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Samuel F. Smith
ssmit131@utk.edu

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Examining Cultural Stereotypes
Through Russian and American Voices

Samuel F. Smith

"Tolerance, inter-cultural dialogue and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where peoples are becoming more and more closely interconnected."

—*Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations*

Examining Cultural Stereotypes Through Russian and American Voices

The people of the many varied cultures of the world have never been able to interact with one another as they are capable of doing today. Alongside this interaction with diverse cultures stands the possibility of ignorance caused by a lack of understanding and knowledge of these unfamiliar peoples and societies, and that deficit sometimes leads to stereotyping. Stereotypes can be damaging to a culture, especially when they falsely degrade an individual or entire group without any desire to identify or rectify the claim. It is interaction between cultures, as Mr. Annan states that will allow for these stereotypes to be broken down and cultures to begin to intermingle with one another from a fresh, knowledgeable, respectful vantage point that will only further enrich the lives and cultures of people all around the world.

In the fall semester of 2010, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Yaroslavl, Russia. While in this city, both from my culture class and from first-hand experience, I began to learn about many social differences that exist between the respective American and Russian systems. These differences intrigued me enough to shape my project around their existence in an effort to shed light on these asymmetrical instances in an effort to enlighten American citizens and perhaps future study abroad participants on possible misconceptions that may already be formed.

The media and film industry quite often portray the Russian Federation's citizens as enemies, spies or aggressive fighters (Goering, 2004). It is my belief, however, that the citizens of this country are people who have found practical stability and socio-economic efficiency in their current state and deserve the respect of fellow nations. While my project will be far from achieving any political or social resolutions to conflict between our nation and theirs, the plan for my project is to at least disassemble for the reader of this paper several major biases or stereotypes that may already exist. I will accomplish this through sharing my own thoughts and new understandings and sharing the thoughts of both Americans and Russians that I interviewed as a part of this research project.

I, too, at one time believed the common stereotypical misconceptions that the Russian society is one still stuck in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union: that the government is still run by corrupt dictators and that the country is unable to rise again from the fall in such a way that holds it back from advancing economically, socially, politically, educationally, and even technologically. Furthermore, and mainly due to the film industry and the very little history I knew of the U.S.S.R and modern Russia, my perception of the people of this region was fabricated with the ideas that they were harsh, crude, unkempt, suspicious, sly, and perhaps oddly intelligent but only in a way that would allow them to be government spies. I even found myself believing that the most common of stereotypes for Russians (they are all alcoholics, they are constantly plotting revenge against the United States, they all smoke) were valid, though I had absolutely no solid information on which to base these thoughts.

What further reinforced my ideas of the Russian people was that most people I encountered had the exact same view of the Russian people as I did. As mentioned earlier,

a lot of these ideas stemmed from the popular portrayal of Russians in cinema and even video games and TV. One can simply view any film concerning government threats, espionage or terrorism, such as *Breach* or the more recent film *Salt*, and find that the enemy is quite nearly always Russian. Video games such as the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, for the most part very popular war games, consist of violent, elaborate, exaggerated battles between the U.S. and Russia. On TV, with a bit of attention, one can hear passing comments about “the Russians” or a joke about “the KGB” which portrays them as impatient and evil as seen in *The Golden Ticket* episode of *The Office*, or if not a comment about them, one will hear an impersonation of an English-speaking Russian that is nearly always used when someone wants to come across as dangerous or mysterious.

Perhaps the first time I came to learn of the false nature of these stereotypes was when I enrolled in my initial Russian language course during my freshman year in college. After learning the basics, I came to see a real beauty in the intricacy of the language in the pronunciation of the full words and even the aesthetic qualities of the Russian script. Progressing through the course, we began to learn some basics about the Russian people through the small portions of culture lessons that were scattered throughout the textbook. It was then that I realized that everything I knew about the Russian people stemmed from sheer ignorance and false stereotypes. Choosing to study a language and a completely different culture may lead a person to find that most of what he thinks he already knows about that people group is either completely wrong or a stereotype.

Continuing through my college career, my study of the Russian people was facilitated by Russian literature classes and the study of political science. Slowly but

surely my former misconceptions were broken down by the truth. I quickly became more respectful of the Russian culture and people as I studied their history and the amount of domestic violence and horror that they experienced when first rising to be a major power many centuries before WWI. Then, after reading various stories from their most famous authors, I developed a great respect for the obvious social, moral and intellectual insight of the Russian people as portrayed through both fictional and non-fictional characters and their authors. While my perceptions slowly began to change to a more accurate view of the Russian people through studying their culture in the classroom, my understanding of the true Russian life was soon to quickly expand as I made the decision to study abroad in the Russian Federation.

These changes in my understanding and perception of this completely different culture have led me to recognize the importance of the breaking-down of stereotypes and misconceptions of other cultures and people. Maintaining poor images of other countries, their leaders and their citizens provides no positive outlet for interaction between our country and theirs. A more in-depth appreciation for other cultures will allow for less volatile international relationships in which countries understand each other and each other's respective cultures and are therefore able to understand their political, social and economic desires. I firmly believe that harboring negative orientations of others that stem from past acts of aggression has prevented many countries from being able to move on into a relationship of relative peace in which the leaders strive to work together at all costs in order to provide peace, stability and justice to their respective native citizens and their international neighbors.

In the case of stereotypes for the Russian people and our other international brothers and sisters, ignorance is not bliss. Ignorance is a missed opportunity to have a greater understanding of the world around us that exists and advances whether we understand, like, agree with it, or not.

Theoretical Framework

At least one of the authors of the research studies I read in preparing for this project proposed a theoretical framework that supported studying stereotypes (i.e. Cross-Culture Training Effectiveness – Social Learning Theory, Black & Mendenhall, 1990), but as I began discussing this research with my mother who is a doctoral candidate in literacy studies here at The University of Tennessee, she suggested that the theoretical framework she had established for her own research might accurately apply to my research as well. That theory, Blumer's Theory of Symbolic Interactionism (1969), states that: "1) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; 2) the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and, 3) the meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person dealing with the things he encounters" (Spradley, p. 6 -7).

Examining how this theoretical framework might explain the behavior involved in stereotyping, I believe that it does provide a lens for this research. When a person has no real meaning for an individual, it is easy for that person to apply a stereotype. At times, the stereotype is applied because of a direct interaction with a person. More often, however, people apply stereotypes under the influence of others in their peer groups or

families. Blumer's last point, that the meanings people apply to things (in this case the application of meaning to people they do not really know – stereotyping – where people are treated as inanimate objects/things) can be changed as the person processes his interpretations, corresponds with my thesis that, with interaction, stereotypes can be disproven and possibly abandoned.

By situating my research in this theoretical framework, I allow myself the opportunity to not view stereotyping as the unalterable practice of people who are uneducated or simple minded and hopelessly locked in a world of generalizations based in fear. Instead, situating my research concerning stereotyping in the Theory of Symbolic Interactionism, I can understand the human tendency for stereotyping and, more importantly, can see the possibility of negating pigeonholing and acknowledging that many people, when given the opportunity, will forsake narrow-minded views in favor of more accurate, individual connections.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are part of everyday life. As we walk down the street and encounter various people, we automatically produce assumptions that may be based on nothing more than what we heard about the type of person he seems to be. We all are aware of stereotypes for major people groups that stem from what we think we know about their region of origin, their skin color, their religious group or even something as trivial as their accent or lack thereof. More often than not, these stereotypes cause us to have a negative view of the person and then allow us to alienate this person from ourselves so as to maintain our own self image (Devos & Banaji, 2005).

Stereotypes are the most common form of identification information that is accepted within an individual's mind, especially when the individual has no desire to find out more about the stereotyped person or group. Stereotyping is the more natural approach when encountering new people. This same idea, where stereotypes are used rather than an educated knowledge of the individual or group, can be found in communication when the subject concerns the explanation of the new person or people group. This seemingly natural behavior is thought to have developed out of the once necessary trait of our ancient predecessors who were forced to be constantly aware of their surroundings and the potential need to fight off predators in that they would need to draw quick conclusions about that which they encountered in order to distinguish between a friend or a foe (Yeung & Kashima, 2010).

An individual is capable of stereotyping without cause or consciousness. Often an individual will default to the stereotypes which he has already acquired or developed in order to comprehend or explain an occurrence or even to predict the potential outcome of an encounter with a certain person. It is interesting to note that these stereotypes may develop without the active knowledge of the individual who has the stereotype and, even if an individual recognizes his use of a stereotype, he may not know from where the stereotype originated. Further investigation by Kunda and Spencer showed that while the activation of stereotypes may seem impossible to control once established in one's mind, the use of the stereotypes greatly depends on the individual's preconceived prejudices, his goals in the conversation or interaction, or the general associations that have become instilled in the individual due to constant association of the stereotype with the individual in question (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

The main portion of Kunda's and Spencer's research identifies the activation and application of stereotypes, where activation is "the extent to which a stereotype is accessible in one's mind" and application is "the extent to which one uses a stereotype to judge a member of the stereotyped group." The researchers propose that the activation and application of stereotypes depends on three possible types of personal goals that the individual may have when approaching another individual (Kunda & Spencer, 2003, p. 522).

The first of these goals is the goal of comprehension. This type of goal is found when one seeks to use stereotypes in an attempt to understand a situation more clearly. Stereotypes act as enablers that allow an individual to make a complex situation, unfamiliar behavior, or perhaps simply an excess of information concerning a target group or individual more basic, accessible and reasonable. When the explanation of a situation or a person's behavior is not readily accessible from learned, academic information, stereotypes take the place of this sound judgment and provide a satisfactory, though not always accurate, explanation that allows the situation to be more comprehensible (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

The second goal is the goal of self-enhancement. In this case, stereotypes are used to maintain one's image of one's self in order to preserve self-worth or increase self-esteem. These desires to keep one's self-perception at an elevated level can directly encourage the use of stereotypes upon a threatening individual. Likewise, stereotypes may be suppressed when they threaten the integrity of one's desired idea of a target individual or group. If one's goal is to establish a friendship with or a positive association

of an individual, he will suppress any negative stereotypes that would dissociate this individual from a positive association (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

The last goal is the motivation to avoid prejudice. In many circumstances, especially as awareness of what is and is not “politically correct” increases, individuals are attempting to avoid any type of prejudices. In this case, an individual will actively refrain from activating or applying any stereotypes in an attempt to view the target individual as an equal (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

These same researchers further acknowledge that stereotypes can work for or against themselves. While often they are used to better understand a person or situation, an individual who seeks to learn more about a subject in order to have more accurate, complete understanding will more often suppress any inaccurate stereotypes that were ill-conceived (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

It seems that in American culture, the need for quick answers, whether accurate or not, outranks the desire to have a complete understanding of a situation or person. Kunda and Spencer acknowledge this fact and respond by saying that in this case, it is much more likely that stereotypes will be utilized. Ultimately, the activation and application of stereotypes depends on an individual’s desire to either have a quick answer or instead his seeking a non-prejudicial understanding for which a stereotype will not allow (Kunda & Spencer, 2003).

Stereotypes are also found to maintain a substantial role in relations between groups or individuals. When focusing on stereotypes which are used on an individual, the information processed about another person is biased by stereotypes in order to create

“self-fulfilling prophecies.” In groups, stereotypes are more commonly used to create a distinct divide between the ingroup and the outgroup. In this case, the stereotypes may be integrated into the ingroup’s ideology and then the stereotypes become a form of justification for the ingroup’s actions (Stephan et al., 1993).

The use of stereotypes is relevant in a field of study known as Social Identity Theory. This theory states that personal identification, or the way an individual perceives himself, can be linked to the social group with whom he identifies and the attributes of that group. This theory assumes that “people strive to maintain a positive social identity” (Wong, Owen, Tan, & Collins, 2011, p. 1-2). Negative stereotypes obviously inhibit one’s ability to secure this positive identity and can provide difficult circumstances for low social status groups (Wong, Owen, Tan, & Collins, 2011).

Stereotypes are present in all ages, even children, and it is during childhood that perhaps most stereotypes are learned. A child’s social surroundings or certain static images of other nationalities and countries from brief, uninformed exposure may influence the development of stereotypes. These stereotypes may then continue through generations and never be corrected. A child’s family, school, religious affiliations and organizations, and social clubs are all very influential in the creation and continuation of stereotypes. In addition to these outlets, the portrayal of certain races in literature, media or basic conversation may reinforce stereotypes and may allow children to accept these stereotypes as true without any further explanation. These hard, false images may stay intact for an extended amount of time and be passed on in such a way that brings multiplying numbers to recognize and maintain the same stereotypes, allowing these stereotypes to become widespread (Zelig, 1950).

Stereotypes concerning Russians

American stereotypes for Russians first began to be widely present immediately following the Second World War and most likely as a result of that war. The development and creation of these stereotypes came from judging the Russian character against the accepted and valued qualities of the American character. Furthermore, at this time in history, the Soviet Union appeared to be outperforming Americans when it came to dealing with the issues of women's participation in the work force, unemployment, and ethnic minorities. This threat to American superiority caused hostile feelings towards the Soviet Union and instigated Americans to desire to establish a view of the Soviet Union as "uncivilized" the common stereotype at that time. Initiating this stereotype allowed American citizens to excuse the Russian people as a group of lesser people, therefore boosting their own self-image (Davis, 1947).

One type of stereotyping that accurately identifies this aggression between the U.S. and the USSR is called "scapegoating". Scapegoating is "the discharging of pent-up aggression upon convenient individuals, minorities, external groups, and imaginary entities such as the devil" (Davis, 1947, p. 178). In a situation in which a country such as the U.S. may feel inferior, stereotypes will develop for a scapegoat country that will claim it to be inferior, aggressive, one-sided, and dishonest. Furthermore, the idea that these qualities stem from either a religious or ethnic background and are in some way hereditary will only strengthen the stereotype and allow the object of the scapegoating to be made more inferior, regardless of the truth (Davis, 1947).

Pure ignorance of Russian culture both ancient and present has prevented these ill-developed stereotypes from being ousted and corrected. A geographical factor is also present in the ability for American stereotypes for Russians to be so easily formed and maintained. The physical distance that separates the United States from Russia provides a mentality that the U.S. is safe enough away to harbor these false stereotypes without any repercussions (Davis, 1947).

While tensions between the United States and Russia have been present since the end of WWII, the manifestation of this tension and the development of our now classic Russian stereotypes came about during the Cold War. The enormous arms race that threatened the economic systems of both countries provided for a hostile environment during which both competing countries enforced strict rules on communication between countries. Unfortunately, even after the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, the stereotypes that were established to encourage separation from the enemy remained (Brown, Soloviev, & Eggett, 2007).

Though most people think of stereotypes as being negative and degrading, stereotypes can also be positive and complimentary. According to a study by Stephan, Ageyev, Stephan, Abalakin, Stefanenko, and Coates-Shrider (1993), the four main qualities that a group of 117 American college-age students from New Mexico associated with Russian people were: “proud”, “serious”, “disciplined” and “strong”. These labels then branched to the qualities that were found to be associated with the Russian people through these four main categories, some of which include “hardworking” which was linked to the Russian character through “disciplined”, “patriotic” which was linked through “proud”, and “competitive” which was linked through “strong.” This study

ultimately found that both American and Russian students agree on stereotypes for Americans but do not agree on the stereotypes for Russians (Stephan et al., 1993).

Sandra C. Taylor, a history professor at the University of Utah, has spoken on her personal experience with stereotypes and how they were dissembled when she worked and studied in Russia. Taylor comments on how the Russians had been perceived to not be real people but instead were stereotyped based on the ideas of communism. Taylor recalls that her mindset for such stereotypes were most likely a result of her childhood when parents prepared their children for a third World War by stocking up on supplies, bomb shelters became more prevalent throughout the nation, and all children at school were taught the protections methods in case of a nuclear bomb attack. All of these developments were directly associated with the Russians and therefore caused many to both fear and hate them. Even films such as *On the Beach* and *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, both of which dealt with the idea of a world in the midst of nuclear war, during this time in Taylor's life added to the tension that existed between the two nations (Taylor, 2002).

Taylor suggests that those who are educated and informed will be able to see that post-communistic Russia is no longer the international threat of the years during the Cold War. This reconciliation of the Russian character is accomplished mainly through personal contact with the Russian people or at least via information from one who has had personal contact with Russians (Taylor, 2002).

Personal Experience

My own personal experience has brought me to similar conclusions. Growing up in a very small town, I attended a high school that was 96% Caucasian with only my Spanish language teacher, a native Spaniard, that was of any ethnic background besides Caucasian. While taking the required courses at my high school of world history and American Government, I was educated concerning other cultures and people groups only at a very basic level. Carthage, my hometown, is best known for its connections to former Vice President Al Gore, not for its cultural awareness.

Growing up in the southeast section of the United States and specifically in Tennessee has also affected my world views, views that were challenged as I started my college studies. According to the Pew Forum (2007), Tennessee is the fifth most religious state in the United States. Arriving at college as a product of this very religious environment, I found that there were many more people my age who did not believe what I believed and also had different ideas about social relations, politics and life in general. While I came to quickly understand and perhaps even appreciate the diversity of the college campus and the diversity of my own state and country, the wide range of culturally accepted norms throughout our planet were yet to be revealed to me.

Before venturing to Russia, my international travel experience had only been to poverty-stricken areas of Jamaica on a short-term mission trip where I was surrounded by my friends who, at least on a basic level, shared all of the same beliefs that I did. When I traveled to Russia, I was in a completely different atmosphere with only one person that I knew from class in the states. As I stated earlier, I knew the classic stereotypes for the

Russian people, but quite honestly I was expecting to see a completely different, unique people that couldn't be contained in history or culture books.

That is just what I found. When I eventually got settled into the town of Yaroslavl and started learning the local streets and where the buildings to which I would be walking everyday were located, I was able to start taking in other aspects of my new surroundings, including a finer focus on the people. Perhaps the first thing that is easily the most notable oddity that an American will experience on any street in Russia is the lack of eye contact made between people on the street. In America, or at least in Tennessee, it is common for us to stroll down the sidewalk, make eye contact with people we do not know, and even smile occasionally. In Russia, one rarely makes eye contact with anyone and smiling or laughing in public on the street is seen as a sign of mental instability. “Смех без причины - не признак дурачины.” (Laughter with no reason – a sign of a fool.) One must understand that this is a part of their culture just as much as smiling to people on the street is a part of the American culture; it is not to be seen as a negative characteristic of the Russian people; to them, it is a behavior that is both normal and expected.

Once accustomed to basic differences such as the lack of public smiling and eye contact, the uncomfortable feeling of people standing by American students too close in a line, and the seemingly stern, constantly unhappy tone of voice of all employees of every type of store, one is able to look at the bigger picture and realize that Russia is a very stable, practical country. There are very few homeless people on the streets, public transportation both within and between major cities runs with an incredible efficiency,

and there is a plethora of cafes and stores open for business, indicating perhaps that the economy and job market are evidently at a comfortable level.

One very interesting outlet of the Russian culture is the emphasis on and respect for the musical and performing arts, local history, and religious history. Nearly every weekend of my stay in Russia and often many afternoons throughout the week, either my Russian host mother or my resident coordinator would have some sort of museum or event for my friends and I to attend concerning the culture of Russia both locally and nationally. I would say that this is a drastic difference between the United States and Russia where in the United States, the performing arts such as ballet, opera, theater, and orchestras have been classified as a past-time of the older, retired population, and even then, not nearly as popular as one would realize in Russia. Concerning cultural and religious history, nearly every Russian town has a monastery or church that is open to the public for tours. In addition, there are many museums dedicated to the preservation of the art of iconography – the pictures of earthly and heavenly saints that are an aide in worship in the Eastern Orthodox religion. Of course, an obvious reason for at least a part of this difference is the age of buildings in Russia compared to the age of buildings in the U.S.

A major portion of my deeper understanding of the Russian people came from the conversations I had with my Russian host mom, Natalia Vasilovna. At the time when I was staying at her residence in Russia, she was 60 years old and retired from her job at a factory where VCRs and DVD players were manufactured. Natalia grew up in the Soviet Union until it was officially dissolved in 1991 and was an incredibly cultured woman and knew much about many cultures through the art, music and movies of the respective

nations. During my first few days of staying in her apartment, I was fed not only large portions of food, but multiple courses of food. While at first I thought this might be simply because I was a foreign guest, I realized later that it was simply the fact that Russian women are used to cooking for many people whether it be family or guests and therefore make large portions. One very motherly aspect of her cooking was the fact that she had a home-remedy for nearly everything - stomach ache, headache, cold, fatigue – and always made sure that I had some sort of fruit to take with me to school everyday.

During the times that we would sit and eat together, though she rarely actually ate at the same time I did, she would tell me many stories about herself and her family or about what theater shows or orchestras would be coming to town soon. During one of these conversations, she shared with me what I understood to be a more sensitive part of her life. Natalia explained how in the Soviet Union, the communist government had promised the people financial security and a future that was full of prosperity for all, and that now, one of the hardest parts of her life was living with the fact that this promise was never kept. In fact, according to Natalia, most retired citizens in the Russian Federation today are forced to retire at a certain age and are told by the government how much they will receive for their monthly pension. Natalia explained how most of her pension goes to paying for the apartment in which she lives (in which 3 families had lived during the Soviet Union) and what little she has left after utilities she saves for orchestral concerts and opera-films at the theater. While I am sure that her motivation for housing foreign students was out of her love for other cultures, it may also have been due to the fact that she was compensated every week with money for food and housing on my behalf.

One other event that occurred during my stay with Natalia was the death of her mother. As I spoke with my mother via Skype one night and told her of what had happened, my mother said that I should make every effort to go to the funeral in support of my host mother. I had already discussed such a possibility with my resident coordinator because I had no idea how such matters were handled in Russia and it was then that she explained to me that there would not be a formal funeral as we are accustomed to in the United States and that only the very wealthy could afford something similar to the ceremonies in the U.S. The funeral would consist of a burial with only close friends and then Natalia would go to one of the local churches to pray on the appropriate days after her mother's passing. This was quite a shock as it was so completely different from anything I had experienced so far. The fact that the procedures following death were so expedited if one could not afford a more extensive ceremony was quite shocking to me.

Natalia Vasilovna is the nicest woman I met while studying abroad and perhaps one of the nicest women I have ever known in my life, but her life was and continues to be one that exists in a time when Russia is still recovering from the lies of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, she demands the most out of her time remaining on earth by continuing to pursue the arts of every culture and enjoying time spent with foreign students and her family. It is her example that was the most eye-opening factor of my entire stay in Russia.

All of these factors exemplify, in my opinion, major parts of Russian culture that are unlike anything we know in America. As Sandra Taylor (2002) noted, it is indeed crucial to experience the Russian culture and atmosphere on a first-hand basis in order to completely understand the people of Russia. I believe that a personal experience or at

least an informed, educated second-hand experience of the Russian people can break down false stereotypes that may have been formed out of hatred or defense.

In addition to what I believe I gleaned personally concerning differences in Russian and American culture while I was in Yaroslavl, I also took the opportunity to ask others questions that might reveal how they viewed the two societies as well. I chose one Russian student and one Russian professor to interview with questions concerning their opinions on a topic and their plans for the future and then completed the same interview with an American student and an American professor in order to compare the answers. All of the interviews were video-recorded.

First, I asked the Russian student and the American student questions concerning money, monetary wealth, and how they would plan to spend \$1 million dollars (roughly 30 million rubles). The Russian student, Ira Sokolova who is studying to be an English teacher, answered that she sees money as necessary to pay the bills. Monetary wealth was of little interest to her and she stated that she was generally indifferent. When asked how she would spend \$1 million, she responded that she would give some to a charity and the rest would be spent on opening a business of her own. The American student Ada Leung, who is studying elementary education, responded similarly to the general question concerning money by saying that she saw it as necessary to pay for life's needs: food, housing, education, family care, etc. but also noted that money can become an object of greed. Concerning monetary wealth, she answered that it can be a good thing as long as someone has worked hard to earn it and she also sees it as an opportunity to use it for one's desires that exist outside of what is necessary for the essentials of life. Last, the American student answered that with \$1 million she would put a large portion into

savings due to her young age and the knowledge that a lot could still happen in her life for which she may need a large sum of money. Another part, she said, would go to her parents to return the favor of having supported her in her young life, and another part would go towards smaller items that she would like to have such as a new computer. Lastly, some portion of her money would go towards a children's charity.

These same questions were asked to a Russian professor and an American professor. The Russian professor Elaine Astahova, a Russian literature and culture professor at Yaroslavl State Pedagogical University, replied to the question on money that she considered money a difficult subject to consider in Russia unless one is working as an entrepreneur, because if one is working in a government-paid position, then it is up to the government to decide how much you will be paid for the work that the individual does. She says that while one may not agree with how little they are paid for their work, one person cannot change that. Overall she says that she does not think about money and that while she can't live without it, she can get by. When asked about wealth, she responded that she thinks it is better to be rich than to be poor, but she does not know how to create wealth. Wealth, in her eyes, is a very responsible position provided that one has the goal of using that wealth to maintain their well-being. According to Mrs. Astahova, she believes that no one should ever live and continue to save, and save, and save their money because it begs the question, "Why?". She thinks that no one should save it for themselves. Mrs. Astahova believes that wealth is not the most important goal in life and that while she has a great respect for those who have managed to become wealthy, it is an extremely difficult thing to accomplish in Russia. Finally, when asked how she would spend \$1 million dollars, she answered that she would put a small amount

away for how the Russians say: a “черный день” (rainy day). The rest she would put towards a home for the elderly. She said that \$1 million would not be nearly enough to build this type of home, but that she would want to do so because of how poorly the elderly in Russia live. Though they are provided with a pension, Mrs. Astahova states, it is very little, and that a house where elderly people could live and be taken care of would make her very happy.

The American professor, Dr. Pam Petty who is a professor of literacy at Western Kentucky University, responded that she believes that money is a great item and that many good things can be accomplished with money. Her personal belief concerning money is that she came into the world with no money and therefore she plans to leave in the same way; therefore she spends money as she receives it. She comments that money, other than that which is given to her as compensation for the work that she does at the university, is “monopoly money – here for a little while and then gone.” Concerning monetary wealth, she considers herself very rich compared to the rest of the world and sees an excess of wealth, such as a \$70,000 dollar car as just something else to have to worry about. Those who are considered wealthy in our country, movie stars and sports players just to name a couple, Dr. Petty believes live lives that are more miserable than enjoyable. When asked how she would spend \$1 million dollars, other than buying a Hummer, Dr. Petty said that she would buy the things that her family and friends felt that they needed for a better quality of life according to them.

I continued the interviews with the professors by asking them what stereotypes they had for the other’s culture and what stereotypes they thought the other culture had for theirs. Regarding stereotypes that she knew Russians had for Americans, Professor

Astahova said that she believed that Americans are very family-oriented people and she noted that this is not the case in Russian where divorce rates are high and, in her opinion, the institution of the family is falling apart. She also said that one stereotype for Americans is that they have very strong aspirations and that one drawback of this quality is that Americans are unable to look away from their goal and will do whatever it takes to reach that goal. Finally she noted that Russians find it very strange that Americans will interact and even smile at each other when they are actually thinking poor thoughts about the other person. She contrasts this behavior to that exhibited in Russia where if two people do not like each other, they simply stay away from each other and would never smile at one another. Then, when asked about what stereotypes she knew or imagined that Americans have for the Russian people she responded that she thinks that Americans are one hundred percent sure that all Russians are alcoholics or at least that many of them drink. She said she could see reason in that assessment and commented on the high death rates that are a result of alcoholism. Other than that, she said that she thinks Americans find Russians to be very strange people and that it must be difficult for the American consciousness to comprehend the Russian character. She says she often hears talk of the “enigmatic Russian soul” during her classes with foreign and mainly American students.

Dr. Petty was also asked what stereotypes she knew of or had for the Russian people. She said that from what she had been able to observe, the Russian people seemed to be a much more serious people in all aspects and that they most likely see us a very wasteful people. She also said that she has never heard of any child abuse or any form of neglect to their elderly, and therefore she imagines that they are very good humanitarians that put more focus on the group as a whole rather than the individual. Finally she

thought of the Russian people as being a very hard-working people for which she had a high respect. Then, when asked how she imagines the Russian people view us and what stereotypes they have for us, she responded that she believes they probably view us as a very vane, rude nation that lacks deep values and puts ourselves first and everyone else next.

Finally, I was able to interview Natalia Pervukhin, a Russian culture, language, and literature professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Dr. Pervukhin was born and educated in the Soviet Union and then came over to the United States in order to find work as a teacher. I asked Dr. Pervukhin what major social differences she noticed between her time in Russia and her time in the U.S. She said that while she did not know the social environment of contemporary Russia, she has noticed that at least in the time that she was in Russia, friendships between similarly-minded people were of greater value than they are in America. She said that this was mostly due to the fact that the friendship in Soviet Russia were established early on and carried out throughout the life. She said that in contrast, in America everyone seems to be more family-oriented where the emphasis is put on one's wife and kids rather than friends. She also noted that one major difference that she had noticed on an educational level is the lack of knowledge that Americans possess of outside cultures. In Russia, she says, even those that did not have the best education had a basic, general knowledge of other cultures and world famous authors, actors, musicians and painters, whereas here in America, many Americans do not even know the names of their native authors and painters. I then asked Dr. Perukhin what she thought of money and how she would spend \$1 million. She responded by saying that she loved money, but unfortunately the feeling was not

reciprocated and that she would spend the \$1 million on very practical matters such as paying off her daughter's loans, her own mortgage, and the rest on travelling. When asked what stereotypes she had heard that Americans have for Russians, she said that she knew that Americans assume Russians drink a lot of vodka, that they are glum and boring and are generally very unhappy. To the question concerning what stereotypes she believed Russians to have about Americans, she responded that she thinks they probably think Americans are uncultured, naïve, and rich. Finally I asked her if there were any aspects of the American culture that she still found surprising today. She said that the honesty and politeness with which Americans conduct their daily lives is still impressive to her. Lastly, she said that there was an undeniable element of hypocrisy in American culture in that there seem to be prefabricated sentences that people use when they meet new people and that it takes quite a bit of time to form closer relationships with people because of these barriers that are put up in an attempt to protect one's self.

When evaluating the responses of those interviewed concerning money, wealth and how one would spend \$1 million dollars, first we see the similarities across both nations of how the \$1 million would be spent on practical, philanthropic matters rather than wasted on more materialistic items. On the general topic of money, we can see that money is widely seen as a necessity that is present to allow one to make it through life without any daily pains. Wealth was generally considered something that must be earned and yet then something that would be a burden to maintain and hard to enjoy.

On the topic of stereotypes, I think it is most interesting to note how those interviewed had many of the same stereotypes for the opposite culture. The idea that the other country was very family-oriented was expressed on both sides as was the idea that

both cultures were very hard-working and goal oriented. Perhaps the largest differences were those concerning the existence of the problem with alcohol consumption, and the respective focuses of the individual in America and the group as a whole in Russia.

Correcting Stereotypes

As is evident from the research and from the interviews, stereotypes both positive and negative exist. All of the individuals I interviewed I know as being very educated, cultured individuals, but even they had a knowledge of stereotypes for the Russian culture and stereotypes that the Russians most likely have for the American culture. While education and a general knowledge of foreign cultures can be beneficial to an individual, it is not a means to an end of false stereotypes.

Cross-cultural training has been researched and found to be an effective way to correct any falsely applied ideas of characteristics of an individual from a different culture. This training involves the interaction of two or more people from different cultures in an attempt to disassemble any stereotypes or misunderstandings that will eventually lead to a wider, more well-rounded understanding of the world and of other specific people groups. The training ultimately allows people to attain an understanding as to why people of a certain culture act, think and feel the way they do about the world around them (Black & Mendenhall, 1990).

Other research suggests that in some situations, an individual or group assessing another individual or group of people with the use of stereotypes only can be to their disadvantage. In these situations, humans should be able to utilize a process known as “individuation” in which one is able to look past the stereotypes and attempt to become

more informed and properly educated on the target culture in order to make a more accurate assessment (Yeung & Kashima 2010).

Suggestions for Further Research

After searching and reading multiple research articles on stereotypes and, more specifically, stereotypes regarding Russians, I have found in the resources available to me that there is virtually no recent research on the current interpretations of the Russian culture from Americans and the American culture as seen by the Russian people. In order to have a more substantial understanding of the tensions that exist between these two nations, a more accurate and detailed study of cultural interpretations and stereotypes would need to be conducted. With this information, one would then be able to educate the general public or even government workers in the hopes that any past tensions that may still have a negative presence in negotiations today would be able to be resolved.

Throughout the experiences of both studying abroad and performing research on stereotypes, I have found that the existence of stereotypes is more present than most people are perhaps willing to admit. Stereotypes are used on a day-to-day basis and are constantly called upon within our reasoning when we view the news and hear of the issues that exist in other cultures. There was one concept throughout the research that I found to be incredibly accurate through my personal studies, and I would venture to guess is still a strong driving force for stereotypes today, and that is the idea of personal, social safety. The research presented by Yeung and Kashima (2010) spoke of the primordial need to constantly evaluate those with which we come in contact in order to recognize them as a friend or foe. I believe that this is still very much present though

manifested in a social way in which we evaluate other people groups and cultures based on the way they may or may not affect us socially and politically and as a result, if they are found to be possibly dangerous, we justify this assessment by using stereotypes and falsely fabricated ideas about others in order to achieve this type of safety.

This idea is most likely not one that is evident if an effort to uncover this biased behavior is ever sought. I must admit that only because of my international travel and this research project have I been able to reevaluate some previous stigmas that I had for other cultures and people. I find this to be a considerable flaw in the human existence and hope that one day, approaches such as cross-cultural training can be widely implemented to combat such behavior.

Ignorance is the key to keeping stereotypes alive and mobile. Knowledge is the key to unlocking these stereotypes and moving on to a time in which the United States and the Russian Federation are able to cooperate and work together in bringing a more widespread peace to this world.

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Translated Transcriptions for Russian portions of interviews:

Ira Sokolova

What do you think about money?

- I will say this: money is necessary to pay the bills.

What do you think about wealth?

- I am indifferent to this. That is, for me, I am not very interested in being wealthy.

If you had \$1 million, how would you spend it?

- I think that right now I would give a part of it to charity who needs it. And the other part, I would spend on opening a business.

Elaine Astahova

What do you think about money?

- It is hard to think about money in Russia, because if you don't study business, money is a problem, because if you work for the government, then you only receive what the government thinks is necessary to pay you for your work. Another thing is you may not agree with the fact that such a small sum is adequate for the work that you do. But that's how it is, and one person cannot change that situation. But overall, I go without thinking about money. I can live - without money, no. But, no matter what you think about money, I can get by.

What do you think about wealth?

- I think it is better to be rich than to be poor. I do not know how to create wealth. And I think that being rich is very responsible, provided that you have the goal of maintaining your welfare, except that you must be very smart to maintain well-being. One should never spend all their time living and save, and save, and save money because there is the question "for what?" One should never save it for themselves. It seems to me that this is generally not the most important goal in human life - there are others. Although I have a great respect for people who have managed to do it - but in Russia it is very difficult.

If you had \$1 million how would you spend it?

- In general, I have no idea what this amount of money looks like. But, I have two answers, and both are sincere. I do not have a treasure pot. I live only on state money - this is my salary. The bulk, I would keep lying away to use, as the Russians say, "on a rainy day." I have a sick mother, and it would be helpful. But I think that thirty million is not for that. I would very much like just one for that use. The rest, well, I've got a pain - it's the Russian elderly. They live poorly. I do not know how the elderly live in America, but in Russia they live poorly. The President of course provides a pension but it is very small. Although, my mother's pension is more than my salary, even with the calculation using my American salary. But it is still microscopic - it is not a very big amount. But, I think that we are dreaming, right? We are dreaming - it is a question for the dreamer. I think that this is not enough to build a house for elderly people. Of course all the elderly people will not fit in this house but maybe someone - maybe five or ten or fifteen people. If this were possible, I would be happy. Out elderly are a completely different subject. We do not need to pity them, we need to help them.

What stereotypes have you heard about Americans, and what stereotypes do you think Americans have for Russians?

- I think that Americans are 100% sure that Russians are alcoholics or at least that many people in Russia drink. I think that there is reason for that. We have a lot of death from alcoholism. It seems to me that the government has not really thought about how to solve this very large problem, because we are already growing into a generation of kids of alcoholics and that is scary. What else? I think that Americans think that Russian are strange people. It is difficult for the average American consciousness to take in. The phrase "enigmatic Russian soul" is very often heard in when I am in class with American students. I think that in the end, Americans generally relate well to Russians. But if an American were to evaluate a Russian, it would be only from the reports in the news and on television.
- Americans are very family-oriented people. That's what I think from my own information and that's how many Russian think, that American's are very focused on their family, but in Russia is not exactly the same. I wish that it were that way, but unfortunately we have a high percentage of divorce. And it seems to me that the institution of the family is falling apart. What else? Americans are very aspiring people and that aspiration will be seen through until the end and that is what very strongly distinguishes them from Russian, but there is a small minus to this overall positive aspect. Russians think that they will not look to the side when they are focused on their goal. I don't know if it is that way or not, but that kind of stereotype in Russia exists.
- And of course, to compare the two cultures, two absolutely different cultures: the collective Russian culture and the individualistic American culture, we can probably find many stereotypes. Yes, Russians think it is strange that Americans can smile at one another and yet think of each other poorly – that

seems strange, because in Russia it is a different situation, because if they think poorly of each other then they will never closely associate with them and they will never smile at them. But this is just something that is out of tradition and nothing more.