

# PERCEPTION OF EMOTIONS AND CULTURAL DISTANCE AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN RUSSIA

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**Abstract.** *The accurate perception of culture-specific emotions of the people living in the host country, may be the most significant, and yet the most underestimated challenge for the international students in the process of adjusting to a new culture. The latest report of the Institute of International Education (IIE) about Russia, confirmed that, in the year 2020, around 353,000 international students are currently studying in the Russian Federation. The studies of van de Vijver in 2007 and 2009 have confirmed that the foreign students from former Soviet republics or former USSR countries (students from post-soviet states, not including Russia: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan) have lower degrees of perceived cultural distance with Russian culture, this can be explained by the fact that the students from former Soviet republics can speak Russian language fluently, and share religion and traditions with Russian culture. Consequently, the group of students from former USSR countries adapt better to Russia in comparison to the rest of international students. The results of our study in 2020, revealed that the perception of Russian culture-specific emotions among international students studying in the Russian Federation, is significantly predicted by the similarity between the culture of the international students living in Russia and the culture of Russian society. Moreover, our study confirmed that the group of students from former Soviet republics, or former USSR countries, perceived more similarities with Russian national culture; therefore, this result is consistent with the findings of the aforementioned studies of van de Vijver in 2007 and 2009. Thus, we can consider that the accurate recognition of Russian culture-specific emotions and the perceived similarities to Russian cultural standards, may be very significant for the international students studying in the Russian Federation, especially for their process of adjusting to Russian culture. Nevertheless, further research on this topic is needed.*

**Keywords:** *cultural distance, international students in Russia, perceived cultural distance, perception of emotions, Russia, Russian culture.*

## **Perception of emotions and cultural distance.**

Emotional perception includes the accurate recognition of our own emotions and the emotions of other people, including individuals from other cultures. However, the differences or similarities between cultures can affect the accuracy of emotion recognition, even those emotions that are considered «basic» or «universal».

David Matsumoto defines «emotions» like the bio-psycho-social reactions that individuals need to adapt and to cope with difference events for survival and wellbeing. Therefore, Matsumoto considered emotions as:

(a) Biological, because they contain physiological responses from nervous system and muscles;

(b) Psychological, because mental processes are involved in the regulation of responses;

(c) Social, because social interaction is always present. Basic emotions are described as the emotions that have universal features, i.e., they share similarities in physiological and psychological characteristic in every culture [Matsumoto, Willingham, 2009].

Matsumoto described the process of behavioral responses for basic emotions. The response starts when events trigger people's basic emotions in the following way:

(a) The first phase is Perception, where the mental process produces the situation into a mental representation, i.e., schema. This schema has two mechanisms, physiological and psychological, the first one to defines the type of the event, and the second one to understand

its meaning.

(b) The second phase is Appraisal, here schemas are evaluated and compared to determine its relevance and matches the emotion with the response. This process happens in the emotion schema database, people from any culture have it since the moment they are born, i.e., everybody will naturally react in the same way with the same emotions to similar events. If the perceived schema does not match with the emotion, no emotion is expressed and the scan continues.

How we mentioned before, once the match happens, the responses start. These responses are:

(a) Expressive behavior,

(b) Physiology,

(c) Cognition,

(d) Subjective experiences. The emotion is this group of responses all together. The goal of the process is to create the behavior that the individual will have in front of an event [Matsumoto, 2009].

The concept of basic emotions is based on the work of Charles Darwin [Andries, 2011], where the universality hypothesis was developed. This hypothesis declares that all humans in all cultures, communicate six emotional states i. e. happiness, surprise, fear, disgust, anger, and sadness, using the same facial expressions as a feature of their biological and evolutionary origins [Jack et al., 2012].

Paul Ekman studied the universality hypothesis in a tribe in New Guinea and confirmed that all members could recognize all gestures of happiness, surprise, fear, disgust, anger, and sadness. Thus, the statement that exist universal or basic emotions in all cultures, was accepted [Ekman, Friesen, 1971; Ekman, Friesen, 1969]. Later, Ekman added the emotion contempt in the list of universal emotions [Ekman, Friesen, 1986]. Consequently, the basic or universal emotions are seven:

(a) Happiness,

(b) Surprise,

(c) Disgust,

(d) Fear,

(e) Anger,

(f) Sadness,

(g) Contempt.

However, Maria Gendron et al., in their study, «Perceptions of emotion from facial expressions are not culturally universal: evidence from a remote culture» examined the perception of facial expressions hypothesized as cultural universal (i.e., happiness, anger, disgust, fear, and sadness); plus, a neutral expression, among Americans and Himbas, an ethnic group from Namibia. The findings revealed that Himbas did not have the same standards of emotions than Americans, e.g. for Himbas some emotions required mental description. Consequently, to perceive some emotions, certain mental state is assumed [Gendron et al., 2014].

Xia Fang et al., in their research, aimed to the study of the specificity of emotion perception across cultures, were compared the perception of two types of non-intended emotions in Chinese and Dutch participants, the facial expressions of emotions which were morphologically similar to the intended emotion (i.e., anger and disgust); and emotions which were morphologically dissimilar to the intended emotion (i.e., fear). The results showed that, Chinese respondents recognized non-intended emotions better than Dutch.

The difference between Chinese and Dutch were more noticeable for morphologically similar emotions than for dissimilar emotions. And, Dutch respondents recognized better non-intended emotions that were consistent with the expressions [Fang, 2018].

Hence, due to the existing diversity in socio-cultural standards and ways of communication, people in different cultures may express several emotions in different ways; therefore, they may perceive several emotions in different ways as well, leading to a possible inaccurate recognition when people perceive specific emotions from another culture.

The aforementioned situation can be explained by the concept of «Cultural distance». This concept is defined as the comparison between norms and practices among two cultural groups, it involves the differences in religious beliefs, race, ethnicity, language, social norms and social values [Ghemawat, 2001; Liu et al., 2018]. Consequently, cultural distance is a measure of the degree of differences that exists between two cultures [Gavrila, Brandt, 2013; Melkonian et al., 2019]. By the model of Hofstede, culture has the following characteristics:

(a) Power distance: connected to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality;

(b) Uncertainty avoidance: associated to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future;

(c) Long term versus short term orientation: related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: in the future, the present or the past;

(d) Individualism versus collectivism: related to the integration of individuals into primary groups;

(e) Masculinity versus femininity: linked to the separation of emotional roles between genders;

(f) Indulgence versus restraint: focused on the gratification versus control of basic human desires, related to enjoying life [Hofstede, 2011].

Thus, in cultures that are low uncertainty avoidance, masculine and high-power distance, people may display smaller amount of emotional expressions. Furthermore, people from high uncertainty avoidance cultures, may regulate better the negatives emotions [Fernández et al., 2000].

The differences in social norms in individualistic and collectivistic cultures, influence the way to communicate and display emotions. In individualistic cultures, people may be really extrovert; however, they may not show negative emotions (e.g., sadness), to people outside their group. Consequently, people from individualistic culture prefer to express negative emotions inside their group. Nevertheless, individualists prefer to express more positive emotions (e.g., happiness). Moreover, collectivists do not endorse expressions of any emotion [Matsumoto et al., 2008].

Consequently, emotions may be expressed differently depending on the national culture. In their society, people may learn to neutralize their expressions, to suit their feelings by expressing emotions in combination, e. g. sadness mixed with a smile, and to simulate emotions [Matsumoto, 1990; Matsumoto, Hwang, 2013], depending on what is more socially accepted.

### **Perception of emotions and cultural distance among international students living in Russia**

Emotional expressions may depend on cultural influences; therefore, the perception of emotions is more accurate or inaccurate, depending on the cultural similarities or

differences between people. A significant cultural distance may be a relevant factor for cross-cultural misperception of emotional expressions, and this can represent an important issue for the international students studying and living in the Russian Federation.

By the model of Hofstede, Russian culture has the following characteristics:

(a) High power distance: making evident the relevant differences between the levels of power and social status;

(b) High uncertain avoidance: Russians feel helpless facing unclear situations, besides this country has one of the most complex bureaucratic system;

(c) High long term orientation: Russia is a pragmatic society, i.e. people believe that the truth depends on circumstances, context and time, also Russians are perseverant in achieving results;

(d) A collectivist society: for Russians close relationships with family and friends are important;

(e) A feminine society: Russians may be really modest about themselves; dominant attitudes are just acceptable in people with higher positions;

(f) Low indulgence, i.e. Russia is a restrain society: this means that Russians may be cynical and pessimists, and do not give importance on personal desires<sup>1</sup>.

In the case of Russia, a collectivist society [Hofstede, 2011], the inhibition of the expression of happiness is common in social interactions with strangers; therefore, Russians may feel more comfortable expressing their happiness to people that are closer to them, like their close friends and family members [Sheldon, 2017].

Therefore, international students in Russia that came from distant cultures may have problems perceiving this inhibited happiness in Russians, and, on the contrary, international students from cultures that are more similar to Russian culture, may not have any problems perceiving it.

The findings of cross-cultural studies conducted in 2007 and 2009 have confirmed that, from all the groups of international students in Russia, the students from former USSR countries or former Soviet republics, subjectively perceived more cultural similarities with Russian national culture. For the reason that, these students can speak Russian language fluently, also, they share religion and many traditions with Russian culture. This means that the national cultures of the students from former USSR countries are perceived as very similar to Russian culture, in comparison to the rest of international students studying in the Russian Federation [Galchenko, van de Vijver, 2007; Suanet, van de Vijver, 2009]. In addition, the group of students from former USSR countries also reported higher levels of adaptation to Russian culture. Thus, having smaller degrees of cultural distance, i.e., having more similarities between cultures, may be an advantage in order to adjust to another culture [Winkelman, 1994].

Our study conducted in 2020 among international students ( $N = 114$ ) studying in the Russian Federation (i.e., students from Algeria, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, England, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, India, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Namibia, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Switzerland, Syria, Tajikistan, Thailand, Uganda, Ukraine, United States, Uzbekistan and Vietnam), was aimed to discover if the cultural similarity between the culture of the international student living in Russia and Russian culture, is

<sup>1</sup> Russia // Hofstede-insights [site]. URL: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country/russia/> (accessed on 29.01.2021).

a statistically significant predictor of the accurate perception of emotional expressions specific to Russian culture.

A measure designed to assess the perception of the overall culture-specific emotions in individuals from a foreign country, previously did not exist in the literature; thus, we developed a novel self-report called «The Perception of Culture-specific Emotions Scale». This scale can be considered the first self-report designed to measure the perception of culture-specific emotions in others. It contains the following 14 items, with response choices ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree:

1. There are moments when I cannot recognize what emotion the people from Russia are expressing.

2. I cannot understand the way that the people from Russia express their emotions, because these expressions are not familiar with my cultural standards.

3. I find hard to recognize the facial gestures of the people from Russia and what emotion they are trying to express.

4. Sometimes I cannot perceive if a person from Russia is feeling happy or not.

5. For me, the emotions of the people from Russia are easy to recognize.

6. Normally, I can identify the emotional states of the people from Russia.

7. I am always aware of the facial emotional expressions of the people from Russia.

8. In some situations, the tone of voice of the people from Russia confuses me.

9. I consider totally understandable the way that people from Russia express their emotions.

10. In my perception, I cannot understand what the people from Russia are feeling, because they cannot communicate their emotions properly.

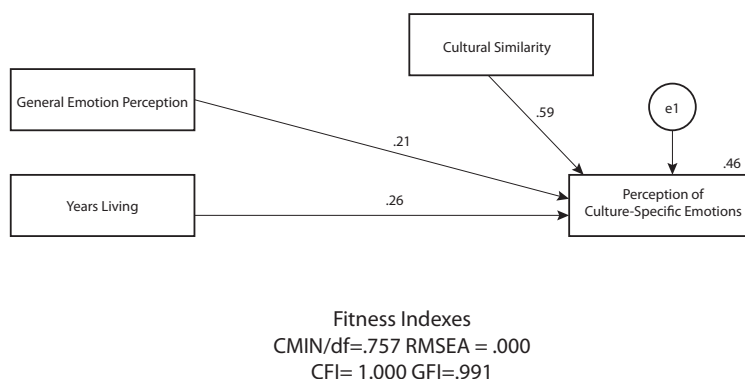
11. I am always certain of the non-verbal communication of the people from Russia.

12. I am never involved in situations of cultural misunderstanding related to misperception of emotions of the people from Russia.

13. There are occasions where I cannot relate some emotional expressions of the people from Russia with any emotion that I know.

14. I do have the ability to differentiate whether a person from Russia is pretending an emotion or not [Berrios Callejas, 2020].

A linear regression analysis was performed with the aim of verifying the significant predictors for the perception of culture-specific emotions. The results of the regression analysis (See Fig. 1) revealed that the perception of Russian culture-specific emotions is significantly predicted by the similarity between the culture of the international student living in the Russian Federation and Russian culture. Moreover, our study revealed that the perceived cultural similarities between the students from former USSR countries and the Russian culture, are a significant advantage at the moment of perceiving emotions specific to Russian culture; therefore, the students from former USSR countries perceive more accurately the Russian emotional expressions, in comparison to the rest of international students studying in the Russian Federation. The results also revealed the relevance of living in Russia for a longer period of time, in order to better perceive emotional expressions in Russians [Berrios Callejas, 2020].



**Fig. 1. Multiple Linear Regression for Significant Variables Predicting the Perception of Culture-specific Emotions.**

*Note.* Model-fit between significant predictor variables «Cultural Similarity», «General Emotion Perception» and «Years Living (in Russia)»; and the dependent variable «Perception of Culture-Specific Emotions».

We consider that the international students may be able to properly recognize the differences between cultures, as they start to be able to adapt [Winkelman, 1994] and accurately identify emotional expressions that are different from their cultural standards. Thus, we conclude with the argument that having an accurate perception of emotions and lower levels of cultural distance may be important factors for the adaptation of international students studying in the Russian Federation. And, hence, these factors should be taken into account in order to create trainings aimed at helping foreign students in their process of cultural adaptation to Russian universities and to Russian society. Especially taking into consideration that today there are approximately 353,300 international students studying in Russia<sup>2</sup>; and in the year 2020, the work rights have been simplify for the international students living the Russian Federation<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, facing the COVID-19 pandemic may be a significant negative consequence for the process of adjustment of the international students enrolled at Russian universities. It is a known fact that the learning process has changed, the lessons are online, and hence the new students may have limited interaction with people of the host country, making it harder to understand their national culture. Consequently, we concede that more research is needed.

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# ВОСПРИЯТИЕ ЭМОЦИЙ И КУЛЬТУРНОЙ ДИСТАНЦИИ ИНОСТРАННЫМИ СТУДЕНТАМИ В РОССИИ

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**Аннотация.** Правильное восприятие культурно-специфических выражений эмоций жителей принимающей страны может быть самой важной и, тем не менее, самой недооцененной проблемой для иностранных студентов в процессе адаптации к новой культуре. Согласно последнему отчету Института международного образования (Institute of International Education) о России, в 2020 г. около 353 000 иностранных студентов обучались в Российской Федерации. Исследования ван де Вейвера 2007 и 2009 гг. подтвердили, что иностранные студенты из стран бывшего СССР (постсоветских стран, не включая Россию: Армения, Азербайджан, Беларусь, Эстония, Грузия, Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Латвия, Литва, Молдова, Таджикистан, Туркменистан, Украина и Узбекистан) имеют более низкую степень воспринимаемой культурной дистанции с русской культурой. Это можно объяснить тем фактом, что студенты из бывших советских республик свободно говорят на русском языке и разделяют религию и традиции с русской культурой. Следовательно, группа студентов из стран бывшего СССР лучше адаптируется к жизни в России по сравнению с остальными иностранными студентами. Результаты нашего исследования, проведенного в 2020 г., показали, что восприятие эмоций, присущих русской культуре, иностранными студентами, обучающимися в Российской Федерации, в значительной степени определяется сходством между культурой иностранных студентов, проживающих в России, и культурой российского общества. Более того, наше исследование подтвердило, что группа студентов из бывших советских республик или стран бывшего СССР ощущала большее сходство с русской национальной культурой. Таким образом, этот результат согласуется с выводами вышеупомянутых исследований ван де Вейвера 2007 и 2009 гг. Таким образом, мы можем считать, что точное распознавание специфических для русской культуры эмоций и предполагаемое сходство с российскими культурными стандартами может иметь очень большое значение для иностранных студентов, обучающихся в Российской Федерации, особенно для их адаптации к русской культуре. Тем не менее, необходимы дальнейшие исследования по этой теме.

**Ключевые слова:** культурная дистанция, иностранные студенты в России, воспринимаемая культурная дистанция, восприятие эмоций, Россия, русская культура.

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