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Perception Differences between Russia and the United States: Changes since 2009

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Chapter 14

Interpersonal Communication and Perception Differences between Russia and the United States

Changes since 2009?

Deborrah Uecker and Jacqueline Schmidt

There is no truth. There is only perception.—Gustave Flaubert

Friedman (2005) commented that the socioeconomic reality of the world is that we are interconnected and interdependent. As a result of global economies, e-commerce, mass media, and changing immigration patterns, there is growing intercultural interdependence and a realignment of the processes of interaction between people (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). Since Friedman's comment in 2005, these interconnections have continued to grow. These changes can have both positive and negative implications. Institutions of higher education continue to increase attention on preparing students to be more globalized in their thinking. In order to prepare students for the opportunities in the future, fostering a strong sense of self-awareness and multicultural orientation is essential.

As a discipline of study, communication is uniquely situated to contribute to this endeavor. "The study of communication underscores structure, process and interpretation and is sensitive to diverse cultural environments" (Schmidt, Conaway, Easton, & Wardrope, 2007, p. 4). Furthermore, "communication is the substance of global organizing, and the ability to navigate the treacherous waters of intercultural conflict and the level of skill and tact necessary to coax high-quality decisions" (Stohl, 2001, p. 335). Perhaps most important of all, studying communication can assist students in developing greater self-awareness by understanding how cultural identities are negotiated, reinforced, and challenged (Schmidt et al., 2007). Stimpson (1994) believes "that people can

talk about, through, across, and around their differences and these exchange will help us live together justly” (p. B1).

The study of intercultural communication helps people understand how they bring different cultural, relational, and work practices with them in every interaction. The process of interaction across cultures involves using different approaches to solving problems or expressing emotions and emotional issues differently. For example, developing friendships and romantic relationships often have different motivations and expectations in different cultures (Schmidt & Uecker, 2015). The rules and norms that operate across cultures can create misunderstanding and miscommunication which affect how people think or interact with others.

This chapter addresses how the process of perception and culture influence interaction and understanding of self and others. The authors conducted a survey of Russian and U.S. participants about their perceptions of each other and self in 2009 and 2017/2018. This type of study is important in the context of Eurasian studies in that comparison and analysis of perceptions can aid in identifying orientations and differences, avoiding possible misunderstandings and providing suggestions for more effective classroom strategies.

Perception is a complex process. “Interpersonal perceptions develop when we observe and interpret communication (verbal and nonverbal) of people we encounter” (Mottet, Vogl-Bauer, & Houser, 2013, p. 63). These observations can be in person, on film, or through other’s accounts of interactions. The process is divided into three stages. First, there is the selection of a stimulus. Imagine a fight between a black-haired waiter and a red-haired customer in a restaurant. Observing this interaction, the viewer must select where to focus their attention. Will the focus be on their own food and people at their table, the actual fight occurring, or what others in the restaurant are doing? It is impossible to attend to everything. After the selection, the individual organizes the event in terms of past experiences. How does this fit into what one has heard or experienced about these situations (e.g., what type of person picks a fight with a waiter in a restaurant)? The final step in interpretation is attaching meaning and attribution to the event, such as the attribution that people who pick a fight with a waiter want a free meal.

The process of perception can create a series of beliefs and attitudes about people and behaviors which often result in miscommunication, misunderstanding, and stereotyping. Stereotyping is a shortcut in the process of perception and occurs when one attributes a characteristic to an entire group of people such as people with red hair argue more, at least in restaurants. Perceptions are highly subjective and often biased. They can pose a powerful barrier to effective intercultural communication. Perceptions can lead people

to choose to separate, disengage, or avoid even getting involved in the first place with someone who does not seem to share their values.

One factor affecting perception is culture. One's customs, practices, and values are derived from their cultural groups. One approach in discussing cultural differences is individualism/collectivism. Individualism (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) sees people as autonomous and independent with high levels of individual and personal responsibility (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). People from individualistic cultures tend to assume that the cause of a problem, such as the previously mentioned restaurant example (bad food, poor service), is the result of the person (waiter) and is under that person's ability to control. For example, people from the United States, an individualistic culture, may assume that a person who argues with the waiter in a restaurant is standing up for his rights and view such behavior as appropriate. Collectivism places a strong emphasis on relatedness and interdependence (Gudykunst, 1998). Collectivistic cultures are more apt to assume the situation caused the problem. A collectivist could see the event in the restaurant as outside of the control of the person (waiter) and find explanations for the problem in other factors (e.g., kitchen not working properly, someone calling in sick resulting in too few waiters). They might view arguing with the waiter who has no control over the situation as inappropriate. The result of these varying cultural orientations is misunderstanding and stereotypes. The individualist is viewed as rude by the collectivist and the collectivist is viewed as unable to defend himself by the individualist.

These stereotypes become part of one's attitudes and way of perceiving the world. Instead of being challenged, they are assumed to be correct. For example, Uecker and Schmidt (2006) showed two films to Russian and U.S. students. Both films displayed young men (one in Russia, one in the United States) trying to succeed in business in somewhat unsavory situations. Students were asked to identify film stereotypes about their culture and the other culture and then assess the accuracy of these stereotypes. While students from both United States and Russia were able to see the stereotypes about their own culture and recognize whether they were true or not, (e.g., the United States is greedy, Russia is corrupt), they had problems detecting the stereotypes about the other culture. This inability may be tied to the fact that the stereotypes of the other culture fit into their existing cultural beliefs about that culture. Instead of perceiving these actions in the film as stereotypes, they were perceived as reality and not identified. Additionally, once formed, these stereotypes cause one to continue to judge and react to people in the same ways, thus ignoring or not perceiving changes. For example, research by Hisrich, Bucar, and Oztark (2003) identified many differences between the

Russian and U.S. participants on the perception of the ethics of various business practices (e.g., giving/taking bribes, taking items from work). However, in 2015, Schmidt and Uecker using the same business practices found there were very few perceptual differences between Russian and U.S. participants. Despite these findings, the U.S. public still perceived that many of ethical differences in business practices between Russian and the United States existed.

These misunderstandings and stereotypes are increased by ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the tendency for any culture to put itself in a position of centrality and positivity and to develop negative attitudes toward other cultures which have different values (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Ethnocentrism is a comparative evaluation. "Ethnocentric people view their own culture or co-culture as the standard against which all other cultures should be judged, and they often have contempt for other cultures" (McCormack, 2016, p. 153). The more ethnocentric one is, the more difficult it can be to make accurate predictions and explanations of others' behavior. High levels of ethnocentrism can also create increased levels of anxiety when interacting with people from other cultures. People become anxious when they can't predict or explain someone else's communication.

One goal of intercultural teaching is to help students become more competent communicators. The ability to communicate in ways that are appropriate and effective with people from diverse backgrounds can be seen as the gateway to connections across cultures. Culturally competent people are more world-minded and have higher levels of attributional complexity and communication accommodation (McCormack, 2016). Embracing cultural differences has many benefits to the self, such as new friendships, romantic relationships, and professional alliances. In order to reach these goals, one must develop self-awareness of their own perceptions and be willing to challenge them. "Intercultural communication consists not only of interpreting behaviors of people from other cultures but also interpreting our own behavior based on others' reactions to it" (Klyukanov, 2005, p. 15). These factors can limit one's ability to accurately perceive and cause misunderstandings that impact interaction.

In 2009 Schmidt and Uecker conducted an online survey of U.S. and Russian students to assess their perceptions of each other. They found that 87% of U.S. students and 61% of Russian students reported knowing nothing or little about the other. Thirteen percent of U.S. students and 49% of Russians reported knowing a moderate amount about the other. No one reported knowing a great amount. Ninety percent of U.S. students and 75% of Russian students reported their information came from media. Other sources of information for Russian students were coursework (18%) and travel/

personal contact (7%). U.S. students cited coursework (5%) and personal contact/travel (5%).

U.S. students' perceptions of Russians were largely tied to the past. Sixty-five percent of the comments related to communism/Soviet Union and the Cold War. Russians were described as stern/strict/harsh/mean (40%), vodka drinking/furry hats (35%), bearded/hairy (15%), and aggressive/athletic (10%). Russian students perceived the U.S. students more in modern terms. Sixty percent described the U.S. students as advanced, enterprising, and stable and listed Disneyland, films, fast food, and McDonald's. Americans were described as sincere, cheerful, friendly, and brave.

In identifying characteristics (perceptions) of their own culture, 50% of U.S. student comments related to capitalism/democracy/ freedom, technologically advanced, and powerful. Other comments described U.S. citizens as obese (19%), materialistic (11%), friendly/open (8%), and lazy/arrogant/rushed (12%). Fifty percent of Russian students perceived Russia as nationalistic, honorable, hardworking, purposeful, and brave and Russians as kind, generous, and hospitable (50%).

Forty percent of U.S. students perceived differences in business practices due to government issues, seeing Russia as more restrictive, communistic, and regulated than the United States. Thirty percent perceived differences in business style, viewing the United States as working harder/faster, caring more about business, and more direct/open/fairer and less formal than Russians. Ten percent identified differences in type of business (size and number) and 10% identified language as the biggest difference. Sixty percent of Russians perceived the differences in business practices due to the government, viewing Russia as more socialist, corrupt, and difficult in which to start a business. Forty percent of Russians perceived differences in business style, viewing Russians as less competitive, more relational in starting and doing business, less experienced in business, and less transparent than the United States.

Ten percent of the United States and 20% of Russian students believed they would likely work with each other in the future. In regard to how comfortable they would be working with each other, 15% of U.S. students felt uncomfortable or somewhat uncomfortable, 42% were neutral, and 43% felt somewhat comfortable to comfortable. Of the U.S. students responding uncomfortable to neutral, the largest reason for being uncomfortable was they did not know enough about the other. Only 70% of the Russians responded to this question. Of the Russians who responded, 30% felt somewhat comfortable/comfortable, 57% neutral, and 30% somewhat uncomfortable/uncomfortable. For Russian students responding not comfortable to neutral, the reasons were they either did not know enough about the United States or did not trust people from the United States.

CURRENT STUDY

Since 2009, much has changed economically and politically between United States and Russia but have the perceptions of Russians and U.S. participants changed about their own country and the other country?

Method

In order to determine whether perceptions have changed, the current study replicated Schmidt and Uecker's 2009 study. A total of 181 U.S. participants and 59 Russian participants completed an online survey. The U.S. students were from two U.S. universities and Russian subjects were invited to complete the survey as a result of a posting on the Communication Association of Eurasian Researchers Facebook page or as part of a class. IRB approval was obtained for the U.S. participants. Russian faculty reviewed the survey and approved their students' participation. Data was collected three different times from October 2017 to September 2018. Participants were asked to indicate how much they knew about each other (the United States about Russia, Russia about the United States), where their information came from (courses in school, media, other), and to list a story from the media. Participants were also asked to list three characteristics that came to mind when they thought about the United States or Russia and to provide three characteristics that came to mind when they thought about their own countries. Additionally, students identified what differences, if any, they saw in business practices between Russia and the United States. A final set of questions addressed whether they anticipated working with each other in the future, and how comfortable they felt working with the other.

Results

What Do They Know about Each Other?

All participants responded to this question. Fifty-five percent of U.S. participants reported knowing nothing or little about Russia, 30% a moderate amount, and 15% a great amount. Twenty-four percent of Russian participants reported knowing little or nothing about the United States, 50% a moderate amount, and 26% a great amount.

Where Do They Get Their Information?

All participants responded to this question. Seventy-eight percent of U.S. participants and 90% of Russian participants reported media as their primary source of information. Twenty percent of U.S. participants reported courses

and 2% travel/personal experience as additional sources of information. Ten percent of Russian participants reported a mixture of courses, travel, and personal experience.

Media Story

When asked to recall a story from the media, 86% of the Russian and 80% of the U.S. participants could recall a story. The overwhelming response for both U.S. participants and Russian participants were political stories. Typical stories were those on "Putin and Trump colluding to rig the election in the US, Trump and Putin's relationship, and Russia in relation to 2016 presidential election and Facebook."

Perceptions of Other

When asked what three perceptions (characteristics) come to mind when you think about the other, the responses varied. The findings are displayed in table 14.1 in terms of general categories of comments about the country and people and the percentage of the frequency with which they occurred. All participants answered the characteristics question, but only 20% of the U.S. participants and 18% of the Russian participants identified characteristics about people.

Perceptions of Own Country

When asked what they perceived about their own culture, results also varied. The results are listed in table 14.2 in terms of percentage of frequency they occurred and divided by comments about country and people. All participants answered the question about characteristics, but only 15% of U.S. students and 8% of Russian students who responded identified perceptions about people.

Perceived Differences in Business Practice

Eighty-nine percent of U.S. students and 72% of Russians students responded to this question. The perceived differences in business practices are listed in table 14.3 grouped by general categories of responses and the percentage of the frequency they occurred.

Anticipate Working with the Other Culture

All participants responded to this question. Thirty-three percent of U.S. participants believed they would work with Russians in the future and 67% felt they would not work with Russians. Of the Russian participants, 77%

Table 14.1 Perceptions of Other

<i>The United States about Russia</i>		<i>Russia about the United States</i>	
<i>Country</i>			
Cold War/Soviets/Communism	37%	Freedom/Liberty	
Putin Tensions/Rivals/Conflict	25%	Trump/Politics/Sanctions	
Power/Military/Missiles/Nuclear	18%	Rich/Industrial/Modern	
Corrupt/Cheating/Spying/Hacking	15%	Films/Hollywood	
Snow/Big/Cold	5%	Violence	
		Competitive	
<i>People</i>			
Aggressive/Competitors		Well-wishing	
Loud		Optimistic	
Proud			

believed they would work with people from the United States in the future and 23% felt they would not work with people from the United States.

How Comfortable Are They Working with Each Other?

All participants responded to this question. Sixty-eight percent of U.S. participants felt somewhat comfortable/comfortable working with people from Russia, 9% were neutral, and 23% reported being somewhat uncomfortable/uncomfortable. Of those responding uncomfortable, somewhat uncomfortable, or neutral, only 53% explained why. Difficulty in understanding language differences was the factor for 64% of the respondents, uncertainty/embarrassment was reported by 27%, and not trusting by 9%. Fifty-four percent of Russian participants felt somewhat comfortable/comfortable working

Table 14.2 Perceptions of Own Country

<i>The United States about the United States</i>		<i>Russia about Russia</i>	
<i>Country</i>			
Freedom	20%	Pride/Home/Powerful	29%
Powerful/Strong/Good Military	20%	Bad Economy/Corruption	21%
Bully/Arrogant/Obnoxious/Greedy	15%	Big/Resources	16%
Going Downhill/Declining/Disjointed/Divided	15%	Putin/Politics	15%
Losing Freedom/Divided/Internal Problems	15%	Has "soul"	7%
Wasteful/Polluted	10%	Traditional	6%
Unknown Future/Changing	5%	Friendly	6%
<i>People</i>			
Affluent/Rich		Sincere	
Obese/Lazy		Hospitable	
<u>Arrogant/Proud</u>			

Table 14.3 Perceived Differences in Business Practice

<i>U.S. Perceived Differences</i>	
Style (52%)	Working styles, treatment of workers, classes of workers. Russia is more formal and direct in business.
Government (30%)	Russians are communistic, determined, less open, and less passionate, and have more government interference and regulations and few ethics than the United States.
Language (18%)	Difficulty in understanding Russian language.
<i>Russian Perceived Differences</i>	
Government (60%)	U.S. businesses are more government-supported, popular, and easier to start, and have more opportunities, less corruption, and few rules/laws than Russia. U.S. workers love their jobs and are always looking to the future. Russians don't always love their job, need money to live, and start a business on their own.
Styles (33%)	Different approaches, communication, and mindsets. Russians rely more on personal contacts and relationship than U.S. businesses.
Economy (3%)	U.S. salaries are higher and economy is more stable.

with people from the United States, 19% were neutral, and 27% were somewhat uncomfortable/uncomfortable. Of those responding very uncomfortable, somewhat uncomfortable, and neutral, 37% explained why. Fifty-six percent of these listed various culture differences, 33% reported awkwardness, and 11% indicated difficulty in understanding language as factors.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to see if perceptions of students had changed since 2009, and, if so, how had perceptions changed. Are students more "global-minded" and thinking less stereotypically today than in 2009? Both U.S. and Russian students claim to be more knowledgeable (up to 32% for U.S. students and 37% for Russian students) about each other in 2017/2018 than in 2009. Additionally, in both 2009 and in 2017/2018, Russian students claim to know more about the United States than U.S. students claim to know about Russia. Although both Russian and U.S. students claimed more knowledge about each other in 2017/2018 than in 2009, this additional knowledge did not change how they perceived each other or perceived differences in business practices from 2009. Students in the United States still think of Russia using old stereotypes (37%) and relate primarily to negative political issues/stereotypes (57%). Much of their thinking about Russian characteristics continues to be generally negative, referencing events in the past. Russian students also have not substantially altered their responses

of the United States. In both 2009 and in 2017/2018, their responses are still positive in tone toward the United States. Russian students still see the United States as modern, developed, free, and an entertainment center (60%). Findings on differences in business practices were also very similar to 2009 findings with a slight change in perception of government problems (increase of 10%) for U.S. students. Generally, these findings reinforce the studies on perception that once formed, perceptions are difficult to change, even though changes do occur in practices, ethics, and business approaches (Schmidt & Uecker, 2015). Furthermore, perceptions continue to be developed within the construct of one's own cultural lens and ethnocentrism.

One difference for the Russians in 2017/2018 was an increase in negative comments about the United States such as "the US is false" and "the US accuses other countries for their own problems." These negative comments were not present in 2009. Smeltz, Goncharov, and Wojtowicz (2016) found a similar negative attitude in that only 23% of Russians said they had a positive view of the United States. This was among the lowest of the rankings since the post-Cold War era. This shift is also reflected in the writings of journalist Tavernise (2015) on her travels to Russia, noting that she felt that anti-Americanism was more potent now than ever. Much of this anti-American shift might be a reflection of Russian media. Grincheva and Lu (2017), in their study of media messages on the fifth BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit, commented on the tendency of the Russian media to capitalize on the strong national identity of Russia, placing it in comparison and even opposition with the rest of the world. This increase in negative comments did not occur for U.S. students even though the discussion of political hacking and Russian involvement in the 2016 election has been a major subject of U.S. media. Even with this shift in negativity toward the United States, it should be noted U.S. participants both in 2009 and in the current study had a much more negative perception of Russia than Russians' of the United States.

The responses to what participants perceived about their own countries was the biggest change in perception since 2009. Both groups gave more negative comments about their own country in the current study than in 2009. Russian participants still thought of Russia as being a strong, big, beautiful country; friendly; and having "soul" (58%), but also included characteristics such as corrupt, pride, nationalism, and "bad economic system" (21%). These comments were not present in 2009. One possible explanation might be a change in cultural orientation for Russians to more individualistic and different expectations of the economy. U.S. participants still referred to the United States as free, democratic, and a land of opportunity (40%), but also described the United States in more negative terms such as declining, divided, polluted, self-centered, "meddlesome in other countries," and arrogant (60%). They

also described people in the United States in negative terms such as lazy, fat, and obese. For the U.S. participants, the number of these negative comments was much higher and the actual comments were more negative in describing the United States than those used by Russian participants in describing Russia.

As the results of this study demonstrate, the media continues to be the number one source of information for both Russian and U.S. participants. Furthermore, the articles or news stories most remembered related to possible interference by Russia in the 2016 presidential campaign. These findings confirm research by Gottfried, Barthel, Shearer, and Mitchell (2016) who found that over 90% of U.S. adults learned about the presidential election through media sources. Although the majority of information still comes from the media for both Russian and U.S. participants, the frequency of participant dependency on the media for information was reversed. In 2009, 90% of U.S. participants and 75% of Russian participants cited the media as primary source information, and in the current study, 75% of U.S. participants and 90% of Russian participants cited the media as their major source. Russian participants also mentioned the film industry in their perceptions of the United States.

Given the substantial influence of media in forming and maintaining perception and the research of Grincheva and Lu (2017) as well as Hall (2017) about the ethnocentric bias in both Russian and U.S. media reporting, teachers should challenge sources of information from media and encourage students to develop media literacy, thinking critically about what they read or hear on all media platforms. Additional studies should examine what type of media (e.g., movies, Internet, social media) people rely on and the perceived credibility of these mediums especially in light of recent information about hacking and planting fake news stories. Furthermore, the question should be asked how this media reinforces cultural stereotypes and encourages ethnocentrism.

An additional source of knowledge for students was coursework. In 2009, 5% of U.S. students and 18% of Russian students identified courses as a source of knowledge. In the current study, this was reversed with more U.S. students identifying coursework as a source of knowledge than Russians. While courses can potentially help offset media for U.S. students, what is not asked in this survey is the type of courses. For example, are these courses primarily history courses reviewing the past (possibly reinforcing old perceptions) or courses that examine current policy and approaches? What types of texts are used and do they have an ethnocentric bias?

Since 2009, there were substantial differences in the perception of the likelihood of working with Russia or the United States and the perceived comfort level in working with the other. In the current study, the number of U.S. and Russian participants who believed they would probably work together in the

future increased and both expressed being more comfortable working with each other. While more U.S. participants felt more comfortable working with Russians, more Russian participants believed that they would work with each other in the future. This increased comfort level reinforces studies supporting that more knowledge (in this case the perception of more knowledge) reduces anxiety, and less anxiety helps perceive others as more predictable/attractive, encouraging them to consider the formation relationships and working with them (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002).

This study reinforces the need for researchers to study and collect material about practices and perceptions from various cultures rather than to just collect data about their own culture. Additionally, researchers should conduct replication of earlier studies to identify if perceptions are changing and develop longitudinal studies to see trends. Given the findings of this study on students' reflections on their own culture, additional studies are needed on the relationship of ethnocentrism and the concept of individualism/collectivism to perception.

This study also reinforces the need for teachers of communication to continue to challenge students' stereotypes in the effort to develop intercultural competence. One approach would be to have students take a survey similar to this study before class discussion, identifying characteristics they have of other cultures and share the results. The results would help to make students aware of their perceptions, where these perceptions come from, and how these perceptions may affect their ability to interact with people from other cultures. One of the authors found this method to be very helpful to class discussion. Students became aware of not only the effect of the media in forming their perceptions but also how their perceptions affected them in assigning attribution for actions by the "other."

Another approach would be to develop more exchanges using Skype or Internet surveys/exchanges between students of different cultures to discuss differences in perception. For example, as a follow-up to this survey, a U.S. class was asked to list the three characteristics they thought Russians would have of the United States before they saw the results from the Russians. The U.S. students, given their largely negative perceptions of the Russians, thought that the Russian students' perceptions of the United States would be negative. They were surprised to find out that the Russians had positive impressions of the United States. This led to a discussion between the groups on how these stereotypes were established and why the differences in perception existed. These exchanges not only give students more experiences with each other, but also increase their knowledge and comfort level in working together.

CONCLUSION

Perceptions are strong factors influencing interaction in a globalizing society. This chapter discussed the process of perception and the impact of culture, media, and ethnocentrism on assessing ourselves and others' cultural values and attributions through an online survey of Russian and U.S. participants. The goal of the survey was to identify perceptions, where these perceptions were developed, and what possible effects they could have on interaction between these cultures. This type of research is important in the Eurasian context, because in order to enhance the intercultural competence needed for developing personal and business relations in the future, students must become more aware of their own cultural lens and ethnocentrism. Students must also be aware of how their perceptions of themselves differ from others to avoid possible misunderstandings. Instructors and researchers should be concerned with improving how students communicate with others and facilitating how to engage in mindful learning and understanding to foster a multicultural perspective that allows them to check their perceptions when interacting with people different from themselves. The authors provided suggestions for future research and classroom instruction.

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