

## ETHNOGRAPHIC SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS OF RUSSIAN ADOPTEES

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### Introduction

A decade after *perestroika*, Russia's citizens are suffering a serious decline in quality of life. Unemployment, the costs of child rearing and mortality have increased significantly in the last decade as fertility rates have declined (Heleniak, 1995: 446, Perevedentsev, 1993: 13), and the number of Russian suffering from disease, malnutrition, drug abuse and crime has also risen considerably since the 1980s (Likhanov, 1996, Garrett, 1997). As a result, many Russian children have been abandoned to state-run childcare systems. In 1991, it was reported that over 59,000 children were admitted to such systems (Serkova, 1992). That same year, the Russian government, unable to care for the growing numbers of children unaccounted for, opened its doors for the first time in history to outsiders willing to offer a home to Russia's children.

Between 1991 and 1999, American couples adopted over 80,000 children from abroad, and of those children adopted, over 20,000 were Russian children (U.S. State Department, 2000). Most American couples who adopt from abroad are upper-middle class, white and infertile (Poston and Cullen, 1986, Poston and Cullen, 1989); due to the "shortage" of white infants available in the U.S., the prospect of acquiring a white child is thus what usually draws parents to Russia for adoption. In 1997, Russia officially became the most prolific sending country of adoptees, exporting that year almost 4,000 of their 300,000 available children to America (Isachenkov, 1997). Since then, the rate of Russian adoptions has increased even further. (U.S. State Department, 2000)

While many American couples claim that international adoption is the answer to their prayers (see, for example, Sommer, 1998), others report very serious problems involved with the process of adopting a child from Russia. Among the most generally cited are hostility to outsiders fueled by nationalist sentiments (Stanley, 1997a, 1997b), inconsistent laws regarding adoption (Engeler, 1997, King and Kendall, 1997), and forged medical records (McQuiston, 1996a). However, according to adoptive parents themselves, the largest problem they are

experiencing occurs long after they return home from abroad. More and more, Americans are adopting children who are ultimately diagnosed as severely emotionally disturbed. Disappointed and frustrated, these parents often prove unequipped to deal with the challenges these children bring into their homes. Ultimately, many reinsitutionalize the children in long term foster care or group homes in the States. Parents are also suing adoption agencies on the grounds of "wrongful adoption," accusing agencies of purposely misinforming or misguiding them about their children simply to make the transaction (Peterson and Freundlich, 2000).

For the last four years, I have been researching the disorder most commonly associated with Russian adoptees – Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). RAD is described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV, 1994) as an inability to bond with a parental (most often maternal) figure, due to early separation from a primary attachment figure (Richters et al., 1994). A child's symptoms include being superficially charming, forming indiscriminate attachments or being overly friendly with strangers, lying, stealing, needing to be in control at all times, poor cause and effect thinking and an inability to feel guilt, remorse, or compassion. Current methods of attachment therapy vary, but all prioritize the possible biological and psychological sources of RAD, relying heavily upon the experiments of Goldfarb, Bowlby, and Ainsworth, which demonstrate the negative psychological and neurological effects of an infant's early separation from the mother (Randolph, 2000). Therapists first pathologize these effects, and then work to repair that break in attachment through a standardized series of techniques designed to emotionally "regrow" a child – for example, teaching him to trust, to ask for help from an adult and receive it, to learn to accept direction from an adult and comply, and finally, to learn to empathize with others, to feel compassion, and thus, remorse or guilt.

Because the work of Goldfarb, Bowlby and Ainsworth assume that the process of infant-mother attachment is biological, instinctual and thus, universal, attachment therapists currently apply the same techniques to all children

diagnosed with RAD regardless of the child's cultural background. Anthropologists have shown, however, that attachment is not a purely biological process, and that it is, in fact, influenced and altered by external factors. In her book, *Death Without Weeping* (1992), Nancy Scheper-Hughes demonstrates how socio-economics or "deprivation, loss, and abandonment" has an effect on mothers in the slums of the Alto de Cruzeiro in Brazil. They exhibit a loss in the "ability to love, nurture, trust and have and keep faith in the broadest sense of the terms," (340) causing a delayed or nonexistent attachment to infants which often proves fatal. This kind of "conditional" mother-love challenges traditional Western assumptions of maternal love as natural and uniform, and demonstrates a political economy of emotions in which an individual's emotional responses to reality are not only encoded in the DNA, but constantly evolving with the social structure. Like the work of Scheper-Hughes, my fieldwork, which has been conducted in Russian orphanages, the Denver foster care system and an Evergreen, Colorado clinic that specializes in treating attachment disorders, challenges the notion of the attachment process as universal. And like the work of Scheper-Hughes, it shows how *culturally specific* forms of deprivation, loss and abandonment may influence attachment development. I offer some examples of the cultural reasons why children raised in Russian orphanages may have particular difficulties adjusting to life in American families. Ultimately, I believe that this research begs the question of how multisited and comparative ethnographies can be used to inform and reform the attachment disorder community and subsequently, the international adoption process.

#### **Ethnographic Contributions to Attachment Disorder Studies**

The cultural values associated with childhood and selfhoods in Russian orphanages are different than those extolled in America's families. The abrupt transition that adoptees make between these ideas causes much confusion and conflict within adoptees. To understand how this confusion is interpreted as a component of attachment disorder, we first have to explore the reasons why Americans adopt, as well as the expectations that prospective American parents have for their adoptive children. In her book, *Kinship With Strangers: Adoption in North America* (1994), anthropologist Judith Modell interviewed over 100 Americans who adopted. She found that one of the main reasons for their decision to adopt centered

around a feeling of almsgiving and sentimentality towards children in need. Indeed, open-word surveys that I've used in my own research show that an astounding 70% of individuals who have adopted say that they did so because "they could provide a good home for a child." Jesse, one mother who had adopted two Russian children from an orphanage in St. Petersburg, elaborated: "We had a nice home, we had so much land, we live up in the mountains and we thought the kids would enjoy what we had. It seemed selfish to keep all that to ourselves" (AP-7, 1999). More in-depth interviews, however, revealed that the desire to provide children with the better things in life was, in fact, symptomatic of a sincere and well-meaning desire for upper-middle class individuals and couples to somehow make a change in their *own* lives: to slow down and stop working so hard, and to shift their attention and time from their work lives towards the maintenance of a household and family. According to Margaret, a mother who adopted a girl from an orphanage in Ulyanovsk, Russia:

John (her husband) and I saw each other for about ten minutes a day. We were both working 60-hour weeks. It sucked the energy right out of both of us . . . I can conceive, but we didn't want younger children. We talked and talked and though that it would be a great idea to adopt . . . What I thought was that I would go part time, and come home from work and make dinner for them, we'd play games and do things together. Tuck them into bed and read them stories. Doesn't that sound nice? Be a real family, not just two people running around like chickens with their heads cut off . . . (Interview AP-17, November, 1999)

That adoptive children could provide adults with the image of a "complete" family that is somehow both private and emotionally fulfilling was an expectation of most of the male and female parents I interviewed. Christopher Lasch has called this image of the family and household as refuge a "haven in a heartless world" (1975: 1). According to Lasch, the image was inspired by the socialization of production and reproduction in America, particularly the process by which capitalists took production out of the household and collectivized it under their own supervision in the factories. They extended control over the private lives of workers by extolling the virtues of marriage and children, depicting the household as an emotional refuge in a hostile, industrializing landscape and reorganizing family relationships

within the household to create a site of consumer values.

The central role that the child plays in promoting the family as a refuge is brought into relief by Viviana Zelizer, whose book, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1985) documents the specific cultural construction of childhood in twentieth century America. She argues that the health of emerging capitalist ventures and the safety of children were contrary and resulted in tensions between the upper-middle class and immigrant communities. These tensions manifested themselves in clashes over child labor laws, playground movements and the expansion of American education. In the process, children were expelled from the cash nexus at the turn of the century and they began the rocky transition from the edge of the labor pool to the center of family consumption. Simultaneously, their lives began to be sacralized. The home became the site of the sacralization, and the child became, if not the head, then the figurehead of the household – the reason, in essence, to maintain the family as the site of socialization and thus, consumerism. Today, Zelizer argues, we understand the child not necessarily to be an economic, but an exclusively *emotional* asset, one that is still vitally interlinked with the maintenance of a capitalist economy.

The reliance on adoptive children as emotional asset often goes hand in hand with the assumption that all children, and especially children raised in foster care or in an institution, dream about, desire and long for a family so that they may realize an attachment with a parental figure. For many children, however, and especially those who are raised in foster care or in institutions, this is not the case. In fact, the transition from abandoned child to adoptee creates much conflict within children. Children who are raised in Russian state-run institutions and who are abruptly integrated into American families with the expectation of being emotional assets are especially disturbed by the changes. For, in addition to being expected to make obvious transitions such as learning to speak a new language and to acclimate to new sensory sensations, schedules and places, Russian adoptees are also expected to move quickly from collective to individual behavior, from public to private living, and from deprivation to indulgence. Finally, they are expected to understand the terms of attachment in American families, which often calls for deference, trust and reliance on adults, a concept that is culturally foreign to them.

Both David Ransel (1988) and Allen Ball (1994) have carefully documented the relationship between the State and abandoned children in pre-Soviet and Soviet Russia. Prior to the revolution, Russia's attempts to modernize included the construction and maintenance of massive foundling homes that would house, raise, and most importantly, train Russia's future caretakers and protectors. Russia's attention to these new wards of the State, however, was short-lived and somewhat superficial, since resistance to Western bureaucracy and the actual implementation of Enlightenment ideals was stronger than the vision for this new generation of Russian citizens. Mortality rates increased and foundling homes declined in popularity. Later during the Soviet regime, the State expressed a new commitment to abandoned children, expanding an orphanage system that was charged with proving the superiority of Russian psychiatry. Children were monitored in strictly run educative environments and trained to be self-sufficient, independent and economically useful, all in the service of the State that raised them through the age of 18. Since *perestroika*, however, there has been a shift in attitudes about abandoned children in Russia. No longer symbols of the State's ability to create strong, loyal and capable generations of future Soviets, abandoned children are now grave reminders of a failing government that needs to attend to its citizens now. In her 1996 ethnography, *Childhood in Russia*, Clementine Creuzinger documents that abandoned children are now stigmatized as "throw-away" children and are considered excess baggage for an already overtaxed government. The status of orphans, or "children without parental care" as they are now known, has actually become an official social category, one that stigmatizes a child for his or her entire life. Children carry documents that signify their orphan status and list their permanent address as an institution. They are often rejected for educational and professional opportunities. More and more, abandoned children, once they become of age, comprise a large segment of Russia's first modern burgeoning lower class.

The stigmatization an abandoned child experiences outside an institution begins within the institution. According to one orphanage staff interviewed by a Human Rights Watch worker in 1998, "Orphans are called children with no prospects – thus they are not trainable, not treatable" (Hunt, 1998). Many of the adults they see every day, regardless of which government ministry oversees their care or whether they

actually suffer from mental or physical defects, have labeled them *oligophrenic* or *debil* (heavily or lightly retarded respectively) and thus, not worthy of more than the required attention, so children must rely on themselves or their peers for amusement, education or comfort on a day-to-day basis. In the five orphanages I researched in Moscow, Vladimir and Ulyanovsk between 1996 and 2000, I observed a series of peer-based networks in which older children are expected by staff to "look out" for younger children. These peer networks all included initiation rites and rites of passage, often in the form of endurance tests. Children were also disciplined by peers and taught how to play certain games and do certain tasks, such as making beds. According to one Russia adoptee who was adopted by a Denver couple: "It didn't ever cross my mind to ask an adult to help me with things. If you needed help it meant that you were dumb. Stupid. Because I didn't want to be put in a worse place, I asked (friends) Sergei and Erik to help. We helped each other get what we wanted." (AK-12, March 3, 2000)

Abandoned children who are raised in Russian institutions are encouraged to remain loyal, trust and help one another instead of adults. This is a behavior that is culturally induced, and one that has proved more fruitful than any other for both the children and the orphanage staff. It is the way they each survive. However, these attachments that they are encouraged to make in Russia are not considered healthy here in the U.S., particularly if a child is to prove an emotional asset to a family. When a Russian adoptee makes the transition from abandoned child to adoptee, he is simply not equipped to make the attachments he is supposed to affect with adults. However, because of the lack of education on the part of adoption workers and parents on this point, the child's behaviors are quickly pathologized and are often interpreted as symptoms of an attachment disorder. Children are often subsequently medicated for depression or bipolar distress. More often than not, the medications do not work and the medical professionals are left to wonder why. Without these ethnographic details and without an anthropological cross-cultural and comparative perspective that I've tried to show here, such dilemmas will continue to be a part of attachment theory, and more importantly, Russian adoptees will continue to be challenged far beyond their cultural means.

### Conclusion: Putting Ethnography to Work

In their book, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), George Marcus and Michael Fisher argue that the potential for developing a distinctive and useful anthropology depends on the anthropologist's willingness to emphasize description of foreign cultures while at the same time doing some sophisticated interrogation of his or her own society. As this article demonstrates, I support Marcus' and Fischer's emphasis on forging more rigorous forms of ethnography abroad to challenge Western cultural assumptions – particularly when such a complex, transnational process as international adoption requires it. However, I believe that it is equally important to proactively work to reach audiences for the ethnography once it is finished. The ideas outlined in this paper are just a few that are being used to demonstrate the possibility of using ethnographic fieldwork to guide new attachment therapy techniques. For example, since returning from my second trip to Russia, I have led two workshops on the relationship between culture and attachment disorders. The first, "Integrating Culture into Attachment Therapy," pulls together ethnographic information on childhood and families from various countries to help therapists and therapeutic foster parents to develop an awareness of, and possible competence in, identifying which behaviors of attachment disordered children may be approached as pathological and which may be approached as cultural. The second, titled, "When Disorder *is* the Order," urges therapists and adoptive parents to look at the complicity of American cultural assumptions about children, family, emotions and medicine in the growing numbers of cases of attachment disorder in America.

In addition to working with attachment therapists and therapeutic foster parents, I have also been collaborating with several adoptive parents whose children have been diagnosed with attachment disorder to develop a cultural component to two Colorado adoption agencies' training and education sessions for prospective adoptive parents. These sessions, called "Adopt a Child, Adopt a Culture," use ethnographic data to familiarize parents with the societies their children are coming from, and include an in-depth discussion on the culture of child rearing in which the children have been brought up. This aids prospective parents to be more realistic about the needs of their adoptive children and their own needs as new parents.

Reactions to these efforts have thus far been very positive. As more people in the attachment community learn about them, more requests for efforts like them are being made, and I recently I was asked to contribute to an internationally adopted child's therapy to serve as part of her treatment team. This convinces me that a cultural approach to RAD is only becoming more valuable as the number of couple who turn to countries like Russia to help them complete their picture of the ideal family life increases. It is my hope that this example of how ethnography will inspire other anthropologists to think about the ways in which their own research can contribute to Russian society and the transglobal communities of which Russia is a part.

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