SOCIALIZATION EXPERIENCES OF RUSSIAN EMPLOYEES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS – CULTURAL APPROACH

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Socialization Experiences of Russian Employees at the University of Alaska Fairbanks – Cultural Approach

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory study examines Russian employees’ lived experiences at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) and the influence UAF culture has on the communicative socialization process. Like other international workers employed at various positions in American universities, Russian employees, especially Research and Teaching assistants, may experience difficulty in terms of language, culture, training, in terms of adapting to American culture, specifically American academic culture, to succeed in their jobs. The literature review for this study includes theoretical perspectives from intercultural communication, organizational communication, and the social construction of reality.

Russian employees participate in in-depth narrative interviews about their communication experiences of socialization at UAF. Four repetitive themes emerge: (1) vulnerable self; (2) competition; (3) freedom; and (4) informality. Analysis also provides insight on cultural similarities and differences between Russians and Americans in their interactions at UAF, and on an interpersonal level. Implications for future research in relation to how cultural similarities and differences are revealed in a communication process between Russian graduate and professional students and their American counterparts, and how these similarities and differences affect their everyday interactions.
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There is a tide in the affairs of men [and women],
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to the fortune...
On such a sea we are now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
or lose our ventures.

William Shakespeare

INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that international student population has risen greatly in US universities over the past four decades. For instance, between 1958 and 1988, the number of foreign residents receiving Ph.D.s from American Universities increased from 772 to 8,589 (Bowen and Rudenstine, 1992, p. 28). In some major research U.S. institutions, more than half the graduate assistants are not from the United States (Kulik, 1985).

International graduate assistants, especially those who find themselves in teaching roles, may experience difficulty in terms of language, culture, or pedagogical training to succeed in the classroom. As a result, they are often forced to turn to peers for support and encouragement as well as for assistance with problems of adapting to American life, culture, and students.

The current trend towards globalization suggests that an increasing number of Russian graduate and professional students will also encounter American culture. Entering a new culture for these students can challenge their cultural beliefs and the ways in which
people use communication to negotiate cultural similarity and difference. Cultural sensitivity to different (and similar) others may play an important role in understanding how Russian students perceive American culture, choose ways to communicate and adapt themselves to their work in American educational institutions, and thereby increase global unity and decrease global conflict.
PURPOSE

The primary goal of this study is understanding communicative styles Russian graduate and professional students use to adapt at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, Alaska, USA. This study builds on the framework developed by Pribble (1987, as cited in Frishman, 2001) by conducting research that examines the communication processes associated with organizational socialization of new employees.

Pribble (1987) argues “the process of socialization in organizations is a logical objective of study for students of organizational communication” (p. 2). She views socialization as a process in which an outsider becomes an insider. This process involves learning rules of conduct, modes of thinking, and accepted explanations of reality. Pfeffer (1988) suggests, “organizations may be viewed as a set of beliefs, attitudes, and values, which impose order on goal directed behavior” (p. 3). Such cultural or interpretive approaches to organizations view communication as the central process in the creation, maintenance, and extension of corporate collective meaning (Putnam, 1982; Smirchich, 1983).

This study draws also from the work of Bragg’s (1976) research on adult socialization, conceptual analyses of students’ socialization in higher education at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Stein & Weidman, 1989) and other investigations of the socialization process over the past three decades.

Particular emphasis is placed on the role communication plays in the ways organizational values are transmitted to new members of an organization and details on how this process creates and maintains organizational cultures at UAF. The primary
focus of this research is the process of socialization as communicative enculturation. Field research in a corporate setting seeks to determine the following: the values an organization and its leaders hold toward constituencies, how these values are communicated to new members, and whether or not the values espoused by the organization are broadly held among members and ultimately help form a coherent culture. A secondary area examines the influence corporate culture has on the socialization process. A fundamental assumption of the secondary area is that communication (in various forms) acts as a primary mechanism during socialization enabling newcomers to acquire the values of an organization. A second assumption is that an organization’s culture plays an important role in determining what is being communicated, how, and why.

Since the cultural approach, that involves development of values and ethics, has been neglected by many organizational scholars, I frame this research in the context of graduate and professional student socialization. For international students, communication is central to the adaptation process. Coming to a better understanding of intercultural communication competence, and all the factors, which facilitate adjustment to a new culture, can assist in designing programs for international students. Furthermore, encouraging international students to interact more with university faculty, staff, and students, other international students, and members of the larger community provides not only international students with enriching communicative experiences, but does so also for their partners in the intercultural communicative event. Developing intercultural communication competence is essential in the academic world and in the workplace as
the "global village" continues to become smaller and each hamlet more culturally diverse. It is also important here to recognize that Russian graduate students experience socialization, and communicative enculturation processes, that reflect their chosen disciplines and their institutional homes.
The end of the Cold War, which brought rapid social, political, and cultural changes all over the world, and the need to provide answers to perceived economic challenges from Asia and Europe, exerted enormous pressure on organizations and countries to change and adapt. Many organizations seek global stability through the creation of strategic partnerships that span the globe while others have responded to this challenge by making their internal environments more culture-sensitive and friendly. Such organizations seek to attract the best and most qualified individuals who will contribute to organizational goals and missions. The individual, on the other hand, attempts to modify the organizational context to better satisfy his or her needs (Jablin, 1982). An example of this relationship between the organization and individual is seen in the admission process at most universities and colleges. Like any organization, universities and colleges admit only students who have the potential to succeed. Students, on the other hand, want to use the opportunities offered by universities to achieve their personal goals. The unique intercultural interaction between the organization, an American university, and individual employees with a Russian cultural background constitutes the focus of this study. The intercultural dimension of this experience requires an examination of culture and its impact on the organization and the employees.

According to social constructionist thinking, people's understanding of the world relies on linguistic and communicative conventions created through interactions and relationships (Gergen, 1994a). Gergen posits that human interactions contribute to constructing lived reality, which is pluralistic, relativistic, and dynamic. This approach is
opposed to positivistic thinking, which claims the existence of an objective truth. It claims that human realities are constructed in communication and the basic context of reality construction is the human relationship.

In social constructionist thinking, there is no right or wrong way to perceive or experience a new culture, or a new organizational culture; nor is there a right or wrong way to adjust to it. How entering a new culture is perceived by a newcomer depends on the interactions between individuals in interpersonal interaction, taking cultural differences into account. The meaning of a situation is constructed through relationships and at the same time modifies those relationships (Gergen, 1994a).

Because the meaning given to the constructed reality motivates the emotional and the behavioral response to it (Gergen, 1991), the participants’ ways of experiencing the intercultural organization, situationally as well as personally, socially, and culturally context the experience of Russian people living and working under intercultural conditions of uncertainty must be taken into account. Accounting these experiences can be accomplished by informally exploring how people construct their experiences rather than by diagnosing or assessing their adjustment indicators; that is, one can ask of them their stories of the adaptation experience.

Experience and its assigned meaning can be evaluated largely through the language people use to describe and explain that experience (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). Language is a tool for defining and describing experiences, as well as for communicating about them. The language used (that is, words, metaphors, or sentences) constructs the narrative of an experiential situation and the knowledge a person makes of it. At the same time, the
relationships that are constructed in the context of telling about the situation reconstruct
the experience and modify an individual’s knowledge of that experience (Gergen, 1994).
If international TAs experience, of role and culture tensions, is considered in regard to
relationship, as Gergen suggests, then interactions with students are the ground of those
tensions.

Often people with great cultural differences are not well accepted in the host society
and do not have the opportunity to spontaneously choose a strategy for acculturation;
rather, they are forced to follow a specific strategy (Berry, 1997). It is very important for
a new group member to be well accepted by the existing group and to develop
relationships with this group. Researchers have considered this experience in regard to
acculturation strategies related to experiential levels of stress (Zheng & Berry, 1991), and
to psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). In particular,
socio-cultural adaptation stresses the capability of a new group member to organize his-
or her everyday life in a new environment, such as language ability, cultural knowledge,
and social relationships).

A simple and comprehensive definition of culture was suggested by Dodd who
approached culture as the “total accumulation of identifiable group’s beliefs, norms,
activities, institutions, and communication patterns” (1991, p. 41, as cited from Matveev,
2002). His definition agrees, to a large extent, with those of other researchers (Bormann,
1983; Hall, 1976; Herkovitz, 1955). Hall suggests that culture affects how people express
themselves, the way they think, how they move, how they solve problems, how they plan
and lay out the cities, and how their government systems are put together and function.
In Hall’s definition, like Dodd’s (1991), culture is an extremely complex concept that is connected to every aspect of life. Samovar and Porter (1991) illustrate the same idea when they say that culture is our “invisible teacher” (p. 47) and that it “dictates who talks to whom, about what, how, when, and for how long” (p. 48). Schein defines culture as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learns as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid. Therefore, culture can be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel with relation to problems (p. 12).

As one can see from the above definition, a person’s culture affects both the understanding of a communication act and what is seen as the “correct” behavior within the context of the act. To Bormann (1983), communication is “the human social processes by which people create, raise, and sustain group consciousness” (p. 100). Gudykunst and Kim put these conceptualizations of culture and communication neatly together in their definition of intercultural communication, by defining intercultural communication as “communication between people from different societal cultures” (1992, p. 16). Their definition applies to all situations wherein individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other. Their definition covers, specifically, the complex dynamics of organizational entry and socialization, which are the scope of this study. Louis defined organizational socialization as “the process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member” (p. 230).
Kim (1980a) introduced a theory of cross-cultural adaptation that relies on a different theoretical perspective, namely, general systems theory (see Boulding, 1956/1977; Ruesch & Bateson, 1951/1968). She views a person as an open communication system that interacts with and adjusts to the environment. According to this theory, little adjustment is required when interacting with individuals from the same culture because both interlocutors have already learned to communicate similarly through the same socialization process. However, adjustments are required if one is to interact effectively with culturally different others who constitute a foreign environment. Kim’s theory suggests, when people enter environments in which they no longer function effectively, they will attempt to change through the process of stress, adaptation, and growth, which occur entirely through communication. During intercultural communication, interlocutors who recognize themselves to be “outsiders” become stressed with the experience of ineffective, confusing communication. Consequently, they attempt to adapt by learning new elements of the host culture, while, simultaneously, unlearning the respective elements from their own culture. In an unfamiliar environment, communicators grow in a continuous process of trying to successfully “fit” with those who make up their environment, by developing communication competence of hosts. Thus, in Kim’s view, who is learning, or not learning, what elements of which culture, constitute intercultural communication.

Before continuing, it is necessary to define two terms already used in this paper. Although the concepts of “American” and “Russian” appear to be self-explanatory, these terms do not necessarily refer to nationality and ethnic heritage. In this study, I use the
adjective “American” to describe organizational commitments and interests that are economically, politically, and geographically located in the United States (particularly, at UAF). When this descriptor refers to the person, it denotes a representative of this university. The term “American” refers also to his or her cultural background. Similarly, the adjective “Russian” describes organizational commitments and interests that are economically, politically, and geographically located in the Russian Federation, and the cultural heritage of the person. The group characteristics categorized under each label are similar because they operate in economic, political, and social environments that have similar requirements and expectations. In turn, these result in similar beliefs and values about the way the world operates. Because both the United States and Russia are diverse societies, the terms “American” and “Russian” do not refer to race, ethnic heritage, birthplace, religion, or other attributes frequently associated with culture.
**UAF as an Organization**

The University of Alaska Fairbanks is America's northernmost land, sea, and space grant institution. The UAF Graduate School offers 51 Master's and 15 Ph.D. degree programs, serving 750 degree-seeking graduate students from all 50 states and many foreign countries. Nearly half the UAF student body comes from out-of-state, and several hundred come from other countries.

The mission of the University of Alaska is to respond to the educational needs of all Alaskans and to enhance Alaska's economy by fostering and promoting a high quality postsecondary educational system, appropriate vocational education development and training, advancement and extension of knowledge, learning, and culture, and the application of new knowledge and emerging technologies to meet the needs of the state.

The Office of International Programs provides international student advisors who help international students adjust to the U.S., Alaska and UAF, and provide counseling for personal and academic problems. The Office of International Programs also provides counseling and other helpful services for international students at UAF.

The mission of the Office of Multicultural Affairs is to provide culturally sensitive educational opportunities to the campus and surrounding community through an on-going expansion of services that are both complementary and supplemental to existing efforts available elsewhere on campus. The purpose is to promote cultural diversity, academic and personal resources, to bridge barriers between the university and the underrepresented populations (Institutional, Linguistic, and Ideological).
UAF aims at making the learning experience a positive, exciting, and diverse one for all the students. Aspects of the campus organizational structure (for instance, the mission, faculty credentials, academic requirements, departmental characteristics, and reputation) affect students' socialization (Stark, Lowther, Hagerty, & Orczuk, 1986). The ethos of individual academic and professional departments at UAF serves as a frame of reference for newly entering graduate students and lays a foundation for socialization into the field represented. To access information about job requirements and the program, students use the school catalog, Web-resources, internal policies of the graduate programs, values within a particular department, and key interaction patterns. All these sources help build their knowledge of faculty and their future profession.

**Organization as a Cultural Place**

Millhous (1998) was struck by significant differences in the way Russians and Americans communicate, which occurred most in the context of business. The tenor of the dialogue suggested to her that Russians are more attentive to the context, while Americans critically examine the content of the messages. Millhous refers to Smith’s words, “American focus on the words, Russians on the pauses” (p. 6) which may result in frustration for many business representatives.

As a social scientist, Millhous assigned categories to the behaviors she observed. Russian participants seemed to be less explicit, or more “high context” using Hall’s (1976) taxonomy, while Americans were more descriptive and verbal about what they meant. Bales’ (1951) distinction between the task and relationship dimensions of group
work also seemed pertinent; Russians were busy building relationships, whereas Americans set themselves to accomplish the task of making their business function.

Millhous looked into theories of relationship development and considered Schutz’s (1958) Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) as a possible explanation. Schutz asserts that an individual’s needs for inclusion, control, and affection emerge predictably at different stages of relationship development. Millhous considered the idea that Americans and Russians differed systematically in the order of these stages, the needs they felt, or some combination of the two. These assumptions led her to a trait motivation theory and beyond, searching for a theoretical framework that could help explain the differences she observed.

The more she looked at the theories of culture and collaboration, the more convinced she became that the reason for conflict in interaction would become obvious if she could identify the core differences between the two cultures. Her field notes of 30 interviews with Russians and Americans in Russia were filled with description of conflict and frustration, but in the end most respondents concluded they enjoyed working with their counterparts. It was difficult to believe that they were enjoying the conflict, but the theories provided no alternative explanations.

The finding that Americans and Russians enjoyed their interaction went against most of the existing intercultural training. The cultural difficulties should create uncertainty and anxiety that result in negative stereotypes and inhibit interaction. It was theoretically unlikely that members of such different cultures could truly understand each other; inaccurate attributions should destroy collaboration from the outset.
Literature drawn from a variety of disciplines identifies cultural differences between Americans and Russians as a cause for concern in American-Russian joint operations. Stephan and Abalkina-Paap (1996) identify Russians as collectivistic, in contrast to American individualism. Russian scholars have described their own culture as valuing the spiritual rather than the material elements (Epstein, 1995; Solzhenitsyn, 1995) while Stewart and Bennet (1991) say Americans clearly evaluate the material over the spiritual in their description of U.S. culture (Kluckhohn & Strodbeck, 1961), also note that distinction.

Differences in ethical systems of Russians and Americans are documented by Puffer and McCarthy (1995). They identify both shared and divergent values, but perhaps the most problematic for business is a Russian belief that maximizing profit is exploitation, and thus unethical. In addition, accepted Russian practices of personal favoritism, bribery, price-fixing, and ignoring regulations seen as senseless, are difficult for Americans to appreciate. Puffer and McCarthy call on U.S. business to recognize that the extreme levels of change in Russia create a flux in the ethical standards of the culture. The absence of laws makes it much like an ethical vacuum.

Walck (1994, as cited in Millhous, 1998) has noted that:

In Russia it is still difficult to divorce leadership traits of initiative and risk-taking from illegal and unethical behaviors. As long as the legal underpinnings for private enterprise are minimal, contradictory and constantly changing, taking initiative will mean risking doing something illegal. As long as the old system coexists with the
new, taking initiative will often require doing something unethical, like giving gifts to customs officials. (p. 58)

The ethical differences are noted by Russians and Americans alike. One innovative Russian scholar has modeled these differences mathematically and makes a convincing argument that the two cultures have opposite approaches to determining what is ethical (Lefebvre, 1982). Lefebvre suggests that Russians value moral certainty whereas Americans value ethical self-doubt.

According to Hecht and Kovach (1995) Russians work for self-profit, rather than company profit and typically do not see progress and materialism as part of their life. They posit, “... For the Russian, time spent at work is simply the boring, but mandatory period between breakfast and supper when one needs to keep an eye out for objects and services that could be acquired illegally and diverted to one’s own benefit” (Tongren et al., 1995, p. 9).

Stephan and Abalakina-Paap (1996) hold that Russians historically tend to rely on a close network of interpersonal relationships to accomplish life goals through interpersonal contacts rather than through individual skills. Russian people had to distinguish between public and private communication (Mikheyev, 1987; Smith, 1976). An old Russian proverb that is still being used today states: “It’s more important to have 100 friends than 100 roubles” (cited in Bollinger, 1994, p.52). Therefore Russians have a higher capacity to “behave as if one understands the world as others do” and “to appear to put themselves in others’ shoes” (Lustig & Koester, 1999, p. 332). These characteristics of Russians, paired with their natural passion for social interaction (Kluchhohn and
Strodbeck, 1961), enable Russian managers to develop a spirit of inquiry about other cultures and communication patterns in these cultures, and appreciation for different working styles. Previous research has shown that Russians value people for what they are rather than what they have done (Kluchhohn and Strodbeck, 1961). Russians are less persistent as Americans and more accepting of the passive sides of their nature. They display little concern with achievement, are intensely personal in relationships, and are more oriented toward the group than the individual (Peabody, 1985).

Basing on this study, and on my personal observations, I have an impression that dichotomies such as high context-low context, individualist-collectivist, task oriented-relationship oriented, and material-spiritual sometimes create oppositional thinking between Americans and Russians. In my everyday interactions with American colleagues and students during the last four semesters, I believe I have often been a source of misunderstanding because I, for instance, am being less descriptive and verbal on both interpersonal and formal levels than is expected. Their expectations, on the other hand, were a continuous source of frustration for me because I felt that much of what I meant to convey to them should have been clear from the context. These differences can make any interaction potentially difficult, but several descriptions of American-Russian collaboration, as noted by Millhous (1998) and Smith (1990), indicate that the opposing values increase the complexity of working relationships.

*Organizational Entry Stages*

Wanous (1996) examined the organizational entry process in three stages: prior to entry (the individual is an outsider), shortly after entry (newcomer), and after more
experience (insider). Jablin calls the first stage *anticipatory socialization*, which he suggests has two phases: the process of vocational choice or socialization and the process of organizational choice or entry, especially for workers in their first full time job (1987). Anticipatory socialization in the workplace primarily concerns the ways in which individuals seek and transmit information about jobs and make employment decisions. Research supports the correlation between realistic anticipatory socialization and satisfactory post-entry socialization and performance on the job (Wanous, 1976, 1977).

During the second stage in the organizational entry process, the encounter stage, newcomers’ anticipations or expectations are tested against the reality of their new cultural, organizational experiences, or both. Differences between anticipations and experiences become apparent and contribute to transition or reality shock. Transition shock is a state of loss and disorientation precipitated by a change in one’s familiar environment that requires adjustment (Bennet, 1997). In the third stage of organizational entry, an individual adopts the norms and values of the organization, and is cognitively and psychologically adjusted to the environment.

Besides the very stressful experience of culture shock happening in the second stage of the organization entry, Zaharna (1989) argues that a degree of self-shock is an integral part of the overall “transition package.” This psychological aspect arises during cultural contact and affects the individual’s relationship with him- or herself. Zaharna continues, “self-shock is the intrusion of new, and sometimes conflicting self-identities that the individual encounters when he or she encounters a culturally different Other” (p. 511). In
other words, both the individual’s cognitive maps and self-identity are affected during organizational entry.

New Members Adjustment and Assimilation in Organizations

The adjustment process involves learning the functionally defined elements of the organization, such as mission, values, strategy, artifacts, and the basic assumptions and network of shared symbols of meaning that members use to make sense of their environment. The culture in an organization can be seen as a web, the center of which holds the future of the outsider, or the new member within the organization. The strands of this cultural web include the surface structure, and the deep structure of the organization (Deetz & Kersten, 1983, p.157).

Organizational assimilation is defined as the process by which an individual becomes integrated into the reality of the host culture or culture of the organization. It is a process by which organizational members become a part of, and are absorbed into the culture of an organization (Jablin, 1982, p. 256). It is the transition from the outsider, to newcomer, to insider (Wanous, 1976).

For newcomers (students, employees, or immigrants), the process of adjustment to a new environment poses the alternatives of adapting to meet environmental requirements or manipulating the environment to meet individual needs (Nicholson, 1984). It is after the entry stage that newcomers really begin to “learn the ropes” and enhance the development of cognitive maps suitable for sense-making and survival in the new environment. In the cognitive complexity-simplicity template, it is possible to have two types of newcomers to the new environment. They include the sideliners and the active
players. The sideliners are those newcomers whose main motivation is to get by and meet their basic life needs. They are satisfied with basic membership privileges and accept the status quo as satisfactory, if not ideal. They maintain non-challenging relationships or networks outside the new environment. At the other end of the spectrum are newcomers who want to be active players in the new environment; they combine the cultural elements of their first culture of socialization with the culture of the new environment to form a personal cultural whole. Newcomers who are active players readily immerse themselves in existing networks, and through this, tap into the basic assumptions, norms, and sense-making mechanisms in the new environment. In their cultural assimilation, they abandon their old cultures for the new ones. Such individuals find it much easier to adapt effectively to the realities of the new environment (organization), which is usually characterized by ambiguity, change, and uncertainty conditions, which may create discomfort and anxiety (Morrison, 2002).

Central to explaining communication behavior is reduction of uncertainty (for example, Berger & Bradac, 1982) which elaborate, on the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUT) based on the pioneering work of Berger and his colleagues. Within the context of cultural adaptation, uncertainty reduction refers to an individual’s ability to explain and predict his or her own and others’ behavior, while “anxiety refers to the fear of negative consequences in a foreign cultural environment” (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1987a, p. 112).

On the whole, the study offers general but not complete support for AUT as it is extended to the intercultural adaptation context. The results show the importance of
interpersonal saliencies for uncertainty reduction, and the importance of host contact conditions for facilitating feelings of comfort and reducing anxiety. That intergroup saliencies were significantly related to uncertainty reduction is also supported, but not, contrary to expectation, to anxiety reduction.

A number of studies indicate that the Anxiety/Uncertainty Theory can be extended to explain communication behavior between people from different cultures in both initial interactions and more developed relationships (Gudykunst, 1988; 1993). Since a few studies have systematically tested AUT, Hammer et al. (1998) tested the theory with a sample of international students studying in the United States. The authors argue that each of these factors are variables with an interpersonal rather than group focus. Stereotypes, cultural identity, and cultural similarity, they say, form the factors of intergroup saliencies.

Communication message exchange is operationalized by passive media strategies which focus on the respondents' use of media; interactive or interrogation communication strategies which target the measurement of the extent to which participants ask Americans questions about American attitudes, values, feelings, personality, and background; self disclosure, i.e., the extent to which they share information with Americans about their own attitudes, feelings, etc.; language proficiency, respondents self-assessments of their English proficiency on speaking, reading, listening, comprehension, and writing. Statistical analysis reveals the correlation between the self-reported language proficiency measure and TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language) scores for the participants.
An analysis of communication differences across cultures shows that “substantial differences in communication orientation exist among the countries of the world” (McCrosky & Richmond, 1990, p.76, as cited in Matveev, 2002). Since people unavoidably display “several layers of mental programming” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 10, as cited in Matveev, 2002). Russian communication patterns differ from those of Americans. The differences generally reflect the values of group consciousness or collectivism in Russia and individualism in the United States. While language in the United States is often competitive, confrontational, and aimed at making a point, communication in Russia is usually cooperative and conciliatory (Ferraro, 1998). In a collectivist culture, as Russia, communication tends to have a higher degree of emotion and personality as opposed to the climate of an individualistic culture with its high degree of objectivity (Lewis, 1998). These differences should create challenges for Russian graduate students and employees entering the US workplace.
Chapter II

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

While investigating the existing literature on this topic I found that most related research focuses on the experiences of either Asian or Western European employees in American organizations. The most common method used by researchers to study these experiences is questionnaires.

Another way of understanding these cultural processes is to study lived experience. Narrative methodology assesses the stories people tell and the language they use to communicate about their lived experiences, in this instance in the work place. Such stories lead to detailed descriptions about those experiences, and the description aids in creating a deeper understanding of human communication.

The focus of this study is Russian employees' socialization experiences in a multicultural American academic setting, UAF. The purpose is to develop an understanding of Russian people's meanings for their experiences of communicative socialization in a particular educational institution, that is how they become social, adjust to, and find a good fit for cooperative group living through the process of communication.

Because narrative recognizes the meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts in a whole (Polkinghorne, 1988), narration, particularly the capta of conversational interviews—as one narrative form, is the primary method used for this study.
Czarniawska (1998) maintains that narrative enters organizational studies in at least four forms: organizational research that is written in a story-like fashion ("tales from the field," to paraphrase Van Maanen, 1988); organizational research that collects organizational stories; organizational research that conceptualizes the work life as story making, organization theory as story reading (interpretative approaches) and a disciplinary reflection that takes the form of literary critique. Narrative forms of organization studies are easiest to find in case studies: research cases, educational cases, and fictive cases that use chronology as the main organizing device.

Beech (2000) argues that narrative styles form cognitive frameworks within which the actors make sense of their own actions and those of others. Frameworks are self-substantiating, creating cycles of interaction, interpretation, and evidence-gathering to reinforce their own structure. In other words, the narrative styles form part of the culture and subculture of the organization. I employed a qualitative approach for studying the actual communication experiences of Russian employees in a particular organizational setting, UAF, and used narrative interviews as a primary method of data collection to gain a deeper insight into the phenomenon. By putting this research into a narrative framework, I attempted to achieve results in a most efficient way since conducting individual interviews on this issue allowed me to gain a deeper insight into the attitudes and feelings that the students and employees experience when trying to adapt to a new culture, to understand how Russian students perceive American culture, what information seeking strategies they choose, and to identify the ways organizational values are communicated to them.
Six in-depth interviews, with three female and four male participants were conducted. The focus was on the stories students and employees tell. These interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, translated from Russian into English, and thematically analyzed. I employed a conversational, unstructured interview format allowing me to capture “the magnitude of subjects’ views of a theme and to picture a manifold and controversial world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 7).

Kvale defines semistructured life world interview as, “an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (pp. 5-6). The researcher emphasizes that in human interaction of the interview a scientific knowledge is produced. According to Kvale, in an interview the importance of the researcher as a person is central because the interviewer him or herself is the primary research instrument for obtaining knowledge (1996).

During the interviews, the co-researchers shared their particular experiences of socializing wherein they participated actively, or witnessed, and they extensively elaborated on socializing interactions they had observed.

It appeared that none of the co-researchers had been interviewed before. From the very first interview I realized that most of them, except for those who were majoring in Professional Communication, had a perception of an interview mainly as a question-and-answer session guided by a pushy interviewer (the perception created mostly by television programs) and, therefore, they anticipated direct questions from me, as the interviewer, and regarded their role of interviewees as providing me with straight answers.
to my questions. Thus, at the beginning of almost interview, I had to describe, in general terms, to my co-researcher(s) the nature of an unstructured qualitative interview and emphasize that we would not necessarily have to rigidly follow the list of questions. Instead the focus would be on situations the participants viewed as most important throughout the course of the interview. Some of them, although puzzled a little by this difference at the beginning, seemed to feel more relaxed after they realized that it would be more like a conversation, a chat between two (three) friends, rather than a formalized interview with a rigid list of questions for them to answer.

The interviews turned into mutual exploration of the topic of study. To establish a trustful atmosphere and elicit the co-researchers' sincere answers, I occasionally had to share my own personal experiences of adjusting to a new culture with them.

Research Tool

According to Kvale (1996), “the research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest.” He posits that the interview is “a specific form of human interaction in which knowledge evolves through a dialogue” (p.125).

Communicative socialization in a multicultural academic environment, UAF, and adjustment to a different (American) culture is something that I, as a Russian female Graduate and a Teaching Assistant employed by the Department of Communication at UAF, have been experiencing during two years of my stay in the United States, specifically the UAF campus. My familiarity with American culture began long before coming to Alaska however, when I was an undergraduate student at State Linguistic
University in my hometown in Russia. For me, just like for many other young people of my generation who did not have an opportunity to travel outside the country, the only sources of information about the U.S. were newspaper articles, books, and television programs. I was very interested in American classical and modern literature, popular music, movies, and of course, since I was an English major, in the English language also. My home town, where I was born, raised, and lived most of my life, was "closed" to foreign visitors for security reasons for many decades up to the time of my college graduation. Access was closed because the town was home to a large military industry. For this reason, I was not used to meeting foreign people and communicating with them until it became part of my job responsibilities.

It has to be said that Russian people have always had a "special" attitude towards the United States in general and American people in particular which has often been extreme. The generation of people in their sixties perceive America as Russia's main economic, political, and ideological rival reaping its benefits from "inhuman exploitation" of the working people showing concern only for its well being, as opposed to the well-being of the rest of the world. Younger people in Russia, who are more ambitious, refer to the US as a place of greater opportunities for everybody, especially for professional, talented people who have been always valued by Americans.

This time in the U.S. has been my first "big" foreign experience of living in a new culture, not counting a few overseas trips to Western Europe, Mid- and Far Eastern countries. I realize that my Russian background and personal experience of living in a foreign environment for a lengthy period of time, which is similar to that of the co-
researchers, in many respects, were helpful in creating a trustful and enriching atmosphere during the interviews. As a researcher, I could see how my relationship with my co-researchers was important both to the interview process and the data interpretation. I was able to recognize the way in which data is not “found” in interviews, but co-created through the process of talk, dialogue, and interaction. As in any interaction, both the co-researcher and the researcher are changed by the experience. The extent of such change in this study varied from minor, when a co-researcher(s) talked about ideas he or she already was thinking, but expressed during the research process, to more substantial, when participation in the research moved the co-researcher(s) toward different perspectives.

Kvale argues that in an interview “the importance of the researcher as a person is magnified because the interviewer him- or herself is the main instrument for obtaining knowledge” (p.117). The author continues that in the process of interviewing, “knowledge is created inter the points of view of the interviewer and the interviewee” (p.124). The personal contact and energy of new insights into the participants’ lived world make interviewing an exciting and enriching experience. A researcher has “an emphatic access to the world of the interviewees (p. 125).” The interviewees communicate their lived meanings by words, tone of voice, expressions, and gestures in a natural flow of a conversation. In establishing a safe environment for a co-researcher to talk freely about his or her experiences and feelings, a researcher strives to maintain a delicate balance between knowledge seeking and the ethical sides of emotional human interaction.
The researcher as a research tool must be authentic and neutral at the same time, continually being self-aware in relation to both the study and the process.

**Description of the Pilot Interview and Co-researchers**

In order to pilot the interview questions and gain more experience as an interviewer, I conducted pilot interviews with two Russian employees at UAF. Andrei is a Graduate Student and a Teaching Assistant from an academic Department; Linda is a PhD student and a Research Assistant from the same department.

By the time the interview was conducted, Andrei had been employed by his department for a third semester to teach two one-hundred-level Core classes. Before coming to Alaska in the fall of 2002, he lived in many parts of Russia since his father was in the military. He is twenty-three, and received his Bachelor’s Degree from a Russian Teaching Institute, majoring in the English and French languages. Therefore, this is his first working experience as an employee. Linda is a young Russian woman of twenty-five years old. She came originally from one of the largest Russian cities, and has been in Fairbanks for more than three years; first as a graduate student and a Teaching Assistant, and then—for nearly eighteen months—as a PhD student. Linda lives with her husband, a Russian student who completed his doctoral study in another department, and their two-year old son who was born in Fairbanks.

The pilot interview took place in the researcher’s dorm and lasted for 40 minutes. One of the interviewees, Linda, had to bring her sun with her to the interview since she did not have anyone at home to sit with the boy. The presence of her sun at the inetrview resulted in being the most disturbing factor for me as an interviewer and for the two
participants, since the little boy was in a playful mood and often demanded attention from
his mother. Thus, several times during the interview, Linda had to focus on two things at
a time: answering my questions and attending to her son.

I began the interview by describing its purpose. Since the participants were familiar
with the Communication program, I did not have to go into much detail regarding the
confidentiality issues related to the interview. I merely asked them to sign the Interview
Informed Consent Form (see Appendix A). The participants chose Russian as the main
language for this interview, although both of them also have a good command of English.

I then asked two general questions relating to whether they like working and
studying in Alaska. It is interesting that in their answers both Andrei and Linda kept
referring to the name of the program in English because they could not provide a Russian
equivalent to the term, although there is a Russian word which conveys similar meaning.
This term is mostly used in academia (in educational or psychological fields) with
relation to a communicative act rather than an everyday context. Since Russian colleges,
institutes, and universities do not normally offer undergraduate courses in that discipline
or undergraduate programs, it is difficult to translate the title of the related course or
program from English into Russian in one word – one has to add more description in
order to convey the full meaning. Thus participants continued using the English term
during the entire interview.

Next, to ground the discussion in the complexity of intersubjective experience, I
asked them to recall specific, actual experiences and to comment on their experience of
socialization in organizations, particularly at UAF, or to comment on their personal
history with or interest in the topic (for the interview protocol, see Appendix B). To encourage them to speak openly about their beliefs and concerns, I asked them to share their personal experiences and stories.

It appeared that both co-researchers had similar reasons for studying at UAF. For instance, Andrei described his reason as "just looked for a change." He also added, "I did not want to teach, I mean I went on the Internet and learned that most of the students [graduate teaching assistants] - they check the [students’] homework ...” Linda also did not interpret her future work at UAF as actually involving teaching until the moment the UAF Graduate Program Director actually said to her over the phone, while she was still in Russia, that she would teach one of the core curriculum courses. She said that when "he [the professor] told me that I am going to teach X, my heart sank…” It is interesting that even after looking into the departmental guidelines for Graduate Teaching Assistants that offer clear explanations of the responsibilities of TAs and Graduate students, neither co-researcher could believe they were going to actually teach. They both continued that they were fully aware of their weaknesses in terms of language, and differences in their cultural background, and thus could not imagine that they might be allowed to teach from the very first semester. Both co-researchers admitted that the most difficult thing for them after the Department Graduate Student Orientation was to actually enter the classroom with American students. They spoke of this recollection as certainly the strongest, if not most "inhumane" [Linda] occurrence during their first year of teaching. Linda thinks this approach to TA instruction is "certainly” wrong. She believes that all Teaching Assistants, whether American, Russian, or from any other country, should not be allowed
to teach at least during their first semester. She added that she has witnessed American TAs in a state of “despair” as well during their first semester.

Andrei had a different approach to teaching at UAF as compared to Russian universities. He excitedly defined this experience “good,” saying, “What struck me here mostly ... I was free to choose how to teach... you just teach the way you want to... No one is taking control over you.” However, when asked directly if the freedom is good or bad he seemed to consider it negatively, saying, “If we compare it to our [Russian] system, it’s damned bad—bad.”

Andrei’s controversial interpretation of “freedom” suggests that he still has not defined for himself if such freedom helps TAs teach, or not, since this approach may put a lot of pressure on a Teaching Assistant at the beginning of his or her career.

One more point the co-researchers discussed during this interview is the informality of relationships between professors, and graduate students. Andrei said, “… Of course I did notice they [faculty] called themselves like Joe, or John, not like Mr. Smith, or Dr Smith. It took, probably, six months before I started calling them that way.” Andrei explained that it is “impossible” to imagine Russian professors speaking so interpersonally to their students, since there is a greater power distance between professor and student. On the whole, I found the resulting discussion and stories shared useful for the research questions posed. A tentative analysis of the stories led to the ideas that, as Teaching Assistants, the co-researchers tend to learn from on-the-job training, primarily trial and error aided by feedback from students’ evaluations of teaching. They perceive the learning environment to be developmental, but stressful, especially during their first
semesters. They were afforded little advance notice of the class to be covered; given short-term, hurried training; and received poor long-term supervision. However, opportunities to gain entry to a profession by first being colleagues-in-training (Teaching Assistants) offered the participants the prospect of developing self-confidence, insight, and professional identity.

In sum, this discussion mostly compared the Russian and American educational and organizational systems. This small focus group produced some important insights into the communication dynamics between UAF faculty and graduate students, and some understanding of the communication patterns within a particular culture. In this context, it is important that this socialization research focus more on cultural differences, and how they affect Russian employees' socialization at UAF.
Chapter III

DESCRIPTIONS OF NARRATIVES

*Elisa's Narrative Interview*

Elisa has been living in Fairbanks for eight years with her family. Elisa is in her early forties, and for several years she taught English at a Russian university in a mid-size city in central Russia. Elisa has an excellent command of English; she speaks English almost without a Russian accent. When we talked, it was often easier for her to come up with the English equivalents for many notions rather than the Russian ones. In fact, while studying at a graduate school in Russia, Elisa began work on a dissertation, the topic of which was related to communicative socialization; however, she has not yet finished the project.

Elisa has a nice and comfortable office, which looks like many other offices in the university, not very spacious yet has all that is needed for work. On her desk one can see a couple of framed pictures with the smiling faces of her children.

As a child, Elisa dreamed of either a teacher's or doctor's career. Elisa's grandmother taught Russian at a secondary school, and her grandfather was a school principal. Elisa says that medicine, probably, would have been her first choice, but it would have been too financially difficult for her family, because she would have had to move to a different city. There was no medical school in town at that time. Thus, she decided to stick with teaching.

During her first years of living in Fairbanks, she was employed by the Department of Foreign Languages at UAF as an instructor of Russian, and she has been working as a program coordinator in one of the UAF departments for three years now. Elisa admits
that teaching, at a Russian and an American university is different. A Russian teacher, in her opinion, is perceived there as holding more of an authority position and possessing more freedom and administrative power than in an American educational institution, and this reflects the grading system, which is more subjective in Russia. She says, “There, [in Russia], the teacher is the king, the commander and the master, and you give the grades you give.” The American grading system, she continues, is more appealing to her since it “makes more sense.”

Elisa also notes that instructors at American universities normally develop “very informal” relationships with their students; and that students often call their instructors by their first names. Elisa adds “Over here [at UAF], the relationships between a student and a instructor are very informal, you just end up saying to them, ‘Call me by my first name.’”

Elisa thinks that a big difference between an American and a Russian university is that they (American universities) have “extremely mixed categories” of students in that they are of mixed ages (in a classroom, there may be half who are nontraditional students, over forty old). Students in Russia are usually young people in their early twenties; therefore an instructor is always “a few stair steps up,” and it is easier to build working relationships. The students at UAF are often focused on different goals. For instance, only some students aim at getting credits; others are more interested in learning for the sake of learning because they want to speak a foreign language fluently in order to travel. Such students are not usually concerned about their grades. Elisa had to adjust to both categories of students in order to make class more interesting while at a Russian
university the classes usually are of a more “academic” nature where students are
supposed, “to study as long as they are there.”

Elisa says that in America they adopt a “market-oriented approach at high school
since the classes have to be full,” and the discipline of the Russian language, similarly to
probably any other foreign language, is not among those popular at American
universities. She says that university administrators, once an instructor is rated well by
students evaluations, are not generally interested in how an instructor conducts the class.
If one is evaluated well by students, administrators assume a person is doing well as an
instructor. Thus, an instructor has more freedom for creativity as far as the teaching
methods and the content of the class is concerned. This freedom is attractive to Elisa
because she does not like to do same things over and over again. Elisa does not possess
this kind of freedom at her present position; she is much more dependent on her
colleagues’ performance. It might not be bad, Elisa continues, “if people (co-workers)
understood each other well.” She said,

“... we all supposedly speak the same language here and assume we understand each
other but very often it is not quite the case... it may be frustrating, because, ... too
much dependence on other people.”

Elisa is not comfortable with her American colleagues showing interest in her
personal life, for instance, when they ask about her children, husband, and other personal
things. Establishing mere business relationships with people at work is something she has
been more accustomed to in Russia where they focus on maintaining good business
relations with most co-workers. It involves greeting each other in a friendly manner in the
morning, sharing about one’s progress at work, and other similar things. Of course, she says, there always may be a person there with whom one wants to develop a more close relationship, and become friends, perhaps a person with whom one might want to discuss personal matters, but not with everyone in the office. She considers it to be a “normal” situation in Russia. At UAF, colleagues approach her in a more personal way, and it often makes her feel uncomfortable because Elisa does not want to talk about her personal matters. To do so, she says, would be a “friendship level,” and she would not like to “make friends with everyone on the floor.” Sometimes, she added, she gets the impression that people who show such interest in her personal life do not have sincere intentions, and later she often seriously regrets what she has had to say to them. Elisa wishes she could have some ready-made answers to such questions. She adds,

“I feel like I’d better not say too much about something… I’d better have some ready-made answers that would not offend people while, at the same time, I would not have to open up a lot.”

Occasionally Elisa talks to Russian people who used to work at UAF some years ago, but are currently working with different companies in larger American cities. They also think that in Fairbanks, “they are just trying to get into your soul” while in their new places, one can “pass away” in his or her cubicle and this fact can remain unnoticed.

Elisa does not want to know about the “personal matters” of her colleagues, and reports that maintaining mere business relationships is more acceptable for her. She attributes this difference mostly to the mentality of a small town, though she says she is
Individual introductions are something that is hard to accept for Elisa. When at different kinds of university meetings, she says that people are supposed to introduce themselves: present their credentials, scientific degrees, merits, rewards, personal biographies, former positions, et cetera. She defines these experiences as self-promotion. For Elisa, introducing herself in this way is like overcoming a barrier within herself. She says she always experiences a “cultural clash” during these moments – gets nervous – and thinks that her introductions are not good enough:

“... my introductions are always clumsy because I can not, like many of my colleagues, put my breast forward and say like I’m this and that, I’ve made such a glorious way...”

At this point in the interview, Elisa got excited trying to act out an “American” way of introducing oneself. We both burst into laughter trying to imagine how such introductions could be received in Russia. Elisa continued that according to Russian traditions it would be sufficient to say one’s full name and current position.

Elisa reports she is happy with her present job for several reasons. One of them, which she says is probably the most important for her, is that she is associated with an academic world. It is something that she has been accustomed to in Russia, before coming to the United States. One more reason is that her job is a full-time one and, as any other UAF full time employee, she enjoys job benefits. Finally, she has to deal with students on a regular basis, which, she says, makes her feel even better. She makes it
clear during the interview that working with students and colleagues is of major
importance to her since she loves teaching and used to be a instructor for several years in
Russia and for a short time in Alaska, when she was teaching Russian to college students.
She said that if she had to choose between teaching and her present job, she would not
hesitate a moment to choose teaching since it is the most creative activity and an
opportunity to work with students; “to be free,” and not to depend upon the co-workers.

Roman’s Interview

My second co-researcher was Roman, a Russian, twenty-five year old, male,
graduate student majoring in mathematics. He is also an instructor of Trigonometry in his
department. The interview with Roman was conducted at the UAF student center and
lasted for one hour and ten minutes. This is his fourth semester at UAF. He went to
Russia last summer for three months and was back to Fairbanks by fall semester. His
hometown is the third largest city in Russia, populated by about 2 million people. Before
coming to Alaska he did his undergraduate degree in Economics at a Russian university
and after graduating was admitted to a graduate school where he studied for one more
year.

Roman says that when he decided to study abroad he considered two options, an
American University and an Australian one. He decided to come to Alaska because, he
explained, from what he could learn about the place and the university itself from its web
site, it looked very attractive to him. Roman expounded that UAF had one of the best web
sites he had visited among a lot of universities. He had not traveled outside Russia before
coming to Fairbanks, thus the United States is the first foreign country he has actually
visited in his life. Roman says he likes living in Alaska and studying at UAF, but he does not plan to be here for long. He would like to take a PhD program in some other American state, where it is “warmer,” or go to Australia or Europe to study.

I came to know Roman almost four semesters ago. We arrived at Fairbanks during the same week. We first met each other at an International Teaching Assistants Orientation held by the International Program Office a day before the school year began. I could see him socializing with students he did not know or barely knew. He was an easy person to talk, and I now know often encourages his friends to see something new or travel to new places. If someone lacks enough money to join him, Roman is often ready to help, not asking for the money back. It seems more important for him to keep everyone happy around him.

Roman says he has always been interested in Russian and world cultures and history. On his office shelf I noticed a large stack of Chinese movies. Roman explained he has probably watched all the Chinese movies he can borrow from the library, and has listened to many tapes of Chinese songs. Roman said that he has not been watching American movies for long since he is more interested in European and Asian cinematography. He says he is upset that they do not show foreign films in the movie theatre in Fairbanks, and says that American movies are “primitive.”

Roman explains that one of his life goals is to travel around the world, and since the time he came to Alaska, he intentionally planned the route of his travel to visit family in his home city so that he might stop and stay for some days at the places he has always
wanted to visit, for instance: South Korea, and the Russian Far East. For the spring holidays, he went to Canada where he stayed with his mother's friends.

There are eight faculty members in the Mathematics Department where Roman works and studies now: five Americans, two Chinese, and two Russians. There are also two American graduates students in this department, and four Russians. Roman's advisor is Russian, but also takes classes from American professors. Roman defines his relationships with all his professors as respectful regardless of their nationality, English or Russian, but he continues to socialize mostly with students. He says professors and students belong to different university levels: "I've never talked a lot to my professors [in Russia] ... Professors, they are in a higher level than me. I do respect them but I can't talk to them like an equal."

Roman tells me that he often helps his Russian advisor do construction work on his house, as well as maintenance of the heating system, and also house at for him during the winter break.

He describes American students as different from Russian. For example, he says they are very friendly "as compared to the general mass of the Russian people." He maintains that it is easier to begin conversation with them, but notes that they have different viewpoint about life. Roman describes his relationships with American students as not serious, and not very trustful. He admits that part of it may be a language barrier, but still he says that Russian students are "closer to him and more related." Comparing American and Russian students he says, "They [Russian students]... have groups and develop closer relationships in groups [sections]... they stand as one. If they decide to do
something they go as one. Here [in America], each of them acts for himself, they, to a big extent, do not care about other people [in the group]…” He concludes, “Groups as such do not exist here. You have to approach each one on an individual basis.”

Roman maintains that for him, as an instructor, it might be simpler that American students do not develop “collectivist” relationships with each other. He explains that for him it is easier to talk to a student individually when he or she does not take the responsibility to speak on behalf of the rest of the class.

Roman also says that American students rely on themselves while Russian students also rely on their luck, and that “an instructor might leave the classroom during the exam and they’ll be able to ask someone for advice,” adding that Russian students also count on good relations with their teachers.

When I asked him to compare graduate programs in a Russian and an American university, he said that it was much easier for him to study in Russia because, on the one hand, he did not have to combine work and studies since he did not work there while studying and, on the other hand, the program by itself was not very challenging for him since he was majoring in the same discipline; mathematics. The Russian program did not require Roman to spend almost all his time on doing problems and reading. He says that his first semester at UAF was most challenging; often he had to do his homework until morning and could not get to sleep at night at all.

Roman maintains teaching college students is also a new occupation for him. He is not fond of teaching activities and realizes that he is not a perfect instructor, yet he is glad to teach at UAF because this experience is new for him and “works well” for his resume.
English is his second language: it is not very fluent yet his students, Roman continues, do not complain that they do not understand him. His student evaluations are generally positive and they usually speak well of his personal qualities and good interpersonal communication skills, especially when their interaction with him happens outside the classroom. They “blame” him, he says, for not being very enthusiastic about teaching the discipline. Roman explains that the feedback he receives from his students is very similar to his professor’s comments provided to him after visitations of his class. Roman agrees that he has to be more “passionate” in teaching his discipline yet, at this point, he can not really think of any improvements he can make in his teaching style in that he is not sure how he can bring more enthusiasm into the classroom. While he does not generally receive complaints from his students about his English – in the evaluations, they write that it is fairly easy to understand – Roman admits that he still has a language barrier that needs to be overcome and that his explanations sometimes lack clarity. At the same time, unclear explanations, he says, are something that most of the instructors and professors have to work on.

Roman has been taking an English class for three semesters but he says he is not very satisfied with his progress on the language. He expected that he could improve his pronunciation and “smooth” his Russian accent yet, in his opinion, this progress did not occur. Meanwhile, I often see him mixing with American students – he is a frequent visitor to the UAF theatre, the movie theater in Fairbanks, and of all the international events that take place on and off campus, including those organized by the UAF International Program Office, Office of Multicultural Affairs, his Residence Hall, and by
other sponsors. Roman shares a room with an American roommate “in order to improve his English,” he explains.

Daniel’s Narrative Interview

Daniel is twenty-five years old. He completed his undergraduate degree in physics at a Russian State University. Daniel is a PhD student and has a research assistantship from a UAF department. Daniel was a Teaching Assistant in the Mathematics Department for four semesters when he was working toward his Master’s Degree. Daniel likes what he is doing now, enjoys living, studying and working in a “village,” as he refers to Fairbanks, where UAF is a “huge farm.” I met him a couple of times at Russian students’ parties on the UAF campus.

From our previous conversations I had an impression that his views on various subjects, including UAF and campus life, were different, even opposite of mine. Therefore, I thought it might be interesting to interview Daniel because he might come up with unexpected interpretations of things to be discussed.

During the interview, Daniel often made categorical judgments about his life in America, Russia, and at UAF, in particular. He seemed to be more prone to debate points rather than telling stories. Because of this interpersonal style, he was not an easy person for me to interview. After a few minutes into the interview I was tempted to participate in this “debate,” expecting the interview to go nowhere. Initially, I described to Daniel, in general terms, the research I was doing and asked a few questions about his dissertation. These questions were meant to be an icebreaker but he only briefly in talking about his
research, as if waiting for questions more related to my study. Finally, I decided to encourage him telling me more about his life on the UAF campus.

While explaining his reasons for studying at UAF, Daniel says he is focused on his studies and takes pleasure in the process of learning and exploring new places in Alaska and other parts of the United States. Daniel was not very expressive when he talked, and it was difficult for me to see his eyes behind his glasses. He spoke in a quiet voice; thus, sometimes I could not hear him well and had to ask him to repeat things, in order to be certain that I understood him correctly. Daniel’s voice sometimes suggested an ironic, if not a sarcastic tone when he described his life at UAF, making it difficult to anticipate his attitude toward my questions.

Daniel continues, saying that UAF means different things to him. First, he says, it has to do with his living on his own for three years and staying away from his parents who live in Russia. In his opinion, this experience has played a “certain” role in his life in that here, at UAF, he is able to “think things over,” and set his “personal life goals.” He adds that UAF is mostly a “geographical” notion for him and, as an educational institution, the university “did not give” him anything. Daniel emphasizes that “... it [UAF] is just a distant place to go where you can stay for a while, re-consider your world view, and get some rest.”

Daniel says that in Russia he lived a “more or less structured life,” which was made more sense to him while he finished secondary school and graduated from a university. At a certain point, during his first two years of studying and working at UAF, he says he spent time sorting things out for himself, trying to get on the idea of what he needed most
of all at that moment because he felt like he was “floating on inertia.” He reports this was a difficult time in his life since he found himself “lost.” Daniel continues, saying he looked at people around him, attempting to understand what was driving them in their everyday life, trying to determine what was there that he might like, and realized that if something was good for someone, this does not automatically mean that it might be good for him. He then set a goal to earn a PhD from this university. He says he likes this goal because in Russia, it would have been more difficult for him to focus on earning a graduate degree. He reports he would have had to take on several jobs, to be able to support himself during his studies, and even if he had earned a degree, it might be of no use to him. When I asked him what he might be doing in Russia now if he had not come to UAF, he paused for a moment and said that, most likely, he might have ended up doing drugs and dying, like a couple of his close friends. He defines his life at UAF as a “three year exile” that has helped him make his own way in life. Making one’s own way in life is something that is, in his opinion, typical of American way of living. He explains that young people in Russia are often led by their parents in that they (parents) decide what kind of occupation their children are going to choose. For instance, if one of the parents headed a department at a university, his son’s or daughter’s career is, to a large extent, pre-determined. He, or she, is going to graduate from the same department, and pursue the same career as his or her parent. Daniel reports that this situation is not be “normal” in the United States, since young people make decisions about their future for themselves, and a very clear cultural distinction between the two countries.
During the interview, Daniel came up with the “individualist versus collectivistic” distinction between Russian and American people, although his perceptions of “who was who” were quite different from mine. Daniel insisted, “They may think that all Russians are collectivists, — absolutely, damned wrong! They are more individualist than Americans.”

“Russian individualism,” Daniel maintains, is one of the reasons why Russian students on campus do not get involved into social events. He explains that another reason for this lack of co-curricular activity may be that they tired of being put into various collectives while in Russia; thus they are not interested in collective activities in America.

In general, Daniel says Russians and Americans are not a lot different, positing that they just “look different.” He says he builds relationships with American colleagues and students on a similar basis as he would in his home country – he socializes with the person if he or she has an attractive personality, and does not, if this criterion is not met. As an instructor, he says he tries not to complicate his students’ lives and that his students treat him the same way, adding that his students like to do their homework with him because he is interesting to them as a personality.

Anatoliy’s Narrative Interview

Anatoliy is a professor in one of the university departments. He is in his middle fifties and married. His son is pursuing an undergraduate degree in Russia. Anatoliy has been living in Fairbanks for three years with his wife, who also teaches in the same department. Before coming to Alaska, he worked for twenty five years at a Russian State
University, the second largest and one of the most prestigious in Russia. He began there as a Senior Research Assistant and made a career as a Professor. In the late nineties, he was a visiting professor for two years at an American university and, for about two years, taught in this position in Australia.

I did not know Anatoliy before the interview. I happened to meet him quite accidentally – I was in the Mathematics Department looking for another person about participating in this study when Anatoliy was leaving his office one day. When I explained to him that I would like to interview a Russian professor, to my surprise (he did not look an easily approachable person) he eagerly agreed to participate in my study. The interview was very interesting for me as a researcher, since Anatoliy has a rich working experience both in Russia and abroad, and thus touched upon matters that other co-researchers did not.

Before the interview with Anatoliy began, he asked me a few questions about why I am at UAF, my plans after graduation, and my previous occupations. Some small talk established a more trustful atmosphere. Then I asked him what he thinks about the university.

Anatoliy says UAF is a “respectable” scientific university in the United States, some departments of which, for instance, the Geophysical Department, are rated very high in the world. At the same time, he says, it is a “standard” American university. When I asked him about how he feels about working in an American organization, he explains that this kind of job was what he wanted for several years before coming to UAF, in fact, since the early nineties. He recalls that the years from 1991 to 1998 were “horrible” for
Russians. At that time, when he was first applying for a professor’s position at American universities, there were from 300 to 1300 candidates for one job vacancy. Anatoliy maintained that such tough competition favored only those who had established good personal contacts in the academic circles of the U.S., which he did had not done at that time. In his opinion, things have changed for the better, in that there is now more opportunity for a Russian professor to get a job in the United States. At this “turning point” of his life, as he calls it, Anatoliy had to begin teaching career. First, he had to get papers published in the “right” journals in America, even if the journals where they first appeared in Russia were considered well known and respectable. Therefore, during those years, Anatoliy continues, his papers had to be urgently placed in respectable American scientific journals. Also, Anatoliy had one of his books translated into English and published in America. At about the same time, he established more foreign contacts and joined international scientific projects. One more “challenging thing” for him turned out to be teaching in a different language since in America, he explained, they have a different “teaching culture.” He says, however, that scientists adapt easily to new situations. What Anatoliy also defines as different at UAF, as compared to a Russian university, is the approach to students. He reports, “... a student here is like a customer, a client who is always right, and for whom a professor should sell the goods of highest quality, of the quality he [the student] wants.”

However, this approach does not mean that professors follow every student’s wish because “they know better what they should teach and how.” At the same time, American professors are very respectful to their students. Anatoliy continues that American people,
in general, show a respectful attitude to their children from the very early years of their lives. He says, “Just see the way they [Americans] call their kindergarten children – they are already students… since very early age they [the children] are goal oriented… they are already making a career.”

Anatoliy notes that the system of recommendations (references) is very effective in the United States. These references, he explains, reflect the people’s deeds from their early childhood. Building their careers and life is a process where each step is crucial. References describe their attitudes toward study, their peers, their abilities to study and work. He says, “… in fact, they [references] can’t cross out a single page of their life. Not a single nasty action on your part, or moreover, a lie – none of them can be forgiven… You can wash them off, but at the cost of an extraordinary effort only.”

Anatoliy reports that references have not become part of the Russian business culture so far, although sometimes “they may ask for them there.” Therefore, he says, Russian people, if they have done something wrong at a certain point, may think, “They are going to accept it,” or ”I’ll get another job and it’s going to pass unnoticed.” He continues, explaining that these principles do not work in America, because American people do not have the notion of “another job.” Another job may not become available, “if one does not attach good references to his or her interview.” He also says that American people give accurate recommendations that one can trust because they, the recommendations, are truthful: “He [an American reference provider] will write only what he knows about you, not a word more or less. For this reason they appreciate their written and oral word....
They [Americans] will write them [references] clear and concise because what they say means a lot to them."

Anatoliy continues that Russian references are less trusted because people there often find it uncomfortable to refuse to give a recommendation for someone whom they may not know well, but who might be related to their close friends or relatives. He says Russians prefer not to complicate their relationships.

Anatoliy describes an American business culture as the best in the world, wherein professional ethics is strictly regulated and people follow clear rules, which are "reasonable," and where problems can be solved in an open dialogue. If one is truthful, and speaks about problems openly, "like to his friend," then issues can be settled. He likes that professionals in America are truthful, trustful, and frank, and that American people do not say anything bad about one directly. He believes Americans simply do not say anything at all if they do not like something about someone. He explains that in Russia people often try to think of indirect ways to handle matters so that they can succeed and skip hard work to get what they want right away. He regrets that, from his experience, Russian students at UAF do not sometimes understand that they have to do their utmost (even if they are very smart), just like their Americans peers, so that their professors do not have to "push, and push, and push" them to make progress. Anatoliy attributes such attitudes of Russian students to new Russian cultural realities; where people do not have good motivation for hard work, do not trust the state, nor their leaders.
To the question of why he is in Alaska now, he replies that there are several reasons for him to work here. First, he says he likes American business ethics, enjoys using a computer and other office facilities that he lacked in a Russian university, and he is paid a much more here. He describes the salary of a Russian professor as “a miserable one,” and says he also appreciates being able to visit Russia every year during the summer, to see his relatives and friends there, and to go to new theatre performances.

*Tamara’s Narrative Interview*

After three years of doing a PhD program at UAF, Tamara was employed full time by one of the UAF Geophysical Institute laboratories. Tamara’s husband is an American, and they have been married for two years. She says that she knows American culture well enough, speaks English fluently, but it took her almost three years to understand American slang words and jokes. She recalled that “half of the words” Americans use she could not find in the dictionary. However, when I asked her to describe American culture she hesitates for a moment before she replies, “You can’t compare them [American and Russian cultures], they are so different… They both, by themselves, are appealing to me.”

Tamara says she definitely likes the way Americans celebrate Christmas and Halloween, which are new holidays for her, even despite the fact that most Russians do not accept them for religious reasons. She explains that, in her experience, Russians look at Halloween as a celebration of an evil spirit. She says she likes to meet nicely attired children at the door and treat them to some delicious food. As for UAF traditions, Tamara says that UAF, as an academic institution, does not have any specific traditions like, for
instance, they have developed in other American universities. Foreign students at UAF, in her opinion, usually socialize with their country fellows, e.g., Chinese students with Chinese, Scandinavians with Scandinavians, and Russians with Russians. She says normally she does not take part in any social events for students held by the university because she has found them “a little bit dull.”

Tamara also recalls that there is nothing on the UAF campus that particularly impressed her on her first visit. She stresses that the most exciting thing for her was a sense of freedom that she felt upon arrival, because in Moscow, where she spent most of her life, she lived with her parents and did not have this freedom. She describes this feeling of freedom as “wonderful,” and explains that it may be for this reason she does not miss home a lot. She says that she has gotten used to UAF life very quickly, “surprisingly” quickly, and does not miss her family. Also appealing to Tamara in Alaska, specifically Fairbanks, is the “beautiful Alaska nature,” particularly, she continues, after living in a “smoggy” area in Moscow.

Tamara maintains she has no prior experience of working with colleagues. She was a translator of English into Russian at one of the Moscow universities, but she normally did her work at home. She says that during the last four years, while she has been at UAF, she has been in conflict with almost every person in her department because her job is dependent on contributions from others, who do not always complete their own work. She says she has had to learn some new functions in order to be more independent in her work, mentioning that the laboratory at which she is now working is headed by a Russian professor, and all researchers employed there are Russian. She describes the relationships
that Russian employees develop in an American work place as "very complicated" and explains that all of them have problems with visas, status, and also because they "want to know who is paid how much, etc."

She says that for her, it is easier to work with Americans. She has never had any problems with American colleagues when they were part of a project team. Tamara explains that she was usually "very persistent," assertive, and therefore she might have been a problem for them, rather than vice-versa. Tamara describes typical qualities of American co-workers as politeness and friendliness. She emphasizes that it is specifically related to the employees from the Human Recourse Department who are, in her opinion, much more useful and friendly to people than their Russian counterparts. Describing her perceptions of American people's attitude toward her, and other Russian people, she points out that Americans continue to stereotype Russians, "They still fear us... Like in the years of the 'cold war,' which was a long time ago. Especially, older people... I could feel it myself and it is something I could learn from my new [American] relatives."

Tamara reports that she had to adjust to a different rhythm of studies at UAF because here she had to spend more time on homework since grades are directly related to the scores one gets on homework assignments at UAF. In Russia, she explains, she used to be very busy with studies mostly during the examination session period that usually follows the end of a semester. Tamara emphasizes that she was sure, at a certain point, that she would not be allowed to stay with the Ph.D program because she was having difficulty passing one course that she had taken in Russia five years earlier and that she did not
master well, “I was 100 percent confident they will fire me, almost ready to leave but thanks, Lord, all turned to be good… I survived.”

When asked about what helped her to “survive” at UAF, Tamara was silent for a moment, then laughed and said, “What helped me survive? I’ve never thought of it… Maybe… hm… fear. Fear that I’d have to come back to live with my parents again.”

Describing her attitude about UAF, Tamara says she does not have any special feelings towards the university, adding that by the time of her Ph.D defense, she even had a negative attitude toward school because of all the stress she experienced during the first three years of studying and working toward the degree. She did not want to do her degree for some years longer because, she explains, she would have had to do even more work before she graduated.

Tamara went back to Moscow after her first year of stay in the United States, where she says, she was struck by the fact that no one smiled back at her as they do in America. She continues, “They [Russians] look at you as if you’ve done something wrong to them. What have I done? Nothing bad… Over here they are always friendly looking, even if it may not be a sincere look – what’s the difference? I like it.”

She also recalled that on her visit back home to Russia being asked about Alaska, and she reports being amazed to know that the perceptions of Russian people about Alaska were similar to the perceptions of Americans about Siberia – just lots of snow and grizzly bears.
Chapter IV

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DATA

Interpretation of Narratives

The traditional view is that science should stick with facts and logic, leaving metaphors and stories to literature. By the criteria of positivistic knowledge, knowledge gained from narratives is not very impressive since formal logic does not guide narrative reasoning, the level of abstraction is low, and causal links, if any, may be established in an arbitrary manner. Yet it is often claimed that narrative is the primary mode of human knowledge (Bruner, 1986, 1990), the main mode of human communication, and the primary space in which higher orders of human reality (e.g., self, relationship, society) are created, maintained, and transformed (Deetz, 1982; Gergen, 1994a). According to Czarniawska (1998) interpretation of the narrative—both of its status (fact or fiction?) and of its point (discrimination or not?)—is situationally negotiated, because context and contingency play as much a part in the process as aesthetics or politics. Although it may be indifferent to extra-linguistic reality, narrative is extremely sensitive to linguistic reality.

According to Helling (1998), the interview text “is an interactive product, even before it is read and analyzed” (p. 235). Since narrative interviews occasionally turn into storytelling, narratives are present from the beginning of the research. Denzin (1989) maintains that in triangulated research, multiple perspectives on the same life experiences are sought, each case is treated as “a universal singular,” and meanings are extracted from
the stories. The broader, larger life picture is achieved by "working back and forth between each element of the life."

Postmodern researchers maintain that experience and events do not have an inherent meaning, and that we are actively constructing our meanings out of "the chaos we experience." In the process of creating meaning, we use language and other signs. And because the language already exists before we are born, the making of meaning is essentially a social process.

The stories my co-researchers told provide interesting meanings and understandings they hold with relation to their cultural adaptation to an American university organization. As they speak for themselves, the co-researchers disclose their perceptions and understandings of values shared by people of their culture, and the new culture they had to encounter in their lives. They also present different individual perspectives on social, business, academic, and ethical norms practiced in their home and host country.

As the researcher, I could see that some of those perspectives and worldviews were in many ways similar, some, despite my co-researchers' cultural similarity, were different, and some totally different, or even opposite. I found that the central matters they focus on are how new social, cultural, and professional realities challenge their beliefs and attitudes in a host environment also how these matters change their lives, how these realities affect their relationships with people around them, and how they make sense of this experience.

As mentioned, there were many similarities between the ways the co-researchers made sense of their experience. The meanings they share turned to inherited meanings
drawn from their culture, education, religion, self-esteem programs, and everyday discourse. Statements like “I have no idea why it is so,” show that sometimes their narratives do not contain a clear message, or are changing, or even contradictory. In analysis of these narratives, I have attempted to understand not only the content, but have concentrated too on nonverbal behavior and context.

In analyzing the interviews, four repetitive themes emerge, in this order of importance: (1) vulnerable self versus safe self; (2) competition; (3) freedom; and (4) informality. I have ordered themes in regard to the importance shown by the frequency in which they are mentioned by the participants, and the participants’ eagerness to elaborate on them in their stories.

Vulnerable Self versus Safe Self

The narratives disclose feelings of being vulnerable, that is, the co-researchers appeared to be unable to convey their meanings fully and thus failed to be understood, or fully understood by the people of the host culture, and often felt incompetent, that is, that they failed to perform their functions effectively. Therefore this theme contains two contradictory sub-themes: “the feeling of being incompetent,” and “the feeling of being safe.”

The Feeling of Being Vulnerable

Linda, Andrei, and Roman shared that they did not want to teach students. When Linda was admitted to the graduate program and knew that she was receiving a Teaching Assistantship, she recalls she “was absolutely sure” they would not let her teach. “I was thinking they will have me grade students’ written assignments, or do any other work
within the department,” she continued. She recalls that: “when he [the professor] told me I was going to teach X my heart sank.” She stresses that the English language was not even her “first” foreign language since her undergraduate major was Spanish. Linda knew her English left “much to be desired” since she lacked speaking practice and interaction with English speaking people. On the other hand, she had only a “slight idea” how the American system of higher education works. For Linda, the most challenging experience during her first year of teaching at UAF was actually entering a classroom full of American students. She shares that she was terrified by idea that she could “miserably fail” in the American classroom because of her poor English, poor background of the discipline she was going to teach, and lack of understanding of university rules.

Andrei admitted he was sure that he was not going to be an Instructor either. Just like Linda, he also hoped to get a minor job within the department, and thought that his major responsibilities would include grading students’ papers. He thinks that: “a two day training session for Teaching Assistants orientation is ‘nothing’” as far as his readiness to perform as an instructor of a required course. Unlike Daniel, who while a Teaching Assistant in his department, had “a one year training” in UAF student policies, grading system, and other related procedures (one hour every week) before he was assigned as an instructor, Andrei recalls that this orientation could have probably been useful to him if he could understand more than “half of what the professors were saying.” Another challenge, apart from a linguistic problem for Andrei, was “to figure out the idea of the students’ main graded assignments, and the way the grading system works.” Andrei had very similar feelings to Linda, anticipating his first days in an instructor’s role.
Describing the way he felt Andrei says, “It made me sick to think it is gonna happen.” Roman says that even after his first three semesters his English “is not noticeably improving.” Although his students “do not complain” about his poor English when evaluating his performance as an instructor, they are not satisfied with the way in which he explains things to them. Roman’s inability to clearly state his ideas and instructions to students may also be attributed to his command of English that is still “not as fluent” as he wants it to be.

*The Feeling of Being Safe*

It is interesting though that, as follows from the co-researchers stories, despite studying and working in a multicultural academic organization puts a lot of pressure on them, along with feeling “miserable,” and “incompetent,” they have a feeling that their life in a new environment is more “safe” and “stable” than it was in Russia. Anatoliy and Elisa perceive stability in terms of an opportunity to be employed by a respectable American academic institution, and to enjoy an improved standard of living and well-being. “Certainly,” as Anatoliy says “it’s not of the highest rate here in America, but at the same time it’s far from being the last one here. Not just a teaching university, but also a respectable scientific university.”

Elisa stresses that for her it is very important “to be associated with a university” since it used to be a memorable part of her life in Russia. The metaphors Elisa uses to describe what UAF means to her are the “safety and comfort zone” where she is “in her shoes,” and back to “normal life.” Anatoliy was also happy to get a job at this university because it allowed him to continue doing things he always enjoyed in his life, such as
research and teaching, and to be “decently paid” for it. Most of the time it would be impossible to achieve both of this goals working in a Russian university, because the state funding of Russian academic institutions has been progressively cut. Professors are “insulted by miserable salaries” and put into the position of “physical surviving.” The co-researchers employed full-time by the university, such as Elisa, Tamara, and Anatoliy, are satisfied with the salaries and benefits they receive as UAF employees. For Daniel UAF became, “… a distant place to go where you can stay for a while, re-consider your world view, and get some rest.” It was a place where he could set his personal goals in life. There is more safety and stability in Daniel’s life in America. He thinks that it would have been more difficult for him to focus on studies because he “would have had to take on several jobs to be able to support himself during his studies,” and even if he had earned this degree, “it might be of no use to him.” When I asked him what he might have been doing in Russia if he have not come to Alaska, he paused for a moment and said that, most likely, he might have “ended up in doing drugs and dying, like a couple of his close friends had.”

**Competition**

Competition is one more theme revealed during the narrative analysis of the co-researchers’ discourse. This theme includes an element of self promotion.

Elisa thinks that the competitiveness of her colleagues: “comes out differently, … sometimes, *in a very subtle way* [Elisa smiles]. But it *does* come out.” My request to illustrate her idea with some sort of an example, though, made her feel a little bit embarrassed. It seemed to me that she had some particular examples in mind but did not
feel safe enough to share them even regarding the confidentiality of this research. She explained that UAF is such a small place that one can easily identify the person. Elisa often tries to make sense of this phenomenon. She adds, "You may ignore it, but if you pay attention to it you can pick up a lot... They develop business relationships, but there is always room for competition."

Taking into account students' feedback on a teaching process at UAF, as a constituent element of competition in the faculty level, is a new experience for the coresearchers. Roman mentions he "was scared" anticipating his students' feedback. At a Russian school or academic institution, the teacher's performance is usually evaluated by colleagues, or a supervisor, and is never rated by students. In a Russian school it is assumed that only a professional evaluation should be of value. Students there are not considered competent enough to provide objective evaluation of a teacher's performance. It is considered that students do not have a clear idea of the course content, course requirements, or teaching methods. This situation can be explained by the fact that Russian universities probably have never had to compete for their students since normally they have more applicants than they can accommodate. Usually professors and instructors at a Russian university do not have to compete for students within the same university either, since almost all courses offered by Russian educational institutions are required. Russian students' curricular are not as flexible as Americans in regard to taking elective courses. Faculty and lecturers in Russia expect their classes to be always full. As time passes and the universities grow in number though, they may also be put in a position when they will have to listen to students' "voices" with regard to a teaching process and
in that adopt a "market-oriented" approach in doing business. Anatoliy and Elisa think that such business approach guides the relationships between professors, instructors, and students at UAF since they show concern for their "classes to be full." Daniel's perceptions on the presence of the competitive environment at this university though are opposite. He states, "Sometimes it seems to me, they know why they are living here. There is no competition here, it's a marsh. Can there be a competition in a marsh? It's a fairly weak university." At this point of Daniel's life, it suits him living here, in a "village," after living most all of his life in a large city. Daniel explains, "Yeah, it's fun living here. It's good to live in such a village…"

Some of the co-researchers (e.g., Anatoliy and Elisa) think that competition is "definitely" a characteristic feature of an American personality. Anatoliy believes that is a "necessary element" of American life. He feels the presence of "a competitive spirit" in different levels of this society, in fact, competitiveness is something that, according to him, one is faced with in the US "from early childhood." Anatoliy thinks that American people "do not just live their lives, they build those." At this point of the conversation he gets more excited, and a change in his tone suggests that he views this reality as a positive thing. Anatoliy is certain that Americans "get focused" and "start to build their lives" already when they are in kindergarten. He acknowledges "they" might be "still naïve" at this point, but they "have a feeling that they already are making a career."

Anatoliy makes a point that "every step in this process is very important," and one "simply can not skip any." He believes that an important instrument that helps American children stay focused on their successful future, which is mostly associated with making a
professional career, is the institution of references. Anatoliy explains that: “the recommendations, the references... follow them from the early childhood describing what’s their attitude towards studies, their relationships with peers and teachers, their abilities to study, their abilities to work – everything!” Because of the way this system works, he continues, “they can’t cross out a single page out of their life.” Later in the conversation, my co-researcher goes back to this idea and puts it almost exactly in the same terms: “… you can’t cross out anything that won’t be unnoticed.” Anatoliy is deeply convinced that this system of references makes people feel “accountable and responsible” for their actions and words, and it motivates them to be truthful, not to tell lies, not to commit bad actions or show misbehavior. The co-researcher thinks it is something that “they know very well,” and do not expect to be forgiven. He says, “Not a single action on your part, or moreover, a lie, they do not forgive any of them. It will be following them... You can wash it off, but at the cost of an extraordinary effort only.” Anatoliy contrasts this attitude of Americans towards making their career with what he calls “Russian nature,” which he defines as a frequent expectation of Russian people that something they might have done wrong “will work out” because “they are going to accept it.” For instance, if they, Russians, do not do something right at their job they may think that “they gonna accept,” and they, if caught, “will find another job.” Anatoliy emphasizes that such “another job” just will not happen in the American system unless you bring a whole “collection” of good references to your potential employer.

During the conversation, Anatoliy was coming back and forth to the idea that: American students, raised in this culture “understand that they have to do things well, to
do their utmost.” He regrets that Russian students at UAF are not always focused on their studies: “Unfortunately… they do not always do it [do not do their best], they may be very smart, yet a bit lazy, and you have to push, and push, and push them, otherwise they do not make a good progress.” Roman explains that: “Russian students study only during the session [examination session]. Some say they do it differently,” and he looks at me smilingly (because from our previous friendly talks he recalls that I was making a different point about students in Russia who study foreign languages), “but as far as I could see it was so.”

_Self-promotion_

Elisa shares that it is hard for her to accept a “self-promotion” part of the American work environment. It is hard for her to present herself when “at different kind of university meetings people are supposed to introduce themselves: present their credentials, scientific degrees, merits, rewards, personal biographies, former positions, et cetera.” Each time she has to do it, Elisa feels very uncomfortable introducing herself in an American manner. During these moments she feels that she has to deal with an “overcoming a barrier within herself.” Describing this experience, Elisa, for the first time during the interview uses the metaphor “a cultural clash.” This “cultural clash” also makes her feel nervous, and, that her introductions, are not good enough; even “clumsy.” She says, “… my introductions are always _clumsy_ because I can not, like many of my colleagues, put my breast forward and say like I’m this and that, I’ve made such a glorious way…” Clearly she understands American self presentations as self-promotion.
At this point in the interview, Elisa got excited trying to act out an “American” way of introducing oneself. We both burst into laughter trying to imagine how such introductions might be received in Russia. Elisa continues that according to Russian traditions it would be sufficient to say one’s full name and current position. Very often, in Russia, there should be someone else there, for instance, the supervisor, who is supposed to introduce a new person, mentioning the degrees and former positions the person has held. Such introductions are normally very brief in Russia, and do not usually include much personal information. It is assumed that people will come to know each other better in the process of work. Elisa considers a “Russian” way of introducing people as more natural and more appropriate because, by creating a “sort of a programmed attitude towards themselves,” and “creating the image,” one deprives one’s colleagues the opportunity to make their own judgments with relation to the person. Elisa wants to be appreciated for what she is doing at her present job, how useful she is to her current collective, regardless of her former awards, which, she recognizes, “can be very misleading.” “I want people to evaluate me on the basis of what, and how, I am doing now,” she states, “… basing on my current outcome. Why should I talk here about my origin and my past?”

**Freedom**

One more theme that emerges from the transcriptions was *freedom*. The co-researchers referred to it in terms of *personal freedom* and *academic freedom*.

*Personal freedom*
Tamara gives a wide smile when she recalls that “the most exciting feeling” she sensed upon her arrival from Moscow to Fairbanks, was a sense of “freedom.” She definitely associates this feeling with a personal freedom that she perceives from living on her own in a place she likes. Tamara says that she did not enjoy this freedom in her home place, Moscow, where she spent most of her life, because she lived with her parents. She describes this feeling of freedom as “wonderful,” and explains that perhaps because of her feeling of freedom she is not missing her home. For Tamara the feeling of freedom is certainly something she is afraid of losing. When asked about what helped her to “survive” at UAF, Tamara, after a short pause, laughed and replied, “What helped me survive? I’ve never thought of it... May be... hm... fear. Fear, that I’d have come back to live with my parents.” Whatever freedom means to her, it is evident that she does not want to give it up.

Daniel, however, does not acknowledge directly that UAF is more than a mere “geographical” notion for him, and says that the university “did not give him “anything.” Later in the interview, he seems to contradict himself. Daniel implies that studying and working at UAF became a noticeable step in his life: empowered him with personal freedom; made him more independent, and more responsible for his own life, and for his professional career. Describing the way he felt before and on coming to the US, he says, “Yeah, it’s about a man who’s been mainly living by a family, and then he went to the university, ... and then, after college graduation, he started to learn life. The life roads take different directions, and all this made him feel kind of down and lost. ... I did not have single goal in my life, just was kind of flowing on inertia.” Daniel’s words also
support the idea that UAF “gave” him the opportunity, the freedom, to make, probably, the most important decisions in his life:

“It [UAF] did change my life, but I can not say UAF helped me change my worldview. UAF certainly played a certain role, like...hm... [he sighs] ... a stick, which...where I could live my own life: where I could think things over, and set my personal life goals.”

_Academic freedom_

Andrei had a different approach to teaching at UAF as compared to Russian universities. He excitedly defines this experience as “good,” saying, “What struck me here mostly ... I was free to choose how to teach... you just teach the way you want to... No one is taking control over you.” However, when asked directly if the freedom is good or bad he seemed to consider it negatively, saying, “If we compare it to our [Russian] system, it’s damned bad—bad.” Andrei’s controversial interpretation of “freedom” suggests that he still has not defined for himself if such freedom helps TAs teach, or not, since this approach may put a lot of pressure on a Teaching Assistant at the beginning of his or her career.

Elisa says that university administrators, once an instructor is rated well by student evaluations, are not generally interested in how an instructor conducts the class. If one is evaluated well by students, administrators assume a person is doing well as an instructor. Thus, an instructor has more freedom for creativity, as far as choosing teaching methods and the content of the class is concerned. This freedom is attractive to Elisa because she does not like to do same things over and over again. Elisa does not possess this kind of
freedom at her present position; she is much more dependent on her colleagues’ performance.

**Informality**

My co-researchers note that there exists a “more informal level of relationship between faculty and graduate students, and instructors and students.” This theme emerges from the transcriptions and, it contains three sub-themes: “the feeling of embarrassment and discomfort,” “the feeling of losing power and respect,” and “the feeling of openness and trust.”

**The Feeling of Embarrassment and Discomfort**

At the start of their teaching career, my co-researchers felt embarrassed when those who have a “lower” social status than they do, i.e., their students, called them only by their first names. These feelings are shared by Russian co-researchers of different ages, particularly by teaching assistants, who are normally young people in their mid-twenties and fall almost into the same age category as their students. Andrei says that he “did notice that they [faculty] called themselves like Joe, or John, not like Mr. Smith, or Dr Smith. It took, probably, six months before I could begin speaking to them that way.” Andrei thinks that it is “impossible” to imagine a Russian professor speaking so interpersonally to his or her students, and to “invite students to his or her place for a party” since there is such a greater power distance between a professor and astudents.

Roman defines his relationships with his professors as respectful (formal) regardless of their nationality, American or Russian, but he continues to socialize mostly with students thinking that professors and students belong to different university levels: “I’ve
never talked a lot to my professors [in Russia] ... Professors, they are in a higher level than me. I do respect them but I can’t talk to them like an equal.” Interestingly, this formality of relationship turns to supportive relations between Roman and his Russian professor and does not prevent Roman from staying at his Russian advisor’s house during the winter break, helping his professor to do construction work on his house, and performing maintenance on his heating system.

Linda agrees that the way faculty, teaching and research assistants communicate is more informal and interpersonal, but she is sure that this informality is “seeming,” because she believes that “hierarchy subordination still exists within the department.” From her words it becomes clear that Linda does not consider informality as an indicator of a lack of power and authority in work relationships at UAF.

*The Feeling of Losing Power and Respect*

Establishing more informal relationships between supervisors and subordinates, professors, or instructors, and students, symbolizes a loss of respect and authority to the co-researchers. Elisa thinks that it is easier to build working relationships with Russian students because they are usually young people in their early twenties, and an instructor in Russia is in a different age category and always is, “a few stair steps up” (she uses an English word to convey her idea). She points out that a Russian teacher is perceived in that system as more of an authority position and possesses more freedom and administrative power than in an American educational institution. Elisa says, “You always expect that you may have to explain why you gave a certain grade to a student,
but a teacher still has a lot more ... administrative authority, power, and more freedom than over here [in America].

She thinks that this difference reflects the Russian grading system, which is "more subjective." She adds, "There, [in Russia], the teacher is the king, the commander and the master, and you give the grades you give." At the same time, interestingly, an American grading system is "more appealing" to her since generally it "makes more sense."

During their first semester Russians in an American University find it difficult to establish other indicators of their power in in-class interactions with students because of their lack of knowledge of discipline they teach, the cultural, academic and social norms accepted in American society, and their "poor English." Linda mentions that she is "sorry for her first students," because she realizes that she did not perform to their expectations of an instructor. Linda adds, "... I feel ashamed to look into their [her first students'] eyes when I incidentally meet any of them on campus." It takes the co-researchers a long time, at least one semester, before they can feel "more confident" in the classroom. Linda considers this approach to TA instruction in her department as "certainly wrong." She believes that no Teaching Assistants should be allowed to teach during their first semester because she has witnessed even American TAs in a state of "despair" during their first semester of teaching.

The co-researchers have been accustomed to maintaining more formal relationships in the academic environment in Russia, which constituted part of the expectations of professional ethics in teaching. "Keeping a distance" with their subordinates, that is students, in in-class and outside class interactions is a "natural" indicator of respect,
status, power and authority, which are reinforced through the use of their first and second names, and a personal pronoun “Вы.” It has to be mentioned here that, in the Russian language, there are two equivalents of the pronoun “you,” “ты” and “вы.” “Ты” is used in communicating with relatives, friends or people one has known for a long time. To address those with whom one is not very familiar, their superiors by age, job position, distinguished or respectable persons, the Russian people commonly use the word “Вы,” which is also capitalized. Since in the English language there is only one pronoun to address all the categories of individuals regardless of their age, status and positions, my co-researchers find it embarrassing to call their supervisors by their first name only, as it is generally accepted in American business culture.

On the whole, the findings of this study suggest that the co-researchers often perceive UAF not just a “different” academic environment, but also as an “entirely different system,” system accumulating values, norms, and beliefs which are directly opposite to those accepted in their home country. Adjusting to American academic norms and values is a challenging process for them since it makes the co-researchers reconsider their Russian “rules of the game.” They often regard these “rules” as “reasonable” though, and attempt to develop communication styles, which are perceived as appropriate in the US in general, and in American University, in particular. This assumption can be illustrated by their attempts to develop informal communication styles where their cultural expectation was formal.
**Discussion and Implications for the Future Research**

In this study I examine the lived experiences of the communication experiences associated with socialization in an American university of seven Russian employees, three females and four males. Socialization of immigrants in the American work place is not new to social research and has been studied from various angles, but never within the context of Russian graduate and professional students, and seldom from the participants’ point of view. Narrative methodology enables a researcher to recognize the meaningfulness of individual experiences constituting parts of the organizational ‘whole.’ Four themes emerged from the co-researchers’ narratives: (1) vulnerable self; (2) competition; (3) freedom; and (4) informality.

In many ways, the co-researchers experience their involvement with an American organization in a similar manner, and their attitudes and definitions of cultural phenomena and an adaptation process often echo, or resemble one another. Analysis of the narrative capta, however, reveals the co-researchers’ confusion about communicative socialization and their tendency to change their perceptions of communicative experiences in academic organizations. To interpret these themes, I employed a narrative approach, which helped me to understand Russian graduate students and professionals relationships in both the organizational and interpersonal level. The contradictions of vulnerable self/protected self, independence/obligation explored by were most apparent in this study. Five of the co-researchers mention them almost directly. The contradictions of vulnerable self/protected self appears in three narratives: the experience of being not understood or misunderstood, the experience of feeling incompetent, and a
safety/stability experience. These contradictions may be applicable in these contexts, since they aid in exploring the communicative patterns of being not understood and misunderstood, being incompetent as a professional, and being safe in these co-researcher’s experiences. Future research might examine the perceptions of UAF students taught by Russian instructors and professors with relation to student perceptions of the Russian instructors’ professional competence.

One more contradiction, independence/obligation, is revealed in this research. This contradiction may be applied to narratives, such as experience of personal freedom and experience of academic freedom in the co-researchers’ narratives. Although this contradiction is of minor importance in this study, it is mentioned directly by three co-researchers.

A narrative approach helped me, as the researcher, listen to the personal perspective rather than an organizational perspective, and to look at an organizational member as an active participant in relationships within the organization since recent social constructionist research (Gergen, 1994a; Gergen, 1991) emphasizes the role of an individual in an organization.

The repetitive themes that emerged from the narratives can be viewed within the framework of one larger theme, which can be defined as Starting Anew, or a Turning point. The co-researchers did not just have to enter a new work place; they entered a ‘new life,’ and had to “start anew.” Most of them view their lived experiences in an American university as ‘turning points’ in their lives and student or professional careers. Their experience of studying and teaching in an American educational institute, a more diverse,
in terms of age, race and culture, academic environment, challenged their cultural
attitudes with relation to the host university's academic norms and values, and challenged
them to make sense of new organizational and cultural realities.

This research was conducted from the perspectives of organizational, intercultural
and interpersonal communication. The themes revealed in this study suggest that a
communicative aspect of socialization in a host organization plays an essential role in
building people's experiences of a multicultural work place.

Investigations of intercultural communicative socialization in an organizational
setting from the perspective of human communication using a method focusing on
people's human experience enhances our understanding of the equivocal nature of this
human activity, though does not exhaust the topic. In this study I did not attempt to look
at differences and similarities between the ways Russian men and Russian women
experience the process of getting social in an American academic institution. The data
derived from the narrative interviews in this study suggests that there are some
distinctions in the way men and women negotiated their experiences. For instance, I
noticed that women were more concerned about the confidentiality issue of the
interviews; they also tended to be more careful in choosing the right wording, and
provided more accurate and detailed descriptions of their experiences. Another area of
future research, informed by this thesis project, could be studying of the lived
experiences of American students in other nation's universities, for instance Russia.
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Appendix A

Subject’s Consent Form

This interview is being conducted in connection with my pursuit of a Master of Arts in Professional Communication at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The purpose of this interview is to explore Russian UAF employees’ experiences regarding their socialization in the work place. You will be asked to spend approximately one-two hours for an interview. During the interview, you will be asked to describe these experiences as recalled from your professional life. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed afterwards. The audiotape will be destroyed immediately after the research is complete.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and all information obtained during the interview process will remain confidential. You can withdraw from this study any time with no penalty. In case you choose to withdraw, you can simply inform me about your decision by calling or via e-mail. Your name will not be used in any report or paper. A pseudonym will be used for the narrative story from your interview. Strict guidelines for participant confidentiality will be followed in the study and all participants will be treated with respect. There are no apparent risks involved in the research process to participant or researcher. You will be free to not discuss issues that you do not feel comfortable discussing. You are also not expected to mention any real names of other people in the interview unless you choose to do so.

By reading and signing this form you agree to participate in the study.

________________________________________________________________________

Name Date

Thank you for your interest and participation in this research project. A copy of the research results will be available for you upon request. If you have any questions please contact me at the office:

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If you have any questions regarding your participation in this study, please contact the Research Committee Coordinator, Office of Research Integrity, UAF at 474-7800 or fyori@uaf.edu
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working at UAF?
2. Describe teaching/studying at UAF.
3. How did you come to know about the university?
4. Describe why you decided to work and study here?
5. Did you have any working experience in Russia?
6. What kind of expectations about working or studying at UAF did you have before coming here?
7. Was your actual experience similar or different to what you originally expected?
8. Compare this experience with your working (studying) experience in Russia. (if applicable).
9. Describe your first day at UAF.
10. How you were introduced into the organization?
11. Describe your feelings at the moment of introduction to the organization.
12. What struck you most of all?
13. Why do you relate to it as such? (if applicable)
14. What does UAF mean to you? Can you describe it in 1-3 words? What metaphor would you use to describe your work experience?
15. Describe the relationships between the professors, faculty and teaching or research assistants? (if applicable)
16. Describe the relationships between UAF employees?