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Mutual perception of Russian and French managers

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The purpose of the present exploratory research is to study mutual perceptions of French and Russian managers regarding the management culture of Russia and France, respectively.

The present study uses the conceptualization of culture proposed by Schein and cultural dimensions developed by such scholars as Adler, Hall and Hall, Hofstede, Schein, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. These cultural dimensions present a framework to study the perception of the host culture by managers regarding a foreign culture. The present research tests asymmetry assumption of mutual perceptions, which suggests that managers on reciprocal transfers differentiate their host and home cultures by means of different cultural dimensions.

This exploratory study uses a two-flow sample of French managers working in Russia (the data of Muratbekova-Touron) and Russian managers working in France (current research). It employs a qualitative research method based on in-depth interviews.

The results support the hypothesis about the asymmetric nature of mutual perceptions. Russian and French managers working in France and Russia, respectively, do not always use the same cultural dimensions to differentiate their cultures.

Keywords: France; French managers; perception; Russia; Russian managers

Theoretical background

One of the key determinants of success in the increasingly global business environment is the extent to which its actors are able to cope with cross-cultural differences. This ability to deal with cultural differences is based on the perception of the culture within which they work. For managers working in a foreign country, the way of perceiving may influence their behaviour considerably. Incorrect perception may lead to the committing of cultural gaffes or just non-understanding of the host culture and therefore a general malaise. Thus, the managers' perception may have a negative effect on the adjustment to the host culture. It is, therefore, important to examine the perceptions of managers regarding the culture within which they work.

The national culture within which people were brought up influences the perception of another culture. Thus, the perception of Russian management culture by French managers is rooted in French culture. For example, French managers consider Russians as short-term-oriented people (Muratbekova-Touron 2002). This is because French managers approach time differently, they prefer a long-term orientation. So, the perceptions of French managers tell us about their own culture as well as about the Russian culture within which they work.

The rationale of this paper is to study the perceptions of French management culture by Russian managers. Then, on the basis of these results and the data of Muratbekova-Touron

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(2002), a further aim of the paper is to compare the perceptions of Russian and French management culture by French and Russian managers, respectively. It is to examine whether these mutual perceptions are symmetric.

The present study uses the conceptualization of culture proposed by Schein (1988), who distinguishes three interconnected levels of culture: artefacts and creations which are visible manifestations of a culture (language, technology and art); values and ideology which are the rules, principles, norms, values, morals and ethics and basic assumptions and premises which are unconscious, invisible and create the essence of culture. The set of basic assumptions have evolved over time and are passed on from one generation to another. These assumptions serve to solve the problems of external adaptation (how to survive) and internal integration (how to stay together). On the basis of this definition, the paper uses the cultural dimensions developed by such researchers as Schein (1988), Hall and Hall (1990), Hofstede (1991) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) as a framework to study the perception of managers regarding a foreign culture.

It is important to consider culture as a 'normal distribution' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998). There is a wide spread of values and assumptions which are not shared by all people within a culture. However, '*this spread does have a pattern around an average. So, in a sense, the variation around the norm can be seen as a normal distribution*' (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998, p. 24).

To the best of my knowledge, the research on the mutual perceptions of managers from different cultures is not extensive, especially regarding managerial culture. As one of the few examples of such research, Everett and Stening (1983) studied the mutual perceptions of Japanese and British managers working in London. The results indicated the existence of discrepancies between how the managers see themselves (their auto stereotype), the way the managers of another nationality see them (their hetero stereotype) and the way they believe the managers from another nationality see them (their meta stereotype). Thus, according to this research (Everett and Stening 1983), the mutual perceptions are inaccurate. Or in other words, they are not perfectly symmetric.

Another approach that can help to study mutual perception is to look at the notion of cultural distance. Cultural distance measures *the extent to which different cultures are similar or different* (Shenkar 2001). Shenkar (2001), while presenting conceptual properties of cultural distance, points out the illusion of symmetry. The assumption of CD symmetry would suggest that '*a Dutch (company) investing in China is faced with the same CD as a Chinese firm investing in the Netherlands*' (Shenkar 2001, p. 523). However, according to researchers (Shenkar 2001; Selmer, Chiu and Shenkar 2007), there is no support for such assumptions of CD symmetry. Moreover, the findings of Selmer et al. (2007) corroborate the asymmetry hypothesis: the impact of cultural distance is contingent on the direction of the assignment.

Expectations can also distort perceptions. As it is argued by Shenkar (2001), cultural attractiveness can help to close cultural distance. Thus, expectations of managers concerning a foreign culture linked to its attractiveness may influence their perceptions. However, cultural attractiveness is not always reciprocal: Russians may be attracted by French culture but the French may not be attracted by Russian culture. This argument contributes to the development of the asymmetry hypothesis of mutual perceptions.

French culture has always been perceived as an attractive culture by Russian people. From the times of the first political opening of Russia towards Europe initiated by Peter the Great, French influence in Russia was considerable (www.answers.com). Russian nobility adopted the French language as the language of conversation and correspondence and thereby spread French culture (Kraatz 2006). '*During the nineteenth century, travel in*

France was considered a form of cultural and intellectual apprenticeship. Study travel abroad by Russians, as well as trips to Russia by the French, shared a common cultural space, encouraging exchanges most notably in the areas of fine arts, sciences, and teaching' (www.answers.com). This cultural influence of France did not perish after the revolution of 1917.

On the basis of these discussions, this paper aims to develop a hypothesis about the asymmetric nature of mutual perceptions. One can suppose that French and Russian managers did not always use the same cultural dimensions to differentiate their cultures. This asymmetry assumption does not suggest a complete dissimilarity in managers' mutual perceptions. Managers from both countries may use some identical cultural dimensions to perceive differences. But there will be discrepancies. Thus, the claim I wish to defend is:

Proposition. Managers on reciprocal transfers differentiate their host and home cultures by means of different cultural dimensions.

Methodology

This study uses a two-flow sample of French managers working in Russia and Russian managers working in France. It compares the results of the study on the perception of Russian management culture by French managers (Muratbekova-Touron 2002) and the data of the present research on the perception of French management culture by Russian managers. Both studies have used a qualitative research method based on in-depth interviews.

In the previous study, interviews with 12 French managers who have worked in Russia were conducted to study their perception of Russian management culture (see Muratbekova-Touron 2002 for the profile of interviewees). Interviews were conducted in French.

In the present study, the interviewees are Russian managers currently working in France and who have had professional experience in Russia also. They were asked to explain the peculiarities of the French management culture and describe events or behaviours considered by them as specific to their new environment. These peculiarities perceived by Russian managers were analysed and categorized, when possible, in the cultural dimensions and are listed in the table. The size of each category (cultural dimension) is determined by the frequency of which these peculiarities were mentioned by Russian managers. The largest categories then allow us to define the differences which are considered as most important for Russian managers working in France.

Sixteen interviews with Russian managers were conducted. The first interview was conducted in September 2008 and the last one in March 2009. Each interview was from about 30 min (the shortest one) and to more than two hours long (the longest one). The anonymity of data was assured. The interviews were conducted in Russian, were tape-recorded and transcribed.

It would be worth mentioning the construction of the sample of this study. Russian managers were highly reluctant to respond to my requests for an interview when approached by telephone or by mail without a personal contact. Managers in Russia often do not see the point of academic investigation into their professional activities (Gilbert 1997). Grachev, Rogovsky and Rakitski (2008) share their difficulties in data collection for GLOBE studies in Russia. According to the scholars, interviewed people were suspicious about attempts to learn about their views, were hesitant to give honest answers to some questions and, generally, were not motivated to contribute to the research

(Grachev et al. 2008, p. 810). Having grown up in the former Soviet Union and being familiar with the attitude of the population to management research in general and to interviews, in particular, I had to use a convenience sample. After finding the first interviewees through acquaintances, I then used a snowball method for sample selection: each interviewee was asked for names of other Russian managers currently working in France. I always had to contact Russian managers on behalf of another person who they knew personally.

The profile of the interviewees is described in Table 1.

Limitations of the methodology

The exploratory character and small convenience samples on both studies (French in Russia and Russians in France) present the major limitation of the methodology.

The gender composition of the interviewees (12 females and 4 males) may be considered a limitation of this study. However, according to some interviewees, there are certainly more Russian women than men in France and so the study reflects the reality of the gender balance in this regard. Furthermore, Russian women tend to hold more senior, a more highly paid position than Russian men. As stated by the interviewees:

‘There are more Russian women than men in France and in other foreign countries in general. Women are more educated, especially in foreign languages, and they go abroad easily.’ (10–11)

‘Russian men also study in France. But they pursue short courses of study and go back to Russia. They are more interested in earning money. They have to take care of their families and they can earn much more in Russia than in France. They can make a better career in Russia that they would ever be able to do here in France. Russian women remain in France more easily. In addition, there are many of them married to French men.’ (12)

I could not confirm this fact because of the difficulties of finding statistics regarding Russians living in France. The difference in the male–female ratio can help to explain the predominance of female interviewees. The male–female ratio (between 15 and 64 years old) in Russia is 0.93 according to the official figures of 2008 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Russia). The ratio in France for the same population and for the same year is one male for one female (http://www.indexmundi.com/france/sex_ratio.html).

Another limitation concerns the results of the previous study on the perception of the Russian management culture by French managers conducted almost 8 years ago. Russian management culture is a highly dynamic culture, and it is likely that it would be considered differently by French managers at the present time. Only two of the Russian managers interviewed came to France less than 3 years ago, whereas the majority of the interviewees have lived in France for more than 4 years; and half of them have lived here for more than 8 years. Thus, their perceptions are based on their comprehension of Russian culture of 4–8 years ago. This limitation has been minimized by additional interviews with French managers who have worked in Russia. One interview was conducted with a French manager who had worked in Russia for more than 15 years and who is currently a consultant to French companies that want to work or that are currently working in Russia. His perceptions confirm the data gathered from the previous research.

Results and discussions

According to the previous research (Muratbekova-Touron 2002), the most important differences indicated by French managers regarding Russian management culture concerned *power distance* and *affectivity* dimensions. French managers also perceived

Table 1. The profile of the interviewees.

<i>Number appropriated to the interviewee</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Experience in Russia (area of work, industry and number of years)</i>	<i>Experience in France (area of work, industry and number of years)</i>
1	Female	33	Public and private, project manager, more than 5 years	Semi-private, project manager, 2 years
2	Female	26	Insurance, private, project manager, more than 2 years	Private, professional training, more than 8 months
3	Female	38	Private, manager, 4 years	Publishing firm, professional training, more than 6 months
4	Female	36	Private and public, more than 2 years	Consultancy, 12 years
5	Female	32	Private, director of dealer department, more than 1.5 years	Private, French multinational company, Manager, 10 years
6	Male	44	Economist, public, more than 15 years	Economist, 6 years
7	Female	46	Professor of Russian language, public university, more than 15 years	Professor of Russian language, private language school for adults, 2 years
8	Male	55	Airspace industry, engineer, 20 years	Airspace industry, engineer, 10 years
9	Female	42	Art, 12 years	Various: assistant, commercial assistant, 10 years
10 and 11	Female	29	Interpreter, 2 years	Property business, 4 years
	Female	30	Agro business and American company, 3.5 years	Property business, 3.5 years
12	Female	31	Academic institutions, project manager, more than 2 years	Academic institutions, project manager, professor of university, 8 years
13	Male	56	Transport industry, manager, more than 10 years	Transport industry, manager, 13 years
14	Female	46	Public factory, programmer, more than 18 years	Private, programmer, 2.5 years
15	Female	31	Public, health industry, physician, 1.5 years	Public, health industry, physician, 6 years
16	Male	30	Private, entrepreneurship, industry, 1.5 years	Private, restoration, Waiter, then manager, 7 years

Russian culture as a more *particularistic* culture. In addition, they noted differences regarding *time* and *human nature* dimensions. All of the above-mentioned characteristics were considered as significant (50%) or highly significant (75%) by French managers. However, it is important to refer to three other dimensions: *high-context communication*, *space* and *language*. The percentage of 41.7% which is close to 50% of the level of frequency emerging is significant and, therefore, warrants further investigation.

A brief resume of the perception of French managers regarding Russian management culture is presented in Table 2.

The gathered data indicate that the following cultural dimensions are more frequently used by Russian managers to differentiate their culture from French management culture: *hierarchy*, *universalism vs. particularism*, *feminine vs. masculine*, *space* and *language* (Table 3).

Table 4 presents some examples of events or behaviours perceived by Russian managers as specific to the French management culture and which were categorized into cultural dimensions.

Hierarchy

According to the results of the previous study (Muratbekova-Touron 2002), the difficulties linked to this dimension are highly significant for French managers working in Russia (91.7% of managers mention this problem). Even French managers who used to work in a highly hierarchical society had problems when confronted with Russian centralization, strong respect to and obedience to authority.

Table 2. Russian management culture perceived by French managers.

<i>Cultural dimension</i>	<i>Characteristics perceived by French managers as specific to Russian management culture</i>
Differences which are considered as <i>significant or highly significant</i> by French managers (more than 50% of the level of frequency emerging). Listed in the order of the importance.	
Hierarchy	Autocratic management style, larger power distance
Time	Short-term orientation
Affectivity	Warmer, more spontaneous and more natural people
Human nature	X theory of McGregor (1960 cited in Adler 1986) is applied: people are supposed to be supervised and controlled because they are not trusted.
Particularism	Social orientation. Importance of interpersonal relations: relationships prevail over law and rules.
Differences which are considered as <i>moderately significant</i> by French managers (41.7% of level of frequency emerging)	
High-context communication	Low information flow. Secrecy
Space	Culture of G-type life space (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998): the mix of professional and private life is very strong among Russians.
Language	Importance to speak Russian to succeed.

Source: Muratbekova-Touron (2002).

Table 3. French management culture viewed by Russian managers.

Interviewee (number)/cultural dimension	Hierarchy	Time	Neutral	Human nature	Universalism	Individualism	Feminine	High context: relationships	Low-context: information flow	Space	Language	Ascription	Russo phobia, stereotypes
1		X		X	X		X		X	X			
2			X	X	X			X		X	X		
3	X			X	X		X	X			X		
4	X			X	X	X	X		X	X	X		
5	X			X	X		X			X	X	X	
6		X		X	X		X			X	X		X
7				X	X		X			X	X		X
8	X			X	X			X		X	X		X
9		X	X	X	X				X	X	X		X
10-11	X			X	X	X	X			X	X		
12	X	X		X			X			X	X		
13	X			X		X	X			X	X		
14	X-		X	X			X			X	X		
15	X	X			X	X	X			X	X		
16	X-						X	X		X	X	X	X
Frequency	8 (2)	5	3	6	8	4	9	4	3	8	10	2	4
Percentage	50%	31%	19%	38%	50%	25%	56%	25%	19%	50%	63%	13%	25%
Level of frequency	High	Low	Very low	Low	High	Low	High	Low	Very low	High	High	Very low	Low

Table 4. Characteristics perceived by Russian managers as specific to the French management culture.

<i>Cultural dimension</i>	<i>Characteristics perceived by Russian managers as specific to French management culture</i>
Hierarchy	Management put less pressure on subordinates. It is less hierarchical than in Russia. There are more horizontal links than in Russia where it is more centralized
Time	Management reports to employees Long-term orientation. People are not late
Neutral vs. emotional	There are more warm relationships in Russia at work French, they are superficial: they can hate you, but will smile and never tell you
Human nature	People are more responsible and serious in their work. People are 'over' polite
Universalism	Work only in the domain as per their professional qualifications. Personal relationships are expressed less than in Russia. Promotion according to merits not one's network. There are more rules and rigour.
Individualism	Respect for rules (In Russia, they are transgressed historically) A systematically helpful attitude cannot be assumed.
Feminine	It is a more individualistic society State of law development (democratic society vs. wild capitalism): high-social protection. French are fragile.
High context communication	People are less ambitious than in Russia Relationships Less direct relationships.
Low context communication	Russians are perceived as brutal and direct. Information flow Preference for written communication Rapid information flow in France, and extremely low in Russia
Space	Private and public spaces are clearly separated
Language	'Your French is not good enough' Arrogant attitude of French towards those who do not speak French well
Russo phobia	French clients do not trust Russian managers

Russian managers working in France perceive French management culture as less hierarchical than Russian culture. The research showed that 50% of Russian managers mentioned the differences in hierarchical relations which are more subtle in Russia.

'You should respect subordination in Russia more than here, in France. Here, there is a more democratic attitude of superiors to their subordinates. The boss intervenes only if necessary . . . In Russia, the boss wants to know what is happening. We are obliged to send all documentation to him. And then, he distributes it vertically. This documentation may "travel" two weeks before reaching the person who needs it. So, we have invented our tricks: we send the fax to the boss and the electronic version to the person who really needs it.' (8)

'In France, your superiors respect you and respect your work hours.' (10–11)

It would be noteworthy to give the opinion of one of the Russian managers interviewed (16) who consider the French system as more hierarchical than the Russian one. However, his background can explain why his attitude is not consistent with judgements of the

majority of other interviewees. Indeed, this manager started his career by creating his own enterprise in Russia. Thus, he, together with his two associates, successfully managed more than 12 employees in their early twenties. After having the highest managerial position in Russia, he found himself at the lowest rank in a French organization. At that time, he underwent a complete reversal which can explain his perception of the French managerial culture as a highly hierarchical one.

Two Russian interviewees working in a Russian–French company situated in Paris speak about two different styles adopted by their boss when working with either the French or the Russian employees.

‘Our boss is Russian who grew up in France. He clearly differentiates Russian and French employees in our company. He adopts Russian style for Russians: he shouts at them. And he never shouts at the French.’ (10–11)

Another point worth mentioning are the differences that concern addressing someone as ‘vous’ or ‘tu’ (referring to French language). These differences also reflect the attitude to hierarchy: the more delicate is the issue of addressing someone as ‘tu’ (‘ti’ in Russian) depending on his/her status, the more hierarchical the culture is.

‘What is surprising here, is the ease with which a French person addresses someone as “tu”. My thesis director is 60 years old and she suggested that I address her as “tu”. It was very difficult for me . . . The first month, it was really difficult. Now, it is better, but anyway, I would prefer to address her as “vous”. My co-author (*Russian*), also her doctoral student, never managed to do it.’ (12)

Thus, one can conclude that the mutual perceptions of French and Russians are symmetric regarding this cultural dimension.

Time

According to the majority of French managers (75%), the notion of time in Russia is completely different from the Western (*French*) perception of time (Muratbekova-Touron 2002). Russian people are considered as short-term-oriented people by French managers.

On the contrary, this cultural dimension is far from being the most important for Russian managers in France. Only 31% of Russian managers mention the differences in the perception of time which concern long-term orientation and the punctuality of the French.

‘One of the differences which complicates our contact and communication is the organisation of time. And I should say that I am on the French side now. The French are highly organised people regarding the management of their agendas and meetings . . . They can take weeks or months to prepare reunions . . . And it is practically impossible or extremely difficult to plan reunions in advance in Russia.’ (6)

One can presume that this is a case of asymmetric perception. Apparently, it is more difficult for the French to manage the short-term orientation of Russians than for Russians to deal with the long-term orientation of the French.

Neutral

The majority of French managers (66.7%) were enthusiastic about the affective nature of relationships in Russian management culture (Muratbekova-Touron 2002). They underlined *an incredible sense of hospitality* and the authenticity of Russians.

Even if some Russian managers (19%) refer to a more neutral character regarding the relations in France, this cultural dimension remains underrepresented in the perception of

French management culture by Russians when compared with French managers in Russia. It is another example of asymmetry in mutual perceptions.

'He/she (*French*) can smile at you but you know that he/she hates you. Whereas a Russian, if he hates you, he may not tell it to you, but he will not smile.' (2)

'Relationships between colleagues in Russia are warmer than in France. But they may be more problematic because of this. When somebody knows a lot about you, he/she can use this information against you.' (14)

Human nature

According to the data gathered from French managers regarding their perception of Russian culture, Russian managers operate in conformity with theory X of McGregor (1960). In French managers' perception, Russians want to control and supervise their subordinates because they do not trust them.

The Russian managers interviewed (38%) mention the differences regarding this cultural dimension. Despite a rather low level of frequency emerging, it would be worth describing the perceptions of Russians. Russian managers working in France consider French employees as more responsible, organized and polite than Russians.

'I have a feeling that people here are more responsible and more serious in their work. If they work, they work. For me, who appears to be not very well organized, it is a very good experience. In Russia, you can come a bit later and leave later; if you have nothing to do at the moment, you do nothing. Here, you should try to do something.' (1)

'Here, it is less chaotic, it is more organized. In Russia, we start lightly and then work hard to succeed.' (1)

'People are "over" polite here. You should say "thanks" constantly. Somebody puts a paper on your table; you should say "thanks". In Russia, you don't say it every time.' (3)

Referring to McGregor's theory, French management culture is more inclined to represent the application of theory Y in the perception of Russian interviewees. However, the size of this category does not enable us to make any definitive conclusions regarding the symmetric nature of mutual perception with this aspect of cultural dimension.

Universalism

The majority of French managers (58.3%) view Russian management culture as a culture of social orientation rather than task orientation (Muratbekova-Touron 2002). Despite the existence of a strong network of graduates from a Grande Ecole (Barsoux and Lawrence 1991) and the importance of social relations in France (D'Iribarne 1989; Hall and Hall 1990), French management culture is still perceived by Russian managers as more universalistic than particularistic. Of the Russian interviewees, 50% differentiate their cultures by means of this dimension.

While admitting the magnitude and importance of social connections in France, Russian managers consider the French as people who respect the rules more than Russians.

'You can work here (*in France*) only according to your diploma. In Russia, you can work anywhere with any diploma. You are more mobile. Using acquaintances and connections you have more variants, more possibilities. Here, it is not like this. I found this job (*in France*) by acquaintances also, but my diploma was very important for them.' (1)

'If Russians want to create relationships, they need to take time, to meet together somewhere outside the office to have more informal atmosphere. They often meet in restaurants to discuss

business. The relationships become more productive and active. In France, it is different. They are more distant.’ (2)

Thus, mutual perceptions regarding this cultural dimension are symmetric. Although French perceive Russian management culture as more particularistic, Russians consider French culture as more universalistic.

Individualism

The results concerning the cultural dimension of individualism also support the claims of symmetrical mutual perceptions. Only few French managers (16.7%) perceived Russian management culture as collectivistic (Muratbekova-Touron 2002). Although there are opinions underlining richer family relationships and a stronger sense of a group, other French managers think of Russia as an individualistic country.

Similarly, a small number of Russian managers (25%) find French business culture individualistic.

‘Sometimes, one of my colleagues is overwhelmed by work. Others pretend not to see it. Of course, from time to time, they help him/her. But it is not regular. We are (*in Russia*) a collectivistic country: if you need help, I will lend a hand.’ (13)

‘I think that France is an individualistic society. And this is seen in the workplace. Everybody is sitting in his own cocoon. And sometimes, it is difficult to work; especially when you are working for a project and your work has an impact on the others.’ (4)

However, Russia was considered as a more collectivistic country than France in a previous research (Hofstede 1991). Individualism indexes for Russia and France correspond to 50 and 71, respectively, according to Hofstede (1991). Latova and Latov (2003) call for rather cautious use of Hofstede indexes for Russia. The data were calculated using indirect sources such as the national statistical data, descriptions of Russian archetypes in literature and history rather than from standard questionnaire (Latova and Latova 2003, p. 26). Other scholars undertook studies in order to measure Russian culture using Hofstede dimensions (Naumov and Puffer 2000). It allows comparing the Russian data with those of other cultures. Individualism index for Russia is 41 in the estimations of Naumov and Puffer (2000). As per GLOBE project, Russian real index stands at 23 and its ideal index at 34. Thus, the differences in individualism–collectivism dimension between France and Russia are even more important according to the latest studies (GLOBE project, Naumov and Puffer 2000). But the results of this study demonstrate that neither Russian nor French managers perceive differences in individualism–collectivism dimension. It may be explained not only by the limitation of the methodology: a small number of interviewed managers, but also by the evolution of Russian culture towards individualistic society.

Femininity

The perceptions of French and Russian managers regarding this dimension put forward by Hofstede (1991) are completely asymmetric. French managers in fact mention the aggressive and tough behaviour of Russian superiors, but they refer to the way of managing people, i.e. to the hierarchical differences. Russian managers working in France clearly differentiate the characteristics regarding hierarchy and femininity dimensions. As was already mentioned, Russian managers find French management culture less hierarchical and French bosses more willing to delegate. Furthermore, they also highlight the feminine nature of French culture. Of the Russian interviewees, 56% stated that

Russian employees value success, competition and acquisition of money more than did the French.

'People are less ambitious here. I have a colleague, for example, a young man, a talented man. I asked him why he does not look for another job, in another company with a higher salary. He just responds: I don't know . . . There are many of such people in France.' (14)

High social protection, quality of life and, according to some interviewees, a certain psychological fragility of the French indicate a more feminine nature of the culture.

'They [*French*] are very fragile. They quickly develop depression. For example, my boss has depression because she is overwhelmed by the work. I tell her to establish priorities. But she does not listen, she goes to pieces and starts taking pills . . . By the way, according to statistics, French are the highest consumers of antidepressants in Europe.' (4)

'Here [*in France*], the boss intervenes only if a subordinate has problems. And then, the boss tries to solve this problem. On the one hand, it is good. On the other hand, subordinates get used to making mistakes without taking the job seriously. They think, it's ok, if there is a problem, my boss will help me. I think it is not fair. One should take responsibility. In Russia, people were afraid of being fired or not having a bonus. Here, there is social protection.' (13)

'I have the impression that Russian men do not stay here. They come to France to get education and return to Russia. They are more interested in earning money. It is possible in Russia. All my friends in Russia earn much more than me . . . But I don't envy them at all. I prefer to see and enjoy a higher quality of life on every level here. Of course, some of my friends have already built houses outside Moscow, and it is perfect at their home. But when you look around . . . You can't always stay at home and on the job, you should go out, and then you see traffic jams, poverty . . .' (12)

Some managers are even more categorical, stating that the French clearly prefer a higher quality of private life at the expense of work.

'French do not like working. They look at their watches and they leave. They are protected by the law. And it is now deep in the culture: the professional trade unions which protect employees, the law which allows for some to work for only 6 months and to receive 80% of the salary the remaining 6 months. They exaggerate. It is becoming absurd. We are different in Russia. Our willingness to survive pushes us to work a lot and not to look at our watches. Of course, there are positive points in this, but also negative ones. Sometimes, people in Russia start working early in the morning and they finish at 12 pm. They have no private life.' (16)

High- and low-context communication

According to the classification of Hall and Hall (1990), a low-context communication culture is characterized by free flow of information and clear communication processes. In a high-context culture, the access to information is a privilege; communication is situational, personal and subtle: non-directness and ambiguity are encouraged; information is highly focused and controlled. It is an instrument of management and control.

Of the French managers interviewed, 41.7% considered Russian management culture as a high-context communication culture. It is important to emphasize that the characteristics related to this dimension concern the difficulties of obtaining information, its transparency and the tendency of Russians to classify everything as a commercial secret.

According to the Russian managers interviewed, these perceptions are arguable. Indeed, 19% of Russian managers perceive French management culture as a low-context communication culture, if referring to the information flow. Indeed, the interviewees often mention the preference for written communication by the French. This ardour of putting

everything into writing described by Barsoux and Lawrence (1991) generates different feelings among Russian managers.

'Everything should be materialised: for example your presentation should be materialised in a PPT presentation with exact documentation, illustrations and references. The French have a more serious attitude to documentation.' (8)

'There are more rules and rigour here. It was difficult for me to adapt to them. And it starts from the CV and the letter of motivation. Everything is important: the form and the content. May be the form is even more important.' (1)

However, some Russian managers consider French culture as a high-context communication culture regarding relationships. Despite the low level of frequency emerging for this dimension (25%), it is worth illustrating the difficulties experienced by Russian managers while working in France.

'French people will never say to you that they don't like you. They will never say to you that you speak in an aggressive manner for them. My husband (*Russian also*) is perceived as a brutal person because he speaks directly without using any conditionals. Russians would let you know, you don't have to guess what is happening.' (3)

'French do not like to express their opinion directly. They are hypocrites. I have adapted my behaviour in the workplace also. I have understood that to be direct is to damage your relationships. So, I have become a hypocrite.' (16)

'French don't like to say 'no' in a direct manner. It is the particularity of their character: politeness maybe. For example, it is difficult to understand whether the French would really like to know you better in the situation of an over-prolonged correspondence (*between two possible partners: French and Russian*) or it is just a polite manner of saying no.' (6)

Thus, according to some Russian managers, French prefer ambiguity and non-directness in their communication. As one manager explains, this rude and extremely direct way of communication is the reason for the bad image of Russians and Russia in France.

'I was writing very short emails while working in Russia. Americans write in the same manner. We start directly with the problem... French are not so direct. They would rather write "if you have already paid when you received this letter, please, do not take it into account, etc." Russian manner is: if you do not pay, we stop deliveries. And this happened in the Ukraine. In Russia, they don't understand why the world is scandalised by the fact that Russia cut off gas supplies to Ukraine.' (3)

Space

The social context of this dimension proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) distinguishes two different types of 'life spaces': U-type (specific involvement) and G-type (diffuse involvement). Personality can be considered as a series of concentric circles with 'life spaces' or 'personality levels' in between. The most private space is near the centre and the most public space is at the peripheries. Although people of a U-type life space culture tend to separate different sections of their life (ex. professional and private), people of G-type culture tend to mix all levels of their activities. G-type circles are circles with much more private than public space; one cannot enter into your space as easily as in a U-type circle. However, if the person is accepted, he (she) is accepted to all spaces: not only public, but also private space. This is *diffuse* involvement.

The French managers (41.7%) consider Russia as a culture of G-type life space (Muratbekova-Touron 2002). According to them, the mix of professional and private life is very strong among Russians.

The perceptions of Russian managers working in France are almost symmetrical to those of French in Russia. The Russian managers (50%) talk about the French who do not like to mix private and public spheres.

'The relationships in the workplace are different in France. For example, we can celebrate our colleague's birthday at the office in Russia. Here, they don't do it. But I did it: I brought a birthday cake with candles for one of my colleagues here. They were a little bit shocked but very glad.' (2)

'Here, in France, they are not used to having friends in the workplace. I do, I invite them to my place. But I don't know anyone else who does this.' (5)

'We work here in the Russian manner (*Russian company in France*): we celebrate anniversaries, 8th of March (*international day of women which is widely celebrated in Russia*) and other holidays. Our boss (*Russian*) gives us money to buy presents. Our French colleagues did not know about it before, but they have got used to it now and they like it.' (10–11)

'The level of relationships in the workplace in France is very superficial. They don't speak about family. In Russia, we know a lot about people with whom we work. But I prefer the French style. Of course, the relationships between colleagues are warmer in Russia; but on the other hand, people can use the personal information about your weaknesses and use it against you.' (14)

According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), the 'danger' of the specific-diffuse encounter is that the person of U-type culture (French) sees as impersonal something the person of G-type culture (Russian) perceives as highly personal. When the French allow a Russian into one compartment of their public space and show friendliness, the Russian may take it as being accepted into the diffuse private space. And according to some of the Russian managers interviewed, they are offended when the French do not show equivalent friendship. The danger zone of the French–Russian (specific-diffuse) encounter is schematized in Figure 1.

'The French, they keep distance in the relationships. I give you my personal example. We (my wife and I) made friends with one French couple. I thought that we were close friends. We called or saw each other almost every day. And this lasted a year. But during this year, there were some situations that we did not understand. Sometimes, for example, our other acquaintances were invited to their parties while we were not. . . . In the end, I told this couple that we have to cease our friendship. They were shocked, they did not understand why. In general, French like separating: they may invite someone to a marriage ceremony, another one to a cocktail, and another one to the dinner. So, during the whole day they have separate guests for their marriage.' (16)

Language

French managers (41.7%) insisted on the importance of speaking Russian for successful work activity in Russia. Although some managers emphasized that a good mastery of Russian is an absolute necessity for working in Russia, others stated that they work well with translators.

Speaking French, good French, is one of the most important dimensions for Russian managers working in France. The majority of the Russian managers (63%) emphasize that to work in France and to adjust to the French culture, one must master French.

'The main problem for me of working in France regards mastering the French language. I have a strong accent. And even if I correctly construct my phrases, people don't understand me at once. I have to repeat often. It creates a barrier.' (3)

'In general, French don't like to work with foreigners. The majority of foreigners at my workplace do not speak the French language as French do. Unconsciously, if somebody speaks badly in your own language, he or she is considered as inferior to you. It is true for

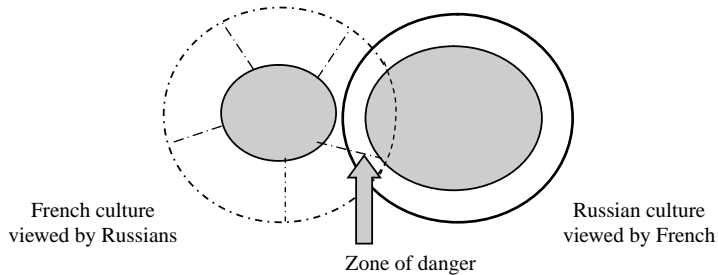


Figure 1. The danger zone: the specific-diffuse encounter. Source: adapted from Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998, p. 85).

every nation, not only for the French. So, we irritate the French: we cannot perfectly explain to them what we want. The French excuse the British or the Americans because French like them. But not others...’ (7)

‘Not mastering French does not cause problems at the level of big multinational companies. Managers speak English. The problem occurs at the level of middle and small enterprises. There are no managers or specialists speaking foreign languages. This also concerns a myth creation. France is known as a country receptive to external economic connections. But, at certain moments in certain industries, it concentrates only on French speaking countries or the countries where French is very popular.’ (6)

Even the Russian interviewees who had perfectly mastered the French language mentioned this problem for adjustment in France. According to the Russian interviewees, the French people known for their dedication to and affection for the French language do not appreciate a poor or intermediate level of mastery by foreigners. According to some managers interviewed, the French consider that foreigners are not capable of mastering their language better than they do themselves and, therefore, have an arrogant position regarding foreigners. Thus, it is more difficult for Russian managers to adjust to the French management culture than for French managers to adjust to the Russian culture where even a poor mastery of the Russian language is welcome.

‘Once, to gain a mission with a consultancy, my colleagues trained me to have an interview with our client. The “boy” who conducted this preparation interview started by saying: “pay attention to your French”. I was furious. I consider that I speak rather good French.’ (4)

‘I remember when one of the HR managers of our company said to me: “your unique advantage is that you speak Russian, you will never speak French as well as Russian”. Just to prove the contrary, I did it: nobody heard an accent a half a year later. And now, my colleagues on the entire floor come to me to check their letters written in French.’ (5)

Cultural attractiveness (France) and unattractiveness (Russia)

As was described in the theoretical part of the paper, Russians consider French culture as an attractive culture. Russians usually have a high degree of familiarity with French culture. And, according to some interviewees, this facilitated the adjustment to French culture.

‘Russians know a lot about French culture before they come to France. Even people who have never come here are familiar with French literature, French cinema, French art, etc. So, when we come to France, we are not disoriented. This helps to adapt to the culture.’ (15)

However, these expectations may not be realized.

‘There are certain myths about France and French people that exist in Russia. We have to admit the capacity of the French to present their achievements in the best way. They do this in

such a manner that all weaknesses that these achievements may have become secondary . . . France is the country which creates myths about itself. And when people really discover France, they are surprised and sometimes even disappointed . . . It is at the other extreme regarding Russia. There are many extremely negative myths about Russia. However, when foreigners come to Russia they discover completely different things. And this helps a lot. I've seen very few people who were frustrated by their experience of working in Russia. The majority of them say: 'I've discovered a wonderful country, there are so many interesting things, I would like to return to Russia.' (6)

'Before the Russian–Georgian conflict Russians did not realize that the French did not like them. France for Russians is magnificent: wine, art, style, culture, castles . . . Russians love France, especially those who have never been to France. And they think that French people love Russia also . . . But when Russians come to France and see that Russia is regarded by the French as an evil place, they do not understand. What's the matter: we like you and you don't like us?' (7)

Thus, as stated by some Russian managers, Russia, contrary to France, suffers from a bad image that the French have about it. These peculiarities are listed in the 'Russo phobia' category. Even if the size of this category is low (25%), it is important to mention the difficulties related to Russo phobia.

Negative stereotypes of Russia and Russian managers may considerably damage the relationships between Russian and French managers. The study of Puffer, McCarthy and

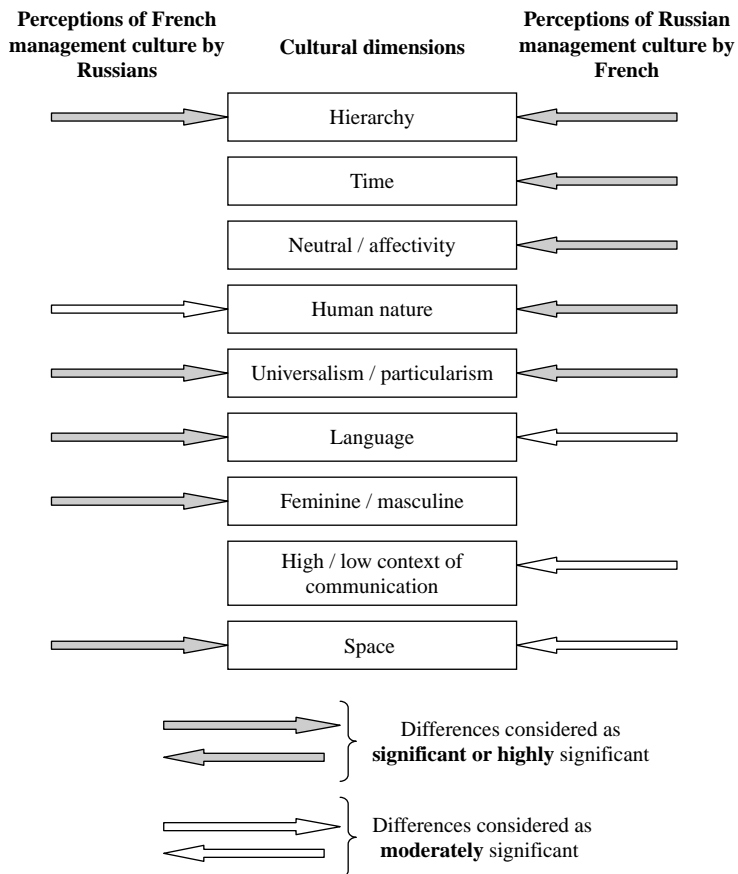


Figure 2. Mutual perception of Russian and French managers: cultural dimensions.

Naumov (1997) demonstrated that widespread negative stereotypes portraying Russian managers as bureaucratic, authoritarian and relatively disinterested in their work are not always accurate.

'French clients do not trust Russian managers. If a Russian comes to French clients, they think according to the stereotype: Russian money means money of the mafia. So, our company (a Russian company in France) was obliged to hire French sales representatives.' (10–11)

'Even people in the top positions in France have a very stereotyped vision of Russia as an underdeveloped country. And they will let you know this while joking. And, in general, the French have a biased opinion about Russians. Sometimes, I hear that all Russian men are bandits or hooligans, and Russian girls are all prostitutes.' (16)

The degree of cultural familiarity in the case of Russia and France is asymmetrical. Russians are more familiar with and attracted by French culture than French with/by Russian culture.

Conclusions

The present study supports the proposition about the asymmetric nature of mutual perceptions. Russian and French managers working in France and Russia, respectively, do not always use the same cultural dimensions to differentiate their cultures. As was detailed in the theoretical part of this paper, this asymmetric nature of mutual perceptions does not assume the absolute divergence of these perceptions. Indeed, according to the data gathered, there are some cultural dimensions used by both Russian and French managers as well as there are dimensions used only by one counterpart. Therefore, I propose the following three-category classification of mutual perceptions.

The first category – *symmetric perceptions* – concerns the cultural dimensions utilized by the managers of both countries. These dimensions are *hierarchy* and *universalism vs. particularism*. Russian managers do perceive French management culture as more universalistic and less hierarchical, whereas French managers perceive Russian culture as more particularistic and more hierarchical. In this case, one can deduce symmetric mutual perceptions.

The second category relates to the cultural dimensions that are referred to by both counterparts in different degrees. The cultural dimensions *human nature*, *language* and *space* are used by both Russian and French managers to differentiate their cultures. However, the difference between this category and the first one lies in the level of frequency emerging of each dimension. For example, French managers find the differences related to the human nature dimension highly significant. It is moderately significant for Russian managers. And, the opposite is true regarding language and space dimensions.

The third category – *asymmetric perceptions* – regards cultural dimensions perceived only by one counterpart. A dimension perceived by Russian managers and which was not used by French managers is *feminine vs. masculine*. As was described in the result section of this paper, Russian managers consider the French management culture as more feminine than the Russian management culture.

On the other hand, Russian managers do not refer to *time*, *neutral vs. affectivity* and *high- vs. low-context communication* dimensions whereas French managers do this to a significant extent. Russians are regarded by French as short-term oriented. In relation to the affectivity dimension, French managers consider Russians as more warm, spontaneous and natural than French people. French managers emphasized the affective working style of Russians. French managers also consider Russian management culture as a high-context communication culture.

Taking into account the exploratory character of this research, these results need confirmation. However, they present a good base for further research.

A graphical presentation of the mutual perceptions is summarized in Figure 2.

The managerial applications of this paper are quite obvious. Analysing the mutual perceptions of Russian and French managers can help them to understand the host management culture in a better way. This understanding may enable them to avoid *faux pas* and thus facilitate their adjustment. In a more general way, the results of this paper may help multinational enterprises to prepare their expatriates for foreign assignments. Taking into account that mutual perceptions are not always symmetrical may facilitate training and regulate it depending on the direction of cultural flow. In conclusion, I also hope that this paper will be my small contribution to expanding business relationships between France and Russia.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the managers interviewed without whom this research would not have been possible.

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