Stereotypes vs. Generalizations

The danger in considering cultural differences is that of stereotyping people. All of us are unique. To say, for example, that “All Russians are alcoholics” and “All Asian people eat dogs and cats” is both foolish and possibly dangerous.

First, it is important to distinguish between stereotypes and generalizations. They may appear similar, but they function differently.

For example, if I meet a Hispanic woman named Maria and assume that she has a large family, I am stereotyping her. But, if I say to myself, “Hispanic people tend to have large families; I wonder if Maria does,” then I am generalizing.

A stereotype is an ending point, and no effort is then made to ascertain whether it is appropriate to apply it to the person in question.

A generalization, on the other hand, serves as a starting point. Generalizations help us make sense of our world using information that we already know. As we get to know people from other walks of life, we may see that they do not fit the generalization. At that point, as open-minded individuals, we should adjust our way of thinking about the individual and quite possibly, all other people from the same culture or heritage.