

'To suffer is to suffer': Analyzing the Russian national character

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The 19th-century Russian scholar and war hero Boris Grushenko had this to say about human suffering: “To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering one must not love, but then one suffers from not loving. Therefore, to love is to suffer, not to love is to suffer, to suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love, to be happy then is to suffer but suffering makes one unhappy, therefore to be unhappy one must love or love to suffer or suffer from too much happiness.”

Pretty heady stuff—and pretty depressing.

There is no Boris Grushenko. Woody Allen fans will recognize Boris as the cowardly anti-hero of the 1975 film *Love and Death*, the director’s parody of Russia’s brooding national character. Boris represents all Russians in his deep distrust of happiness and his eagerness to indulge his every distressing thought and melancholy emotion.

Woody Allen is not alone in stereotyping the dark Russian temperament. But is this caricature accurate? Are Russians really more self-absorbed than their Western counterparts? Do they ruminate more on the negative, and is such brooding impairing the country’s collective mental health?

Two University of Michigan psychological scientists had some doubts about this caricature, and they decided to explore it in the laboratory. Igor Grossmann and Ethan Kross suspected that, even if Russians as a group are more self-reflective and more preoccupied with negative thoughts, this trait may not necessarily be a bad thing. In other words, all self-reflection may not be the same, and some styles of rumination—including the Russian style—might actually be healthy rather than maladaptive. They tested this theory in a couple of simple experiments.

The first study aimed simply to test whether the stereotype was accurate, and whether or not self-reflection was related to depression. The scientists recruited large groups of both Russians and Americans, and gave them a battery of psychological tests, including tests for depression, for rumination, and for a tendency to self-analyze negative thoughts. The results were clear: The Russians were much more likely to identify themselves as self-reflective, but this group trait was not linked to depression. In fact, the opposite: The self-reflective Russians had fewer symptoms of depression than did the less analytical Americans.

These results raised more questions than they answered—like why? It appears that something about the Russian culture or character or cognitive style reduces distress, but what is the mechanism? Grossmann and Kross had an idea, which they tested in a second experiment. In this study, volunteers—again both American and Russian—were instructed to recall and analyze their “deepest thoughts and feelings” about a recent experience that made them angry. Afterward, the volunteers answered questions about their self-analysis: Did they actually re-experience the distressing events? Or did they see the events as a detached observer, from afar? Did they simply narrate the emotional experience to themselves, or were they

looking for insight and closure on the event?

These questions were meant to identify the volunteers' style of self-reflection. Some people tend to immerse themselves in past negative events, to relive them, while others distance themselves. Some want to put bad things in perspective more than others. These different ways of construing negative experiences determine whether self-reflection is healthy or harmful.

The scientists suspected that the Russians would be more detached than the Americans in their self-analysis—and that's just what they found. As reported on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*, the Russian volunteers were not only less distressed while recalling a bad experience, they thought about the event in a healthier way, keeping more psychological distance from the emotional details. They analyzed their feelings, but with detachment, and this detachment buffered them from depression.

So is there something about Russian culture—and American culture—that leads to these healthy and unhealthy styles of self-indulgent thinking? Grossmann and Kross believe it has to do with the basic nature of Russian and American societies. Russians tend to be more communal, more focused on interpersonal harmony, and this allows them to see their own personal needs in larger context, from an outsider perspective. Americans, by contrast, come from a tradition of rugged individualism, and tend to focus on the personal. With less of a community perspective, they immerse themselves in the emotional details of negative events, and this self focus leads to distress and depression.

So it appears that the stereotype of the brooding Russian may contain an element of truth after all, but the caricature of the Russian suffering and loving to suffer is a mere fiction from the American cinema.

Wray Herbert's book, *On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*, will be [published by Crown in September](#). Excerpts from his "We're Only Human" blog appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and the magazine *Scientific American Mind*.