Weaver, Tali: Perception of Gender Roles: A Comparative Study on American and Russian Values

Proposal

In my video project, I plan to address gender and family expectations of those in the United States v.s. Those in Russia. Russia is still dominated by traditional gender roles, which guide social expectations, interaction, perception and the structural composition of its society. I aim to compare the ethics and ideals of America and Russia while also showing the different perceptions of those in each respective culture on these traditions. Things like expected interaction between men and women, jobs normally available to each gender, marriage responsibilities, and general opinion of gender roles as acceptable or in need of reform.

Hypothesis:

I suspect to find a strong line between the differences in definition and opinion on these topics. Mostly to show how the construction of these dynamics can be altered from one people to the next. I expect to find a stronger acceptance and even generally positive perception of traditional gender roles given to men and women in Russia, partnered with a lack of interest in change; combating the idea of inequality that gender roles have become interchangeable with, in the United States.

Scholarly Background:

Russian gender roles are unique as they were institutionalized, then destroyed, and then strongly re-institutionalized. During the Bolshevik revolution, one focus was on cultivating equal opportunities for women. These goals were forgotten in favor of a stronger family unit (a type of cohesive partnership of men and women) during the C.C.C.P. and affects modern-day Russia in that "The Soviet gender order has helped construct social and economic roles based on biological essentialism. Consequently, business culture supports gender segregation in the public sphere. Individual subjectivities reaffirmed this macro gender order." (Dawn Metcalfe and Afanassieva 2005). Soviet Russia felt gender roles were a strong way to keep families together to support the country because “gender roles here are basically perceived in terms of family significance.” (Bocharova and Lerner 2001). American gender roles have been a more streamlined battle as shown in the “1900s first wave suffrage campaigns, or 1970s sexual equality agitations by second wave movements, today’s activism is suffused by a modern, third wave feminist movement” (LeSavoy and Jordan 2016.) The general difference is that American equality has been pushed for by the people consistently while Russian equality was an inconsistent institutional decision.

Traditional gender roles in Russia and America closely resemble each other. Stigmas are instilled at an early age and carry through development framing youth expectations of themselves for, potentially, the rest of their lives. Russian boys, when faced with identifying their own gender spectrum placement, were already identifying masculine traits and shaping their self-expectations to those traits in talking about "traditional male gender norms underlying boys answers to the question of why they wanted to be boys; physical strength and endurance, dominance, aggressiveness, and breadwinning” (Levant et al. 2003). These perceptions extend to Russian girls as well “despite the fact that girls in Russia today are experiencing many more global influences than did previous generations, they remain committed to the traditional gender norms” (Zdravomyslova and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2015). American children also start to identify with spectrum alignment from early ages of development as "boys tend to internalize more of male gender-role stereotype into their identity, while girls would identify more with mothers’ roles than fathers’ to form relatively less male gender-role identity.” (Zhang et al. 2014).

I assumed it possible to find Russians more accepting of traditional gender roles and less critical of perpetually enforced gender roles. For example "Russian women students were less likely to reject traditional gender roles than were U.S. women students. Thus, we predicted that the gender difference in endorsing traditional masculinity ideology would be smaller for the Russian sample than for the U.S. sample.” (Levant et al. 2003). This shows a distinct cultural opinion on the acceptance of gender roles between Russia and America. The American view (with more liberal gender expectations) may ask “do Russians want to change and are they equal.” The answer may very well be no they do not want to change and yes, to them, they are equal.” One interpretation of Russian women's position on this issue looks decidedly non-feminist. Russian women, like Russian men, have accepted the argument that everyone benefits from a return to traditional roles.” (Henderson-King and Zhermer 2016).

Perhaps the most important result I found was that femininity was synonymous with softness, emotional support, and nurturing; while masculinity was synonymous with leadership, strength, and providing. Both in American interviews and Russian, everyone defined and recognized these traits to be found on their respective sides of the spectrum. The main development being Americans view placement on the spectrum of gendered activities as a choice separate from biological sex; Russians consider biological sex to determine gender spectrum alignment and expect people to work toward alignment. Studies actually suggest most people, Russian or American, align within the gender spectrum by their biological sex, for example, “According to the results of the diagnosis at the cognitive (verbal) level, the gender identification of most participants corresponded to their gender...Features of their identity on many items of the Masculinity and Femininity subscales were highly correlated. Thus, most of the participants had a firm self-assessment” (Lopukhova 2015.) Going from this data I would say that between Russia and America the only difference in these terms is whether or not biological sex holds expectations, limits or define the gender spectrum.

The study A Cross-Cultural Study of Stereotypes of Female Behavior: (in Russia and the United States) points out that cultures commonly have skewed views of “universal concepts”. Russians believe if one admits they are happy or content with their life they risk potentially losing it. American view on happiness is more modeled after aspirations of future happiness, and a “believing is achieving” mentality. The researchers define this stating that “from the point of view of the Americans, it is the contemptible woman that has the greatest sense of dissatisfaction with herself . in the Russian mentality such a feeling, far from evoking rejection actually might be said to evoke acceptance and understanding; the Russian woman gave the highest score for this item to the typical Russian woman” (Mitina and Petrenko 2001). Meaning American women do not feel content and fight for “equality” to secure their futures whereas Russian women feel their futures are secure as long as they are content with their lives now. Of course, Russian and American men share these cultural views respectively.

Video:
Interview Questions:

- Are men and women different? how?
- What defines a woman? What is feminine? Are they synonymous?
- What roles do you expect her to fulfill in jobs and marriage?
- What defines a man? What is masculine? Are they synonymous?
- What roles do you expect him to fulfill in jobs and marriage?
- What are your views on feminism?
- Does equality mean having the same rolls and opportunity? Or does it mean something else.

Video Reflection:

During my video and article, I wanted to find the cultural line for gender and family expectations regarding America and Russia. My expected to find some very strong difference in the gender roles and expectations between these cultures. I noted specifically a positive acceptance of gender roles and lack of drive to change in Russia as opposed to America’s ever-changing gender roles and expectations. While my theories were correct, I found more similarities than differences. My wiki space and video worked very well together to solidify this as well. Through this project, I found that between these values there is actually only one difference, which was whether or not biological sex decides placement on the gender spectrum. Generally, all data suggested this as well as still supporting my theories. My video did well in portraying this, partly due to the filming style used but also in the interviews. Everyone agreed on equality, opportunity, and defining femininity/masculinity on the gender spectrum. Differences were only seen (in both movie and wiki) over whether or not one is free to choose their place on the spectrum, and if that is productive.

Things within my filming style that were done purposefully were my complete absence from the film as an entity other than through editing the piece (almost entirely visually). I wanted uncoached, real responses, not lead by a narrative. It was mentioned in the 1974 article “Truth vs Veracity” by Edmonds that just like an artist a filmmaker may create a filmed based on fragments of the footage, which to him does not distort the truth presented but, I wanted to avoid any mixing and tried to just let the interviews take place. This is also why I did not include an audio of me reading the questions on screen or interact with the participants in person or verbally; instead I provided the questions and let them speak. While not seeing who is giving the opinion may create a bit of impersonality I feel they are still valuable emic perspectives.
Out of my control was equality of content. Due to accessibility issues, my ability to get genuine audio and video footage from Russia was limited, resulting in low visual and audio footage diversity. My intention was to create a good representation of Russian and American values as they closely resemble each other; so I decided with my limitations to go ahead and also keep my American footage as diverse as my Russian footage. Even with my limitations I feel it was the right call as "The interpenetration of these perspectives may be seen as a metaphor for the interpenetration of cultural perspectives" (MacDougall and Castaing-Taylor 1998) and I found the answers to show a great comparison. After finding more similarities between the two cultures I wanted to make sure my video didn't draw a harsh line between them. I wanted rather, that the visuals uphold what I saw while the participants also spoke about the differences. I wanted to use the video to help create a blending effect of both Russian and American footage as to make them less distinguishable and I think keeping a balance of footage (even with my limits) helped to show that.

References cited:

Edmonds, Robert


MacDougall, David and Lucien Castaing-Taylor