

A Case Study of the Hasty Generalization

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As a logical fallacy, the hasty generalization is an error in reasoning that uses too small of a sample or unrepresentative evidence to make hasty judgments about members of a class. This fallacy is committed when people use one sample to judge all the samples. This fallacy often results as an over-reaction to one sample, occurrence, or event. The inaccuracy and the inherent dangers of using only one sample to judge all the other members may be clearly seen in the following example: a little girl sees the tame and playful baby grizzly at the zoo and leaves believing that all grizzly bears are tame and playful.

Small Samples Are Often Unrepresentative

By definition, the hasty generalization concerns the odds that all the members of a group will be the same as the one member under scrutiny. People commit the hasty generalization fallacy when they form a judgment about a group of items on too small of a sample--sometimes on only one item. In a similar example, a couple lands at Frankfurt Airport and some busy passengers bump into them and push them out of the way. Then the couple angrily concludes that "the Germans are rude and aggressive," although the people they bumped into may have been from France, Italy, Japan, the United States, or countless other places. As

such, the couple commits the hasty generalization because they blame the entire German race based on the behavior of a few people. There are just too many variables and possibilities to allow such a single-minded judgment. The hasty generalization forms the basis of much of the irrational thinking that we encounter in this world.

Hasty Generalizations & "ALL" Members of Group

This fallacy is based on a faulty understanding of the odds involved in assessing something and then expressing the conclusions of the assessment. As you can see, people commit this fallacy when they resort to the common practice of exaggerating without qualifying their comments, often inflating one sample unreasonably to mean all samples. Logically, we cannot judge all the peaches in an orchard by tasting only one--the sample is just too small to provide accuracy or reliability. The odds are against all peaches tasting the same. Just because one is sweet, it does not mean that they are all sweet. We will definitely need to test more than one to form a sensible judgment about all the rest. Even if we do manage to guess correctly, we still used faulty reasoning to get there. Just remember that a hasty generalization is a hasty judgment in which a small sample leads

to the stereotyping of all the members of the same group. We meet a hippie from California and then judge that all Californians are hippies, or, in an equally absurd way, we meet five divorced women in New York and jump to the ridiculous conclusion that "New York women are all divorced!"

People leap to hasty conclusions for many reasons, including laziness and convenience. Sometimes it proves just too much work to think deeply about a situation or draw reasonable conclusions. This fallacy often results from the common practice of taking the easy way out--generalizing without constraint requires considerably less thought and effort. Many visitors to the United States often commit this fallacy when they assume that the few people they see are representative of all Americans. For example, foreign visitors often think that all people living in Texas or Oklahoma are actual cowboys. They base this assumption on the few people they see wearing cowboy hats and other western garments. If they were to examine the population a little more carefully, we would soon realize our error in judgment.

Hasty Generalizations & Prejudice

Furthermore, hasty generalizations confirm people's cherished beliefs and prejudices, as clearly witnessed in matters concerning gender, race, politics, religion, and such. In many cases, racial stereotyping begins with the hasty generalization. A member of a certain race commits a crime or goes on welfare, and the rest of the members are condemned as criminals or lazy people unwilling to work for a living. People fall victim to a similar pattern of stereotyping when traveling abroad. We are all familiar with this line of reasoning: a taxi driver in Italy cheats a tourist; the tourist then later condemns all Italians as "crooks." A tourist

meets one arrogant American or one Muslim extremist and generalizes that "all Americans are arrogant" or "all Muslims are fundamentalist crazies!"

We can see a similar pattern in the relations between the sexes in which people often express their biases in the form of hasty comments. Throughout history, humans have generalized hastily about the differences between men and women. In the tit for tat struggle that often takes place in modern society, members of both sexes generalize hastily. When a man lazes around the house and does nothing, his wife or other may brand him as "lazy like the rest of the men in this world." Sometimes, such comments can be considered just teasing or dead serious; nonetheless, they operate on an illogical association between one item and another. A woman causes an auto accident, and a man illogically comments that "Hah! the car wreck was caused by a woman driver. What'd you expect? Show me one woman in this world who can drive a car!" A woman dates a young man from Sonoma State University and has a horrible evening. She then tells her friends that "the men from Sonoma State University are a bunch of brainless, macho jocks totally lacking in sensitivity. Don't even think about going out with any of those losers!" As you can see, disappointment, anger, or some other emotion often leads to stereotyping those who do not come up to our established expectations.

Hasty Generalizations and Stereotyping

Let's just say at the beginning that some generalizations about groups, races, or others may turn out to be true in some sense in some cases, especially when dealing with small, unified samples like a few individuals or small groups in which all the members, let's say, are committed to the same goal,

display the same competitive spirit, have had the same rigid discipline or training, or have been shaped by the same political ideology, religious indoctrination, social agenda, cultural ideals, or other. People from the same culture often display similar attitudes, behavior, and desires, all of which may provide a basis for stereotyping individuals. But it is literally impossible to group all of the people in a given culture into the same pigeonhole. In many parts of the world, Americans are stereotyped as militaristic. This accusation may be true of many U.S. policies, but it is not true of every American!

In many cultures, some so-called stereotypes result from commercial "booms." For several decades, the Japanese camera industry made it a goal to put a camera in the hands of every Japanese citizen as a strategy of commercial enterprise. But we must remember that "booms" and crazes inspired by financial pressure come and go. To many people, all Japanese people during the height of the Japanese tourism boom of the 70's and 80's seemed to be committed camera buffs, leading to the faulty reasoning that all Japanese are obsessed by cameras! The operative word concerning the formation of the hasty generalization, once again, is "all." Not all doctors are altruistic saviors of the human race, nor are all mafia members cold-blooded killers, nor do all Japanese people even own a camera.

As the camera example demonstrates, hasty generalizations can eventually turn into rigid stereotypes from which no one is really safe--not even the President of the United States. Remember that Richard Nixon was stereotyped as a shady politician. He was dubbed "Tricky Dicky" by the press and public, and Bill Clinton still carries with him the stigma of being the stereotype of the dishonest politician who will use any means to slip out of the various scandals he was personally involved in. His nick-name became "Slick

Willy." The personal and professional behavior of these two presidents helped confirm, no doubt, certain prejudices against lawyers and corrupt politicians. Upon hearing about the numerous illegal activities and questionable moral behavior of politicians, the public has the ammunition necessary to fire off hasty generalizations that will stereotype all politicians as unethical and dishonest: "Hah, Nixon and Clinton were corrupt politicians just like the rest of them. When will we ever find one who does not lie and try to trick the American people?" Once again, as this example demonstrates, the hasty generalization is usually worded in such a way as to include all members of a group.

Stereotypes like the ones above often result from hasty generalizations based on a small sample that portrays all the members of a nationality, a political party, a family, a city, a government, a company, a trade union, and so on as being the same. One politician gets caught stealing money from a fund, and all politicians get branded as thieves. People tend to judge everything in their lives using this same process. The transmission goes out in a new Dodge truck, and the owner, in a fit of anger, condemns all Dodge trucks (also composition fallacy).

Converting Hasty Generalizations to Reasonable Claims

We can easily minimize our tendencies to over state or exaggerate our arguments by qualifying them with words and phrases that limit the scope of the generalization. For one thing, we can simply replace words that express absolutes like all, every, and must, among others, with terms that qualify our statements like some, a few, many, most, may, perhaps, usually, sometimes, possibly, maybe, many, some, often, or others. A wide

range of verbs can also be used to limit the scope of claims, such as (X) resembles, (X) appears like, (X) seems similar to, and others. Standard phrases to express degrees of certainty also provide ways to present evidence accurately and clearly. Study the following schema which lists appropriate terminology based on the strength of the available evidence.

When you have weak evidence, use

- .There is a chance that~
- .It seems that~
- .It may be the case that~
- .If I am not mistaken, this~
- .It is possible that~
- .It could be that~
- .We can't state for sure, but~
- .I cannot say with 100 percent accuracy, but~
- .I get the feeling that~
- .I do not want to over state the case here, but...

When you have some evidence, use

- . The evidence suggests that~

- . The facts point in the direction of~
- . The research indicates a reasonable possibility that~
- . The evidence makes a case for~
- . From our perspective, we can most likely state that...
- . Enough evidence exists to suggest that at least...

When you have strong evidence, use

- .The evidence proves that~
- .The facts clearly support~
- .The evidence clearly shows that~
- .It is clearly the case that~
- .There is no doubt that~
- .We can say with great certainty that~

Finally, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, this fallacy falsifies the reality of groups and creates ugly stereotypes. As you can see, the key to avoiding this fallacy is to qualify statements with the appropriate words and phrases. Without such qualifiers, our statements may strike others as extreme, unfair, rash, or prejudiced.