PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT TO ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

In 1982 Vladimir Lefebvre described two systems of ethical cognition and suggested that one characterized the USA whereas the other characterized the former Soviet Union. Since glasnost, perestroika, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the election of two Russian presidents, has the ethical system in Russia changed? Specifically, has there been movement from the second toward the first ethical system? Although Lefebvre suggests that a person learns one of the two ethical systems at an early age and that little change thereafter is possible, Lawrence Kohlberg claimed that moral
development is not only possible but universal, although some people progress farther than others. This paper describes the ethical changes taking place in Russia from two perspectives. First, we describe the feelings among the Russian people that are associated with the current economic and social changes, as examples of “moral suffering.” And we explain the logic Americans use as an alternative to feeling moral suffering in similar circumstances. Second, we describe change from the second to the first ethical system as it appears from the perspective of Kohlberg's theory of stages of moral reasoning. We suggest that Russian culture can be thought of as a combination of Kohlberg’s first and fifth patterns of moral reasoning. The missing intermediate stages -- two, three and four -- can be learned by participating in the institutions of civil society. If Russian culture changes by moving from the second to the first ethical system, Kohlberg’s theory may serve as a guide to how to make this transition.

Introduction

In the past two decades the work of Vladimir Lefebvre has attracted considerable interest among academics and policy makers both in Russia and in Western countries (Lefebvre, 1992, 1997; Wheeler, 1990). Lefebvre’s work is a major contribution to comparative psychology and has important implications for those engaged in negotiations involving people from East and West, whether for purposes of diplomacy or business. For those interested in the economic and social changes now occurring in Russia, a key question is whether Lefebvre’s second ethical system describes the political ideology of the Soviet Union or the culture of the Russian people (Lefebvre, 1982). If the second ethical system is a description of the ideology of the Soviet Union, then the transition to Western style democracy and a market economy can occur rather quickly. But if the second ethical system is a description of Russian culture, established over hundreds of years, then the transition to a Western style political and economic system is likely to take much longer. Indeed the next relatively stable social system in Russia may be quite different from the Western European model.

Lefebvre’s theory may make an important contribution to the discussion of the ethical foundations of economic systems. Previously, capitalism was associated with greed, the pursuit of self-interest, and exploitation of others. Communism was associated with concern for others, sharing, and devotion to the community. This description of the ethical foundations of the two economic systems makes communism look far more appealing than capitalism.

Alternatively, Lefebvre associates the US, and hence capitalism, with his first ethical system and the Soviet Union, and hence communism, with his second ethical system. The first ethical system is concerned with means or process – obeying the law, fair procedures, etc. The second ethical system is concerned with ends or outcomes – equality, basic services, etc. According to the second ethical system, going around the law or avoiding the law is justified if the goal is good. According to the first ethical system, working within the law (and changing the law when necessary) is more important than a specific outcome. This way of describing the Western social system (as emphasizing process over outcome) may be more acceptable to the Russian people than a description of capitalism as based on pursuit of self-interest. If so, then it may facilitate the cultural transition to a more Western type of society.

Moral Suffering in Russia due to Economic and Social Change

An important contribution of Lefebvre’s theory is that it suggests that there are fundamental differences in how people think about and emotionally perceive heroism, moral virtue or sainthood, and moral suffering. Currently the Russian people are experiencing considerable moral suffering because the political and economic reforms of recent years have been interpreted by many people as a movement toward a less moral social order. For seventy years people in the Soviet Union were told that communism was good and capitalism was bad. Rejection of communism in favor of capitalism could therefore easily be seen as a set backward.
How does Lefebvre describe moral suffering? He suggests that the first ethical system is closer to the cultures of the USA, Western Europe, and the other developed, trading countries. Most of these countries share an orientation toward individualistic values, technological progress, market relations, and belief in democracy and law. Russian culture, with its orientation toward abstract spirituality, collectivism, and belief in conscience, is different from the ethical system currently dominant in most modern societies.

This crucial difference in the ethical systems of Russia and the West is one of the most important problems making the process of psychological adjustment of the Russian people so difficult. The current situation in Russia is characterized by high social and cultural stress. Here are some examples:

1) Approximately two years ago a column, "The formula for success," in the newspaper Argumenty i Facyt described a successful Russian businessman, Vladimir Dovgan. Dovgan, who was always very self-confident and optimistic, said that he is disappointed by the development of modern civilization. He noted that material progress has not increased the happiness of humankind. The columnist asked about the reason for his pessimistic views. Dovgan replied that he remains an optimist, as he was earlier, but he thinks that modern civilization looks like an error in the development of humankind. "Progress is measured by the things people have, by the food people eat, by the clothes people wear, by the houses people live in, etc. I have nothing against material things, but limited natural resources force us to think how much is justified... False values are affirmed, money is deified. Blind instincts such as envy, greed, and fear lead people." In this way, a young, successful businessman at the end of the twentieth century discovered the limits of a consumer society and came to affirm Orthodox Russian values.

2) A similar problem was described in an article in the newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda. The author wrote about a young, successful Russian businessman who earned a lot of money and was disappointed in such a style of life. To solve the philosophical problems torturing him, he created the Research Institute of Time.

3) It has been said that the behavior of the so called "new Russians," amazing by their uncivilized manner of spending easily received money, is also an example of an attempt to fill a soul that was empty as a result of breaking habitual patterns of behavior. Culture is an aid to the psychological survival of people as thinking, reflecting beings and forms the foundation of their psychological stability.

4) An article titled, "The business of doctor", appeared in the newspaper Argumenty i Facyt, April 26, 2000. It described a doctor, Igor Yemelyantsev, from Komsomolsk-na-Amure who took payments from patients and spent the money on bonuses for workers starving without wages. Dr. Yemelyantsev was condemned to 7 years of loss of freedom. The newspaper noted that the policemen and judges involved felt shame about this case. Discussing this article, a doctor, Alexander Zolotov, from Spassk-Dal'nii pointed out the view of Minzdrav (the main organization managing the Russian public health service) about paid service in medical institutions. He writes: "There is nothing in this document about the most important point: what payment a provider of service will receive." He describes an example from the work of his hospital: consultation with a patient by the doctor costs 50 rubles (less than $2); the doctor as the main provider of this service receives 4 rubles (15 cents). A bandage for a patient on a weekend costs 22 rubles (less than 1$). The nurse who makes this bandage receives nothing.

The strongest feature of Russian culture and the Russian mentality is compassion and charity. The example of Dr. Yemelyantsev shows that the Russian people are able to accept economic and social changes and to preserve the best features of the Russian mentality. However, compassionate actions by individuals are not sufficient to create a modern, productive society. A market economy and effective government based on just laws is needed.
There has been a radical breaking up of the stereotypes which had been developed and had been taught for many years -- ideas about what is good and what is evil. The boundary between what is legal and illegal, between what is proper and improper, has been erased. To comprehend the current social and economic changes, people have had to recreate themselves to fit the new conditions. "Self-determination is a key moment of freedom." People are struggling to learn new ways to be free (Tillich, 1952).

The high level of uncertainty and rapid social, political, and economic change have led to stress and illness and a rise in mortality (Stone, 2000). Research on the influence of social factors on a person's psychology suggests that uncertainty has the largest negative effect on the psychological health of people.

B.S. Chorev, professor of demography at Moscow State University, was interviewed for an article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* on 21 November 2000. He noted that the decrease of population in Russia from 1992 has been 5.8 million people. He explained that depopulation is excess mortality over the birth rate. It has been the norm for Russia in recent years. In 1998 mortality exceeded the birth rate by 1.8 percent, and there are districts where mortality exceeded the birth rate by 2, 3, or 4 percent. Prof. Chorev noted that the most important reason for this decline in population is the transition from socialism to capitalism. The highest mortality happened in 1994-1995. This was the consequence of the transition to capitalism. The average duration of life then increased a little. But in 1999 there was another peak of mortality. Prof. Chorev compares the demographic situation with the syndrome of a concentration camp. In the case of a concentration camp when people are faced with catastrophic circumstances for the first time, the result is death and suicide. After some time people adapt to the new conditions, apathy increases and mortality decreases. What do we have now in Russia: improvement of the situation or the syndrome of a concentration camp?

Compared with earlier times, Prof. Chorev says, the reasons for mortality have changed. Earlier, mortality was increasing due to a growing number of older people. Now the reasons are illnesses, murders, and suicides. Prof. Chorev mentions the figure of 75 thousand suicides in 1994-1995. This is an extremely high number. In 1998 there were 40 thousand suicides. Old married couples hang themselves together. Teenagers jump out of high windows

Prof. Chorev emphasizes that the high rate of mortality is made worse by a low birth rate. This combination is killing the Russian nation, the professor says. So this summer B.S. Chorev and his colleagues created a League for Struggle with Depopulation of the Russian Nation.

**Stages in Adjusting to Cultural Change**

We suggest that the following scheme of stages of psychological adjustment to a new culture can be used for analyzing of the Russian situation:

Stage 1 - initial euphoria/excitement
Stage 2 - irritation/hostility
Stage 3 - gradual adjustment
Stage 4 - adaptation and biculturalism.

The first stage of psychological adjustment of Russian society to the recent social and economic changes occurred from the beginning of "perestroika" in 1985 to 1992. This period of transformation was characterized by very hopeful expectations. The Russian people wanted to feel united with the world, so they focused on similarities between Russia and Europe, and between Russia and the USA. They wanted to show other people that Russians want to be free, want to have peace for themselves and for the world, want a wonderful future for their children. Russians gathered every evening in order to watch TV programs where M.S. Gorbachev was speaking. His democratic manner of communication and the content of his speeches were new. His speeches aroused sympathy and gave hope. Government meetings were watched with more interest than the most fashionable and popular movie. Many people tested themselves as businessmen. The possibility to test oneself in new
activities can be intoxicating. The variants of privatization were discussed and people hoped that they would find their own share of the national property. People were standing in line at night in order to put a stamp in their passports and take a privatization check symbolizing that they were owners.

In the second stage, after the period of great expectations, there came a time of disappointment which has lasted longer than the time of euphoria. In Russia this period was from about 1992 (a year of price liberalization) to 1996, a time of uncertainty, deception, and cynicism. The time came when people began to joke sadly, mimicking the recent words of the President: “We shall not have 'shock' therapy as it was in Poland. We shall have something much worse.” The recent privatizations were called by people "prihvatizatsiya." It is a play on words: "prihvatit'" is a popular expression meaning "to steal." Everything in the country was stolen and people were showing their pain by using this word. People came to believe that it is impossible to survive if one works honestly. People who were continuing to live by moral laws came to be seen as weak people, and society did not respect them any more.

People began to be afraid of each other. Iron bars appeared on the first floor windows of apartment houses. Previously such bars on windows were associated only with prisons and houses for crazy people. People were spending their last money to purchase a second door made of steel. When apartments were robbed, everything was taken, including food. Murders, terrible because of their cruelty and senselessness, came to be a common occurrence. Televised government meetings began to be interpreted by people as performances in a circus, but it was not fun. It was very sad to watch them, because people understood that new laws brought very little change in society. Those people who were in power during the Soviet time and were called "communists" are in power today and are called "democrats" or "liberals."

In the third stage, from 1996 to the present, the Russian economy is a contradictory system which consists of elements of a free market with government regulation, powerful monopolies, and remainders of centralized management. The state of the Russian economy is intermediate in character. And the current ethical system of Russian society is similarly uncertain. The way society has reacted to such strong shocks is seen by some people as moral disorientation and by others as moral degeneration. There has not been sufficient time for individuals and institutions to adapt by building new myths, traditions, and procedures. The problem of psychological adjustment is increased because reforms have the appearance of modernization or are justified as being necessary for "progress." But are the changes steps forward or backward? In Russia the transition to a market economy is associated with moral suffering.

**Why People in the West do not feel Moral Suffering**

The Soviet Union was based on the theories of Karl Marx. Marx assumed that societies passed through several stages of development – slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and communism. Since the New Independent States are now trying to go from socialism or communism to capitalism, it is not surprising that people would imagine that they are going backward in the development process.

In the West people have not been using Marx’s stage theory of development. They believe that the world is going through a multi-faceted process of political, economic, social and psychological development. Although the process of development varies from country to country, they believe that most indicators are improving. There have been fewer wars in the last half of the 20th century than the first half. Most people are eating better. Our ability to treat diseases has improved, although access to health care varies greatly. People are better educated. Trade has increased dramatically due to improvements in communication and transportation. Access to information and entertainment has improved greatly. The greatest doubts concern environmental pollution, long-term sustainability, and equality of opportunity. But a civilization based on capitalism and democracy is flexible and adaptable. People in the West have learned to rationalize behavior that may seem unethical elsewhere.
In the US businessmen and entrepreneurs have no moral doubts about engaging in business. They feel that if they provide a quality product or service at a price that people are willing to pay, they are making a positive contribution to society. If they charge too much, a competitor will offer a similar product or service at a lower price and take away their business. Hence, the market insures that profits are not excessive. Those people who do become very wealthy usually become philanthropists after they realize they have no use for a very large amount of money.

In the West if conscience and the law conflict, people work to change the law. For example, in the U.S. there have been a long series of legal reforms regarding civil rights. Also, corporate lawyers work to insure that their corporation is complying with the law, and lobbyists work to influence the law. The assumption is that people can and should operate within the law and that changing the law is a way to improve society.

**A Western View of the Transition**

What does the transition look like when viewed from a Western theory of ethical cognition? A leading example of such a Western theory is Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning. In terms of Kohlberg's theory the transition looks like movement from the lower stages of moral reasoning to the higher stages of moral reasoning. Lefebvre's second ethical system could be seen as similar to Kohlberg's first stage of moral reasoning. Kohlberg’s first stage of moral reasoning is characterized primarily by fear of punishment. One must do what an authority figure says to do or be punished. The second stage refers to barter relationships -- agreeing to exchanges of goods or services perceived to be of equal value. The third stage, responding to peer pressure, could be regarded as a transition stage. People can adopt the values of their peers in either the second or the first ethical system.

Lefebvre's first ethical system can be interpreted as being similar to Kohlberg's fourth and fifth stages of moral reasoning. In these stages there is an emphasis on process rather than outcome. The fourth stage describes a "law and order morality". People obey the laws because they believe that if they do, society will operate better for everyone. The fifth stage introduces individual conscience and allows the individual to violate the laws of the state if he or she feels that they are not consistent with the "laws of God". However, the laws of the state must be broken openly and publicly in an effort to persuade others that the current laws are unjust and should be changed. This assumes, of course, that open discussion of problems is widely practiced in society on every level and that public discussion of social problems will eventually lead to appropriate political changes.

But associating Russian culture only with the first stage in Kohlberg’s theory fails to capture the strong element of compassion.

**Comparing Moral Suffering with Moral Development**

Individual adjustment to the recent reforms in Russian society is complicated because Russian culture confronts two main challenges. On the one hand, the best of Russian culture proposes the ideals of the spiritual development of individuals and advocates social arrangements which could be regarded as similar to the fifth stage of moral reasoning in Kohlberg's theory. But on the other hand, there is often an absence of elementary politeness and consideration shown to other people (Kohlberg's second to fourth stages of moral reasoning). So, one interpretation is that adequate institutional mechanisms for realizing Russian social ideals have not yet been developed. This situation is usually described by saying that the NIS needs to develop the institutions of civil society. One feature of stage theories is the assumption that stages cannot be skipped. People must move gradually in sequence from one stage to the next, each time increasing the complexity of the way they reason about moral issues. Experience in working with the institutions of civil society helps people to move up the stages of moral reasoning and tends to fill the gap between the first and fifth stages of reasoning.
Reflexion occurs not only within individuals but within societies as well. Discussing ethical issues promotes change in ethical systems by means of moral development in both individuals and societies. Assuming there is the possibility of moral development in both individuals and societies, the task is to promote and to facilitate that development.

References

“After 100 years there will not even be a Russian spirit!” An interview with Professor B.S. Chorev, Komsomolskaya Pravda, November 21, 2000.


