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## A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF AMERICAN AND RUSSIAN PROPRIETIES IN COMMUNICATION\*

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An examination of eleven intercultural textbooks, used in the field of communication in America, reveals little research comparing Russian and American proprieties in communication (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Dodd, 1998; Jandt, 2004a; Jandt, 2004b; Kelly, Laffoon & McKerrow, 1994; Lustig & Koester, 1996; Martin & Nakayama, 2004; Martin & Nakayama, 2005; Martin, Nakayama & Flores, 2002; Samovar & Porter, 2003; Samovar & Porter, 2001). In order to investigate the similarities and differences (S/D) of the two countries, an instrument was developed containing questions dealing with proprieties and customs appropriate in both cultural settings. In order to maintain language integrity, the 29-item instrument was administered to English speaking students with: 1) no direct exposure to the Russian culture, or 2) direct exposure to the Russian culture. The results suggest proprieties in American and Russian society are more similar than difference in the majority of areas investigated in this research. However, there was a substantial difference between the two cultures in the following four areas: a) Russians are less likely than Americans to discuss their ethnicity in public situations; b) Russians are more polite than Americans in social situations; c) Russians feel more comfortable than Americans about speaking their minds in public situations; d) Russians are more honest when expressing opinions than their American counterparts.

**Key words:** Communications behaviour, proprieties in communication, speech strategies.

### INTRODUCTION

Intercultural textbooks, currently used by educators in college classrooms in America, discuss a variety of aspects dealing with communication among international cultures as well as communication among co-cultures in the United States. Each text discusses a large gamut of information ranging from topics dealing with the rationale for studying intercultural communication, world view, family issues, values and perceptions, verbal and nonverbal interaction, educational and business situations as it relates to a variety of countries around the world. Although the authors successfully discuss several major countries throughout the world, it is blatantly obvious that discussions concerning Russian customs and proprieties are missing from the majority of the textbooks.

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## RATIONAL

Few intercultural textbooks refer to the Russian culture. Six of the eleven intercultural textbooks examined in this study (Dodd, 1998; Jandt, 2004b; Kelly, et al, 1994; Martin, et al, 2002; Samovar & Porter, 2003; Samovar & Porter, 2001) did not address Russian culture. Three of the remaining five books (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 1996; Martin & Nakayama, 2005), dedicate one or two sentences to information concerning Russia. Jandt (2004a), in the textbook, *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication: Identities in a Global Community*, dedicates a little over one page to a discussion of the history of Russia. Martin & Nakayama (2004), in the text, *Intercultural Communication in Context*, allocate the greatest number of references pertaining to Russia culture found in the textbooks investigated in this research. The authors' include a one-half page story, written by a Russian student, plus three sentences pertaining to the following categories: romantic relationships, social conflict and Russian history. There are also two, one-sentence, references to the Soviet Union in their text. This research examines the similarities and differences of the Russian and American cultures to enhance cross-cultural understanding of the proprieties of each culture.

## METHODOLOGY

A two-step process was used in the development of the questionnaire: 1) A focus group consisting of 10 Russians and 10 Americans contributed general observations of communication styles and customs of each culture; 2) A list of questions was developed based on a content analysis of the conversation gathered from the focus group.

The 29-item questionnaire consists of four categories: I.) Borders of Curiosity with Strangers; II.) Social Gatherings of Acquaintances; III.) Age and Gender Communication in Social Settings with Acquaintances; IV.) Manners/Etiquette between Strangers in Social Settings.(See Appendix A).

In order to maintain language integrity of the instrument, the 29-item instrument was administered to English speaking students with: 1) No direct exposure to the Russian culture, or 2) Direct exposure to the Russian culture. The instrument was administered to 67 American students at a large southeastern college. The qualifying criteria — the respondents spoke English and were raised by American parents who spoke English. They also did not have direct exposure to the Russian culture. Thirty-nine students, at a large western university, met the criteria of having direct exposure to the Russian culture. E.g.) English speaking, born in Russia, raised by parents who spoke Russian thus giving them direct exposure to the Russian culture. A total of 106 university students completed the instrument.

## RESULTS

The data were analyzed using Pearson Chi-Square analyses. A total of 106 surveys were analyzed (39 respondents had direct contact with the Russian culture and 67 respondents had no contact with Russian culture). A two-tail analysis, at the .01 level of significance, suggests that American and Russian cultures are more similar than different in the majority of areas investigated in this research. In the first category, "Borders of Curiosity with Strangers", students reported similar responses for Russian and American cultures. However, the questions pertaining to ethnicity suggest a difference between the two cultures. The difference is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

**Borders of Curiosity with Strangers in Social Settings**

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Question acceptable in U.S.: Where family name comes from	Yes	Count	57	19	76
		% within Country	85.1%	50.0%	72.4%
	No	Count	10	19	29
		% within Country	14.9%	50.0%	27.6%
Total		Count	67	38	105
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Question acceptable in U.S.: Where accent comes from	Yes	Count	57	21	78
		% within Country	85.1%	55.3%	74.3%
	No	Count	10	17	27
		% within Country	14.9%	44.7%	25.7%
Total		Count	67	38	105
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In the category “Social Gathering of Acquaintances”, students reported a significant difference between the two cultures in the majority (5 out of 7) of questions as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

**Social Gatherings of Acquaintances**

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Situation acceptable/preferred in U.S.: guest offer to help host	Yes	Count	65	30	95
		% within Country	97.0%	76.9%	89.6%
	No	Count	2	9	11
		% within Country	3.0%	23.1%	10.4%
Total		Count	67	39	106
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Situation acceptable/preferred in U.S.: guest explain why leaving party	Yes	Count	26	34	60
		% within Country	40.0%	87.2%	57.7%
	No	Count	39	5	44
		% within Country	60.0%	12.8%	42.3%
Total		Count	65	39	104
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

End of Table 2

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Situation acceptable/preferred in U.S.: guest expected to bring gift	Yes	Count	24	31	55
		% within Country	35.8%	81.6%	52.4%
	No	Count	43	7	50
		% within Country	64.2%	18.4%	47.6%
Total		Count	67	38	105
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Situation acceptable/preferred in U.S.: host repeatedly offer food/drink	Yes	Count	27	31	58
		% within Country	40.3%	79.5%	54.7%
	No	Count	40	8	48
		% within Country	59.7%	20.5%	45.3%
Total		Count	67	39	106
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Situation acceptable/preferred in U.S.: explanation necessary when refusing food/drink	Yes	Count	8	28	36
		% within Country	11.9%	73.7%	34.3%
	No	Count	59	10	69
		% within Country	88.1%	26.3%	65.7%
Total		Count	67	38	105
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 3 illustrates the one question the respondents reported a significant difference in the category, “Age and Gender Communication in a Social Setting with Acquaintances”.

Table 3

**Age and Gender Communication in a Social Setting with Acquaintances**

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Situation common in U.S.: use slang with older person	Yes	Count	29	5	34
		% within Country	43.9%	12.8%	32.4
	No	Count	37	34	71
		% within Country	56.1%	87.2%	67.6%
Total		Count	66	39	105
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The following responses, reported in Table 4, illustrate the significant differences in the “Manners/Etiquette” category.

Table 4

**Manners/Etiquette between Strangers**

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Acceptable communication in the U.S.: reprimand someone you do not know	Yes	Count	6	21	27
		% within Country	9.4%	55.3%	26.5
	No	Count	58	17	75
		% within Country	90.6%	44.7%	73.5%
Total		Count	64	38	102
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Acceptable communication in the U.S.: give advice before being asked	Yes	Count	16	24	40
		% within Country	23.9%	61.5%	37.7%
	No	Count	51	15	66
		% within Country	76.1%	38.5%	62.3%
Total		Count	67	39	106
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Acceptable communication in the U.S.: complain about your life around strangers	Yes	Count	5	23	28
		% within Country	7.6%	59.0%	26.7%
	No	Count	61	16	77
		% within Country	92.4%	41.0%	73.3%
Total		Count	66	39	105
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Acceptable communication in the U.S.: share personal information with strangers	Yes	Count	7	15	22
		% within Country	10.8%	38.5%	21.2%
	No	Count	58	24	82
		% within Country	89.2%	61.5%	78.8%
Total		Count	65	39	104
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Crosstab**

			Country		Total
			NonRussia	Russia	
Acceptable communication in the U.S.: express an honest opinion about clothing/hair	Yes	Count	31	27	58
		% within Country	47.0%	73.0%	56.3%
	No	Count	35	10	45
		% within Country	53.0%	27.0%	43.7%
Total		Count	66	37	103
		% within Country	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

## CONCLUSION

A content analysis of the Intercultural textbooks, currently used by instructors in the field of communication, suggest authors are dedicating little space to topics related to the people and culture of Russia. This study was conducted to investigate the similarities and differences of Russian and American cultures to enhance pedagogical research and cross cultural understanding. The proprieties in American and Russian societies were found to be more similar than different in the majority of areas investigated in this research. However, there is a substantial difference between the two cultures in following four areas: a) Russians are less likely than Americans to discuss their ethnicity in public situations; b) Russians are more polite than Americans in social situations; c) Russians feel more comfortable than Americans about speaking their minds in public situations; d) Russians are more honest when expressing opinions than are their American counterparts.

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## ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЯ ОБ УМЕСТНОСТИ И ПРИЛИЧИЯХ В КОММУНИКАЦИИ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ПОВЕДЕНИЯ АМЕРИКАНЦЕВ И РУССКИХ

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Цель данного исследования — выявление сходств и различий в коммуникативном поведении американцев и русских. Как показал анализ 11 учебных пособий в области межкультурной коммуникации, предпочтения американцев и русских с точки зрения уместности и социальных приличий изучены в американской коммуникативистике явно недостаточно (Chen&Starosta, 1998; Dodd, 1998; Jandt, 2004a; Jandt, 2004b; Kelly, Laffoon&McKerrow, 1994; Lustig&Koester, 1996; Martin&Nakayama, 2004; Martin&Nakayama, 2005; Martin, Nakayama&Flores, 2002; Samovar&Porter, 2003; Samovar&Porter, 2001). В целях исследования сходств и различий коммуникативного поведения представителей двух стран был разработан вопросник, касающийся привычек речевого поведения в обеих культурах. Для установления «лингвистической прямоты и искренности» англоговорящим студентам, имеющим либо не имеющим непосредственных контактов с русской культурой, предлагалось ответить на 29 вопросов. Как показало исследование, в большинстве сфер, включенных в опрос, сходств в коммуникативном поведении представителей двух культур больше, чем различий. В то же время существенные различия обнаружены в 4-х сферах: а) русские менее, чем американцы, склонны обсуждать свою национальность; б) русские более вежливы в публичном общении; в) русские более склонны обсуждать свои личные проблемы с незнакомыми; г) русские более искренни в выражении своего мнения; чем американцы.

**Ключевые слова:** коммуникативное поведение, коммуникативная уместность, речевые стратегии.

### **Appendix A** **Instrument**

#### **COMMUNICATION STYLES SURVEY**

Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? Female Male

Age group under 21 22—35 36—50  
over 50

In general, what interpersonal communication styles do you experience or observe in **social situations**? Comment in general terms — not what **you** would specifically do in each situation.

Circle **YES** or **NO**

**I. BORDERS OF CURIOSITY WITH STRANGERS in a social settings.**

Are the following questions acceptable in \_\_\_\_\_ culture?

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. How much did you pay for your house?   | Yes | No |
| 2. Do you have a college degree?          | Yes | No |
| 3. Are you married?                       | Yes | No |
| 4. Do you have any children?              | Yes | No |
| 5. Are you planning to have children?     | Yes | No |
| 6. How old are you?                       | Yes | No |
| 7. Where does your family name come from? | Yes | No |
| 8. What is your religion?                 | Yes | No |
| 9. Where does your accent come from?      | Yes | No |

**II. SOCIAL GATHERINGS OF ACQUAINTANCES**

Are these situations acceptable/preferred in \_\_\_\_\_ culture?

- |  |     |    |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Is it acceptable to ask a person to bring food or drink when inviting him/her to a party? | Yes | No |
| 2. Should a guest offer to help the host/hostess?  | Yes | No |
| 3. Should a guest explain his/her reasons for leaving a party?                               | Yes | No |
| 4. Is a guest expected to bring a gift (candy, wine, etc.) for the host/hostess?             | Yes | No |
| 5. Is it expected of the host/hostess to repeatedly offer food or drink to the guests?       | Yes | No |
| 6. Should guests apologize for arriving late at a party?                                     | Yes | No |
| 7. Are explanations necessary when refusing food or drink?                                   | Yes | No |

**III. AGE and GENDER COMMUNICATION  
in a social setting with ACQUAINTANCES.**

Are these situations common in \_\_\_\_\_ culture?

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Is it acceptable to use slang /jargon (“you guys”, “cool”) in a conversation with a person who is obviously older? | Yes | No |
| 2. Is it acceptable to use mild profanity (“shit”, “damn”) when speaking to a person obviously older?                 | Yes | No |



- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 3. Is it appropriate to use mild profanity to a person of the opposite gender?  | Yes | No |
| 4. When members of the opposite sex are present, is it appropriate to announce the need to use the restroom in an explicit manner? (eg., "I am going to pee.")          | Yes | No |
| 5. When members of the opposite sex are present, is it appropriate for a female to discuss specific female topics? (eg., feminine hygiene products, physical problems). | Yes | No |

**IV. MANNERS/ETTIQUETTE BETWEEN STRANGERS  
IN A SOCIAL SETTINGS.**

Is it acceptable communication in \_\_\_\_\_ culture to

- |  |     |    |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. compliment the opposite gender on what they are wearing?  | Yes | No |
| 2. initiate conversation with a person in a public place?  | Yes | No |
| 3. speak to a child you do not know?   | Yes | No |
| 4. reprimand someone you do not know?  | Yes | No |
| 5. give advice to before asked? (eg., In a fitting room at a department store.)                    | Yes | No |
| 6. complain about your life at social gathering of strangers?                                      | Yes | No |
| 7. share personal information with stranger? (eg., "My husband is abusive to me and our children.) | Yes | No |
| 8. express an honest (negative) opinion when asked about a new item of clothing or hair cut?       | Yes | No |