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Preferences for Male or Female Bosses Among Russian and American University Students: The Sway of Modernity?

Social scientists often count gender equality among the values held by modern individuals. One of the key indicators of support for equal rights focuses on preferences for a man or a woman as your boss at work (Opros . . . 2004; Erskine 1971; Americans . . . 2006; McGlen et al. 2006). Typically, this involves a survey questionnaire that asks respondents whether, generally speaking, they would prefer a man or a woman to be their boss at work; options include man, woman, no difference/either, or no opinion. If longitudinal data show a growing proportion of respondents expressing the view that it makes no difference whether the boss is male or female, scholars view the results as evidence of a decline in discrimination against women, while high levels of support for the "no difference" position stamp a population as "progressive." The modern or progressive stance thus implies a rejection of gender stereotyping in favor of judging people as individuals whose suitability as a boss has little or nothing to do with gender.

This research seeks to increase our understanding of the meaning behind "boss preferences" by examining how respondents—Russian and American university students—justify and account for their choices (Stepanova 2005; Women Take Care . . . 2005; Podtserob and Dagaeva 2006; Palilova 2006). The cross national research design promotes an enhanced understanding of intercultural understanding, intercultural communication, and the interplay between gender and nationality. We will seek answers to the following questions: What do university students—female and male, Russian and American—value in a boss? How do they characterize the major traits of male and female bosses? Are there systematic patterns related to gender and nationality in actual

preferences? With respect to how students explain their choices? What does the study suggest about U.S. and Russian culture?

Research Methods

During spring semester 2005 in Volgograd and spring semester 2006 at Penn State Harrisburg, survey questionnaires were distributed, respectively, to Russian and American university students. The Russian data were drawn from four institutions of higher education: Volgograd State University; Volgograd Pedagogical University; Volgograd Law Academy (Ministry of Interior); and the Volgograd Academy of State Service. All U.S. data were gathered at Penn State Harrisburg. The samples were restricted to undergraduate students, age 17 to 24. The Russian sample numbered 275 students (71% female) and the U.S. sample 384 (48% female).

A brief questionnaire was passed out in selected classes. Students first responded to the following closed question: "Generally speaking, would you prefer a man or a woman to be your boss at work?" They could check off any of four options—man, woman, no difference/either, or don't know/no opinion. Then they were confronted with an open ended question that asked them to briefly explain their choice. It is the open ended responses that provide insight into university students' thinking on this aspect of gender equality.

Research Results

Due to limits of space, this essay will highlight the most striking findings. The most popular choice among university students in both countries is "no difference": 58% of Penn State students endorse this position while 48% of their Volgograd counterparts do so. The Volgograd proportion rises to 52% if the 26 male respondents from the MVD Law Academy are excluded from the data set (21 of the 26 prefer a male boss). The Penn State score is virtually identical to national public opinion in the United States while a poll carried out in Volgograd oblast in 2004 that asked about preference for a male or female boss found that only 21% of the population chose the "no difference" option,

with little difference between male and female responses (Americans More . . . 2002; Opros . . . 2004). The Russian university sample thus differs significantly from the general population: this divergence may signal that young, well educated people will hold substantially different gender attitudes than older generations.

Turning to other aspects of the "big picture," the two university groups diverge markedly. While 42% of the Volgograd sample prefers a male boss (38% without the Law Academy students), only 25% of the Penn State students express this preference. Still, the Volgograd students fall well short of the oblast survey that found 61% of residents favoring a male boss. Fourteen percent of the American sample preferred a female boss, while 7% of Russian students chose that option. In both cases only negligible numbers (3%) stated that they had no opinion or did not know.

Of greater interest, however, are the dyads—comparisons of American and Russian females who prefer a male boss, American and Russian females who prefer a female boss, American and Russian males who prefer a male boss, and so on. An overall examination of the breakdown of the data by gender and nationality shows that U.S. students—male and female—think much more similarly than do the young Russian men and women. In the U.S. case, 25% of both men and women prefer a male boss, while the respective scores for favoring a female boss are 10% and 18%, and for either/no difference 61% and 55%. In contrast, the Russian sample contains substantial gender gaps: 58% of the men prefer a male boss (47% without the MVD Law students) compared with 36% of the females. There also is a wide divergence with respect to either/no difference responses, with 54% of the women but only 33% (41% without the MVD Law students) of the men choosing that option. Though Russians often reject feminism as preaching conflict between the sexes and argue that Russians favor harmony, it is the American students whose attitudes reflect a more consensual or "harmonious" relationship between the sexes.

A closer look at particular sets of dyads reveals striking cultural differences between the two sets of university students. Take the case of

males preferring a male boss. Among Penn State males embracing this position, the most common explanation involved comfort—having more in common with another man, being able to pal around. The only other rationale that drew some support involved the idea that men have more energy, are more direct, efficient, and assertive. The Russian men offered as their prime reason the notion that men are strong, strict, tough, and can handle crisis or extreme situation. It should be noted that 18 of the 70 Volgograd women students opting for a male boss also mentioned men's advantage in crisis situations. In the U.S. sample, references to a crisis or extreme situation are almost totally absent from student responses. It appears that the Penn State men seek a friendly boss while the Volgograd men want strong leaders who can handle difficult situations.

These differences presumably reflect recent Russian history, which has been a roller coaster of crises from the late 1980s to the turn of the millennium, as well as traditional views about the need for strong leadership. There also are sharp differences in attitudes toward female bosses across gender and nationality. Looking first at women, 18% of Penn State Harrisburg women expressed a preference for a female boss while only 7% of their female counterparts in Volgograd did so. Moreover, the explanations differ: the American students overwhelmingly cited the idea that they were more comfortable with a woman boss and that women were more sensitive and caring, especially about scheduling issues. The Volgograd women students contended that women are more responsible, organized, and competent. Ten percent of the Penn State male sample wanted a female boss; this group, like their female classmates, focused on the notion that women are kinder and treat employees better. Again, the rationales behind "boss preferences" differed markedly across cultures.

A final example involves females preferring male bosses. The Penn State group (25% of the female sample) primarily felt that women are too judgmental, petty, and competitive with other women, while the Volgograd women (36% of the female sample) held that men were more rational (less emotional) and better in crisis situations. A

substantial minority of the American women subset also cited men's greater emotional stability as a strong point for a male boss but none explicitly stated that men are more rational.

A majority of U.S. men and women, and of Russian women, choose the "either/no difference" option. Overwhelmingly, they explain that what makes a good boss—qualities like competence and organizational skills—are not related to gender. Yet even here there are interesting patterns. U.S. students, unlike their Russian counterparts, tend to cite personal experience: that they have had male and female bosses, that both were OK, and that it therefore does not matter. American university students typically have years of work experience—and multiple bosses—under their belt by the time they are 20 years old. The role of personal experience is one that needs to be explored further in future research as it clearly has great impact on university students' thinking about male and female bosses.

Conclusion

In both the Russian and U.S. cases, it is striking that few students explain their choices in terms of more general ideological or philosophical appeals to equal opportunity or to equality between the sexes. Indeed, a substantial minority of students who select the "no difference" option actually employ stereotypes to explain their answer. But these stereotypes prove a wash: the students note that male bosses and female bosses bring different strengths and weaknesses to the table, so who can say which is better. From a methodological viewpoint, the "either/no difference" category is capturing two very different types of responses: those who hold that the ability to be a boss is not related to gender AND those who do hold deeply held convictions (stereotypes) about the character of men and women but simply do not assign either sex a clear advantage. While this is "progress," the level of support for "gender neutral" approaches to social issues is overstated in standard survey research.

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