Brooding Russians are happier than they look

By Zosia Bielski
Globe and Mail Update

Studies find that, while they may revel in misery, they get over it quickly

All of life and human relations have become so incomprehensibly complex that, when you think about it, it becomes terrifying and your heart stands still.

With those words, Russian writer Anton Chekhov seemed to perfectly encapsulate the brooding spirit of his people, an attitude that U.S. ethnographers actually researched in "national character difference" studies in the 1950s. Then they concluded that Russian immigrants tended to dwell on negative memories more than Westerners.

A new report from the University of Michigan, however, dispels some of those creaky stereotypes, as researchers have discovered that even though Russians tend to brood, they're less likely than Americans to feel as depressed afterward.

"The conclusion that you often jump to is that Russians are unhappy," says Igor Grossmann, a doctoral psychology candidate who co-authored the report, to be published in the August issue of Psychological Science.

The report looks at the findings of two studies conducted in the U.S. and Russia in 2007 and 2008 and funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. In the first study, the researchers looked at self-reflection and depression among 85 American students and 83 Russian students, age 21 on average.

They used a personality-trait scale developed by Yale University's Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, a leading expert on rumination. Sample statements included, "I often spend time by myself thinking about past negative experiences," and, "I often like to walk in the park and think about past events," Mr. Grossmann said.

The researchers observed that although Russians were more likely to brood, they had fewer depressive symptoms than the Americans.

In the second study, 86 American and 76 Russian students were asked to recall a recent unpleasant experience, be it a breakup, infidelity or a fight with a friend. The participants were asked if they’d achieved closure or still blamed the other party. They were also asked to describe whether they were replaying the event through their own eyes or if they were watching it unfold as "a fly on the wall."
Compared to the Americans, the Russian students were more likely to spontaneously distance themselves from the situation as they analyzed their emotions.

"Distancing is one mechanism that helps them see the positive, despite the fact that they're contemplating negative experiences," Mr. Grossmann said, adding that this seemingly paradoxical ability may be tied to linguistics. "Past research also shows that the meanings of positive words often have negative connotations for Russians, and the meanings of negative words often have positive connotations for Russians. There is some kind of dialectical thinking going on there, where they see the other side."

The Russians were also less distressed after remembering the moment - and less likely to blame the other person. "Blaming the other person often leads to anger and pronounced negative emotions, past research in emotion-regulation shows," Mr. Grossmann said.

The native of Ukraine - and self-confessed brooder - said the findings suggest culture can shape how individuals respond to negative interpersonal experiences.

The report was co-authored by Ethan Kross, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Michigan.