

When Local Myths Meet Global Reality: Preparing Russia's Abandoned Children For International Adoption

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Introduction

The adoption of Russian children by Westerners is currently a popular and controversial subject, but there is little empirical work that talks about how to improve the process. In this paper, we draw on Olga Tunina's experience as a foreign language teacher and Rachael Stryker's ethnographic data in a Russian orphanage to theorize about ways of approaching language and culture to better prepare Russian children for adoption by Americans.

Typically entering a family is beneficial for an institutionalized child because even the best orphanage cannot be like a family for a child in terms of helping to develop his or her individual potential. Scholars have demonstrated this both clinically and empirically (Buianov 1991; John Bowlby 1969, 1979, 1988). They also show the transition from institution to family life has many dimensions. During lessons at the orphanage, we have tried not only to teach English, but also to create the atmosphere of an American family and explain to adopted children about the cultural differences they will encounter. In this paper, we specifically compare and contrast expectations that American adoptive parents and Russian adoptees have of the international adoption process, and that often hinder children's and parents' abilities to deal with the situation realistically. These myths include the notion of "rich Americans" on the part of the children, and the "grateful child" or "rescued child" on the part of the parents. This paper explains how we attempt to dispel these myths during classes. Such work and this paper have a practical use—to prepare children and parents for international adoptions—but they may also help us to target certain themes and tropes about the transnational process between Russia and America.

The Myths of International Adoption: Rich Americans and Grateful Russians

Since 1991, the year that Russia first allowed international adoptions, Americans have adopted almost 25,000 Russian children (US State Dept., 2000). Generally, Russian orphanages have no special staff to prepare children for adoption,

however some orphanages are beginning to prepare children for this process. Our work is at an orphanage in Ulyanovsk, a Russian city of 800,000 on the Volga River. We evaluate all abandoned and orphaned children in the region and relocate them according to their medical and legal conditions among the other 15 orphanages in the city. We house approximately 300 children at any given time. An ex-director of this orphanage realized the ineffectiveness of raising children in an institutionalized fashion and decided to raise children in an atmosphere as close to "home" as possible. Today, all policies in the orphanage are based on recreating a home atmosphere. In many other Russian orphanages children are divided by age, sex, and health status into living units within one large building, and are each tended to at certain times of day by staff members. In our orphanage, children of different ages and sexes live in one of seven cottages each with its own kitchen, bathroom, and group bedrooms. They are cared for throughout the day by a staff of women, all of whom they call "mom." Unlike other orphanages, the children are expected to contribute to the household in age-appropriate ways by doing chores, gardening, and helping their "moms" to care for the other children. At this orphanage, it is our role to encourage the linguistic and moral preparation of children for adoption to other countries.

Olga began working as an English language teacher in this orphanage in 1998 as part of a project on the Accelerative (Intensive) Method of teaching Foreign Languages. With this method she encourages children to envision America beyond a new linguistic world. She not only relies on textbooks and flashcards to help them grasp grammatical rules, she also gears lessons toward their specific situation as newcomers to American culture and an American family. To reduce children's anxieties about being adopted, she shows them pictures of American families, schools, and street scenes, and generally helps them prepare for adoption so they have a more positive attitude towards it. Teaching children to be ready for this experience and to know what to expect when it happens helps the children considerably. It also comforts their adoptive parents and precludes much of the frustration inherent in the first days of adoption.

Based on our experiences, we learned one of the main frustrations Russian children encounter when they are adopted by American parents is the discrepancy between the kind of attention they receive from Americans at the orphanage and the kind that the children themselves are expected to *give* once they arrive in their actual home in America. Children abandoned or orphaned to Russian institutions know little about many conditions of American life—for example, where food comes from or how much it costs, or how money is earned. According to many of the children we work with, money is either scavenged if you are poor or else it simply appears if you are rich. The idea that Americans are rich is strengthened by movies about American life, as well as by numerous gifts that children receive from adoptive families and friends when they are visited at the orphanage. This induces them to think mostly about an easy, beautiful and rich American life (complete with new toys, clothes, cars, and a house) where they will be continuously showered with presents. However, once

they arrive in America, a “normal” family life begins. Children are expected to perform duties and responsibilities in their new family, to give respect and to defer to their new parents, and to be a close member of the family. They are also expected to study hard for a good education because intelligence is highly valued in American families.

Children in Russian orphanages are generally completely unprepared for these kinds of cultural and emotional challenges. In many cases, they have never had any long-term family relationships, as parents who are now in prison or who are too poor or sick to care for them abandoned the majority of the children. Once abandoned to Russian institutions they become used to taking part in peer-based networks, less rigid schedules, and shorter school periods than are required in America. In language classes, we talk to the children about these differences and encourage children to write, in Russian, about their expectations of American life so that we may later talk about them in English. Recently, Olga asked the children what they thought life in America would be like. Most wrote things such as, “We will be loved by parents. *And there will be candies in America!*” Others try to speak specifically about their new families. One child wrote, “New parents will help with difficulties, will understand.” And one boy was worried that since his new parents both work for a living, he would not be able to play everyday like they did in the orphanage. But, and this is an important point, none of them mentioned their *own* responsibilities as family members. For many of these children, their previous experiences with American adults who come and go through the orphanage, all smiles, playing with the children, going shopping, and buying souvenirs for them lead them to believe this is what their their “real life” with their new American family will be like. The parents will give, and they will receive.

The adoptive parents also suffer from certain myths when they enter the adoption process. The most troubling is the myth that children are grateful to be taken away to America. American parents understandably want to give the children love and a new chance at a good life, and to some extent, it is understandable that they would think that the children would be grateful to them or immediately respect their needs in return. But the children we work with are rarely grateful. This is because very often, new parents rely on their own experiences, their own cultural assumptions, or their own family history to create their model of a family, which ultimately does not match with the reality of the adoptive situation. In Rachael Stryker’s dissertation project on international adoption (2000, 2001), she found that adoptive parents’ understanding of the adoption process is primarily skewed by their assumption of children as “emotional assets.” This drives a parent-centered international market for children, prioritizing the consumer rights of the adoptive parents over the emotional and physical challenges of adopted children. In this scenario, adoptive parents and adoption professionals are often more preoccupied with the material needs of children. They prioritize the fantasy aspect of parenting—taking their new child to a first meal at McDonald’s in Moscow or on an immediate pilgrimage to Disney Land rather than

confronting the emotional and cultural needs of the child during this transition time. There is also an emphasis on demonstrating new technologies and recreational activities to these children (Stryker 2000, 2001).

However, the excitement that American parents hope to bring to their new children through these experiences often backfires. Institutionalized children in Russia have usually never been exposed to such stimuli, and they don't know how to use technology that Americans take for granted. Some of them are deathly afraid even to get in a bathtub or take a shower, for example. They would rather run around dirty than be scared by the loud noise of rushing water and being left alone in such a small space. This is often disappointing and disturbing to parents, who value the cleanliness and hygiene of their adopted child as a reflection of their own status as parents in the eyes of others. It leads them to think there is something wrong with the child, or wrong with the orphanage that raised him or her.

American parents are also preoccupied with whether their new child loves them at first sight or not. However, one of the main peculiarities of children from the institutions is their difficulty in relating to adults. A clinical experiment (Kelleher 1999) comparing the reactions of children raised in families and children raised in institutions to a "positive situation" (in this case, the presentation of a bright toy to the child) and a "frightening situation" (the presentation of a frightening mask) found the reactions of children from a family setting and an institution were approximately the same, but there were differences in their behavior towards adults. Children from a family setting met their mothers with a smile, trying to involve them in their activity, and to share toys with them. Children from an institution were less active with a caretaker in this situation, their emotions were harder to read, and their expressions were flat. Olga recalls a time in the orphanage when one American couple was very surprised when they found that their adopted children (a boy, aged 11, and a girl, aged 14) didn't smile at all during the first days of the relationship. The children never showed if they were happy to have new toys, clothes, and parents, making the parents wonder why the children weren't more grateful to them. However, the reality is that an adopted child is in a new and emotionally charged situation, and whether or not he can express this in words, he is stressed. An adopted child goes through a period of grieving for what he will be losing and for what he has already lost: his early childhood home, his birth parents, his caretakers and peer-network at the orphanage, his old routine, his language, and culture. Devoid of these important things in his life at once, knowing his adoptive parents only a few days, armed without much of the English language, he cannot possibly understand that what these people are doing is supposed to help him and make him or her happy. Thus, the children are usually not grateful.

Dispelling International Adoption Myths in the Classroom

In order to dispel these myths it is important that children are introduced to different aspects of American culture once their adoptions are finalized. Usually, a few weeks to a few months exist to work with children before their new parents arrive to meet them. As mentioned before, in general and throughout the classes, we encourage the children to read both Russian and English texts about American life and then discuss what will be new to them. However we also work outside of textbooks. For example, we encourage role-playing and games where they create their image and expectations of the family so we may try to understand and correct them. In these situations, we especially target interpersonal relations with them. If, for example, a child wants to create a scene where he has his own pool in his backyard in America, we try to focus the child not on the act of swimming, but on the social aspects and social possibilities of swimming in a pool. We ask who he would like to invite to the pool, what games he would play with people, what he would like his new parents to teach him about the pool, and how he would help to take care of it himself.

Another important part of classes is to use the letters adoptive parents send to the children as study materials. We work with a child one-on-one with their letter, translating the English into Russian, encouraging the children to read for themselves those easier words they know. We choose certain words from the letter and create English dialogues around these words, creating scenarios that might happen in their new family, at their new school or church, or in after-school activities. It is also very helpful to work on the children's language and comprehension skills with photos parents send so children know about their new home, the members of their new family, any children nearby that might be potential peers, pets, as well family activities, both fun *and* boring, and begins to identify themselves with these scenes. Again, in any work we do, we focus on the social interactions that are involved with owning material goods rather than the act of "owning" these things.

As this helps the children in the classroom with cultural change, the process also attempts to forge a relationship with the adopting parents that help them to understand the cultural needs of the children during this time of great transition. When possible, once we learn that particular children are to be adopted, our director contacts the parents in America to talk with them about their children and to offer cross-cultural language services to them. If they like, Olga contacts the parents often and encourages them to learn about the social history of their child as well as the medical history of their child by asking both the Director of the Orphanage and the children themselves. She encourages them to ask the children tough questions, like how long they have been living in the institution before adoption, and why they were left there. She also refers them to the studies cited earlier in this paper, to learn about the multifaceted nature of the cultural acquisition of institutionalized children. She asks them to write as many letters to the children as they can, whether they send them

or not, to help them get used to the idea of having a new person in the center of their lives.

When they arrive at the orphanage to meet their child, they are encouraged to focus on the interactions between them and to hold off on providing them with gifts and new clothes. They cannot expect the child to love them at first sight and they should not force affection. It also makes things better if they talk positively about the child's home at the orphanage and take part in the activities there.

Finally, parents are encouraged to allow the children to reconnect with the orphanage by telephone and through letters as much as possible during the first year. They must realize that the children will have continued loyalty to their birth parents, their home country, and their orphanage friends, even though they are now American. We find on average children will ask to call the orphanage every week when they first arrive in America. They should be allowed to do this every time they ask as the children will not want to forget this part of their lives.

Conclusion

Such teaching methods are beneficial for the new families that arrive at the orphanage. It makes things easier, as the parents and children come to know each other, learn each other's ways and communication styles, and grow into their new family roles. However, the work has proved to be only as beneficial as the children and parents allow. As scholars have shown, a lack of willingness to create cultural understanding is resulting in rising rates of reinstitutionalization for Russian adoptees in America (Stryker 2000). It can also cause more serious tragedies for Russian children adopted by Americans, such as the rising number of abuse and murder allegations that adoptive parents of Russian children are facing in America (Canellos 1997). However, if parents can come to Russia with the knowledge that the American family is not a biological structure set in stone, and thus realize that it may be remodeled and redone as the environment allows, and if they can realize that children are not preprogrammed to provide limitless entertainment, love and affection, then they are well on their way to a successful adoption. Likewise, the children we work with must come to understand that they are going to be emotionally challenged by becoming the new member of an American family. Being a member of an American family is hard work. Ultimately, we believe that the anxieties and worries associated with international adoption can be far outweighed by the love and joy that everyone experiences in the months and years that follow. But there is also a need for the understanding of cultural differences between the countries involved in this phenomenon. This is a process of self-interrogation that begins in the classroom, but certainly does not end there.

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