Stereotypes/Generalizations

A cultural generalization is a statement about a group of people. For instance, saying that US Americans tend to be more individualistic compared to many other cultural groups is an accurate generalization about that group. A cultural generalization may become a stereotype if it is definitively applied to individual members of the group. For instance, it would be stereotyping a particular person to assume that he or she must be individualistic by virtue of being a US American.

The term "stereotype" refers to a metallic template used in printing repetitive copies of something. As it is used in the context of intercultural communication, a cultural stereotype is a rigid description of a group (all people of Group X are like this) or, alternatively stated, it is the rigid application of a generalization to every person in the group (you are a member of X, therefore you must fit the general qualities of X). Stereotypes can be avoided to some extent by using cultural generalizations as only tentative hypotheses about how an individual member of a group might behave.

We cannot and should not avoid making cultural generalizations. Generalizations are an inherent part of human perception. Every describable object of perception has been assigned to a category that associates it with other assumedly similar objects and contrasts it with other assumedly different objects. For instance, horses may be assigned to the category of domesticated work animals, similar to oxen and camels, but different than pets such as cats and parrots. Horses may also (or alternatively) belong to the category of food animals (along with cows and goats) in contrast to the category of competitive animals such as roosters and dogs. But there cannot be a horse or any other object of perception without some set of associations.

The idea of "culture" is itself a categorization of people. In fact, it is impossible to refer to a group at all without making a generalization about what qualities are shared by members of the group. But like horses, people could be assigned to different cultural categories depending on what criteria are used for comparing them to other groups. Also, individual members vary in the degree to which they share the group's common characteristics. To deny that variation -- to assume that every individual is a static representative of a single group -- is the essence of stereotyping.

It is possible to make accurate generalizations about prevalent qualities of a group without stereotyping individuals in the group. Accurate generalizations are based on the measurement of a chosen set of cultural criteria (for instance, "styles" or "values") in a large number or a random sample of individuals. This process either generates groups based on similar patterns of criteria, or it describes the patterns that exist within a group based on other criteria, such as national boundaries. If the generalization rests on too small a sample, it may describe some unusual quality that is not represented widely in the group as a whole. This is why it is not a good idea to generalize from having met a few members of an existing group; they probably are not representative of the group. Basing a generalization purely on personal experience is likely to be inaccurate, but inaccuracy is not the basis of stereotyping. It is when generalizations – accurate or inaccurate – are rigidly applied to individuals that they become stereotypes.

Level of Analysis for Generalizations

For the purpose of making cultural generalizations that are useful for analyzing interaction, it is important to define what *level of analysis* we are using in observing human behavior. Culture in the sense it is used in intercultural work refers to a *group level* of analysis, where the concern is with the prevalence of defined qualities such as values or styles within defined groups such as a national societies, ethnic groups, geopolitical regions, etc. (See section on Intercultural Communication) By contrast, an *individual level* of analysis refers to individual characteristics and personality. It is generally assumed that genetically driven personality traits and personal characteristics such as intelligence are more or less equivalently distributed in different cultural contexts. Following this assumption, we cannot say that one culture has more of a personality trait like extroversion than another, and similarly we certainly cannot say that one cultural group is less intelligent than another. In other words, we cannot make cultural generalizations about individual characteristics; to do so constitutes a "confusion of level of analysis."

It is important for intercultural work to not confuse these two levels of analysis. If, for instance, we are trying to analyze a conflict between two people, the individual level of analysis would lead us to consider differences in personality (e.g. extroversion/introversion), intelligence, learning style, leadership style, and other characteristics that are treated as personal variations. However, we could also analyze the conflict at a group level of analysis, looking for differences in cultural worldview such as communication style, nonverbal expression, or cultural values (e.g. individualism/collectivism). It may well be that the conflict can be explained adequately with reference to only personal differences – a "personality clash." But in many situations, particularly cross-cultural ones, clashes in worldview may be as or more important in explaining the conflict. Since much of popular and even academic lore regarding communication is posed in psychological terms (at the individual level of analysis), it takes a conscious effort to maintain focus on worldview issues at the group level of analysis.

At an *institutional level* of analysis, focus is on human behavior in terms of institutions such political, economic, or religious systems. Events can be analyzed at this level by understanding how institutions channel human behavior into certain interaction patterns. For instance, the conflict mentioned earlier might be approached usefully by analyzing status and power relationships of the participants or by understanding their possibly different allegiances to competing organizations. Some forms of cultural studies combine the institutional and individual levels of analysis, seeking to position individuals in social organizations in terms of power, privilege, and oppression. A wide range of behavior (e.g. dominant/non-dominant group relations) is then explained in terms of the roles (and thus the relative power) people have in society.

Without denying the importance of power relationships, the institutional level of analysis may nevertheless be conceptually dangerous ground for cultural generalizations. Institutions such as political and economic structures, architecture, literature, etc. are <u>artifacts</u> of culture; that is, they are the products of groups of people who are coordinating meaning and action amongst themselves. Once created, institutions become "objective" in the sense that they exist as relatively stable objects in our environment. When we define behavior in terms of objective institutions, the behavior itself becomes objectified, and role relations among people in institutional terms becomes static. In explaining human interaction exclusively in institutional terms, we are in danger of saying that, whoever we are personally, and whoever we are culturally, our behavior is essentially determined by our position in society. This is the ultimate stereotype, using social role as an essentialized label.

The key to using cultural generalizations without stereotyping is to use them at a group level of analysis, seeking to understand individual behavior as to some extent a manifestation of cultural worldview, and to understand interaction among individuals as to some extent a clash and coordination of those worldviews. We can also analyze personality and power dimensions of interaction, but to confuse those levels of analysis with the cultural level is to risk overwhelming cultural generalizations with individual or social stereotypes.

Scope Conditions for Generalizing Culture

The level of specificity of a cultural generalization depends on the scope of the group being generalized. Using the definition of culture as "the coordination of meaning and action among people interacting within a boundary," the scope of a culture group is defined by its boundary. A typical boundary follows the national border, so we can speak of "Italian" culture or "U.S. American" culture. However, the scope of most national groups is already quite broad, and the accurate generalizations that can be made are therefore relatively broad (abstract) as well. For instance, one might accurately generalize that Italians are more relationally-focused than US Americans who are more task-focused, even though that true statement includes a huge variation in both groups. If we wanted to make a more specific generalization such as "people of culture X tends to be more hospitable that people of culture Y," then we need to refer to a more specific group. For instance, Southern Italians tend to be more hospitable that Northern Italians, and African Americans are more hospitable than European Americans.

At the extremes, generalizations become very vague or very sharp. At an extremely wide scope, we might compare "the West" to "the East," but we can only make rather vague generalizations about this contrast. For instance, one might generalize that Asians tend to be more sensitive to context than Europeans or Americans. But the variation is so great in both groups that such a statement is not very useful for specific cases of communication. At an extreme narrow scope we might compare the culture of one department in a company to another; for instance, the departments may differ in their preference for email or telephone communication. But beyond interaction between those specific groups, such a narrow-scope generalization is not very useful. The most useful generalizations are those that are positioned at a mid-level of abstraction, neither so broad as to be only vaguely true nor so narrow as to be only trivially true. Good mid-level cultural generalizations generate cultural contrasts that are relevant to intercultural communication and transferable to various other cultural contrasts.

For instance, we can accurately generalize that North Americans use a more linear (low-context) communication style than do South Americans, who use a more circular (high-context) style. This contrast is immediately relevant to intercultural communication, in that can it can predict a likely mutual negative evaluation: a North American may find the South American unfocused and time-wasting, while a South American may find the North American simplistic and arrogant. The simple act of bringing this difference in communication style into perception may be enough ameliorate the negative evaluation and possibly provide some grounds for mutual adaptation. This mid-level generalization is about two rather broad regional cultures, but it is reasonably applicable to national and ethnic variations within the regions. And, most importantly, the generalization is transferable to other cultural contrasts such as more linear Dutch vs. more circular Italians, or more linear European Americans vs. more circular African Americans.

Culture-General Frames

Culture-general frames are constructed for the purpose of creating useful cultural generalizations. Unlike culture-specific information, culture-general frames do not claim to describe cultures exhaustively as an anthropological ethnography might. Instead, the frame is constructed to guide perception towards distinctions and contrasts that are useful to interaction and that are general enough to be applied to a wide range of cultural contexts. (See the Constructivism section for a discussion of how and why these frames are constructed). A frame defines a domain and a continuum: the domain defines a focus such as nonverbal behavior, and the continuum is a variation in some specific behavior in the domain such as eye contact. Generalizations are then made about how the behavior is distributed among the population

of different cultural groups. Following are some examples of how culture-general frames can be used to generate useful generalizations about cultural differences without creating stereotypes.

Language Use. The domain here is not language systems, but the way language is used in ritual ways to coordinate social relations. Continuua typically include greeting, leave-taking, and other rituals such arguing, negotiating, complimenting or criticizing. For example, *verbal greeting rituals* might be contrasted in terms of length (short to long), general content (impersonal to personal), and style (joking to serious). To contrast European American men's culture with European American women's culture: E-A men tend to verbalize short greetings in passing, emphasizing impersonal common experience such as sports-viewing, and sometimes using a teasing style. E-A women are more likely to engage in longer greetings, emphasizing personal relational experience and perhaps including a compliment on each other's appearance.

A potential misunderstanding arising from the above contrast in greeting ritual might go like this: the woman may perceive the man as brusque and unfriendly, and maybe even hostile in his use of "baiting." The man, on the other hand, may perceive the reception of unexpected personal revelations and compliments from the woman as unusually intimate and even flirtatious. These perceptions are likely to be inaccurate because they flow from the wrong level of analysis. Because the greeting rituals were not identified as cultural patterns, they are mistakenly taken as indications of personal traits. Actions taken on the basis of these misperceptions will probably exacerbate the situation. For instance, the man might feel justified in flirting back to the woman. In the context of her perception of the man, the woman might find his sexual attention particularly distasteful or even frightening.

Nonverbal behavior. Even more than ritual use of language, nonverbal behavior eludes cultural explanation. This can be illustrated with the eye contact frame, which includes continua for *eye-contact length* (short to long) and for use of eyes in *conversational turn taking* (strong to weak). In a cultural contrast between U.S. Americans and people of some northern European countries such as Holland or Germany, Americans tend to make medium-length eye contact before looking away, and they use a longer, direct gaze as a cue for changing speakers. Germans and Dutch people tend to make longer and more direct eye contact, and turn taking is more likely to be cued by looking away.

There are several potential misunderstandings arising from this difference in nonverbal behavior. Many Americans interpret strong eye contact as indicating either sexual or physical aggressiveness, depending on the situation. Germans, on the other hand, tend to interpret weaker eye contact as indicating lack of interest or attention. These misinterpretations are likely to be exacerbated by Germans intensifying eye contact in an attempt to engender attention, while Americans may weaken eye contact to reduce the perceived threat. Things may get even worse, since the shifting American eyes send unconscious cues to Germans that it is always their turn to talk, while the steady gaze of Germans sends the same message to Americans. Consequently, both participants in an intercultural interaction may go away convinced that the other was trying to dominate the conversation.

Communication Style. There are several forms of this frame, many of them based on Edward T. Hall's distinction between *high-context* and *low-context* styles. The high-context side of the continuum is where a lot of meaning is derived from the surrounding situation rather than from what is said explicitly. Populations that are mainly distributed on the high-context side may have various language use patterns (e.g., they may be very talkative or mostly silent), but they share a reliance on "reading between the lines" to communicate the real meaning. In contrast, people on the low-context side rely more on explicit statements to convey meaning. Such people may also be either talkative or relatively silent, but they will usually look to whatever is actually said for the real meaning. On this continuum, people with European roots tend to be low context, as compared to the high-context style used by many people of African, Latin American, and Asian roots.

Misunderstandings along the high/low context continuum are quite common. European Americans may wait for Asians to request something explicitly before they offer it, leaving the Asians to wonder (silently) at American insensitivity and obtuseness. Some Asians, on the other hand, may create

relational confusion by reading unintended meaning into European American behavior. In the face of confusion, European Americans are likely to become more direct and explicit, which may lead people who use a higher-context style to become more indirect and circumspect, thus creating a spiral of increasingly incompetent exchanges.

Cognitive Style. This domain of this frame is patterns of thinking, or how people process perceptions. The basic continuum runs from *concrete*, where people use more description and physical metaphor to capture their perceptions, to *abstract,* where people are more likely to use theory and explanation to organize perception. On this continuum, people in many Asian cultures tend to be concrete, stressing accurate description and direct experience of events. In contrast, people many Northern European cultures tend to be abstract, stressing coherent explanation and historical contexting of events. U.S. Americans tend to be midrange on this continuum, stressing action-oriented procedures that are neither particularly accurate nor particularly coherent.

Given their position along the continuum, U.S. Americans tend to be impatient with both theory and relationships, preferring to focus on tasks. Within the U.S., Americans of European heritage are more tolerant of abstraction compared to Americans of African or Asian heritage, who are more likely to attend to the relational aspects of task-completion.

Cultural Values. This is one of the best-known intercultural frames. Its domain is how people assign goodness to ways of being in the world. For instance, many Westerners think it is good for people to act as individuals, with stress on self-reliance, independent decision-making, and individual achievement. Many Asians place more value on the family or other group, stressing responsibility to others, contextual decision-making, and collective achievement. In addition to this continuum of *individualism/collectivism*, other typical value continua include *time orientation* (learning from the past to planning for the future), *activity* (letting things happen to making things happen), *social roles* (stressing status difference to stressing role equality), and *tolerance of ambiguity* (low avoidance of uncertainty to high avoidance of uncertainty).

A common clash of values between U.S. Americans and people of many other cultures occurs on the value continuum of social roles. Americans tend to be uncomfortable with the overt recognition of role and status differences, even though such differences obviously exist. Many Asians, Africans, South Americans, and Europeans (that is, everyone else outside of North America, including those of non-European heritage with the U.S.) are more comfortable with the acknowledgment of status differences, as indicated by their more frequent use of titles.

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See also: Intercultural Communication, Constructivism, Anti-racist Education, Class (Socioeconomic), Colorism, Stereotype Threat, Racism

Further Reading

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