

## When in Rome, Do as the Romans Do...But What's a Roman? Working with Stereotypes and Testing Hypotheses

The question "What's a Roman?" is actually a very interesting one. We probably assume that all Romans are not alike, just as we know that all persons from our country or region are not the same. At the same time, we might have a lot of images in our mind about Romans from books, the news, television, and movies. So, we are in a quandary. What does it mean to behave like a Roman? How can we speak about Roman culture without just stereotyping it? How can we make any sense of how Romans do things? If the images are incorrect, how can we correct them? In other words, what does understanding a culture really mean?

There are several ways to answer these questions, and we will suggest some strategies to use. First, it is useful to acknowledge that we do have cultural images in our mind. They may be simplistic and crude, but they are there.

Did you ever hear anyone say:

- The French are rude.
- Spaniards love their siestas.
- Brits have a wonderful, dry sense of humor.
- U.S. Americans are self-centered.
- U.S. Americans are friendly.
- Asian students are good in science and math.

Are these statements true? Of course not; they are **stereotypes**—the automatic application of information we have about a country or culture group, both positive and negative, to every individual in it. This information is often based on limited experience with the culture, so it is incomplete at best and downright wrong at worst. If you consider only stereotypes when learning about a culture, you limit your understanding of the host culture and can make serious mistakes.

What's the alternative? A **generalization**. This means using initial ideas about a group to form hypotheses. For example, you've been watching British television and note the dry sense of humor that forms the basis for several sitcoms. Then you meet several Brits who also have a dry sense of humor. You begin to form a general idea about British humor.

Generalizing recognizes that there may be a tendency for people within a culture group to share certain values, beliefs, and behaviors. Generalizations can also be based on incomplete or false information, but you are less likely to get into trouble with a generalization because you are using that information with caution, you are constantly testing and revising your ideas, and while you are searching for general patterns in the culture, you never assume that every person will act in the same way.

The way to test a generalization is to form one or more **hypotheses**. The hypothesis is recognized as a guess; it leaves open the possibility that you could be wrong and that you need to collect more information. The best hypotheses are stated as questions and are in neutral or descriptive language so that they can be used to gather more

information rather than reveal your personal judgment (positive or negative) about the situation. Your desire to learn more about the culture will sound much more authentic if you resist the temptation to exaggerate and stereotype. For example, instead of saying, "Women are second-class citizens in Japan," you might change this to a hypothesis and collect more information: "Are women treated equally to men in employment? For example, I have only seen women making tea, never men, even when I thought they had the same positions." Note that the statement includes the observable behavior that led you to the generalization. The extra detail in the revised statement makes it preferable to the original stereotyped statement. You haven't concluded anything, and yet you see a pattern emerging from the information you are learning about the country. This allows the listener to see what your hypothesis is based on and can lead to further discussion about whether your assumption is accurate and what additional information you might need (for example, that the roles are based on age, that this used to be more common and is changing, or that other definitions of "equality" exist).

### Changing stereotypes into generalizations and hypotheses



This exercise gives you some practice in changing stereotypes into generalizations. By being able to transition from stereotypes to generalizations, you can help yourself and can also help fellow travelers and host nationals to develop stronger skills in understanding cultures.

#### Example:

**Stereotype:** Americans are very friendly.

**Changing it to a generalization:**

Many Americans are friendly in the way they act toward people from other countries.

**Changing it to hypotheses (questions with an observable component):**

What do Americans do to appear very friendly? Do they talk more readily to strangers than people from other cultures? Do they smile more? Do they smile more often at people they don't know?

#### Practice Statements:

1. Americans are superficial.

**Changing it to a generalization:**

**Changing it to hypotheses (questions with an observable component):**

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## Using Generalizations to Respond to Stereotypes about You

While you are abroad you are likely to encounter many occasions when the host nationals or other international students will make stereotypical comments about the U.S. and its citizens.

How can you respond? One of the things you can do is explain your culture in terms of its general patterns. This assumes that you know what they are, which interestingly is something most of us don't think about very often. The following section will introduce you to the numerous values that underlie the actions and thoughts of some people living in the United States. For example, imagine that your Thai host father has commented on how individualistic U.S. Americans are. He claims, "They always want to express their own ideas, and they look after their own welfare rather than their family's." Using generalizations, you can give a cultural overview, saying something like James Lassegard did:

*Yes, Americans like to be independent and to see themselves as in control of their lives. These values are reflected in the popular song 'My Way' or in the emphasis on 'self-expression' or 'self-empowerment' in today's society. Of course, this does not mean that all people living in the U.S. value individualism in the same way or to the same extent. It simply means that many, if not most, Americans appear to have this value, and that the culture views this as a positive attribute. ~ James Lassegard, Japan*

### **The wealthy American?**

One challenging stereotype people may have of you is that you are rich. The reality may be that you are going into personal debt to be on this trip or that you have saved for months for the opportunity to study abroad. In either case, you may feel far removed from wealth and very much like a poor student!

Yet by world standards, you may very well be wealthy. Consider the following:

- Did you have access to a job to save money for study abroad?
- Will you be able to find a job when you return?
- Although attending college in the U.S. may not feel like elitism, USA Today reported in 2005 that fewer than 30 percent of U.S. Americans between the ages of 25 and 29 have a college degree, with members of certain ethnic groups less likely to have a college degree than members of other ethnic groups. Do you know what the ratio is in your host country and how it may vary by ethnic group? If the numbers are not readily available, what might this suggest?

While access to jobs and education may not put money directly into your bank account, it does make you wealthy in comparison to those you might meet in your host country.

In many countries, wealth and opportunity are paved streets, and, with mass media, comes via movie soap operas and your own, and it reality anywhere. the impact of she from a movie about month's supply of and-rust colored apartment. Not a material!) With the versus ordinary U is the stereotype of shallow, and wasteful curiosity and anti

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In many countries, there exists an image of the United States as a land of limitless wealth and opportunity. For over a century now an idealized image—"where the streets are paved with gold"—has drawn people from around the world to the U.S. and, with mass media, what is now "known" abroad about the United States often comes via movies, pop music, and television shows. The lives depicted on U.S. soap operas and in most Hollywood movies probably bear little resemblance to your own, and it may seem laughable that those depictions would be accepted as reality anywhere. However, there are often few alternative images to counterbalance the impact of shows like *Baywatch* or *As the World Turns*. (Try to imagine the scenes from a movie about your life, if you are an average college student: purchasing a month's supply of ramen noodles in the grocery store or moving your aunt's avocado-and-rust colored plaid couch, circa 1973, up four flights of narrow stairs into your apartment. Not exactly a lifestyle that translates easily into international blockbuster material!) With the imbalance of superstars, pop singers, and multimillionaire athletes versus ordinary U.S. citizens represented in the media, it is not surprising that there is the stereotype of U.S. Americans as rich and materialistic, and by extension, greedy, shallow, and wasteful. Depending on your host country, you may find a strange mix of curiosity and antipathy directed toward you because of these stereotypes about the U.S.

As an American, you may hold strong views about the United States. Some of you may feel that your home country is the land of opportunity, a special place in the world where those who work hard can achieve unlimited personal success. Others may feel that this is a country riddled with social problems and gross inequalities. Still others of you may not have given these issues much consideration up to this point, and you accept the United States as it is. Regardless of your opinions, it will be worthwhile to pay attention to the differences in wealth and personal opportunities that you notice between your host country and your home country. Some differences may be overt and some may be subtle, so look closely. Write down what you see, hear, and observe, and talk with your friends and host family if you can. In the end, the point is not to come away with a definitive answer or opinion, or to define which value system is right and which is wrong. The goal is to discover what you feel is valuable in both cultures and ultimately have a greater understanding of what you have in the U.S., both in terms of physical possessions as well as opportunities.

And here is some final advice from another traveler about being a U.S. American abroad:

*I remember feeling as though people judged me unfairly because of my nationality while traveling in eastern Europe. I was with a group of kids about my age while in Slovakia, and I felt that they were overly critical of me as an individual because of my government's military actions in Belgrade. The anger I felt toward them for judging me actually helped me. It is very important to remember the golden rule of intercultural interaction: Don't judge a person completely because of cultural stereotypes if you don't want them to be equally critical of you. I now realize that no one is responsible for their government. We are all individuals and deserve to be evaluated on our own merits, not those of our elected officials. ~ Dan Jakab, Spain*