Russian immigrant women in Finland

Raija Warkentin

Abstract

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, many Russians immigrated to Finland. This paper focuses on the largest group of such immigrants, namely, Russian women who have married Finnish men. Most of the 13 women in this study complain that their life in the West is generally ”poorer”, not only economically but also socially. A major concern is the lack of appropriate job opportunities. The women must deal with the stereotype of Russians as the enemies of Finland as well as negative attitudes towards foreigners fueled by economic recession. They often feel alienated in their adopted country, while at the same time they seek to integrate into and experience its advantages. I characterize this situation in terms of ’polarity’, a concept which reflects the tense duality in the feelings and motivation of the women.

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Introduction

This brief ethnographic study of Russian*1 immigrant women in Finland is intended as a contribution to the ongoing anthropological research in acculturation. The scope of this research endeavor was originally characterized over half a century ago by Redfield, Linton and Herzkovits (1936) in terms of understanding ”those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups.” Subsequently, Barth (1969) emphasized the maintenance of ethnic boundaries in situations of culture contact. Social identity theory, which draws upon both Redfield et al and Barth, is useful for understanding the defense mechanisms that are part of the difficult process of acculturation. Being a member of an ingroup of some type is a key factor contributing to an individual’s positive self-image and sense of dignity (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Marques 1990). Members tend to see themselves as different from outsiders, and they maintain their social identity by comparing themselves to members of other groups. This, of course, is ethnocentrism, a basic sociocultural phenomenon familiar to anthropologists.

Padilla (1980) used a model of acculturation which allowed for the construction of profiles of acculturative types of individuals. The model was based on extensive interviews with Mexican American immigrants and their families. The key elements of the model are ”cultural awareness” (of the adopted country) and ”ethnic loyalty” (to the country of origin). Padilla delineated five types of acculturation in a continuum from ”unacculturated” to ”anglicized” individuals, with ”bicultural” individuals in the center of the continuum.

More recently, a comprehensive model has been developed delineating four basic modes of acculturation, namely, integration, separation, assimilation and marginalization (Berry et al 1987; Berry and Kim 1988; Berry 1990, Berry and Sam 1997). These are based on the ”acculturation attitudes” of immigrants in relation to their cultural origin and their situation in the new country. Integration, or ”bicultural

identity," is the most positive mode, since it appears to enhance mental health and personal stability (Padilla 1980; Phinney 1990; Sue and Sue 1990). Marginalization "alienation from both the old and new cultural identities" is the least healthy. In the assimilated mode, individuals emphasize their new cultural identity, while the opposite is true for separated individuals. Important variables in this acculturation model are the psychological features of the individuals involved and the nature of the larger society. Voluntary migrants appear to undergo an easier acculturation process than involuntary migrants such as refugees (Berry 1988). However, there are differences among voluntary immigrant groups. For instance, one would have expected that the Ingrian Finns*2 who in 1990 responded with enthusiasm to the invitation to repatriate to Finland, would have integrated easily to the Finnish society. Yet, many of them experienced difficulties in the acculturation process and became marginalized (Kyntäjä 1997).

Other key factors in acculturation are immigration policies, attitudes to immigrants by the receiving society and characteristics of the immigrants themselves (Berry et al 1992, Berry and Sam 1997). It is generally thought that immigrants are better adjusted when the receiving society practices multicultural policies and its citizens are tolerant of newcomers. Finland is deficient in both these respects"and some scholars suggest that Finns are xenophobic (see, for example, Liebkind 1990; Matinheikki-Kokko 1991; Liebkind1994; Tolvanen 1994, Virtanen 1996; Wahlbeck 1996; Huttunen 1998). Russian immigrants have often been subjected to negative attitudes on the part of Finns (Jaakkola 1994, 1995; Karemaa 1998). Indeed, the term ryssäviha refers to hatred of Russians in Finland since the 1917 civil war (Karemaa 1998). Moreover, there has been a special animosity between the two countries dating back to the Soviet Union"s invasion of Finland during World War II. Economic recession in recent years has made Finns even less receptive to Russians and other immigrants. It must also be noted that Finland has the lowest proportion of residents with a foreign background than any other western European country. In 1995 there were approximately 67,000 immigrants in Finland (1.3% of the population), and Russians were the largest immigrant group.

Rather than fitting neatly into one of the four boxes of the standard acculturation model, the phenomenon of Russian women leaving their homeland to marry Finnish men approximates both the integration and separation mode of acculturation.*3 These women are proud of their Russian cultural heritage and manifest a bicultural or hybrid identity in some aspects. They are frustrated with the lack of professional work for them and the hostility of the Finnish general public towards them. In terms of the acculturation model, the women have feelings of separation in reaction to the hostile attitudes some Finns have toward Russians. Yet, for the most part, they do not want to return to Russia. I characterize this situation in terms of "polarity," a concept which reflects the dual tensions and challenges experienced by these women.

This is in line with recent theory emphasizing the fluidity of identity. Lindsay and Booth (1998), for example, reject the use of concepts such as separation and integration. They use the term "layering" to describe the selective use of different identities and in order to understand the interconnections among the many experiences that come together to generate identity. The concept of "transculture" (Epstein 1995) implies a more dynamic, relational form of multiculturalism whereby a group's culture is shaped through interaction and dialogue with other cultures. As Bakhtin states, "only in the eyes of an alien culture, does another culture open itself in a fuller and deeper way" (cited in Epstein 1995: 304). This theoretical orientation views the margins or borders of a culture as a place where individuals realize their existential inadequacy and turn to "other" cultures in a creative dialogue.

Finland does not yet find it appropriate to fully "open up" Finnish culture to Russian immigrants. Thus, Russian women who marry Finns and come to Finland find themselves in a situation of polarity, as indicated above. This study is oriented toward the presentation of rich ethnographic description based on intensive interviews and participant observation rather than quantitative sociological data. The subjects of the research were 13 Russian women married to Finnish men in an anonymous small Finnish town. Their ages ranged from 29 to 44 (median = 37 years in 1995) and they had lived

in the same small town in Finland for a period of 2–10 years (median = 5 years). They were interviewed in 1994, 1995, and briefly again in 1998. Most had arrived in Finland from St Petersburg and most had met their Finnish husbands in Russia. One woman had defected to Finland from the former Soviet Union.

Negative views of life in Finland

Many of the women missed what they viewed as their previous rich social and cultural life in Russia.*4 They emphasized a loss of quality of life in Finland. When asked about obtaining everyday supplies in Russia, they pointed out the value of friends. One woman put it this way, ”In Russia you don’t need a hundred rubles, you need a hundred friends.” A friend who worked in a butcher shop would reserve a choice piece of meat for her. One woman said that a friend was sent to buy clothes in Moscow for a group of people. Another claimed she lived better in the Soviet Union than in Finland because of her father’s connections through his prestigious job in a university. Her family had owned two cars when she lived in the Soviet Union, and she was without a car in Finland. Other women highlighted the importance of friends in helping to find accommodation.

A major frustration was the lack of suitable employment. All the women interviewed claimed to have an occupation or profession, including one accountant, a waitress, a seamstress, and an ice dancer. Some had earned undergraduate or postgraduate university degrees, including a teacher and an engineer. In the Soviet Union, they said, everyone had to work. Their working careers ended when they immigrated to Finland. Only one of the women, a music teacher, had a full-time job, but she considered herself underemployed as a courier. Three women (including the two most highly educated women) were apprentices in a Finnish government job-training program. The rest stayed at home, apparently bored with life. Most of the women wanted to work. One of them stated, ”It is work that differentiates humans from animals.” The women believed that only Finns were able to obtain the few jobs available during the economic recession.*5 One woman told me that after futile attempts to find work as a seamstress, she now stayed at home as a ”quiet mouse.”

Some of the women were dissatisfied with the quality of arts and entertainment found in their small Finnish town. One stated, ”The country is young. It has no high culture. My mother warned me that I will not find the right atmosphere here.” Another criticized Finnish television programs for being ”too shallow.” While some apologized to me for their criticisms, they viewed Finnish culture as underdeveloped. Several commented on the lack of in telligent or inspiring discussions on the arts. One complained that her husband did not even know who Shakespeare was. Another said that her husband laughs when she tries to analyze life and emotions.

The women felt the Russian style of dress was superior to Finnish style. They complained that Finns preferred to wear jeans and other kinds of informal clothing. The women preferred what they considered to be a more feminine appearance that included the wearing of high-heeled shoes. One complained that her husband had bought her clothes more suitable for a ”grandmother” than for her. Another showed me the stylish dresses she had worn to work when she lived in Moscow.

Most of the women felt that life in their Finnish town was dull. One characterized her neighborhood as ”quiet as a graveyard.” They clearly missed the noise and merrymaking they said was characteristic of Russian life, especially in the city in the evenings. They viewed Russians as more approachable and friendly than the reserved and taciturn Finns. A woman told me that she and her husband had traveled a long way to visit her parents-in-law and on arriving at midnight found everyone asleep in bed. She was disappointed and claimed that in Russia everyone would have stayed up to welcome their arrival.

Several women felt disappointed in their husbands, noting that they were more reserved in Finland than they had been in Russia when they had first met. In the words of one woman, ”In Russia the Finnish men were in a celebrating mood ... When I now tell in Russia that they are reserved and depressed, they don’t believe me.” Another woman provided the following description of communication between her and her husband: ”Silence. Question.

And then after ten minutes an answer."

Most women missed what they considered male chivalry. They would like men to open doors for them, to wait for the women to be seated first, to bring them flowers, to call them with endearing terms and so on. A woman said that while her husband had brought her breakfast in bed during the early months of their marriage, this special treatment had soon ended. The most drastic disappointment was experienced by a woman whose husband had become an alcoholic. He shut her and her children out in the cold the very first night they arrived to live in Finland. Five women reported marital difficulties to the extent that they had to seek refuge in a women's shelter for a period of time.

Most women said they felt accepted by their in-laws. A few claimed that their best friends were their Finnish relatives. However, when problems arose in their marriages, the old Finnish-Russian animosity rose to the surface. Several women claimed their husbands called them *ryssä*, a derogatory term for a Russian used during World War II. Some told me that they countered by calling their husband a *tsuhna*, a derogatory term connoting "barbaric" which was used for Finns during the World War II. One could even say these Russian women had married their former "enemies."

Several women told me they hear *ryssä* being used most often after men have become inebriated. I witnessed one such occasion when I went out to a restaurant with two Russian women. One of the men who had come to sit at our table became inebriated, after which he stood up and said, "I'll kill all the *ryssäs*." One woman said she had a neighbor who harassed her day and night by pounding on the door and saying, "*Ryssä*, damn you, whore, go to Siberia."6 The woman had complained to the police several times, but they took no direct action to remedy the situation. I went with her to help her register a formal complaint. After taking the complaint, the officer on duty advised the woman to move and not wait for society to help her. Eventually, however, the harassing neighbor was taken to court and fined.

Several said their children have been called a *ryssä* at school. One woman told me her children tried to hide the fact that their mother was a Russian. Her own daughter had once said, "All Russians are ugly and have long noses." Most children responded to their mothers in the Finnish language, although their mothers continued to speak Russian at home. One woman told me that store clerks carefully watched those heard speaking the Russian language, fearing they would be shoplifters. It was also pointed out that the local paper printed unfavorable stories on Russians.

The positive perspective

Despite their many complaints about life in Finland, the Russian women acknowledge some improvement in their lives since immigrating. Many women said they had gained a *kiltti* ("nice") husband. One stated, "He is like a father who takes care of me." Another was grateful to her husband for helping her adjust to life in the new country. I heard husbands referred to positively with a variety of terms, "a gentle man," "non-aggressive," "trustworthy," "hard-working," "pleasant," "warm," "good sense of humor" and "my best friend." Six of the women were pleased their husbands helped take care of the children, and two women commented favorably on their husbands" willingness to do household chores. In Russia, according to what they said, many men did not even want children, and it was common for a husband to let his wife do everything around the house "while he would lie down on the couch."

The women were impressed with what they viewed as the neatness and cleanliness of Finland as well as its safe and secure streets. Several commented on the green and unspoiled Finnish forests, in contrast to the situation in St Petersburg and its environs. One woman said that she had never seen so white snow as in Finland and that the Christmas season with the colored lights was like a scene from a pleasant fairy tale. Moreover, some referred to the economic advantages of living in Finland. Three women praised the Finns for working hard and giving the resultant benefits to their families. Three noted the stores were always well stocked, unlike in Russia. In telling me about her first visit to a Finnish store, one woman said, "I loved everything." The women were generally satisfied with their homes (most lived in rented apartments but a few owned their own homes).

Most of the women I interviewed reported having participated in the language courses offered by the Finnish department of employment. The courses are free, and students also receive a small daily payment. Seven of the women were receiving Finnish social assistance benefits. Some of those who were not receiving benefits criticized those who were, suggesting this was the main reason some women had married Finns.*6

When asked about friends, all reported having some friends. Many distinguished friends from ”acquaintances,” using the term friend in the sense of ”confidante.” The woman whose neighbor had harassed her, pointed out that she also had three decent neighbors she trusts to take care of her house when she goes away. When walking outside with Russian women, I often observed them greeting Finnish neighbors and chatting with them in a friendly fashion. Two women said they had no Finnish friends. The women who divorced their husbands subsequently found Finnish boy friends. It appears that having a Finnish man in their lives had prevented the women from becoming totally separated or marginalized. It is notable that they sought to maintain a positive image of Russians

As is evident from the preceding ethnographic data, the Russian immigrant women viewed their lives in Finland in both negative and positive terms.*7 To better document their overall attitude, I asked the women to rate their ”satisfaction” with their life in Finland on a sliding scale of 0 (not satisfied) to 10 (very satisfied). The results indicate moderate satisfaction. The lowest rating was 5 and the highest 10 (median rating = 7.25). One of the two who rated her satisfaction 5 explained that she would have given a lower rating if there had been no social assistance benefits available in Finland, while the other said she would have given a lower rating if her family life was not happy.

Two women claimed to be depressed, although their ratings were 5 and 7 respectively. One of them commented that perhaps it was something in herself and not Finland that had caused her to be depressed. The other one had been unhappy all her life, explaining to me that she grew up living in exile with her mother in Siberia. A third woman (who rated her satisfaction with 8) found her life in Russia much harder than the present life. She belonged to a visible minority in Russia (being from Kazakstan) and encountered discrimination in every step in her life when she moved to Central Russia. She said she had to make much higher marks than others in order to go ahead in the university. She was so exhausted of struggling ahead that she contemplated suicide. Now in Finland, she accepted the fact that Russians were not especially liked and she worked hard to gain the acceptance of the Finns. When she worked in the pharmacy, she ”smiled like a sun” and thanked her customers ten times. She studied hard in the university without getting full credits for her Russian degrees and was determined to go at least as far in Finland as she had done in Russia. There was no time to miss her family in Russia.

When I asked the women if they wanted to go back and live in Russia, 10 of the 13 said they preferred to remain in Finland. They were concerned about the economic and social disarray in Russia as well as the lack of security there. Moreover, they did not wish to disrupt the lives of their children.

”Finland has improved”

In 1998, the employment situation was improving for some of the women. Two were pleased to have obtained part-time work in their professions. One woman was happy to have gotten a full-time job. Although not in her profession, the job was ”the only thing one can get.” She had to commute to Helsinki which made it hard on her young family. Furthermore, she was unsatisfied with the relationships among colleagues. Another woman had bought a small confectionery store, or kiosk, with the help of her Finnish in-laws. Although she worked alone many hours seven days a week, she was satisfied with her job, since she felt she had no hope of obtaining employment in her profession as a laboratory technician.

Four women were apprenticing on the government program, which gave them a job, at least temporarily. Two of them were hoping to start their own small businesses some time in the future.

While some of the women continued to complain about the low level of cultural events and activities in Finland, two of them told me that Finland has greatly ”improved” in the past few years. They

believed that much of this was due to the great Russian artists who have come to work in Finland. The two women have become acquainted with artists with whom they can carry on spirited conversations, just as they used to do in Russia before emigrating. As for chivalry, one woman told me that she had become more ”self-confident” and no longer needed chivalry from men. She said, with sarcasm, ”perhaps I am a feminist.” In general, the women did not understand or appreciate the modern feminist movement.*8

Several women said that their children spoke poor Russian or no Russian at all. These women tended to view Russia as ”dangerous”, ”evil and poisonous” according to one woman. They felt privileged to raise their children in Finland. The negative view of the recent situation in Russia has undoubtedly given them a more positive view of life in Finland. The overall satisfaction with their life in Finland in 1998 was 7.8, which was a bit higher than in 1995. The range was the same as before, 5–10.

Most of the women had visited Russia since our previous interviews, some by themselves and some with their families. They tended to worry about the material conditions in Russia, although all enjoyed meeting with their relatives and friends. A woman who had been to St Petersburg alone claimed she would never take her daughter there because it was dangerous and many of the people seemed angry and tired.

Concluding remarks

It is evident, then, that the Russian immigrant women living in a small Finnish town, who were the subjects of this research, had polarized feelings about their life in their new country. There were a number of complaints about life in Finland: lack of professional work for them, low quality of arts, entertainment, and design of clothes, dull social life, lack of chivalry on the part of Finnish men, and above all, the hostile attitudes of the Finnish public towards Russians as former enemies. On the positive side, the Russian women found their Finnish husbands as caring fathers and bread winners, their housing suitable, the environment unpolluted, the shops as offering an abundant variety of goods, the government programs for immigrants and social assistance for unemployed as excellent. Thus they simultaneously held both strong resentment and deep admiration towards their adopted country.

The existing models about identity formation do not adequately explain the experience of the Russian immigrant women in Finland. While the influential model (Berry et al. 1987, Berry and Kim 1988, Berry 1990, Berry and Sam 1997) would call for an immigrant to neatly fit in one of the four boxes offered in terms of their attitudes toward the culture of their origin and the new adopted culture, the Russian women could simultaneously be fitted in two: separation and integration. Bakhtin and Epstein (Epstein 1995) present an optimistic model of ”transculture” whereby those living in the margins of cultures would benefit the most as they are able to open up to a dialogue with another culture. This Russian form of multiculturalism cannot materialize in Finland, when most Finns refuse to forget the long held prejudices and hostilities towards the Russians in order to enter a dialogue with them. While Lindsay and Booth’s (1998) ”layering” model accepts immigrant experience as containing uncomfortable contradictions, which certainly coincides with the views of Russian women in Finland, it emphasizes the continuous fluidity of identity. The immigrants of my research demonstrate that their identity has more fixed points and can be described as dialectics instead of endless fluidity. These points remain even over time, if becoming slightly less extreme, as shown by my repeat visits and interviews. Polarity is an adequate concept for characterizing the situation of the Russian immigrant women Finland, at least for the first generation. Their pain and struggle were obvious even though they tried to focus their attention to the pleasant part of their living in the new country. However, assimilation appears to be the most appropriate model for the second generation as they strive to become accepted as full and equal citizens of Finland.

Notes

1. I have generally preferred the term Russian (rather than Soviet), as it is the term most frequently used by the women to describe themselves and their cultural heritage.

2. Ingrian Finns are the descendents of Finns who moved to Ingria, near St Petersburg, in the 1600s. Many of them experienced oppression under the Soviet system.
3. The desire to return to the homeland is a key feature in the Diaspora model of immigration, the scope of which has widened beyond the Jewish Diaspora to include modern global and transnational networks (Safran 1991; Clifford 1994; Lie 1995). Other scholars suggest that identities are not static but undergo continuous transformation under historical, political and cultural forces (Hall 1990, 1996; Grossberg 1996). Identities express difference not sameness, and space and time are considered crucial variables. However, in my research, I found consistency over time in terms of the identity of the Russian women. According to Hall (1991: 21), ”Identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself.”
4. It is notable that many of the complaints presented in this section of the paper are similar to the complaints of Polish immigrants, as documented by Jaakkola (1994).
5. The unemployment rate in Finland in the early 1990 was highest among immigrants (Jaakkola 1994; Nieminen 1994).
6. The women were aware that Finns suspected them of marrying Finns only to live in an affluent country. Most of the women sought to refute this stereotype, but some did not (see Marques 1990 for a discussion of the ”black sheep” phenomenon).
7. This is in accordance with Lindsay & Booth’s (1998) suggestion that identity entails ”uncomfortable contradictions” with ”only ephemeral solutions.”

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Suomi College to be Finlandia College

The Suomi College Board of Trustees voted overwhelmingly recently to change the name of the 104-year-old institution to *Finlandia College*. The new name will take effect July 1, 2000, pending approval from the State Board of Education.

The vote came after a great deal of discussion by the Board. Other names under consideration were Finlandia International University College, proposed by President Dr. Robert Ubbelohde; Finlandia University; and Suomi University.

The Board chose Finlandia College as an option on the Finlandia University theme with plans to revisit "University" as curriculum development continues.