

Impressions of American and Soviet behaviour: RWA images in a mirror

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Received June 1991; accepted July 1991

Thirty years ago Bronfenbrenner described how Russians and Americans appeared to view the world in diametrically opposed fashion. Americans saw Russians as aggressors on the international scene who could not be trusted and who exploited and deluded their people. Russians seemed to mirror this in their image of Americans. The current research, which was conducted in the early years of glasnost, investigated these perceptions in American and Russian students. The findings revealed little evidence of nationalist bias in these subjects. They did, however, show that right-wing authoritarians on both sides were markedly biased. Ironically therefore it seems that in this sense anti-communist Americans and anti-capitalist Russians are the same people. When right-wing authoritarians are standing on each side of the glass, the mirror image still appears. But the reflection they see is their own.

Dertig jaar gelede het Bronfenbrenner beskryf hoe die Russe en Amerikaners oënskynlik die wêreld in lyn-regte teenstelling met mekaar beskou. Die Amerikaners het die Russe as aggressors op die internasionale toneel beskou wat nie vertrou kon word nie en hul eie mense uitgebuit en mislei het. Die Russe het op hul beurt weer hierdie siening oor die Amerikaners gehuldig. Die navorsing onder bespreking wat in die vroeë jare van die glasnost periode onderneem is, ondersoek hierdie persepsies by Amerikaanse en Russiese studente. Die bevindinge het min bewyse van nasionalistiese bevooroordeeldheid in hierdie proefpersone na vore gebring. Opvallende vooroordeel onder die regse outoritêres aan beide kante is egter gevind. Ironies dus dat dit blyk dat anti-kommunistiese Amerikaners en anti-kapitalistiese Russe in hierdie opsig dieselfde mense is. Indien die regse outoritêres aan beide kante van die glas staan, kom die spieëlbeeld nog te voorskyn. Maar die weerskaatsing wat hulle sien is hul eie.

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Thirty years ago Urie Bronfenbrenner (1961) reported how he had been struck, during a visit to the Soviet Union, by the extent to which American and Russian citizens saw the world in opposite ways. Americans generally believed that the Russians were the aggressors on the world scene, that the Soviet government exploited and deluded the Russian people, that the Soviets could not be trusted, and so on. Bronfenbrenner said that the Russians he met felt just the same about the United States government and the American people. Together the two sets of perceptions formed a 'mirror-image', probably distorted and undoubtedly dangerous. This 'good-guy, bad-guy' dichotomization was apparently as staple a feature of the Cold War, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, as it was among the Rattlers and Eagles in the Robber's cave experiment (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961).

The intensity of these feelings, on the American side at least, was driven home in a study of the double standards found among a group of California undergraduates (Os-kamp, 1965). These students thought it was all right that the United States had established rocket bases close to the borders of Russia, that America had carried out blockades, that it had intervened in civil wars in Third World countries, and so on. The same actions by the Soviet Union, however, were roundly condemned.

Thanks to the pioneering research of Tajfel and his associates (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, Flament, Billig & Bundy, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we know that collections of people rather automatically divide the world into in-groups and

out-groups. This 'minimal group effect' has been widely observed in natural groups, and even in artificial, meaningless groups whose members know they have been assigned membership on a purely random basis (Billig & Tajfel, 1973).

If the minimal group effect is the mainspring of ethno-centrism, is this spring wound a little tighter in right-wing authoritarians than in others? The first author conducted a rudimentary test of this at the very beginning of the school year in September, 1990 with two introductory psychology classes who answered a logical reasoning test. Immediately after this test, the students read:

Your professor has two sections of Introductory Psychology, one that meets during slot 9 and one that meets in slot 14. Which section do you think will score higher on the reasoning test?

- Slot 9 will score higher than slot 14.
- There will be no difference between the two sections
- Slot 14 will score higher than slot 9.

In both classes most students (sensibly) said there would be no predictable difference. The students who did think one group would be superior almost always picked their own class. And high scorers on the Right-Wing Authoritarianism or RWA Scale (Altemeyer, 1981, 1988) were twice as likely (30/113) to show this in-group preference as were low scorers (15/114) ($\chi^2 = 6.40$; $p < 0.02$).

Besides the fact that high RWAs are apparently biased in favour of any group to which they happen to belong, they

are also (by definition) submissive to established authority, aggressive toward sanctioned targets, and highly conventional. One would therefore expect, when it comes to international relations, that American high RWAs would particularly accept their government's accounts of its dealings, feel an authority sanctioned hostility toward the Soviet government, and accept the conventional *Us vs. Them* outlook of the Cold War.

This same line of reasoning leads to the curious hypothesis that right-wing authoritarians in the Soviet Union would be among the staunchest supporters of the Communist regime, and would therefore be the most likely to have the mirror-image impression of American-Soviet relations. 'Curious' because devoted Communists are thus considered, in this social-psychological context, 'right-wingers'; curious because the opposite points of view in the two countries are accommodated by the same, not opposite personalities; curious because it follows that many staunchly anti-Communist Americans would be staunch anti-capitalist Communists if they had grown up in Russia. (And vice-versa for their Soviet counterparts.)

This 'curious' model was recently partly confirmed in a study performed by an American and two Soviet psychologists (McFarland, Ageyev & Abalakina, 1990). They administered a translated RWA Scale and eight other attitude measures through public opinion organizations to a quota sample of 200 Moscow and 200 Estonian adults. Over 86% of the surveys were completed and returned. The interitem correlations on the RWA Scale averaged 0,27 yielding an alpha coefficient of internal consistency of 0,92.

RWA Scale scores correlated 0,55 with hostility toward Jews; 0,39 with negative attitudes toward women; 0,71 with hostility towards dissidents in the USSR; 0,72 with distrust of the youth; 0,74 with dislike for democracy; 0,65 with aversion toward a free press; 0,63 with hostility toward the many ethnic minorities which comprise the nation, and 0,71 with hostility toward 'capitalists'. As the authors concluded, 'the authoritarian personality is not the special possession of either East or West'.

A second study which is described below was done in both the USSR and the USA, and explored the mirror-images we have been discussing more directly.

Method

The Soviet study

In the fall of 1988, in the early days of 'Perestroika' and 'Glasnost,' the first author asked the second, an acquaintance majoring in sociology at Moscow State University, if someone in his faculty would be interested in administering a 44-item survey to a student sample. Several months later, after the second author had translated the items, he received permission to collect the data himself at his university.

Measures

The questionnaires began with the RWA Scale, whose printed instructions described it (as usual) as a survey of public opinion. About a sixth of the items had to be modified to meet Russian circumstances. For example, a (contrast) statement about freedom of speech allowing people to advocate overthrowing the government was changed to say

Soviet people must have the right to criticize the Communist Party and demand its resignation from power. Similarly a statement that atheists are as moral as regular churchgoers was modified to say that people who fight the present order are as good as those who defend this order. And so on. We tried to identify the 'established authorities' as the traditional, pre-Gorbachev Communist officials.

Two items, dealing specifically with Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, followed the RWA Scale:

31. The Soviet Union will be a much better country if the policies of Glasnost and Perestroika will prevail.
32. Perestroika and Glasnost are changing society too fast and too intensely; the changes must be limited and much slower.

The next 12 items measured opinions about the Soviet and American governments. Two Mirror-Image versions of this scale were distributed in the sample, though each subject received just one of the forms. The first item on Form A, for example, read:

33. The Soviet Union has the right to intervene militarily when one of its neighbours shows signs of becoming allied with the United States.

The same item on Form B went:

33. The United States has the right to intervene militarily when one of its neighbours shows signs of becoming allied with the Soviet Union.

Each version contained three items favourable, and three items unfavourable, to the USSR, and to the USA (see Table 1). Like the rest of the survey, each was answered on a nine point, -4 to +4 scale. The survey ended with a few demographic questions about gender, academic programme, etc.

Table 1 'Form A' of the Mirror-Image scale

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33. The Soviet Union has the right to intervene militarily when one of its neighbours shows signs of becoming allied with the United States.
 34. The only reason the United States keeps building nuclear weapons is to defend itself from the Soviet Union.
 35. When it comes right down to it, Soviet government leaders just want peace and freedom for all the people of the world.
 36. American peace and disarmament proposals are not propaganda ploys, but sincere efforts to bring about world peace.
 37. When the United States sends foreign aid to foreign countries, its real goal is to dominate and control those countries.
 38. Most other countries tend to see the United States as diabolical and evil.
 39. If the Soviet Union knew it could do so without being hurt itself, it would probably launch a nuclear attack against the United States.
 40. When the Soviet Union intervenes militarily in another country, it really does not care what's good for the people there, but only about its own interests.
 41. The government of the Soviet Union tells its people the truth about its actions and goals abroad.
 42. When the United States does something nice, such as helping trapped whales, it really doesn't do it for the publicity, but because it genuinely cares.
 43. The American government is only pretending to be trying to end injustice in the United States.
 44. The leaders of the Soviet Union are basically aggressive, warlike people.
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Procedure

Most of the subjects were recruited in the Spring of 1989 during a meeting of a 'college orientation' course, and a law course at Moscow State University. AK appeared before class began and announced he was a sociology student conducting an opinion survey under the auspices of a social research laboratory known on campus. He said the completely anonymous survey covered general opinions about society, and Soviet-American relations, and would take about 15 minutes to complete. Altogether about 250 surveys were distributed in these classes, of which 160 were completed and returned at the end of the period.

To improve this return rate and to round out his sample of Moscow State undergraduates, AK set up a table in other classroom buildings, where about 90% of the passing students he randomly 'button-holed' completed the questionnaire then and there.

Altogether 236 sets of answers were collected, of which 10 had to be discarded because of incomplete responses. The largest contingents among the 226 remaining respondents were 68 philosophy, 58 physics, 37 law and 26 history majors. Their mean age was 20,6 years, and on the average they had completed 1,8 years at university. Sixty-two per cent of the sample was male. Nearly all the subjects were ethnic Russians.

The American studies

Harvard University

In October 1989, 172 subjects, representing nearly all the students enrolled in the introductory psychology course at Harvard, answered the same survey, only in English. It was administered in class by a graduate student who said he was collecting data on social attitudes and Soviet-American relations.

SUNY-Potsdam

In the same month, 183 introductory psychology students at the State University of New York at Potsdam served in a survey experiment outside of class time, conducted for the authors by Dr. D. Hanson. They answered a booklet of materials that began with the RWA Scale and then one of the two versions of the mirror-image scale.

Tulane University

In late January of 1990 the first author administered a booklet of materials to 57 introductory psychology students at Tulane, also serving outside of class time. The booklet began just as the SUNY-Potsdam one had: RWA Scale and then mirror-images.

Results

The Russian study

The 226 Moscow State RWA Scale scores ranged from 63 to 205, with a very low mean of 123,3. (North American students typically average within 10 points of 150, the mid-point of possible scores.) The mean interitem correlation on the test was 0,12, producing an alpha coefficient of 0,81 the lowest ever reported.

The students agreed very strongly ($M = 8,05$ on a 1-9 response basis) with the pro-reform Item 31, and disagreed almost as sharply ($M = 2,58$) with Item 32 which urged moderation of glasnost and perestroika.

The means of the answers these subjects gave to the two versions of the Mirror-Image scale are presented in Table 2. It can be seen, for example, that the 111 students who answered Form A disagreed fairly strongly with the notion that the Soviet Union has the right to intervene militarily in its neighbors' affairs. It can also be seen that the 115 students who answered Form B objected just as strongly, but not more so, to the notion that the United States has such a right. That is, there is no evidence of a double standard in these answers.

Possible nationalistic biases can be found in some of the other items. The Soviet students were inclined to blame both superpowers for the nuclear arms race, but especially the United States (Item 2). They also thought Soviet leaders were more interested in peace and freedom around the world than American leaders were (Item 3), and that Soviet peace and disarmament proposals were more sincere (Item 4). They doubted either country would launch a surprise nuclear attack against the other, but they still thought the United States was more likely to do such a thing than Russia was (Item 7). And they doubted either country cared much about the people whose countries were invaded, especially the Americans (Item 8).

On the other hand, these Russian students thought the world tended to see the Soviet Union as more diabolical and evil than the United States (Item 6), that neither set of leaders was particularly truthful with its people, but the Soviet government was less truthful than the Americans (Item 9), and that the Soviet Union was less likely to act altruistically 'because it really cares' than the Americans were (Item 10). Finally, these Moscow State subjects were equally cynical about the motives behind American and Russian foreign aid (Item 5), felt the two governments were equally committed to trying to end injustice in their respective countries (Item 11), and that neither set of leaders was 'basically aggressive and warlike' (Item 12).

Overall, then, one can find some evidence of a nationalistic bias in these answers. But just as often there is no bias, or a seemingly reversed one exists.

Connections with RWA?

Were the more authoritarian Moscow State students more likely to favour the Russian point of view than their low RWA classmates were? A net nationalistic 'Image' score was calculated for each student by summing all the opinions about the Soviet Union (scored in the direction of a favourable opinion) and subtracting the corresponding sum for the items concerning the United States. The mean of this Image score was 5,24 over the 12 items. RWA Scale scores correlated 0,46 with the students' tendency to view their own country as 'right' and America as 'in the wrong'.

The American studies

Harvard sample

Harvard RWA Scale scores ranged from 34 to 254, and averaged 122,4 the lowest student mean ever obtained in

Table 2 Mean responses to the Mirror-Image items

	Moscow	SUNY		
	State	Harvard	Potsdam	Tulane
1A USSR can invade neighbours	2,33	2,39*	2,84*	3,29
1B USA can invade neighbours	2,30	3,85*	4,51*	4,28
2A USA forced into arms race	2,89	4,32(*)	4,87	4,54
2B USSR forced into arms race	4,10*	4,95(*)	4,92	4,38
3A USSR wants world peace	6,42*	4,23	4,78	3,93*
3B USA wants world peace	4,76*	4,24	4,78	5,28*
4A USA peace proposals sincere	5,87*	5,21	5,30	6,11
4B USSR peace proposals sincere	7,08*	5,59	5,31	5,72
5A USA foreign aid insincere	5,96	5,14	4,54	4,00*
5B USSR foreign aid insincere	5,89	5,65	4,92	5,24*
6A Others think USA evil	4,06(*)	4,74	4,73	3,32*
6B Others think USSR evil	4,68(*)	4,42	5,23	5,55*
7A USSR would sneak attack USA	2,52*	3,77	4,21*	4,50*
7B USA would sneak attack USSR	4,28*	3,35	3,67*	3,14*
8A USSR invades others for self	5,96*	6,29*	5,80*	6,14*
8B USA invades others for self	6,96*	5,73*	4,30*	4,55*
9A USSR gov't tells the truth	3,95(*)	2,79*	3,19	2,32*
9B USA gov't tells the truth	4,54(*)	3,38*	3,58	3,69*
10A USA genuinely altruistic	6,71(*)	5,06	5,61	5,61
10B USSR genuinely altruistic	6,24(*)	5,18	5,34	5,59
11A USA not ending injustices	4,58	3,90	3,75*	3,46
11B USSR not ending injustices	4,93	3,92	4,29*	3,41
12A USSR leaders are warlike	2,97	2,97	3,70	3,68
12B USA leaders are warlike	3,30	3,41	3,56	3,21
Net Nationalistic 'Image'	5,24	1,64	5,87	11,12

* indicates $p < 0,05$ by a two-tailed t test for the pair of means

(*) indicates the significant difference is in the anti-nationalistic direction

North America. The internal consistency of their responses to the test also set records for student populations, with interitem correlations averaging 0,32, producing an alpha of 0,93.

Form A of the Mirror-Image scale was answered by 87 students, and Form B by 85. There were only four significant differences in their answers to the different versions of each item, three favouring the United States. These Harvard students, like their Moscow State counterparts, thought neither country had much right to intervene militarily in neighbouring countries; but they thought the United States had a greater right than the Soviet Union did. They also believed their government cared more about the people in countries it invaded than the Russians did. And they thought the American government was more truthful than the Soviets were (although like the students in Moscow, they did not think either government was very truthful). On the other hand, the Harvard students blamed the United States for the current arms race more than they blamed the Russians.

Again, 'Image' scores were computed, only this time by subtracting net favourable impressions about the Soviet Union from net favourable impressions about the United States. The mean image of 1,64 indicates these students had almost *NO* nationalistic orientation, as a group. But relatively authoritarian Harvard undergraduates still tended to: the correlation between RWA Scale scores and Image differences was 0,38.

Potsdam-sample

The RWA Scale scores of the 183 SUNY-Potsdam students ranged from 50 to 225, and averaged 143,7. The interitem correlation among their answers to the scale averaged 0,19, for an alpha of 0,88.

Ninety subjects answered Form A of the Mirror-Image scale, and the remaining 93 answered Form B. Table 2 reveals there were significant differences on five of the twelve pairs of items, all favouring the United States. The Potsdam students thought the United States had a greater right to intervene militarily in a neighbouring country than the Soviet Union did, that the world saw the Soviet Union as being more diabolical and evil, that the Russians were more likely to try a surprise nuclear attack, that the American government cared more about the people whose countries it invaded than the Russians did, and that the American government was trying harder to correct injustices within its borders than the Soviet government was. Again, high RWAs were more likely to have an apparent nationalistic bias in their answers. RWA Scale scores correlated 0,40 with image scores, whose mean was 5,87.

Tulane sample

Tulane scores on the RWA Scale ranged from 95 to 211, with a mean of 153,3 about what my Manitoba student samples average. Their interitem correlations (mean = 0,17) produced an alpha of 0,86.

Twenty-eight of these students answered Form A of the Mirror-Image scale, while the remaining 29 answered Form B. Despite these small *n*'s, their answer to half of the items on the Mirror-Image scales were significantly different, all favouring the United States. They thought the American government wanted peace more than the Soviet government did, they felt American foreign aid was more sincere, they believed the rest of the world liked the United States more, they felt their government was less likely to launch a surprise nuclear attack, that it did not invade other countries for its own self-interests, and that the American government was more truthful with its citizens.

The image scores for these students was higher than that seen elsewhere (11,12). As usual, the more authoritarian students had a greater nationalistic bias in their opinions ($r = 0,47$).

Discussion

The Soviet results

The low internal consistency of the Moscow State answers to the RWA Scale could be a (perfectly plausible) sign that the test is less valid in the USSR than elsewhere. But McFarland *et al.* (1990) obtained an alpha of 0,92 in their survey of Soviet adults. So it appears more likely the alpha of 0,81 of the Moscow State sample can be attributed to poor testing circumstances — most of the surveys were completed while the students were (supposed to be) listening to lectures in class.

The very low mean score on the test among the Moscow State students also draws our attention. One is tempted to infer that these are atypical, revolutionary students. But McFarland *et al.* (1990) found even lower scores among their much more representative, nonstudent samples. So the two Soviet studies to date indicate Soviet citizens are much less authoritarian than North Americans are — quite a sobering realization since the latter are supposedly the standard-bearers of democracy.

While this has led to the burning of some of the first author's lectures (which concluded societies have enormous power to shape their populations), it does agree with the basic finding about the origins of personal authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1988). As described earlier, Manitoba students (and Potsdam too, incidently) seem to have had their RWA Scale attitudes shaped, not so much by their parents, peers, the media and so on, but mostly by their experiences with the objects of those attitudes (Altemeyer, 1988). That includes experiences with the established authorities in their lives. And if there is one group of people who have learned from bitter experience that the authorities cannot be trusted, are often incompetent, and corrupt, etc., the Russians apparently have.

The Soviet Mirror-Image scale data are also provocative. Much has apparently changed since Urie Bronfenbrenner's visit during the depths of the Cold War. The Russian students show very little evidence of a net nationalistic bias in their attitudes toward the Soviet and American governments. This relatively balanced view coincides with the low authoritarianism of these reform-minded students. Learning to distrust the traditional regime could bring with it distrust

of that regime's depiction of 'the enemy'. The less authoritarian the Moscow State student, we saw, the less the image scores favoured the Soviet Union.

The American data

This also proved to be the case at the three American schools sampled. High RWA students at each site were the most likely to have double standards about American vs. Russian invasions, to blame the arms race on the Soviets, to believe the Russians would launch a sneak nuclear attack if they could, etc. This all fits into the deeper understanding we have acquired of the authoritarian mind, where double standards abound, fundamental attribution errors teem, contradictory beliefs are highly compartmentalized, 'Us vs. Them' distinctions are springloaded, fear claws at one's peace of mind, and self-righteousness steadily beats a militant drum (cf. Altemeyer, 1988).

Of course, none of the American samples showed the nationalistic bias Oskamp found in the mid-1960s. Soviet-American relations have changed enormously. Nevertheless, one notes that the more authoritarian the overall sample was at an American school, the greater the nationalistic bias evident in Table 2.

Are there mirror-images?

What may we then conclude about the 'mirror-images'? When one looks for them in the combined Soviet and American responses, there are but a few. On most of the items, most of the sample saw no difference in Soviet and American actions, or else saw the same differences.

There are not many mirror-images in these data, for one thing, because the Moscow State students showed little evidence of a net nationalistic bias. Therefore those American samples which did show some bias had few opposing images to mirror. Of course the Moscow State sample is no more representative of the Russian population than the Harvard students are representative of the United States. If we had looked elsewhere in the Soviet Union, we could probably have found that 'opposing image'. And we have a pretty good idea where to look — in the high RWA segments of the Russian population. The constant finding in the study has been that the right-wing authoritarians in each country tend to endorse their government, and mistrust the other side, the most.

There *are* right-wing authoritarians in the Soviet Union. We noted earlier that Soviet Highs tend to be hostile toward Jews and other ethnic minorities, toward women, toward dissidents, toward youth, toward democracy. In all these things, they are carbon copies of North American highs. The only point of departure is that (as expected) right-wing authoritarians in the Soviet Union are as hostile toward 'capitalists' as North American Highs are hostile toward Communists.

Thus Soviet and American high RWAs seem not only to be each other's mortal enemy; they seem to be the same people. So the mirror-images will probably still appear today if right-wing authoritarians are standing on each side of the glass. But it really is a mirror. The image they see on the other side will be *their own*.

Acknowledgements

We thank Roger Brown and Gregg Solomon of Harvard, David Hanson of SUNY-Potsdam, and Ed O'Neal and Paul Frankel of Tulane for their help in collecting the data at Harvard University, SUNY-Potsdam, and Tulane University.

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