

GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER



You may now know who the student you will be hosting is, you may be expecting a boy from France or a girl from Spain; or you may still be waiting for the match to be made. Either way, you are probably thinking “What will they be like?” You may be thinking in broader terms “What are French boys (Spanish girls) like?” That is when your assumptions about people from a particular culture come into play.

Making assumptions about someone from another culture can be useful - it can give us insight into where the person is coming from and how they might behave. However, assumptions can also easily lead us to the wrong conclusions and cause conflict; they may even make us look prejudiced or judgemental.



In this handout we are going to look at **stereotypes**, what they are, and how we can turn them into **cultural generalisations**. A key aspect in this process is suspending or withholding judgement. Together, these techniques allow us to make informed conclusions, while remaining curious - which are the foundations of intercultural competence.

What stereotypes do people make about your own culture?

Are there times when those stereotypes are accurate? How about inaccurate?

How do they make you feel?

Cultural Stereotypes happen when we characterise **all** individuals from a particular cultural group as having the **same** characteristics. The problem isn't that they are always wrong – sometimes they can be accurate. However, the problem with stereotypes is that they are inflexible and do not change in the face of new information or experiences.

Even when we are not aware that we are making them, stereotypes can cause us to discriminate against, or respond inappropriately towards others.

For example, Johan says that “all Americans are obese and eat junk food”; he thinks that this describes all Americans. Interestingly, Johan went to the USA once and stayed with an American family, and this family happened to cook very healthy meals and not be overweight. Instead of letting this new information change his mind, Johan says “They're an exception, they are not very American”. **The problem with stereotypes is that they are inflexible**; this can lead us to acting with prejudice and discrimination.

So, if stereotypes can get us into trouble, how do we avoid them? We could try and not make any assumptions about anyone, approaching each person as a blank slate. It might be a good strategy – **if it were possible**. Our brains naturally create categories and draw conclusions based on our experiences, and removing all assumptions would keep us from getting to know the people with whom we are interacting. So the secret to avoiding stereotypes is to do two things **make informed cultural generalisations** and to **suspend or withhold judgement**.

Making informed cultural generalisations means grouping people together based on a similar behaviour, for example we can state **in general**, that the USA has an obesity problem and that part of this problem is because of poor diets. What is useful about generalisations is that they are **flexible** – they are like a hypothesis about another culture that can be challenged or built upon with new information.

Suspending judgement means acknowledging that everybody is unique and that no one statement can capture the variation of individuals or a population. For example, the USA is a big diverse place, and some citizens maintain a high level of fitness; there's a lot that we don't know, so suspending judgement allows us to approach other cultures with a certain degree of humility. We have some general information about the country or the population as a whole, but we still always have to evaluate when we have the person in front of us. The trick is to approach the people that you meet with curiosity, because you know that you don't know much about them – and what you **think** you know might be incorrect.

Let's try turning these stereotypes into informed cultural generalisations...

“Japanese are shy and don't have opinions.”

“Germans are rude and criticise all the time.”

We already include some cultural information in these generalisations...

“Japanese culture is more group orientated and people tend to favour harmony of the group over conflict.”

“In German culture, people tend to prefer a direct way of communicating and voice their ideas and opinions in that style.”

So, if you were suspending judgement when interacting with someone from Japan or Germany, you would keep in mind that every culture and every person is more nuanced than your generalisation, and you would seek new information to update and build upon your understanding of the **specific** person with whom you are interacting.

Try checking yourself the next time you have a conversation with someone from a different background. Are you stereotyping? Why? What can you do to make more culturally sensitive comments?

To finish this introduction to stereotypes and generalisations, keep in mind that Edward T. Hall said
“The information is in the people, **not in your head.**”