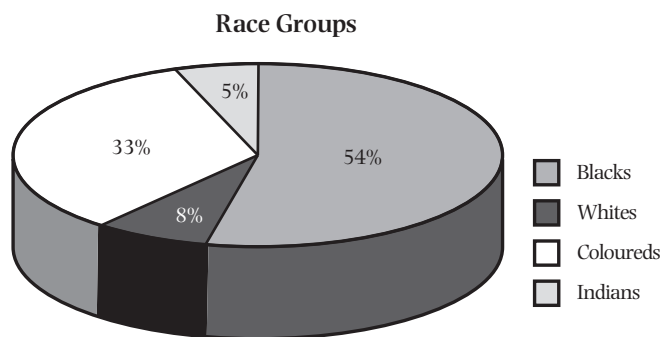


Figure 3: Race demographics.

Responses to close-ended section of the questionnaire

Summary of ratings on positive variable attributes

The respondents were asked to rate the characters on a scale of 0–5 using the variable attributes provided below. The variables were regarded as positive attributes by virtue of their having an affirmative attribute. To ensure a uniform understanding of the concepts as used in this article, each attribute is defined before the results are presented.

Professionalism

Professionalism was used in this study to imply a high standard of competence. The behaviour pattern exhibited by individuals generally reflects the skills and the expertise they possess. The response obtained indicates that, compared to females, males were more likely to be portrayed as professionals: 70% of respondents indicated that males were portrayed this way, both in the nature of the work that they do and the way they conduct themselves. The professionalism factor can be deduced on the number of businesses that collapsed under the management of women (who are often portrayed as clumsy and incompetent) compared to those run by men. This could reinforce the stereotypical view that women are incapable of running businesses, as we have seen with Dineo, who eventually had to turn to Paul (presented as being dignified, courageous and innovative) for help, after admitting that she was incompetent.

Independence

Independence is defined by the *Webster Third New International Dictionary* (2000) as 'not subject to control by other; not subordinate; exemption from external control or support; freedom from subjection or from the influences of others'. With regard to this attribute, the majority of respondents (87%) saw men as independent. Women portrayed in *Generations* tend to rely more on other people, especially men, for help or support, and this confirms the observation that women in soap operas are 'generally dependent on male help and support in all kinds of personal and professional situations' (Gunter 1986: 11).

Success

In the context of this study material possession was not a key indicator of success. In this category, although female characters were occasionally

portrayed in positions which were traditionally considered only suitable for males, a large number of respondents classified males as being successful (75%). This could be deduced from the large number of women who tend to fail in various areas, including personal relationships and businesses.

Power

Sixty-three per cent of respondents rated males as powerful.

Business acumen

For this study, people with business acumen were regarded as hard-working people with the appropriate mentality, intelligence, and tact needed to succeed in a trade. Forty per cent of the respondents thought that women were portrayed as having business acumen, with 47% disagreeing and 13% voting neutral. In contrast, 80% of the respondents rated males as having business acumen, while 13% disagreed with this view and 7% remained neutral.

Intelligence

Thirty-eight per cent agreed that the women characters could be seen as intelligent, while 71% of the respondents felt that males were portrayed in a way that could be seen as intelligent. For instance, the character Queen has largely been presented as dull, irrational and ignorant.

Responsibility

There was only a small difference in the way the respondents scored the characters under this attribute: 53% of the respondents indicated that female characters came across as responsible people, compared with 57% who felt that male characters were responsible.

Happiness

In this category, females by far outnumbered males in ratings, with 73% of the respondents indicating that women were portrayed as happy people.

Benevolence

Female characters rated higher than their male counterparts, with 53% of the respondents indicating that they were benevolent, as opposed to 33% who felt the same way about the male characters.

Adventure

The trend was reversed here with 73% of respondents finding male characters adventurous.

Summary of ratings on negative attributes

Respondents were again asked to rate variable attributes on a scale of 0–5, but this time using the attributes listed below. These attributes, which are also discussed in the following paragraphs, could be regarded as negative in view of their unpleasant connotations: exploitation, arrogance, selfishness, defencelessness, emotionalism, manipulation, dishonesty, immaturity, rudeness, and negligence.

Exploitation

Exploitation means treating something or someone selfishly, as mere workable material to make capital out of (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 2000). Sixty per cent of the respondents believed that female roles were exploitative while 30% indicated that the women themselves were exploited.

Arrogance

Arrogance refers to an aggressive conceit and undue assumption of dignity, authority or knowledge (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 2000). In the context of this analysis, instances where characters made nasty remarks, were not respectful and sometimes fought unnecessarily, were classified as 'arrogant'. Of the respondents, 69% agreed that female characters on the set were more likely to be arrogant than the males.

Selfishness

This means regard for one's own interest or happiness to the disregard of the well-being of others (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 2000). Seventy-four per cent of the respondents agreed that female characters on the set were more likely to fall within this category. Ntsiki, for instance, is portrayed as being only interested in herself as she only wants to marry Mike Modau to inherit his money and businesses.

Defencelessness

Under this attribute, the analyses probed evidence suggesting that characters on the set were defenceless on their own and that they tended to rely upon others for protection. Seventy-one per cent of the respondents believed that female characters on the set were more likely to be seen as helpless or defenceless when faced with a serious challenge.

Emotionalism

Emotion refers to a mental feeling or affection such as pleasure, pain or fear (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 2000). According to Gunter (1986), emotional people are believed to become flustered in the most minor crisis. They are seen as sensitive, often fearful and anxious and generally dependent on others for support in all kinds of personal and professional situations. The research that this study reports on investigated if characters on the set were emotionally strong or weak. Eighty per cent of the respondents felt that female characters were more likely to be emotionally weak.

Manipulation

Manipulation is the act of controlling, influencing or handling someone or a situation in a clever or underhand way (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 2000). This study explored whether characters on the set were cheated, abused, harassed, or if they were drawn into making wrong decisions. Of the respondents, 75% felt that women on the set were manipulative.

Dishonesty

Unfaithfulness and unreliability characterize this quality. The respondents were asked to look for any evidence or sign that suggested that characters

on the set were deceitful, traitorous or dishonest. Seventy-seven per cent of the respondents felt that the women characters were portrayed as being dishonest.

Immaturity

This characteristic was understood as an underdeveloped sense of discretion. The question was therefore whether the characters in general were mature enough to face tough situations and still be able to take credible decisions. Seventy per cent of the respondents felt that women were portrayed as being immature.

Rudeness

Here the respondents were asked to look for elements suggestive of impoliteness, especially in the use of language and gesture. Sixty-nine per cent of the respondents felt that women on the set could be seen as being rude.

Negligence

Negligence refers to carelessness with regard to one's duty or business, and a lack of necessary ordinary care in doing something (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 2000). The research wanted to determine whether characters portrayed on the set cared about those around them, including children. There was no statistical difference here as both males and females were more likely to be perceived as being negligent, than being shown as being neglected. But women characters appeared to be more neglected when compared to males, who appeared to be negligent themselves.

Responses to the unstructured section of the questionnaire

Occupational distribution of characters

Ninety per cent of the respondents thought that male and female characters in *Generations* had the same occupational distribution. This indicates a shift from the traditional paradigm, where women are portrayed in traditional roles and men in more dominant positions. Of these respondents, 68.9% thought that the female characters in *Generations* do not successfully occupy traditionally male-orientated roles. Three different responses emerged with regard to the fact that women in *Generations* were still portrayed as receptionists and secretaries to male bosses. The first response was that the soap opera merely reflects what happens in real life, thus it captures gender dynamics as they occur in a typical society (40%). The second response was that the portrayal of women in these roles shows that the soap opera is perpetuating gender stereotyping (51%). In the third and most startling response, some respondents (9%) felt that, as there are more women than men in *Generations*, women end up in these roles because of their sheer number.

Views on whether Generations perpetuates gender stereotypes

A large number of respondents (69%) thought that *Generations* perpetuates gender stereotyping (against 31% who disagreed). This was indicated by respondents' views on women still being exclusively portrayed as receptionists and secretaries to male bosses. Notable responses were forthcoming, with respondents ascribing different characteristics to men and women. Men

whose business endeavours failed were generally viewed as 'failures' while women in the same circumstances were generally seen as being 'weak', over all the other variables provided. The fact that women were likely to be perceived as being 'weak' when they fail in business, while men in the same predicament were regarded as 'failures', points to the entrenched gender-based categorization of men and women by society. A more balanced portrayal would help challenge this categorization rather than entrenching it, as is the case with the present characterization in *Generations*.

Views on the ideal male and female character

The 'ideal' implies the identification of one's internalized values and orientations, reflecting both wishes and expectations. The 'ideal' can be traced to the assertion by the Caucasus Women's Research and Consulting Network (CWN), which maintains that 'an ideal image is based on a person's covert values and orientations' (CWN, 1999: accessed 2008). For the sample population covered by this study, an ideal female character possessed the combination of the following qualities, grouped in order of their relatedness to each other (see an explanatory note in the paragraph below.) For instance, an ideal female character was considered to be: beautiful, cute, irresistible (80%); clever, intelligent, independent (73%); warm, loving and caring (57%). An ideal man generally possessed these qualities: strength (67%); intelligence (53%); kindness, reliability and loyalty (73%); looks, irresistibility (57%).

The qualities in the preceding paragraph were stated by respondents (and not by the researcher) in the open-ended sections of the questionnaire, where they were asked to provide qualities they prefer for their ideal man and woman. Other qualities mentioned for both the ideal male and female characters were business-mindedness, assertiveness, compassion and wealth. The latter element was interesting, with about 9% of respondents saying that their ideal character has to be rich, or 'well off', as most of the respondents put it. Other than this find, no gender-related disparities were observed in this material wealth category, though, in general, female respondents seemed to favour male characters that are caring and reliable while male respondents favoured female characters that are independent and intelligent. Both men and women respondents rated highly the variable attribute 'independence' as an indispensable trait for their ideal female character, while women respondents ascribed 'charm and true love (reliable, loving and caring)' as the best qualities for their ideal male character.

Discussion

The research results show that females scored far lower on positive personality traits compared to their male counterparts. This indicates certain stereotypes relating to the image of women, who appear to be denigrated and compromised. This finding affirms the view that 'television generally represents highly stereotyped views of male and particularly, female roles' (Greenfield 1984: 33). The respondents indicated that women were more associated with negative attributes such as greed, jealousy, weak emotions, immaturity, arrogance and selfishness compared to their male counterparts.

From the research results it is clear that although both males and females may be portrayed in dominant positions, in media programmes

males are generally still shown in a way that has them significantly more dominant when compared with their female counterparts. This refers to the behaviour patterns that the characters are made to display according to the storyline; for example, a woman collapsing during a minor crisis and ending up being dependent on a male character (where a critical viewer might expect her to face the challenge and overcome her difficulties). This confirms Gunter's observation that 'television plots symbolically denigrate women, so that even when they are portrayed in leading roles and outside the home, they are surrounded and continuously rescued by male colleagues' (Gunter 1986: 2).

Although the number of females in positions that were traditionally regarded as male-only has increased over the years, mainly due to government legislation on gender and other developments such as symposia and debates surrounding the issue, stereotyped gender images in *Generations* still linger in muted values manifested in gender roles. The research results showed that *Generations*, for its part, has attempted to portray women in more responsible roles, although it failed to improve the status of these female characters in terms of the behaviour patterns they are made to display. As a result the soap opera paints women as weak despite all the glamour we see around them.

However, *Generations* seems to have attempted to portray both male and female characters in roles that were traditionally associated with men. For instance, when asked if women and men had the same occupational distribution in the soap opera, an overwhelming number of respondents (90%) felt that this was indeed the case. This indicates a shift from the traditional paradigm, which tends to portray women in traditional roles and men in positions that are more dominant. It shows that *Generations* has attempted to cast women in roles that were previously male-dominated, and this is a major achievement for a local programme.

Interestingly, the same respondents differed greatly when asked to comment on the positive and negative behaviour patterns that these characters display. Many of the respondents indicated that female characters were depicted negatively compared to male characters. This seems to confirm what Ogunleye calls 'a recent but unsuccessful and biased attempt to pander to the new feminist consciousness' (Ogunleye 2005: 134).

It attempts to present the woman as quite able to hold her own in a male-dominated world and making an impact on her career, but it does so in a distorted way which implies that she is a freak, thereby arousing more suspicion than sympathy.

(Ogunleye 2005: 134)

Linked to this concern is Gunter's (1986: 5) observation that portrayals of women on peak-time television tend to be unfavourable and lack balance relative to depictions of men, both in terms of the frequency with which female characters appear and the nature of the roles which they are allocated. Proper balance between the demeanours envisaged by scriptwriters for both male and female characters would have constituted improved behaviour patterns.

Whenever or not women are portrayed in the higher echelons in *Generations*, they fail dismally and often experience a lot of pressure that they cannot cope with. This is, however, not the case with males, as revealed through both the analysis of recorded episodes and the questionnaire survey. It is precisely this one-dimensional approach, amongst others, that has become a concern because it undermines women's ability to operate as people in their own right. Media researchers such as Gunter (1986) and Fiske (1987) highlight this concern. For instance Gunter (1986: 11) found that women in televised material are normally shown as more emotional than men, and that they become emotional even in the most trivial circumstances. The same was observed with regard to the attribute emotion: 80% of respondents felt that female characters were shown as being emotionally weak when confronted with a challenging situation.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, this article revealed that there is indeed gender stereotyping in *Generations*. Concerns raised by the research are relevant and prevalent. For instance, during the course of the study some actors and actresses left *Generations*, citing character portrayal as the reason for their departure. One of *Generations'* top actors, Sello Maake ka Ncube – known to viewers as Archie Moroka – complained on the *Felicia Show* (television talk show programme hosted by Felicia Mabusa-Suttle) that often characters had to play parts that they felt were either stereotypical or unrealistic. He has since left to join the *Lion King* cast in London, but he recently returned to South Africa and is now starring in another locally produced soap opera *Scandal*, which is broadcast on e.TV (South Africa's free-to-air channel). Another main performer, Lillian Dube, who played the character Masebobe, also left the soap opera, complaining that the soap was becoming 'too western'. Juxtaposed against the research literature, the findings of this article also highlight the importance of research in identifying hidden or muted stereotypes with a view to developing the best local productions. Therefore more research of this nature is necessary to address issues of stereotypes and misrepresentation in the media.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that gender reversal did happen in *Generations*. The best portrayal in *Generations*, as far as female characters are concerned, has been that of Zoleka (played by S'thandiswa Msomi.) She was cool, sincere, humble, affectionate, loyal, courageous, caring, giving and had developed a sense of responsibility and discretion. Unfortunately this character was short-lived. Much incidental learning takes place when such programmes are viewed. Many viewers say they have also learned a great deal about important contemporary issues such as child abuse, homosexuality and race relations which have been highlighted in the soap opera. This is a further indication that soap operas stimulate and inspire viewers through the real life situations that are portrayed. Thus it is necessary that stereotyping of images and roles be avoided. Many of the views expressed above came from people from a sophisticated background, who could assist producers of *Generations* and other soap operas to make sure that these programmes are free from any stereotypical or destructive negative overtones.

It is vital for production houses to consult extensively if they want to address gender stereotyping. Thus, the research division of the production *Generations* should ensure constant viewer feedback, including script revision from time to time. Preview sessions should include communication experts, regulation experts, women's lobby groups and all stakeholders who could assist in making the show more suitable to the majority of its viewers. Most post-study respondents believe that *Generations*, given this kind of consultation, would reach a balanced level that will carry it far beyond the present stage, where the portrayal of female and male characters is still a problem. The Gender Advocacy Programme recently produced a handbook on gender coverage for media practitioners. *Generations* could consider having its own in-house guidelines on the portrayal of women, men and children. This research has shown that the majority of those who watch soap operas are women, so it could be important for women to take an active role as writers and producers of soap operas. Till then gender relations in South Africa will not normalize.

References

- Akatsa-Bukachi, M. (2005), 'African Feminism, Does it exist?', presentation made at the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) Gender Festival, September 6–9.
- Baker, K and Raney, A. (2007), 'Equally Super? Gender-Role Stereotyping of Superheroes in Children's Animated Programs', *Mass Communication and Society*, 10:1, pp. 25–41.
- Barrat, D. (1990), *Media Sociology*, London: Routledge.
- Bennet, J. M. (2006), *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cantor, G. and Pingree, S. (1983), *The Soap Opera*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/S/htmlS/soapopera/soapopera.htm>. Accessed 11 April 2008.
- Caucasus Women's Research and Conflicting Network (1999), *Study of Gender Stereotyped and Hidden Female Discrimination in Georgia*, Georgia: CWN, <http://wie.iatp.org.ge/7.html>. Accessed 22 April 2008.
- Commission on Gender Equality (2003), *Commission on Gender Equality: Annual Report 2002/2003*.
- Curran, J. (2002), *Media and Power*, London and New York: Routledge.
- De Fleur, M. and Dennis, E. (1998), *Understanding Mass Communication*, Boston: Houghton Mafflin Company.
- Esipisu, M. (2005), *Black power of South African soap*, 27 April, <http://www.tiscali.co.uk/news/newswire.php/news/reuters/2005/04/27/entertainment/blackpowerofsouthafricansoap.html>. Accessed 1 June 2009.
- Fiske, J. (1987), *Television Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Greenfield, P. (1984), *Mind and Media: The Effects of Television, Computers and Video Games*, USA: Fontana.
- Gunter, B. (1986), *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*, London: John Libbey & Company.
- Kitunga, D. and Mbilinyi, M. (2006), 'Notes on Transformative Feminism in Tanzania', *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1 & 2, pp. 46–48.
- Littlejohn, S. (1992), *Theories of Human Communication*, California: Wadsworth.

- Mandela, N. (1994), 'State of the Nation Speech', delivered on 24 May in Cape Town, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1994/sp940524.html>. Accessed 5 April 2008.
- Montsho, S. (1999), Personal Communication with author, 21 September: Mafikeng, South Africa.
- Mosime, S. (1999), Interview with Sophia Mosime, former Bop Television Education Broadcast Researcher.
- Ogunleye, F. (2005), 'Gender stereotypes and reconstruction: a feminist appraisal of Nigerian video films', *Acta Academica*, 37:3, pp. 125–149.
- Richmond-Abbott, M. (1992), *Masculine & Feminine*, New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.
- Scott, Eryn (1995–1996), 'Differences and Intersections Between Feminism in Africa and Feminism in the United States', *Sister*, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/afgen.html>. Accessed 16 June 2009.
- South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) (2009), *TV rating figures*, Johannesburg: SAARF.
- Tomaselli, R., Tomaselli, K. and Muller, J. (1989), *Broadcasting in South Africa*, Cape Town: Anthropos.
- TVSA (2009), Primetime TV Viewing Figures. <http://www.tvsa.co.za>. Accessed 8 October 2009.
- Webster, M. (2000), *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Suggested citation

- Motsaathebe, G. (2009), 'Gendered roles, images and behavioural patterns in the soap opera *Generations*', *Journal of African Media Studies* 1: 3, pp. 429–448, doi: 10.1386/jams.1.3.429/1

Contributor details

Gilbert Motsaathebe teaches in the Department of Journalism, Faculty of Informatics and Design at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Bellville Campus.

Contact: P O Box 2428, Cape Town 8000, South Africa.

E-mail: motsaathebeg@cput.ac.za

Copyright of Journal of African Media Studies is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.