**A Russian View on Culture, Language and Mentality**

by Elena Nossal

**Introduction**

You probably want to know what Americans think about Russians and vice versa. Below you can read what Elena from Russia has to say in answer to some ideas expressed by James K., an American language professor and cross cultural trainer:

**Elena says:**
A little more on cultural differences in reply to Jamie [James K.]:

First of all I have to say a couple of words on the «secrecy» complex, which I think is only alive in older people here.

You mention that a Russian man and a Russian woman have a problem with keeping innocent things secret. I do not know how old they are and when they immigrated into the USA. It could have been possible in the early 80s here, but not any longer. If they moved at that time they might have extinct traits which you can't find now in Russian, otherwise there could have been more innocent purely psychological reasons found in any culture. The situation when people suffer from something, want someone to sympathize with them and do not tell what the problem is, it is something mysterious and needs further facts in order to judge if a person falls into this or that stereotyped acquired habit prescribed by this or that mentality, I truly have not often seen this in Russia, most people I meet tend to be more or less articulate and try to explain and express their feelings to the outside world.

That can happen when someone is ashamed of something, like something she feared you would disapprove of or maybe lack of self-assurance or probably lack of trust in the person whose sympathy she wanted. Or maybe she couldn't define her thoughts and feeling clearly to herself? Maybe she was in love with you? Some people are «great assumers» and they want you to guess what you think and what you feel, I've never thought of this trait as a typically Russian trait though, but some people here think that this tends to be more common with females (not rational enough or too emotional creatures). It can be a part of another myth, which we can discuss in another forum.

The man's behavior seems more mysterious because I'm a woman but I guess can be also explained without bringing Communism ideology, he was probably suffering from a stress or was provoked by probably not so innocent question to «talk back». In a word, I see no secrecy tendency.

On «Schadenfreude» being more of an eastern concept, that's a huge topic for discussion really! Thanks for mentioning it!
I have made a small research and talked to my compatriots and friends abroad. Firstly, the word itself, I must say that the Russians normally use 3 words «rejoice at someone's misfortunes» to speak about Schadenfreude (well at least for the last 50 years), foreign-words-fiends even adopted Schadenfreude in Russian, a word? which you probably mean is 'mischief' in English actually. Another search found that only in Greek language there's such a word. However I may be wrong and we can ask other English learners in the forum what word they normally use. I do not think that cultural differences lie that deep anyway mostly because of their universal nature, and also because of cultural integration, when you speak about emotions you feel, isn't it the way you express them, the way is considered polite to express them in this or that culture — isn't that the main difference?

I've found another humorous interpretation of this missing notion in the English language (by an American journalist):

Philip Howard identifies Schadenfreude as one of the black holes in English. One commentator (R.C. Trench) celebrates this gap, saying «What a fearful thing is it that any language should have a word expressive of the pleasure which men feel at the calamities of others; for the existence of the word bears testimony to the existence of the thing. And yet in more than one, such a word is found: in the Greek epikairekakia, in the German, Schadenfreude.» Well, it is rare to see such refinement of feeling deployed in the service of philology, but relations between the English and the Germans has always been complex. Personally, I think Schadenfreude is a useful and expressive word, and much to be preferred to epikairekakia.

Terry Lane has defined Schadenfreude as the sensation experienced when you see two Mercedes Benz collide: but that may reflect his preference for Australian-made cars more than his proud egalitarianism. In either case, it is a near-perfect definition for a sentiment which dares not speak its name in English. Clive James admits to Schadenfreude when he sees his rival’s books in the remainders bin.

Trench's point is neatly made in the Victorian laws against homosexuality. Since Queen Victoria refused to accept the possibility of homosexual attraction between women, the offence created by Parliament was confined in application to men (as Oscar Wilde soon found to his grief) and it was not until 1925 that Aldous Huxley borrowed (this time from the Greek) and coined the word lesbian.

So the absence of a word in the language does not necessarily mean that the mentality originally lacks the notion, it could be a hypocritical stiff-lipped approach of certain people who happened to be in higher positions then. Otherwise we have to deduce that up to the beginning of the 20th century purely western Anglo-Saxon cultures were lacking such awful things like homosexuality, etc. (and had to use evil eastern words) that never existed or else everything had long been burnt in sanitizing witch-hunt fires hundreds of years before that.

On the other hand could it be that invention of the word Schadenfreude
could mean naming a demon to know its face in order to fight it better? Torsten, what do you think about its etymology? This word seems to be originally created to be used in derogatory sense and not to condone having this emotion or being proud about it. A rational human being is ashamed of evil things, of envy etc.

Thirdly, the German language is famous for combining several words in one. Speaking about German language Schadenfreude is like two words spelt in one not one simple words, If the English language allowed such word-creating techniques easier then probably malicious joy were spelt together?:—) Let us take a couple of others: «Realpolitik», «Weltschmerz», «Frommelei», «kleinkariert», «Zeitgeist», «Angst», «Astbruchgefahren» (that was a funny one (you're-in-danger-of-tree-branches-falling-from-above). Take other foreign words in the English language, and be careful, if you have to use etiquette and savoir-faire, does it mean that the Anglo-Saxon culture originally lacked good manners? Hmm, originally benevolent, but unable to use fork and knife properly and to say sorry when you step on someone's foot, now that's an interesting point for further discussion... (sorry, it was a silly joke).

The German language is a peculiar language which allows to compose one word out of two to umpteen notions by simply adding then one to another, you don't even need to add any suffixes and change endings like in some other languages, some of the words are paragraphs long, no other widespread language that I know is like this. Correct me if I'm wrong. Other European languages seem to miss this word as well, and maybe it's the precision and the wit of the German language rather than something originally missing in the western culture whatever you mean by western culture... After all the USA is to the east of Japan, and Japan is to the east of Russia, isn't it?

My strongest belief is that there are of course differences in expressing feelings between cultures but they are much more subtle and more on the surface than this especially now when cultures penetrate into each other at an unprecedented speed and I don't believe that the eastern or western cultures are in such a confrontation in deep-routed notions. Maybe we should find the real differences? Otherwise we can reach an absurd stage and will wage our own fight.

When a person doesn't like something about someone (that someone happens to be of another race, nationality, sexuality, religion, sex, neighborhood) how easy is to blame it on the cultural difference, then search for a true answer? Our mind tends to jump to easier conclusions, life is short, why the hell we should spend time questioning them, but are the conclusions always correct? Let's imagine a situation either in China or in Russia or in the USA Your overseas partner screwed up something, of course it's none of your fault. Stage 1: Just go to xenophobe jokes page, Stage 2: Look up a joke in is his nationality tab that perfectly illustrates this situation, Stage 3 have fun and Stage 5: Relax and tell it to your friends if it's funny, Stage 6: If you're really witty make one yourself and post it on the Internet, Stage 7: Tell to your two-headed great-grandson
(he was one of the few who survived the nuclear war) that it was your joke and making such jokes was really funny because other subjects were too un-PC at that time. Otherwise you may find yourself still at stage 1a): Wondering if you yourself had screwed up anything negotiating with your partner beforehand and that is beginning to be 2a) dangerous. East-west culture difference notion is much safer :—) You don't have to do anything except for moaning (how malicious they are) or boasting (how benevolent we are). Both feel nice.

But really maybe you should have discussed some matters in advance, warned your partner of some important points? For me the mistakes my business partners make mean one thing: Next time I should re-check this particular point with them as well as with others. I can do as much moaning as I want, but we will go bankrupt if we do just that. A perfect illustration of my point on a myth on cross-cultural differences is «M.Butterfly» by D.Cronenberg (playwright D.H.Hwang, starring Jeremy Irons). Go and watch it if you haven’t, it was based on a true story (this particular one dwells on Chinese-French huge differences).

Let’s go a little bit astray on the subject of female participation in the work force: Did you choose carrier which you can interrupt and not the one that you can enjoy? Why should someone else do it? Both men and women should be encouraged to interrupt their carrier for child-minding. Wife for (pre and post) and natal periods and husband for babysitting afterwards. Other notions are connected with old-fashioned myths. It doesn't have to be that all people necessarily have to do that, but society should encourage both men and women to care for their babies and interrupt their carriers if necessary. Scandinavian countries are beginning to encourage this and this is a good example. If society doesn't follow this, OK, go and learn Chinese now, you'll need it pretty soon anyway. (By the way is only Russian spam full of ads to learn Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese?) In USA you also have families where both adults are working especially in bigger cities and they use baby-sitters. And who originally forced English and American households to have governesses and servants, not the evil influence from the east, I hope?

Russia is partly in the east partly in the west? Nothing empty, it's just very catchy, someone was having a point when it was first said, but it was lost after a thousand of repetitions. For me it's mainly religious confessions and the influence from the East and the West-Islam, Christianity, Buddhism. For me Buddhism makes more sense: I do not see any evil and bad-wishing in this religion, nor do I see anything bad in Islam I mean when you read the Koran, not the extremists' babble. The Protestant church is fairly young, younger than Catholicism or Russian Orthodox Church, a lot of awful things happened with Catholicism in middle ages, during Spanish Inquisition times, Russian Orthodox Church is not without sins...Protestantism appeared in quite different times — in quite another state of society development, in different society formation,
and it's only a few hundred years old, so it's one of the youngest confession that's all. After all the only difference between the Saint and the Sinner is that the Sinner has the past and the Saint has the future. Let's talk after the Light and the Good news after it is 1000 years old.

Moreover why should you talk about imperialistic impulses of the USA? I think we were talking about business and household prejudices, but if the subject has been touched, then here you are. I do not subscribe to the idiotic views that USA act like Hitler imposing 'benevolent' truth upon the world, etc. etc., but I'm also far from the naive belief in the purely benevolent impulses of your politicians, why should the benevolence coincide with Iraqi oil, why should the Good news not be spread to North Korea or a couple of islands in the Pacific Ocean? No matter how cynical the real reason to wage the war is, the human minds have always needed plausible excuses for the military aggression: Alexander the Great invaded India claiming to be their savior, when in fact it was for diamonds, Crusades were to free the God's tomb but «incidentally» allowed to conquer rich oriental countries in between and waged new aggressive wars. What I say is that any country of the world being in the USA position would probably wage these invasions as well to get the oil, this is cynical but it seems true. However to consider this benevolent impulse of innocent lambs is going way too far, reasonable people here are not claiming here America is evil, it's been typical in human history to wage wars for economic and political profits under plausible 'benevolent' pretexts to convince the convincible, sadly but it is, but no reasonable person will ever admit that America is a new Messiah...Both extremes are dangerous in a way...These extreme pseudo «cross-cultural» differences between «evil east» and «benevolent west» play into the hands of modern cultural superiority myth makers and serve just like a good reason to wage a new cold war, I only hope that such xenophobic attitudes planted in the brains of your students and our students now will not develop further to bring the species to the extinction very soon. Each country is exceeding others in some aspects I do not think it gives any reason and any right to the politicians to impose its excellence and superiority on others.

And a final point: Let us speak about national identity itself — what makes a person believe that being a Russian, American, British or German one has to behave this or that way, in other words how truly you can say for sure that you have the national mentality. When you read books or watched TV as a kid — that was all the influence as well — in the majority of cultures you're not convicted to art created solely by your own country, you have the diversity. Now with the internet so wide-spread when you see hundreds of young kids infesting internet-cafes or sitting at their homes with red eyes after the all-night chat with their pals not necessarily from their own country — which mentality they have now?

The ideas, believes, values, along with prejudices, stereotypes etc.
brought up in a person by parents, school, society but how truly «ours» are all these if we do not question and review them? I'm not speaking here about unquestionable taboos like value of person's life, etc. violators of which are tried and convicted and found in jails all over the world.

But how it works when we identify ourselves as possessing these or those traits, features, qualities of our national character. Is it just habits like eating habits, table manners or preferring a certain style in clothing or something much more deep-routed? A human being seems so easily adjustable and can review the habits with this or that degree of flexible or stubborn behavior. (Come on, you can even learn to never cut your potatoes with knife, Gosh, I always forget myself when I'm in Germany).

People seem keen on neatly pigeonholing themselves in order to give the world some preliminary information, to show the world they are this or that type to express themselves further. But from what sources do they get the information to do the classification in their minds — we go to the outside world to gather the perceptions or opinions of other people or we go inside and introspect — matching the outside qualities with our true self. We do both at a certain ratio. But how true is the former and how honest is the latter, in short how fitting is the pigeonhole we put ourselves in?

May I deduce that the person who doesn't devote some time introspecting about who he is and relies more on the opinion of who he is by the people surrounding him more automatically sticks to stereotyped behavior, stipulated by «national character» or «country mentality»?

Let me ponder further: when you grow up in the second half of the 20th century, you bathe in Oscar Wilde tales, are enthralled by Sheherezade tales, hide with Tom Sawyer from adults in Mark Twain's novels, swoon at Beatles' songs, sail the ships and survive in wilderness with Jules Verne, sympathize with Oliver Twist in Dickens' novel, despair at misfortunes of Chekhov heroes, ask questions about yourself reading Dostoevsky, find you're scared by Brothers' Grimm fairy-tales, D.Argento's movies, Dante's descriptions of inferno, amused by Figaro, are entertained by less Hollywood movies, Disney cartoons, Manga cartoons and savor Cannes and Berlin festivals and Oscar winners if you're get more refined, if you don't then you can't exclude a slight possibility that at least some of your friends your parents, your teachers, your country's writers, actors, poets, singers and playwrights (maybe even some of your politicians!) do this when they grow up, your actors use Stanislavksy's system to learn acting, your psychologists all over the world still use techniques to control anger mentioned by Seneka (check yourself), we can go on forever here...moreover if you're blessed with language skills, you begin speaking one or two languages. Check the fairy-tales all over the world the majority of them are pretty much the same. Then you wake up one day and you hear that you have a Russian, German, Spanish, American mentality.
which is this and that, people in your country are generally this and that, lacking this and having a surplus of that, bringing this and that upon the world. You hear it and you may swallow it as is but do you review it when you're turning into an adult? When you're told that Russians are lazy and always late but have an example of your granny who was pathologically punctual, never stopped working all her life and is very skilled and precise in what she was doing and got a kick out of just working, doing something right...so which point of view you finally subscribe to?

Can you look into yourself and clearly define: OK this trait I got from parents, this was given by school, this was picked from my favorite book, my favorite hero acted like that, this was learnt from my teacher, my friends taught me to smoke J) and this... well I was in love with someone and picked it from him/her, and this, oh yeah, this is really a trait of my national mentality that I have in blood. Can you really tell the difference?

When you are growing up at some stage you need to identify yourself with some group, but how strong your analytical abilities are when the identification stage is accomplished, i.e. in your teens and 20s, i.e. is the self-identification process final and binding? For many people the real analytical abilities (if any) arise quite a few years later.

So how deep-routed are the differences in the national character traits? At least for the younger generations in more or less industrially developed countries they more and more seem very surface and subtle indeed and are in the scale of table manners or surface politesse.