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The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2018, vol. 12-13, iss. [1], pp. 177-189

ISBN 978-80-210-9024-8

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138503>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Perceptions and Misperceptions of Canada among Non-Canadian Students

Perceptions et perceptions erronées du Canada parmi les étudiants non canadiens

Diana Yankova / Andrei Andreev

Abstract

The present case study is an attempt to establish what university students in Bulgaria know about Canada and how they perceive the average Canadian, providing an outsider's view to a nation that is frequently visited by questions as to its identity and doubts about the image it projects to the rest of the world. The study, which aims to explore both general factual knowledge and subjective personal perceptions, was first carried out among Bulgarian students only; because of the surprising nature of some of the findings, it was then duplicated – with slight modifications – among a group of foreign undergraduates studying at Bulgarian universities.

Keywords: Canadian identity, perception and knowledge of Canada, constructing identities

Résumé

La présente étude est une tentative d'établir ce que savent sur le Canada les étudiants de l'enseignement supérieur en Bulgarie et la façon dont ils perçoivent le Canadien moyen, offrant une vue de l'extérieur à une nation qui est fréquemment visitée par des questions identitaires et des doutes quant à l'image qu'elle projette au reste du monde. L'étude, qui vise à explorer à la fois les connaissances factuelles générales et les perceptions personnelles subjectives, n'a été réalisée qu'auprès des étudiants bulgares; en raison de la nature surprenante de certains des résultats, elle a ensuite été doublée – avec de légères modifications - d'une étude auprès d'un groupe d'étrangers de premier cycle étudiant dans des universités bulgares.

Mots-clés : identité canadienne, la perception et la connaissance du Canada, la construction des identités



Background

Debates about identity have become a defining feature of the present times. The current unprecedented movement of people and ideas across continents has engendered a shift in heretofore more static and clear-cut concepts of nationhood, ethnicity, religion, among others, leading to increasing scrutiny, reconsideration and reassessment of notions and values. The search for our essence and belonging, for the why and how we feel similar or distinct individually or as a group has been the preoccupation of a myriad of researchers and practitioners.

With the sesquicentennial anniversary of Canada already a fact, one concept that has yet to be defined is that of the Canadian identity. Although many attempts have been made in delineating the characteristics of this elusive abstraction, and although it has been the object of attention in popular, media and academic quarters both inside and outside of Canada, to this very day the attributes of national identity have remained loosely, hazily and hardly unanimously described. 150 years after the birth of the Canadian nation many questions are still unanswered.

Initially, especially English Canada was mainly characterized by British influences, visible in preserving British institutions, customs and traditions. At the time of the creation of the country, most English-speaking settlers considered themselves British subjects. “A British subject I was born; a British subject I will die” were Canada’s first Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald’s famous words. They were a clear attestation to his vision of Canada: loyal to the British Empire and independent from the United States. With time, the Britishness of the Canadian identity began to be less pronounced and with the disintegration of the British Empire, the Dominion of Canada was compelled to establish closer relations with the United States. The 1931 Statute of Westminster constituted the legislative sovereignty of the self-governing dominions of the British Empire and Canada achieved full political independence. The struggle for defining Canadian identity became more intense.

As a counterpoint, French-speaking settlers aspired to a country that would not rely politically and economically so much on Britain and were therefore more willing to proclaim their Canadianness and call themselves *Canadiens*. Francophone Quebec has made numerous appeals for the rest of Canada to recognize its distinct society status, accompanied by measures to preserve the French language and culture, finding its most drastic expression in the independence referendums in 1980 and 1995. There is no doubt that, especially in the past, the *Quebecois* or French Canadian has been an identity much less fuzzy and more readily and effortlessly definable than that of the English Canadian: with its distinct language and traditions Quebec seems to be one distinguishing characteristic of Canada’s identity.



Scholarly attempts to define Canadian nationhood saw an unprecedented surge that began 50 years ago when two opposing tendencies arose – the federalist model promoting a unified national identity, and the limited approach which proposed a study of how different regional, ethnic, religious and cultural groups perceive Canada; and the debate is still ongoing (cf. Massolin 2001, Howells 2002, Edwardson 2008). It can be claimed that, in recent years, the search for this new national identity has definitely moved away from the British heritage and has focused more on the acceptance of the lifestyles and traditions of immigrants that have been coming to the country in the past several decades – i.e., that Canada is defined by its multiculturalism, with the implication that therefore there is no Canadian identity and culture proper.

English Canada is viewed by some merely as a geographical concept with a vague cultural definition. At most, it is considered as a reflection of the negative features of the United States, absorbing American tasteless pop culture, demonstrating an increased disposition to engage in lawsuits (especially after the 1984 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, cf. Coe 1988), or adopting hyper political correctness.

The 2000 Molson beer TV commercial “I am Canadian” came to be regarded as a quintessential expression of the Canadian identity – one which had an extraordinary impact on the reinforcement of the defining characteristics of Anglophone Canada and started nation-wide discussions at political and institutional levels. Against a backdrop of Canadian symbols, it shows the flannel-shirted average Canadian Joe, who feels anything but American, extoling the typical virtues of the Canadian character: polite, gentle, with propensity to self-irony, with an immigration model of diversity, not assimilation, peacekeeping, not policing, and ultimately – proud to be Canadian, but mostly a description of what Canadians are not, not what they are. Joe’s ironically bombastic rant actually set out to dispel stereotypes – both American stereotypes of Canadians and Canadian stereotypes of Americans and their lifestyle – and the advertisement went on to become one of the emblems of the Canadian identity, turning into a kind of pledge of allegiance.

Notwithstanding the bulk of research dedicated to the multifaceted Canadian identity, this fuzzy and elusive concept of the English Canadian still merits academic attention and the present study is a modest effort in that respect: striving to elicit how Canadians are viewed from outside the country.

The study

Cultural stereotypes, or generalized ideas about a group of people, are explored by academics on the basis of forming impressions of self and others, and, depending on whether they are about one’s own group or other cultural groups, they can be



classified as autostereotypes or heterostereotypes (Matsumoto and Juang 2008). Ideally, an analysis of the outsider view, or the “etic” aspects, and the insider view – the “emic” aspects – can provide insights into points of similarity as well as differences between external perception and self-perceived image. The former studies behavior by comparing cultures from a perspective outside the culture analysed, applying a conceptual apparatus which is universal and not culturally dependent, while the latter focusses on behavior from the perspective of the studies culture (Krumov and Larsen 2013, 4).

“Pondering ourselves is the occupational hazard of being Canadian” declares Andrew Cohen, thereby highlighting that the elusive Canadian identity has “animated – and frustrated – a generation of statesmen, historians, writers, artists, philosophers” (Cohen 2007: 3). The perception of Canadians by people from outside can digress from typical popular characteristics within Canada, namely friendly, peaceful and/or polite. Friendly turned out to be an ambiguous concept, since it could be taken to mean opening the doors for someone, which Canadians seem to do, or inviting somebody to your home, which Canadians are not generally inclined to do, according to a survey among international students in Canada (Packer and Lynch 2013: 61). In Cohen’s (2007: 48) view, non-Canadians perceive Canadians as nice, hospitable, modest, blind to their achievements, obedient, conservative, deferential, colonial and complex, fractious, envious, geographically impossible and politically improbable.

The starting premise of our study was that respondents will demonstrate a positive view of Canadians in general and will single out more positive traits that they attribute to Canadians. The reason for this assumption was that Canada has long been a favourite destination among Bulgarian emigrants, and nearly every Bulgarian has a family member or friend living in Canada (and generally praising the quality of life there). This preliminary hypothesis contravenes the view expressed by some researchers that due to an in-group bias, Canadian-born respondents perceive themselves more favourably than members of an out-group (Packer and Lynch 2013: 75).

Methodology

In the first stage of the study, the data was collected by means of recorded structured interviews conducted with 28 Bulgarian BA students (12 male, 16 female) majoring in different subjects, including English and American Studies at New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria. None of them had ever done a course in Canadian Studies.

The study did not include a respondent background question section since the interviews were directed to a group with more or less the same profile: university students in their early twenties, born and residing in Bulgaria. The only background



information that was relevant to the study and was included in the interview was whether any of the respondents had spent time in Canada. This fact was very important in order to establish whether their perception and knowledge of Canada and Canadians was based on personal experience or was acquired through the mediation of friends, films, radio, etc. Most respondents did not have first-hand contact with Canada; therefore one of the main issues under investigation was the basis on which they formed their impression and vision of Canada.

The interview questions were twenty in number and elaborated with two main objectives: to establish students' basic factual knowledge about Canada, and to elicit their perceptions and feelings about Canada. We opted for a combination of types of questions: an unprompted adjective section, open-ended questions, multiple choice questions, Likert-scale questions for reasons we will discuss below. The questions were divided into two main groups: first, questions aimed at eliciting respondents' knowledge about Canada, and second, questions pertaining to their attitude.

The basic knowledge questions were the following:

Where is Canada situated and which countries does it border? Which is the capital of Canada?

Can you name three cities in Canada?

What is the population of Canada and which place does it occupy in territory worldwide?

When was the state of Canada founded: 1660, 1789, 1867, 1903 or 1969?

Is Canada a republic, monarchy, principality? Who is the Head of State?

Which are the official languages in Canada?

What is the currency in Canada?

Can you name any famous Canadians (musicians, actors, film directors, writers, politicians, sportsmen/women)?

What do you know about the social policy/crime level/predominant religions in Canada?

The earliest settlers in Canada are:

a) Americans; b) Englishmen and Frenchmen; c) Indians and Inuit; d) Vikings.

The content of the questions in this part was based on basic general knowledge about a country as accumulated in the obligatory Geography and History classes in Bulgarian secondary schools, and the type was determined by the difficulty: we chose multiple choice questions when we felt respondents were not likely to have active knowledge on the subject, e.g., with history dates or more specific Canadian concepts,



such as Inuit, for instance, and open ended questions when a large number of answers are possible, such as “Name famous Canadians”.

The second part of the interview was comprised of the following attitude questions:

Have you visited Canada? If yes, when and why? If not, would you like to go and why?

How do you imagine the average Canadian (compared to the average American, Brit, Frenchman, Bulgarian)?

What is the first thing you imagine when you hear the name of Canada?

Which of the following words or phrases best define Canada as a country? Tolerant, democratic, immigrant, imperialistic, social, socialist, unstable politically, totalitarian, World Power, peace-loving, a police state?

Why do you think so many Bulgarians have immigrated and continue to immigrate to Canada?

What are your answers based on – your stay in Canada, films, books, accounts by friends, music, the media?

What is it you would like to know about Canada?

In this section we opted for several Likert-scale questions with answers ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” with a “neither agree or disagree” option in order to gauge more precisely the degree of certainty of respondents’ opinions, and an unprompted adjective ranking segment where respondents were asked to provide spontaneous, impromptu adjectives, describing Canada and Canadians.

In the second stage of the study, respondents were 22 foreign BA students (13 male, 9 female) at New Bulgarian University majoring in various subjects, but mainly in Political Sciences, which attracts the largest number of international students to the university. The students came from Greece, Macedonia, Slovakia, Italy, Syria, Somalia, Azerbaijan, Nigeria, and the State of Palestine, among others. The major modification made in the questionnaire was to the question “Why do you think so many Bulgarians have emigrated to Canada?,” which was changed to “Why do you think Canada is such a popular destination for immigrants?” Of the respondents, only one had previously visited Canada and, again, none of them had ever done a course in Canadian Studies; however, because of the predominance of Political Sciences students, it was expected that they might prove somewhat more knowledgeable than their Bulgarian counterparts.



Factual knowledge: results

Bulgarian students' answers to the questions on factual knowledge about Canada produced some rather – to put it mildly – unexpected findings. Over a third of them could not put Canada on the map at all, even when prompted to consider on which continent the country is situated. The rest tentatively placed it in North America, with two students relatively certain that it lies south of the USA, and one hypothesizing that Canada actually borders on North America. Despite this lack of knowledge on Canada's geographic location, nearly 70% of respondents rightly identified the country's capital as Ottawa, 20% admitted to having no idea at all on the matter, and three students made the rather uncertain guess of Toronto. When asked to list some other major cities, 40% failed to provide any answer whatsoever, while the remaining students came up with Toronto, Ontario, Montpellier and, inexplicably, Quebec itself. As to the population of Canada, the majority of informants could not even hazard a guess, except that it must be “large” – a word also applied to the country's territory, although not a single student had any notion of its world ranking.

Students' knowledge of the history and political set-up of Canada did not prove to differ much in terms of accuracy. 50% chose 1867 as the year when the country was founded, but then admitted to having made a guess on the grounds that “Canada is a young country”. Nearly the same number, however, opted for 1879 without being able to provide a reason for this choice, and one student opined that it must have been after the Second World War because “Canada is a young country.” 90% were of the opinion that Canada is a republic, while 10% believed it to be a monarchy. Respectively, 80% assumed that the country's Head of State is its President, one student argued that it is the Prime Minister, one seemed to recall that “the English Queen has something to do with it,” and the rest simply gave a “Don't Know” answer. About 70% of respondents stated that the official languages of Canada are French and English, in that order, 10% could think of English only, and 20% mentioned “French, English and others” without being able to specify the “others,” although two suggestions were made of Spanish. 40% had no idea of Canada's national currency, but 60% did provide “dollar” as an answer; the question, however, of whether this was the same dollar as that of the USA, resulted in considerable confusion.

The task of naming some famous Canadians proved to be a stumbling block for nearly 40% of students, who could not come up with a single name (when supplied with certain well-known names from popular culture – the presumption being that they must be familiar with them at least – they expressed sincere surprise that Celine Dion, for instance, is Canadian). The remaining 60% were able to mention mainly figures from the entertainment industry: actors like Ellen Page and Jim Carrey, or musicians such as The Weekend and Nelly Furtado.



Three quarters of the informants admitted they did not know much about Canada's social policy, with 25% labelling the country a welfare state. 80% stated that the crime rate "must be" low – based on ideas of Canada's high standard of living – while 20% remained undecided. Religion proved to be a confusing concept for most students, as they listed the following as dominant, in their opinion, religions: Catholicism (60%), Christianity (30%), and Protestantism (10%). 60% also pointed to the English and the French as Canada's earliest settlers, 30% chose Indians and Inuit, and 10% imagined Vikings as conquerors.

As can be seen, these findings reveal a serious paucity of factual knowledge among Bulgarian students on the geography, history, and political organization of Canada. This we attributed mostly to the deteriorating quality of public education not only in Bulgaria, but worldwide, a trend that has established itself in the past two decades or so, according to dozens of concerned sociological studies over the years, despite the attempts of numerous governments to reform and update the education system. It was this reasoning, in fact, that prompted us to conduct the same research among university students of a similar age but different national and cultural background, with a view to cross-checking results.

The outcome of posing the same questions to a group of international students established that results did not differ radically from those of the survey among Bulgarians. Thus, the question of Canada's geographic location elicited the answer that it borders on the USA (with only a few informants able to specify in which direction), or that it is "somewhere in North America". Three students selected Toronto as Canada's capital, the same number replied with a question of their own – "Is it Ottawa?" – while the rest simply said they did not know. Major Canadian cities named included Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver, Montreal, and "the place where they speak French," but still 40% of students could not provide a single name. Speculation as to the country's population resulted in wide range of choices: from eight through twenty to thirty-forty million, with the one student who had visited Canada stating, "I know the territory is the same as that of Europe, and the population – as that of Poland". As with the Bulgarian respondents, the adjective "large" proved a popular one to apply to the territory of Canada, with a few students guessing that the country must be fourth or fifth in world ranking in terms of size.

The majority of foreign students could not make any choice, informed or not, as to when Canada was founded; five did opt for 1867, but on the grounds that it is the middle option of the three provided. Thirty percent were certain that Canada is a monarchy (one reply consisting in "It's not a republic"), while the remaining respondents had no idea as to its political set-up. Respectively, the popular choice for Head of State was monarch ("because it is a monarchy"), with one student pinpointing Queen Elizabeth II, but 70% opting for "Don't Know".



Eighty percent selected French and English as official languages of Canada, while 20% mentioned English only. The national currency proved a mystery to most, answers varying from the euro (“because of the Queen”) to “some kind of Canadian money,” with four students stating that it is the Canadian dollar. Asked about famous Canadians, nearly all students immediately supplied Justin Bieber’s name, one mistakenly identified Nicki Minaj as Canadian, and three could not think of any name at all.

Most informants professed ignorance of Canada’s social policy, although three said they had heard that the country has “great health care,” one of whom provided the following example: “Sixteen-year-old single mom gets a house from the state, which just funds the stupidity of teenagers.” The prevailing view seemed to be that there is little to no crime in Canada, one opinion being that “crime is almost non-existent, as Canadians are really polite”. Religions believed to be dominant in Canada were Christianity (60%), Catholicism (30%), and Eastern-Orthodoxy (two students). To about 90% of respondents, the country’s earliest settlers were the English and the French, with Indians and Inuit being the choice of one student, and Vikings – of another.

Perceptions and feelings: results

Exploration of heterostereotypes relating to Canada also did not reveal significant differences between the perceptions of Bulgarian informants and those of international students. For instance, when asked about their first mental images associated with Canada, most respondents immediately cited Niagara Falls, mountains, snow, ice, and “extremely cold weather” (the last was provided by African and Middle Eastern students). Somewhat surprisingly, in view of their poor general knowledge of Canada, as established with the previous set of questions, nearly all Bulgarian students mentioned the maple leaf on the flag (or, alternatively, a red flag with a leaf); this knowledgeability, it transpired, was due to the popularity of watching international sports events on television. A number of informants from the English Studies Programme also made reference to “a different kind of English”. On average, Canadians were considered to be kind, polite, tolerant and, in comparison with other nations: not as conservative as Europeans, more hospitable, friendly, and open than people from the United Kingdom or Americans, more polite and less opinionated than Americans, but often made fun of by the latter – an impression formed by TV shows, in particular the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*). A somewhat contradictory view emerged from the interviews with Bulgarian students, some of whom (about 30%) stated that Canadians are accustomed to a slower and more provincial life than Bulgarians, while



others (roughly the same number) were positive that they are busier and have less of a social life. In addition, Canadians were acknowledged by all informants to be good hockey players and, in the opinion of the international students, “very smart, not like Justin Bieber!”

Both groups of students seemed to agree, in general, that Canada could be described as a tolerant, democratic, social, and immigrant country. Perhaps because most of them were majoring in Political Sciences, the foreign students were somewhat more consistent in this respect (with one stating that Canada cannot be called a World Power “because they like to keep a low profile”), while about 20% of the Bulgarians produced paradoxical statements such as: Canada is a democratic *and* a totalitarian country, or it is peace loving *and* imperialistic at the same time. These conflicting views made us wonder whether the interviewees clearly understood the meaning of some of the adjectives proposed, but we decided not to alter the question at that point in order to establish whether similar confusion would arise with the second group of informants – which, as already stated, was not the case. However, 47 out of 50 students in total declared that they would certainly like to visit and possibly even move to Canada, most of them on the grounds that it is “one of the best countries to live in” because of its thriving economy and high standard of living. Another predominant reason proved to be sheer curiosity, i.e., the opportunity to learn about a new culture and environment, “see what it’s like over there” and, again, “maybe get a better life”. Surprisingly, an idealized perception of Canadian weather also emerged as a motivating factor from responses such as “it is cold and nice and Christmas must be beautiful,” “I want to see the sights, especially when the ice melts in the North” and “I’d like to go to Toronto, because of the snow in winter”. The weather, however, was also what discouraged the three African students who expressed no desire to visit the country: “it is extremely cold, I’d prefer to go to the USA because Canada is too silent and too cold,” “I’d prefer to move to Spain or France, it’s better over there”. Other reasons for wanting to visit Canada included “to visit my relatives in Vancouver,” “to practice my English,” and “it’s a paradise for vegans there.”

Logically enough, most of the above reasons coincided with the explanations provided by students for the fact that Canada is such a popular destination for emigrants: “the country is richer, will help you start a business,” “there’s a good standard of living, better prospects for work and life,” and “it’s easier to find a job than in the USA”. Along with economic considerations, about 30% of students mentioned their belief that people in Canada are more tolerant to immigrants.

Informants’ answers to all previous questions, whether concerning factual knowledge or personal perceptions, proved to be based on feature films and documentaries (about 50%), the internet (40%), accounts of friends and relatives with first-hand experience of Canada (nearly 30%), personal first-hand experience from the student who had



been to the country, and video games (this from an ardent gamer who was proud to inform us that Canada is the third-largest global producer of video games).

Finally, when asked what they would like to know or learn about Canada, almost all respondents listed precisely the general areas they had been surveyed on: more about the culture and history, what a typical Canadian is like, and how the country is different from the USA and other countries. One student expressed a personal interest in learning more about the status of the French language in Canada.

Conclusions

The majority of participants in the case study, regardless of their nationality, demonstrated very little factual knowledge about Canada. Their answers to the questions in the first part of the survey indicated that they knew next to nothing about its history and geography: most of them believed the first settlers in Canada to be the English and the French, very few could name more than a couple of major Canadian cities, and some even had difficulties placing the country on a world map. In addition, they appeared to be highly confused or seriously mistaken about the political set-up of Canada, eventually opting to consider it a presidential republic despite the fact that nearly half of the informants were majoring in Political Science. Finally, when faced with the task of naming famous Canadians, be it historical or contemporary figures, they could come up with only a few names from films and pop music only.

The prevailing perception of Canada, based mostly on personal accounts of relatives or acquaintances living there, or on impressions gathered from movies or TV series, proved to be that it is a wealthy country with a high standard of living, a low crime rate, and a warm and welcoming attitude to immigrants. With very few exceptions, informants painted a postcard-perfect picture of Canadian nature and weather conditions, as well, envisaging spectacular mountain views and cosy white Christmases. Canadians as people were generally considered to differ from both Americans and Europeans in being kinder, friendlier and more tolerant. This somewhat rosy vision was further enhanced by the students' failure to attribute a single negative feature to Canadians as they did with representatives of other nations (e.g. Americans are bossy and dominate, most Europeans are intolerant and snobbish), despite not being asked explicitly to do so in either case. Thus, on all the above listed points, respondents justified initial expectations that, as an out-group, they would present a highly favourable and somewhat idealized perception of the subject under investigation.

The findings of the study seem to indicate that the predominant perception of Canada is that of a beautiful, peaceful and prosperous country offering better job and life opportunities than either its Southern neighbour or any European state, coupled



with an easier and more tolerant integration process for would-be immigrants. This generalized impression aside, it would appear that the country does not play a particularly prominent part in international media coverage, whether in the political, sports or entertainment features, as a result of which little is actually known about Canada other than what can be gleaned through personal contacts with people who reside or have at some point resided there.

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