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Adaptation of Russian Orphans in the United States

Русские Сироты в Америке

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has experienced economic instability which has contributed to the rise of children entering orphanages. Unless they are adopted by a certain age (usually 16), these children are bound to life in an orphanage ("Inter-Country Adoptions"). There are more orphans than the amount of domestic adoptions that occur. Fortunately however, international adoptions have helped with this problem. International adoptions have been on such a rise that more Russian orphans were adopted by foreigners than Russians in the year 2003. This trend may change however, due to the recent curtailing of international adoptions. This is partially due to the recent media trend covering stories that deal with the abuse of Russian orphans in American homes. ("Over 1000 Russian Children Killed…"). Even though these cases are tragic and unacceptable, they are still rare and overshadow the successes of other adoptions. The debate over international adoption is a huge one and includes not only the risk of the adoption process becoming a business to sell orphans, but also more direct issues in regards to the best interest of the child ("Children Go on Sale"). International adoption takes a child away from his or her country and culture and places him or her into a world which poses many challenges that aren’t typically experienced in domestic adoption.

Early childhood environments affect language acquisition as well as social adjustment. There are two possible environments for an internationally adopted child: either the child will fully acquire the foreign language and assimilate into the new culture
or he or she will be in an environment where it is easier to retain his or her native language and culture as he or she acquires the new language and assimilates into the new culture. This paper will explore the degree of successful adjustment by analyzing the interviews of two Russian orphans who experienced different post-adoption environments.

This paper concerns two Russian orphans who attended the Concordia Language Villages, a Russian children’s summer camp called лесное озеро (Wood Lake) in Fargo, Minnesota. Interviews were conducted with the two orphans so that the processes of their adjustment into their new society might be juxtaposed. For the purposes of securing anonymity for the participants in these case studies, the symbols X and Y will be used to represent the two orphans. Orphan X is a female who was adopted by an American family, which included an American-Ukrainian father, at the age of six. The description will examine the interview of the participant, who at the time was seventeen, and compare her experience and current level of adjustment to her counterpart in this study: Orphan Y. Orphan Y is a male who was also adopted to the United States at the age of six. Orphan Y relates his experiences adjusting to his American family along with his unfortunate experiences from childhood. The interview with orphan X covered an array of questions that inquired about her linguistic, social and cultural experiences with adjusting. The questionnaire also included questions that asked this participant to elaborate on her present family environment as well as on her experience with orphanages before her adoption. A portion of the interview also covered her linguistic progression since the adoption, as well as questions regarding her self identity.

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1 Concordia Language Villages: Campers (many of whom were former orphans) at this Minnesota based camp enroll in the summer program and receive intensive language instruction complemented by cultural immersion
While the interview with Orphan X was conducted over the internet, the interview with Orphan Y was conducted on the telephone. Additionally, a letter sent by Orphan Y to his psychiatrist a few years after he was adopted will be discussed in the latter parts of this paper. The participants were chosen because it appears that the different backgrounds of their adoptive families contributed heavily to the differences in their adjustments as orphans.

**Orphan X**

X was born in Russia in the southern city of Armavir. She entered an orphanage called “Улыбка” (Ulybka) when she was just five years old. The conditions of Ulybka were poor. Fortunately, after only a year at Ulybka, Orphan X was moved to “Медведовский детский дома” (Medvedovskii Orphanage). By her description, this orphanage had better facilities and the children were fed three meals a day.

X was chosen from among many Russian children for international adoption based solely on a picture and a video clip of her. She was adopted along with another Russian child because her foster parents were told by her orphanage that she had no other siblings. The fact that she did indeed have a blood brother and sister didn’t come to light until she was already in the United States and began talking about her brother and sister to her adoptive parents. Orphan X’s sister was eventually adopted by her foster parents after some years, but her brother was not fortunate enough to be adopted as well because he had been relocated to another, stricter orphanage due to behavioral problems. X was initially uncomfortable around her foster father because of her negative experiences with her biological father, but as time passed their relationship improved.

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2 See appendix A for a transcription of the interview.
Despite the linguistic barriers, X was a popular child at school and her fellow school children were eager to sit next to her and her foster brother and engage in conversations. The only negative aspect of her early socialization that X could recall was that many of the children would repeat their own speech in a louder tone when it seemed as though X or her brother did not understand. This was done under the assumption that at a louder tone, linguistic barriers would fall. This of course was not the case, and it was one of the more negative experiences for subject X during her childhood.

X’s foster home environment was very supportive and warm towards her and her foster brother. Because her father was Ukrainian, he was able to somewhat understand Orphan X before she learned English. X and her brother also had the luxury of receiving occasional doses of Russian-Ukrainian culture since many overlapping holidays were celebrated by the family. The parents also hired a babysitter who was fluent in Russian and who attended doctors’ meetings with them so that she could explain to the children what was happening to ensure that the children were never mentally excluded during these visits. X’s Russian language ability is far more limited now than it was in her former years. Her sister, however, who was adopted later, still speaks Russian fluently due to her late arrival and to the fact that she has mainly Russian-speaking friends. Orphan X felt that her English was very fluent by the age of nine. As she matured into her teen years and had fewer reasons to use Russian on a daily basis she lost the flexibility that she used to have with the language and now has certain limitations. To rectify this problem, subject X, while still in high school, attended Concordia Language Villages for a summer. There she attended the Russian village camp and, throughout her stay, she could feel the gradual retrieval of her capabilities in her native language.
X now considers herself a Russian-American and says that despite being an American, she will always be proud of her Russian heritage. She is currently in a long term relationship. She is now awaiting her high school graduation and plans to stay in her hometown in Minnesota. X is content with the current status of her life and she plans to reconnect with her roots more in the future.

**Orphan Y**

Orphan Y was born in Tula. He is the eldest in his biological family; he has one brother and one sister. His younger brother was adopted around the same time as him to a different state (Florida), but his sister passed away at a much younger age. He was adopted at the age of six by an American family, which currently lives in Anchorage, Alaska. Orphan Y did not know any English before his adoption and his parents had no connection to his culture or language. After his adoption, Orphan Y was placed in an environment where no aspect of his previous world was nurtured. Instead he was forced to immediately adapt and react to his environment without much transitional support. At the beginning of his transition in the United States, Orphan Y visited a psychologist who conducts research on the psycho-dyadic environment. This psychologist works at the Center for Family Development\(^3\) and focuses on attachment and detachment disorders among children. I was able to acquire an online view of a letter Orphan Y wrote to the doctor when he was nine (see Appendix B). This letter touches on his troubled life in his early years, how hard it was for him to adjust to a new family and the degree to which he appreciated his situation at the time the letter was written.

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\(^3\)The Center for Family Development in New York offers therapy and resources for adopted and foster families with trauma and attachment disorder.
One of Orphan Y’s recollections concerns his harassment at the hands of his elementary schoolmates for being different. Eventually he adapted both culturally and linguistically; he was still, however, socially maladjusted. Orphan Y did poorly throughout high school, was rebellious against authority and dropped out of school after his sophomore year, which he was repeating at the time. Orphan Y usually exhibits apathetic and antisocial behavior, and he even revealed in his phone interview that one of the psychologists that he saw while he was younger told him that he had an anti-social personality disorder. Orphan Y admits having a hard time expressing and handling emotions, and he has also admitted to the use of recreational drugs. By the time Orphan Y attended the Concordia Language Villages immersion camp he wasn’t able to recall any Russian except for his own name and certain places he had lived in Russia. During the phone interviews\textsuperscript{4} Orphan Y expressed his desire to relearn Russian. Orphan Y is currently in the U.S. Navy and has had a series of unhealthy relationships. Orphan Y also suffers occasional bouts of depression.

**Conclusion & Analysis:**

The results of the study provided insights into the adjustment of Russian orphans in the United States. In the case of Orphan X, domestic abuse that was suffered early in her life placed her in an orphanage. Her experience during her earlier years was similar to that of Orphan Y, as described by him in his letter to his psychologist at the age of nine (see appendix B). However, Orphan X was fortunate enough to be adopted into a family environment that nurtured her Russian roots. Orphan Y, on the other hand, found himself in an environment that wasn’t complimentary to his Russian background. In addition to

\textsuperscript{4} Orphan Y’s phone interview was conducted with the same questionnaire taken by Orphan X.
not having much of a comfort zone at home, he also had more difficulties with his initial 
experiences with adjusting, such as the bullying that he was exposed to at school.
Another factor that helped Orphan X flourish was being adopted with another Russian 
orphan at the same time. Having this mutual support at home and at school helped her 
establish a level of comfort in her new environments culturally, socially and linguistically.
All of these supports contributed to her adjustment. Complete immersion also proved to 
have back lashed against Orphan Y by subjecting him to more difficulties and adversities 
in assimilating into his new environment. As a result, he was not provided with any 
significant advantages for the process of adjusting both culturally and to the new 
language. In terms of social adjustment, Orphan Y, while somewhat successful, was not 
as successful as Orphan X. The ease which Orphan X had in the course of her early 
adjustment helped her adjust in all areas more successfully than Orphan Y, whose 
adoptive environment was less complimentary to his roots. From these findings, it is 
arguable that a post adoption environment that compliments cultural and language 
retention is favorable to that of a complete immersion environment. The results showed 
that complete immersion gives no advantages to an orphan in the course of adjusting to 
being an American. Both orphans have also expressed their desire to reconnect with their 
roots. In addition to helping her retain her prior culture and language, Orphan X’s post 
adoptive environment did not inhibit the rate of acquisition of or adjustment to the new 
society, language and culture.
Works Cited


“Over 1000 Russian Children Killed by Parents in Last 5 Years — Top Official.”


Appendix A:

Orphan X:

Interview Questionnaire

At what age were you adopted?
At the age of 7

Where were you born and at what orphanage/orphanages have you stayed at?
i was born in the town of Armavir. When i was about maybe 5 i stayed at an Orphanage called "Ulibka" and then got moved to a different orphanage called "Medvedovski Detski Dome"

At what age did you join this orphanage?
"Ulibka" at the age of 5, "Medvedovski detski Dome" at the age of

What were the living conditions like in this orphanage?
Ulibka wasn't as nice as the Medvedovski orphanage. At the Medvedovski everything we had was nice stuff. We ate good food 3 times a day. Pretty much good conditions

Did you have siblings? if so where are they now?
Yes i have a brother and a sister. My sister lives with me now but my brother is still in Russia. At first when my parents adopted me they didn't know i had siblings, the orphanage people lied and said i didn't have brothers or sisters. The only way my parents found out that i had siblings was because i use to talk about my brother and sister. Six years after i was adopted my parents adopted my sister but they couldn't adopt my brother because they sent him to another orphanage, because he wasn't very well behaved, and the orphanage he got sent to wasn't a nice orphanage. They shaved all the kids hair at the orphanage he got sent to and they didn't have alot of food, it looked poor and stuff inside not like the "Medvedovski" orphanage that hat pretty much the same stuff you would have in america to take care of kids.

Describe in detail as best as you can remember the process of the adoption, how were you selected etc.
From what i know The parents pick out a child by looking at pictures and a movie tape that was made of me and then they would tell the orphanage and the orphanage people would tell us

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5 The language of this interview, taken over the internet, has not been normalized.
that we were going to get adopted, they gave us an album of pictures of the family we were going to get adopted by and then when ever the family wanted to come and get us was when we went. We didn't have much of a choice.

When the family came to get us we would have dinner with the boss of the orphanage and say good bye to everyone. Then we had to get all sorts of shots and we went to places to finalize our adoption. I don't really know much about what places we went to, i was too young to really remember.

What were you initial experience with your new foster family, describe them including (who the family members were ie foster sister, brother etc)

When i first met my foster parents i didn't really like my dad, i would always stay away from him, Which was probably because i didn't have a good experience with my real dad. my real dad was an alcoholic and he use to beat my mom and my brothers and sisters. So i stayed close to my foster mom. When i met my dads son Ian we got along pretty well. My brother would pick on us and tease us but not really trying to hurt us or anything he was just goofing around with us. Where were you adopted to?

I was adopted to North Andover MA

Did you have any initial exposure to russian throughout your post adoption childhood?

Well i was adopted with my brother now named Sasha, he isn't my blood brother but my parents adopted him with me because they said that i didn't have any siblings, so my brother and i talked Russian to each other all the time, and also my dad was Ukrainian and Ukrainian is similar to russian, so my dad spoke to us, so you can say we were exposed to our language

What was the experience with not speaking the same language like?

It was hard because we had to find other ways to communicate, like draw pictures and point to stuff. But at the same time i had my brother to talk to when i felt lonely with out anyone to talk to.

Describe the stages in which you acquired the new language

It didn’t take long to learn English because we were young and we caught on quick, it took us about a summer to know the basic words, But it took us about a year to really understand and speak the language

At what age did you feel like your English was your dominant language (fluency) if applicable, at what age did you feel like you have forgotten your first language?

At the age of 9 i think i was pretty fluent in English and I haven't really forgotten my
first language, i still understand a lot of it and i know
a lot of words and phrases still. I don’t think you really ever forget
the whole language but
some times you do, like with my brother i think he forgot Russian
about when he was maybe 11 or something because he was younger than me, so he
doesn’t remember anything
anymore, unlike me

What was the initial schooling process like for you?

We had to walk to school everyday, WE would have to wear uniforms
and iron them before school everyday.

Did you receive negative social reinforcements ie from
school/classmates for
linguistic differences?
No not really everyone liked me and wanted to be my friend, although
people would talk loud to our faces like we were deaf which wasn’t the case, we just
didn’t
understand that English that well. I remember everyone wanted to sit with me at
lunch and when
we had to sit on the floor at school. So no , no one was negative to me

What was it like making friends?
It was kinda hard because you couldn’t really speak there language that well
but people accepted me and wanted to become friends with me because i was
different

what was the family environment like in terms of helping you adjust to
your
new lifestyle?
My parents always played games with us to help us learn English and they even
hired a girl that spoke Russian to help us out, she was like our babysitter but
she came with us to the doctors and stuff to help us understand what the doctor was
saying.

was any aspect of Russian culture or language present in your life?
Yes my dad was Ukrainian so we had Russian Ukrainian food and we celebrated
Ukrainian/Russian
Christmas and stuff. WE would go over my dads parents house and there
house was full of Russian/ Ukrainian things. SO i was around alot of Russian things
and
language
how would you more comfortably identify yourself now? Russian,
American, Russian American,
I identify myself as Russian-American because that is my heritage and it will always be, just because I don’t know as much as Russian as I used to doesn’t mean I am a full American. I still know a lot of Russian and I am proud of it.

What changes if any would you make on the process of your development? maintain the language, culture etc.

I think my parents should have sent us to a Russian class or something so we would still have our language, but otherwise we still maintain our Russian culture. I celebrate Russian Christmas and Easter and making Russian food. I think if my dad wasn’t Ukrainian I don’t think we would still be intact with the Russian culture just because the foster parents I think worry more about us learning their language that they forget where we came from.

Do you feel like it is necessary to let go of your first language and only be in an English speaking environment and situations to fully adjust to the new country? (If applicable)

No I don’t think it necessary to let go of my first language, you can still learn another language without having to fully forget your language. You could fully adjust to a country without forgetting your first language, maybe it will help you when you don’t have to languages to keep up but I don’t necessarily think you need to let go of your first language to really learn another language.

Explain in detail your capabilities in Russian before any Russian instruction/classes if you had any after you had forgotten Russian, explain in detail the process of relearning Russian was it easy, difficult, easy to understand? (If applicable)

Before I went to Russian camp or any place to relearn my language again, I could understand a lot of Russian but I only knew some words and phrases, but no fluently like I used to know Russian. After I went to Russian camp to try to relearn my language, I found it really easy. I found that I could understand more than I thought I could. It’s like the language was slowly coming back to me I started to recognize words and things, that I totally forgot about that I knew. So it was fairly easy to relearn my language because I had it all in the back of my head I just never had the chance to use it.

How often do you have the chance to speak Russian? Before and now.

I used to speak Russian with my brother a lot but then he forgot it and now I barely speak it.

My sister speaks it everyday because she has a Russian bf but I don’t. I still use some
words in russian
for things, and my family
understands it, but I barely speak it anymore.

What advice would you give to future parents of Russian adoptees?
Dont let your kid forget the culture their from and the language because when they
grow up they are going to regret forgetting the language, they would want to relearn
it again. And to be easy on us when you first adopt, we dont understand alot, so we
dont know right from wrong. Thats one thing my parents would get mad at us for
we didnt know right from wrong so they would scolled us when we didnt know any
better. Also try to learn some of the language we are form it will help them and us.

Appendix B:
Orphan Y:
Orphan’s Letter to Psychiatrist

My Heart

There was a boy named

He was 3 years old. He had a

They both were in an

Yes, food toys, and most of all

But when

One day he went to see a

He would get my clothes

It was good. He tried I was

He was getting my legs out, but was

one day a miracle happened.

He was a very good boy and

the End

look at back
Dear Dr. [Name],

How are you? Thank you changing my life. You are a very nice man and Dr.

Love,

PS, Hi