Should We Generalize about People?

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Charon’s description of sociology highlights its generalizing potential, discussing how categorizations and generalizations are made accurately. While generalization is an important aspect of everyday human life, people often mix stereotypes in with their empirical categorizations. Charon sensitively distinguishes between stereotyping and generalizing, showing how the inaccurate and potentially harmful characteristics of the former are replaced by the measured and carefully empirically constituted latter. In so doing, he offers you a guide for how to assess useful and damaging categories, and shows the careful work undergirding sociological analysis. Is generalizing, as a goal for sociology, good or bad? What is the difference between social scientists’ generalizations and laypeople’s stereotypes?

CATEGORIES AND GENERALIZATIONS

The Importance of Categories and Generalizations to Human Beings

Sociology is a social science, and therefore it makes generalization about people and their social life. “The top positions in the economic and political structures are far more likely to be filled by men than by women.” “The wealthier the individual, the more likely he or she will vote Republican.” “In the United States the likelihood of living in poverty is greater among the African-American population than among whites.” “American society is segregated.” “Like other industrial societies, American society has a class system in which
more than three-fourths of the population end up in approximately the same social class as what they were at birth."

But such generalizations often give rise to a lot of trouble. I know that the sociologist must know about people and generalize about them, but I ask myself: "Are such generalizations worthwhile? Shouldn’t we simply study and treat people as individuals?" An English professor at my university was noted for explaining to his class that "you should not generalize about people—that’s the same as stereotyping and everyone knows that educated people are not supposed to stereotype. Everyone is an individual." (Ironically, this is itself a generalization about people.)

However, the more I examine the situation, the more I realize that all human beings categorize and generalize. They do it every day in almost every situation they enter, and they almost always do it when it comes to other people. In fact, we have no choice in the matter. "Glass breaks and can be dangerous."

We have learned what "glass" is, what "danger" means, and what "breaking" is. These are all categories we apply to situations when we enter so that we can understand how to act. We generalize from our past. "Human beings who have a cold are contagious, and unless we want to catch a cold, we should not get close to them." We are here generalizing about "those with colds," "how people catch colds," and "how we should act around those with colds." In fact, every noun and verb we use is a generalization that acts as a guide for us. The reality is that we are unable to escape generalizing about our environment. That is the aspect of our essence as human beings. This is what language does to us. Sometimes our generalizations are fairly accurate; sometimes they are unfounded. However, we do in fact generalize all of us, almost all the time! The question that introduces this chapter is a foolish one. Should we generalize about people is not a useful question simply because we have no choice. A much better question is:

How can we develop accurate generalizations about people?

The whole purpose of social science is to achieve accurate categorizations and generalizations about human beings. Indeed, the purpose of almost all academic pursuits involves learning, understanding, and developing accurate categories and generalizations.

For a moment let us consider other animals. Most are prepared by instinct or simple conditioning to respond in a certain way to a certain stimulus in their environment. So, for example, when a minnow swims in the presence of a hungry fish, then that particular minnow is immediately responsive and reacts. The fish is able to distinguish that type of stimulus from other stimuli, and so wherever something identical to it or close to it appears, the fish responds. The minnow is a conspecific object that can be immediately sensed (seen, smelted, heard, touched), so within a certain range the fish is able to study include objects that look like minnows and to exclude those that do not. Of course, occasionally a lure with a hook is purposely used to fool the fish, and a slight mistake in perception ends the fish’s life.
Human beings are different from the fish and other animals because we have ways for objects and events in the environment, and this allows us to understand that environment and not just respond to it. With words we are able to make many more distinctions and are able to apply knowledge from one situation to the next far more easily. We are far less dependent on immediate physical stimuli. So, for example, we come to learn what fish, nettes, and whales are, as well as what rainbows, worries, hopes, and hopes are. We read and learn what qualifies all fish have, how fish differ from whales, and what differences there have been one another. We learn how to catch fish, and we are able to apply what we learn to some fish but not other fish. We begin to understand the actions of all fish—all, us, all, female, males, some of us decide to study fish, and we try to determine if all fish feel pain, if some do, or if all do not. Humans do not then simply respond to the environment, but do label that environment, study, and understand that environment, develop categories and subcategories for objects in the environment, and constantly try to generalize from what they learn in specific situations about those categories. Through understanding, a category we are able to see important and subtle similarities and distinctions that are not available to animals who do not categorize and generalize with words.

Generalizing allows us to walk into situations and apply knowledge learned elsewhere to understanding objects there. When we enter a classroom, we know what a teacher is, and we label the person at the front of the room as a teacher. We know from past experience that teachers give grades, usually know more than we do about things we are about to learn in that classroom, have more formal education than we do, and usually resort to testing us to see if we learned something they regard is important. We might have also learned that teachers are usually kind (or mean), sensitive (or not sensitive), authoritarian (or democratic), or we might have had many diverse experiences with teachers that whether a specific teacher is any of these things will depend on this specific individual. If we do finally decide that a given teacher is in fact authoritarian, then we will now see an "authoritarian teacher," and we will now apply what we know about such teachers from our past.

This is a remarkable ability. We are able to figure out how to act in situations we enter because we understand many of the objects we encounter there by applying relevant knowledge about them that we learned at the past. This allows us to intelligently act in a wide diversity of situations, some of which are not even close to what we have already experienced. If we are experienced and reflective, we can even evaluate now good or how poor our generalizations are, and we can alter what we know as we move from situations to situations.

The problem for almost all of us, however, is that many of our generalizations are not carefully arrived at or accurate, and it is sometimes difficult for us to recognize this and change them. Too often our generalizations actually stand in the way of our understanding, especially when we generalize about human beings.
To better understand what human beings do and how they sometimes get us into trouble, let us look more closely at what "categories" and "generalizations" are.

The Meaning of Categorization

Human beings categorize their environment; that is, we isolate a chunk out of our environment, distinguish that chunk from all other parts of the environment, give it a name, and associate certain ideas with it. Our chunks—or categories—are not intentionally; they are socially created. We discuss our environment, and we categorize it with the words we take on in our social life: "living things," "animals," "reptiles," "mammals," "poisonous snakes," "turtles." A category is created, and once we understand it, we are able to compare objects in situations we encounter to that category. The number of distinctions we are able to make in our environment increases manifold. It is not only nouns that represent categories (men, boys) but also verbs (run, walk, fall), adverbs (slow, fast), and adjectives (soft, strong, intelligent, married). Much of our learning is simply aimed at understanding what various categories mean, and this involves understanding the qualities that make up those categories and the ideas associated with them.

The Meaning of Generalization

A category is an isolated part of our environment that we notice. We generalize about that category by observing specific instances of objects included in it and by isolating common qualities that seem to characterize those included in that category, including other yet unobserved members we might observe in the future. We watch birds build nests, and we assume that all birds build nests out of sticks (including birds other than the robins and sparrows we observed). We continue to observe and note instances where birds use materials other than sticks, and then we learn that some birds do not build nests but dig them out. More often, our generalizations are a mixture of observation and learning from others; we learn that wealthy people often drive Mercedes, and that police officers usually carry guns. On the basis of generalizing about a category, we are able to predict future events where that category comes into play. When we see a wealthy person, we expect to see a Mercedes (or something that we learn is comparable); and when we see a police officer, we expect to see a gun. That is what a generalization is.

A generalization describes the category. It is a statement that characterizes objects within the category and defines similarities and differences with other categories. "This is what an educated person is!" (in contrast to an uneducated person). "This is what wealthy people do to help ensure that privilege is passed down to their children." "This is what U.S. presidents have in common." "This is what Catholic people believe in."
THE STEREOTYPE

When it comes to people, generalization is very difficult to do well. The principal reason for this is that we are judgmental, and too often it is much easier for us to generalize for the purpose of evaluating (condemning or praising) others than for the purpose of understanding them. When we do this we fall into the practice of stereotyping.

A stereotype is a certain kind of categorization. It is a category and a set of generalizations characterized by the following qualities:

1. A stereotype is judgmental. It is not characterized by an attempt to understand but by an attempt to condemn or praise the category. It makes value judgment, and it has a strong emotional flavor. Instead of simple description of differences, there is a moral evaluation of those differences. People are judged good or bad because of the category.

2. A stereotype tends to be an absolute category. That is, there is a sharp distinction made between those inside and those outside the category. There is little recognition that the category is merely a guide to understanding and that in reality, there will be many individuals within a category who are exceptions to any generalization.

3. The stereotype tends to be a category that overshadows all others in the mind of the observer. All other categories to which the individual belonged tend to be ignored. A stereotype tins the human being as simple and undimensional, belonging to only one category of consequence in fact, we are all part of a large number of categories.

4. A stereotype does not change with new evidence. When one accepts a stereotype, the category and the ideas associated with it are rapidly accepted, and the individual who holds it is unwilling to alter it. The stereotype, once accepted, becomes a filter through which evidence is accepted or rejected.

5. The stereotype is not used carefully in the first place. It is either learned culturally and simply accepted by the individual or created through uncritical acceptance of a few concrete personal experiences.

6. The stereotype does not encourage a search for understanding why human beings are different from each other. Instead of seeking to understand the cause in as to why a certain quality is more in evidence in a particular category of people, a stereotype aims at exaggerating and judging differences. There is often an underlying assumption that "this is the way these people are," it is part of their "essence," and there seems to be little reason to try to understand the cause of differences any further than this.

Stereotypes are highly oversimplified, exaggerated views of reality. They are especially attractive to people who are judgmental of others and who are quick to condemn people who are different from them. They have been used to justify ethnic discrimination, and systematic wonder of whole categories of people. Far from arising out of careful and systematic analysis, stereotypes arise out of
hearsay and culture, and instead of aiding our understanding of the human being, they always stand in the way of accurate understanding.

SOCIAL SCIENCE: A REACTION TO STEREOTYPES

Creating categories about people and generalizing intelligently is very difficult to do unless we work hard at it. A big part of a university education is to teach you to critically evaluate stereotypes in order to obtain a better understanding of reality. Each discipline in its own way attempts to teach the student to be more careful about categorizing and generalizing.

Because this book focuses on the perspective of sociology and social science, I would like to show how social science tries to rid us of stereotypes through the careful development of accurate categories and generalizations about human beings. Social science is a highly disciplined process of investigation whose purpose is to question many of our uncritically accepted stereotypes and generalizations.

Social science does not always succeed. There are many instances of inaccuracies and even stereotyping that have resulted from poor science or from scientists simply not being sensitive to their own biases. It is important, however, to recognize that even though scientists make mistakes in their attempts to describe reality accurately, the whole thrust and spirit of social science is to control personal bias, to uncover unfounded assumptions about people, and to understand reality as objectively as possible. Here are some of the ways that social science (as it is supposed to work) aims at creating accurate categories and generalizations about human beings:

1. Social science tries hard not to be judgmental about categories of people. We recognize that generalizations and categories must not condemn or praise but must simply be guides to understanding. To stereotype is to emphasize qualities in others that we dislike or to emphasize qualities in others that are similar to our own that we like.

2. Categories and generalizations in social science are rarely—if ever—absolute. Social scientists begin with the assumption that it is difficult to generalize about people and that every time we do exceptions are likely, and often a large number. By definition, all atheists do not believe in God, but there is absolutely nothing else we can say about all atheists. However, we might contend that atheists tend to be more educated (but there are many exceptions to this), male rather than female (but there are many exceptions to this), and raised by atheist parents (but there are many exceptions to this). We can then use these generalizations about atheists from carefully studying them, but we will never find a quality that all of them have other than their belief that there is no God. This goes for every category of people we try to understand: those who commit suicide, those who abuse drugs, those who commit violent acts against children, serial killers, and students who do not finish college. We can generalize, but we must be careful, and we must assume
exceptions within every category we create. The scientific generalization is treated as a probability rather than an absolute.

3. Categories in social science are not assumed to be all-important for understanding the individual. A stereotype is itself an assumption that a certain category necessarily dominates an individual’s life. We might view a young African-American single male as ‘the stereotype’; he may or may not be important to the individual. For some individuals, being male or single or an artist will be more important, for others it will be being African American. For those of us who stereotype by race, it will almost always be African American.

4. Social science tries to create accurate and generalized through carefully gathered evidence. Stereotypes tend to be cultural; that is, they are taught by people around us who have generalized based on what they have simply accepted from others or on what they have learned through personal experience (which is usually extremely limited in scope, unrepresentative, subject to personal and social biases, and selectively observed). Science tries hard to encourage accurate generalizations through making explicit how generalizations must be arrived at.

5. Generalizations in social science are tentative and subject to change because evidence is constantly being examined. Stereotypes, on the other hand, are unconditionally held. Once held as stereotypes, the category is so important that only evidence that validates the stereotype is admitted. A stereotype resists change when we believe that others have superior abilities to ourselves, we tend to notice only those individuals who support our stereotype. If we believe that politicians are selfish bureaucrats, we tend to forget all about political leaders who are unselfish and who get things done. (Note: the category ‘politician’ gives way that one is stereotyping rather than simply generalizing, because politicians have come to mean something who is not worth our respect.) Because the purpose of a stereotype is to condemn or praise a category of people, it becomes difficult to evaluate evidence. The stereotype is embedded in the mind of the observer, it takes on an emotional flavor, and evidence that might contradict it is almost impossible to accept.

A generalization in social science about a category of people is subject to change as soon as new evidence is discovered. The final truth about people is never stated as having been found. The generalization is always taken as a tentative guide to understanding rather than a quality that is etched in stone. 

6. Sciences do not category at one end to itself instead, scientific categories because they seek a certain kind of generalization: they seek to understand cause. In social science that means we seek to know why a category of people tend to have a certain quality. We generalize about categories of people only because we understand what causes the existence of qualities that belong to a great category. We seek to understand the cause of schizophrenia, but we can only do this after we understand what characterizes those people who are schizophrenic.

Real generalizations in science, therefore, is to uncover why certain qualities make up a category, and why they are less in evidence in other categories. Why is there increasing individualism among Americans? Why do some people graduate
college and not others? Why are women denied front the top political and eco-
nomic positions in American life? Is it that an increase in the number of peo-
ple who are experiencing downward social mobility in the United States? Why is
there a rising suicide rate among young people? In every one of these cases we
find a category, we describe those who make up that category, and we attempt to
generalize as to why a certain quality exists in that category. To judge? No. True of
everyone in the category? No. The only category of importance? No. A fixed cat-
egory that clearly and absolutely distinguishes between one group and another?
No. A generalization that we can regard is true without reservation? No.

Finally, we should examine once more the question that we started with:
Should we generalize about people? This is not an easy question to answer.

We must begin our answer by admitting that we all take whatever we
know about categories of people and apply it to situations we encounter.
When we see that the individual is a child or an elderly person, male or fe-
male, single or married, a professor or a physicist, wealthy or poor, kind or
inensitive, that information guides us in our actions. If we are careful, we will
recognize that our view of the other must be sensitive, that the individual
may in fact be an exception in our category, and that we must be ready to
change whatever we think as we get to know that person as an individual.
In fact the category we use may end up being unimportant for under-
standing this particular person.

In a society where we try out for individual recognition, few of us will admit
we want others to place us into categories and generalize. "Do not categorize
me. I'm an individual." Yet, if we are honest, we will recognize that those who do
not know us will be forced to categorize us. It actually is not too bad if the cate-
gory is a positive one. If we apply for a job we want the employer to categorize
us as dependable, hardworking, knowledgeable, intelligent, and so on. We will
even try to control how we present ourselves in situations so we can influence
the other to place us in favorable categories. I'm cool, intelligent, sensitive, athlet-
ically talented, educated. The doctor may try to let people know "I am a physici-
ian" so that they will think highly of him or her as an individual. The individual
who announces himself as a boxer is telling us that he is tough, the rock musician
is telling us that she is talented, the manner that he or she is caring—in many
such cases it does not seem so bad if we are being categorized. For almost all of
us, however, it is the negative categorization that we wish to avoid. And this makes
good sense: no one wants to be put into a category and negatively judged with-
out having a chance to prove himself or herself as an individual.

But no matter how we might feel about other categorizing us and applying
what they know to understanding us as a member of that category, the fact is that,
except for those we know well, human beings can only be understood if we
categorize and generalize. If we do not carefully, we can misunderstand much about
them, but if we are sloppy, we sacrifice understanding and end up making
irrationally based value judgments about people before we have an opportunity
to know them as individuals. . .

If we have to generalize, let's try to be careful. Stereotyping does not serve
our own interests; we have to be-educated about the dangers it poses in stopping
stereotypes.