



Generalizations & Stereotypes

...for AFS
& Friends

Our work in AFS is rooted in cultural diversity. Whether we are volunteers, staff, program participants, host or natural families, teachers, or in other ways connected to AFS, we are often surrounded by people, values and languages from not only one but many different cultures. In our efforts to act and respond appropriately when interacting with people from other cultures, it is necessary that we understand the existence of and difference between cultural stereotypes and cultural generalizations.

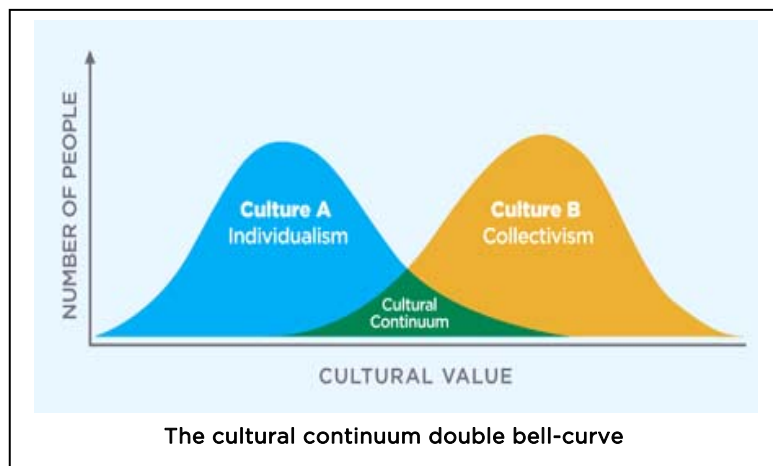
CULTURAL PATTERNS

When the word culture is mentioned in the AFS context, it is often thought of from the perspective of national cultures due to the nature of AFS work. However, culture is much more complex than that. Within every national culture, there are dominant cultural patterns, as well as countless sub- or co-cultures with values, attitudes, and behaviors that are not necessarily the same as those of the dominant culture. There are also cultural patterns for religions, age generations, and social classes, among others, that are not necessarily related to national borders.

CULTURAL CONTINUUM

Just as there are differences between cultures, differences within a single culture group also exist. These variations can be demonstrated by the double bell-curve graphic referred to as a “cultural continuum”.

On the left side of the graphic, the cultural value of Individualism in Culture A is displayed, and on the right side, the value of collectivism in Culture B. The midpoint of the bell-curve for Culture A demonstrates that, on average, individualism is the dominant cultural value. However, the curve also shows that some people from Culture A are much closer to the collectivist value of Culture B. Conversely, collectivism is the dominant cultural value in Culture B, but some people from Culture B can be found on the individualist side.

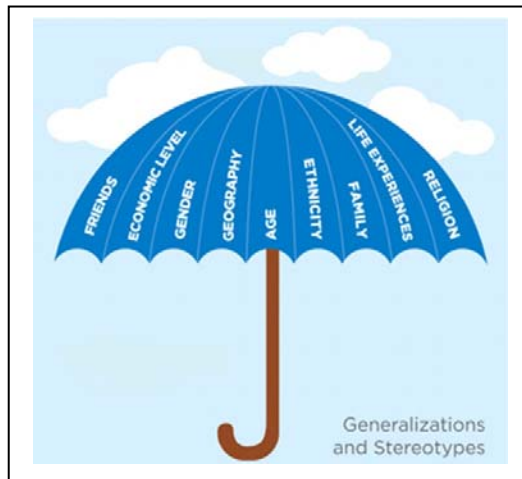


The area shaded in green shows how certain people from opposite cultures may be more like each other than they are like the average person in their own culture. For example, there could easily be a German who was a higher context communicator than most Japanese and an Australian who was more collectivistic than the majority of Costa Ricans. These people who fall into the furthest edges of the curve are called *cultural deviants*.

The bell-curves show that there is great diversity within each culture group, while at the same time there is still a preferred or dominant cultural value, behavior, or attitude.

CULTURAL GENERALIZATIONS

Being aware of and understanding the patterns of the cultures to which one belongs (nation, age, gender, etc.) provides the basis for understanding other cultures and their sub- or co-cultures. **Cultural generalizations** can help us with this process.



Cultural generalizations involve categorizing members of the same group as having similar characteristics. Generalizations are flexible and allow for the incorporation of new cultural information. They are a type of hypothesis, or guess, of what we expect to encounter when we interact with a certain culture. This flexibility can subsequently lead to increased cultural curiosity and awareness and thereby improve intercultural relationships. Generalizations are a necessary part of intercultural communication as they can help us to anticipate, sort, and make sense of the new information and sensations we experience in intercultural situations. Cultural generalizations can be used as a base to build upon, while we continue to seek out more information about individuals from other cultures.

An example of a cultural generalization would be “People from Country X tend to have an indirect style of communication.” Cultural generalizations allow for individual difference and help build cultural awareness. Cultural generalizations must not be applied to every person within a culture group, however, and must not be confused with cultural stereotypes.

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

Generalizations become **stereotypes** when all members of a group are categorized as having the same characteristics. Stereotypes can be linked to any type of cultural membership, such as nationality, religion, gender, race, or age. Also, stereotypes may be positive or negative. For example, a positive stereotype would be “Participants from Country Y are good students” or “Host families in Country Z are great hosts to participants.”

Stereotypes, however, tend to be more negative than generalizations. Also, they are typically inflexible and resistant to new information. They can, and often do, lead to prejudice and intentional or unintentional discrimination. A negative stereotype may be “People from Country A are superficial.” Whereas cultural generalizations give us a starting point from which to continue learning about others, cultural stereotypes do not allow for individual difference and interfere with efforts to understand others.

CURIOSITY & FLEXIBILITY

Curiosity and flexibility help navigate the differences between generalizations & stereotypes. While generalizations serve as a basis for comparison and a springboard for greater intercultural exploration and understanding, stereotypes hinder both awareness and further learning about others and about oneself. One must make cultural generalizations in order to avoid what has been referred to as cultural chauvinism. Milton



When you look at this picture, are you interpreting the interactions you see using cultural generalizations or stereotypes?

Bennett, author of the Developmental Model for Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), has also written on cultural generalizations and stereotypes and says that one way some people of Western cultures have tried to avoid unjustly categorizing members of cultural groups is by “treating every person as an individual,” a tendency of many Westerners who value individualism. Rather than doing this, he reminds us that it is more beneficial to use accurate cultural generalizations to avoid cultural stereotypes rather than relying on the communication patterns we value within our own cultures.

A solid understanding of the general values and behaviors related to the national and sub- or co-cultures we are a part of can help us to develop a curiosity about the general tendencies of other cultures. A willingness to allow oneself to be surprised by individuals who do not behave as cultural stereotypes prescribe, and being able to alter one's perception and understanding of other cultures after using cultural generalizations as a base from which to build, is the result of being both curious and flexible.

CULTURAL AWARENESS & AFS

Whether an AFS participant, host family member, volunteer, staff, or anyone who will interact with people of other cultures, awareness and understanding of the dominant values and related behaviors of one's own culture (or sub-culture) lays the ground work for identifying and understanding how we are similar to or different from people in other cultures.

This knowledge enables us to better understand the intentions and actions of others and helps us avoid the cultural misunderstandings that can hinder cross-cultural communication, and relationship- and peace-building.

Cultural Generalizations...

- ✓ are flexible and open to new information.
- ✓ can lead to increased curiosity and awareness and intercultural relationships.

Cultural Stereotypes...

- ✓ can be positive or negative depending on the perspective of the speaker.
- ✓ are resistant to new information.
- ✓ do not allow for individual difference as much as cultural generalizations do.

For more theoretical information:

Bennett, M. (1998). *Basic concepts of intercultural communication: Selected readings.*

Lewis, R. D. (1999). *Cross Cultural Communication: A visual approach.*