

Effects of Immigration on Russian Women:
Narrative Stories about their
Own Experiences

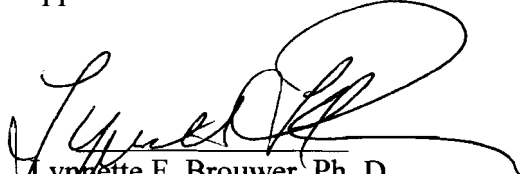
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Angelika Kulyasova

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Lynette F. Brouwer, Ph. D.
Research Advisor

The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout
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The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, WI

Author: Angelika V. Kulyasova

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a qualitative study exploring Russian women's experience of being immigrants in the USA. The USA is historically based on immigration. Immigrants arrived from all over the world bringing with them different culture, life style, and family patterns. Like other immigrant societies, the US has had to manage cultural diversity in the context of mutual stereotypical attitudes and perceptions by native and newcomer, and, in the process, forge a multicultural, pluralistic society. Along with many other immigrant women in this country, Russian women are going through many processes: multiple losses, racism and stereotyping, identity conflicts, relationship issues, and others. However, despite all of the hardships of being an immigrant in the USA, Russian women reveal astonishing courage in terms of coping with resettlement issues. Paradoxically, there is not enough attention has been paid to understanding the meaning and experience of women who go through the process of immigration. Literature specific

to women, including ethnographic studies and personal narratives, can provide a phenomenological perspective. The narratives of the women in this study open the door for better understanding how they have experienced the process of immigration and found their own unique ways of facing the new challenges in their lives.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The focus of this study is the female migrant discourse. The goal was to give the voices of Russian immigrant women an opportunity to be heard and to educate us about experiences of immigrant women. Going through the immigration process and meeting other immigrants in the USA, the author understands that women of different cultures of origin have different immigration experiences. According to Berger (2004), women who come from conservative, traditional, less industrial societies have different experiences than women who emigrate from industrialized, Westernized societies. There is no doubt that black women who emigrate from Africa have a different experience than Russian women who emigrate from the Former Soviet Union (FSU). However, through this study, the researcher collected information, which helped her to find common experiences among Russian immigrant women and, in addition, these findings are similar to the results of other studies about female migration in this country. Also, the researcher explored the coping patterns of Russian immigrant women and their positive or negative input of immigration into their lives.

As described in many studies, abundant empirical knowledge documents the negative effects of immigration on one's social, financial, and professional status and on individual and family psychological well-being and functioning (Garza-Guerrero, 1974). Although there is no doubt that immigration is a challenging experience which may have harsh outcomes for individuals and families, evidence suggests that it also has favorable aspects. However, very few reports document the positive effects of immigration (Berger, 2004). This study provides some evidence of positive aspects of immigration to the USA through women's eyes.

Statement of the Problem

During this time of increasing awareness of immigrants' needs, only several studies investigated the female migration in the USA. Most previous studies focused on negative aspects of immigration. Although there is no doubt that immigration is a challenging experience which may have harsh outcomes for individuals and families, evidence suggests that it also has favorable aspects (Berger,2004). In order to explore this issue- what positive aspects immigration introduces into Russian women's lives-the author conducted the qualitative research to bring better understanding of female immigrants' needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of being female immigrant in the USA, using qualitative research. Qualitative research seeks to develop a new theory from individual cases and to develop "a subjective testimonial to other people's voices" (Ahearn, 1999, p. 15). In this study, the researcher allows Russian women to tell their stories about their own experiences of adjusting in this country. These stories might help mental health providers to be aware of some unique aspects of female migration in the USA, developing unambiguous interventions to assess this group of immigrant population. Exploring coping strategies and patterns related to the adjustment process might help providers to develop treatment plans and goals for the treatment.

Research Questions

- What positive aspects does immigration introduce into Russian women's lives?
- What coping strategies or patterns were revealed during the adjustment process of Russian women in the USA?

Definitions of Terms

Migration: As defined by Espin (1999), "...the geographical move of individuals across national borders for the purpose of residing more or less permanently in a country other than the person's country of birth" (p. 16).

Assimilation: as defined by Berry (1986), "Relinquishing one's original cultural identity and moving to adopt that of the larger dominant society" (p. 22).

Integration: as defined by Berry (1986), "Combining components from the culture of origin and the absorbing culture" (p. 22).

Rejection: as defined by Berry (1986), "Self-imposed withdrawal from the dominant culture" (p. 22).

Deculturation: as defined by Berry (1986), "Striking out against the dominant culture accompanied by stress and alienation (a sense of "not here and not there")" (p. 22).

Supercoping phase: as defined by McIntyre and Augusto (1999), "it is the phase prior to immigration with effective functioning even in the face of extreme stressors, especially in the role of providing for their children" (p. 388).

Collapse phase: as defined by McIntyre and Augusto (1999), "this phase characterized by marked psychological impairment and generalized inability to function after arrival to the United States and involves a dramatic change in the women's sense of identity and self-efficacy" (p. 388).

Chapter II: Literature Review

According to the United Nations (1995), women represent about half of the international migrant population, usually as “secondary migrants” following or joining other family members, typically their husbands. Immigrant women are among the most vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and human rights violations (National Network on Immigrant and Refugee Rights, 2000). Immigrant women are vulnerable to triple discrimination and marginalization because they are caught in an intersection of being immigrants, women, and having minority status. The interface of gender, ethnic, and social status often causes immigrant women to find themselves affected simultaneously by racism, sexism, and class inequality (Berger, 2004).

In spite of all the unique aspects of female migration, recognizing the importance of gender in immigration is relatively new. Women as migrants were largely invisible in the social sciences until the mid-1970s, and if mentioned at all, they were viewed as dependent on men (Knorr and Meier, 2000). The past two decades have witnessed growing attention to sociological, psychological, and anthropological aspects of the female face of emigration and immigration (e.g., Simon and Brettell, 1986).

Even though national and international organizations started to pay close attention to the issues of immigrant women, there is still more research about men and immigrants in general (Berger, 2004). Also, most research conducted about immigrants focuses on negative effects of immigration: loss of status, individual and psychological stresses, family problems, and unwillingness to embrace American culture (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; McIntyre & Augusto, 1999). Additionally, most research about immigrants was using linear models where all groups of immigrants supposedly have four ways to cope with

identity issues: 1) assimilation; 2) integration, 3) rejection, and 4) deculturation (Berry, 1986).

Although most theories and studies of integration and assimilation place individuals and families on a linear path from immigration to assimilation to integration, the recent work of Zhou and Bankston (1998) provides a more complex picture of how immigrant families choose different paths toward adaptation and mobility. One of these paths is the choice to adhere to their own community values and follow their traditions, which may lead eventually to more opportunities for upward mobility. Upward mobility is one of the factors of a positive adjustment of immigrant population in the USA. Just recently, the scholars started to use qualitative studies to present the narrative stories of individuals who are going through immigration and experiencing this positive adjustment. Reading those stories (Berger, 2004; Espin, 1999) inspired the author to do this study.

Status

According to Berger (2004), there are two factors that shaped the experience of immigrant women: motivation and circumstances of their migration. First, this study explores what kind of difficulties Russian women encounter when they decided to immigrate to the USA. McIntyre and Augusto (1999) identify in female immigrants a supercoping phase prior to immigration and a collapse phase after arrival to the new country because of a pervasive loss of sense of self and an inability to negotiate their identity in the new culture. For many Russian women, the collapse stage means the loss of status. Their occupational role is a salient element of their personal identity, and its loss causes a decline in self-esteem and sense of mastery. The inferior status of

immigrant women at work is aggravated by their subordinate status and double roles in the family (Remennick, 1999).

Gender "Equality"

Gender-based expectations in the culture of relocation and the culture of origin play important role in process of immigration. According to Voronina (1994), soviet-type "emancipation and equality" meant that gender divisions ceased to exist, and women were treated by the state as badly as men: doing the same hard work for equally low salaries, abused by the party bureaucrats, getting equally poor health care insensitive to their needs, and so on. Some men from FSU became depressed and dysfunctional because they are overwhelmed by the problems of employment, linguistic and cultural adjustment. Women in many cases become stronger, more flexible and adaptable to the new reality and then, they take over as breadwinners and managers of the family need (Remennick, 1999).

Roles and Expectations

Kasaba (2000) asserts that immigrant married women and mothers especially vulnerable to migration experience since they have their personal difficulties and responsibilities to be mediators with the host society plus they serve as buffers between their husbands and children who are torn between two cultures as well. On the one hand, a woman's children want more freedom and tolerance like their American peers; on the other hand, her husband demands that she use a more strict parenting style (Berger, 2004). Women may also face a role reversal caused by dependence on children, who often acquire the language faster than their parents. Many Russian women who marry

American citizens adjust better in terms of being fluent in English than women who came to the USA with their Russian families (Remennick, 1999).

Even though Russian women who married American men and who immigrated with their families have many differences among them, a common factor is marital distress. For the first group (married to American men), marital distress includes: the language barrier, different expectations about marriage and gender roles, clashes of different cultures, and others. For the second group, marital distress consists of problems of employment, linguistic and cultural adjustment, a husband's depression and disfunctionality, and others (Remennick, 1999).

Combining bread winning and caregiving roles, women from the FSU have another responsibility to take care of elderly parents (often times not just their own parents but their husband's as well). Due to shortage of state housing, many young families in Russia live with their parents at the beginning of their marriage; however, many times it could be years before they can move out to their own apartments (Vishnevsky, 1996). When parents are getting older, nearly all caregiving of them took place within families. Coming to the USA, many Russian immigrants try to bring their parents with them to continue to take care of them here (Voronina, 1994).

Employment and Economic Stability

Simon and Brettell (1986) claim that the FSU has higher rates of female labor force participation than the United States. Russian women have a long history of contributing to family earnings through factory labor, home work, and entrepreneurship. According to Nechemias (1996), the post-1917 USSR was able to industrialize at an unprecedented rate by drawing women into farms and factories. Women performed the

toughest and lowest-paid tasks within each sector of the economy. Until the 1980s, women made up over 50 percent of the workforce, yet on average they received 70 percent of the male wage. They carried the "double burden" of work outside the home and within it. Most Russian men consider housework beneath them.

More recent history, 1985-1995 was the period of post-perestroika freedom and the drastic financial difficulties, which circumstantially led to the economic collapse, poverty, malnutrition and poor health care endemic across the country, have been especially hard on women. For example, in a 1999 survey over 42% of the Russian population declared that their material situation was bad or very bad. Women account for more than 70% of Russians who are unemployed (Goscilo, 1999). Some 6 of every 10 marriages end in divorce, and Russian men do not willingly take on a wife with young children (Wines, 2000; Walsh, 2003). Like in the Western world, the new enterprises employ women as clerks and secretaries rather than as managers or directors. No more than an estimated 1-2 percent of the new class of entrepreneurs is female (Bridger, 1994). Also women are the first to lose their jobs. In 90s, for every three men made redundant, there were seven women (Bridger, 1994).

Russian Partners/Husbands and Potential American Husbands

In this somber climate of social and economic decline, Russian women are complaining with increasing bitterness of the failure of Russian men to support their wives and children. One of the parts of the economical secure situation in many Russian women's lives is to be with responsible partner/husband/boyfriend who can provide and protect them from economically unstable situation in Russia. According to Buckley (1994), Russian men have the world's highest alcoholism rate, and this has markedly

increased since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is no surprise that some young women are choosing to emigrate, usually through a real or a fictitious marriage to a foreigner. Life abroad may not fulfill expectations, but women hope it will be an alternative to intensely hard work, low status and life with a drunken husband.

Summary

The author found similarities in Russian women's motivations and circumstances of their migration. The reasons are 1) unstable economical and political situation in modern Russia, 2) hardships with raising family, 3) multiply roles, 4) discrimination at workplace, and 5) a lack of good and responsible mates. In spite of all hardships related to immigration, narrative stories of Russian women demonstrate their positive outlook on their decision to immigrate to the USA.

This study follows the path of previous scholars who started to investigate the personal experience of immigrant women through their own stories (e.g. Berger, 2004; Espin, 1999). Their stories of female migration recognize the importance of gender in immigration. Also, most researches conducted about immigrants focus on negative effects of immigration and only several of them investigate the positive aspects of immigration. Narrative stories of Russian women show such positive aspects of their immigration to the USA based on their unique coping strategies during that period of their lives.

Chapter III: Methodology

This study tells the story of immigration of Russian women as the women themselves have experienced it. The author highlights their subjective perception and interpretation of their lives in the USA. The focus is on the inside stories, including how they have adjusted in this country, demonstrating a sufficient amount of resiliency that has social, familial, personal, circumstantial, and spiritual source. Also, in which way immigration brings to women a mix of social, economic, personal, and psychological losses, and opportunities for new liberties, educational, professional, and personal growth.

Instrumentation

The interviews of six women were conducted in a technique called an open-ended interview. In this technique, the interviewer has a general list of topics to be addressed in no particular order. The interviews took place in the interviewees' homes. They lasted between one and three hours in Russian. All necessary papers, including informed consent, were translated to participants. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect respondents' identities. Most of them (five of six) speak English very well. One participant was taking classes in English at the time of the interview.

Data Collection

According to Berger (2004), personal issues that researchers bring with them affect the inner sieve through which we filter the world around us. This sieve is created and shaped through our journey in life and colors our understanding, feeling, thinking, and being. Hunt (1989) explains that the narrative of the interview "is partly biographical

reflecting something about the researcher's personality as well as those of the subjects" (p. 41).

To prepare for interviewing, qualitative researchers are required to sensitize and familiarize themselves with the culture to be studied (Creswell, 1994). This can be done by sharing it or immersing in it. First, the researcher is in a process of immigration herself. Second, at the moment the study was conducted, the author was immersing herself in theoretical, empirical, and clinical knowledge about the topic and conducting dialogues with professionals and nonprofessionals who had familiarity with topics that pertain to the immigration of women. This included a social worker who works with a Russian-Jewish community in Madison.

The author was aware of the risk of allowing her own experience of immigration to influence the way in which she might elicit and hear the stories of her interviewees. This risk is known as researcher bias, which results from selective observation, selective recording of information, and allowing one's personal views and perspectives to affect how data are collected and interpreted (Creswell, 1994). On the one hand, the researcher believes that her potential immigration status contributed to women's openness because it made her somewhat of an "ethnic insider" even for women who had backgrounds different from her own. On the other hand, once again, being a Russian, the researcher had to watch for her personal reaction and attitude toward these women. The author was aware of her own bias, and that was taken into consideration.

Creswell (1994) and Berger (2004) provide helpful tools for gaining trustworthiness. The first tool is called participants' feedback. During the interview, the researcher was checking back with interviewees to seek their feedback to verify the

accuracy of her perceptions and understanding. The second tool is reflexivity, in which the researcher deliberately and actively engages in critical self-study to identify potential predispositions. The third strategy is that the data was collected during prolonged interactions under diverse circumstances from different sources. Finally, the researcher had a knowledgeable advisor who reviewed her study. The Marriage and Family Therapy coursework and familiarity with the issues of immigration of women in particular also contributed to the author's credibility.

Sample

Six women were interviewed for this study. Only three stories are described in this paper due to limited format, however, the quotes from all six women are presented in Chapter four. The author knew three of them personally before the interview process and the rest were called by first three women who knew them through the Russian community. They emigrated from various parts of the FSU and varied in age, educational, professional and personal background, family status, and duration of living in the new culture, as well as in motivation for and pattern of migration. Most of the women live in mid-west of the USA.

Analysis of the Interviews

Each interview was transcribed and analyzed before proceeding to the next one. The researcher decided to do that because this practice offered several advantages. First, she was recording fresh impressions immediately without allowing them to be diluted by interviewing another woman. Second, the researcher was learning from each interview additional ways of interaction with her interviewees, including communication and

listening skills and more, possible venues to explore, which allowed the researcher to apply her learning and growing from one interview to the next.

The analysis focused on the content. According to Creswell (1994), there are many ways to analyze interviews. The researcher was trying to learn about the experience of the interviewees from *what* they were telling her rather than from *how* they were telling her. Therefore, the author deliberately did not analyze emotional expressions (laughter, tears, pitch, sighs), or choice of words, pauses, sequences, and proximity of certain topics in women's narratives. The researcher devoted her full attention to understanding each woman's story about her experience.

In the analysis, the researcher identified themes in the interviews. For example, some of the interviewees came to this country as a “mail-order bride,” and two interviewees came as a family: mother and daughter/son. The author examined related literature and incorporated it into the discussion of the specific narratives to contextualize the women's stories.

Limitations

This study has its own limitations. For example, while it informs us about unique aspects of Russian women's experience of immigration, it does not educate us about commonalities, i.e., gender-specific aspects of immigration that transcend ethnic or cultural backgrounds because the interviewer focused on the FSU and not other countries. Another limitation is related to the depth-breadth dilemma, which is typical to qualitative research. Opting to conduct in-depth, resource-consuming interviews limits the feasibility of collecting data from a large number of respondents, which affects diversity of sample (Creswell, 1994).

Chapter IV: Narrative Stories

All names used in these stories are pseudonyms. To protect participants' confidentiality, the author omitted any details related to legal status, the reasons of divorces and other intimate issues. The researcher chose three stories of six because these stories are a good example of three categories of participants: 1) who came as a family, 2) who married to an American man, and 3) who came to the USA by themselves, not knowing their future plans for immigration.

In Chapter V, the researcher is giving voices of all six women involved in this study. It is essential to give to reader the opportunity to see opinions of all participants. There are brief characteristics of the other three participants. Ekaterina is 38 years old came to the country seven years ago as a bride, married to an American man, and now live with her husband and his family. She is working in a hair salon. Anna is twenty nine, came to this country two years ago as a graduate student, not knowing about her decision of trying to stay in the USA. Svetlana is fifty years old, came to the country almost eighteen years ago with her family: her husband and three years old daughter. Svetlana is working now as a teacher of English as a second language in a community college.

Olga

Olga is 47 years old. She came to this country almost 11 years ago as a bride. Her future husband had been married before to an American woman and divorced. Their relationship started through the Internet. They wrote letters to each other during one year before Olga's future husband invited her to America. At the beginning, Olga did not know what she was going to do in a new country. Back home, she had a successful career as a designer: she decorated houses, creating her own styles. Olga came from a big city,

8,000,000 people, which was a huge factor in a process of adjustment to settle in a small town of 15,000 residents.

Olga: I did not know what to do. Small town gives you small perspectives. I wanted to continue my life style, which I was familiar with: exhibitions, art galleries, big projects, many clients, many friends, and mostly the rhythm of my city. Here, it was like jumping to the pond instead of to the ocean: no people on the streets, only place to go - Mall, no friends, no Russian community. I was like a fish thrown out of water plus language. You have to learn English as fast as you can. I was too old to study new language; it was and still is difficult to learn a new vocabulary, even though my progress in English is enormous. Well, I can say three big things I tried to overcome at the beginning of my journey in this country: language, absence of friends/relatives, and the sizes of the town I lived...

Investigator: How was your new role being a wife of American man?

Olga: I loved my husband. At the beginning it was like one month of honeymoon. New impressions of country, people, style of life, and etc. Then, there were daily routines where I felt misunderstood and lonely. My husband will give me 20 dollars a week, saying that I should be happy that I am in this country. He thought that he saved me from "poor, underdeveloped, dirty" country. When we came together to Russia in 2001, my husband was just shocked when he saw Moscow and the same supermarkets there. Anyway, we have so many arguments about what I have to do. My husband wanted me to stay home and cook the meal. That is it! I wanted to open my own business and continue the education. Well, I depended on him until I got the permission to work, then it was so easy. I opened

my business and took English classes. I started to see more people and develop relationships. It caused a huge disagreement in my marriage. He went to the attorney and rewrote the papers about the property. In case of divorce, I would get nothing. He showed it to me, saying that now I definitely will stay. He was wrong. However, I am doing fine now. I like my job and I like not depend on anyone.

Investigator: Olga, how did you cope with feelings being lonely and misunderstood and when your marriage had some crises?

Olga: Well. You just “suck it up” as Americans would say. First, I called my mom and my friends in Russia. Even before the decision to immigrate, I understood where I am going. I was ready (I mean mentally) to embrace difficulties. First, it was love and hopes to move me forward, and then it was just basic survival. I did not have anyone, except myself, to help to survive in this country. So, working 12-15 hours a day was my best medicine. You really do not have time to be depressed. Also, I think that we, Russians, have survival skills developed in our native country. We have learned how it might work where for any westernized person it will be just impossible: for example, in our two-room apartment, there were my parents, my grandparents, I and my sister, plus every summer, the relatives would come to stay with us for several weeks.

The researcher: Olga, in what areas the immigration brought negative/positive input into your life?

Olga: I think that I never thought about really negative experience being here. Yes, you are going through difficulties: language, isolation, and adjusting to a new culture,

but you keep saying to yourself that everything will be fine. I remember that I called to my friend crying about myself, and she said that you can come home of course, but what kind of future I will have there: instability, bureaucracy, economic changes, and knowing that you had that chance to do what you really want to do and you did not use it. So, I stopped crying and started doing. To think about my future helped me a lot. I did not look back; it is no point to do it. Then, I had this goal to save some money and buy a townhouse. I bought a house after six years being here. It is a very positive experience. Also, I feel good about myself. I did it without anyone's particular help. My self-confidence and self-imagine were boosted by my process of immigration.

Investigator: What do you know about Mental Health Services and how it might help you with adjustment of immigration process or/and marriage related issues?

Olga: Therapy... You know that for most Russians that will mean being crazy. I think that family therapy might help. However, first, I would call my friends in Russia, my mom, then people here in our Russian community, and as a last resort, I will go to seek some help outside. Personally, I have to know this person or to hear about this therapist from someone who I trust. I will go only to female, the same age or older, and bilingual. Young girl does not have the life experience. Well, as I said that will be my last resort. I am very strong person. I survived many cataclysms in my life, so I can be someone's therapist myself.

Oksana

Oksana came to the USA 15 years ago on one type of visa, knowing that she would try to apply for another type of visa in a future, and finally, if she would be lucky to stay in the country permanently. Her intention was to be legally in the USA and to follow all necessary procedures according immigration laws here. She was 35 when she immigrated to America. She brought her seven years old son with her. Her husband was in Moscow, trying to finish all paper work. He would join her and their son only several months later. Oksana had relatives and friends in the USA. She knew that it would be difficult to start a new life in a foreign country without language, and the first thing she did was borrow money from her relatives to attend evening classes to learn English. During the day, she would be waitressing, cleaning houses, and baby sitting. Oksana was a family physician back in Russia. She could not find a “real” job here until her English was good enough to speak and use the professional terminology. When her husband came to America, they both decided to pursue their careers being doctors. Back in Russia, her husband was a surgeon. Later on, Oksana gave a birth to a baby girl.

Oksana: You know how it is hard to give up on your dream and not doing what you have passion to. In my case, I and my husband can not imagine ourselves without medicine and with out being doctors. That was our life. Job is my light and pride. We did all types of different jobs before we passed all necessary exams and start to be assistances of doctors in American clinics and then finally to work as professional doctors. Now, both of us have established reputations in our community. Job was my motivation not to give up. My children were another “reminder.” When you have kids, you do not think about your own needs such as

sleep, food, etc. I even could not imagine if I said to myself I can not do it anymore or it is too hard; that is not an option. There was no time to have such negative attitude.

Investigator: What was your support system at the beginning of immigration?

Oksana: Like I said, I was very lucky having my relatives and friends around me and my son. When I was working, I could leave my son with them. Also, my relatives helped me a lot to fill up all necessary documents not just for INS but for my English classes, job, and other organizations.

Investigator: Have you ever thought to come back to Russia?

Oksana: May be just one time, but it did not last long. Now, I like being here; this is my home, I feel safe, especially in my own house.

The researcher: Oksana, in what areas the immigration brought negative/positive input into your life?

Oksana: I think that I have learned a lot about myself and my inner strengths. You never think that you can do until you try. Before coming to the USA, my friends and relatives told me a lot about American society. I was ready to encounter some cultural barriers and overcome them as my friends did. Also, being a doctor, I always believe in human ability to be resilient and strong in face of difficulties. I am glad that I was not completely alone at the beginning, that a huge factor: to be around Russian speaking people. Also, my son depended on me, and I could not just give up. When my husband joined us, then I felt even better: I could help him with his process of adjustment.

Investigator: Being a doctor yourself and knowing about Mental Health Services would you go to seek help with the issues of adjustment or immigration process here?

Oksana: This is funny... when my clients asked me about psychoanalytics, family therapists, and psychologists, I would say: "Go, see, and make decision." I highly recommend going and seeing if this person a good fit for you. I personally believe that you should have a good rapport with your clinicians before you make a decision to open up to her. As for me, I would go if I would know this person or at least I would hear something good about her.

Investigator: You said "her" twice. Does gender play an important role for you?

Oksana: Yes. I think that therapist should be a female, gynecologist a female, and surgeon a male. That is it. Do not ask me to rationalize this. It is just my belief. Also, I have to say that my husband would never go to the family therapist. Being a doctor himself, he does not believe that someone would say something new to him. Also, I think that we, Russian women still bringing our mentality not to think about anyone else, except ourselves or best friends, to help us in most difficult situations in our lives. We do not rely on anyone. We just do it. What's good to sit and cry and complain about the difficulties? You have so many things to do in your life and so little time.

Investigator: Is it a new philosophical coping strategy for immigrant women?

Oksana: Yes. Indeed. Think bigger. Have a goal. And do not forget about that you have a Russian spirit! Can American family therapist analyze this? I mean Russian spirit. That is it.

Elena

Elena came to this country 5 months ago. She is 24 years old. She does not speak English fluently, but she is taking classes in community college and knows how to read and write in English. She lives with an American family where she is looking after three children. She cooks, cleans, and basically does everything in the house. She admitted that it is very difficult for her to be without her mother and girlfriends. She can not call them ~~as often as she wants~~: she has just two minutes a week to talk with her mom and sometime with her friends. The family has the Internet, but she is not allowed to use it. Elena said that she wants to stay in the USA, go to the university and study biology. She has a diploma from Russia with the same major, but only some credits can be transferred. This is a reason she has to go back to school.

Elena: I like it here, even though every night I still see my city, my mom, and my two best friends in my dreams. I so miss them. Sometimes I want to cry, but I am afraid that kids will hear me sob. What helps me is thinking about my future. You know when you have a goal, mine is to get a degree and be biologist, the rest is easy, because every day you are making one step toward that goal. I can do it. I am strong. Also, I do not want to disappoint my mom, she is my model. I want to show her that I can do something in my life, something good. Also, now when I know some Russian women here, I can talk and they will understand and give me advices. I am glad that I am not completely alone here, in this small town.

Investigator: How did your perception about this country and its people change during these six months?

Elena: There is no gold rain in this country. For some reason, we Russians have tendency to see this country as a golden paradise where everyone has a palace like in Hollywood movies and vacations on Bahamas. That is not true. On the other hand, I feel safe in terms of stability. In Russia, you do not know what will be tomorrow; I mean economy, salaries, prices on food and gas. Here, I live in predictable society. American people like to smile. They ask "how are you?", not meaning anything by that - just being nice. First, it was just difficult for me to put that artificial smile on my face but now I like to smile. In Russia, people will take me as an idiot.

Investigator: Was it difficult for you to psychologically adjust to a new environment?

Elena: I think the most difficult thing is language. My English is getting better and better every day, so my self esteem is improving every day. I think the day I will speak fluently English will be the day of my victory over the fear that I will never be good in that. Also, as I said, being around other Russian women helps a lot, even though I do not see them every day.

The researcher: Elena, in what areas coming to a new country brought negative/positive input into your life?

Elena: First of all, it is my first experience to be so far from home without my mom. It feels good, even though it came gradually to me. Being more independent increased my self esteem. At the beginning, I wanted to cry because I missed her so much. Feeling lonely and not understanding people, my basic English helped me but not much, I wanted someone to speak in Russian. Then, the idea to go to

continue my degree brought a new meaning in my life. I am sure now that if I will get the American diploma, I can find the job and I will stay.

Investigator: What do you know about Mental Health Services here and would you consider using this service to help you to go through some difficulties related to adjustment process in the USA?

Elena: Well, I do not know. I never really thought about it. Knowing you personally, I guess, I will go, but you explained to me that if I know you personally, I can not be your client, right? So, I do not want to see a stranger, and remember my English is not so good. So I still need you as a translator. In Russia, we do not have such service, or at least, in my native town. I have a stereotype that someone will go to the therapy if she is mentally sick. Yes, I know the difference between psychiatrist and family therapist, but how you can change my perception, which I have all my life? I think that American people have this stereotype: take the pill and everything will be OK. So, that could be negative factor for me to consider going to the therapy. I do not want "to be prescribed."

Chapter V: Results

In Russia, is the proverb “Women do everything, men do the rest.” When the author was in secondary school back in Russia, she studied one of the Russian poets- Nekrasov (1967) who wrote about Russian women a beautiful poem. One of the main lines described Russian woman as a person who can stop a running horse and enter a burning house. One of my interviewees said that you just “suck it up” and move forward. Many of my participants said that they did not have time to be depressed or think of giving up. That was not simply the option for them. Historically, Russian women carry the majority of responsibilities out/in home and burdens in their society. Coming to the USA they already have this training to be strong and ready for any difficulties.

This study’s research questions are: 1) what positive aspects immigration introduces into Russian women’s lives and 2) what coping strategies or patterns were revealed during the adjustment process of Russian women in the USA. The researcher found out that Russian women indeed had a positive experience of immigration. As Anna said, “It was difficult at the beginning, but after several months you know the new routine and just follow it. It did not occur to me that I am doing something impossible; actually it is easy to do in this society because of laws.” Another participant, Ekaterina agreed that it is hard at the beginning because she did not know what to do, how to fill out necessary papers for INS, where and how to find the job, but after that period she started to feel good about herself because she did it without anyone’s particular help.” She said, “I never felt good about myself like I did during my immigration. I learned a new language, found a job, applied for school, and met so many interesting people. I do not think that I could do it in Russia where my salary was enough just to buy food and clothes.”

All six participants agreed that immigration brought them a new self image and belief in their inner strengths. Also, all women in this study demonstrated a sufficient level of resiliency, which was found also in study of Berger (2004). Her study revealed capacity of women to thrive, despite the hardships of immigration. Also, several studies found the same pattern of resiliency and wellness in immigrant women. For example, Ferugson (1999) found that "Despite their sense of isolation and dependence, in fact the women revealed extraordinary courage in the way they are coping with resettlement issues" (p. 35). Also, all six women in this study claimed that immigration brought them a new experience to feel more independent, boosted their self-esteem, and change their own perceptions about their inner strengths. For example, Tatyana said that before coming to this country she did not have any idea what inner strengths she had. Now, she feels that she can do anything and achieve any goal in her life.

Women from different countries in Espin's (1999) study claimed that "the experience of migration had enriched them and given them choices, options, and fluency in a repertoire of languages, modes of thought, and social networks" (p.163). Even though the interviewees of this study admitted that the first months were the most difficult for them in terms of establishing jobs, paper work for INS, network, and health services, they never seriously thought to go back to Russia.

Patricia Pessar's (1986) asserts that women migrants are generally immune to the tension between "the household in the host society and the home community" that imperils migrant men: "In contrast to men, migration does not rupture the social sphere in which women are self-actualized. On the contrary, migration reinforces women's attachment to the household because it emerges as a more valued institution and becomes

a social field for women to achieve greater autonomy and equity with their male partners" (p. 276).

Answering the second question of this study about coping strategies and patterns, which emerged during the immigration process, four women said that what helped them was not to think about past and focus on future. For example, Olga said, "To think about my future helped me a lot. I did not look back; it is no point to do it. Then, I had this goal to save some money and buy a townhouse." Two women who are in a process of making a decision to stay in this country also are focusing on their future. All six women mentioned about their goals. For one of them it was to continue her education, for another it was to buy a house, and for all women the big goal was not just to stay in this country but accomplish what they planned in their lives for themselves.

During this study other aspects were discussed: social isolation, networking, nostalgia of motherland, difficulty with language, marital distress due to new environment, new culture and traditions, and discrimination at work. Most women said that they did not feel entirely isolated since they could call their friends, talk to their husbands and later, to new acquaintances. There was no nostalgia about Russia, only thoughts about friends and parents. Language was a necessary tool "to move to another level of American society" and most of participants stated that it was their first primary goal - to speak fluently English.

Russian women admitted that at the beginning, they have struggled with new traditions and customs: driving car, smiling on a street, write a check, having a bank account, not to wear some types of clothes they used to have back home, less make up, demand of American smile-to have whitest teeth, and others. However, their least

concern was not fitting to American society. Having European appearance (most women were aware of this factor) made easier for Russian women to become “more Americans.” During the interview, only one discrimination case at workplace was described by Oksana. She said that when she just started to work as a doctor, her nurses would warn the clients that they would not be able to understand the doctor because she is a foreigner. Oksana said that it was “the battle of interest”, and felt by that time discriminated. After conversation with her boss, it stopped.

The last aspect discussed during was psychological adjustment and use of American Mental Health Services. Most Russian women stated that they would use the service of family therapist as a last resort. First, they would talk to their friends and families. The factor of misinterpretation of therapist plays a sufficient role in understanding of family therapy and its use. Some Russian people do not know the differences between a therapist and psychiatrist/psychologist. The fear of “being prescribed” gives people the negative perception of family therapy. Due to limited history of it in Russia, women are not accustomed with its service. Another factor verbalized during interviews was a personal contact. All women said that they have to trust and know the therapist or at least hear about her prior to the first visit. Also, all participants stated that they would prefer a female therapist their age or older.

Russian women are very strong psychologically, and their adjustment in the USA has not just hardships but positive experiences. In the USA, Russian women feel more secure in terms of jobs, families, and future perspectives. They are satisfied with their marital and financial situations. Most women would like to continue their education and be successful in their careers. All my participants said that job is very important for them

to establish social status in the USA. At the beginning, most women went through low paid jobs, considering better positions in future. The roles of being wife and mother were not discussed in full scope since only two women had children. Additionally to positive view of themselves, Russian women view the USA and its society as a legally protected and economically stable.

In sum, results of this study indicate that immigration process brings positive aspects into Russian women's lives. All six participants agreed that immigration brought them a new self image and belief in their inner strengths. Also, all women in this study demonstrated a sufficient level of resiliency, which was found also in study of Berger (2004). Russian women claimed that immigration brought them a new experience to feel more independent and boosted their self-esteem. To cope with hardships of immigration they used some coping strategies: focusing on future, closeness to other Russian immigrant population, conversations with friends and relatives, setting a goal during the period of settlement, and getting fluency in English language.

Chapter VI: Recommendations

Narrative stories of immigrant Russian women can be utilized in further studies about female migration in the USA. Russian women have different backgrounds and motivations to come to this country. Their coping strategies also can vary. However, implementing their experiences into further study with larger sample can help investigators to explore uniqueness of this immigrant group. It will help Mental Health Services providers to develop unambiguous interventions to assess these clients. This chapter provides some recommendations for further research and providers who work with immigrant population.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study offers further exploring subjective views of one's experience. Learning from women and identifying factors that contribute to their successful adjustment in the USA can help to inform and develop effective strategies for success for other immigrant groups. Women's positive experience of the process of immigration can help further research to focus not just on negative effects of immigration on one's social, financial, and professional status and on individual and family psychological well-being and functioning, but on positive effects of immigration.

Further researchers can focus more on specific groups of Russian immigrant women: women who married American men, women who came here as a family unit, and women who came to this country, not knowing about their future decision to stay in the country. All three groups have their unique and similar ways to cope with the immigration process. Also, specific topics can be developed: *how immigrating with your family affect the process of immigration* or *mother-daughter relationships during the*

immigration. In general, Russian immigrant women have their specific tendencies to cope with the process of immigration, however, according to some studies (e.g. Berger, 2004; Espin, 1999), they also have the same tendencies of resiliency, belief in inner strengths, and relying on their own mental and physical abilities. Further studies can focus on how and in what spheres Russian women are different from other immigrant women.

Recommendations for Mental Health Services

One major finding that emerges from the stories of Russian immigrant women is that immigrant women have specific and unique needs, which have a major impact on the coping of their husbands, children, and extended family. General services should modify their approaches and interventions for immigrant female population to increase their productivity and efficiency. For example, Ferguson (1999) cites gender blindness and monolingual and monocultural services as major barriers to effective service delivery to immigrant women that adversely affect well-being of women and their children. In addition, according to (Healy, 2002), many immigrants are underserved because of service providers' discomfort in servicing them, and when services are provided, they are often inappropriate (as cited in Berger, 2004). Tailoring services specifically for immigrant women is beneficial in that they target the unique needs of this population and offer culturally acceptable responses to these needs, and therefore have often been recommended (e.g., Cole, Espin, and Rothblum, 1992).

Mental Health Service for Russian women could be different than for other immigrant women in this country. Immigrant women are not a homogenous group. Their resettlement needs differ, and all of them cannot be treated in the same way. However, some general principles can be generated from the life histories of the women in this

study. For example, loss of status, friends, families, and language barrier for Russian women are similar to the experience of other immigrant groups. That means that some interventions can be developed to help to decrease those factors.

At the same time, the narratives show that women demonstrate resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness in coping with immigration-related issues. Developing specialized services carries a potential risk of segregation and polarization and the separation of these women from mainstream society (Berger, 2004). One way to address the tension between the need for specialized services and the potential damage of these same services is to adopt Pittaway's (1999) way to move from protection to empowerment, i.e., ensuring that the women have opportunities to exert their power, take control of their own lives, and assist themselves and their children.

This means new reality demands to move from models where immigrant women are service recipients to models where clients and provider establish partnership (Berger, 2004). In such context, immigrant women can prioritize their needs and desires by themselves, and the provider can help them in coaching to achieve their goals. For example, in this study, Russian women expressed the desire to have a close rapport with the provider. Trust and understanding are crucial factors for the successful results of the service. Such service will empower women in their own strengths and accomplishments, which this study focused on.

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Appendix A: Questions to the Participants

- How long have you been in this country?
- What was (were) reason(s) for immigration?
- How was it for you to be cultural isolated in a new country?
- Were you close to your family in Russia, and how it affected you to be far away from them?
- How was it for you to leave your friends behind? Did you find new social support here, in the US? How long did it take to establish this network?
- How was it for you to adjust to new culture/traditions/rituals?
- How did your perception about this country and its people change during your immigration?
- What was the role of idealization and nostalgia?
- How did you feel about yourself being in new country?
- Was it difficult for you to psychologically adjust to a new environment?
- What do you think about increased social isolation in the new country?
- How was it for you to speak foreign language and be comfortable to be bilingual?
- Have you ever thought to come back to Russia? What were the reasons?
- What will be helpful for other women to know before they will come to the US?
- Does immigration bring positive input into Russian women's lives?
- What coping strategies or patterns were revealed during the adjustment process of Russian women in the USA?
- What do you expect from social and Mental Health Services in the US? In which way they can be beneficial for you?