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What Do We Think about Them? Stereotypes in Russia about U.S. High Schools.

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What do we think about them?
Stereotypes in Russia about U.S. high schools.

Master's project
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Introduction

End of May, 1995. I do not remember now the exact date but I do have a vivid memory of the events of that day. It was the Commencement day at Dartmouth College, NH, but it was more than just a regular commencement because of the special guest speaker who drew crowds and crowds of people from little New Hampshire and Vermont towns along the Connecticut River. The event did not start until nine in the morning. Nevertheless, the stadium seemed to have gathered half the population of the two states by seven.

At that time I was an exchange student living with an American family in Thetford, VT and I was more than excited that morning as I was about to see and hear William Jefferson Clinton deliver his commencement speech. I knew we had the best seats possible, very close to the stage and my breath indeed was taken away when the President walked along the aisle, up to the stage only a few steps away from where we were seated. I was enchanted by his personality; he was my hero at that time. Surreptitiously I envied those lucky Dartmouth graduates who were about to shake the President's hand as he granted them their diplomas. So there I was, listening intently to every word coming from him when suddenly I heard his voice rise triumphantly over the stadium, "Education in the US is the best in the world..." I know people were applauding but all I could hear was silence. For a moment, I was paralyzed. Just recently, my American brother and I had been arguing about which education was the best. Now he is tapping me on the shoulder and whispering, "You see, I was right because the President is saying the same". I understood perfectly well that Clinton was saying it because of the occasion and because many people present at the ceremony, as well as those across the US, wanted to hear it. Somehow, I took it personally and felt I was insulted.

Why did this issue bother me so much in the first place? Was it the fact that he might have been right? Was it because I had been raised with the idea that education in my country was the best and now somebody was stepping on this long-held dear belief of mine? It was as if somebody was lifting the veil from my face and suddenly my eyes could see more; they could see that my belief was by far not the only Truth. The world was inhabited with multiple Truths held by people in veils, people who knew little about other Truths.

The danger lies not in that there is this multitude of Truths but in that they block people's minds on their way to learning about and understanding Truths of other people. More than that, Truths are not simple facts; they bare some value assigned to them, making one Truth look good (or the best) while denigrating all the others. This denigration is not expressed verbally; rather it is a subtle part of the Truth that can be easily inferred: education in the US is the best => all other educational systems are not that good (are worse). Furthermore, details are left out from such statements. The Truth creates a holistic picture around a certain idea but many objects, ideas, situations can be dissected either physically or mentally into smaller units. For instance, what do we mean (what did Clinton mean) by saying that education is the best? Do we mean higher education? If yes, then are we talking about natural sciences, humanities...? In other words, the Truth makes a complicated issue or idea look simple.

Looking back at that May day, I realize that I was trapped by the 'better' – 'worse' dichotomy that made evaluating education a bipolar simple judgment which it is not. I did not see that education, be it in Russia or in the USA, is a patchwork quilt with many little pieces that come together to form a beautiful work of art that cannot be better or worse; it is just different from any other quilt. We can look at them, compare different pieces, and, yes, each

of us can judge for himself or herself which one we admire more but our opinions will vary as different piece will find their path into our heart.

End of October, 2000. I am flying to Yekaterinburg, a 1.3 million city in the Ural Mountains of Russia, to attend a conference “Education at the turn of centuries and continents”. The conference is organized by alumni of different US exchange programs and sponsored by US Department of State. I expect to see a lot of educators who have studied in the US there and it turns out just as that – most participants have gone on various educational programs to the US. On the second day of the conference, I am making my presentation on freedom of choice in Russian and American schools. In conclusion, I am presenting a model that draws upon both systems and allows to integrate certain beneficial features into one prototypical school. I am trying to show that there are good things in both systems. The session is over. Two women are coming up to me and one of them, who, as I find out later, has gone to the US on a ten-day training, starts off by saying that American schools are so much worse than Russian schools. How do you know? Everybody knows; they don’t know how to teach over there. Then she refers to some research that found that US high school graduates’ level corresponds to a Russian average 7th grader, and she goes on and on talking. Soon she leaves American schools behind and plunges into a related “Truth” topic of how education in Russia is certainly the best. I feel like interrupting her never-ending panegyric, and when I manage to find a single pause in her speech, I say that I studied in high school in America and I think it is a good school, not worse than my school in Russia. “Do you actually mean to say you learned something there?” “Of course, I did,” I reply. The look I receive from her can mean only two things: either I am lying or I am so stupid that even “a bad American school” was good enough for me. Surprisingly or not, I feel insulted again.

Now for several years since my return from the US, I have heard many people ask me the same question over and over again, “Did you learn anything new there?” Hardly ever did they expect me to answer that question as they were sure they knew the answer themselves. Rather it was asked to confirm their long-preserved fixed opinion on the topic. What is it, a national obsession with being the best all the time? How and why has it developed? Is the situation changing with the younger generation of high school students? What do they think about American schools? What influences their opinion? These are the questions I will be trying to answer here.

Even though this research topic developed out of my personal experience and I am very passionate about it, the research done for this project is based on experiences of other people, those who have studied in American high schools and those who have never been in the US. With the exception of the first two introductory examples, I will be trying to avoid my encounters with stereotypical thinking about US education. Instead, I will be relying heavily on personal interviews with the participants of my study as well as on surveys conducted with Russian teenagers and newspaper articles featuring US education. While this is done to eliminate any possible bias, I realize that since the topic is so much a part of my daily life, it is impossible to avoid subjectivity altogether.

The strong desire to explore the topic will inevitably make me a participant of the study. In fact, subjectivity is present at every stage of researcher’s work and there is nothing malevolent about that insofar as we learn to understand our subjectivity. The initial hypothesis we make is influenced by who we are. Every sentence and every word that we write bears the mark of our identity. Quotations and references we choose to make reflect our knowledge that was shaped by the type of education we have received. This list can go on forever. Very often we associate in our minds researchers, writers, artists and their work.

Somehow there exists a bond, and as Lous Heshusius argues, the deeper this “level of kinship”, the stronger the passion for what you are doing, the more fruitful and truly rewarding the results of your research are. We must be “enchanted” with what we are doing (Heshusius, pp. 16-19). Besides, it is important to show how the researcher is related to his/her work so that the reader could understand better the voice of the researcher, can distinguish it from the voices of other participants and make his/her interpretations of the topic presented more easily. The first two examples served this purpose: I wanted to show not only what the research questions were but also where I stood in relation to those questions.

The study is not based solely on my personal interest in the topic. It is meant to be of practical use for various groups of people. There is not enough research done on the issue of stereotyping American society in post-Soviet countries, while such research would be valuable for different purposes. First of all, it could be applied in creating and organizing orientation programs for exchange students going to the US. It is true that some programs do mention common ‘myths’ about American education but this information is rather scarce and oftentimes students come unprepared for their new experience and try to survive through their school life based on what they hold as true about American education. It is important not only to list common stereotypes but to understand why they were developed and how we can help these students be more flexible and see beyond these stereotypes.

Furthermore, the number of Russian-speaking families coming to live in the United States, either as immigrants or temporarily, continues to grow. Compared to exchange students, who go to live and study in the US because of their interest in the country, immigrant children have even less knowledge about American schools and are less aware of what to expect. I argue that problems they encounter in schools are very often due to the lack of information about the educational system in the US. Very often the only sources of

information they have are American TV shows portraying school life and occasional newspaper articles which do little in breaking the formed stereotypes. This study could give immigrant children and their parents an opportunity to familiarize themselves with a wider array of opinions concerning American schools, especially since the study is based in part on interviews of those who have experienced American school life for themselves.

Finally, the study can be of general interest to educators working with international students from different countries and for people who go on to study or teach in a foreign country. Stereotyping in different forms exists in all societies and, as it to a certain degree influences people's behavior, we need to learn to understand and accept stereotypes to survive in a culture different from our own.

Literature review

Before engaging in the analysis of a particular set of stereotypes held by Russian people in regards to American education, it is necessary to make clear what a stereotype is. It is quite common for people to take for granted the meanings of words that have entered their everyday vocabulary. Complicated abstract concepts are easily simplified in oral communication. Words we have used and heard over and over again quickly become too familiar for us to bother about definitions ascribed to them. Indeed, it would be cumbersome to extrapolate every term's definition in the course of communication. As a rule, we readily assume that our interlocutor shares with us the understanding of the word we are using.

Stereotype and stereotyping comprise the words that have long ago stepped over the border of scientific discourse and are widely used among laymen. Myriads of other terms related to stereotype are often brought into conversation as well. The concepts of prejudice, bias, discrimination, and attitude are often used in place of or along with that of the stereotype which makes it important to define this term.

However, as soon as we leave the realm of everyday discourse and try to give as much a scientific definition as possible, we encounter the real complexity of this word's meaning. In fact, there are too many definitions that differ from each other and at times contradict each other. Even when comparing definitions taken from two different dictionaries of the English language, we will be faced with a conspicuous disparity between them. Thus, Longman dictionary of contemporary English defines the concept of stereotype as "a fixed idea or image of what a particular type of person or thing is like", while according to Webster's dictionary a stereotype is "a fixed or conventional notion or conception, as of a person, group, idea, etc., held by a number of people, and allowing for no individuality, critical judgment". Quite obviously the second definition incorporates the first and at the same time adds on a new attribute of 'being shared by many people'. Is this an important characteristic of a stereotype? Does an idea have to be shared by a group of people to be called a stereotype or can a stereotype exist at an individual level? A simple reference to two dictionary definitions shows the controversy around the concept of stereotype.

When we plunge into social sciences (primarily, social psychology) that deal with this concept, we will encounter a web of definitions and theories explaining why's and how's of stereotypes. I do not claim to compare the theories and choose the true one, nor do I attempt to build my own theory here. The goal is rather to look carefully at a variety of existing theories and the theoretical framework which would allow me to interpret and analyze the data of my research project. While it is desirable that one theoretical framework be the essence of the study, I do not exclude the possibility of combining ideas belonging to different approaches.

When talking about stereotypes, social science theories are attempting to answer the following questions:

- What is a stereotype?
- Why do we have stereotypes? Or why do we need them?
- How do we acquire them?
- Is it possible to change our mentality? Is it possible to get rid of some stereotypes and if yes, then how?

Some approaches deal with all of these questions while others concentrate particularly on one or two. However, it is difficult to answer the why and how questions if the first one of ‘what’ is not explained. In fact, the response to the latter ones will very often depend on the answer to the first question.

What is a stereotype?

Fortunately, it is possible to trace back the origin of the word stereotype and see how the first researchers defined the term. Unlike many long-used words, its history has no white spots and we can travel back there and see how it all started. American journalist Walter Lippmann was the first to use the word *stereotype*, not in its original meaning of a printing plate but metaphorically in the sense we use and know it today. In his book “Public Opinion” he introduced the concept, supported it by many everyday life examples, and gave his own explanation as to how stereotypes are formed (Lippmann, 1965). From there the term was quickly picked up and disseminated among social scientists who started to add their own flavor to it.

Originally, for Lippmann stereotypes are maps of the world that people need to guide themselves in the complicated maze of life. People live too far away from each other and have too little time to understand the complexities and to dig out the truth. Still our mind seeks explanations for the unknown and the far-off. That is why “we have to reconstruct it

[the world] on simpler model before we can manage with it. To traverse the world men must have the maps of the world” (Lippmann, 1965, p. 11). According to Lippmann, each of us is a unique observer of the world and since “the role of the observer is always selective and usually creative” (Lippmann, 1922, p. 54), each person paints his or her own picture of the world. There is a great difference between “the scene of action” and the “the human picture of the scene of action” which is fictitious in nature and serves to make the unfamiliar world more comfortable for us to live in. Stereotypes “may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world, to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things” (Lippmann, 1965, p. 63).

Very close to Lippmann’s understanding of stereotypes stands out the perspective adopted by psychologists working under the social cognition framework. In this approach stereotypes are believed to be “a requisite component of ordinary cognitive functioning” (Pickering, 2001, p. 28). Typically people put different objects, ideas into categories, thus generalizing about their nature by eliminating certain attributes and nuances. We tend to think in categories because they help us create order and structure out of chaos. Indeed, categorization can be of great value to us in many situations. For instance, when we see a Volvo, a Ford, or a Mercedes, we know that they belong to the broader category of ‘cars’, so that we do not have to learn from scratch what we are supposed to do with a Ford if we already have some experience of driving a different make of a car.

We place objects into different categories according to different attributes they possess. “A category is an abstract structure of knowledge that groups things that hold together on the basis of coherence” (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 76). If the attributes of the new object match those possessed by the objects already placed in the category, the new object gets accepted into the category as well. Thus, previous knowledge of what constitutes a

category plays a role in categorizing new objects. However, the process can be reversed in that once the new object is recognized as belonging to a particular category, there is a chance that attributes already contained in the category, but not necessarily characteristic of the entering object, are expanded to the object. For instance, for somebody a category of 'being Italian' is based on the fact that a particular person was born in Italy or his/her parents come from Italy. So when such a person is met, s/he is naturally put into the category of 'being Italian'. But it may well be that this category, apart from the essential attribute of 'born in Italy', contains dozens of other attributes such as 'having dark hair', 'talking loudly', or even 'associated with mafia'.

Although the newly categorized Italian may not have any of the above attributes and at the same time possesses hundreds of other features not found in the category, s/he is ascribed these characteristics of what is considered to be a typical Italian by the person who created this category in his/her head. In other words, "over time, people develop beliefs about the characteristics of the important social groups in their environment, and this knowledge influences their responses toward subsequently encountered individual members of those groups" (Stangor, 2000, p. 65).

According to the social cognition approach, this is a process of stereotyping. Stereotypes are nothing more than "mental representations of the world" (Stangor, 2000, p. 65) and because mental processes are happening in the heads of individuals; from this perspective, stereotypes are purely individual. A developed attitude does not have to be shared with many others in order to be called a stereotype.

Adherents of socio-cultural, or sometimes called cultural, perspective take the opposite stand by claiming that the main feature of the stereotype is that it is always shared by groups of people. Stereotypes are viewed as stable images that are shared by large groups

of people and last through time (Leyens et al, 1994, pp. 40 – 44). Authors within this approach are not concerned so much with what is happening inside an individual's mind but rather with the outside factors that create the group-think. They consider "society itself to be the basis of stored knowledge" (Stangor, 2000, p. 68). Thus, every child acquires stereotypical knowledge along with other cultural values and beliefs. Stereotypes are transmitted from generation to generation through different means of communication.

Do we really need cultural consensus to consider a certain attitude to be a stereotype? Studies show that very rarely a certain stereotype is held by the majority in a culture (Schneider, 2004, p. 324). Socio-cultural perspective does not offer us any guiding principles as to what number of people is sufficient to consider a certain attitude a stereotype as it is held a large group of people. Is it enough for something to be a stereotype, if 30% of the population believes in its truth? Or 10% is enough to make the group sufficiently large? It really seems that numbers do not matter because from our experience we somehow know subconsciously that a certain belief is shared by many in our community.

As Schneider points out, stereotypes are often introduced by hedges like "everyone knows that..." (Schneider, 2004, p. 326). How do we know that everyone knows? The existence of jokes about certain nationalities and ethnicities in a certain culture is a good proof. For instance, in Russia there is a series of jokes about Finns based on the stereotype that they are sluggish and tardy. Maybe personally I do not share the stereotype itself but I know it is out there since it is repeated over and over again by many people around me. The stereotype is in the air; it is communicated and understood by many.

Social cognition and socio-cultural approaches bring up a controversial dichotomy: are stereotypes individual or shared? It seems that each of them ignores the logic of another. Social cognition authors do not take into consideration the process of socialization which

influences the formation of attitudes and stereotypes. It looks at a person who lives in isolation accompanied solely by his/her own experience that helps him/her to build certain categories. But what about experiences and beliefs of other people who help us develop our attitudes? Yes, we may construct our own category of what Finnish people are like but since we live in the society that holds and disseminates its own societal category of the same concept, it is unlikely that we will get by without being influenced. At the same time it is important not to overemphasize the role of consensus in creating stereotypes. "Conformity pressures surely do account for some of the stereotype consensus" (Schneider, 2004, p.327), but in most cases the group that holds something as a stereotype is not necessarily the majority of a given culture.

While some researchers ignored or, on the other hand, criticized the ideas presented by the opposing approach, others tried to investigate both theories and combine the findings of the two in some way. In most cases, two separate words were offered for each of the phenomenon. For instance, Leyens, Yzerbyt and Schadron distinguish between stereotypes per se which for them are "shared beliefs about person attributes, usually personality traits, but often also behaviours, of a group of people" and the individual process of stereotyping individuals which refers to "the process of applying a – stereotypical – judgment such as rendering these individuals interchangeable with other members of the category" (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 11).

For instance, 'Everyone knows that Finns are sluggish and tardy' in this case will be considered a stereotype while on an individual level if I meet somebody named Junas who lives in Helsinki and assume that Junas is tardy because he is Finnish, I will be stereotyping. Stereotyping does not have consensus at the core as other people who may be well aware of the commonly held cultural stereotype will not necessarily stereotype Junas in accordance

with that belief. In short, the definition of a stereotype falls within the socio-cultural perspective, while stereotyping is defined in terms of the social cognition framework. Further Ashmore and Del Boca suggested the distinction between an individual stereotype and what they called a cultural stereotype that “should be used to describe shared or community-wide patterns of beliefs” (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 11).

For the purposes of my research project, I choose to look at cultural stereotypes, not at individual ones. First of all, my research finding show patterns of similar beliefs among different individuals. It is possible to group together attitudes expressed by different survey respondents as well as by my interviewees. Secondly, in the study I will be analyzing different socio-cultural factors that might have influenced the formation of such stereotypes. The socio-cultural approach seems more appropriate for such purposes.

There is yet another point about the nature of stereotypes that has been debated since Lippmann’s book saw the world. Are stereotypes always negative in nature or can they be positive as well? When talking about stereotypes being negative or positive, we can mean two different things.

Firstly, we can refer to the content of a particular stereotype. Can we consider the statement “People belonging to some x-nation are honest” a stereotype or should we give it a different label since it bears a clearly positive evaluative connotation? This is an important part of the definition that has to be dealt with. For instance, in my research project I encountered both negative and positive statements that were reported repeatedly. So are statements “Children are respected in American schools” and “Education is bad over there” both stereotypes?

It is oftentimes believed that stereotypes should be negative. Thus, Frederick Schauer points out that both prejudice and stereotype are pejorative and the word stereotype “has an

even more negative connotation” as compared to prejudice (Schauer, 2003, p. 17). That is why he prefers to use the term *generalization* as the common term for both negative and positive semantics of an attitude and then talk about different types of generalizations.

Gordon Allport looked only at negatively formulated stereotypes. For him a stereotype is “a rigid, bad and oversimplified belief” that is synonymous with prejudice (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 13). While in his early work on the nature of prejudice he did not refer to the term stereotype per se and extrapolated solely on the concept of prejudice, later on he made it clear that stereotypes are very much like prejudices and the latter refer to “thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant” (Allport, 2000, p. 22). So we can infer that thinking well of others even though it is still “without sufficient warrant” does not account for a prejudice.

Subconsciously we do consider stereotypes to be negative. However, fixed ideas can vary in content and it would be illogical to exclude them from the category since they bear similarities to negative stereotypes. In fact, positive stereotypes can be as offensive as negative ones or even more so in some situations. For instance, a person stereotyping that all Asian women are beautiful may get into trouble by making such references as the woman may consider them as the underestimation of her other qualities due to her ethnic background.

Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a particular statement is positive or negative. Evaluation is rather relative in nature and one and the same statement may be judged differently by different people. For example, one of the statements found among survey responses of my project is “There is much more freedom in American schools”. Here by freedom the person meant that children can wear the clothes that they want and that there are in general fewer rules and regulations to obey to. This particular stereotype can be considered either as positive or as negative. Thus, a positive interpretation would be that there is more expression of one’s personality in a school like that. The negative one would be that

as a result of such a policy children may get loose and will show more signs of disrespect towards other individuals. Either interpretation (or maybe there are more interpretations possible) will be chosen by a particular person in accordance with his/her personal as well as cultural values. For instance, British culture has a long tradition of private boarding schools where strict discipline is a must. Therefore, “more freedom” can bear a negative connotation to the person who is a strong adherent of that system.

Due to the above-mentioned points, throughout my project I will be considering both negative and positive fixed ideas as a stereotype. Though I will attempt to classify them into negative and positive, it should be borne in mind that such classification will be based on my philosophical understanding of what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is as well as on my cultural values.

The second understanding of “good” vs. “bad” stereotypes is the discussion around whether they are true or untrue. Sometimes it is thought that stereotypes are only those statements that are fictitious in nature (=bad). Can we consider a statement to be a stereotype if it contains some degree of truth? And if yes, how much truth can it contain to still be a stereotype?

In this respect, Frederick Schauer employs the terms of spurious (fictitious stereotypes) and nonspurious generalizations (good, true) (Schauer, 2003, p. 7). Spurious statements are those that are not based on facts while nonspurious ones are “generalizations with a sound statistical basis” (Schauer, 2003, p. 7). Further, he introduces the comparative dimension that allows us to classify each generalization (as mentioned above Schauer avoids using the term stereotype) either as spurious or nonspurious. Generalizations can be considered as true if the attribute ascribed to the subject is encountered in more cases in relation to that particular subject than to other subjects (Schauer, 2003, pp. 8 – 13).

Let us say that we want to check whether the stereotype “Asian women are beautiful” is true or not. Here the attribute is “beautiful” and the subject of our interest is “all Asian women”. Now we need to employ the comparative dimension. Somehow we have the ability to measure the beauty of all women in the world. As a result, we find out that 70% of all women are beautiful. Then we measure the beauty of Asian women and get the number of 80%. So beautiful relates more to Asian women than to all other women, therefore, the statement “Asian women are beautiful” is nonspurious (true).

No matter how beautiful this logic suggested by Schauer may seem, it has a few faults. First of all, in most cases it would be next to impossible to collect all the necessary data for his “comparative dimension”. Stereotypes are generalizations and, as that word suggests for itself, they are too broad and involve masses of people. Secondly, it would be hard to find consensus among evaluators on a certain attribute such as beauty, for instance. As most stereotypes involve similar culturally biased concepts, such an evaluation will be hard to do. That is why I choose to abstain from any discussion of whether stereotypes found in my project are true or not. To check each of them for the degree of truth contained would be to test each of the statement as a hypothesis which would require many separate studies. As Michael Pickering mentioned, “it is pointless trying to gauge whether or not they are accurate. What counts is how they circulate, and with what consequences.” (Pickering, 2001, p. 25).

As it has been shown there is no consensus over certain features pertaining to the concept of the stereotype. Over time three dichotomies have been developed in the literature on stereotypes: individual vs. shared, negative vs. negative and positive together, and true vs. fictitious. There is, however, a common semantic core of a stereotype that is shared by all researchers. Stereotypes are made up of a descriptive and an evaluative component. As a descriptor, a stereotype defines the subject by ascribing certain (both positive and negative)

attributes to it. The evaluative component “can be defined from two perspectives: self-profitability or other-profitability” (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 13). One and the same attribute can be manipulated linguistically to create stereotypes with a positive connotation toward the in-group and with a negative connotation towards “the other”. Thus, “we are generous” would be a stereotype that has a positive connotation and profits the self, while “they are prodigal” has a negative tint.

More recently, a new component of stereotypes was suggested by David Schneider. He emphasizes that “stereotypes involve theories about why people behave the ways they do” (Schneider, 2004, p. 326). For instance, the component of explanation is easily traced in this statement: “Of course, what can you expect, given the appalling conditions in which they bring up their children?” (Schneider, 2004, p. 326). However, not all stereotypes offer explanations; very often those who hold stereotypes consider them to be universal truths that need no explanations. Even if explanations are given, they are based on emotions rather than on logic.

Having discussed disparities and similarities in the understanding of a stereotype, I have come up with a definition that will serve as the guiding point in my research project. *A stereotype is a fixed belief that describes and evaluates a group of persons, objects, or ideas and that is shared by many in the community.* Two final remarks should be made. Firstly, it has to be shared by many but many do not have to be the majority. Secondly, while I assume that stereotypes are to a certain degree fictitious, I do not claim that to be an important attribute of the stereotype.

Why do we need stereotypes?

While everyone would admit that the result of using stereotypes can be unpleasant, dangerous, oppressing, it can be argued that there are some definite advantages in operating

in the world of stereotyped knowledge. We need them; we feel more comfortable creating and living in the semi-fictitious environment. The first and foremost advantage of stereotypes is that they save us a lot of time. Once different categories are created, all we need to do to understand a new object is to associate it with one of these existing categories. “There is economy in this. For the attempt to see all things freshly and in detail, rather than as types and generalities is exhausting” (Lippmann, 1965, p. 59). This point has become the centerpiece of the social cognition approach to stereotypes. Along with Lippmann, adherents of this approach attempt to justify the human race by saying that stereotypes are a natural part of our cognition with the help of which we arrange the reality around us. We would not survive if we did not have them. The explanation given by the social cognition approach is based on the fact that stereotypes are embedded in our thinking processes. We cannot decide whether we want them or not; they are just there.

Other theoretical approaches can be clustered together as they assume that a person seeks stereotypes to improve his/her psychological well-being. In other words, we derive some personal satisfaction when we come up with a stereotype. The premise of these approaches is that by nature a human being feels better when s/he knows that somebody else is worse. So stereotypes in this case are rather like self-defense mechanisms as they make us believe that some ‘X is negative’ (especially when X is in fact positive).

One of these theories is the self-image maintenance approach, according to which “people may find stereotyping and prejudice to be a reliable and effective way to protect their self-esteem in a frequently threatening world” (Fein & Spencer, 2000, p. 174). There are situations in which we experience psychological threats to our self-image. Situations are not just simple events themselves; they can be considerably prolonged in time to include the prelude and the aftermath of the situation itself. For instance, a student is faced with a

difficult exam for which she knows she cannot get prepared in time though she herself and others think she is smart. As a result, she is under a lot of stress, she feels her self-worth is being threatened. She does not want to see herself humiliated in her own eyes and in the eyes of her friends. However, she can restore her self-image in different ways. Potentially she could draw on her own resources, for instance, prepare well for the next exam and prove that she is worthy. But under stress she is looking for an easier way to affirm her image in a given situation. Let us assume that the same student is at the same time teaching in a local elementary school. The next day after her exam she is giving a test to her students.

Unwillingly, she can find more mistakes and lower the grades of students of a different ethnic group. As studies conducted by Fein and Spencer show, “stereotyping or derogation of a member of a stereotyped group can provide such situational opportunities to restore a threatened self-image” (Fein & Spencer, 2000, p. 185). Stereotypes will always be directed at a member of the “other” group. In this particular case a negative evaluation of a person of a different ethnic group or social class in terms of their intelligence “They are all stupid” could make this woman feel superior.

Related to the self-image maintenance approach is the social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner. In summary, the theory is based on three premises. First of all, the nature of social categorization is such that people tend to see more similarities than there are in reality between objects belonging to the same category, while more differences are ascribed to objects of different categories. We think in such a way that we create more distance between in-groups and outgroups and erase the borders between members of the same group. Thus, if I as a Russian person meet another Russian (especially if I am in the place where there are few Russians), I may assume that we have much more in common than we really do. At the same time, if I meet an American who is even more likely to become my

friend since in spite of the difference we share some things, I may mentally create a series of differences that are not even there. Very often people would say things like “they are just so different from us”, “they are not like us at all”. In most cases these are exaggerations, and if we looked more carefully we would find at least some similarities between people of different groups.

The second premise is that of social comparison that people apply when talking about different groups. When we compare, “the comparison is most likely to be biased so that the ingroup comes out positive” (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 61). Finally, the third premise is that each of us has multiple social identities, meaning that we belong to different groups that we associate ourselves with. Since our social identity is deeply connected with who we are and with who others think we are, we are looking for ways to strengthen our position in certain groups, to make sure that we and others understand that we belong to those groups. As Leyens stresses, “people can improve their self-image...by enhancing their social identity” (Leyens et, 1994, p. 61). To make sure we belong to a certain group, we compare ourselves against “them” (comparison premise) and as a result find more differences between our group and an outgroup (social categorization). By creating more distance between the groups, we feel we are more comfortable where we are: we are who we are and we have nothing to do with “them over there”. “In everyday life, where groups really exist, stereotypes are another dimension by which people can differentiate WE and THEY” (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 70). So we need stereotypes to differentiate between different groups of people, to understand our social identities better, and to make these social identities more attractive for us.

Within the social identity theory, Leyens et. al identified three social functions of stereotypes that people use when interacting with different groups. The first function is the function of social causality which is needed “to understand social or non-social events by

identifying groups that may be responsible”(Leyens et al, 1994, p. 70). Secondly, we use stereotypes “to justify behaviours towards a given group” (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 70), and the third function is that of social differentiation that “aims at clarifying and accentuating the differences among groups in order to establish a positive distinction in favour of the ingroups” (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 70).

While the social identity theory focuses primarily on such socio-cultural constructs as self-identification, beliefs and values pertinent to certain groups, the social conflict approach is drawing more radical conclusions. According to this approach, there are distinct groups that are in conflict with each. The nature of the conflict, however, is not social but material. “At the core of this approach is the assumption that people struggle over scarce material resources. This competition causes antagonisms, ethnocentrism, discrimination and prejudice” (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 46). Research was done on how friendly groups, when separated and put in the conditions of competition, quickly lose control of their emotions and form stereotypes and prejudices against another group. There is only a minor variation from the previous two approaches here since the answer to the question of “why do we need stereotypes?” is still the same. People construct them to protect their own identity and the image of the group they belong to. The only difference might be that in extreme conditions, which competition is, these stereotypes are even stronger and more oppressive against another group.

In this section different explanations as to why we need stereotypes were given. We can refer to these explanations as functions of stereotypes. So, the following functions developed under different frameworks were discussed:

- cognitive categorization function;
- maintaining and protecting self-image;

- differentiating between groups (with different purposes).

How do we acquire stereotypes?

It seems like the 1920s are too far away from where we are now on the timeline.

Nevertheless, it is worth looking at what it was that caused stereotypes at that time and see if the present-day world has changed much. Lippmann identified six major factors that answer the question of how do we get to have stereotypes (Lippmann, 1965, p.18). In general he saw stereotypes as the substitute for real facts. According to him, we acquire stereotypes because we have a limited access to facts. This limited access is due to the following facts (Lippmann, 1965):

- *artificial censorship*; all information is purposefully censored before it reaches people, especially if this information is related to outgroups;
- *limitation of social contact*; we live too far away from each other, very often we have never seen people about whom we construct stereotypes;
- *meager time*; we devote only a bit of our time to reading about what is happening in the world, we ourselves limit our access to information and then substitute its lack with stereotypes;
- *short compressed messages*; even if information presented in messages is true, there are different interpretations of that information possible due to its compressed character;
- *small vocabulary for complicated world*; journalists writing articles for us to read cannot reflect the complexity of the events because the vocabulary we use is not fit for the world we live in, therefore, we acquire stereotyped knowledge;
- *fear of facing the facts*; we do not want to know facts because they are not always pleasant; newspapers know their target audience and try to allay their readers' fears.

Maybe because Lippman was a journalist himself, he saw mass media as the main source that feeds stereotypes to us. All of the above factors are directly connected to how information is presented in newspapers and perceived by readers. For Lippmann, language and communication in general is the key to forming our stereotypes (small vocabulary, censorship, compressed messages).

Social cognition and socio-cultural perspectives took up different explanations offered by Lippmann and, based on them, suggested two ways of how we acquire stereotypes. For social cognition approach, *experience* is the main factor that determines how we learn stereotypes. Within this framework, it is assumed that “stereotypes are learned...through the information that individuals acquire through direct contact with members of other social groups” (Stangor, 2000, p. 66). This explanation is related to Lippmann’s limitation of social contact factor. Because authors of social cognition theory see stereotypes as purely individual entities, they do not take into account any possible outside influence as the source of stereotype formation.

Quite oppositely, “cultural approaches consider the ways that stereotypes are learned, transmitted, and changed through indirect sources – information gained from parents, peers, teachers, political and religious leaders, and the mass media” (Stangor, 2000, p. 68). Schneider gives a good illustration of how stereotypes are acquired through communication with peers. “When Tom, Dick, and Harry make jokes about gays, and no one disagrees, Jim may well believe that everyone...agrees and start making jokes of his own” (Schneider, 2004, p. 328). We learn stereotypes in our everyday life through the process of socialization. Communication is the main factor responsible for stereotype transmission.

Among different sources of information, mass media is becoming a stronger source of stereotype formation (Stangor, 2000, p. 69; Schneider, 2004, pp. 343 – 353). As more

attention is given to the role of mass media, it should be borne in mind that Lippmann considered it as the most important factor at the beginning of the 20th century as well.

There is yet another school of thought that leaves out the importance of both cultural factors and the experiences that people have (situational factors), and offers its own explanation as to why we have stereotypes. According to Adorno and other representatives of the Frankfurt school, some people are more prone than others to acquiring stereotypes and prejudices (Leyens et al, 1994, pp. 34 – 35). Similar to that is Rokeach's theory explaining the work of "the open and the closed mind". Some people are naturally not flexible and closed to new ideas, while others are ready to learn new ways of thinking and feeling (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 36). Though it is true that some people are more flexible than others, it would be undesirable to exclude the importance of socio-cultural factors from stereotype formation. Furthermore, if we assume that there is no rule or no explanation as to how stereotypes are acquired except for the fact that some people are just this way, we would automatically conclude that there is no solution to changing our mentality and eliminating at least partially some stereotypes. These theories do not hold the possibility of transcending from the category of "closed mind" to the category of the "open mind". Once you are labeled to be authoritarian, or dogmatic etc., there is nothing to change your mind.

Is it possible to change our stereotypes? How?

The answer to this question depends on the explanation given to the question of how we acquire our stereotypes. The theory of the open and closed mind assumes we cannot get rid of our stereotypes because of our permanent personality traits.

Authors of the social cognition theory believe that the source of our stereotypes is in our experiences or the lack of them. Therefore, they see the solution in the change of a situation, namely if we expose somebody to more contact with members of the other group,

the person will get a bigger array of experiences to choose from to construct his/her categories. Eventually, this will lead to change from fictitious to true information. As Stangor and Schaller note, "information acquired through intergroup contact is expected to offer the best means of change" (Stangor, 2000, p. 61). However, there are studies showing that the increase of intergroup contact does not necessarily lead to the elimination of stereotypes. "Intergroup contacts often correlate with anxiety. This anxiety could well lead to negative stereotypes of outgroup members" (Leyens et al, 1994, p. 50). Instead, it is suggested that interpersonal one-to-one contact should be employed to achieve a better result in stereotype erosion (Stroebe et al, 1988).

As the socio-cultural approach emphasizes the role of socialization in the process of stereotype formation, the change by means of educational methods as well as through institutional changes is seen as the primary solution (Stangor, 2000, p. 72). Changes can take place if efforts will be made to eradicate stereotypes in families, schools, universities etc. Sometimes deliberately organized and planned programs should be implemented in order to reach the goal. We shouldn't "regard stereotypic thinking as inevitable and surrender to the worst of it. But we need to understand that our job isn't going to be easy" (Schneider, 2004, p. 379). Changing mentality is a slow and difficult process but a rewarding one in the end.

My personal belief is that a socio-cultural approach is the most sound one (at least it is the most optimistic one!) because it assumes that change is possible and offers concrete educational methods that can be implemented to achieve this change. In addition, as my research project has shown, people do change their attitudes under certain conditions.

In conclusion, I should emphasize again that in this project I look at a stereotype as the fixed belief or idea shared by many people. It can be both negative and positive. I do not attempt to make a conclusion as to the accuracy of stereotypes, though I will be comparing

stereotypes with statements of those who have experienced change of stereotypes. I am also interested in what functions these particular stereotypes fulfill and through what sources the stereotypes were acquired. In general, I will be relying on the socio-cultural framework.

Research design and methods.

I accepted the definition of stereotypes that emphasizes their being shared by the community. So in my research project I am exploring what a particular group, namely Russian-speaking high school students and their parents, thinks about American schooling. In other words, I am interested in the group attitude. Nevertheless, at least half of my project was based on learning about individual experiences, thus individual (not the group) becomes the unit of analysis. That was the first *qualitative* part of the project that involved high school students and their parents who have recently moved to the United States and have experienced studying in both Russian and American settings.

Why did I choose to center my research around individual experiences? First of all, this approach allowed me to learn initially more from participants rather than suggest my own guesses and assumptions. I wanted to avoid (if it is indeed possible) talking about my stereotypes and to find out what their friends back home thought about US schools, what they themselves thought before coming to the States, and how their opinions changed over time. Secondly, as it turned out later, by talking to my participants, I got a deeper understanding of what stands behind stereotypes. In fact, most participants tried to explain and analyze the existence of some stereotypes themselves. Their interpretations are included in my data analysis as well.

Since I decided to concentrate on individual experiences, I have chosen to design my project as a phenomenological study. In general, phenomenological research concentrates on “the meaning of a particular aspect of experience, assuming that through dialogue and

reflection, the quintessential meaning of the experience will be revealed” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 97). As dialogue and reflection are at the core of phenomenological research, interview as a method has become the centerpiece of the methodology used. There are seven participants in this phase; four of them are currently students at Amherst Regional High School and three of the participants are parents of these students.

The project began with a general group interview that gave some background data and first glimpses of the children’s experience at their American school. At the same time the first interview with parents was conducted. These two interviews were of introductory nature and served the purpose of getting to know each other better, which is important for any research but particularly so if the research is interested in personal experiences of the participants. Phenomenology as a genre relies primarily on in-depth unstructured interviews and since “the goal of unstructured interviewing is *understanding*, it becomes paramount for the researcher to establish rapport” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 367). This first group interview held in the home of participants was crucial in establishing rapport.

Following these two interviews, a series of unstructured individual deep interviews with students as well as with parents was conducted. I was trying to follow Seidman’s model of iterative interviews that suggests a researcher have three interviews with each of the participants: the first interview focusing on life history, the second one giving more details of a participant’s particular experience, and the final one concentrating on reflections of the meaning (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 190).

In my case, the focus of the first interview was on students’ experience back home. We talked about what their school life was like there, what they liked and disliked about it, etc. For me it was important to understand that experience before switching to their new American environment. Though education in Russia is highly centralized, there is a variety of

different types of schools; undoubtedly, school experience there would influence these children's perceptions of their American school. Unwillingly, they would be comparing the two systems, often thinking about the school in the US and relating back to what it was like in Russia. Furthermore, the first interview was the time for me to ask how they were preparing for their moving to the States. Did they know anything about their American schools? What expectations did they have? These questions were important as they showed what opinions my participants had prior to emerging into their new high school.

The second interview was wholly devoted to each participant's experience in the US. As mentioned above, the interview was unstructured to allow for the natural flow of conversation. However, there were a few questions that I raised to all my participants. For instance, I asked each of them to describe their first day at school how they remember it. Later I realized that that was an essential question as my participants when telling about their first day at school would often begin their sentences by saying "I was surprised", "I was shocked", "We didn't expect". These were important in making inferences about stereotypes.

After I had interviewed some of my participants for the second time, I did an observation in the school that all my participants attend, which turned out to be an important contribution to data collection process as well as to the credibility of my study. Observation was no less useful than the preceding interviews. It is much harder to understand what somebody is saying if you haven't experienced what she or he has gone through. Observation made it possible for me to look at the same world the student is looking at even though I am looking at it through my own lens. After I had done the observation, I returned to the interview transcripts again. And listening to them, I had images popping up in my mind. I knew what the student's teachers and peers looked like, how they talked, what the classrooms were like...And even more than that, I had a holistic picture of the student's day at school

since I spent the whole day with the student shadowing her from her first class and throughout the whole day. At the same time this experience helped me personally to broaden my perspective on what American schools are like.

The final third interview was of a clarifying nature. Its purpose was to ask the students to interpret some parts of my field notes from the observation as well as to look my interpretations. Differently from previous interviews, I came 'prepared' in the sense that I made up a list of questions and some points that were not clear after the observation and the previous interviews. So the last interview was more structured as compared to the first two.

All in all, there were twelve interviews with students. Additionally, one interview with each of the parents was held. There were fewer interviews with parents because many of them are busy and it is not so easy to "catch" them in their daily routine. However, these interviews turned out to be of great value to me as they showed the perspective of a different generation of people. Moreover, these planned events (interviews and an observation) were complemented by many informal chats with participants as well as with some high school teachers who have Russian-speaking students in their classes. These chats were sometimes as short as five minutes and arose spontaneously but they turned out to be of great value.

For the second part of the project, a mixture of *qualitative* and *quantitative* methods was used. To see the differences in how American schools are perceived by those who have had a first-hand experience and those who did not have this opportunity, high school students in Russia were involved in the project. None of them have studied in the United States though some of them had friends or relatives studying in an American high school. These are students attending different high schools in the north-west of Russia. It is important to note that the communities they live in are similar to that of Amherst (university town). Both schools are not just regular typical Russian schools. The environment, parents' educational

level, exposure to libraries and so on makes them different. In total there were 38 Russian participants (20 from one school and 18 from another). Differently from US participants, there were no parents involved.

Qualitative data included participants' responses to the open-ended question. The students were asked to write a short paragraph (2-3 sentences) describing their image of an American school. There was no direction specified in terms of what to describe. They could write about academics, the school's exterior, students... That was their choice.

Secondly, the same students were asked to fill in the survey that was made up of pre-set statements about high schools. Students were asked to indicate whether they thought a particular statement referred to high schools in Russia, the USA, both countries, or neither. Thus, there were four possible answers for each of the fifteen statements. Additionally, there were a number of background information questions that asked for the students' age, visits abroad, visits to the USA, and where their image of American schools came from. These were constructed as multiple-answer questions to turn data into quantitative variables.

Here is the summary of the project design:

	United States	Russia
Participants	Eight participants (high school students and parents)	Thirty-eight participants (high school students from two schools)
Methodology	Qualitative (interviews and one observation)	Qualitative (open-ended question) and quantitative (survey)
Time framework	October 2003 – January 2004	February 2004

Ethical considerations

Presently, a lot of attention is given to ethical issues in any type of research including qualitative research. It has been admitted that research should not cause any physical or

psychological harm to the participants involved. The era of utilitarianism, which justified any research if it was done for the benefit of the majority (Rossman, Rallis, 2003, p. 71), is fading away and with it Carolyn Ellis-es are becoming unpopular. To be ethical has become a must.

When doing this particular study I had to deal with different ethical dilemmas that can be classified into three different types. First, there are issues that are oftentimes discussed in literature on ethics in research. For instance, I had to elicit consent from all of my participants. I made them fully aware of the purposes of the study. This included not only those directly involved but some involuntary participants who “accidentally” took part in the study. Teachers whose classes I was observing, American students with whom my participants talked in class as well as during break times and outside of school have all become involved in my project. Of course, I did not ask all of them to sign the form of informed consent but they had as much information as my direct participants about the nature and the purposes of the study. Furthermore, all participants were asked to choose pseudonyms in order to guarantee privacy and confidentiality. Survey responses elicited from Russian participants are presented anonymously. This was important, even though the material was collected for the project which is being written far away, because some students were afraid to write “true things about America” as they thought that might affect their grades.

The second group of ethical issues deals with more subtle dilemmas that are very often below the surface. In most cases only the development of a situation or a conversation brings them up to the surface. Unfortunately, they can sometimes stay unnoticed. They are on-the-spot dilemmas and that makes it harder to elaborate on them. It is how sensitive you are that determines whether these covert dilemmas will be uncovered. In the course of my project I encountered several of these dilemmas when I was interviewing my participants. One word can hurt the interviewee’s feelings and it can stay unnoticed. Students were telling

me stories about their high school experience in the States and at times sensitive topics were brought up (relationships with teachers or other students). I tried to be careful about what and how I was saying. The best strategy for me was to let the student speak as much as possible and to avoid doing many commentaries.

Finally, there are important ethical issues in regards to the audience (readers) of my project. When doing research one should remember that it is always conducted and written for others to read it. The potential reader should always be kept in mind, especially when a researcher is exploring a sensitive topic. This is exactly the case with this project: stereotypes do hurt no matter what. When doing the literature review, I came across an article that discussed the nature of stereotypes in general and drew on some examples of stereotypes of Americans in regards to different nationalities. There was a big chart with characteristics of many ethnic groups. Naturally, my eye searched for my country and naturally I got an unpleasant feeling. It is not the fault of the researcher; these are data obtained from meticulous studies. However, a piece of data can never be neutral; it is always emotionally charged. So how do we present such sensitive data? This is definitely an ethical issue.

I consider it important for my readers to know the following. Firstly, I do not claim that any of the attitudes/stereotypes presented here are true. Purposefully, I tried to avoid the topic of “the kernel of truth” of stereotypes. These are simply the opinions elicited from a group of people, opinions that I am justifying by looking at some cultural and historical factors. Secondly, I tried to exclude as much as possible my personal opinions from the study. Of course, stereotypes are often acquired by us through our cultural surroundings when we are children and I cannot claim that I do not share anything presented here. However, I would like to ask my readers not to make any associations between these data and what may be seen as my attitudes.

Data analysis and findings

It has already been discussed in the previous section that data collection for my project was done by employing three different methods: interviews with US and Russian participants, an open-ended survey and a closed-ended survey with Russian participants. As the first two represent qualitative methods and the last one is the quantitative one, there is a challenge of combining the two so that the findings could be presented in the best way possible.

I chose to rely more heavily on my qualitative data to generate themes which for the most part (not all of them) will be formulated as stereotypes. These themes were developed out of broader categories that represent the emic view in that they are the ones discovered in the interviews and surveys by looking at the participants' language (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 282). I was more interested in indigenous categories, as I didn't want to impose what I thought were typical stereotypes of American schools. In other words, when I conducted my interviews, I tried not to ask questions like "Do you agree that American schools are X?" or "You know many people think that ..." or, even more direct as "Do you know of any stereotypes of American schools?" I allowed each interview to flow naturally. Both parents and students were simply telling (narrating) me what their schools back home were like, what their expectations of American schools were, what surprised them in American schools most of all. Here are the examples of the most relevant categories that were identified in the interviews and which were developed into themes: QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS, SCHOOL FUNDING, CURRICULUM, EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES.

Themes were thought out while looking at what each person was saying repeatedly about each particular category. It is important, however, that I was searching purposefully for

stereotypes, not just for themes, that would describe what American schools are like for these people. That is why I paid attention to such phrases as “back in Russia people were saying that... but when I came here I was surprised that...” or “people say... but it is complete nonsense”, or “everybody knows that...” These hedges as well as multiple repetitions of one and the same idea around a particular category throughout an interview and from one interview to another were two key factors in determining stereotypes. This goes in line with the characteristics of a stereotype as being shared by many people and being a fixed belief. Thus, multiple encounters of one and the same idea in many interviews shows that the idea is shared at least by some people.

It is also possible to check if a particular idea is fixed in the minds of people. Fixedness implies no change. Therefore, if an interviewee is talking about how s/he or her/his friends had a particular belief about American schools before coming to the US and then was surprised to see that the belief was wrong, we can infer that the belief has changed and, consequently, in its original form it was fixed. What was believed before we would consider a stereotype in the case Russian participants who have not been exposed to American high schools and still hold to that idea.

Here is an example to clarify the point. One of the participants mentioned that her friends back home thought that education in schools in America was of lower quality. She came to the US with this idea but as her children started studying in a local high school, she realized that the quality was good. She was satisfied with the school curriculum and with how it was taught. So she left behind the opinion with which she originally came. However, that opinion is still in existence among her friends back home. The idea is fixed in their minds. At this point it is possible to incorporate into data analysis the answers to the open-ended question of the survey because they show exactly what people who have never been exposed

to the US high school think. So the analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the interviews in the US and in the open-ended part of the survey is going in the following way: categories from interviews → themes formed from categories → comparing these themes with data from the survey → clarifying, enriching and modifying the original themes → final results.

Stereotype 1: There is a complete freedom in American schools. Originally, US participants (both parents and students) were talking about strict discipline in their American high school. The theme that was developed out of this is the opposite of the stereotype itself: there are many rules that regulate the behavior of students and teachers in the school. However, when compared to answers in the survey, it was discovered that many students who have never studied in the US thought that students are allowed anything they want to in school and teachers are not allowed to control students' behavior. Thus, one of the Russian students wrote that "that students are absolutely free in their behavior". Another one was more specific by saying that "There are no limitations as to what clothes American students wear to school or how much make-up they choose to put on."

American participants mentioned that, while they thought that would be the case in the US, they encountered quite the opposite. For instance, one of the students studying in the US told me how several times she experienced problems with one of her teachers because the teacher asked her "not to come to school like that" as her clothes "were showing too much of her body and it was inappropriate for the school environment". Furthermore, one of the parents described her surprise on the first day she went to school with her child as she saw how disciplined students were: there were no fights, no running around the corridors... and "students looked like normal kids". Another parent when talking about her child's American school said that there is "iron discipline in the school... everything is organized and thought

out carefully”. Rule of law prevails in high school; there are regulations about anything you can think of: being late, skipping classes...

When doing my observation, I noticed that students were not allowed to leave the classroom whenever they wanted to: “The boy sitting in front of me stands up, takes a big yellow pass sign, writes his name in the journal and leaves the room”. Later the students explained to me that you cannot wander around the school with the pass and that there are passes of different color for different floors of the school building. So if you want to leave the classroom, you can stay only on the floor where the classroom is. These practices are unheard of in any Russian school.

There may be different explanations as to why many students in Russia think that there is complete freedom in American schools. Russian culture scores high on power distance. This score, or rather index, demonstrates the extent to which people in a particular culture “expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 28). In the educational setting, it means that there is more inequality in teacher-student relationship that is accepted and valued by the society. Students are looking up at their teachers or professors and are not supposed to misbehave in their presence or to act as they wish thus ignoring the opinion of the teacher. This is interpreted as discipline. Students are disciplined because they respect (or fear) the one in power. American culture, on the contrary, scores much lower on the power distance index: 40 for the USA as compared to 76 for former Yugoslavia at the time Hofstede was doing his research (Hofstede, 1997, p. 26). So there is not so much distance between teachers and student (though, of course, it doesn’t mean that in America students respect teachers less). It implies that students and teachers feel more comfortable questioning each other’s ideas and behaviors. That is an accepted norm. However, when Russian teenagers through different sources, mostly TV, learn about teacher-student

interactions in the USA, they may misinterpret them and conclude that students are so to say 'more loose', they talk back, they are not forbidden to wear what they want by their teachers etc. In other words, they have more freedom in expressing their opinions as well as in their actions. That is the possible way to form the stereotype that "there is a complete freedom in American schools".

So when these teenagers (and their parents) come to American schools, they are taken aback by the fact that there are indeed more rules in American than in Russian schools. The difference is that there are different ways to enforce the rules. They see that in American schools rules are written down in documents for everybody to obey. The school is the miniature representation of the American society itself: these are the laws; you are here to respect and obey them.

Stereotype 2: Children are respected in American schools.

In chapter 1 I mentioned that I am including both negative and positive fixed ideas as stereotypes. Thus the latter are included into the findings as well. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that, by saying that "children are respected in American schools" is a stereotype, I am not judging whether this is true or not. It is easy to assume when one says that something is a stereotype that the idea behind it is not true. The issue of true-untrue stereotyping was discussed in chapter 1, and I want to emphasize again that I am not trying to establish what is true. So when I put this stereotype forward, I do not by any means want to say that children are not respected in US schools.

This particular stereotype was first encountered in my interviews with students here in Amherst. In my very first interview (which was a group interview), one of the students mentioned that "teachers here [in her American school] they are very friendly...they are first of all friends for students and then teachers". At that point I marked this passage as the

category of TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS and decided to look into it further. Later on, in the same interview as well as in other interviews with other students, the same idea of teachers' friendliness and respect towards their students was recorded. In other words, it was a consistent opinion from one person to another. The only exception was the students who described how one of the teachers criticized her for the clothes she was wearing. However, she also mentioned that other teachers were very respectful.

Stereotype one was derived from survey responses as the idea opposite to what was obtained from the interviews and the observations: strict discipline and rules (from interviews) vs. complete freedom (from surveys). Quite differently, stereotype number two had basically the same wording in interviews as well as among participants in Russia. In other words, this is the positive (from the evaluative point of view) stereotype that was generally confirmed when participants moved to the US. People in Russia think that children are respected by American teachers and, when they immerse themselves into American schools, they encounter little evidence to change their opinion to the negative one. It is a pleasant discovery and a relief to learn that positive beliefs stay as they are.

Interestingly enough, when thinking about the source of this stereotype, I came up to the conclusion that the analysis can be similar to the one given for stereotype 1, even though they are of opposite evaluative connotations. Again, because of comparatively lower power distance in American culture, students can talk back to their teachers and express their opinions. So a Russian student seeing this on his/her TV screen easily concludes that children's opinions are valued. Teachers are interested in learning what students think, and they actually let them talk. Students can speak up, therefore, it is deduced that children are respected. While in most cases in Russian schools, the teacher is the sole authority and thus questioning what the teacher is saying is a taboo.

Stereotype 3: Education in American schools is of low quality.

Probably if I were asked to rank all the stereotypes in terms of their “popularity” among people, this would be the number one hit. It is no coincidence that I started my Master’s project with the two vignettes that reflect this very stereotype. I had known the issue would come up in my interviews before I conducted them and it sure did. Parents were saying things like “there is no system in their education, it’s all bits and pieces” or “it seems to me that the teachers are better back home”. Additionally, when I asked each parent what s/he expected or knew about American schools when they were preparing for moving, several of them admitted that they didn’t know much except for the fact that “schools are easy” or “education is not good” there.

Interestingly, students (the children of these same parents) have never mentioned the fact that education in the States was worse than in their home country schools. In fact, in my interviews I asked each of the students a provocative question: “If you had an opportunity for your own child to study in the US high school or in high school in your home country, which one would you choose and why?” All of my respondents chose their American school because they considered knowledge they received here as more useful. One of them mentioned that “knowledge is more practical and clearer for the students... and classes are very interesting”.

Further, this student explained that when she was studying in her home country, she felt she missed a lot because the teacher was rushing through the planned curriculum never stopping and reviewing if the revision was not planned. So the program covers much more material in Russia as compared to her American school, there are more things that you have to learn, but at the same time in America “you are really learning” because the teacher is not worried about following some plan prescribed by someone else and is teaching according to

students' needs. Another student from Ukraine whom I interviewed was indeed enchanted by her social studies classes. She said there were much more opportunities in her American school because of the variety of the classes available to her:

- What classes are you taking this semester?
- Criminology and anthropology. I have two social science classes. That's where there is a huge difference because in my school in Ukraine nobody would care about criminology and anthropology.
- Do you like these classes?
- I think they are very useful because I am learning just so much about myself, people and about the world, I understand the world more for instance in anthropology we so... for example, why are women and men divided into two different classes? Why is there a division in their roles? Why do women and men have different roles...and you start thinking about these things and the teacher asks questions and we have discussions or we just talk to each other trying to express our opinions. I think it is very useful... (Interview with Anastasia)

So those who are actually studying are enjoying their experience and think that they are learning more useful things. Isn't it the quality of education? However, parents do not hold to the opinions of their children. When talking later on to Anastasia's mother, she herself brought up the topic of quality. Indeed, she said she was very satisfied with how social sciences and mathematics are taught, while she was sure that hard sciences were not paid due attention and she and her husband had to tutor their kids to make it up to the appropriate level. Responses obtained from the surveys echo parents' opinions: "illiterate students", "applied sciences are taught poorly", "instead of calculus they study simple equation", "does not meet European standards" (I wish I could ask what these standards were 😊). These are very serious accusations coming from people who did not have a chance to study calculus in American schools or to measure the standards of the schools they are talking about. There are at least three possible explanations as to the sources of this persistent stereotype.

First of all, people may misinterpret the notion of *choice* in American schools. Some people are simply not familiar with how the system works. They assume that the process of choosing classes in high school means that a student is completely free in deciding what s/he wants to study. Thus, if the student is not interested in science but, on the other hand, takes liking to music and dancing, those will be the only classes s/he will be taking. Indeed, one of the parents told me about her experience with the high school during the first trimester of her daughter attending the school. When her daughter came back with her schedule of classes, the mother was terrified because all that was there was “singing and dancing and things like that”. She was in panic. Where is science? What is going on? Unfortunately, at that time nobody in their family spoke enough English to be able to go to school and talk to her daughter’s counselor about the courses she was taking. She ended up with a very lopsided schedule that semester. She didn’t know how that choosing system worked. There are many stories, gossips circling around in the air about in some American schools sciences are not taught. If this mother judged by that very trimester, she might have concluded the same: they study only fun things, sciences are disregarded. Therefore, education “does not meet the standards”.

Secondly, when immigrants from Russia or from any other country arrive in the US, they are tested in their English language skills as well as math to be placed in a class of the right level. As many immigrant children, especially during their initial stay in the USA, have little English language knowledge, they are placed in classes that are lower in level of what their American counterparts are studying. Due to the language problems, they are placed in easier math classes. As a result, they are studying the material that they have already learned in their home countries. That’s why it is so common to hear a student or a “proud” parent say that everything is too easy in the States since their children are in the ninth grade but are solving the problems they were solving in the 5th grade in Russia.

In the third place, the notion of “choice” may transfer into the meaning of the word *chaos* for many people. Russian culture is characterized by high uncertainty avoidance which is defined as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 113). Choice of classes is viewed as this “uncertain or unknown situation”. Thus, people would feel more uncomfortable choosing classes. They may feel suspicious as to why, for example, somebody is studying anthropology while another person is studying criminology. From the perspective of the high uncertainty avoidance culture, there is something wrong when there is no prescription that explains what to do and how to act. I remember when I was teaching English at a university in Russia, one of the discussion topics we had with my students was the advantages and disadvantages of American education. I was really surprised when after my “enchanting” talk on how great it is to be able to make your own decisions and to choose the classes you want to study, one of the students said that she would never like to be in a situation like that. She said she liked the Russian system much more because how would she know what to take and what not? What if she made the wrong decision? She preferred it all solved and put on the plate in front of her. She believed prescriptions worked better.

Finally, the stereotype can be attributed to the historical context of the US-USSR relations. Education and research were certainly given a priority in the USSR. For seventy years the state had put great financial resources into educational development, and people for several generations had seen the successful results of these investments. They are used to seeing high achievements in raising literacy levels as well as discoveries in the world of science. They got used to believing in being the best. The combination of their own hard work and propaganda made them believe this. Though I am not doing a historic analysis of stereotypes, I believe this particular stereotype was born during the Cold War period. The

social conflict approach discussed in chapter 1 gives a possible explanation as to how the stereotypes may have appeared. According to this approach, even friendly groups put under the conditions of competition develop ethnocentrism, of which stereotypes are the inherent part (Leyens et al, 1994, pp. 46-47). These two countries by far could not be described as “friendly groups”, rather they were rivals competing for power and resources. Research and education played a major role in that competition.

It is impossible for people to change the image of themselves and their country in a day. Big empires even after their decease hold on to their great past reminiscing about what cannot be returned. The stronger a person’s national identity is, the harder it will be for that person to understand and accept the crash of his/her nation. Many people after the collapse of the Soviet Union, even if they were against the system, feel tremendous pride in their dead country’s achievements. They would often say that, yes, everything was bad but you cannot deny that the sputnik was launched in that country and... Deeply inside they understand the time has changed and the present is not as bright as the past. They feel their self-image, their self-esteem is being damaged by the change occurring in their country. They may realize that their educational system is facing a lot of problems and is not as strong as it used to be; however, by admitting this to themselves they would damage their identity. That is why they are looking for self-defense mechanisms and, as research shows, at times people maintain and defend their self-image by stereotyping against “the other” (Fein & Spencer, 2000). So by assuring themselves that American education is not that good, they exaggerate the quality of education in Russia, even though it is only in their minds. I think when people make use of this stereotype, they do not really mean that education in the US is bad. Rather they are trying to say that education in Russia is better. They cannot prove that it is better, so they are bound to create myths and legends about how good it is.

Stereotype 4: There is little or no homework in US high schools.

As my survey showed, this is a very widely held stereotype concerning American schools. Students who participated in my study repeatedly mentioned that there are fewer classes per day and very little homework in US high schools. In general, they thought the load was smaller as compared to Russian schools. However, when in my interviews I confronted US participants with the same question, they all began their answers with some exclamatory sentences like “What? We get tons of homework!” In the very first interview that I conducted, the student herself mentioned that there is a lot of homework to do:

- I'd like to know if you are involved in any extracurricular activities at your school. Did you try playing any sports, for example?
- It is only school because after school you are so tired that... Everything starts so early. We wake up at six in the morning. We are wiped out by the time we get to school. And then also there is a lot of homework, so there is no time to do anything else. (from interview with Irina and Anna)

Parents of the students agree that their children get a lot of homework and have to read and write a lot, even more than they had to back home.

This stereotype can be interpreted both as a negative and a positive one. If we take it to be negative, the analysis of why it exists can be similar to stereotype 3 as, in fact, this stereotype can be viewed as another wording of the previous one: there is little homework, therefore, knowledge cannot be acquired that well, consequently, education is of low quality. However, the same stereotype can be given a positive connotation. Currently, many parents in Russia are worried that the school load for children is too heavy, which, consequently, causes many health problems. Teachers and educators are looking at models in other countries which would lower the burden. So some people, by thinking that there is indeed less homework in American high schools, may look at their fictitious model with praise and admiration: they are really taking care of their kids over there. Which of these two interpretations is the better fit is hard to say, since I didn't have a chance to conduct personal

interviews. Only in one survey response it was mentioned that “education in the US is good because there is no extra load”. The certain thing is that the stereotype is transformed as people get to study in an American school.

Stereotype 5: American schools are rich.

This stereotype has multiple wording variations. Here are some of them as they were put in survey responses: “schools are rich, beautiful new furniture...”, “is equipped with new furniture, big computer classes”, “teachers have high salaries”. All of them, whether talking about equipment or teachers’ salaries, have at the core one and the same idea: there is money in the USA and, therefore, there is money in American schools. Partially, this opinion comes from the lack of knowledge as to how American schools are financed. On several occasions, I saw how surprised people were when they found out that the education in the US is highly decentralized and there is no equal distribution of money coming from the “center” to all schools. People assume that the richness of the country automatically translates into rich schools and big salaries.

My US participants also mentioned that the school they went to was rich compared to their schools back home. In most cases, students mentioned excellent sports facilities, computer classes, availability of the Internet but also well-equipped laboratories:

- And also we are doing different experiments in our biology class. Recently we were learning about different microscopes and how to work with them and were doing labs in biology. In my school we didn’t have any microscopes and so there were no labs. (from the interview with Anna)

That was unheard of in their schools back home. When I was doing my observation, I also couldn’t help noticing that the school was much better equipped. By luck, one of the classes I was observing (a Spanish class) was partly held in the computer class but, even apart from that, there was a computer, a VCR and a phone in every single room! Again, it should be remembered that this is only one particular high school that may be very different from the

rest of the US. Nevertheless, on seeing that, one unwillingly begins to stereotype, as what you see easily connects to the US national wealth.

Another connection is quite obvious; that is, the availability of funding and the quality of education. As the example taken from the interview with Anna shows, her educational experience in her home country wasn't as rich, as there was no access to some equipment due to the lack of funds. It seems like we encounter a paradox here: people hold that American schools are rich but at the same time they think that the education is of low quality. What I noticed is that US participants hold this stereotype as positive. For them (like for Anna, for instance), more money in schools also means more opportunities.

At the same time, "American schools are rich" has a negative connotation for Russian participants. In fact, in several responses "American schools are rich..." is only the beginning of the sentence which is continued with the reference to the quality of education: "Rich, beautiful, news furniture but education is bad". It is as if they were trying to say that even though schools in Russia do not have sufficient funds, they manage to offer better education. From that they want others to speculate that, if Russian schools got all that money, they would definitely be the best in the world. The last explanation given for stereotype 3 can be applied here again: people feel threat to their self esteem which is coupled with envy and frustration. So they choose stereotyping as the defense mechanism.

Stereotype 6: All American schools are big.

Many Russian participants mentioned that "schools are big" or "schools are very big". Most likely, this is the image they got from television programs and movies since this stereotype is a visual representation. What they see is compared to their schools in Russia, and they draw a conclusion about the relative size of the school. Do people like it bigger? Is it a positive or a negative stereotype? Of course, there can be quite different implications here,

both negative and positive. For instance, we may assume that people see this characteristic as negative because a person (especially a child) can get lost (indirect meaning) in the bigness of the school. S/he can feel fewer connections to people; it is like living in a big city where very often people don't know who lives the floor above them. The sense of community is not so strong. Furthermore, in the minds of others, big size can be associated with more crime, especially if we consider that there is a stereotype about complete freedom and lack of rules in American schools. It is easy to assume that unruly crowds of teenagers teem the buildings. However, the responses I received show that teenagers view this stereotype as positive because on several occasions the word big goes together with the word beautiful: "All schools are big and beautiful".

The same can be said about US participants. Indeed, all of them mentioned that the school was very big. It was the first thing that struck them on their first day of school. When I asked one participant to describe how she remembered her first day, she started by saying:

When I first came to school, when we [with parents] came to school for the first time to enroll. We were like, is that the school??? All of us standing in front watching how everybody is leaving the building. ...Then they gave me the map of the school and it was easy. (from interview with Anastasia)

Though I knew that many (or even most) schools in America were indeed much bigger than average Russian schools, I was really surprised by the size of it when I came to do my observation. And I really appreciated that the students were meeting me there. Otherwise I would have gotten lost. I mentioned before that I would not go into details of how much truth there is in a stereotype. However, with this stereotype, it seems like the kernel of truth is there: schools in the US are generally big in comparison to Russian schools.

Half-stereotype: In the US students wear uniforms in schools.

I refer to this as half-stereotype because my US participants never mentioned that that was their opinion before coming to the US or they knew that other people thought so even

though we did discuss clothing. I do not have sufficient evidence to claim this is a stereotype. However, I found this statement repeatedly in the survey. That is why I decided to include it here. Again, if it were possible for me to talk to my Russian participants, I would probably be more clear on whether this is a stereotype or not. Interestingly, it is the opposite of the stereotype of complete freedom, part of which is that you can wear whatever you want to school. This is a completely different image of an American school. How can we explain that? I think the answer is quite simple: lack of information and confusion between different types of schools. Most likely these teenagers had a general image of schools abroad as elite boarding schools somewhere in Switzerland and Britain. These schools are often talked about in Russia since children of prominent politicians are studying there. In most cases, they are just referred to as “schools abroad”. That is where the image of the uniform comes from.

In this section I singled out six stereotypes that were most commonly mentioned by US and Russian participants and tried to give explanations as to the possible sources of these stereotypes. However, I realize that there are other interpretations possible. At the same time, I tried to decide whether a particular stereotype has negative or positive connotations. When both are possible, explanation is given in parenthesis. Here is the summary:

Stereotype	Positive connotation	Negative connotation	Explanation
There is a complete freedom in American schools	● (= freedom of expression)	● (=children are unruly, chaos)	Cultural factor (power distance)
Children are respected	●		Cultural factor (power distance)
Education is of low quality		●	- misinterpreting choice; - cultural factor (uncertainty avoidance); - historical context
There is no or little homework in American schools	● (= good for health)	● (= low quality of education)	- lack of information of distorted information
Schools are rich	● (= good	● (= rich but of	- historic context

	equipment etc.. for US participants)	low quality)	(necessity to maintain self-image)
Schools are big	• (= big and beautiful) That's what the study showed	• (individual can get lost; crime) Was not encountered in this study	- images from TV, comparisons to schools in Russia.

While these stereotypes were obtained by searching for emic categories that came from the participants themselves, the closed-ended part of the survey was written from the etic, that is outsider's, perspective. Participants had to decide whether statements given to them are characteristic of Russian, American, both or neither high schools. They could not come up with their own statements or stereotypes; they were pre-set to them. However, to reduce subjectivity, I did not put the statements that I thought were stereotypes. Rather, I used themes obtained from the interviews as such statements. So the survey served the purpose of checking my qualitative data. Purposefully, some statements are the reverse of stereotypes. For instance, instead of writing that education is of low quality, I wrote "good quality education". Sometimes there are also several statements describing one and the same idea. Thus, I also put in a statement "Mathematics is taught poorly". There were 15 questions in total. Here are the results on those most relevant to the stereotypes developed out of qualitative data:

Statement	Russian Schools (only)	American Schools (only)	Russian and American Schools	Neither
Schools are big	34%	53%	11%	2%
There is a lot of homework	95%	0%	5%	0%
You can get good quality education	66%	3%	26%	5%
Mathematics is taught poorly	0%	79%	0%	21%
No restrictions	10%	45%	35%	10%

in terms of what to wear				
Teachers respect students	24%	24%	47%	5%

Clearly, most disparity between Russian and American schools is expressed in relation to the statements of “There is a lot of homework” and “mathematics is taught poorly”. So these are the most often stereotyped statements. At the same time, these two statements are the two that were most often raised as points of discussion in my interviews with participants in the US. They were very strong in their opinions concerning these topics. These data also reflect propositions of the self-image maintenance theory. None of the participants admitted that math is taught poorly in Russia, while most thought that this was the case in the United States.

By summing up the percentages given in the last two columns, we will see what proportion of students thinks that there are no differences between Russian and American schools on a particular issue:

Schools are big	There is a lot of homework	You can get quality education	Math is taught poorly	No restrictions on clothes	Students are respected by teachers
13%	5%	31%	21%	45%	52%

Thus, the last two statements are the ones that represent the least stereotyped knowledge. According to these data, we could conclude that “Students are respected by teachers” is not a stereotype, especially since the majority of the students (47%) think that they are respected in both countries. However, according to the data collected from the interviews and the open-ended question, it is still a stereotype because most students were discussing the issue of how they were finding teachers very respectful and friendly. It is no

accident that both Russian and US participants discussed the issue at length. However, it should be borne in mind that the stereotype is much weaker.

The second purpose of the survey was to look at what influenced participants in their image formation of a typical American high school. Out of 38 people, 30 claimed that they got their image from movies, shows and commercials on TV, 12 from stories of people who have studied in an American school (relatives or friends), 9 from news on TV, and 3 said they were learning about American schools from the Internet. Interestingly, none of the students chose the option of teachers and parents in influencing their opinions. So mass media seems to be the main factor in forming their attitudes. This information can be used in organizing trainings and orientation programs for the youth. As one of the activities during such programs, they can be asked together with a facilitator to analyze and discuss what comes to them from their TV screens.

Checking the contact theory hypothesis

So far I have enumerated the stereotypes, explained them and showed the sources from which they are coming. One of the sources is stories told by people who have come through the system. For instance, one of the survey participants mentioned that his uncle with his family has moved to the United States; that is how he is learning about schools there. He said, "I know for sure because my uncle is over there with his family". In other cases, students have friends who have studied in the United States. The contact hypothesis is the theory that assumes that people lose stereotypes against a group as they meet with people of the stereotyped group or, similarly, they lose stereotypes of certain practices in a given culture when they come into contact with that culture. Otherwise, "if observers know very little about a given country, if they have very few occasions to interact with citizens of this country, the only behaviours they will observe are those that attract media attention" (Leyens

et al., 1994, p. 41). While for participants in my sample, media did turn out to be the major factor, it would be interesting to look into whether more contact with those who have experience or whether experience itself influences the process of stereotyping.

First, I examine whether there are fewer stereotypes expressed by those who claim they have been influenced by personal stories of others. Here is a similar chart with the same statements:

Statement	Russian Schools (only)	American Schools (only)	Russian and American Schools	Neither
Schools are big	6%	42%	50%	0%
There is a lot of homework	100%	0%	0%	0%
You can get good quality education	67%	8%	17%	8%
Mathematics is taught poorly	0%	100%	0%	0%
No restrictions in terms of what to wear	17%	50%	33%	0%
Teachers respect students	33%	17%	42%	8%

There is no dramatic change that would indicate that more contact in this case accounted for fewer stereotypes. In some cases, the situation is reverse. While 21% of the entire group thought that there is no difference in how mathematics is taught in Russia and in the US, all participants who were influenced by personal accounts thought that, in fact, mathematics was taught poorly in the US.

Furthermore, in the survey I asked the participants to indicate if they have been in the USA and in general how often they travel abroad. This was done to check if there was any correlation between how often people travel abroad and the number of stereotypes they have.

The correlation coefficient was found to be -0.222 which shows a weak dependence between the variables. The negative value indicates that the more often people travel abroad, the fewer stereotypes they have. The regression I ran showed the same correlation as it is reflected in the regression equation: $y = 3.93 - 0.240x$ where x is the independent variable of the number of times students traveled abroad and the dependent variable y represents the number of stereotypes they have. As x increases, y decreases. So my initial guess that the negative relation exists is confirmed. However, $r^2=4.9$ is very small and the coefficient on x is insignificant ($= -1.37$). This means that there are other factors (besides traveling abroad) that are influencing y and are missing from the equation. I can only speculate what these factors are because I did not collect sufficient data to include more variables in my analysis. For instance, the level of parents' education, some personality traits, foreign language skills as well the time spent watching American movies, can all be the factors and of course the nature of travel itself (short vacation vs. an exchange program).

We can conclude that contact itself cannot be sufficient to change stereotypes. It should be accompanied by some other techniques that could help students decrease their stereotypes. Additionally, it should be mentioned that it is not only that there should be something besides contact to see the change; it is also the nature of the contact that is important. As investigated by Cook, in the situations of contact (or exposure to another culture), attitudes change under certain conditions (Cook, 1984).

First of all, the situation of contact should not confirm the existing stereotype. Let us say that by chance a newly arrived immigrant from Russia gets into the school which is huge, where they don't know how to teach math and where rules are not obeyed. If these had been the person's stereotypes before coming to the US and the person saw that they were the realities, the stereotypes are reconfirmed and the belief in them, in fact, increases. Secondly,

the stereotyping and the stereotyped cultures should be of equal status for the contact to be beneficial. Finally, there should be no competition between the cultures. I would agree with Cook (1984) that these are essential for achieving success. Unfortunately, we rarely encounter such ideal situations. Seldom can we find perfect conditions that would momentarily erase our stereotypes. That is why once again I want to emphasize the importance of purposefully organized trainings and workshops aimed at helping people understand other cultures better.

Credibility and limitations of the study

Credibility is important for any type of research, but even more so for qualitative studies. “The qualitative researcher’s task is to render an account of participants’ worldviews as honestly and fully as possible” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 65), but how one can guarantee that the research results indeed present the worldview of the participant as the participant himself or herself understands this world? Qualitative studies, more than quantitative, are threatened by accusations of being subjective and not trustworthy. In my case the credibility of the first (qualitative) part of the project is crucial since the developed themes were used further as the statements in the survey. Several strategies were used to ensure the credibility. They are participant validation, the strategies of triangulation, and “being there”, as well as the use of the community of practice.

First of all, to make sure that the themes developed as a result of the interviews and an observation in the US really reflect my participants’ thoughts and feelings, the third clarifying interview was employed where I asked participants to look at my interpretations of our previous dialogues. At the same time throughout the first interviews and interviews with parents, I was trying to ask as many clarifying questions as possible.

“Being there” strategy is associated with the prolonged observation during which I shadowed one of the students. By doing this I could understand the phenomenon that I was studying better.

Triangulation implies the use of different data gathering methods. For instance, the project, although heavily relying on interviews, was complemented by the observation which served as the basis for development of categories obtained in the interviews as well as for the emergence of new categories. When developing a theme, it was crucial to see that it was part not just of the interviews but of the observation as well. At the same time the second part of the project held in Russia served as a good addition that helped not only to check my preliminary findings, but to discover some more as well as enrich my understanding of the phenomenon. As a result, I was able to check one answer against the other by looking at data obtained by employing a different methodology.

I found it helpful to use the community of practice especially because the group in which I was working had similar problems. For instance, we were trying to figure out together how to conduct the observation because our projects were of phenomenological genre and observation seemed to be at the periphery of methodology used at the beginning. After the observation was conducted, the group of colleagues assisted me by reading through my field notes and marking some useful comments about how I organized them. That helped me further when I started to use these field notes for analysis.

Finally, the community of practice was helpful throughout my work on this project and at the same time served as one more strategy to make the project more credible. For instance, a group of students working with me in the Qualitative research methods class helped by reading through my observation notes and interviews transcripts, making useful comments which later on helped me in organizing and interpreting my data. At the same time,

when I started the second phase of the project in Russia, my colleagues who were conducting surveys for me were of great help. They provided me with more information on the participants, discussed with me the results of the survey, and shared their ideas about the phenomenon.

With all this being said, there are certain limitations to the study that should be noted and explained. The results of the project should be interpreted in accordance with these limitations.

Both US and Russian parts of the project were conducted with the participants who attend a certain type of high school. Thus, all US students taking part in the project go to Amherst Regional High School which is the school typical for small American university towns. It represents only one type of school found in the United States. So the experiences of these students are limited only to this one type. The same can be said about two schools in Russia. One of them is situated in a small town similar to Amherst, another is in St Petersburg, but most parents of the children participating in the study have high levels of education, and the school itself offers a rigorous curriculum. Again when these children were answering the survey they, most likely, were keeping in mind the school they are going to as a model of a Russian school and comparing this model to whatever image of the American school they have.

Secondly, it should be admitted that both samples (in the US and in Russia) are rather small. For the qualitative part of the study, it was impossible to include more participants since the main method was that of deep interviews which lasted at least more than an hour each. As for the part conducted in Russia, I could only conduct surveys in those schools to which I had direct access, therefore, bigger samples would have been a problem. Besides,

there would have been a huge mismatch between the number of participants in the United States and in Russia.

Finally, I could not conduct surveys in Russia myself. Therefore, I did not have an opportunity to talk directly to the participants, to ask for clarifying questions which sometimes were needed especially for the open-ended part of the survey or even to see them.

Because of these limitations I am not making any inferences from the data I analyzed as to Russian society at large. My conclusions are relevant only for the particular setting I was looking at.

Final considerations

As I was working on the project, I realized that there are a lot of interesting issues arising from what I was exploring, issues that need to be addressed, but which are beyond the scope of what I can do now. First of all, the study of stereotypes in Russia in regards to American schools can be expanded. I was looking only at one region in the North-West of Russia. If possible, I would conduct a bigger study involving students, parents and teachers in different regions of Russia. In this case it would be possible to consider more factors influencing stereotyping. I showed the existence of the correlation between the number of stereotypes and the frequency of students' traveling abroad. However, a lot of factors were missing. In a bigger study, it would be possible to look at such factors as rural vs. urban community, social class, parents' education, region in Russia (center vs. far-off regions).

Secondly, in my interviews with US participants, I noticed that there are certain differences between how older generation (parents) and students view American schools. In several interviews my participants mentioned that their parents think that schools in the US are such and such but they did not agree with that. I began to wonder if there is indeed a tendency among younger people to have fewer stereotypes because they are growing in a

different socio-political context. But I could not draw any conclusions as my sample in Russia included only students as the participants. However, it would be interesting to look at the change of stereotypes throughout time and compare the opinions of parents and their children in Russia.

Thirdly, a more thorough study on how stereotypes can be changed should be conducted. This study would be of great practical value. Many immigrant children as well as exchange students would have a more valuable and successful experience if they were not caught by their stereotypes. How can a child who from the very beginning dislikes his/her school (and is not willing to change his/her opinion) become a successful learner and a true member of the school community? I propose several possible suggestions:

- to organize special training sessions for those intending to study in the US (especially potential immigrant children);
- to have more information about US high schools available in American culture centers (or American corners as they are called). Presently, there are centers like that established by the US Embassy in many cities in Russia. However, most of them have information only in regards to colleges and graduate schools in the United States. All educational workshops organized by these centers again are aiming at higher education;
- if possible to include more varied information about US high school in the English language curriculum in Russian schools;

These are just considerations and it would be useful to see how some of them work in practice and then draw conclusions on whether it is indeed possible to change attitude by some of these means. Hopefully, in the future there will be more people among us who will agree with the statement I got from one of my Russian participants: "In the States some

schools are better than school in Russia and there are also those that are worse. We are the same, but they speak English over there.”

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ATTACHMENT 1

SURVEY FOR RUSSIAN STUDENTS (translated into English)

- I. Describe your image of an American school as fully as you can in one-two paragraphs.
- II. What influenced your opinion about American schools? Circle all answers that apply.
 - a) TV (movies, TV series, commercials...)
 - b) news
 - c) Information on the Internet
 - d) Stories of people who are/were studying there.
 - e) Parents and Teachers
 - f) Other

III. Below there are 15 statements made by other people about schools and school life. Read each statement and decide whether it refers to a school in Russia, in the United States, in both countries or neither. If you think the sentence is about a Russian school write R to the right of the sentence, if you think it is about a US school put letter A. If you think the sentence is true for both Russian and American schools put to letters R, A. And put “-“ if you think the sentence refers to neither.

1. Schools offer good quality education.
2. Foreign languages are taught well in school.
3. There is a lot of homework.
4. Students come to school more to chat with their friends than to study
5. There are a lot of extracurricular activities.
6. It is easy to study.
7. There are no restrictions as to what to wear.
8. Most students arrive in their own cars.
9. Math is taught poorly.
10. Schools are very big.
11. Teachers respect students.
12. It is possible to come to school with your homework not done.
13. It is interesting to study.
14. There are not many students per class.
15. There are a lot of opportunities to express oneself in school

IV. Choose what refers to you and circle the answer.

1. What grade are you in?
A) 7 b) 8 c) 9 d) 10 e) 11
2. Have you ever been in the US?
A) yes b) no
3. How often do you travel abroad?
A) every year b) have been several times
B) have been once r) never went abroad

ATTACHMENT 2

Possible training design

INTRODUCTION

This training design is targeted towards Russian high school students (age 14-17) who are planning to move to the United States or to go there on an exchange program and, consequently, attend a US high school there. Very often exchange students have some kind of pre-departure cultural orientation program which focuses primarily on cultural differences (between Russia and the United States in this case) and some aspects of living with host families. However, there is not much attention paid to what their schools will be like in the US. Even worse so, immigrant children have almost no opportunity to learn beforehand about peculiarities of their new American high schools. They come unprepared and, as a result, may become easily frustrated with their experience studying in the US. The problem is more than just a lack of knowledge about American schools; many children and parents come to the US with deep-rooted stereotypes about this country's education, stereotypes that they hold for the only truth. I have been doing research on the issue of stereotypes towards American high schools in Russia. Here are the main findings in the form of stereotypes:

1. There is a complete freedom in American schools.
2. Children are respected in American schools.
3. Education in American schools is of low quality.
4. There is little or no homework in US high schools.
5. American schools are rich.
6. All American schools are big.

Most stereotypes do have a kernel of truth in them but the problem is that they tend to generalize. Yes, education in some American schools is of low quality (and in some Russian

schools as well) but there are schools where it is good or excellent. Another problem with stereotypes is that they are fixed ideas that people are not willing to change and that they hold as the only truth. Any of the above mentioned stereotypes can become a detrimental factor in a teenager's adjustment to the new American school setting. For instance, a child beginning his/her first day of schools with an attitude that "everything is bad here and is for stupid people only" will not be willing to learn much. It is reported that many immigrant children from the former Soviet Union face serious problems studying in the US and many of these problems are because of lack of interest and negative attitude (also the attitude of their parents!). Stereotypes are hard to change but at least it is possible to try to show that there is a variety of opinions, variety of "truths" not just one. That is why trainings focusing particularly on exploring new school settings are necessary before (or at least at the beginning of) children immerse themselves into the unfamiliar environment. I realize that attitudes change very slowly and one training will no do it but at least it can give a glimpse of the reality; it can be a first step raising awareness of these teenagers.

Participants: Russian high school students who are going to study in the US. There will be maximum 20 students in the training.

Location: pre-departure training taking place in Russia. Training itself will be held in the building of a local high school. This is done on purpose to draw comparisons between American and Russian learning environments.

Time: One-two months before their departure to the United States. Training will be held on two consecutive afternoons. Therefore, there will be two sessions, three hours each.

Day 1

Goal: to learn to see a variety of things instead of one.

Objectives:

- ❖ To explore our images of American and Russian schools;
- ❖ To learn to describe a situation in nonjudgmental terms;
- ❖ To learn to give several interpretations to one and the same event;
- ❖ To learn to appreciate a variety of opinions;

* It is highly recommended that participants are presented with both the objectives and the activities for the day at the very beginning of the workshop. This is important for any training but particularly for Russian culture. Russian culture is characterized by high uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1997) which means that for many Russian people it is hard to tackle any situation of ambiguity. Preference is given to structure. Participants would feel uncomfortable and might get frustrated if they did not know the course of activities for the day. Also when presenting objectives (and activities later on), the trainer should remember that the audience is *teenagers!* It means that language should be chosen accordingly.

Agenda for the day (put on the blackboard):

- ❖ Introduction and an opener
- ❖ “Let’s build our schools!” activity;
- ❖ Energizer
- ❖ Watching some movie abstracts
- ❖ Discussion of the movie. What did you see?
- ❖ The Zebra’s stripes activity
- ❖ Conclusion

INTRODUCTION (15 minutes)

In the introduction it is important to set the tone of the training, to show who the trainer is and how s/he is related to the participants. Ideally, this kind of training should be conducted by a

person who has had experience studying both in an American and in a Russian school. However, the trainer should not distance himself/herself from the participants. Because the training deals a lot with attitudes, opinions and feelings, it would be ideal if the trainer could work as closely as possible with the participants making the training participatory in nature. To do this one may open the introduction by saying “We will be exploring together our opinions about school. Of course, I will share my experience but I went to school 10 years ago so you probably can tell me much more about what school life is all about”. Further, an opener is introduced for participants and the trainer to get to know each other.

Opener (Eitington, 2002, p. 10): pass around the room a bowl of candy (M&Ms) and ask participants to take as many as they want to. Of course, this should be done in a very relaxed manner so that they don’t suspect that this is a part of an activity coming up. Finally announce that for each candy a person should tell everybody something about himself/herself. Finally, the trainer briefly talks about different activities that participants will be involved in during the session.

ACTIVITY: LET’S BUILD OUR SCHOOLS! (50 minutes)

Objective for the activity: to explore our images of schools by working cooperatively in groups.

Materials to be used: toy building blocks with words and sentences written on some of them.

Some sentences will potentially refer to what Russian people hold as stereotypes about American schools while others will be true for what is considered a typical Russian school.

Examples: “wear what you want”, “science rules”, “no homework”, “no make-up”, “say what you want”. However, there should be plenty of blocks empty for participants to write their own statements. Four sets of blocks should be prepared (for each team). Additional building and decorating materials such as colored paper, stickers, tape should be provided.

Procedure:

1. Divide students into four teams by counting off to 5.
2. Explain that they are not students any longer. By magic they turn into builders, engineers and designers. “Team #1 and Team#2 were chosen to help two US towns build their schools. You are building American schools. So think as a team what American schools are like? Team#3 and Team#4 you will be working in Russia. What are Russian schools like? You will be working under strict deadlines. Your schools should be built by... time (give students 20 minutes). Don’t forget to give a name to your school!”
3. Four teams start working on their buildings. This exercise has also a covert (inner) objective of learning how to work in teams. Cooperative learning is used more widely in the US than in Russia and since students will be moving to the United States, it would be useful to give them at least a glimpse of learning methods used there. The trainer should be aware of these differences, however, and help the groups in their work.
4. Group presentations of their work (3-5 minutes per group). Each group is asked to explain why particular blocks were chosen, what the design stands for, why they chose particular rules for their school.
5. Concluding discussion (10 minutes). So what images do we have of Russian and American schools? Make two columns on the blackboard. Ask participants to name statements referring to Russian and American schools. Write them on the board. The final and very important question for this discussion is where do we get our opinions from? How do we know that American schools are the way we think they are? Participants will be naming different sources of their knowledge: friends (or relatives)

who are studying in the US, movies, news. My studies showed that students name mass media as the main source of their image of American schools. That is why some of the following activities will be organized using video.

ENERGIZER (5-10 minutes)

The purpose of this energizer is not only to help participants relax after the previous activity but also to relate to some of the objectives put forward at the beginning, namely, to learn to give several interpretations to one and the same event and to appreciate a variety of opinions. Participants are asked to stand up from where they are sitting and form a circle in the middle. Then they are given a stick (a branch from a tree) and are asked to show how they can use this stick in an inventive way. Each participant has to come up with his/her own action. The energizer should start with the trainer himself/herself setting an example. Possible usage of a stick: use it for fishing, as a walking stick, as a writing tool, to cook shish kebab. So first the trainer comes in the middle of the circle and shows how s/he will be using the stick. Conclude the energizer by saying that there are so many different ways to look at such a simple thing as a stick. It can be used for so many purposes by different people. There is no simple one solution.

ACTIVITY: WATCHING THE VIDEO (40 minutes)

Objective for the activity: to see and discuss the ways mass media portray American high schools.

Equipment and materials: it would be easier to use the in-focus projector and a CD than a videotape because with a CD it is possible to rewind very fast or even to make a movie combined of different episodes from several movies. I suggest the trainer choose several short episodes that capture the US high school atmosphere, including buildings, classrooms, cafeterias as well as student-student and student-teacher relationships. Ideally there would be

five three minute episodes from movies and TV series popular among Russian teenagers. For instance, it is possible to use some scenes from “American Pie”. This movie has some short episodes which show the inside of the school, some extracurricular activities, the library and the cafeteria.

Procedure: It is essential to set the task for the students before they actually start watching the movie: “We are going to watch several episodes from American movies that take place in different high schools. Observe as much as you can.

- ❖ Pay special attention to the physical setting. What do buildings look like? What is it like inside?
- ❖ Observe the classroom. How is the class conducted?
- ❖ What is unusual for you?
- ❖ Compare these schools to the one you designed. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

Students watch all episodes and at the end the trainer starts the discussion of the questions posed above. Finally, the most important question is “Are all American schools like that?” “Should we believe what we see in movies?” To help participants understand that there are many differences within the US the trainer may hint at how there are so many different Russian schools. The USA just like Russia is a big country where schools in rural area would differ from urban schools, quality of education will be different in different schools...

ACTIVITY: THE ZEBRA STRIPES (15-20 minutes) (Hubbard, 1996)

Objective: to help realize that we all have different perceptions of one and the same situation.

Relevance for the training: this activity is perfect for demonstrating that what we see is not always the way it is. People tend to interpret things according to their cultural values as well

as to their personal philosophies. That is why one person's understanding of what constitutes useful high quality education can be different from another person.

Procedure:

- ❖ Divide students into two groups by counting off to two.
- ❖ Ask group one to go to a different room. The two groups shouldn't communicate with each other during the activity.
- ❖ Show a picture of a zebra to group 1 (handout 1) And let them decide what color is the animal and what color are the stripes.
- ❖ Show a picture of a zebra to group #2 (handout2). What color is the animal? What color are the stripes?
- ❖ Both groups come together and are shown a picture of yet another zebra (handout 3). Now they have to decide on the color of the animal. Group one who saw the white animal is likely to claim that this animal is white as well while group 2 will most likely say that it is black.
- ❖ Debrief. Why do we see things differently? Are zebras the same? Make a transfer to the discussion of schools. Are they all the same? Can we claim that all schools are big and offer poor education?

CONCLUSION FOR THE DAY:

Participants summarize what has been learned during the first day. For evaluation of the first day they are given green and red cards on which they can say what was useful for them (green cards) and what not (red cards). They are also asked to write any suggestions for the second day of the training.

Finally, they are given two tasks. The trainer explains that s/he is inviting two students who have just returned from the United States. They have studying there for a

year. They will facilitate part of the second day's session. Participants are encouraged to think about the possible questions they might want to ask the facilitators. The second task for the participants is to go to www.google.com and find photos of American high schools by going to the image option on Google. They are asked to bring the images if possible or to describe what they find. These images will be used and discussed during the second day.

Day 2

This session is facilitated by the trainer and two assistants – teenagers who recently returned from their study in the USA. Inviting those who actually have had the experience of studying in the United States is crucial for this kind of training. Stories from real witnesses can if not shake the stereotypes, at least give a variety of different stories to choose from. A story of one assistant can be quite different from that of another. When discussing something, they may start by “In my school...” and then “But in my school it was different...” This will illustrate the existing differences within US high school system.

Goal: to expand knowledge on US high schools

Objectives:

- ❖ To learn differences within US high schools;
- ❖ To practice and build some skills necessary for survival in an American school;

This session is oriented more towards skill building and that is why involves activities requiring active participation such as role-playing and decision-making. In general, the first session served to analyze the images (stereotypes) we have and at the end show that there is

no universal definition of an American school. They are different. That is where the second session picks up the theme.

Agenda for the day (put on the blackboard):

- ❖ Introduction;
- ❖ Ice-breaker;
- ❖ Photo review activity;
- ❖ Choosing classes activity;
- ❖ Role-plays;
- ❖ “funny American math”;
- ❖ Evaluation

INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

Briefly go over the agenda for the day. Explain how this day’s session is connected with the previous one. Explain what an ice-breaker is if necessary.

ICE-BREAKER (15 minutes) (Eittington, 2002, p. 4).

The ice-breaker is necessary to introduce the two facilitators and make the participants comfortable working with them. This ice-breaker is called “My personal Shield” where participants as well as the facilitators and the trainer are asked to draw their coat-of-arms with several boxes where they should respond to the following questions:

- The best time I ever had;
- My greatest accomplishment;
- The place where I grew up;
- My expectations for the future;
- My family and friends;
- My fears about the future;

Participants' sharing about their fears and expectations may also be useful in implementing further activities where basically they will discuss their future life in the US with the facilitators. Each participant makes his/her own shield. Markers and paper are provided. Each shield will also bear the name of the participant to make it easier for the facilitators and the participants remember each other's names. Participants briefly describe different symbols on their coats-of-arm.

ACTIVITY: PHOTO REVIEW AND DISCUSSION (40 minutes)

This activity is conducted by the two facilitators. They become the trainers while the trainer assists them in their work. The point is that participants will be talking to students just like them. Potentially there should be more trust and they be more comfortable sharing their thoughts and asking questions.

Objective: to look at differences among US high schools and to learn from facilitators' stories.

Materials: Photos from the Internet found by participants and photos, pictures brought by the trainer and the facilitators. Photos should reflect the physical environment as well as different situations and events in high schools (e.g., graduation, extracurricular activities...). In general, photos should reflect high school life.

Procedure: Participants are divided into two groups. Division can be random or if they already know where in the US they will be going to, the two groups can be chosen as urban vs. rural areas or East Coast vs. West Coast. Though it would be hard to form groups like this. Then each facilitator joins one of the groups. The two groups can stay in the same room, but preferably they should be sitting in a circle with photos in the middle. Participants start off by sharing what they have found on the Internet. They compare different pictures and the facilitators are answering their questions about things they don't understand in the photos. Then facilitators in each group are telling about their experience supporting their story with

the pictures. Participants are encouraged to ask as many questions as possible. Finally put the two groups back together and debrief. Was there anything new you have discovered?

Discussion in groups should take up to 30 minutes with 10 minutes of debriefing at the end.

ACTIVITY: CHOOSING CLASSES (20 minutes)

One of the main differences between Russian and American school systems is that in the US high school students are allowed to elect classes they want to study. In Russia all classes are obligatory and students will be taking all classes together. This is a big difference which need to be addressed since skills of choosing classes should be developed in order to succeed in the new American setting. It is not as easy as it may seem. There are certain rules (explicit and implicit) as to how to choose classes depending on whether you want to go to college or not afterwards. Newly arriving immigrants are not familiar with these procedures and thus the whole experience of selecting the right classes can become a frustrating experience for them.

Objective: to learn some tricks of choosing the right classes.

Materials: copies of course catalogs from real high school from the US.

Procedure: This activity is conducted by the facilitators. Students are again divided into two groups. It is better to switch the facilitators for this activity between the groups. Facilitators serve as counselors and participants take on the role of high school students in the US who are asked to make up their schedule using the course catalog. The role of counselors should be explained at the beginning of the activity. At the end students share their schedules with each other and debrief on how they actually liked the experience.

ROLE-PLAY (25 minutes)

Objective: to understand American high school setting better by practicing certain skills

Procedure and the description of the role-play: This activity will be built as a fishing bowl with several participants actually role playing and the others sitting around and carefully

observing. As a continuation of the previous exercise the role play can be based on the issue of choosing classes. Actually this is a real life situation that was described to me by one of the Russian children parents in an interview. There are three roles: a Russian student, a parent and a counselor at school. The role of the counselor can be played by one of the facilitators. But it can also be played by a participant. A parent and a student roles are chosen among the participants. Each of them receives a card briefly describing the situation and their role in it.

For the student: You have just arrived in the US and it is the beginning of your first semester at an American school. You were given a course catalog and were told that a counselor can help with choosing your classes. You decide to do it on your own. You are excited there are so many different classes that you like. You can actually study things that have always been your hobbies: photography, theater, choir! But when you come home and show your schedule to your mom, she is angry. She thinks the school is of low quality. They don't even teach physics here! So together with your mom you go to the counselor and try to negotiate your classes for the semester.

For the parent: Your child has just returned from school and has brought you his/her schedule. You are terrified. There are only fun classes on the list. You don't understand what is happening because you don't know much about electing classes. You blame the school and start thinking about sending your child back to Russia. You go to school together with your child to talk to the counselor. Maybe there are better schools in the area that do teach sciences?

For the counselor: You have two visitors in your office: your newly arrived student from Russia and his/her mother. They want to talk about the schedule for the fall semester. Their English is not very good but you're trying to do your best to understand what they want. They seem not to understand how classes are chosen. Try to calm them down and help with the problem.

Before the role play other participants are given two general questions: What is the problem here? Why do we have this problem?

After the role play start the discussion. It would be useful to ask those who actually played the roles of the student and the parent about their feelings during the scene. What did they feel? Were they frustrated or angry? Why? And finally the trainer can ask the participants what they would do in a situation like that.

ACTIVITY: FUNNY AMERICAN MATH (10 minutes)

Background info on the issue: Mathematics is one of those subjects that people in Russia often think is taught especially poorly in the States. Parents are especially concerned about their child attending an American school and learning nothing in math there. One of the problems is that when children arrived they have a test in math and are put into a certain level class depending on the results. As their English is not very good and because of differences in standards they are placed lower than their real knowledge is. They are stuck studying what they have already learned several years ago and consequently they think that math is of low level in the States. Very often I would hear something like: “Oh, in 11th grade they are learning in math what we in Russia learn in the 6th grade. I know because my friend who is studying there told me.” Furthermore, one of the students told me that she scored less on the test because of the differences in math notation. The teacher marked her answers as wrong because he didn’t understand them.

Objective: to make students aware of the differences in math notation.

Procedure: Students are divided into five teams of four. Then they are suggested two different problem sets and their solutions written down. They do not have to solve anything (it is not a math class!). Rather they are asked to translate the notation. One of the problems is solved by an American student and is written the way they do it in the States while the other is written

by the Russian student (also in English). Both solutions are written on flip chart paper. What is the difference between the two? Can you “translate” American into Russian and vice versa? Each team is given 10 minutes for corrections. They correct with a marker of a different color and then put the paper on the wall for others to see. Facilitators can join in some groups and assist them with the task. This is just a fun activity that, however, illustrates differences that can potentially cause misunderstanding.

Some differences in notation:

Decimals: 0,07 (Europe) .07 (US) This one causes most problems

Large numbers: 250980 (Europe) 250,980 (US) Students may confuse this with decimals

Some trigonometry: tg (for tangent) tan (in US for tangent)

Division procedure is done differently.

EVALUATION (15 minutes)

Evaluation is done openly and is participatory in nature. Three points in a room are chosen for “high learning” location “moderate learning” and “limited learning”. Then participants are asked to place themselves in one of the locations. Then the trainer asks people in each group to explain why they chose a particular location. At the end of the training it would be useful if the two facilitators could give their contact information to all the participants and encourage them to call them with any questions they may have.

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