

Generalizing about Cultural Practices

Pitfalls in Generalizing about a Culture

In their attempts to interpret other cultures, anthropologists offer generalizations about a culture—that is, they make claims describing what the culture, generally speaking, is like. They will say, for example, that most North Americans are taller than most Asian people or that the Inuit in Northern Canada are very aware of the different kinds of snow. While making some generalizations about a culture seems necessary and permissible, there are two pitfalls associated with generalizing about cultural groups. We will refer to these as stereotyping and radical individualism.

- Stereotyping is a form of generalization that oversimplifies or exaggerates the practices of a group. The practice or trait is either more complex than is suggested or not as widely shared. For example, an early explorer might write back to Europe that Aboriginal peoples are dangerous (or gentle). This statement is a stereotype in two ways. It overlooks the fact that many Aboriginal peoples did not share this trait (only some Aboriginal peoples may have been dangerous) and it exaggerates the extent that this trait describes typical behaviour (Aboriginal peoples may have been dangerous only some of the time toward some kinds of people). The word “stereotype” arose in the early days of printing to refer to the plate or set of type that was created, from which all of the printed copies were made. The stereotype was repeatedly printed so that every copy was just like the original. Hence, one image was used to shape the image of all the rest. Over time, the term was used when someone applied one example or feature to all in a group. For example, the early explorer described above may have acquired his stereotype of Aboriginal peoples based on one or two encounters with a war party or a group that was threatened by the explorer’s presence.
- Radical individualism suggests that no generalizations about individuals or groups are possible—each person or event is so individualistic that no generalizations are possible; there are no cultural traits. This pitfall arises out of a concern to avoid stereotyping by denying that any generalizations can be made. According to radical individualism, all statements about a culture should be limited to the specific person and

event. For example, the person might say, “On Monday, Jane got up at 9:04 a.m., on Tuesday at 8:55 a.m. and on Wednesday at 9:01 a.m.” Even after many days with similar results, the person would not generalize that Jane usually gets up around 9:00 a.m.

Cross-cultural Sensitivity when Generalizing about a Culture

When anthropologists generalize about a culture, they try hard to avoid the extremes of stereotyping and radical individualism. Cross-cultural sensitivity is the middle ground between these two poles. Cross-cultural sensitivity in generalizing about a culture is defined by the following characteristics:

- **Recognize differences:** Anthropologists expect to find differences within and between cultures, and they presume that sweeping generalizations are likely to be inaccurate.
- **Is aware of dangers:** Anthropologists are cautious when generalizing about a culture.
- **Is careful when reaching conclusions:** Anthropologists will make qualified generalizations only when a broad basis of evidence supports the conclusion.

In their attempts to generalize about cultures in a cross-culturally sensitive manner, anthropologists typically refrain from drawing any conclusions if they have only a limited amount of information; and even when they have accumulated a breadth of evidence, they will qualify their generalizations with statements such as “some people seem to ...” or “often it appears that ...” or “one explanation may be that ...”

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