

Responding to Stereotypes about You

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

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 most people living in the United States. For example, imagine that your Thai host father has commented on how individualistic U.S. Americans are. They always want to express their own ideas, look after their own welfare rather than their family's, etc. 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 'I Did It 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 very 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?
- While attending college in the U.S. may not feel like elitism, only 1 in 5 people do. Do you know what the ratio is in your host country?

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

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 the advent of mass media, what is now “known” abroad about the United

States 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 a U.S. American, you may hold strong views about this country. Some of you may feel that the United States is the land of opportunity, a special place in the world where those who work hard can achieve unlimited personal success. Others of you 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 just accept the United States as it is. Regardless of your opinions about the U.S., 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, some may be subtle, so look closely. Write down what you see and 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." Hopefully you will 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 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 actions recently 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