Fons Trompenaars’ Cultural Dimensions in Application: Russia

The seven cultural dimensions of Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner have defined the way many industries interact with cultures of varying values and attributional systems. The definitions their research generates focus around seven central affective and metaphysical outlooks that allow cultures to be compared along a series of seemingly objective dimensions. These dimensions exist, in a classically Western mode of thinking, as contrasting elements. A culture may instill in people ideas of Universalism vs. Particularism, Individualism vs. Communitarianism, Specific vs. Diffuse relationships, Neutral vs. Emotional expressions of affect, Achievement vs. Ascription, Sequential vs. Synchronous understandings of time and Internal vs. External attributions of life events (“Mind Tools”). These categories fit a number of countries very well, such as France, Germany and England, where data concerning the general populous are readily accessible and national identity can be viewed as being relatively stable over the last twenty or thirty years. Russia, however, is an increasingly odd duckling among the flock. Modern Russia is composed of people who have possibly witnessed two revolutions or none at all. Russians live a constant life of redefinition - of their values, religious affiliations, stability of national boundaries and stability of their governmental mechanisms.
Trompenaars’ seven dimensions of culture place Russia as Particularistic, Individualistic, moderately Diffuse and Emotional, barely Ascriptional, Sequentially oriented and expressing an External locus of control (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 54-155). The dimensions appear to be rightfully conservative on many measures. Moderate scores in the dimensions of Specific vs. Diffuse, Neutral vs. Emotional, and Achievement vs. Ascription reflect sensitivity to an ever-changing Russia amidst generational turbulence. A Particularistic orientation that allows for an individual to change based upon the needs of a specific situation fits perfectly with the model of an unstable state. Individualistic tendencies are reflective of a modern change in Russia from a Communist to a Democratic state and the adoption of capitalism. However, a Sequential conceptualization of time and External attribution of life events do not fit the mold. The maintaining of active relationships with coworkers (Diffuse) and slight tendency toward Affective versus Neutral emotional states are not effective strategies of identity negotiation in Sequentially and Externally oriented individuals. Psychological research posits that emotion is commonly associated with greater Internal attributions and those Internal attributions generate visible affective states (Duval, and Lalwani 1220-1229). Sequentially oriented individuals are not as likely to blend work and fun together by maintaining personal relationships with their coworkers. Asking a friend how his mother is, or taking a minute to catch up on his life’s occurrences would not contribute to a Sequentially regulated and productive work day.

These latter two scales did not apply to an in-depth analysis of Интерны, a popular Russian television series modeled after the American series Scrubs. The series depicts the daily routine of four interns (Semyon Semyonovich Lebanon, Gleb
Victorovich Romanenko, Varvara "Varya" Nikolayevna Chernous, and Boris "Borya" Arkadyevich Levin) in training under head Doctor Andrey Yevgenyevich Bykov. The actions of the main characters do not support a Sequential following of a schedule or External attribution of life events. The characters can be often seen working with one patient for exorbitant amounts of time, getting over hangovers instead of attending to their duties and leaving the hospital premises to unexpectedly visit patients. Also, when an error is made by one of the interns, the error is attributed by the Doctor to that intern. The medical students in the series express personal regret, and take steps to right their actions. A person who attributes life events to External sources would not constantly seek to improve Internal attributions of failure (“Series 1”).

Two particular occurrences in ИНТЕРНЫ lead to a more Synchronic and Internal analysis of Russian culture. The repentance of Semyon in episode one, and the romantic dilemma of Gleb and Varya in episode four both exemplify the deviations from Trompenaars’ dimensions noted above. In the first episode the main characters are introduced. Among them is a rather curious figure: Semyon. In later episodes he is known to be a highly affective individual that interacts with patients in a very personable manner. His first assignment is to meet the needs of an elderly woman. He dismisses her from the hospital exclaiming that she is not ailing. The woman leaves the hospital and subsequently dies. Consumed with regret, Semyon leaves the hospital and professes his guilt to the old woman’s weeping relatives and friends. Though the episode is definitively humorous in nature a few clear deviations from Sequential orientations toward time and External attributional tendencies occur. Semyon displays a Synchronic temporal orientation when he leaves the hospital to apologize to the dead
woman’s family. There were doubtlessly more scheduled tasks for him to complete during his first day of training, and Doctor Bykov did not ask him to visit the woman’s family to apologize. He placed the importance of specific tasks over those written into a schedule, thus displaying a Synchronic orientation toward time. His drive to offer his condolences and his guilt clearly stem from an Internal attribution of the woman’s death as opposed to crediting her passing to an illness. The fact that he was driven to such a motive state from his feelings of responsibility for her death clearly displays an Internal as opposed to External accreditation of the day’s occurrences.

The romance between Gleb and Varya also displays Internal attribution and Synchronic temporal orientations. The time in the episode devoted to the conversation of their romance, amongst themselves and fellow employees, is not spent completing pre-designated tasks set by a clock or unyielding planner. The fact that the employees could take time away from their vocation to discuss something non-work related exemplifies a hospital that is Synchronically oriented. The Internal attributional properties of the episode are displayed in Gleb, who sees his preliminary failure at romancing Varya to be the result of a lack of effort on his part instead of her failure to find him attractive due to External factors. An Externally motivated person would attribute their failure in this instance to a third variable they cannot adjust, whereas Gleb connects his failure only with his lack of effort, something he can correct by contributing more effort.

A Synchronic orientation toward time can also be seen in the head Nurse’s (Lyubov Mikhaylovna Scryabina) reaction to Borya’s drunkenness in episode five. Instead of chastising him for not conforming to his set schedule for the day, she does
everything she can do to keep him from participating in the hospital’s functioning.

Another Internal attribution can be observed in the head Doctor’s handling of a childbirth in an elevator. Gleb and Varya find themselves trapped in an elevator with a pregnant woman giving birth (episode five). Doctor Bykov is locked outside of the elevator and so chases it from floor to floor in order to assist the interns. He placed the burden upon himself to deliver the child, regardless of the difficulties he may have suffered in the process. The Doctor could have simply left the birthing process to the interns and resigned himself to the position that he cannot change what’s going on in the elevator, but he believes the child to be his responsibility and ardently pursues his end goal of securing the child’s birth.

The Trompenaars framework was useful for understanding the cultural product save the two aforementioned scales of External vs. Internal attribution, and Sequential vs. Synchronic inclinations toward time. The other five dimensions were extremely sensitive to the cultural implications of the television series reviewed. The Diffuse and Emotional components of the Russian cultural imperative can be clearly observed in the characters’ emotional outbursts and expression of intimate relationships at work. The Particularism of the hospital’s employees is displayed in the favoritism of Doctor Bykov for Gleb and changes in Nurse Lyubov’s behavior when speaking with Borya, who entertains an intimate relationship with her. The actions of the entire hospital staff are Individualistic in nature; from the expression of unique emotions, sexual preferences and feelings toward gambling. The characters often times are more concerned with their own well-being than that of their organization.
The two cultural dimensions by which Trompenaars’ model fails to properly categorize Russian culture are probably the result of the complex psychodynamic effect recent socioeconomic changes have had on the country. Though the reviewed media material does not completely fit Trompenaars’ framework, it is possible that an alternate television series might. *Интерны* may only be representative of the type of Russian that would agree with its humor. The demographics that the series does not appeal to may exemplify the seven cultural dimensions with an unprecedented degree of precision. While an argument of unique or non-generalizable results is applicable to any cultural framework, it is specifically valid in this instance, seeing as though Russians who have lived under radically different sets of circumstances are likely to have varying perspectives on life. Further surveys should be conducted in Russia to refresh Trompenaars’ data. The statistics collected should also be segregated by age, ethnicity and various group affiliations to better understand how cultural dimensions may differ within the Russian populous.
Works Cited


