POST-SOVIET MARRIAGE IMMIGRANTS IN THE USA: BUILDING NEW LIVES THROUGH ADULT EDUCATION AND CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

by

TATYANA PAVLUSCENCO

(Under the direction of Thomas Valentine)

ABSTRACT

The issues of massive international migration have received an increased attention in the adult education research. Historically, the United States has been greatly influenced and enriched by a vast diversity of immigrants from all over the world. It is important to gain a deeper understanding of the various factors related to the immigrants' effective cultural integration that underlies the country's economic and political advancement. In this study, I attempted to shed light on the unique group of post-Soviet marriage immigrant women in the United States. The women's personal stories of learning and adaptation in the new culture, told in their own voices, lie at the core of this research.

Ten face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with the women, who came to America from different post-Soviet territories through the help of international matchmaking agencies. Critical examination of the participants' immigration experiences revealed such aspects as expressions of agency, discovering support and social networks, and achieving better fitness in the new society through learning and transformation. The women in the study exhibited great capacity to confront the challenges and stresses of acculturation and adapt to new situations. As predicted by Kim's (1988, 2001) stress-

adaptation-growth pattern, numerous disorienting dilemmas that the immigrant women encounter become an essential and integral parts of adaptation to the new cultural milieu and continuing growth.

This study revealed two major conclusions: 1) The post-Soviet marriage immigrants represent a heterogeneous group whose adaptation trajectories in America were found to be shaped by the many ways in which these women expressed agency and resilience, and 2) continuous transformative learning has accompanied each phase of the women's psychological and cultural transition.

INDEX WORDS: Adult Learning; Marriage Migration; Cross-Cultural Adaptation; Post-Soviet Women; Transformative Learning; Agency.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Sam and Mariam Weis.

To both of you, Mom and Dad, thank you for instilling in me an ever optimistic view of life and a persistent desire to grow by taking on new challenges.

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As I finally reach this important milestone in my life, I would like to give love and gratitude to those who became an integral part of this both tiresome and exciting journey.

To Russ—my husband, my rock, my best friend: I am here because of your unwavering love, endless patience, and your always so delightful sense of humor.

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem

> *… Well, in the airport, I arrived in the evening… I remember everything seemed so wide and the floors were so shiny. I had a feeling that everything around was gleaming as well. … So, I am getting in this white car and I am thinking: "Goodness, he is like a prince on a white horse!" [laughs] It felt like we could take off any minute….so fast and soft the car was going…The roads were nice. I, honestly, had a feeling that I got into the future …where people still looked pretty ordinary to me but, because they were in the future, they all spoke English… (Marina from Ukraine)*

> *... Shock, culture shock! I remember …entering the airport….Well, number one, it was very stressful because of the Atlanta's weather…we had to fly around and stay in the air for like an hour. Then landing, getting out, and just seeing all the gigantic people of sizes I have never seen before…sitting on the floor and eating fat burgers. I was thinking: "Wow, is this my future? Is this what my children are going to look like, entering this culture of unhealthy eating… (Arina from Russia)*

The Background of the Problem

The United States has seen and absorbed multiple waves of immigrants since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The fact that each year over 1 million people immigrate to the United States (2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2013) raises a broad variety of issues for me. As an adult educator, I am interested in examining the context of immigration as it influences the learning and adaptation experiences of a particular immigrant group and exploring the intersection where migration and adult learning converge.

The United States was historically the target destination for the European emigrants, and the Russians were no exception. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

(Soviet Union USSR), once the largest country in the world, disintegrated on December 31, 1991 (Keenan, 2015). The collapse of this world super power brought about numerous political, economic, and cultural changes. Broken political and economic ties were responsible for widespread poverty and large-scale unemployment in the countries of the former USSR. Thousands of people were looking for ways to leave the country in search of stability, job opportunities, and better lives for themselves and their children. Although the typical emigration profiles in the post-Soviet era consisted primarily of political and ethnic minority refugees, another migration category initiated by women started to emerge.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and expansion of the Internet, the world around the crumbling infrastructure of the former USSR started to change rapidly, immersing the countries in a new era of growing globalization. The combination of these factors created a fertile ground for a new phenomenon —the emigration of post-Soviet women with the help of various international marriage agencies. Constable (2003) describes that in the 1990s, women from the former Soviet Union were closely competing in numbers with Asian and Filipina women, in particular, to be represented by the matchmaking companies. The new migration trend had quickly been characterized as a "highly profitable business operating on a global scale," often referred to as the "mail-order bride" business (Zabyelina, 2009, p. 86).

Modest estimates on the scope of the international marriage phenomenon in the countries of the former Soviet Union claimed the existence of nearly 500 marriage agency sites advertising about 120,000 Eastern European women from the countries of the former USSR (Hughes, 2004). In 2008, typing the term *mail-order bride* in Google

would return a minimum of 500,000 entries (Zabyelina, 2009, p. 90). Most agencies offered photographic catalogs with thousands of women's profiles, information and instructions on group tour packages, and personalized matchmaking services for those tired of "long correspondence with different women" and online customer service (Begin, 2007, p. 46).

The Choice of Terminology

Despite the fact that the term *mail-order bride* as well as the phenomenon itself had no roots in Russian history, it was by no means a recent creation. For example, in her article on history of the business of matchmaking, Enss (2015) discusses how in the 1800s during the American Gold Rush, men travelled West in hope of getting rich and found themselves outnumbering women twelve to one. Although the men were desperate to get rich, they also frantically missed female companionship. Enss's (2015) study presents authentic advertisements placed by traditional-thinking men and women who were forced by the rapidly changing times to succumb to new ways of finding a mate. Crowds of women headed out West in search of their soul mate. Unlike the Old West situation, where the prospective brides and grooms would mostly come from the same country and speak the same language, the contemporary mail-order bride phenomenon is transnational, crossing the boundaries of race, nationality, and class, among others.

When discussing the appropriateness of the *mail-order bride* term to present-day realities, many researchers maintained that the term bore a negative stigma of sex trade business that stemmed from a covertly prejudiced assumption that choosing a foreign partner was somehow pathological or unnatural (Simons, 2001). Constable (2003) affirmed that "many of so-called 'mail-order brides' were not even aware of the term and its negative connotations. Instead, they saw themselves as being involved in 'pen pals

relationships'" (p. 70). In his research, Begin (2007) used a more contemporary term, *virtual brides*, in place of mail-order brides. He explained that mail-order brides, which dated back to Colonial times, "[…] conjures an image of a passive and somewhat helpless woman who, having fallen victim to dire or unusual circumstances, consents to her own commodification" (p. 17).

Johnson (2007) and many others advocated for replacing "mail-order bride" with "marriage correspondence" or "transnational marriage," stating that it was better at describing the reality. Although many researchers perceived the term *mail-order brides* as inaccurate and degrading, some were defending it, arguing that it was recognized as a "useful marketing expression that commands instant recognition" (D'Aoust, 2009, p. 13), especially when searching the Internet. The term was also used in U.S. immigration law (see Section 652, "Mail-Order Business," of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996), while the more recent International Marriage Broker Regulation Act of 2005 referred to "mail-order marriage" (D'Aoust, 2009, pp. 12–14).

I am a post-Soviet immigrant woman, whose story of coming to America, though fascinating, is very different from the women's stories described in this study. Through the years of living in America in different social circles, I met numerous Russian women who came to this country pursuing marriage. Contrary to the typical scholarly and public assumptions of these women as helpless and highly vulnerable to abuse and control, I saw them as ambitious and independent. It became evident to me that there were other sides to the story that have been continually overlooked, both by the popular press and scholarly research. As Constable (2003) noted, "it involves less intrigue, and less sex and

violence. It involves more of the everyday challenges that take on new meaning when lives are transplanted to another part of the world" (p. 20).

I personally believe that the term *mail-order bride* term is problematic and is not appropriate in reference to my participants. I consider the term *post-Soviet marriage immigrant women* to be an accurate description of the women in my study. In addition, the blanket term "Russian women" here would indicate the women from former Soviet republics. It should be noted that in 1991, each of the fifteen Soviet republics previously dominated by Russia became an independent nation (Dewdney, 2015). Despite the fact that these republics were not ethnically homogeneous and had different pathways of transitioning into the capitalist market economy, they certainly had a lot in common. They shared the Russian language and culture, education, and health systems, as well as their Communist past and ideology. Thus, frequently in both public opinion and research, the people of post-Soviet republics are simply referred to as "Russians."

Two Perspectives on International Marriage

When sharing with a colleague, a renowned history professor at my college, that the post-Soviet marriage immigrant women would be in the center of my doctoral research, he enthusiastically exclaimed: "I myself cannot wrap my head around the fact that Russians would sell their daughters like that!" This opinion that an international marriage is a shady wives-for-sale business, where the women are being sold by their families or ordered over the Internet by the men abroad, is widely spread among the academic community as well as in the society at large.

Although, there is no definite statistical data on the number of Russian women entering the United States on the fiancée visa every year, the number is miniscule in comparison with the marriage immigrant women coming from Asia or Latin America

(Osipovich, 2004). Nevertheless, the American media have paid a disproportionate amount of attention to the post-Soviet marriage immigrant women, painting an image of a glamorous but poor and often naïve woman anxious to leave her country at any price. Interestingly, only 31 percent of the Russian marriage immigrants are younger than 25, compared to 61% of women from Asian countries (Osipovich, 2004). Despite the fact that most post-Soviet female immigrants are educated women making an independent decision to emigrate, the media and the majority of scholarly research on the topic still refer to them as con-artists out for a green card, victims, or commodities being shipped in or sold to their American husbands. Some of the early feminist discourses on international marriage are full of blanket characterizations of the women as targets of sex trafficking and the warnings about the marriage agencies controlled by organized crime networks (Glodava & Onizuka, 1994; Lee, 1998; Chun, 1996; Jedlicka, 1988; Lloyd, 2000; Langevin & Belleau, 2000; Hughes, 2000).

Generalizing on the entire matchmaking industry from a few highly sensationalized negative cases of violence and abuse, the press and the media create a grim picture that awaits the women on arrival to the United States (Constable, 2003). Several documented cases of domestic abuse and a few murders against female marriage immigrants have been played over and over in the media and press, satiating the public's thirst for topics of sex, crime, and murder, but they do not represent the whole picture (Simons, 2001; Constable, 2003; Osipovich, 2004).

Hollywood reacted to the subject of Russian brides with a movie *The Russian Bride* (2001), in which a new life in America became a battle of survival for beautiful Natasha when an Internet marriage agency set her up with an abusive husband. The

British-American drama and crime film *Birthday Girl* (2001) featured Nicole Kidman as a gorgeous Russian woman who met her American fiancé on the Internet. She is a seasoned con-artist who eventually destroys her husband's quiet life, dragging him into a web of corruption and crime. A comic novel by Marina Lewycka, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (2005), featured an 84-year-old widower, Nikolai, who married a highly attractive and much younger Ukrainian immigrant. His two daughters had to intervene when the manipulative behavior of the gold-digging Valentina started to escalate. Clearly, the unverified claims and cultural stereotyping of this group of immigrants may lead to distort of the image of post-Soviet women in the United States as well as harmfully influence the immigration policy regulations with regards to these marriage immigrants (Osipovich, 2004)

A growing number of relatively recent feminist discourses on the topic (Johnson, 2007; Plambech, 2008) have been trying to draw attention to other aspects of the complex international marriage phenomenon. Among them are the women's sense of agency, personal power, and market value in the global marriage market as well as their cultural adjustment, "practical details of learning to live in America, and learning to live with a new partner" (Johnson 2007, p.107).

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Regardless of whether these women are viewed as victims or actors, there is no denying that learning to live in America requires significant adaptation. The women's ability to get around in the culture (sociocultural adjustment), along with their ability to handle the new culture emotionally (psychological adjustment), was pivotal to their successful adaptation in a new American society. To feel at home, the women in my study have a demanding enterprise involving a multitude of challenging everyday tasks,

"from the practical (e.g., figuring out which bus to take), to the economic (e.g., finding a job), to the social (e.g., making new friends)" (Kisselev, Brown, & Brown, 2010, p. 768).

"Cross-cultural adaptation is a journey of establishing and maintaining a relatively stable and reciprocal relationship with the host environment" (Kim, 1988). Clearly, such adaptation is inseparable from the women's cross-cultural transition. The latter may imply myriad changes: "physical (adjustments to population density, weather), biological (new nutritional status), cultural (novel economic, linguistic, social and religious systems), social (ingroup-outgroup relations) and psychological (behavioral and psychological processes) changes" (Ward, Fox, Wilson, Stuart, & Kus, 2010, p. 27). The results of these changes, positive or negative, are referred to as adaptive outcomes. The psychological and sociocultural adaptation are combined here under the term *acculturation*. Acculturation is broadly defined as the process of adaptation that results when two cultural groups interact, or more specifically, it is "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005).

Acculturation implies adoption and retention of new language and maintaining or transforming identity, behavior, and values as one is coming in contact with a new culture. In spite of a large body of research and theories on cross-cultural adaptation of different immigrant groups, very little is known on the acculturation experiences and strategies of some groups from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) "who have resettled in relatively large numbers in several countries, including the US, Germany, and Israel in the past two decades but are understudied, in part due to their smaller representation compared to other larger cohorts of immigrants" (Miller,Wang, Szalacha, and Sorokin,

2009). This lack of evidence is especially true for the above-mentioned group of post-Soviet marriage immigrant women whose presence on the global international marriage arena became visible during the mid-1990s.

Different immigrant groups have a wide variety of patterns for cross-cultural adjustment that result in different levels of psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Berry (1997) and colleagues described this as four-fold pattern of transition by a person or group to a new culture: 1) assimilation, 2) integration or biculturalism, 3) separation, and 4) marginalization (Berry, 1997, p. 9). According to Kim (2001), when immigrants confront their predicaments as strangers in the new society, they go through "disequilibrium" caused by a transition shock. It requires that the individual adapt his or her behavior at least temporarily to regain equilibrium and to cope with the situation - that brings a person back into balance. This human desire to struggle for an internal equilibrium led to the idea that culture shock was not bad but essential and even good because it promoted change and personal growth (Kim, 2001).

Learning

The ability to critically reflect on and interpret our experiences requires critical and autonomous thinking. The development of these skills was considered to be the primary goal and the core of adult education (Merriam, 2001). With respect to international immigrants, Lee and Sheared (2002) argued that in the field of adult education very few studies examined the context of immigration as it influenced the learning experiences.

Adjusting to a new culture for my participants required learning new thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that, in a way, transformed them into a "different," more complete person or a person with more choices. In adult education literature, learning is viewed as a continuous, emergent, non-linear process grounded in experience that

encompasses the major process of human adaptation (Kolb, 1984). Personal transformation that each of the women in my study has undergone, can be viewed through a transformative learning framework that can help in analyzing and understanding the experiences of the immigrant women and how those experiences influence their sense of empowerment and well-being as they adapted to a new cultural milieu. Transformative learning includes the idea of people changing the way they interpret their experiences and their interactions with the world (Cranton, 2006).

It is generally understood that transformative learning happens when we encounter an event that calls into question what we believe and leads us to revise our perspective (Cranton & Wright, 2008). The occurrence of such an event is described by Mezirow (2000) as a "disorienting dilemma." Challenges that the immigrant women encounter due to economic or social circumstances, or even a condition of survival, cause them to change their previous frame of reference to integrate new cultural context and maintain resilience in the face of adversities.

Another type of learning in which immigrant women are invariably involved in is non-formal learning, which includes informal and incidental learning opportunities. It is "the lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment" (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). It takes place outside of a dedicated learning environment, often through social capital networks, and is deeply rooted in our daily behavior and spontaneous relations. Interpretations of such learning and consequent actions are highly influenced by the social and cultural norms of others and may be distorted by power dynamics (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

Johnson (2007) did a good job of conducting interviews in the former Soviet Union, as well as in the United States, trying to share the insights into the relationship of Russian-American couples that met through the online agencies. However, her book is "a combination of memoir, fiction, and journalistic ethnography" (Ryabov, 2013, p. 49) and has a minimal number of the authentic quotes from women. It does not focus enough on the exploration of the post-immigration adjustment and practical learning activities of the women.

Statement of the Problem

Since the 1990s, international marriage agencies have inundated the Internet with the endless offers of profiles and photos of post-Soviet females. A large number of Russian women immigrated to the United States on so-called fiancée visas to marry an American man and start a new life in a new country. The existing literature on international marriage dealt with a variety of issues ranging from the general overview of the phenomenon, women's motivations to marry a foreigner, and potential situations of trafficking and abuse (Glodava, 1994; Narayan, 1995; Bowes, 2011) to global feminism (Constable, 2003; Johnson, 2007) and legal and immigration issues (Simons, 2001; D'Aoust, 2009; Sims, 2009) as they referred to international marriages. In addition, the Asian side of the international marriage market appeared to be the primary focus in the majority of the studies (Simons, 2001; Constable, 2003; Kim, 2011).

However, a significant gap exists when it comes to exploring the aspects of the learning and adaptation strategies specific to the marriage immigrant women in the United States from post-Soviet Russia. In her extensive research on the politics of international matchmaking industry, Simons (2001) argued that "there have been no studies on the Russian side of the industry and no comparative studies including marriage

migration to the United States" (p. 24). Ryabov (2013) claims that "very little evidence has been accumulated regarding the post-migration experiences of transnational marriage migrants from the former Soviet Union" (p. 45). Since the time of that claim, a few studies on "the Russian side" of the phenomenon have been published.

Osipovich (2004), Johnson (2007), Begin (2007), Ryabov (2013), and a few others explored different aspects of the post-Soviet involvement in the matchmaking industry while only touching on the issues of the post-immigration learning and adaptation of this immigrant group in the United States. These studies called for further research using the women's lived accounts on the ways they engaged in cross-cultural and transformative learning as it related to the women's acculturation experiences, patterns, and strategies. For example, in his study on Russian wives in America, Ryabov (2013) calls for in-depth interviewing that "would shed light on issues that were hidden to his eye of a participant-observer" (p. 63). In addition, the fact that Russian-speaking immigrants in general are viewed as "an often understudied immigrant population" (Kisselev, Brown, & Brown, 2010, p. 768) adds value to the study of the lived experiences of acculturation and adaptation of this particular immigrant group.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to give voice to post-Soviet marriage immigrant women with particular emphasis placed on the learning and adaptation to a new culture as they move to the United States. Through the process of conducting interviews, I intend to look into the common adaptation and learning experiences of the women and conclude what aspects of their own culture facilitate or hinder the process of their successful acculturation as they go through all the phases of the meaning-making process, learning how to live in America.

Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

1) What are the life narratives the post-Soviet marriage immigrant women in the U.S., told through their own stories?
2) What are the common adaptation and learning experiences of the post-Soviet women who immigrated to the United States through international marriage agencies?

Approach

In order to answer the research questions posed, I employed qualitative interview-based study. Ten in-depth face-to face individual interviews with post-Soviet marriage immigrant women were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in English and Russian, depending on the women preferences. The Russian interviews have been later translated in English so that the authentic bilingual women quotes could be used in the study.

The interviews varied in lengths taking on average an hour and a half. They have been conducted in locations convenient for the participants and suitable for confidential conversations.

The real names have been changed to pseudonyms to preserve the participants' anonymity. Along with the women stories, I have also recorded field notes and memos that were utilized in creating participants' profiles and analysis of the data. Through the interviews with my study participants, I tried to explore a "never-ending venture" of these women's adaptation and learning experiences in the new culture and capture the ways they continuously redefine their lives and transform their perceptions of self (Zou, 2002, p. 265).

Significance of the Study

This research will be of significance for immigrant and social services, as well as for adult educators who have for years discussed the importance of adults' ability to become autonomous thinkers and learners. The advances in the field of acculturation contributed tremendously to the understanding of various aspects of immigration research (Berry, 2001). The knowledge accumulated through these women acculturative experiences can prove useful to other immigrant populations.

This research will add perspective about the relationship of these women's acculturation to their mentality, health status, ethnic identity, education, family values, English proficiency, personality, and other characteristics. Therefore, the range of findings stemming from such study may positively affect and help social workers who work with immigrants to facilitate a more successful economic, social, and/or psychological integration into the host society. An example could be creating information brochures on services available for these women, such as legal representation, shelters, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and other resources.

In addition, it is my hope that this research has served as "narrative therapy" (Etemadi, 2013) to the study participants themselves, as it helped them to look at their marriage and immigration stories from an outside perspective. This experience allowed the women, maybe for the first time in their lives, to reflect on and analyze the cultural differences they encountered, adversities they had to overcome, and explore their personal growth and development in the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

CHAPTER 2.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review of the literature most relevant to the study. The chapter has six main sections: 1) Kim's Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, 2) Immigrants' Acculturation and Adult Learning, 3) Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, 4) Individual Empowerment, 5) Gender and International Migration 6) Academic Discourses on International Marriage Migration.

Kim's Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

As the world becoming more connected and accessible through the help of unprecedented technological advances, it becomes more attune to the experiences of people transitioning from one culture to another. The United States has always been a nation of immigrants and ethnic diversity. Therefore, the concept of cross-cultural adaptation has traditionally been an active area of research among American scholars since the 1930s. Kim (2001) points out that through acculturation strangers experience a progression of internal change in their habitual patterns of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. This complex process ultimately results in an assimilated individual with a new intercultural identity.

Kim (2001) explains that researchers from different disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, communication, and sociolinguistics have been exploring numerous issues of cross-cultural adaptation. The multitude of research topics included changes in economic condition, perception, attitude, behavioral patterns,

linguistic proficiency, and ethnic/cultural identity, to name a few. Theorizing about the process of cultural adaptation from different vantage points, researchers came up with a variety of terms describing the adaptation process. For instance, from the anthropological perspective introduced by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936), the term *acculturation* was first used as comprehending "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" (p. 149).

Unlike acculturation, which indicates the acceptance of some (but not all) aspects of the host cultural elements, such terms as *assimilation* and *amalgamation* have been often used to indicate a complete acquisition "of cultural elements of the host society by the individual" (Kim, 2001, p. 38). In addition, the term *adjustment* has been used in association with "the mental and emotional state of comfort, satisfaction, and positive attitude" while *integration* focused more "on the development of social relationships in the host environment" (Kim, 2001, p. 38).

Under the overarching concept of *cross-cultural adaptation*, Kim (2001) managed to combine a number of the somewhat limited ideas such as *acculturation*, *psychological adjustment*, *assimilation*, and *integration*. Looking at each person as an open system, Kim (2001) defines cross-cultural adaptation as "the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to a new, unfamiliar, or changed sociocultural environment, establish (or re-establish) and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (Kim, 2001, p. 31).

In the same vein as the term "adaptation" is used broadly, incorporating more specific terms, Kim's (2001) term "strangers" (not *immigrants*, *expatriates*, *sojourners*, or *refugees*) consolidates "all individuals who find themselves in a cultural or subcultural milieu for varied time periods" (Kim, 2001, p. 38). As the push factors to leave the native country for different travelers vary, they often do not have a choice of the culture they enter. Thus, the motivations to adapt to the new environment and make the host society their second home differ, even when the transition is voluntary (Kim, 2001). The main theorizing effort for Kim (2001) is not to discern "*whether* individuals in a new cultural milieu adapt, but *how* and *why* they adapt" (p. 38).

In her efforts to comprehend the process of intercultural adaptation, Kim's theory is focusing on the following five areas: 1.The effects of both macro (cultural and institutional patterns of host culture) and micro (individual backgrounds and psychological characteristics) level factors on the cross-cultural adaptation process. 2. The integration of short and long term adaptation investigation in the interest of identifying common conceptual issues. 3. The understanding of cross-cultural adaptation in the context of both new learning and psychological growth in order to form a more complete understanding of the cross-cultural adaptation process. 4. The organization and consolidation of factors influencing the cross cultural adaptation process. 5. The incorporation of both pluralistic and assimilation ideological viewpoints.

To delineate the situations in which cross-cultural adaptation occurs, Kim defines the following three boundaries on the theory to define the situations in which cross-cultural adaptation occurs: 1.The strangers have had a primary socialization in one culture (or subculture) and have moved into a different and unfamiliar culture (or

subculture). 2. The strangers are at least minimally dependent on the host environment for meeting their personal and social needs. 3. The strangers are at least minimally engaged in firsthand communication experiences with that environment.

Characterizing humans as open systems in a "continual give-and-take with the environment," Kim explains that "each of us operates much like a radar set continually sending out messages, which then come back to help us define the social world" (Kim, 2001, p. 43). Kim's (1988, 2001) theory introduces two major models: (1) the process model explaining the process in which cross-cultural adaptation unfolds and (2) the structural model identifying key factors that serves as an explanation "for the differential rates at which the adaptation process develops over time" (Giesbers, 2002, p. 138).

Kim's and Other Models of Immigrant Adaptation

Kim's "stress–adaptation–growth" model appears in contrast with descriptions of acculturation dynamics, traditionally based on the original work of Oberg (1960) and his U-curve model of adjustment. Oberg's (1960) model consists of four phases (see Fig. 1): honeymoon (the initial optimism and elation in the host culture); crisis ("culture shock"), which is comprised of fight (lashing out against the culture in some way) and flight (separating self from culture); recovery (gradual embracing of cultural differences or working with them with stability and a good attitude); and adjustment (Baldwin, 2015).

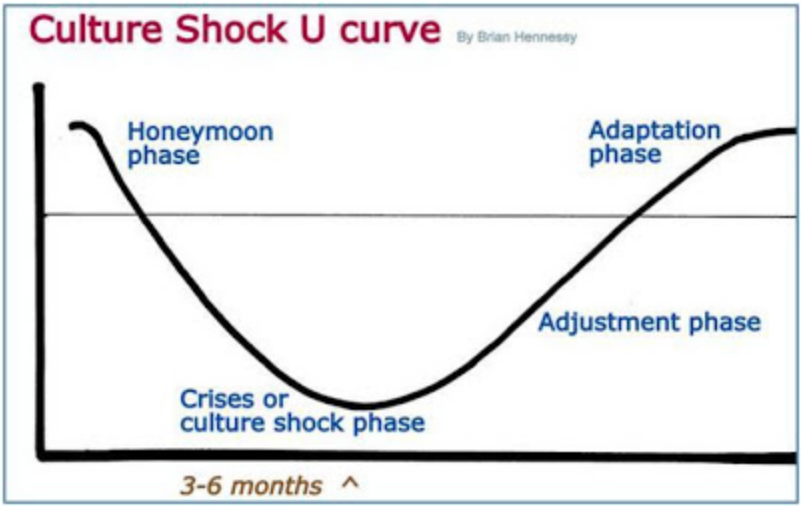

Figure 1. U-curve of adjustment.

According to Kim (2001), the U-curve has been further extended to the 'W-Curve' (see Fig. 2) where the return home phase was added, during which the sojourner's feelings and attitudes initially dip and subsequently regain strength (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Trifonovitch, 1977, in Kim, 2001, p. 20).

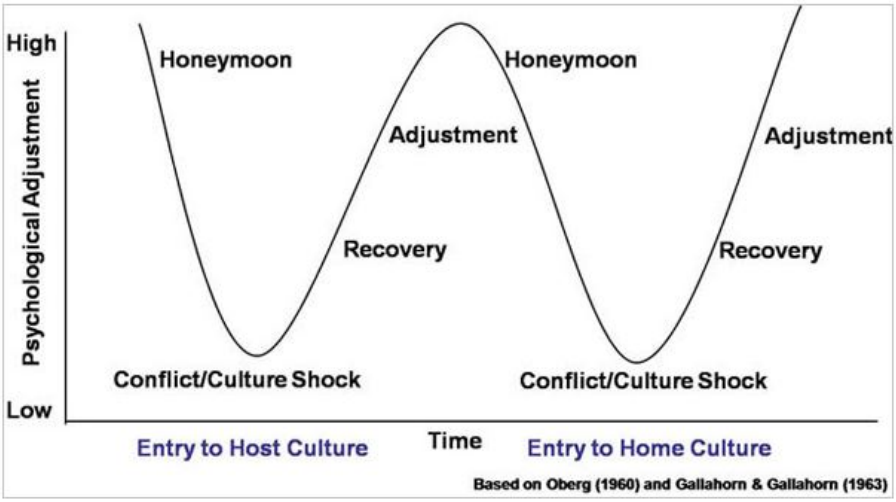

Figure 2. W-curve of adjustment.

Calling the previously mentioned models over-popularized and oversimplified, Kim (2001) introduces the "'stress–adaptation–growth' dynamic" that she describes as a "draw-back-to-leap" process similar "to the movement of a wheel" or "two steps forward and one step back" (p. 56). In a different cultural environment, strangers unavoidably experiences difficulties due to their language and culture barriers and also due to other party cultural premises and assumptions.

Confronting the 'otherness' necessitates reflection on the part of the individual and calls for his/her actions to adapt, which causes stress, or disequilibrium. As an inherent human desire is to stabilize themselves (homeostasis), they partake in the act of adaptation. The process of the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic (Figure 3) is based on this interplay of opposing forces of acculturation (new cultural learning) and deculturation (unlearning at least some of the old cultural patterns) (p. 56). According to Kim (2001):

> "Each stressful experience is responded to by strangers with a 'draw back', which then activates their adaptive energy to help them reorganise themselves and 'leap forward'. This stress adaptation growth cycle involves communication activities that shift between out-looking, information seeking behavior and tension reducing, defensive retreat, and the resultant capacity to see a situation 'with new eyes'" (p. 56).

This psychological movement unfolds over time and results in an increasing level of psychological and functional fitness with respect to the receiving environment

Through this model, Kim does not see culture shock as negative but rather necessary and even positive because it leads to a gradual *intercultural transformation* of the individual in the direction of greater *functional fitness* in the host environment (Kim, 2001, p. 68).

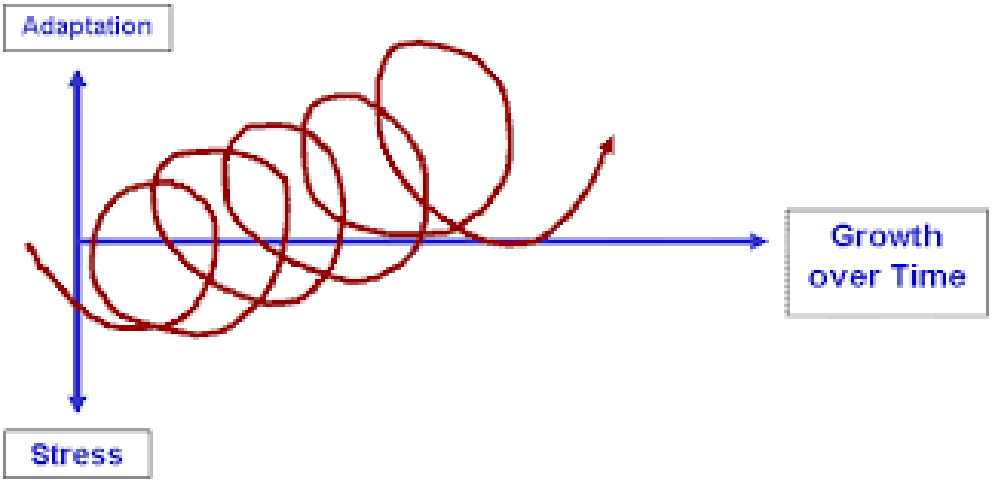

Figure 3. Stress adaptation growth dynamics of adaptive transformation.

Learning to Communicate—Structural Model

Kim (2001) believes that to adapt successfully strangers need to focus on acquiring *host communication competence*, the ability to communicate in accordance with the norms and practices of the host culture and actively engage in its social communication processes. Kim calls strangers to immerse in the communication processes of the host culture in order to learn to communicate, comparing it with plunging into the water in order to learn to swim. At the center of the model (see Fig. 4) is a combination of interpersonal communication at the micro-level along with the macro-level process that takes place via newspapers, television, movies, and other forms of mass communication (Kim, 2001).

Overall, Kim's structural model classifies four interactive dimensions of factors that may facilitate (or impede) the overall adaptation process described in the process model: 1. Individual predisposition (adaptive personality, ethnic proximity/distance, preparedness); 2. the environment (host conformity pressure, host receptivity, ethnic group strength); 3. intercultural transformation (functional fitness, psychological health,

intercultural identity development); and 4. communication (host communication competence, host interpersonal communication, host mass communication, ethnic interpersonal communication, and ethnic mass communication) (Kim and McKay-Semmler, 2013, p. 101).

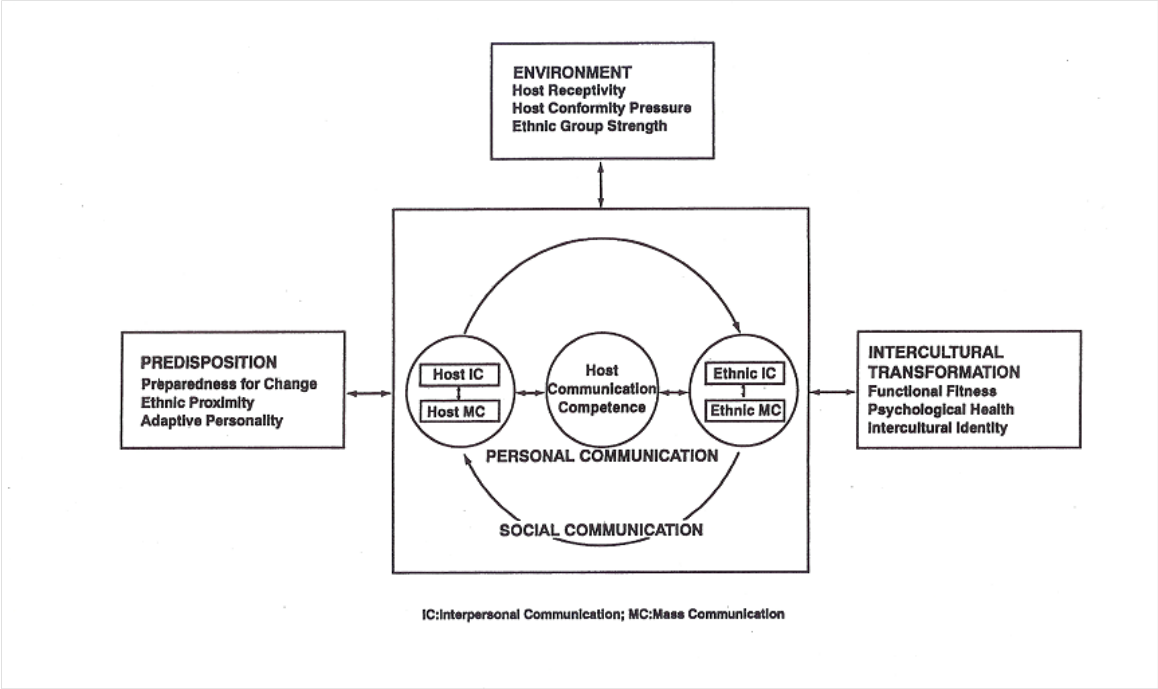

Figure 4. Structural model.

Kim's structural model takes into account multiple forces because "the strangers' adaptive potential prior to migration" and "the receptivity and conformity pressure of the host environment" are simultaneously at work and may influence the communication process (p.76). Kim (2001) explains that over time this cycle results in the three cornerstone aspects of intercultural adaptation: 1. Functional fitness which is being capable of fulfilling your needs within the society 2. Psychological health which involves

minimizing the gap between internal and external reality 3. Intercultural identity which identifies an individual's ability to grow beyond their original culture and encompasses a new culture, gaining additional insight into both cultures in the process, in which the original identity loses some of its rigidity.

According to Kim (2001), increased functional fitness positively correlates with psychological health, inner strength, and the decrease in symptoms of acculturative stress such as withdrawal, denial and hostility. With regards to ensuing intercultural identity, Kim (2015) states: “emerging from the prolonged experiences of acculturation, deculturation, and the stress–adaptation–growth dynamic is an *intercultural identity*—a self-other orientation that is richer in content and more complex in structure” (p. 6).

Immigrants’ Acculturation and Adult Learning

The concept of immigrants’ acculturation is closely intertwined with the theories of adult learning. The field of adult education has long been preoccupied with the ideas of making meaning of one’s experience, critical reflection, developmental transitions, and change. Through the lenses of adult education, adults are defined in terms of the accumulation of their unique sets of experiences and, therefore, their learning is tightly knit to their individual situations and social context they live in (Knowles, 1975, 1984).

Kim (1988, 2001, 2005, 2008) argues that as strangers keep striving for successful adaptation, they learn new thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which means that they experience a gradual personal identity transformation. Although the old identity is not entirely replaced with a new one, it can transform into something more complete, mature, and having a deeper understanding of intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional experiences of others. According to Merriam et al., (2009), “adult learning is at the heart of all adult

education practice" (p. 455). Thus, Kim's idea of human plasticity, or the ability of adults to learn and change through new experiences, is closely connected with the area of study in adult education that is called *transformative learning*. The former is defined as a learning process that transforms existing frames of reference to make them more inclusive, reflective, open, and able to change (Mezirow, 2000).

Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

The study of transformation emerged with the work of Mezirow (1978a) who first applied the label 'transformation' in his study of U.S. women returning to postsecondary education or the workplace after an extended period of absence from the university or the workforce. In an effort to address the needs of the women pursuing their respective activities, Mezirow (1978a) conducted a qualitative study to "identify factors that characteristically impede or facilitate" the women' success (p. 6).

Mezirow (1981) developed the concepts of 'meaning perspectives' and 'meaning schemes', which delineate individual's overall view of the world, and the smaller assumptions and believes, respectively. Meaning perspectives are attained passively during childhood and youth, and are subject to transformation that occurs through experience later in life. They function as perceptual filters that determine how an individual will organize and interpret the meaning of his/her life's experiences. Meaning perspectives naturally change and evolve in response to life-changing events, powerful emotional dramas, or other adversarial life experiences (Kitchenham, 2008).

These changes were viewed by Mezirow (1981) as triggers of transformational learning. Learning through meaning transformation requires "becoming aware of specific assumptions (schemata, criteria, rules, or repressions) on which a distorted or incomplete meaning scheme is based and, through a reorganization of meaning, transforming it"

(Mezirow, 1985, p. 23). With regards to the current study, when the immigrant women encounter a distress that cannot be resolved through their present meaning schemes or through learning new meaning schemes then, the resolution comes through a redefinition of the problem Mezirow (1981). In other words, the women experience transformation that occurs through critical self-reflection of the assumptions that supported the meaning scheme or perspective in use. Thus, two major elements of transformative learning are critical reflection, or critical self-reflection, on assumptions and critical discourse, where the learner validates a best judgment (Mezirow, 2006). Mezirow considered critical reflection to be the distinguishing characteristic of adult learning, and saw it as the vehicle by which one questions the validity of his world-view (Mezirow, 1991).

Mezirow's (2000) ideas about the significance of relationships, feelings and context, experience interpretation, and perspectives transformation fit right into and closely intertwine with the goal of the current study to explore women's learning and acculturation in the new society. Mezirow (2000) argued that transformations often follow some variation of the following ten-phase transformation process:

- "A disorienting dilemma
- A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
- Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
- Planning a course of action

- Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
- Provisional trying of new roles
- Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective" (p. 22).

Remennick (2007, 2009) explains that the need for economic and psychological adjustment in the new country is common for both men and women. Nevertheless, female immigrants can face specific challenges including differences in sexuality, fertility, and family life, as well as occupational downgrading, marital distress, and loss of human capital and personal identity. Fursova (2013) maintains that transformative learning plays a significant role in building resilience and achieving positive acculturation outcomes among immigrant women. Both Mezirow (1991 b, 2000) and Freire (2000) argued that adult education should lead to empowerment and that "knowledge is not 'out there' to be discovered but is created from interpretations and reinterpretations in light of new experiences" (Merriam, 2001, p. 16).

Mezirow's transformative learning theory has been attracting continuous interest from different disciplines, and therefore, has been tested, revised, and enhanced by many researchers. All the while, it has not been immune to being critiqued and challenged. Some major criticism of the theory pointed to the lack of emphasis on social change, social context, and cultural context (Clark & Wilson, 1991), or too much emphasis on the individual, placed at the center of the transformative process, which is viewed as autonomous and individualistic (Taylor, 2006). Taylor (2006) argues that

transformational learning is a process dependent upon the need for support, trust, friendship, and intimacy but that future research is needed to explore their subjective roles.

Although many empirical studies support Mezirow's contention that critical reflection is central to transformative learning, others have "concluded that critical reflection is granted too much importance in a perspective transformation, a process too rationally driven" (Taylor 1998, pp. 33-34). A view of transformative learning as an "intuitive, creative, emotional process" began to emerge in the literature with the advances in analytical psychology (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Another major criticism of Mezirow's transformational learning theory is the emphasis that Mezirow places on rationality. However, later Mezirow acknowledges that both his rational framework and other non- or extra-rational frameworks are involved in transforming our frames of reference (Dirkx & al., 2006).

Mezirow (1995) expands his views on perspective transformation by arguing that transformative learning is not necessarily triggered by a specific disorienting dilemma but may also result from an accumulation of transformations in meaning schemes over a period of time. With regards to the current study, when reading through the participants' stories, it becomes clear that the intense internal conflict is sometimes caused by not one but rather several real-life crises: such as the loss of culture, language, family, and struggles with relationships.

Merriam (2001) indicates that recent trends in adult education place a greater emphasis on the various contexts where individual learning takes place. Likewise, adult learning is regarded as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, not just a cognitive activity that

enables the learner to processes information and to become more empowered and independent. The deeper understanding of historical and sociocultural context of adult learning along with “recent research on the brain, narrative learning, and embodied learning” confirm that adult learning is “firmly embedded in the lived experiences of learners in the world” (Merriam 2001, p. 96).

Individual Empowerment

Discussions on immigrations oftentimes concern themselves with complex power relations between strangers and the host society. Despite the fact that the dominant society plays a significant role in migrants’ adaptation, the ultimate power and responsibility always lie within the migrants themselves (Kim, 2001). The struggles of cross-cultural adaptation are closely related to the concept of individual empowerment as it “suggests a sense of control over one's life in personality, cognition, and motivation. It expresses itself at the level of feelings, at the level of ideas about self-worth, at the level of being able to make a difference in the world around us... We all have it as a potential" (Rappaport, 1985, p. 15).

According to Gutierrez (1994), this definition can be clarified by adding four necessary changes which will define a person as *successfully empowered*. They are as follows: 1) an increased self-sufficiency, 2) a developed group consciousness, 3) a reduction of self-blame in the face of problems, and 4) the ability to assume personal responsibility for change. Thus, rather than relying on others, an empowered individual should try to take control of his/her own life and act towards a necessary transition.

According to Rappaport (1981, 1985, 1987), the ability to redefine yourself and to act efficiently for yourself is the essence of individual empowerment. Echoing the theory of transformative learning, Rappaport’s (1981, 1985, 1987) empowerment theory deals

with a process of personal development that involves both a development of skills and abilities and a more positive self-definition. Rappaport (1987) points out that "by empowerment I mean our aim should be to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives" (p. 119).

According to Rappaport, a person's feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy are closely linked with a real improvement in personal knowledge, abilities, skills, resources, and life opportunities. Rappaport further explicates that individual empowerment is a dual process of internal and external changes. The internal process is the person's sense or belief in her ability to make decisions and to solve her own problems. The external change finds expression in the ability to act and to implement the practical knowledge, the information, the skills, the capabilities, and the other new resources acquired in the course of the process (Parsons, 1988).

Rappaport's (1987) concept of empowerment "conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights" (p. 121). According to Lord and Hutchison (1993), people who believe in themselves and their own abilities (self-efficacy) and those who receive support from others (social support) fare better in unsettling and crisis situations, turning them into new awareness and opportunities.

Gender and International Migration

Boyd and Grieco (2003) argue that in contemporary feminist theories and immigration research, gender has emerged as a core "principle that underlies migration and related processes, such as the adaptation to the new country, continued contact with the original country, and possible return"(p. 2). According to Nawyn (2010), it took approximately thirty years for gender and migration scholarship to make a big leap from

a “few studies that included women immigrants… to a burgeoning literature that has made significant contributions to understanding numerous aspects of the migration experience”(p. 749). In the past three decades, the scholarly community has increasingly recognized that gender permeates every aspect of society and is “central to any discussion of the causes and consequences of international migration, including the process of decision-making involved and the mechanisms leading to migration”(UN Population Division, 2004, p. 15) reported by the United Nations Population Division (2004), it is estimated that as of 2000, “49 percent of all international migrants were women or girls, and that the proportion of women among international migrants had reached 51 percent in more developed regions” (para.1).

However, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2003), a pioneer in the study of gender and immigration, explains that for a long time women have been written off as “associational” or dependent on male migrants, having no impact on state interests and labor markets. It seems inconceivable today that previous analytical frameworks failed to acknowledge women’s role and contribution in international migration or treated migrant women and men as similar and thus ignored analysis of the gendered social world we live in (UN Pop. Div., 2004). The development of the feminist migration research allowed for new theoretical approaches for understanding “the power relations enmeshed in the changing migration patterns and processes associated with post-1989 economic globalization” (Silvey, 2004, p. 1). The author concludes that current research on gendered migration not only explains in which ways gender differences shape migration but also the role that “migration plays in shaping social orders, geographies of inequality, spatialized subjectivities and the meanings of difference across scales”(p. 2).

Mahler and Pessar (2006) shaped a conceptual model of "gendered geographies of power," illuminating the intersection of gender and migration as it relates to multiple geographical and social scales, women's access to channels of transnational communication, human agency, and the gendered nature of social imagination (p. 445). A growing body of academic research on the feminization of migration, especially in the sphere of global economy, raised a wide range of aspects stretching from topics like female employment across the labor markets and gender discrimination, changes in family patriarchy, and female authority to global care chains, transnational motherhood, and the formation of transnational families, among others topics (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011; Beneria, Deer, and Kabeer, 2012).

Another globalization theorist, Sassen (1996), created the term "counter-geography of globalization" that encompassed a cross-national, unauthorized movements of women as diverse as mail-order brides, enslaved and trafficked sex workers, undocumented immigrant factory and service workers (p. 11). With respect to the classification of female marriage migrants, Cuban (2010) noted that immigrant women in scholarly research have been generally dichotomized into the following categories: "forced (refugees, asylum seekers, trafficked) and those who are voluntary (economic migrants, travelling grandparents, gap-year students, entrepreneurs)." According to Simons (2001), some types of immigrants like political or economic immigrants, received more scholarly attention than the spousal and fiancé(e) entrants, who were viewed as having less or no impact on state interests (p. 6).

According to Kofman (2004), family-formation migration is drawing increasing attention in academia due to a fast-growing volume in this type of migration, mostly from

Asian countries toward other more developed Asian or Western countries. In South Korea, the extant of the marriage migration phenomenon became hard to ignore—more than 30% of all new marriages in the country are formed between native men and foreign-born women (Kim, 2011). This type of migration was for years considered less significant in political and economic senses than, for instance, the labor migration of women seeking employment as maids or care workers. “In Vietnam, labor migration is celebrated as a development strategy, while marriage migration is criticized for being ‘trafficking’ or ‘women’s commodification’; migrants themselves are labelled by state voices as the ‘shame of the nation’ and ‘undutiful daughters not fulfilling their duties towards their country and families’” (Bélanger et al., 2009, in Bélanger & Linh, 2011, p. 63).

Echoing this idea, Lee (2013) explicates that the rapid changes in the 21st century caused by globalization processes led to a new type of migration—international marriage migration that was largely overlooked in the previous migration studies. In spite of the fact that ‘transnational brides’(Plambech, 2008, p. 32) constitute just one segment of a large army of female migrants, Pagaduan, LeeAn, & Lopez (2008) believes that the political and cultural responses to this phenomenon are of increasing interest to various social movements and particularly to feminist movements worldwide. “The situation of marriage migrants challenges us with its wide range of problems, issues, and discourses, given that migration is intertwined with practices of gender, race and class” (Pagaduan, LeeAn, & Lopez, 2008, para 5). Marriage migration also covers diverse discourses on the role of the state, the role of gender and social networks, and citizenship, as well as control

and regulation of the match-making industry (Simons, 2001; Constable, 2003; Johnson, 2007).

Academic Discourses on International Marriage Migration

The majority of scholars (Simons, 2001; Constable, 2003b; Constable, 2003; Pessar and Mahler, 2006; Johnson 2007; Plambech, 2008) have been continuously expressing their disagreement with the vast body of academic research and media reports on marriage migration that picture it as harmful for the women involved, at the least, or problematic in many aspects in general. The literature on international marriage of the 1990s (Jedlicka, 1988; Lee, 1992; Glodava, 1994; Chun, 1996; Hughes, 2000; Lloyd, 2000; Langevin and Belleau, 2000) have focused on the idea of victimization and objectification of women seeking a foreign partner.

Investigating the feminist discourses on Thai marriage immigrant women in Denmark, Plambech (2008) emphasized five distinct themes that the author believes are equally relevant in broader international context. They go as follows: 1) women are perceived as victims of illegal trafficking, 2) women are perceived as victims of domestic violence, 3) women are perceived to have "burnt all their bridges," 4) women are perceived to migrate for the same reasons as men, and 5) marriages are explained as a result of extreme poverty rather than embracing a global economic perspective (p. 33). With regards to Thai women in Europe, Plambech (2010) asserts that she found no evidence that these women were helpless victims, but rather, many of them appeared to be active, resourceful, and independent agents. Multiple scholars (Simons, 2001, Constable, 2005; Zheng, 2008; Kim, 2011) have since debunked the anti-trafficking discourses that unfairly conflated marriage migration with prostitution and sex-trafficking.

Statements like “The mail-order bride industry is comprised of an international network that traffics women from less developed countries to men in industrialized nations” (Elson, 1996, p. 367, in Simons, 2001, p.21) have been exposed as having no connection to reality (Simons, 2001, p. 16). Constable (2003) states that this view of victimization is outdated and “has its roots in the universalist feminist discourse of the 1970s, in which marriage was essentially considered as being suppressive, regardless of the woman’s own experience and opinions”(p. 6). Recent researches on marriage migration have vigorously contested another perception of the women as being void of personal agency and having no significant impact on global economic and sociopolitical arenas, mostly due to language barriers, lack of cultural and legislative knowledge, and dependent immigration status (Hugo, 2005; Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Bernstein, 2007; Constable, 2009).

Bélanger and Linh (2011) explain that the multiple lived experiences and survey results show that at the macro level, transnational marriages have substantial economic and social impact as “daughters who married abroad not only participated in decisions associated with the economic welfare of the family, such as purchasing land, buying expensive household assets, or building houses, they also exerted some authority in social aspects of family life, including education, health and the marriages of other family members”(p. 66).

According to McLelland and Mackie (2015), the decision of the women to migrate to the West for marriage purposes encompasses a multifaceted set of motives. Often such a decision can be made in accordance with “a personal or familial plan,” when “children from previous marriages are concerned, or when emigrating women expect and

are expected to send remittances to their native country" (p. 53). Although the upward socioeconomic mobility is a desirable outcome for female marriage immigrants, especially those from marginalized economies, the researchers warn against the pure pragmatic or economic interpretations of marriage migration. To them, this may contribute to further distortion of the image of marriage migrants as victims of commoditized relationships or cunning schemers (Constable, 2005; McLelland and Mackie, 2015). According to Plambech (2010), "personal choices and dreams of freedom, along with motherhood and love, are motives for migration at the micro-level" (p. 41).

Confronting another popular concept of migrant women who "burnt all the bridges," Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1995) explicate that as the women maintain multiple relationships with their homeland and simultaneously become firmly rooted in the new country by building their social and support networks, they can hardly be characterized as uprooted or disconnected from their country of origin due to their migration (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton, 1995, p. 48). Furthermore, the majority of contemporary researchers on marriage migration call for burying another archaism that has tainted the images of women looking for a husband abroad. They point out that the term *mail-order bride* (MOB), historically used to identify a woman migrating for the purpose of marrying a foreign man, may be humiliating in the modern realities, carrying a negative undertone of "forced to sell themselves in exchange for a better life"(Simons, 2001). The stigma and scandalizing nature of the MOB term allow the term to be used "by men against their partners in the context of deportation threats" (Simons, 2001, p. 147). At the same time it defames the men involved, picturing them as

social misfits with various personality problems, or sexists and racists who "have control in mind more than a loving and enduring relationship" (Glodava ,1994, p. 26).

According to McLelland and Mackie (2015), it is important to note that despite the fact that multiple contemporary analyses of the phenomenon emphasize the women's agency in the process of marriage migration, they maintain that the women are not guaranteed from encountering possible challenging circumstances and conflicts that can lead to marital violence and thus cause the women emotional and psychological stress. Referring to the possible dissonance of expectations, Plambech (2008) noted that "the marriage and the women are often far from what the men imagine. The woman is not just a 'sweet' girl, but an independent individual" (p. 44).

Discourses on Post-Soviet Marriage Migrants in the United States

The first evidence of Russian women coming to the United States on fiancée visas to marry an American citizen appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Štulhofer and Sandfort (2005) explain that the fall of the Iron Curtain and the disintegration of the Soviet empire triggered profound changes that shattered every aspect of life across the post-Soviet territories. The utopic communist and socialist ideologies gave way to the burgeoning processes of democracy and pluralism. However, the transitioning to the Westernized market-driven economy has negatively impacted common people who tried hard to survive the tough economic times.

The combination of these conditions, along with the advancement of the Internet after the 1990s, triggered a specific post-Soviet phenomenon (Hughes, 2004). Thousands of single and divorced women from the countries of the FSU were leaving to the United States through the help of international marriage agencies hoping "to find a solution to their social, economic, and personal problems" (Osipovich, 2004, p. 232). The

proliferation of such agencies in Russia and the United States, as well as the success of their social functions and marriage tours, was attributed to the lack of stigma associated with international marriage in the former Soviet Union. Unlike their Asian counterparts, especially in the Philippines, who perceived that "social functions were for prostitutes and military men", Russian women had no historical associations with regards to the mail-order bride business and were rather excited about possible pen-pal relationships with American men (Simons, 2001, p.160).

According to Osipovich (2004), the image of Russian women being presented to Western men portrays them as highly educated but still traditional and feminine, not like those career-oriented and demanding American women. Feminist researchers of the 1990s tend to sweepingly generalize on connection of the match-making agencies with organized crime, sex-traffickers, and further marginalization of Russian brides in the American society. Although admitting "the possibility that some women may find the jobs, romance, and opportunities they seek," Hughes (2004) and some other feminists still considered that women were in big danger of becoming "victims of violence, sexual exploitation, and trafficking" (p. 49).

Osipovich (2004) criticizes the relegation of societal problems of domestic violence to "the foreign brides," thus creating the false impression that violence does not exist in culturally homogenous marriages and in American society at large (p. 238). In her book *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband*, through interviews with Russian women, Johnson (2007) finds that behind the portrayals of marriage immigrant women as trafficked girls are, in fact, "active and driven individuals with agency"(p. 158). Johnson

(2007) concludes that perhaps the strongest motivation behind the women's desire to find a husband abroad is actually that "they are trying to find a husband" (p. 156).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to give voice to post-Soviet marriage immigrants with particular emphasis placed on the learning and adaptation to a new culture as they moved to the United States. I wanted to explore what motivated them to seek international marriage and what types of learning, both formal and informal, these women engaged in as they entered the new culture. Through the process of conducting interviews I intended to look into the common learning and transformation experiences of the women and conclude what aspects of Eastern European culture facilitated or hindered the process of their successful adaptation as they went through all the phases of meaning-making process, learning to become American.

Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

1) What are the life narratives the post-Soviet marriage immigrant women in the U.S., told through their own stories?
2) What are the common adaptation and learning experiences of the post-Soviet women who immigrated to the United States through international marriage agencies?

This chapter will provide a comprehensive explanation of the research design, sampling, data collection, analysis, and researcher subjectivity.

Research Design

My desire was to provide an engaging and compelling story of lived experiences of post-Soviet marriage immigrants. Not being concerned with causal determination,

prediction, or even generalization of findings, I sought to conduct a detailed analysis of the question being researched and fully represent the women's perspectives using their own voices. Shank (2002) defines qualitative research as "a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning" when researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience (p. 5). Merriam (2002) indicates that qualitative researchers are concerned with understanding various constructions and interpretations of reality at a particular point in time and in a particular context. According to Trochim (2006), qualitative study is subjective and may not even be concerned with generalizing themes and ideas, just "telling the story" and gathering rich description of the context, natural setting, or phenomena. My research questions not only exposed the phenomenon of post-Soviet marriage immigrants in the era after the collapse of the Soviet Union but explored the women's journeys through the adult learning lens.

Based on the previously mentioned explications and in consultation with my committee and my advisor, I believed that the qualitative approach was best fitting for this particular study. The nature of the study also led me to the choice of the cross-case analysis that normally facilitates the comparison of commonalities and difference in the events, activities, and processes that are the units of analyses in case studies (Denzin,1989). My research was especially suited for this approach because I was looking across the lives of post-Soviet immigrant women who became American through brokered marriage. I intended to look into the commonalities and differences of their acculturation and learning experiences in the new country. Thus, through cross-case analysis, I was able to accumulate knowledge from individual case studies and produce new knowledge by comparing and contrasting cases (Khan and VanWynsberghe, 2008).

One of the techniques in the cross-case analysis approach developed by Goldstone (1997) suggests that narratives are the keys to cross-case analysis. “Narratives can preserve the essence of the case during cross-case analysis. It could also be argued that constructing narrative models helps to facilitate comparison by encapsulating the case as a storyline” (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). Because the entire phenomenon of post-Soviet brides exploded after 1990, I was planning to cross-examine the cases that took place in the two decades following the fall of the Soviet Union. Thus, the study clearly can be viewed as a cross-case investigation of a relatively contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context presented through a qualitative narrative research approach (Creswell, 2012). Thus, as a part of my methodological perspective, I employed the logic of the narrative method because I was interested in investigating the intersection of transformation and learning with the adaptation experiences of a particular immigrant group. Researchers White (2000), Brock (1995), and Becker (1997) use narrative approaches to make sense of the personalized experiences of others in their own voice about their life stories. As a person continues their life’s journey, they continually experience and interact with the world around them. Sometimes those experiences can be complex and challenging, but they are always unique to each individual. One way of capturing the study participants’ life experiences is through the qualitative narrative approach, which “gives a rich understanding of an individual’s sense of his or her reality” (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 223). I paid close attention to the events, motives, actions, and desires in the participants’ stories, or narratives, to “construe significant wholes out of scattered events” (Ricoecur, 1991, p. 106).

My research on post-Soviet marriage immigrant women was not a theory to be tested but a storytelling, limited to a phenomenon linked to particular real-world experiences of these women rather than a formal quantitative theory. Not testing a prior hypothesis, through this study I intended to explore the particular nuances and their complex interrelationships as they related to these women experiences in the new cultural milieu (Stake, 1995, 2006).

Though I was looking to identify some commonalities and general themes, nonetheless generalizing over the entire population was not the purpose of my study. In my research attention was placed on adult learning and transformative experiences of the women who drastically changed their lives' trajectories when they immigrated to the United States through international marriage. A narrative method is usually represented in the form of biographies or autobiographies deeply and intimately examining the lives of a specific group of people with a common and unique experience that they all share Creswell (2012). The latter form of inquiry was presented in the current research through the methods of storytelling and detailed interpretation of women's narratives.

"Storytelling" (Zellermayer, 1997) is a holistic and natural way of unfolding one's life experiences, through recounting, retelling, and reflecting on a logical order of events to understand a specific phenomenon all members of the group under study share. In addition to our own narratives, we also develop narratives of our experiences with others as they impact and influence our lives. Narratives may be thought of as how people experience the world. According to Polkinghorne (1988), people who do not have narratives simply do not exist because life itself is a narrative. Narrative research is a

qualitative inquiry, with a tradition of interpretation, based on the common themes presented in the stories of research participants.

Thus, for this study, a cross-case analysis supplemented with the aspects of narrative research was employed. This let the researcher—who was a Russian speaker and former country-fellow of the participants—understand, highlight, and interpret their learning and adaptation experiences, as well as construct meaning from them, through the stories the women shared. Consequently, following Creswell's (2012) reasoning on employing a qualitative narrative approach, I wanted to emphasize that in no way was I intended to play the role of an "expert" who passed judgment on participants but rather an *active learner* who told the story from the participant's point of view.

Theoretical Framework

Current research is largely exploratory in nature with the goal to give voice to the study participants without locking them into a preconceived theoretical framework. However, the following frameworks: cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 1988), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), and empowerment theory (Rappaport, 1985) proved very useful in this exploration in two different ways. Kim's (1988) integrative theory served as the bases for my interview structure. Its three major facets: functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity led directly to the formulating of my research questions. During the analysis of the study two other theoretical frameworks proved useful as synthesizing theoretical concepts that helped me to organize my thoughts and ideas. The first of the two was Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory and the second was Rappaport's (1985) empowerment theory. Thus, the combination of these theoretical frameworks influenced the study by giving voice to the women's personal experiences, shaping the interview instrument, and

guiding the construction of the research questions and analysis. It also provided the means to examine the crossroads of the transformative learning and acculturation experiences of post-Soviet marriage immigrants, with particular emphasis on assertion of identity, recognition of common acculturation strategies, and the accompanying individual learning and transformation.

The emphasis of Kim's (1988) cross-cultural adaptation theory is placed on commonly shared adaptation experiences of immigrants coming into contact with an unfamiliar environment. This theory is regarded as a multivariate phenomenon, in which host communication competence and the experience of a gradual personal transformation are necessary "to establish a relatively stable and reciprocal relationship with the host environment" (Kim, 2010, para. 1). In addition, despite the variation in their unique circumstances, all strangers are believed to go through "the process of dynamic unfolding of the natural human tendency to struggle for an internal equilibrium in the face of often adversarial environmental conditions" (Kim, 2010, para. 2).

Mezirow's (1991b) transformative learning theory (TLT) was the second conceptual frame I employed in my study. Along with Berry's acculturation theories it served as a guide in formulation of the research methods and analysis. Transformative learning theory is focused on adult learning. Meaning structures (perspectives and schemes) are a major component of the theory. With regards to immigrant adults, successfully navigating the demands of acculturation requires a variety of skills to be learned and possibly to relearn how to learn.

Rappaport (1985) believes that empowerment "suggests a sense of control over one's life in personality, cognition, and motivation. It expresses itself at the level of

feelings, at the level of ideas about self -worth, at the level of being able to make a difference in the world around us... We all have it as a potential" (p. 17). Although Julian Rappaport was not the first to introduce empowerment, he was the first to develop a theoretical concept of empowerment as an approach to address social problems that result from powerlessness. There are several different approaches for examining empowerment. For purposes of this study, I will examine the phenomenon of post-Soviet marriage immigrants through the lens of individual empowerment. According to Pinderhughes (1983), individual empowerment involves our past relationships with others, our environments as we have interacted with the world, the decisions we have made, and our abilities to cope when dealing with circumstances that are unique to our experiences.

The process of combining cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 1988), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), and empowerment theory (Rappaport, 1985) to build the theoretical framework for this study will give voice to these women on the ways *they* see the world, engaging in different forms of learning and being agents of their lives. It is evident that geographical dislocation, culture shock, and the language barrier that the post-Soviet marriage immigrants face on arrival to the United States causes a major paradigm shift that will demand extensive transformation and change (Harper, 1994; Holt, 1994; Kennedy, 1994; Lee, 1997; Lyon, 2001; Taylor, 1993; Temple, 1999; Whalley, 1995). It was important to explore *what* they learned in their journey, but even more important is *how* they learned it. Taylor (2007) tells that the type of learning, stemming from coping with all sorts of psychological, social, and cultural adjustment, may require taking risks, feeling vulnerable, experiencing pain and emotions, and having one's attitudes and assumptions challenged. Taylor is convinced that

"transformative learning offers a theory of learning that is uniquely adult, […], grounded in the nature of human communication" (2007, p. 181).

Sample Selection

For my face-to-face interviews my goal was to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of post-Soviet marriage immigrants. I was cognizant about the importance of deciding about the site selection, whom to include in the research sample, methods of gaining access to participants, and the rationale for these sampling parameters. The fact that this research was conducted as a qualitative study and the participants had to meet certain criteria to be selected dictated a choice of purposeful sample rather than random one. In particular, a *snowball sampling* selection was employed that worked like chain referrals. The researcher used personal connections as well as referrals from neighbors and friends to locate potential participants. Therefore, despite the fact that the participants were scattered all over the Metro Atlanta area, the researcher was able to successfully locate and recruit them for the interviews. According to Biernacki and Waldorf (1981), a snowball sampling technique is "particularly applicable when the focus of study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and thus requires the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study" (p. 141). Ultimately, 10 people were identified for the interviews. My participants met the following requirements:

- Russian-speaking women from the post-Soviet bloc countries
- Came to the United States after 1990
- Used various matchmaking agencies and internet sites

The reasons for choosing this particular time frame were dictated, first, by the nature of the phenomenon under study and, second, to allow enough time for these women to be engaged in the learning, acculturation, and adaptation processes in the new country. Selecting her participants, the researcher focused on Russian-American families in which the husband and wife met through an international matchmaking agency. Living in Georgia for more than 15 years now, through different social circles the researcher has encountered a large number of such families, as well as the women who made their way to becoming American but for whom the "marriage part" of the deal did not work. Therefore, it was imperative to be aware of personal bias and the influence of the past relationships in the case when the researcher knew the participant and her family intimately. Recognizing the importance of capturing the heterogeneity in my sample selection, the researcher tried to maintain the most important possible variations that were relevant to her study. Prior to recruitment, institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University of Georgia.

The researcher contacted her potential participants by phone or in person, explaining the nature of the study and asking if they would be interested to participate in an interview. After the participants gave their initial verbal agreements to partake in the interviews, the researcher e-mailed the informed consent form (Appendix A) along with the interview questions (Appendix B) to each participant to provide more detailed information on the nature and the process of the study. After the e-mails and phone calls were made, the researcher waited to hear back from the women to set up the meetings.

Across the span of five months, ten out of the eleven women who originally agreed to participate in the study made time to meet for the interview. The researcher

investigated 10 cases that aimed to illustrate some range of diversity within the selected group with a possibility of conducting additional phone interviews upon reaching the data saturation point. According to Seidman (2006), my task as an interviewer was to put the participant's experience into context by asking them to tell as much as possible about themselves in light of the topic to the present time. The sites for the interviews were selected in a way that was convenient for the participants and could ensure quiet settings, conducive for confidentiality. I aimed to obtain enough of participants' data to substantiate recurring or common themes that would emerge.

Data Collection

According to Creswell (2009), Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010), Marshall and Rossman (2006), qualitative researchers rely on the following core procedures for collecting data: interviews, observations, review of documents, and audiovisual materials. These methods provide the means to examine the key dimensions of a problem while allowing the researcher to deeply understand participant motivations as well as to focus on participant behavior and attitudes (Meurer et.al, 2007). Because no two research projects are the same, the researcher ultimately determines what methods work best. The researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon. Thus, the researcher is viewed as the primary "instrument" of data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). Multiple experts explicate that researcher's engagement in reflective analysis that include careful consideration of the phenomenon under study as well the researcher's own assumptions and behavior is vital to the quality of the research (Watt, 2007). Thus, reflexivity is essentially the process of examining both oneself as researcher and the research relationship.

According to Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso (2010), one should not expect qualitative data collection to be a quick and carefree endeavor—usually it turns out to be time-consuming and intense. The process of data collection in qualitative research aims to provide evidence for the experience it is investigating (Polkinghorne, 2005). Therefore, multiple forms of interviewing became the most widely used approach to the production of qualitative data (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). In case studies the types of research questions framed as "who," "what," "where," "how," and "why" determine the relevant strategy to be used (Tellis, 1997, p. 7). The data collection methods in this study stemmed directly from considering those questions.

Interview-based research has numerous strengths and advantages when the goal is to present a story "in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to the experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects" (Seidman, 2006, p. 51). A definition of a qualitative interview is provided by Denzin and Lincoln (2000):

> The interview is a conversation—the art of asking questions and listening. It is not a neutral tool, for at least two people create the reality of the interview situation. In this situation, answers are given. Thus, the interview produces situated understandings grounded in specific interactional episodes. This method is influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer, including race, class, ethnicity, and gender. (p. 643)

Interview Process

For the purpose of this study data were collected through 10 face-to face individual interviews with Russian-speaking marriage immigrants from former Soviet countries who came to the United States through international brokered marriages. I employed *semi-structured open-ended interviews,* which are most frequently used in educational research because they allow "depth to be achieved by providing the

opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 88).

The interviews with each participant differed in length and ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. I conversed with my participants about their ideas and needs in determining an interview setting that ideally should be a quiet location, free from distractions, and conducive for a confidential conversation. Thus, the interviews took place in a mutually agreed setting that was appropriate for audio-recording and note-taking. Most interviews with the women took place in women's homes or at Starbucks cafes, with the exception of one interview that took place at the researcher's house. After arriving at the interview site, I went over the purpose of the study, the amount of time that was needed to complete the interview, and the rights of the participant. I further obtained their verbal permission to audio-record the interview and take notes. Participants were given the opportunity to indicate their preference with regards to English or Russian language and to choose a pseudonym for anonymity purposes.

Preparing for conducting the semi-structured open-ended interviews, I created an interview guide consisting of a limited set of questions that would lead my participants to share their stories of surviving and navigating a new culture. I decided on the sequence of questions and each interviewee was asked the same set of questions. Nonetheless, the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed me to bring up new questions during the interview to clarify and expand participant descriptions, depending on what the woman was talking about. This approach gave me the freedom of adjusting my topics to the interview context and participants I was interviewing.

In developing an interview protocol, I intended to ask questions that were likely to harvest as much information about the women's histories and experiences as possible and, of course, to be able to address the objectives of the research. I was also mindful that a good qualitative interview protocol should contain questions that were "open-ended, neutral, sensitive, and understandable" (Gill, Stewart, Treasue, and Chadwick, 2008, p. 292). It is advised to start with questions that participants can answer easily to alleviate any initial tension. I started with a couple of opening questions that elicited participants to take me on general "grand tour" of their past lives followed by "mini tour" on their first day in the United States. This later helped create a brief "case history" for each of the participants and helped me get a clearer understanding and glean insights into how their personal histories affected the outcome of the study.

Then, the researcher progressed to several key questions that helped define the areas to be explored. This allowed me to pursue further elaboration from the participants to gain greater collaboration. The Interview Guide is attached in the Appendix B. I did not test any preconceived theories or ideas but rather asked participants to reconstruct their experiences or support their opinions. It was necessary to address the language preferences at the beginning, because I was well cognizant of issues regarding interviewing participants for whom English was not the first language. According to Seidman (2006), as in most issues regarding interviewing, "there is not one right way to respond to these situations, except to recognize the importance of language and culture to thought. With that awareness, both interviewer and participants can experiment with ways of talking to each other that most authentically reflect thinking" (p. 105).

The question of language preference was discussed with each participant at the onset and the interviews were conducted in whatever language the women felt comfortable with, even if it meant switching back and forth between Russian and English. As a native speaker of the Russian language, the researcher was able to conduct her interviews in Russian whenever the participants chose that option. Three out of 10 women stated that they felt more at ease speaking Russian, which eliminated the problem of a language barrier and created an atmosphere of trust between the participants and the researcher.

The Russian was then transcribed into English for the bilingual quotations to be used in the study. Each bilingual quote that I have carried forward here, is marked with an appropriate note to indicate that its original Russian version can be found in the Appendix C. The researcher intended to convey the women's perspectives, reflections, and stories on whether the international marriage worked for them or not and what they had to learn in the process of becoming American. It was my primary focus to make sure that the meaning the women implied in their responses was not lost or distorted.

During the next stage, the interviews conducted in English were transcribed verbatim with field notes incorporated into the transcripts. Field notes contained the description of environment in which the interview took place as well as the participants' behaviors, facial expressions, gestures, body language, clothing, and other nonverbal indicators. According to Polkinghorne (2005), data from these sources could be used to shed light on the meaning of a participant's oral comments. After transcribing two or three individual interviews, the process was followed by writing my reflections and thoughts and identifying the common themes (Seidman, 2006). Merriam (1985) suggests

"checking, verifying, testing, probing, and confirming collected data as you go, arguing that this process will follow in a funnel-like design resulting in less data gathering in later phases of the study along with a congruent increase in analysis checking, verifying, and confirming" (p. 17). Interview transcripts spread a little over 70 pages of printed text.

I kept track of my ongoing learning with written memos in a research process notebook that later proved vital in analysis and writing up my findings. I finished data collection when I perceived that the common themes had emerged and that the point of saturation had been achieved. I then further translated Russian quotes and combined and organized participants' quotes by major themes. However, data also emanated from researcher's observations, recorded in field notes and memos.

Field Notes and Memos

"Observation is the technique of gathering data through direct contact with an object—usually another human being. The researcher watches the behavior and documents the properties of the object" (Potter, 1996, p. 98). As Polkinghorne (2005) explains, observational notes can be recorded during an interview, but most often they are made immediately after its conclusion. The latter was the case with me. I was cognizant of the importance of immediacy in recording the field notes because it allowed for better recollection of observations and deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. Whenever I recalled further contributing observations during a review of the interview audiotape, I would incorporate the observational notes, often called memos, into the interview transcripts.

Data Preparation and Analysis

In my data analysis I employed the constant comparison method. According to Glazer & Strauss (1967), the compare and contrast approach or "the constant comparison

method" is based on the idea that themes represent the ways in which texts are either similar or different from each other (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 101). It prompted the researcher to conduct a line-by-line analysis, constantly asking herself, "What is this about?" and "How does it differ from the preceding or following statements?" I have employed the analytic process of constant comparison that started from the point of data collection until the concluding phases of the research study.

At the start of the research, the comparison within the first three interviews was conducted. I listened to the audio files as needed to clarify any confusing statements on the transcripts. Then, I read each transcript, took mental notes, and wrote general thought in the margins. After I coded each transcript, I have opened two blank documents for each research question. I then went through each transcript and copied and pasted all information that would be relevant to each specific research question. As I labeled key concepts, phrases, and words, I would keep recording these codes and theoretical memos (hunches and insights) in a researcher codebook. This analytic procedure would be repeated for each interview thereafter. "Memos are also produced during the analysis of data to capture ideas and thoughts of the researcher as they come to mind" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 144).

I then went on to generating categories from the codes, which is the next step in the constant comparative method. While making notes on the margins, I paid close attention if a reference to the same category was made more than once in the course of an interview. I would compare the fragments relating to this category to find out whether new information about this category was given or whether the same information was

repeated. I further analyzed the fragments to find out what they had in common and how they differed and in what context the interviewee made the remarks.

Therefore, the next step of my process included integrating codes, categories, and memos, and field notes to construct relevant themes from the data. I finally came up with several smaller themes which I **t**ransferred into an outline, with the concepts being main headings and categories being subheadings.

Quality of Data

Qualitative researchers do not subscribe to the concepts of validity and reliability as those originated as the criteria for the quantitative research. Instead, qualitative researchers developed other indicators of the quality of data, fully realizing the significance of the issue. A research of a high quality can help "understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing" (Eisner, 1991, p. 58). In this study two claims to the quality of the data are made: trustworthiness and credibility. Trustworthiness is associated with rigor, which refers to adherence to high standards in the conducting of research (Davies and Dodd, 2002). Morse et.al. (2002) argue that "without rigor, the research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility" (p. 2).

To improve trustworthiness in my qualitative research, I ensured generating rich, thick description (Merriam and Simpson, 2000) of the participants' experiences through detailed accounts of their stories. During the interview, as Creswell (2009) suggests, I used the participant's feedback to verify the accuracy of my perceptions and understanding as a tool to gain trustworthiness. In addition, I deliberately and actively engaged in the process of reflectivity: critical self-study to identify potential predispositions.

Various data sources, which consisted of face-to face audio-taped interviews, generating field notes, and using relevant literature to substantiate findings and claims, became yet another way to ensure the quality of the data. Two close and trusted colleagues served as a peer observers and provided valuable feedback during the analysis and interpretation phases of the study. Finally, an expert in Russian language and literature, who is an associate professor of ESOL at a local college, was involved in validating the quality of the Russian-English translation of the women's original quotes.

Credibility means establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the research (Trochim, 2006). The in-depth nature of this research and the fact that the participants shared the same cultural background, language, gender, and age group with the researcher was an added advantage to the author's credibility. The high level of trust was valuable because it created an instantaneous connection and a sense of intimacy between the researcher and the interviewees. The executive summary of the findings was sent to the participants as they are ultimately the ones who can judge the credibility of the results.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The fact that I was interviewing people from the Russian community of Atlanta, of which I am a member, could definitely carry some limitations and ethical issues. One of the respondents I knew personally, so I had to reconcile the two conflicting dynamics of the informality of the communication with the formal protocol of an informed consent form and formalized interaction between the researcher and the participant. I was honest with my participants about who I was, what my research was about, why I wanted to talk to them, and what I was going to do with the information obtained. I kept the raw data locked and protected and tried to ensure its accuracy to best of my ability.

This study has a variety of limitations, starting with the fact that 1) it explored a small number of cases, as is often the case in qualitative research, 2) all of the cases were confined to a certain geographical, Metro-Atlanta area, and 3) all of the cases where drawn from the same, middle social class. This selection excluded the women who could be residing in rural areas, belong to a lower social class, and whose adaptation experience was not successful or resulted in returning to the home country. Thus, the findings may not be transferrable to the whole population. Although I would argue that, even if the results might not represent all the members of the population under study, they certainly represent to a large extent the views, opinions, and attitudes of the significant portion of post-Soviet marriage immigrant women in the United States.

Subjectivity Statement

The role of "being the primary instrument for data collection and analysis carries with it a responsibility to identify one's shortcomings and biases that might impact the study" (Merriam and Simpson, 2000, p. 98). As a woman of Russian origin, as an immigrant, and as an adult educator, I brought my own experiences, opinions, and predispositions to the research. I was cognizant that talking to my participants could stir emotions and trigger all kinds of biases. I tried to identify and disclose them up front and made my best effort to keep them out of the process as much as possible.

It is hard to dispute that researching within one's own ethnic group adds clear advantages in the ability to speak the language, relate to the cultural norms and practices of the researched group, and so on (Cherti, 2008). The shared ethnic identity certainly helped me, as a researcher, to overcome the access issues as well as provided with a unique perspective on some of the important underpinning issues within the researched population.

My story of immigration started differently from the population in the research because I won the Green Card Lottery for my family of four and was granted the legal status right at the airport. However, my own learning and adaptation experiences had a significant number of overlapping aspects with the Russian women who came to America through international matchmaking agencies. To clarify the nature of the lottery, mentioned above, I would like to add that it is congressionally mandated program for receiving a United States Permanent Resident Card. It was established in the 1990 under the official name of the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program (DV Program). Through random drawing among all entries, it administers 50,000 permanent resident visas annually to provide for a new class of immigrants, known as "diversity immigrants" (DV immigrants). Importantly, these are individuals who are from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States.

I was aware of a number of possible limitations in conducting inter-cultural research that usually stem from the power relationship between the interviewer and interviewees (Zontini, 2004, in Cherti, 2008). The power dynamic was palpable when the women felt as if they divulged every detail of their lives during the interview while knowing very little about the researcher, who despite the same ethnicity was still a stranger to them. Thus, often after I would turn off the recorder, the participants looked at me in clear anticipation of a reciprocal sharing. When that was the case, I readily continued the conversation, answering as many questions about myself as the women had.

Another source of strain that I was aware of, could arise when the interviewees felt under scrutiny from the co-ethnic researcher who they perceived could assess or

judge their behavior against certain standards of their mutually shared culture. As a result, the participants might tend to alter, consciously or subconsciously, their positions on issues related to family, politics, culture, or religion (Cherti, 2008). The possible ethical issues that sometimes occur in intercultural research refer to situations when the interviewer often subconsciously highlights a specific ethnic identification while downplaying the other in a desire to create a greater rapport with the interviewee. When conducting the interviews, I tried to control for such instances but in a few cases I found myself drawn into this very dynamic. When analyzing the data, I had to be careful to avoid further stigmatizing the participants, when at times my subjectivities could interfere with the interpretation of the statements of the participants.

CHAPTER 4

THE WOMEN'S INDIVIDUAL STORIES

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the study related to research question one: What are the life narratives of the post-Soviet marriage immigrant women in the United States, told through their own stories? One of the true virtues of narrative research is that you get to look at individuals in the entirety of their lives, contextualized and connected, as seen through their eyes and told in their own voices. As I approach the overall research goal of how the women adapt to their radically different lives in America and what learning they go through in the process, I am not looking for a way to overly condense the data into a few themes or categories. Instead, my desire is to consider each woman's narrative as a complete whole, maintaining the value of the study participants as complete and complex individuals.

Consequently, I broke this chapter into two separate sections. In the beginning of this section, I will restrict myself to summarizing each woman's narrative and in the end I would like to present a table of data through which some commonalities and differences of the women narratives are discernible.

Alina

Alina is a 41-year-old woman, blond and blue-eyed, who looks younger than her age. Her mannerisms are of a calm, confident person, showing little emotion. The interview took place at her house. She lives in a well-established subdivision in a traditional colonial brick home with a covered porch wrapping around the front of the house. The inside revealed a neatly organized and carefully decorated first floor. A

private pool in the backyard was visible through a large glass door in the living room. Alina is a housewife now, taking care of her two children, one elementary-age and one in middle school-age. While I was setting up for the interview, the doorbell rang and Alina explained that her Russian friend, a young mother, was bringing her young daughter for a play date and staying to watch all the kids so that Alina and I could talk without interruptions. Alina's husband was at work at the time of our meeting. The interview was conducted in English on June 6, 2015, and took a little over sixty minutes.

Summarized Narrative

Alina is originally from Minsk, Belarus, a former Soviet republic. She grew up in a well-off family by post-Soviet Belarusian standards. Both of her parents worked as high executives for the largest construction company in the country, with her mother being the indisputable authority around the house. Alina earned an education degree from a local state university and then got a business degree from a private college, where economics was taught in English by a Canadian professor. She was a good student and even thought she was one of the best in her economics class, attributing her success to her decent English skills. Two years later, out of curiosity, Alina and a few of her girlfriends sent out their information to an international matchmaking agency.

Alina met her husband during a social organized by the aforementioned international marriage agency in Moscow. At the time, she was visiting with her girlfriend who lived in the Russian capital. Earlier, Alina had received an invitation letter in the mail from the agency describing the whereabouts of the event. The girls decided to go. This was not the first social Alina attended. Similar events were held from time to time in her own city, Minsk. She characterized them as "a bunch of old guys interested in

younger girls," where some men had children older than the women in attendance. After one of these events in Minsk, Alina decided that the socials were a waste of time and borderline insulting to her young, beautiful, educated self. So she made the decision to disregard the numerous invitations from marriage agencies she would receive in the future as well as to leave unanswered the more than 300 letters she had received from American men since signing up for the agency.

But this time, in Moscow, Alina and her friend decided that the invitation to the event held in the large five-star hotel, The Rossiya, sounded attractive. The music, the dessert, and the champagne came free with the opportunity to meet potential American husbands. Alina described a big party–like event with approximately 85 American men with interpreters at their side, sauntering and mingling in the ballroom of the hotel with about 800 Russian women. That evening, in August 1999, Alina met a man who was originally from Ellijay, Georgia. He was a former Navy officer who had long been fascinated with Russia and its history. One day, he was driving in his car when an ad for the agency European Connections offering "marriage tours" to Russia piqued his interest. That was how he would later find himself at The Rossiya hotel in Moscow. That evening Alina fell in love: "He looked so young, you would not tell any age difference, even though he was 10 years older than me." They spent two weeks in Moscow and a few months later they met in Poland for his birthday.

By Christmas time, on Dec. 23, 1999, Alina arrived in Atlanta's airport on a fiancée (K1) visa. After cold winters in Belarus, the warm Atlanta weather was a pleasant surprise as Alina stepped off the plane in her long mink coat. They married in February as the immigration protocol required, otherwise Alina had to go back home and lose her

visa. The marriage happened in court with no dress and no rings. She whispered to him during the process that this was not a real wedding and that she would have to wait and see how their relations unfolded in the future. Drawing from her previous relationships, Alina was afraid that her partner's true nature would soon start revealing itself and it would be much different from her first impressions.

Their first Christmas together was spent at Alina's in-laws' house in North Georgia. Alina recalls: "They were a very simple family living there in Ellijay, Georgia, and here I am … I came dressed up as a typical Russian woman. I was wearing a peach Channel costume, high heels, and my very long mink fur coat. They looked at me funny."

Initially, the in-laws thought Alina was a gold-digger—a poor girl from Belarus that came to marry their son for citizenship. However seeing her in person dispelled these thoughts and their new impression of her was that of a daughter of the Russian mafia. "Honestly, I did not care much. Because… I was in love! It was like… I did not even see things for real," Alina mused. With noticeable satisfaction she added that her husband's hometown friends looked at him as if he won the lottery. Time passed, and to Alina's delight, the more she learned about her husband, the deeper she fell in love with him: "He was better and better the more I learned about him—it was experience I never had before. Usually, it works opposite." The in-laws were also growing more sweet and supportive toward her, the only slight problem being communication with her father-in-law: "His father had a strong Southern accent that I still could not understand, whatever he would ask me… I would just nod, smile and say 'yes.'"

After about 6 months in America, Alina's mood started to change. She got desperately homesick: "I missed my family, it felt like a piece of you was torn apart. It

was so painful… like you had to say good bye to everything." She also said that it was like her rose-colored glasses were removed and she started seeing everything around her more clearly. Even American friendliness was not appealing to her anymore because she felt that nobody was genuinely interested or cared about her except her husband who was her biggest support during that difficult time. He would take her with him when he traveled on business, doing all he could to not let her feel lonely. Soon, she got her driver's license and signed up for English courses at a local college. Alina shared with her ESL teacher who emigrated from Germany many years ago about how much she was missing home. The teacher explained her about the W-curve that she believed was a common pattern of adaptation for immigrants, especially women, and included the experience of returning home. "Oh my dear," her teacher said, "you need to go home, spend some time at home." Following her advice, Alina did go back to spend some time in Minsk with her family and friends. On her return back to the United States she was completely cured from her depression.

When one day she called European Connections to ask them to take off her ad, Alina was offered a job in that agency. She had to make a lot of phone calls during the day, speaking English to the American clients. It was very challenging in the beginning but in several months the language barrier was not a problem anymore. The couple's social circle kept growing as a very sociable and communicable Alina met and made friends with other Russian-American couples. When Alina and her husband "found God," the couple joined and became active in a local church, which exposed them to an even larger community of like-minded people.

Seven years after their marriage, their family unit was well-settled and they were confident enough in one another to decide to bring children into their life. Alina believes that she is deeply transformed by American culture and even more by her faith. She believes she learned a lot about relationships from her husband, overcoming the tendency to sometimes be rude and controlling, a pattern of behavior she grew up learning in her own family. Alina described herself as being well-adjusted in this "land of opportunities," where she chooses not to participate in the materialistic rat race anymore but rather concentrate on faith and spirituality. When Norbekov's courses on achieving inner healing and self-actualization came to Atlanta, Alina signed up immediately and discovered a lot about the ability to create harmony within herself and how to use those skills for making the world a better place.

Olga

Olga's interview was conducted in her home. A petite woman with dark short hair and a cigarette in her hand greeted me as she let me into the front door. As she smiled at me I could not help but notice that she looked very tired. Two hairless cats and a small furry dog were lounging in the living room. We went out onto the back porch and sat at the glass round table, overlooking an in-ground swimming pool. Further away in the backyard I could see a tidy, well-maintained vegetable garden that, as Olga explained, was her pride and joy. As we chatted a few minutes before the interview, Olga told me that it was her boyfriend's house and that her 18-year-old daughter lived there with them. Olga said that she would prefer to speak English, and I turned on the audio-recording with her permission. The interview took place on July 23, 2015, and lasted a little over an hour and a half.

Summarized Narrative

Olga came to the United States in 2007 from a small industrial town that is near a big Russian city, Ufa. She earned her doctoral degree in psychology and had a successful career working as psychologist for the local police force. Back in Russia, Olga had been married for fourteen years and had a daughter. Her husband unexpectedly left her for a woman 20 years younger. Olga felt betrayed and destroyed. “It was an extremely painful moment for me,” Olga shared, but she could not discuss her problems with her co-workers: “I was the only psychologist for seven hundred people—who could not manage her own life… it would not look good.” Neither her friends nor her mother’s consolations were helping, so she resorted to the Internet, where she felt she could be more open about her feelings: “I put an ad [with a marriage agency] but mostly to be able to meet new people and talk to them freely like you would open up to a stranger on the train.” The idea to escape the city, the country, and her past life became a huge driving force. “I have never had an idea, never dreamt of leaving Russia—but in light of the recent events in my life, I was ready to go anywhere, even to Africa if that would be where I could go.”

She met her future husband on the Internet. He was from Georgia and happened to speak fluent Russian because he came to the United States from Russia as a teenager. After a short period of correspondence, they met in Saint Petersburg, where he was originally from. He came to visit his mother and five other women he met on the Internet. Olga had no idea that she was one of many, she would find that out later in America, and quickly decided that he was the right person to help her to change her life for better and for good. They communicated for another year after that meeting before she came to the United States. She remembers how she arrived in the Atlanta airport and got immediately

and hopelessly lost. Her Russian cell phone did not work anymore so she could not get in touch with her new husband, who was waiting for her somewhere in that enormous airport. They did find each other eventually and their honeymoon started. She left her 10-year-old daughter behind with her mother until her situation in the United States settled. Her daughter would joined them in 6 months. The relationship between the newlyweds rapidly deteriorated. A substantial sum of money, which Olga brought with her after selling her apartment in Russia, dissipated within a month, paying off her husband's credit card debts. Soon, after Olga's money was completely gone, her husband announced that Olga would have to contribute $1850 per month to be able to keep living in the house because his financial situation was difficult at the moment.

She started working immediately for a Russian-owned senior care company. Working for Russians and with Russians five days a week, mornings and nights, became a major obstacle for Olga in acquiring English skills. The only source of practicing English available to her at that time was helping her daughter with school assignments. Together they did the homework and together they progressed in English.

She did not have a car of her own—her husband would drop her at work on the way to his job because there was no money, he said, to buy a car for her. The next two years Olga spent working two to three jobs, deeply depressed and having a heavy heart, leaving her daughter alone with the husband. Olga suspected that he inappropriately touched the girl and tried to molest her when Olga was not at home. She was afraid to ask her daughter directly because she did not want to scare her.

Olga saved money for a car and planned her escape, in spite of the fact that she still had not received her green card yet. One day she took all the documents with her to

work to make copies so that she could file for divorce. When her husband came home and found out that his passport along with all Olga's documents had disappeared from the drawer, he called the police accusing his wife of stealing his passport. On returning home from work, Olga was confronted by several police officers, who put the spouses and a child each into a separate room for questioning. After a short conversation with Olga and her daughter, the husband was taken in cuffs into police custody and a restraining order was issued for him not get close to Olga and her daughter before the court ruled its final verdict. Eventually, her husband spent a few months in jail and their divorce was finalized.

Through her work at the senior care center, Olga met another man of Russian origin who was able to assist Olga in getting her life back on track. Although they did not marry, he bought a house so that Olga and her daughter could move in with him and helped both women pursue their academic dreams. Olga is now finishing her master's program in physical therapy and working on her thesis. For the past two and half years, she has been spending all her time in the labs and over the textbooks. During her term at the university, in the little time remaining from school, Olga was giving private piano and Russian language classes to children, supplementing her family's income. Olga's daughter is now a freshman in a pre-med program in one of the Atlanta's universities, also with a lot of moral and financial support from her new family.

Jenny

The interview with Jenny took place at her house in midtown Atlanta, a two-storied brick house with high ceilings decorated in traditional style that seemed neatly organized. Julia is a tall and slim 42-year-old woman with piercing blue eyes. There are a row of glamorous portraits of a young Julia in the hallway, featuring her former career of

a fashion model. She greeted me with a big smile and invited me to sit at the kitchen island, where our conversation started. Before I turned on the audio-recording, we chatted a little bit in Russian and Julia shared that her 5-year-old son, a long-awaited and much desired child, was in art camp at the time of the interview and that her husband, a self-employed businessman, was at work. The interview took place on June 26, 2015, and was conducted in English.

Summarized Narrative

Jenny is from Kursk, Russia. Before emigration, Julia lived with her mother, father, and a younger sister. Julia earned an education degree from the local Pedagogical Institute but did not get a chance to work in her profession, a common situation in post-Soviet Russia during the transition to a market economy. Instead, along with her friend, Julia started a fashion studio where seamstresses made dresses that the two businesswomen designed. The studio participated in fashion shows in Russia and in Germany. At one point, a friend of a friend who just started an international marriage agency offered Julia to advertise herself on the agency Web site, free of charge. She was supposed to send her pictures and create a profile and become one of the first women the site would advertise.

The offer sounded interesting but Julia had been busy with work and for the next two months did not act on that offer. Only after another insistent plea from the director of the agency did Julia come into the office with her pictures and the matchmaking process started. Very soon, she was called to the agency to read the first five letters addressed to her. The director served as an interpreter, helping sort through the letters and write back to the men. Jenny said she picked one man’s letter, which seemed clear, simple, and gave

a sense of stability and sincerity. She also said that even though he had the worst pictures out the other four candidates, there was something in his eyes, some warmth and kindness that immediately drew her attention. She responded to him, and in two weeks they were talking on the phone every day. Meanwhile, more than 100 new letters were awaiting Julia's attention at the agency. She looked through some of them but quickly gave up, stating that she had no time or energy to go through such a pile of letters. She decided to keep communicating with her first pen-pal choice.

He was fifteen years older than she, from Georgia, and made an impression of a decisive and honest person. To this day, she believes it was destiny. In two months they met in Moscow. She acquired some English skills at school and even had some minimal practice in conversational English during her trips to Germany. Yet in spite of the fact that the language barrier was very real, they were able to understand each other. After that first meeting, they decided to get married. They met six more times, travelling together to Moscow, Germany, and other places, before Jenny's final departure to the United States in January 2004. She said she was excited and not anxious at all coming to the United States. "I don't remember that I worried at all. I did not have any anxiety—I did feel like I am going home."

Jenny's husband told her that she did not have to work but if she ever decided to, he would support and help her in every way. Julia was mainly eager to become a mother and have as many kids as providence allows. Meanwhile, in a conversation with one of the members of a Russian Orthodox Church that she attended, Julia learned the director of the Russian school founded as a non-profit Russian-American Federation (RAF), was retiring. Always active and truly passionate about children, Jenny became its new

director. She had a vision of how to bring families with children that had Russian ties (immigrants from Russia, American families who adopted Russian children, American kids that wanted to learn the Russian language, etc.) to a broader Russian community. Julia decided to leverage this opportunity by expanding the old school's curriculum from Russian-as-a–second language to multiple subjects that reflected Russian culture beyond just a language. She managed to find Russian professional educators in music, math, logic, chess, dancing, Russian literature, art, and more, who agreed to teach kids, age 2 to 15, on weekends, virtually for free. It took her more than 3 years to reestablish the school as a known cultural center that brought together over 120 kids (and their parents), who attended the school year-after-year for the past 7 years.

Jenny's close involvement with the Russian community caused some tension at home. Her husband was concerned that Jenny would not assimilate into American culture as quickly as he wanted her to. "Too much Russianness. It is like you live in Brooklyn, hanging only with Russians," he complained to her. Nevertheless, he kept supporting his wife by taking care of their newborn son when Julia would leave for work on Saturdays. Jenny kept pouring her heart into her school, and although she had a lot of joyous and satisfying experiences, there were some disappointments along the way. She recalled with sadness that too often her country-fellows felt as though they were entitled for free or discounted classes for their kids and tried to take advantage of the school instead of supporting and helping it grow.

Jenny's social circle grew exponentially because it now included many of her husbands' friends as well as the vast number of Russian-speaking colleagues and parents associated with the school. Her dearest friends, nevertheless, remained a few Russian

women that she met through school. Jenny's earnest attempts to initiate friendships with American women from her husband's friends circle were not as successful. She recalled a few phone conversations with a couple of them that left her feeling as if she was imposing and not welcome. "I think American girls… they have their own things, common interests, experiences, like college football, reading clubs… they had years of communications before … and [their own] stories."

The time came when Jenny had to prepare for her citizenship exam. As she was going through the list of questions, she thought how much of a proud American she had become and how much this country meant for her. "Because you know…I love this country, I am going to apply for my parents to come here, and I felt that yes, I am ready, truly ready to be a citizen. That was this particular moment when I understand that this country was my home."

Lora

I met with Lora at the entrance to the swimming pool area in the apartment complex where she and her family live. Lora is 43, stout and round-faced; she would easily fit the description of a stereotypical woman from the Russian countryside. She led me to the two chaise lounge chairs covered with beach towels that she thoughtfully prepared before I arrived. Because she was mixing English and Russian at the beginning of the interview I reminded her that she could switch to her native language if it was easier for her. So for the rest of the interview she spoke Russian. The interview took place on August 9, 2015.

Summarized Narrative

Lora was born in Ufa, one of the largest Russian cities, with a population over 1 million. She was married for less than a year and had a son from that marriage. After the

divorce, Lora and her small son returned to her family apartment in Ufa where she grew up with her older sister and two brothers. By that time, her parents had moved out from the city to a small village, where they made their living as beekeepers. The parents left the apartment to their four adult children. Growing up there and living later in life in that same apartment, now with her little boy, was painfully difficult. Her older sister was a chronic alcoholic who abandoned her own three small children when the youngest was only three years old. Lora's younger brother died in a car crash at the age of 27, drunk behind the wheel of a car. Her older brother was a drug addict whose multiple overdoses would have killed him long ago if not for Lora's interventions. She worked as an emergency nurse and kept syringes and medication in the house that she used to revive her older brother when he stopped breathing.

From 1997 to 2006 Lora was on a mission to find a husband and a father for her son. She knew she did not want to marry a Russian but she also fully realized that for a woman with a child it was impossible anyway. She sent ads to multiple matchmaking agencies and only in 2006, right after she was able to buy her first computer, was luck on her side. On one of the matchmaking sites she met her future husband. He came to meet her in Saint Petersburg a month later and proposed with a ring on the third day in Mariinsky Theatre.

"When he returned home after our first meeting in Saint Petersburg, he immediately started the process of applying for my visa though an agency he hired—he was so afraid of any mistakes that could cause delays," Lora recalled. The second time they met was in a beautiful Jamaican resort. Larisa remembered calling her mother and screaming into the phone that she found herself, literally, in Paradise and that she could

not believe the luxury conditions they lived in. “All we knew… were rare vacations at the Black Sea shores where people had to rent dismal rooms, separated by carton walls, where every move was heard… outside dry toilets… cold water only…and funny, life still seemed great then.”

Before Lora left for America, both she and her son had intense English training with the best teacher in town that her future husband hired for them. Larisa recalled that she did not have a vast vocabulary but tried to boldly use those few words she learned.

Lora and her son arrived to Atlanta in December 2007 and “not once did I look back,” she stated with confidence. Everything amazed them, starting with a long line of American flags in the Atlanta airport to her husband’s modest house that looked to them like a mansion, that first day they arrived. Her husband had two teenage sons from his previous marriage, who mostly lived with him. The atmosphere in the house would sometimes get heated and tense when Lora’s son got in fights with his new step-brothers. “He was, of course, jealous at the very beginning that my attention has become split between my husband and him.” It was a very challenging transition for this newly formed blended family. It took a lot of patience for both parents to find ways not to ruin their own relationship, arguing whose kid was right. Larisa shared that her in-laws were kind and welcoming and played a huge positive role in helping them adapt. Proving her point, Larisa added that there was not a holiday or a birthday that there was not a card or a present for them from her in-laws. “The only present I ever got from my Dad was a flower bouquet when I turned 20. …but my son would receive their [her in-laws’] attention equally with their own grandchildren,” Lora noted gratefully.

An emergency anesthetic nurse with 17 years of experience in the terrifying environment of post-Soviet Russia, Lora was determined to continue on this path in America. “It was hard to live in a golden cage for 5 years, ….in a nice house...but you cannot work for people…I was just crying…those obstacles…you never know if you ever pass the exam.” With no knowledge of how the education/college system worked in the United States, she needed extensive help and guidance. Her husband was on it. He conducted all the necessary research for every step of studying for the NCLEX, a professional nursing exam. Lora had to accumulate certain working experience to apply for a license. She found a position in Greenville, SC, and lived apart from her husband for a whole year, working in two hospitals. It took three years overall to pass the exam and get back into her dream carrier. She works now in one of the best Atlanta hospitals, in a post-anesthesia care unit, taking care of people coming directly from the surgery.

From the very first day, her husband never took his eye off the ball when it came to his step-son: braces, vaccinations, and any school or doctor appointments, all was taken care of. Having found out that one their neighbors in a subdivision was also a Russian woman with three kids, Lora could not contain her joy. Yet very soon her excitement faded: “She loved to give me tips on adjusting to the new life, but she was always so negative about everything: school, teachers, Americans in general. In a week I was done… That was a sign for me that a Russian here does not always equal to a friend and that I need to expand my mind.” A colleague from a hospital in South Carolina, an American woman, became a close friend. “I have found a good friend when I started working. I could knock on their door at 3 am and they would open… much like the level of friendship I had in Russia.” When asked about her personal transformations, Lora

responded that her life truly only started when she stepped off the plane in the Atlanta airport, saying “From that point I became a changed person.”

Arina

Arina offered to meet on the rooftop of the apartment building where she lived. Modern outdoor couches, wrought iron round tables with chairs, and a stone fireplace featured the top of the building. Arina is 32, slender and tall, with long dark hair. Her business-style designer glasses gave her a professional look, which was slightly in discord with her short dress. Unlike the rest of the women I interviewed, she did not slip one Russian word and insisted on communicating exclusively in English. She explained that Russian presented now more difficulty to her because it has been seven years since Arina arrived in the United States. In fact, she said she was celebrating her seventh anniversary of living in the United States just yesterday, July 30, 2015. For a person who came to the country only seven years ago, she spoke very good English and her accent, though clearly present, was rather pleasant. Her manner of speech was a little theatrical and her whole demeanor was of an important and busy person. She mentioned several times that she had other appearances and interviews scheduled for that day. The interview took place on August 1, 2015.

Summarized Narrative

Arina is originally from Kursk, an industrial city in Russia with a population of half a million residents. Arina referred to it as small and peripheral. In her early 20s, Arina already held a business degree and was working on earning a law degree, going to school and teaching at the same time. Thinking about a future partner, Arina said she had a lot of clarity on what she wanted in life. She wanted to be a mother and a wife. She was looking for “a husband who would be healthy, not a smoker or a drinker, who believed in

God, who was world-minded, and could offer interesting perspectives—he was going to be the father of her children after all."

Arina found herself at a great disadvantage with the choice of men at home and decided to broaden her search through the online international marriage agency. It did not take long, she said, for a Prince Charming to find her. He was 28 years her senior. He was romantic and sexy, exactly like she imagined him to be; he would send flowers and cards to Russia every week. Arina was living her dream as the couple travelled to Bali, Jamaica, and Singapore and they had a beautiful wedding in Barbados in 2007.

Arina was confident she had found the one and was excited to start her life in America. They communicated through an electronic translator that he bought for her because Arina had no English skills at the time. She still has his letters, but now when she reads them—it turns out they are not at all what she thought they were about, back then. Right from the airport, Arina said she had a sinking feeling—it surely didn't look like the fairy tale she expected. Everything looked cheap, people were obese, sitting on the floor and eating fat burgers, nobody seemed to wear designer clothes (contrary to what she expected). Prince Charming came to meet her in a pick-up truck and that disappointed her as well. She thought it could not be his personal car and maybe they were going to pick up some furniture on the way. At least, that was what the car that delivered her furniture in Russia looked like. Prince Charming, as it turned out, lived in a rented townhouse at the time, with almost no furniture. To make the things worse, he recently lost a job and was planning to move to Bambridge, GA, where the only Wal-Mart was the biggest attraction in town.

Within the first weeks, her husband became abusive and after their fourth violent fight police took Arina into a shelter for homeless and battered women. She recalled that she had cried all day. She was the only Russian there, scared and lonely, with no money or documents. She decided to spend her time in the shelter teaching herself English, listening to Frank Sinatra songs, and talking to people. They had an internet access in that shelter but no computers.

Some brave people from a Russian church helped her sneak back home, which was a 4.5-hour drive from the shelter, and retrieve her computer and the rest of her stuff. There, in the garage, she also found her green card application package that was never mailed out. She spent two months in that shelter but then she said she was kicked out as a "rich bitch." The shelter said they had no room to store her "furs and diamonds"—all the stuff that the three police officers helped her pack when they were picking her up to bring to the shelter. One day, still living in the shelter, Arina was going to court for her fifth traffic violation when she was stopped on a highway by two men who ordered her to stop and get out of the car. They explained that they were from the dealership. When she did, they told her that the car payments and insurance were stopped two months before and it was time to repossess her car—she had no idea the car had a tracking device in it. She was left on a highway and picked up by a random driver who agreed to chase the car in front, all the way to the dealership. Arina had no understanding of how things worked in America—things like car insurance, driver license, Social Security, and so on. She still had her international driver's license issued in Russia. The dealership employee who took her car back from her became her first friend in America. He started visiting her in the shelter, bringing her food and helping her with the immediate needs she had. Once the

shelter asked her to leave she moved into his house for the next eight months. While in the shelter, Arina was assigned a free attorney from a Catholic church's immigration legal services, and an interpreter, a Russian lady who helped her tremendously in legalizing her immigration status in America.

Being proactive in seeking out support and help, Arina found a person on Craigslist.com, a high executive at FedEx, who volunteered her time to come over to Arina and teach her English. All these amazing people, Arina recalls, would volunteer their personal time driving her around, spending hours with her at the Social Security office, or Defacs, filing for her health insurance, and visiting doctors when she had some health issues.

In a few years, Arina was back on her feet, a university student working on a professional MBA degree. She had to overcome a slew of personal problems including going into rehab for sexual addiction and she proudly shared with me that she was successful in the abstinence program for the past 12 months.

Today, Arina is a digital interactive marketing manager for a billion-dollar international corporation. She shared that she also has her own business, providing marketing solutions for small businesses. Outside of her work, she keeps herself busy with hosting a book club for her American friends, being active in the church, and working for charities. On top of the above mentioned accomplishments, she reads scripts, produces white-board videos, writes, and speaks. She wrote and published a book on domestic violence issues and vigorously promoted it during the interview. She asked me to mention the name of her book in my dissertation but the laws of confidentiality did not allowed for that to happen.

Antonina

The interview with Antonina took place at her house, where she and her family just recently moved. The house was an impressive million-dollar mansion in a gated community. Her twin sister, who was visiting from London, as well as Antonina's four children and her husband, were all at home when I arrived. Antonina is 47 years old, a strongly built woman with big blue eyes and a warm smile. She preferred to speak English during the interview and agreed to be audio-recorded. The interview took place on August 28, 2015.

Summarized Narrative

Antonina is originally from Moscow, Russia. She and her twin sister were raised by a single mother; the father was never present in their lives. The family always struggled financially, and with a mother having mental health problems, the girls had little protection from the outside world. Yet Antonina was always stronger and healthier than her twin sister, and the fact that she was born a few minutes earlier left no doubts in her mind that she was in charge. In fact, she was always in charge and protective of the whole family. After college, Antonina built a successful carrier as a nurse in the Central Moscow Military Hospital. She shared with me that in the hospital most of her female colleagues 25 and older were single, not able to settle down and find a partner. She explained that in Russia, if you were not married by 25, then "the marriage material is gone and what is left is kinda difficult to choose from." So rather than settle, many of her girlfriends chose to stay single and maybe to have a child by their 30s. "A lot of my friends did just that… being mothers… not being able to find a decent guy."

In the mid-1990s, the former Soviet Union was withdrawing troops from eastern Germany and some of them became the patients in Antonina's hospital. One such patient

wondered why such a vast number of educated and beautiful Russian women around him were single and did not even have stable boyfriends. So one day he showed a newspaper with the address of an international matchmaking agency based in Atlanta, GA, that was called Russian Connections. After much hesitation, Antonina mailed her ad to the agency and soon became inundated with a big volume of correspondence. There were two sides to that process, she thought: on one side, it allowed her to improve her poor English; on the other, nothing in those letters felt authentic or promising. All this seemed surreal to her until she got a letter that she instantly had a good feeling about. “And I don’t know, you feel by his letter… he is genuinely only interested in you.” He was nine years her senior and ready to create a family.

They started writing to each other, using dictionaries and translators, and in a year he came to Moscow to meet her. He was the first foreigner to whom she ever spoke, plus he was originally from Alabama, so his English sounded different than the British version she heard before. During their first meeting the communication process was tougher than both expected. “He probably thought, gosh, what I am supposed to do here for 10 days, without talking to her…. But at least, she is pretty, I like her.” They met again in 6 months when he came back for her birthday. Antonina thought of him as “kind and nice… he seemed reliable and trustworthy. I could feel that he really cared about me.” They travelled to Holland together and later to Paris, where he proposed to her. Several more times later he would come back to Moscow until she finally said “yes.”

Antonina arrived in Atlanta in August 1998. She became a part of a big and tightly knit family who welcomed her with all their heart. At that time, she admitted, she did not fully realize how blessed she was to have them all around. Listening later to the

other women's stories she came to the conclusion that her family was the best. She found also that her husband and two of his older sisters were all owners of a large and successful cheesecake factory that had more than 100 employees and sold their product to such chains as Costco and others. She was also amazed to learn that it all started as a small family business out of an old garage of their parents' Alabama house. In December 1998, three months after her arrival, she got her driver license and "was like a teenager whose parents are very worried but still happy that they don't have to drive their kid around anymore." Her English was slowly improving because she was immersed in the language environment and also attending English classes.

Concerned that Antonina would get lonely without anybody around to speak Russian, her sister-in-law left Antonina's phone number with a young Russian woman she met at the mall. That woman became Antonina's first friend in America. That first time on the phone, they spent three hours talking. They had so much in common—both were originally from Moscow, married to American men, and both just recently became young mothers. Through her, Antonina would get into a big circle of other Russian-American couples. After the couple's first daughter came three more kids: a girl and two boys, they are now 16, 14, 12, and 5. So many changes happened to her so quickly, and she was grateful for every day of her new life in the new country. Growing up in a small family without a father or any male figure around, she liked that people here had big families, 3-4 kids, where fathers were actually spent time with their kids.

She recalled that such families in Russia were rare exceptions. She said that this family-oriented mentality and her wonderful husband were a big part in her personal transformation—she felt now more confident and was able for the first time in her life to

feel secure and happy. It was here, in America, that she could finally relax and accept the notion that nobody was perfect. It helped her learn not to be so hard on herself and get rid of pesky feelings of guilt and shame.

When asked about memorable experiences, Antonina recalled their first time driving through Alabama, not long after her arrival to America "It was shocking, shocking cultural experience, totally different life …You know your body is here but your mind is still there—it was almost out of body experience." She said that the South and its people won her heart by being so accepting of her, friendly and polite. After a few years visiting with kids back in Russia, she felt that the contrast was unbearable. "I really had to sometimes jump in and protect my kids… cause people were really rude in public transportation and even in museums." Apologizing for negative memories, she explained that in America she quickly got used to kindness around and the reverse culture shock was a painful slap on the face. As for hobbies, Antonina shared that tennis became her true passion as she played competitively in her subdivision team.

Lisa

Lisa agreed to meet me at a Starbucks café not far from the college she attends. She is 41, a medium height, blue-eyed woman, easily breaking into a smile and friendly. Lisa preferred speaking English during the interview, which took place on October 16, 2015. The interview lasted about forty minutes.

Summarized Narratives

Lisa grew up in Saint Petersburg, the city always considered to be the intellectual capital of Russia. Lisa was pursuing her computer science degree when she met a young instructor who was a PhD student at the same university and was teaching some classes there as well. They had been dating for two years and even though he bought his own

apartment, it did not seem to her that he was going to propose any time soon. He preferred to live in Lisa's apartment, complaining that his was still unfinished. Lisa decided that she had no good prospects with a user-type and thought it was time to move on. It was 1999, and though computers and the Internet in Russia barely existed, Lisa had her own computer with Internet access at work. One day, at work when she was not too busy, she went on Kiss.com and placed her ad there. She immediately received two messages. One was from a farmer in Finland who was looking for a wife to help him on the farm. The author of the second letter later became her husband. Her future husband was 12 years older and had a number of relationships before but nothing worked out. He was looking for serious relationship and was not the type to meet girls in the bars. Somebody mentioned to him this Web site and he decided to try.

Lisa's relationship with her ex-boyfriend suddenly started to improve—he was talking about getting married and discussing future plans for life together. Meanwhile, the letters from Lisa's American friend also kept coming in at a steady pace. The more Lisa read his letters the more she felt that she was dealing with a person much more mature than her boyfriend, who still required a lot of her assistance.

They finally met in December 1999, when her American pen-pal friend came to Saint Petersburg with a tour. It was easier for him that way because all such tours were accompanied by interpreters and immigration lawyers to help file for the fiancée visa right away. Also the tours guaranteed hotels and transportation. It was a cold December in Russia, and half of Lisa's friend's tour group came down with a bad flu and had to quickly go back home. Lisa's guest got sick too and was lying in bed in his hotel room. Lisa was taking care of him, making him drink a lot of lemon tea, and making him soak

in a steamily hot tub, then pouring him vodka and covering him with tons of blankets afterwards. Miraculously, he got better next morning and stayed ten more days before he returned to the United States. To this day her husband is convinced that Lisa saved his life that cold winter in Russia. The first couple of days they spoke through the interpreter and then they managed communicating on their own. Lisa introduced him to her friends and showed him around her beautiful historical city.

After he left for home, Lisa was not 100 percent sure on how she felt about the American. Yet she could not help but admit that they definitely clicked and seemed to be a good fit for each other. She also wanted to visit the United States. They had known each other for 6 months, since June, so they decided to apply for the fiancée visa. She started taking English courses and used a computer translating program that was a predecessor of a Google translate. “Of course, reading our emails now is a comedy show, the automatic translator did really funny stuff to our messages, but somehow we managed to understand each other.”

After all the bureaucratic procedures, in October 2000 she left her hometown covered in snow, left her one-bedroom apartment, and landed in Atlanta on a bright sunny day. Her husband’s four bedroom house with a basement was absolutely beautiful and there was a car in the garage waiting for her. It had a manual transmission so she had to explain to him that it should be exchanged for an automatic one, and it was done the very next day. “He took days off to show me around: We went to Stone Mountain, sailed in a Pontoon boat—it was even more beautiful than I expected.” However, she did not leave for the United States with a solid decision to stay and “it was difficult to make a decision right there on a spot…”

Leaving all her friends, parents, and relatives behind was not easy. She could easily go back—she had a return ticket she bought prior to the trip and made arrangements to take a month off at her job. At the same time, she left a resignation letter with her colleague, just in case. While staying in the United States, she also realized how little English she knew and how she understood "zero people around.... In spite of all the glamour around, I had the hardest time to decide whether to stay or go back…"

So, the decision was made to flip a coin—and the outcome was to go home. In the morning, when she was done packing, before the flight, she called her mother. To Lisa's surprise, her mother was adamant that Lisa should stay in America: "What is here waiting for you, what are your prospects? Think about it." That finally decided it. Lisa unpacked her bags and stayed. She immediately signed up for English courses in Gwinnet College and was placed in the highest level. Her husband drove her there because she did not have a license yet.

She put herself on a strict schedule, using multiple language computer programs and CDs, two hours every day, talking into a microphone, and then the program would correct her pronunciation. Also, she watched a lot of TV—all of which helped tremendously. Soon, she got a job as a programmer in the company where her husband worked.

After the kids were born Lisa decided to stop working. Now that her kids are relatively independent, she has started taking classes toward a cellular biology major. Her goal is to get a PhD in Cellular biology, Lisa shared. When asked if the new culture changed her in any way, Lisa answered with a big smile that she felt definitely more spoiled now, morally and materially, because she has got access to so much. She also

became more open, stating: “I am not afraid of smiling at people or start a friendly chat with a stranger—something I would never do back at home.”

Nora

Nora agreed to meet me at a Starbucks for the interview. I arrived there early and was waiting for her at one of the tables inside. I had never seen her before, but when a stunning tall blond walked in, I somehow immediately knew it was her. I waved to her and she joined me at the table. She gave me a vibe of a no-nonsense, “let’s get straight to the business” attitude. I asked Nora for permission to audio-record our interview and inquired what language, Russian or English, she felt more comfortable with during the interview. We agreed that she would speak Russian. The interview took place on October 27, 2015, and lasted about sixty minutes.

Summarized Narrative

Nora is a 46-year-old woman from Moscow, the capital of Russia. She was raised by her paternal grandparents because her biological parents were never married and, for different reasons, could not take care of their child. Yet Nora grew up on Tverskay Street, one of the best-known and prestigious Moscow streets. She received an economics degree from Moscow Geological Institute and went on to work in one of the biggest Moscow banks, in the department of international currency. Nora felt worldly working with clients from England, Germany, and the United States and thought that her knowledge of English was pretty advanced. The economic situation in Russia, however, was very unstable. “The common perception around,” Nora shared, “was to leave the country if the opportunity arose.”

At the time, she was about to be kicked out of her Moscow apartment when her relatives disputed the ownership. Nora thought it might be a good idea to try to start a

new life abroad. Among numerous international matchmaking agencies, a big and successful “Arthur” agency opened its doors in Moscow. Its founder lived in Atlanta, and therefore many girls from Russia were landing in Georgia. The year was 1994. American men would come with the tours, admired by young Russian girls for their ability to feel free and comfortable in any situation: “Like, they could throw their coat on the floor or other big stupid gestures—I, personally, always thought it was mainly a lack of culture.” Nora would attend the tours but often felt the men were not ready for serious relationships, “many would just come to have fun,” and thus she felt no connection with them. She remembered that during one of the socials, one 24-year-old American man shared with her that he did not know who to pick, Nora or her girlfriend, because he so much liked both of them. “So nonsense like that.”

She felt that older men who came with the tours made for a much more interesting crowd and were closer to her intellectually. She had just turned 25 when she was introduced to an American man, 14 years her senior, who arrived to Moscow with one of the tours. She liked him and was ready to leave, so the decision was made that she would come to America on a fiancée (K1) visa. She had been to New-York before and liked the city. Her future husband told her that Atlanta was practically like New-York, only better. “I thought ‘Great, I have been to New-York before, it is great, so, let’s go and see.’ But when I arrived to Atlanta—what a disaster this city was!”

Her first impression was that it looked backwards and rural and she said, much to her sadness, that impression has never changed. She was also shocked realizing that her English skills didn’t meet any of her expectations. She thought she would get “the heck of here in a month” but easier said than done. She had all those thoughts: that she made

promises to her husband; that her apartment in Moscow was gone; that the oversized cat that flew in with her, sitting in her lap during a 12-hour flight, would be impossible to carry back. Also, she thought, what if everything turned out well with time? However, a year passed before she got her driver's license and other documents necessary to start working and feel independent. Nora believed that her husband was at fault for not helping her integrate into American life quicker.

She realized that he was an extreme opposite to her ambitious and active self. Nora resented that every new step would take him forever and the fact that he was afraid to teach her to drive made her mad. "With him, it was always like dragging a hippo from a marsh." As soon as she got her driver's license and was ready to look for a job, Nora got pregnant. She was terribly sick all through her pregnancy and her plans to find a job had to be postponed. "I would not practically leave the house till the six month after the birth of my daughter. Only after that I started working."

She also started ESL courses at Perimeter College but said they were at a primitive level and did nothing for her. She tried to find her favorite English textbooks by Bonk that she used in Russia. It was not easy but she did find them and started teaching herself. However, very soon she decided that all those difficult grammar structures were not applicable to what she really needed. Eventually, "the life around me, work, and everyday communications—that what did the job." Nora recalled that per some bad advice of her husband, she decided to study to be a paralegal. As Nora explained, her husband did not realize what a good education she had and thought that the certificate of a paralegal would be "the pinnacle of her abilities." Paralegal courses turned out to be challenging because the language was new and very specific. At that time, she was also

working at a retail store selling perfume. All that gave a great boost to her language skills but she could not connect with the people around her: “People at my paralegal school stared at me as at something unusual but were not eager to talk to me.”

The atmosphere at the store where she worked was not conducive for making friendships either—everybody would fight for customers and commissions, “survival of the fittest,” as Nora described it. “When I was coming to America I could not wait to meet my husband’s family and friends. I only met his Mom who lived with us when I came: She was not quite all there and did not talk.” She died within a year or so of Nora’s arrival. It turned out that the friends were non-existent—her husband moved to Atlanta from New York quite recently and, regardless, he was not a sociable type and would rather stay home than go out. “To this day, I am the only close person/friend he has,” Nora stated. She filed for divorce after 12 years of marriage and two children together.

After the divorce she stayed at her husband’s house with their two children. Working as an accountant for a company she was paying the mortgage and raising two kids, and though finances were tight she managed just fine with no outside help. After her divorce, Nora didn’t lose hope to find her next husband through sites like Match.com, but so far her efforts have been fruitless. When asked if she felt changed by this culture, Nora responded bitterly that her biggest regret was to be living outside of her [Russian] culture and not being able to be herself. Having learned “to pretend and to imitate in order to blend in,” Nora felt well-adjusted in the American culture but never truly felt at home here. Describing her interactions with Americans, Nora explains: “I will smile back to their fake smiles, and I will ask ‘how are you,’ I will behave cool and make them like me, I will even make them laugh – but in reality, I can care less – I am not myself with them.”

Marina

Marina agreed to meet me at my house for the interview. She is a 42-year-old woman, tall and very slim. She has long wavy brown hair and her enormous blue eyes sit wide on her un-made-up face. She reminded me of a beautiful alien from a futuristic movie. Her manners are timid and delicate. She said she would prefer to speak Russian during the interview and agreed to be audio-recorded. The interview took place on November 6, 2015, and lasted for an hour.

Summarized Narrative

Marina is from Donetsk, Ukraine, once a booming city of 1 million people. Since the events of 2014 her city has been torn apart by separatists' military actions and is a lawless and dangerous place for those remaining residents who had nowhere to go. Marina shared that her international journey did not start with a search for a husband. After graduating college with the degree in finance and accounting, Marina worked as a tax inspector. The job was stressful because she had to issue penalties and collect fines from companies in a country where the tax laws were changing on a whim and made little sense to people. Her eyesight was getting progressively worse too, so working with piles of documents and numbers in small font became a strain on her health. The last straw was the new rule that stated that, to keep her job she had to sign a security clearance that prohibited her to leave the country for the next 10 years.

Marina decided to quit and move in a different direction. She worked as a secretary for a corporation to pay for her evening classes toward a new degree in travel and tourism. She was always fascinated with foreign languages and chose to focus on English and Spanish in her new college program. Marina was 26 and single—she broke up with her last boyfriend more than a year prior. She strongly believed in the words of

Omar Khayyám: “You better starve, than eat whatever and better be alone, than with whoever.”

More than anything she wanted to travel and maybe become a tour guide. She thought it would be nice to find somebody who was a native language speaker to practice and improve her English. Her friend told her that an international agency opened not far from her place of work. One evening, they dropped by and explained to an agency clerk that they were looking for ways to find pen-pals to practice their English. The clerk explained that the profile of the agency was international matchmaking and that the best way to find pen-pals was to create profiles and place the ads.

Marina brought a picture made far away from the camera, where her face and figure were barely visible: “So no nude pictures or anything of this nature,” she explained. In three or four months she had more pen-pals than she could handle. She exchanged letters with them and two men even expressed the desire to speak on the phone. She explained that, as a layer of protection, the agency required a separate fee for disclosing the women’s phone numbers to the men, which, in Marina’s case, filtered out all but two men who paid and got her number.

In May 2000, one of the men who kept calling and writing to her expressed the desire to meet her. He was 10 years older than she. His profile picture was not a clear one either—in it he wore sunglasses and his figure was half-hidden by tree branches. They agreed to meet in Kiev, the capital city of Ukraine. Marina was excited because she never was able to spend more than a day in this beautiful city but now she could stay longer and see more of it. In the airport she was waiting for him with a little white teddy bear in her hands that he sent to her as a gift a while before.

She was watching people coming out off a plane when she noticed this really tall man with a mustache that she recognized from the Internet photo. She saw his eyes for the first time and was hypnotized: “It felt like I saw him maybe in my dream before or knew him somehow… his eyes were so familiar and I felt so at ease… to the point that in a taxi I would turn to him and start speaking Russian.” They spent a week in Kiev and later met in Prague for his birthday, but, for the first time, saying good-bye felt unbearably difficult: “Each of us thought ‘what if we don’t see each other again’… and that was terrifying.”

Marina arrived to Atlanta on a warm October night in 2001. She remembers that the floors in the airport were so wide and shiny that she had a feeling that everything around her was gleaming. She was surprised when she learned he had a car of his own that was waiting for them. “So I am getting into this white car and I am thinking—Goodness, he is like a Prince on a white horse!” As they drove on a highway in the night, she was amazed by how well-lit the roads were and how fast and smooth the car was moving. It felt to her as if it could take off any second. She thought of Ray Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles* and imagined herself transported onto a different planet, where everything was different and though people looked pretty ordinary, somehow they all spoke English.

The couple did not have immediate arrangements about the marriage and agreed to wait and see how everything went. The three months allowed by the K1 visa flew by fast—they had the most amazing time together, travelling and enjoying each other. Yet the time came to decide for her whether to stay or to go home. “It was a very difficult moment… And the first year…was too,” she recalled. She stayed and they got married.

They went to Hawaii for their honeymoon. All went well but in six months she did not know how to live with her decision to stay anymore. She did not drive yet and was home alone day after day while her husband was at work. She was overcome with nostalgia and became terribly homesick. When her husband saw her sad or in tears, he would sit next to her and talk. Very thoughtfully he tried to cheer her up, explaining how lucky she was to have two worlds now, and if she ever wanted to go back home to visit, then, sure, any time. He would support her. “He spent so much time talking to me, comforting me, reassuring… He talked to me all the time so I would not shut down.”

He encouraged her to learn how to drive and found English courses for her, where she quickly made friends with other Russian people. She was moving around independently and life slowly but steadily started to look up. After eight years in America, Marina had a daughter and realized that her greatest passion in life was being a mother. Marina’s mother came to visit them but was not able to return to Ukraine because of the war. She now lives with her daughter’s family and takes part in raising her granddaughter.

Marina happily volunteers in all the events at her daughter’s school. She shared that American culture transformed her in a way that let her feel as “if the mask has fallen off, and I am as innocent and wholesome as I was in my childhood.” Recently, gardening and making home videos, working with photos and music, became her new favorite hobbies. She also works from home helping her husband as an accountant in his business, enjoying the flexible hours that this job allows.

Katya

The interview with Katya took place in a Starbucks café. Katya is a 46-year-old blond and blue-eyed, strongly built woman. She is good-looking and fashionably dressed.

Katya agreed to be audio-recorded and preferred for the interview to be conducted in Russian. The interview took place on December 7, 2015, and lasted about an hour.

Summarized Narrative

Katya grew up in a military family that she described as military intelligentsia. Her father was a colonel, highly respected and well paid. Before moving to Tver', Russia, the family lived in Germany. There she met her first husband, who was also Russian, serving in the military, whom she described as a "country boy." The clash of their different social and mentality levels resulted in a divorce after 7 years of marriage. She was a housewife during those years of marriage, so after returning to Tver' to her parents' house, now with her son, she had to start her life all over.

Katya had a degree in science and teaching but never had a chance to put that degree to use. In Tver' she figured that more money could be made by waiting tables in restaurants than teaching science at school. She was doing well in a restaurant business, soon being promoted to a manager. She also worked as croupier in a casino and was overall doing well financially. Her biggest concern at that time was the fact that she was pushing 30 and "everyone who is any good is already married, the others… the others are bad, and I already had a bad one." Somebody recommended an international marriage agency, Partners for Life that happened to be around the corner from the house where she lived. Young men from different regions of the United States started arriving to Tver' to meet Katya, but nobody she liked.

One day, through that same agency, a man from Georgia arrived to Tver' and got very excited when he saw Katya. Everything started happening quickly from that point. He left only to return in a month with a ring. She knew that he graduated from some

university in Florida and worked as an analyst in an IT company in Georgia. The interpreters who were helping Katya translate his letters all agreed that his style of writing was literary and rather sophisticated and that that indicated an intelligent person. When he was vising with Katya in Tver', he quickly won the hearts of the girls in the agency, buying small gifts for them and taking them all on a trip to Moscow.

Her girlfriends were all unanimous that he was a good person, and generous, which was not at all typical for American men they had dealt with before. So they pleaded with Katya not to pass up such a great life opportunity. At that time in Russia, the law permitted natives to marry foreign citizens without having to leave the country. Thus they tied the knot in her hometown and then 6 months later, in May 2003, Katya and her 11-year-old son arrived in Atlanta, GA.

The farther away they drove from downtown of Atlanta, the quicker Katya's excitement faded. The real blow was the subdivision of cedar-wood houses that they arrived to. The houses, all, looked like old barracks to Katya, and she thought of that style as "the house of three little pigs." They were in such sharp contrast with those red brick, European-style cottages that were being built across the street from her house in Tver': "That was exactly how I expected my American house to be." Katya was perplexed. Her visible disappointment made her husband annoyed and angry: "What did you expect? I am not a millionaire, you know it."

Her honeymoon ended without a chance to start:"My dissatisfaction was very sudden and deep… Neither the living conditions nor the environment around were as I expected to see it." Another thing that hit Katya hard and was so different from her hometown in Russia was the fact that she could not walk anywhere she needed or wanted

to, she had to drive. She had no driver's license or a car yet. Plus, her husband's irritation grew bigger every day because he was realizing that the new family addition cost him money and his expenses increased significantly. The tension was already palpable when in two months Katya's husband lost his job. Very calmly he announced that as soon as he would get his last paycheck, he would buy two tickets and send them back home; otherwise, he said, he could not help or promise them anything.

Being raised by a military father, Katya was trained not to fall apart in the face of adversity but rather try to regroup and devise a plan B. That was exactly what she did—she focused on getting her son enrolled in school and decided to treat the events of the past three months as a temporary setback. A Russian lady who lived next door was the one Katya's husband hired as an interpreter when he was writing letters and making calls to Katya. She was also the one who convinced Katya's husband to buy a house in the same subdivision she and her American husband lived in. This Russian neighbor helped Katya survive those difficult times by helping her find her first job. Katya became a school custodian at the same school her son attended. She tried to focus on positive aspects of the job, looking at it as an opportunity to learn the American school system from the inside because she had no understanding of it before.

She quickly made friends with the teachers and staff at school and they helped and supported her. She also fell in love with a young man who was the head custodian at that school. He became Katya's next American husband, which also helped her not to lose her immigration status. They got along great and tried hard to make it work. He worked three jobs and Katya kept working at school. The more Katya was getting comfortable with the language and the life around, the more she grew apart from her

husband: “It became obvious that I married a redneck with whom I had very little in common.” They kept living together— in fact, Katya said, he was a good person. When he got fired from his job at school, Katya devised a plan for him to join the police force: “I knew he would be great there. He had a rather low IQ and a military background [laughs].” He became a county jail warden.

Suddenly, out of the modest school custodian emerged a person with a lot of perceived power, which he started to exercise at home. That was it for that marriage—she left. By that time Katya’s son had graduated from high school, moved out, and lived on his own. For the next several years she became a live-in nanny for two small kids in a wealthy family. Although it delayed her from looking for and building a different career, she honed her English skills. She lived the kids’ life, watched cartoons with them, read books to them, and participated in all their activities.

She stopped babysitting when she met her current boyfriend. He is American, 15 years her senior, and a computer genius, per Katya’s account. They moved in together. He was also the first man she dated in America who she perceived was on the same intellectual level with her, or higher. She is close to his family and they travel a lot, often visiting with them all over the country. Through one of her friends, Katya landed a job of an assistant in the optometrist office. She is loving it and planning to take courses specific to her job requirements. Looking back at her American journey, Katya said “I was meant to go through certain circles here in order to understand the value of things, whether material or relationships.”

Table 1. Participants' Demographics

Pseudonym	Current Age at the Time of Interview	Place of Residence before Immigration	Year of Arrival to the US	Number Of Children on Arrival to the US	Current Number Of Children	Current Marital Status	Current Professional Occupation
#1 Alina	41	Minsk, Belarus	Dec.,1999	0	2	Married	Housewife
#2 Jenny	42	Kursk, Russia	Jan., 2004	0	1	Married	Housewife, Bookkeeper in her husband's business
#3 Olga	40	Ufa, Russia	Feb.,2007	1	1	Divorced	Occupation Therapy Student
#4 Arina	32	Kursk, Russia	July.,2008	0	0	Divorced	Marketing Manager
#5 Lisa	41	Saint-Petersburg, Russia	Oct., 2000	0	2	Married	Cell Biology Student
#6 Lora	43	Ufa, Russia	Feb., 2007	1	1	Married	Anesthetic Nurse
#7 Nora	46	Moscow, Russia	June, 1995	0	2	Divorced	Accountant
#8 Marina	42	Donetsk, Ukraine	Oct, 2001	0	1	Married	Bookkeeper in her husband's business
#9 Antonina	47	Moscow, Russia	Aug., 1998	0	4	Married	Housewife
# 10 Katya	46	Tver, Russia	May, 2003	1	1	Divorces	Optometrist assistant

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS BASED ON CROSS-CASE ANAYSIS

This chapter presents the findings of the study in response to the research question two: What are the common adaptation and learning experiences of the post-Soviet women who immigrated to the United States through international marriage agencies? The findings are organized according to the four salient themes and their corresponding subthemes that ultimately emerged through rigorous analysis and comparison of the data. Table 2 helps to present a detailed outline of the chapter.

Three of the respondents chose to speak Russian during the interview. Their quotes have been translated into English.

Table 2. Chapter 5 Outline

Themes	Sub-themes
1) The women demonstrated agency in making the fundamental life transitions	a) The various motives to seek an international partner
	b) The women demonstrated selectivity in choosing a partner
	c) The women had control over their decision to stay in America
2) The women developed resilience in the many different faces of adversity	a) The women experienced culture shock and other unexpected adversities
	b) Discovering familial support became significant leverage in coping with acculturative stress
	c) Building social networks and friendships helped the women survive

	the crisis of immigration
3) The women sought practical and formal learning to achieve better cultural fitness in the new society	a) The state of disequilibrium became a motivating force for acquiring language competency and other practical skills b) The women experienced different outcomes in attempting to forge relationships with the members of the host community c) Regaining social and professional status through formal and professional education
4) Extensive personal transformation has accompanied each phase of the women psychological and cultural adaptation.	a) The women had to adjust their expectations about the new country b) The women experienced personal and cultural identity transformation. c) The women reflected on their adaptation in the new country

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Theme 1: The Women Demonstrated Agency in Making Fundamental Life Transitions

When it comes to international marriage, the common narrative in the research literature and in the press overflows with images of the women as helpless or desperate, portraying them as victims or commodities. In my study, an analysis of the participants' interviews suggests a strong sense of agency in making an independent decision to seek a partner abroad, regardless of the women's various and unique circumstances.

The Various Motives to Seek an International Partner

In the course of the interviews, I discovered that the prevalent factor that pushed some women in the study to leave their native countries and make a life-changing leap was their sense of protest and dissatisfaction with the culture they lived in. The main

aspects were the women's disenchantment with Russian men, in general, and Russian men's mentality toward relationships and marriage, in particular. Essentially, the lack of basic values the women held important forced them to look for an international relationship. The excerpt below is a reflection of at least half of the participants on the shortage of "marriage material," as some of them aptly referred to it. Please take into account that participants' pseudonyms will precede their quotes. Also, when the woman spoke English only, English was transcribed. When the woman spoke Russian, both languages are shown.

> Marina: *It was not that they would not propose… but it was impossible to have normal relationships with them. … They would be good to you for a short while but then drinking and playing around would distract them even before anything serious would start. … I said to myself: "I am done…using the words of Omar Khayyám: 'You better starve, than eat whatever … And better be alone, than with whoever.'" I thought I would rather try to travel and see the world, maybe become a tour guide.*

Three other women decided to resort to Internet match-making to look for a husband abroad after their failed relationships at home in which the women felt betrayed or used. Olga and Katya were also concerned that their age and the fact that they each had a child would reduce the prospects for finding a marriage partner at home.

> Katya: *I look around me … my age is critical. Over 30, everyone who is any good is already married, the others… the others are bad, and I already had a bad one. … So decision was made to refer to the agency not far from our house in Tver' …that was called "Partner for Life."*

> Olga: *It was difficult for me to understand myself at the moment …as to whether I was running away from the problems and pains or if I was looking for the opportunity to create a new family. … Again—at 33 and with a child, it felt like I did not have much time—so I resorted to Internet communication. … I put an ad but mostly to be able to meet new people and talk to them freely … like you would open up to stranger on a train. That is how we met. He was alone there, I was alone here—we talked a lot—it made us feel close.*

The chaotic economic and political situation in the country at the end of the Soviet period became another significant stressor for two of the study participants. Although employed and happy with their jobs, Nora and Antonina named financial insecurity and uncertainty of the post-Soviet times as one of the push-factors to look for stability and better opportunities overseas.

> Nora: *I was working in one of the biggest Moscow banks for the department of international currency. It was a great job. Good salary. … The problem was the economic situation in the country, in general. … I have worked three years after graduation and, you know, the common perception around was that immigration may be the right move at that time. There were opportunities to do it. Numerous international marriage agencies started opening their doors to those who wanted to marry abroad. … I thought it was a good idea maybe to start a new life abroad.*

> Antonina: *I had my job—pretty established career, you know, respectable—Central Moscow Military Hospital. Financially, of course, [19]90s were very tough times. It was a mess, the Soviet Union collapsed in late '80s, so in the '90s it was basically anarchy, mess…*

Two participants stated that they engaged in the search for a foreign partner out of fun and adventurous spirit.

> Alina: *For me it was out of fun…some of my girlfriends and I sent out our information to some advertising marriage company.*

Clearly, not all of the participants of the study were consciously and from the outset looking for a husband abroad, but all of them were open at some point of their lives to the idea of change, thus effectively taking control over their own lives.

The Women Demonstrated Selectivity in Choosing a Partner

Another strong indicator of the women's agency was their approach on making their partner choice. The women echoed one another in how critically they assessed and analyzed their pool of candidates. Most of the women had to sort through piles of letters and pictures of their pen-pals, consciously narrowing down their choices to the one they

felt a connection with. Evidently, life would make its corrections with regards to the accuracy of the women's choices. Yet regardless of the outcomes of their selection, the women demonstrated a great deal of power and control in the process of choosing their future husband. Below I included just a few examples of how the women contemplated their choices.

> Lisa: …*So I placed my ad on kiss.com. The first letter came from this farmer from Finland [laughs] who was so interested in me—it was clear from his letters that he needed a wife who would be working on a farm with him—he enclosed a picture, plain broad farmer's face—haha—no, I said 'good bye' to this one. Yet the author of the second letter would later become my husband. … I liked him and felt that I was dealing with much more mature person than my boyfriend at the time.*
>
> Alina: *I did meet a guy; I liked him originally—he was Canadian. … He kinda scared me by proposing to me the second day. I was like …what?!…basically, I said 'no.' I don't like too intense, too pushy, too emotional… I did not like that.*
>
> Nora: *Yes, he was 14 years older. I will tell you what though … in my experience, the Americans that would come here [with tours] who were my age or a little older… their mental development was far below our level. … Those who were older made for a much more interesting crowd.*

The Women Had Control over Their Decision to Stay in America

In the conversations with the women I felt that their final decision to stay in America took a lot of courage and soul searching. Two of the women came to America as wives but the rest came on the fiancée visa (K1), which allowed a woman to live in the United States for three months. It is a legal grace period allowing a couple to get to know each other better and make their decision. There are two choices for the women: either to marry and stay or leave the country by the end of the 90-day term.

Most participants recalled that they had a hard time making that final decision to go through with the marriage and stay in the United States within such a limited time. Regardless of the fact that the women's initial impressions in America fell under a wide

range on the emotional spectrum, the healthy optimism about their future in America ultimately prevailed.

> Marina: *When I arrived on a fiancée visa we did not have an agreement about the marriage …we wanted to see how everything would go,…would I be able to live here? … When the final decision was made to stay in America I, of course, started feeling very anxious. … Before that, it was all like an endless nice trip. … So, I realized that either I am going back and basically remain single for life or I stay here and lose my comfort zone. … It was a very difficult moment.*

> Nora: *I had all these thoughts now, that first, I promised to my husband… I quit my job in Moscow… My apartment would be gone by the time I come back. … All those economic and social problems in Russia in the '90s… Another hold was the fact that I brought my oversized cat with me and that was such an ordeal to travel with it. I think the cat was the last straw … [laughs]. Anyway, I decided to take a chance and stay—the door is not going to be closed if I decide to leave, and what if everything turns out well.*

Despite disappointing first impressions of America, Katya negotiated her decision to stay keeping focus on her young son, who felt comfortable and happy in the new country.

> Katya: *My honeymoon period ended right from the start because my dissatisfaction was very sudden and deep … Neither the living conditions nor the environment around me were as I expected them to be. … So after serious soul searching and heart palpitations, I decided this country was good for my son, he liked it here, he was getting a good education, he lived in good conditions. So, I thought, it was alright if stepped on my pride and worked some dirty jobs.*

The image of naïve and poverty-stricken young girls eager to emigrate to the West at any cost did not find validation in my explorations. First, the average age of the immigrant women in this study appeared to be about 29 years on arrival to the United States. Furthermore, although the women came from various intersections of familial background, lifestyle, region, and education level, all of them were consciously willing to challenge the status quo of their existence, critically examining available choices.

Theme 2: The Women Developed Resilience in the Many Different Faces of Adversity

Having made their decision to stay and give it a try in America, the women had a challenging task to settle in and adapt to the new cultural milieu. The participants demonstrated a high degree of resilience going through the stages of internal disequilibrium, which in some cases was exacerbated by traumatic life events. Their ability to bounce back and survive substantial adversity showed that the women possessed a strong sense of identity and control over their lives. Such resilience was rooted in familial and social support and the women's personal qualities, attitudes, and motivations.

The Women Experienced Culture Shock and Other Unexpected Adversities

Having distanced themselves from their families, friends, and native cultural and physical environments, some of the women reported that as early as in a few months in America they started feeling lonely, homesick, and depressed, even those who were in satisfying marriages. As a result of their exposure to the new environment and the lack of elements from the old, the women perceived multiple losses. Some of their losses were symbolic and some were very tangible.

Marina reported being fraught with the feelings of guilt and loss. Her symbolic losses encompassed mourning her past life and feeling uprooted. More tangible was the loss of her natural support system and significant relationships with her loved ones.

> Marina: *I realized that the decision was made to stay in America but I did not know anymore how to live with it. I was increasingly home alone … had too much time to think and to give in to nostalgia. … I do not know, but such thoughts that maybe I betrayed … abandoned my parents. … Not even parents as they were so happy for me, but maybe my grandparents who passed away. … I was holding to and mourning the past. …It was a lonely time.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Due to a terrible longing for her familiar surroundings, family, and friends, Alina started slipping into a deep depression, projecting her anger and frustrations onto the people of the host culture.

> Alina: *I missed my family. It felt like a piece of you was torn apart. It was so painful. Like you had to say good bye to everything. Even American friendliness, I really liked in the beginning—I realized nobody cared about me. … Their smiles and questions were not real. Depression hit me to the point that I did not want to get out of the house*

Inability to move around freely without a car and the resulting home confinement meant the loss of independence and an unfavorable change of roles for active and ambitious Katya. Her sentiments were shared by the majority of the study participants.

> Katya: … *huge disappointment was when I realized I could not walk where I needed—everything is far from the house, I literally started panicking.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

For Lora, the loss of recognition of her previous career achievements and professional credentials became a challenge and the major point of frustration.

> Lora: *After seventeen* years *of being an Emergency Nurse Anesthetist in Russia, always being in the forefront of giving yourself to people, it was hard to live in a golden cage for the next 5 years, living in a nice house ... but you cannot work for people. … I was just crying … those obstacles … you never know if you ever pass the exam, it is such a hard test, even for American students.*

Immersion in the new language environment caused varying degrees of discomfort for the majority of the participants. The feelings of emotional muteness, loss of identity, and desire to shut down often came as a result of the women's inability to adequately express themselves and participate in conversations with the host language speakers. Alina, Nora, Jenny, and Lisa all reflected on the fact that shortly after their arrival to America they had to adjust their expectations and reassess their language preparedness and proficiency.

> Nora: *I was very confident in my English, I took private lessons back in Moscow. At work we had to write and speak in English sometimes—that was one aspect I did not worry about, coming to the U.S. So, of course, it was a complete shock to realize I had no language under my belt.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Listening to the women's stories, I was able to relate to most of their plights of initial adjustment. As an immigrant myself, I clearly remember my first attempt at conversation with a native English speaker in a Philadelphia supermarket. After years of learning English in Moldova and even winning awards in school competitions, I did not expect to be helplessly staring at the woman behind the cashier desk as if waiting for the closed captions to appear on her lips. I realized I did not understand people around me and they did not understand me. Furthermore, the practical task of navigating the supermarket itself, as well as understanding weights, prices, and brands of the grocery labels was a challenge in itself.

In addition to experiencing all the typical symptoms of culture shock, three of the women in the study found themselves bereft of their spousal emotional and financial support fairly soon in their marriages. Inevitably, their adaptation trajectories became riddled with highly stressful and traumatic experiences. As a result of the quickly deteriorating relationships with their partners, they were forced to operate in a survival mode. They had to struggle to provide for themselves and their children, survive violent altercations with their partner, or in one case shield an 11-year-old daughter from a master manipulator, pedophiliac husband. Here are some excerpts from these women's accounts of hardships and adversities they encountered.

> Katya: *My spouse did not realize that we would cost him money and his expenses would increase significantly … but the real tension has started when in two months my husband lost his job. Hence, one day he came home and very calmly broke it to me as follows: "As soon as I get my last*

> *salary, I will buy you two tickets and send you back home. If you don't agree with this plan, I cannot promise you anything."* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)
>
> Olga: … *in addition to paying all of his credit debts with the money I brought with me … when the time came to apply for my Green Card —he said there was no money to pay for that. … I was pretty well-off in Russia, I sold my car and other stuff there… all this money disappeared within the first two months. … He would manipulate me, asking to help him out as he was having difficult financial times, and the whole first year I would jump to rescue. I worked at that time 70 hours a week as a homecare assistant. … After the first year, I began to realize—he was just using me. … The relationships became even more strained when my daughter arrived. …He started to pay way too much attention to my 11-year-old daughter.*
>
> Arina: *The fairy tale ended as I step my foot onto this land. He became very abusive, so after our fourth fight, police took me to the shelter. … When I was homeless, at the shelter for victims of domestic violence, when I had nobody, no money, no documents,—I cried all day.*

Nevertheless, according to Kim's (1988, 2001) adaptation theory, humans, as dynamic systems, have a natural tendency to restore the homeostasis, an internal equilibrium, when facing adversarial environmental conditions. The women in my study built resilience and found ways to restore the equilibrium through discovering available support systems, inner strength, and resourcefulness.

Discovering Familial Support Became Significant Leverage in Coping with Acculturative Stress

Immigration often results in family disruptions or separations and loss of friendships and social ties. Discovering practical and emotional support in the new country became an important factor in building resilience and improving psychological well-being for the women in my study.

Analyzing the women's interviews, I found that most of the participants in the study encountered various levels of psychological stress at some points of their immigration journeys. It became clear, however, that in satisfactory marriages, the

women experienced greater spousal support as well as the support of their new extended families. This became a powerful tool in helping the women survive the aftermath of culture shock and build the platform allowing for engaging in active cultural learning and adaptation. Thus, close ties with the husband and his kin resulted in better communicative skills and larger exposure to American social circles, thus increasing the women's sense of belonging to the host culture in general.

At least, six out of the ten women recounted being strongly supported by their foreign in-laws, although often after experiencing a certain "stand-off period." Several participants' stories reflected the fact that their new families had to overcome their own suspicions and preconceived judgments to accept their foreign daughters-in-law. Such sentiments may partially be a result of the legal obstacle that does not permit international brides to visit the receiving country and meet their future husbands' families before the immigration. Often the situation is exacerbated by the existing language barrier between the parties.

> Alina: …*when we went out to her house for Christmas … to meet his family, it turned out that the woman he dated before was there. She was his Mother's friend. Something in our culture, we don't do that … just out of respect. His family was very sweet … but of course, they were suspicious because there were a lot of stories about gold-diggers.*

Nevertheless, Alina affectionately remembers her mother-in-law that passed away two years previously as *"always very friendly … a typical Southern woman, smiled all the time, very positive, very supportive."*

It was evident for Lora that her husband and his parents became the key forces in her and her son's adaptation process. Referring to her in-laws, she recounted:

> *… It was deeply surprising for me that his parents—the generation that was against Russia for many years, were nice to me when we met, even in*

> *spite of the fact that they were convinced that all Russians were thieves. … I found some common ground with his mother as we both liked to sew, so she enjoyed when I asked her about the way she did this or that. … It was not easy to plow through her Alabama accent … but somehow we made it. I was so appreciative towards his parents … there was not a year that my son and I would not get a greeting card or a present for every holiday and Birthday Day from his parents. My son would receive their attention equally with their own grandchildren. … They have been so accepting of us and welcoming.*

Antonina's story is another example of a great support and affection from her husband's family that made her initial adjustment phases significantly less stressful and lonely:

> *It was as awkward for me as it was probably for them … but they were genuinely happy for him. … I was blessed with his family. … I heard a lot of stories from other girls … all sorts of things.… Anyway, my family was the best.*

The majority of the women in the study shared that their husband's support was invaluable in overcoming homesickness and loneliness. Spousal emotional support and guidance in practical matters boosted the women's confidence in their abilities to adjust to and navigate the new culture.

> Marina: *All this time I had so much support from my husband… when he saw me like that [sad] he would sit next to me … but I could not express my feeling and thoughts at the time. … I was overwhelmed by these new feelings … and could not share them in English. … It was not easy to make sense of them in Russian. … I probably cried more at these moments than I could logically communicate anything. … But he always tried so thoughtfully to cheer me up, saying that I was so lucky to have two worlds now … and if I wanted to go home to visit,—sure, anytime, he would always support me. He spent so much time talking to me, calming me down, reassuring… He talked to me all the time so I would not shut down. … Ultimately, it worked, as I finally stopped crying and feeling miserable. … He gave me a big push by encouraging me to learn how to drive, to find English courses.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Lora's husband provided her with much-needed information on education and medical systems in America. It helped her map out and continue along the path to her dream career. In addition, her husband's extensive practical support was also expressed in taking care of Lora's 9-year-old son's various needs. It made *her* feel a better parent, reducing worries and anxieties associated with her child's cultural adjustment.

> Lora: *He made all the research for every step of my studying and career, he is the one who keeps an eye on everything my son needs, whether it is braces, vaccinations, and any appointments for him.*

Having come to Georgia from Moscow, the busy Russian capital, Nora was highly motivated to do whatever necessary to become independent and functional in the new society but she also desperately needed help from her husband during her first year in America. When reflecting on her experiences in seeking practical spousal support, Nora could not hide her irritation with how slowly and inefficiently it would come.

> Nora: … *it was almost a year before I got my driver license and all the other papers—my husband's fault, you know, he has no ambitions. Now I know it. It was so difficult with him to make every step … efficiently. … Everything took him forever. I am very ambitious, so it was a clash of a kind. … I want everything done and done fast. I want to get my license, be on my feet, be independent, get out of the house.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

In situations when the husbands were unable or unwilling to offer their support, it was essential for the women to discover other channels of social resources. Most often the help would come from their co-ethnic neighbors, friends, or the larger native community.

Building Social Networks and Friendships Helped the Women Survive the Crisis of Immigration

Because the women were socialized in other countries and arrived in the United States as adults, even the most routine activities of everyday life like shopping, children's

schooling, and figuring out the American bureaucracy required constant mental strain to navigate the new culture and be understood. Discovering social support from one individual or many, from other immigrants, or from natives in the host culture became a key element in building resilience and reintegration of identity for all of the participants in the study. Most of the women shared feelings of satisfaction and psychological comfort in socializing with other transplanted Russian natives, especially during the initial adjustment phases.

Analyzing the women's narratives, I found that they negotiated their social networks in a variety of ways. For some of them, the normal feeling of loss they experienced in immigration prompted them to develop stronger roots in their religious beliefs and attachments. Gravitating to the familiar, at least half of the participants found comfort in attending Russian Orthodox churches where they could socialize and hear prayers in their own native tongue, light the candles, and feel an emotional connection, especially when shared with others.

> Nora: *After divorce I went a few times to Russian church in Atlanta and the priest told me you have to find yourself an orthodox Russian man in our church—I said: "Father, did you see the men who come here?!" [laughs]* [For original Russian quote see Appendix C]

In Arina's situation, a Catholic church became an important source of support for the practical problems she faced after separating from her abusive husband. Through their free legal services, she was provided with an immigration attorney who also became a friend. For another participant, joining a Baptist church was a way to build a stronger bond with her husband and integrate with the local host community as well as to meet other Russian-American families.

> Alina: *Later we started to go to church and met more and more people who we became friends with. I am very sociable, I need people around all*

the time. So, for me making friends is very easy. Through church we made friends with many Americans but still we found it easier to be with mixed Russian-American couples.

Apparently, the significance of creating social ties and co-ethnic friendships was magnified for the women in unhealthy marital relationships because their adaptation paths were riddled with turbulent and stressful experiences. Abandoned by their husbands financially, Olga and Katya had to look for jobs almost immediately after their arrival to the United States. Both women were able to find employment or other practical help through connections in the native community. Arina told a story about a Russian woman who had volunteered her time, energy, and friendship in helping her during her difficult time in the shelter.

Arina: …*then when I got to court to get my restraining order, I needed an interpreter. I got a free interpreter, a Russian lady, of course. Once she heard my story, she started secretly helping me (she was not supposed to) but she would come to my shelter, pick me up, take me to her job—she was a real estate agent, she would sit in there, in the house with me, and translate all of my immigration petitions for me.*

Olga: *I ended up working solely with Russians for the first 8 years … as a caregiver, as a private piano teacher, and a Russian language teacher. As I tutored a lot with Russian kids, my circle of communication was comprised of their parents, mostly, as well as of other Russian people I have ever worked with in America.*
Katya**:** *I am a social butterfly by nature, I have no problems making new friends, but my two closest friends are Russian women, both married to American husbands. One is the interpreter who was my neighbor and friend from my first days in America. … She and her husband helped me to get a job as a school custodian. So, there started my custodian career [sarcastically], who else could I become without a language … in my situation here.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Ironically, in Antonina's case, her American sister-in-law established a contact with a young Russian sales assistant at the mall. She was not asked to do so, but she had a

consciousness of her own that she used to open up an opportunity for Antonina to bridge the Russian community in Atlanta.

> Antonina: *My sister-in-law met a Russian girl in the mall and give my phone number and asked her to call me. The first time she called, we talked for 3 hours. … [Sister-in-law] later took me to the other Russian girl's party… it was like a snowball. … I was in shock how many Russian girls were there. … Most have American husbands …that is how you form a circle of your friends. The closest friends with whom you feel totally at ease—it is of course, Russian friends. I think it is normal, intuitively… it is your childhood…mentality, same country, everything.*

Marina's social networking started when she signed up for English courses. For her, meeting people with whom she could talk in her own language, share new experiences, and fully express herself became a refuge and way to alleviate cross-cultural stress.

> Marina: *The first small step out of that miserable state of mind I was in were the courses of English language. … You see different people—you can talk to them in your own language … and not just on the phone. … I talked to my parents on the phone … but it was not enough. … Skype, of course, did not exist then. It is different when you communicate in person. … My friends are mostly Russian-speaking. I express myself in Russian much better than in English. I can speak … but it is always a strain. … Maybe in 20 years this will change.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Arina, Lisa, and Lora successfully used different social media resources to solve their practical problems or to interact with people who were going through similar experiences in America.

> Arina: …*I found on Craig's list somebody who would give free English lessons, she was an executive at FedEx. … She became my friend.*

> Lisa: *In 2000 there was this discussion board—the Web platform for mixed, Russian-American, families. Russian wives of American husbands were meeting each other and exchanging opinions and experiences. I found friends there. Internet was everything for me in building my social network, especially in the beginning. Later on, when kids were growing up*

and attending Russian school and Russian events, I met the whole new circle of people, many of whom I became friends with.
Lora: *We noticed each other sitting in the same area in the airport, but we did not get a chance to communicate during all that time. Later on, she actually found me on the mail.ru and told me that she would like to get to know me. When we talked, we found out that we left our country on the same day and arrived in the same city in the U.S. Also, both met our American husbands on the Internet.*

Remarkably, in the majority of the participants' stories one could hear the duality of longing for co-ethnic connections and, at the same time, harsh reevaluation of their own people through the lens of new American values. Different tonalities toward their former country-fellows arose when the women progressed to more advanced stages of adaptation. On one hand, they stated that their closest and most satisfying friendships were built and, to this day, were maintained with the representatives of the local Russian community. On the other, it seemed that the women's confrontation with a foreign culture triggered the process of self-scrutiny and reassessment of their own national identity. Thus while analyzing the women's stories, it became evident that some of them harbored resentment or self-perceived alienation toward the larger Russian diaspora.

Alina: *Now when I go somewhere and I hear Russian speech, I don't react anymore, I don't say a single word. I don't need more friends. … I mind my own business. Just another Russian.*

Olga's troubled marital situation made her feel vulnerable and helpless in the face of the host country people. Thus, she pleaded to her own well-adjusted countrymen for help and support. When seeing that she was having problems, some tried to help, others tried to dodge her.

Olga: *I calmed down later on and would not throw myself at any Russian-speaking person anymore, I would rather run…. There were moments when I needed help and expected my own people to help, but soon I realized that often would be glad to help you drown… than reach out to you. … Maybe, their mentality was: "We had it hard—now it is your*

turn." I don't feel right saying this but I do see people through different, American, lens now.

Katya's quick immersion in American life gave her a more distant vantage point with regards to her own ethnic community. She deemed it inappropriate to live in America and be stuck in old, Russian ways of thinking and living, not making an effort to integrate.

> Katya: *It has been a much larger Russian crowd around me at the very beginning but it filtered out soon. I have noticed many of them here have not integrated into the new culture, they still think and live by Russian rules and conceptions… it is absolutely unacceptable for me. I was immersed in the American life and community from the first days here.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

As contradictory as the women's opinions sounded with regards to their own community, it was hard to overlook that all of the participants at some point benefitted from the therapeutic effect of ethnic relationships and friendships. More often than not, they provided the women with practical and emotional support necessary to build intercultural resilience.

Theme 3: The Women Sought Practical and Formal Learning to Achieve Better Functional Fitness in the New Society

Certainly expanding social networks and integrating into the host culture would have been impossible without gaining language proficiency and lifting communication barriers. Language competency as well as the acquisition of practical knowledge and skills in the new culture became essential for the women's psychological health and their ability to generate adaptive energy and leap forward after the periods of stressful experiences of acculturation.

The State of Disequilibrium Became a Motivating Force for Acquiring Language Competency and Other Practical Skills

Not everything in the women's lives abroad went as planned or imagined. In the new cultural environment the women had no shortage of unexpected challenges and stressful reactions. However, confronting the situations that disrupted the sense of stability and comfort presented the women with the opportunities to engage in various learning activities and respective adaptive changes. The women's desire to adequately express themselves and emotionally resonate with host speakers indicated their high motivation to adapt and increase their functional fitness.

Linguistic challenges were often amplified by the women's inability to move places independently. Limited access to public transportation, which all of the women took for granted in their home countries, created an absolute necessity for the women to engage in acquiring driving skills. Learning to drive was something that all the women reported as liberating and empowering— it helped them overcome the feelings of social isolation and dependency. It was also an important step that helped the women start attending language courses, building and maintaining their social connections, and seek employment without having to fully depend on their husbands.

Lisa demonstrated a high level of maturity in creating a strict schedule for her self-directed learning. As soon as she was able to drive, Lisa began attending English classes offered by a local college. Her discipline and hard work in mastering the language streamlined her path to a full-time employment as a programmer.

> Lisa: *I know people who have been here for 30 years and they don't speak the language. But it was not my route. I used multiple computer programs and CDs. I had a strict schedule—I would wake up, and for two hours I do my English work. I had to talk into a microphone and the program would record my speech and correct my pronunciation. Then, I watched lots of TV, first with subtitles, of course —it helped tremendously. … After I felt*

> *more comfortable speaking, I went on to take a job. I worked in my field, in the same company with my husband, who put a good word for me with his boss when they needed a person to work on a contract.*

Antonina's close relations with her new family provided an immediate exposure and immersion into the host language environment. She was happy to get behind the wheel of a car for the first time in her life and become less of a burden to the rest of the family.

> Antonina: *I was immersed immediately in the language atmosphere and also I started going to the language school –I think in 3 to 6 months we were communicating more or less effectively. I got my driving license and was like a teenager whose parents are very worried but still happy that they don't have to drive their kid around anymore. You need a car in Atlanta, it was my first car—I was 30 years old.*

Interestingly, Lora's childhood admiration of America has positively translated into her adult immigration experiences. Her long-term fascination not only with the English language but with American culture, in general, became a huge motivating force in acquiring language competency and achieving her education goals in the United States.

> Lora: *I was trying to learn English language before on my own, just bought some grammar textbooks. … For example, in "Wrong" I pronounced every letter. And such mistakes would stuck* [sic] *forever, till this day I have this problem. You know how they say, that in Russia we didn't learn the language—we learned about the language. … I have loved this language from the beginning of my time. I was six when ABBA and Boney M. were in their highest. I loved to listen to their songs. I could not understand anything, but it was so pleasing to my ears. … Growing up, I loved Mickey Mouse, I loved the bright colors in the colorless country that we lived in. I think, subconsciously, I have always loved this country.*

Jenny expressed her realization that learning the language and learning the culture are closely interconnected and that achieving the full competence of one is impossible without the other.

> Jenny: *I realized that learning language is a very slow process, nothing you can do. To know language you need to learn the history of the*

> *country, songs, movies, pop-culture … You have to travel. … You will understand the language when you understand America… full circle of things.*

Arina's experience of abusive marriage, which landed her in a shelter for battered and homeless women, became the strongest factor in her determination to become independent through learning to communicate with native speakers.

> Arina: *I cried all day. I was the only Russian there, I had no choice but spend every day teaching myself English, from the Internet, listening to Frank Sinatra songs, and talking to people.*

In addition to learning the language, Arina had to learn the meaning of such new concepts as 'car insurance,' 'monthly payments,' 'repossession,' and so forth. She also became educated about the American legal and court systems when it came to her traffic violations, divorce procedures, and immigration petitions.

Olga's first two years in America were physically and emotionally draining. Long working hours for a Russian company did not provide the opportunity to participate in cross-cultural communications. For a while, her only sources of English were her daughter's science projects and other school assignments.

> Olga: *My main progress with English was due to my daughter's school assignments that I was trying to help her with. We did her homework together and together we progressed in English. That what really helped me. To this day, it is easier for me to understand science language than to read popular magazines.*

Similar to Olga's situation, Katya's circumstances did not allow for much academic time either. Very much like in Olga's case, Katya had to find employment and support her family almost immediately after the arrival to the United States. The advantage in Katya's case was the opportunity to fully immerse into the language

environment as she began to work as a school custodian and as a baby-sitter for an American family.

> Katya: *School helped, kids helped a lot, as well. I learned language with my kids, read books to them and watched their cartoons. I would go with them to all their school events, and honestly, I felt a big progress in English. Of course, this job did not prepare and rather delayed me in being able to look into a real career.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

The majority of the women in the study shared some common strategies in the ways they approached their learning of English. They studied grammar textbooks, used on-line educational resources, watched American TV programs, and attended ESL courses. However, many factors such as the women's educational background, personality traits, and their different life circumstances in America facilitated or hindered their level and the rate of acquiring language competency.

The Women Experienced Different Outcomes in Attempting to Forge Relationships with the Members of the Host Community

To get over the culture shock and achieve better cultural fitness, it was essential for the women to get to know and build relationships with the people of the host culture. However, this process did not prove to be speedy or effortless. The level of the women's language and culture competence, though seminal for integration in the host culture, was not the only contributing factor. The time that the participants spent in the country, their unique personal qualities, and participation in various host activities influenced the women's different outcomes and attitudes on building meaningful connections in the host community.

It took a long time for Olga to expand her social network because for 8 years her social circle was comprised mostly of Russians. She emotionally shared that only when she started college was she able to make her first close American friend.

> Olga: *Recently… I did not even expect that, being close to 40, and from a different culture... but I made a first close American friend, at school. She is three years younger with a five-year-old boy. With her the difference in cultures just doesn't exist—we are cut out of the same cloth, so similar that sometimes I switch to Russian when talking to her and don't even notice that. When she stops me, it takes me a while to realize she doesn't speak my language—it feels so strange to me.*

When Lora started working at the hospital, she became good friends with her American co-worker.

> Lora: …*I have found a good friend when I started working. I can knock at 3 am on their door, and they will open the door for me, pretty much like the level of friendship I had in Russia.*

Antonina was able to create friendships with her teammates when she started playing tennis in her neighborhood.

> Antonina: *Besides my husband and his family, I did not have anybody. They were great, but it was not enough. Later on, I started playing tennis in my neighborhood … the girls on my team and on other teams –we really became good friends, although, not the same level of closeness as I still had with my Russian girls.*

In spite of her earnest intentions to make friends in the mainstream community, Nora sadly concluded that her efforts were fruitless.

> Nora: …*This nation is very individualistic—for example, in Russia… I worked there, and I am still in touch with those people. Here I worked and I made zero friends. … I did make efforts, trying to connect through Facebook, or when the kids were growing, I was sincerely reaching out to their friends' parents, but no one responded. I have no American friends, such that I can pick up the phone to talk or share.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Jenny was trying hard to meet her husband's expectations to quickly assimilate into American life. He introduced Jenny to his large social circle so she could find her American friends there. She tried to initiate contacts with the two women she seemed to feel a connection with, only to realize that they were not interested. She recognized that

friendships should happen spontaneously and naturally. Reflecting on her numerous American acquaintances, she does not see relationships with them as deep and close, while her real friendships are made with Russians.

> Jenny: *But, you know, these big parties with 40-plus people… they all going around talking about nothing—you don't have these intimate conversations. … I picked two girls who I felt comfortable with and I started building relationship with them … using my technique—calling, asking how you doing, how was your day… And it did not go well. …But it was very important for me to find friends. … Things were happening kinda spontaneously. I think now— my really dear friends here are Russian, period. American friends—just at parties—'znakomie,' 'priyateli,' always forget the English word for it…'acquaintances.'*

Regaining Social and Professional Status through Formal and Professional Education

The women in this study are young individuals who brought with them knowledge, professional skills, and employment experience that they acquired in their home countries. For the majority of the participants, their self-actualization and integration into the new society lay in the domains of education and employment. Nevertheless, when they arrived to America, the women, at least temporarily, experienced the transition from college-educated, self-sufficient adults to the ones who were economically and physically dependent.

Coupled with the frustration over the language and culture barriers, several participants initially experienced a dramatic loss of social and professional status. In the absence of adequate support systems and limited language skills, Arina, Olga, and Katya had to accept unprofessional and unexciting jobs that were significantly below their qualifications and expectations. In Arina's situation, after moving out of the shelter, she realized that due to her unresolved immigration status and lack of language skills, cleaning houses for cash was her only option to make some living despite her two college

degrees from Russia. Olga's doctorate degree in Psychology lay dormant for more than eight years of working as a caregiver for a senior care company and then as a medical billing assistant.

> Olga: *So I have completed 8-months Medical Assistant Courses. We had to check patients' insurance eligibilities—from morning till night—500-600 insurances a day— repetitive, dumb. On one hand, I was happy to make two dollars per hour more than before, and I did not have to hustle three different jobs at a time, but nevertheless, it was killing me.*

Katya, who accepted the job of a school custodian, decided to look at the bright side.

> Katya: *I had to vote on all pros and cons… and decided it was alright—first of all, it can be an opportunity to learn the school system from the inside as I had no understanding of it whatsoever… it was so different from the Russian one; secondly, it gave good benefits.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

In spite of the initial and sometimes long setbacks, the women demonstrated strength and ambition in pursuing their dream careers. At the time of the interviews, least half of the participants were on their way or had already achieved great educational and professional success.

> Arina: *I am digital interactive marketing manager for a billion dollar international corporation that provides information management solutions; I also have my own business providing marketing solutions for small businesses like video, search engine optimization consultant, Word Press consultant. I read scripts, I produce white board videos, I write, I speak …*

> Olga: *I have evaluated my Russian diplomas. It was now easier to understand life around me. My daughter's knowledge and her fluent English helped me a lot. I signed up for TOEFL exam at Kennesaw. I successfully passed it and started the Occupational Therapy program—I realized that it was the best path for me to incorporate my previous education in psychology with some experience in the medical field.*

Table 3. The Women's Education and Career Paths

Pseudonym	Year of Arrival to the US	Education prior to Immigration	Occupations and Careers Prior to Immigration	Formal Education after Immigration	Occupations and Careers after Immigration
#1 Alina	Dec.,1999	Education and Business Degrees	Small Business Owner	None	Marriage Agency Manager/Housewife
#2 Jenny	Jan., 2004	M.S. of Science	Government Trade Ministry Department/Small Business Owner	None	Director of Russian school/ Bookkeeper in her husband's business
#3 Olga	Feb.,2007	Ph'd in Phycology	Psychologist for City Police Department	MS in Occupation Therapy	Caregiver, Piano Tutor, Russian Language Tutor/Med Insurance and Billing/Occupational Therapist
#4 Arina	July.,2008	Business and Law	Student	Professional MBA degree	House Cleaning/Digital Marketing Manager
#5 Lisa	Oct., 2000	M.S. in Computer Engineering	Programmer	Cell Biology Student	Programmer/Student
#6 Lora	Feb., 2007	Registered Nurse	Seamstress/Emergency Anesthetic Nurse	NCLEX Licensed Nurse	Post-Surgery Nurse
#7 Nora	June, 1995	M.S. in Economics	Economist, Moscow Central Bank	Paralegal Certificate	Sales Associate, /Paralegal/Lead Accountant
#8 Marina	Oct, 2001	M.S. in Finance and BA of Science in Tourism Management	Government Tax Inspector/Administrative Assistant	None	Housewife/Bookkeeper in her husband's business
#9 Antonina	Aug., 1998	BA in Elementary and Early Childhood Education/Registered Nurse	Preschool Teacher/ Hospital Nurse in Trauma and Neuroscience Units	None	Housewife
#10 Katya	May, 2003	BA in Science and Teaching	Waitress, Restaurant Manager, Casino Croupier	Professional training - Optometrist Office	School Custodian/Optometrist assistant

Lisa: *I am taking classes towards cell biology. … I am thinking of merging my computer science degree with the cell biology and eventually, to do my PhD in cell biology at UGA.*
Lora: *It took me three year of studying to pass the exam. The hardest part of my live here … but in this country it is normal that if you set a goal and stay your course—you will always reach it. … I am now in a Post-Anesthesia care unit, people coming directly from the surgery, so the recovery can be very hard, and it is a lot of responsibility.*

In Table 3 I summarized the women's data on their education and career engagements before and after immigration.

Theme 4: Extensive Personal Transformation Has Accompanied Each Phase of the Women Psychological and Cultural Adaptation

The Women Had to Adjust Their Expectations about the New Country

For years, living behind the Iron Curtain, people from the Soviet territories were deprived of information about the outside world. As with the majority of the Soviet people that immigrated before or right after the era of "perestroika", most of the women in the study and the researcher herself, admitted to having a romanticized image of America. It was based on magazine pictures or rare Hollywood movies, it encompassed brightly lit streets with powerful tall buildings, rising high above the skylines, and beautifully dressed people streaming along those streets.

The understanding of the participants' expectations prior to immigration and their initial impressions of America was important for further exploration of their psychological adjustment and cultural transformation. Layered with the relationship dynamics within each individual couple, the women's attitudes and emotions in the new country varied from total excitement to complete disappointment. Below I included several excerpts that demonstrated the painful clash of expectations that happened when several women in the study confronted their new realities.

Arina: ... *Shock, culture shock! I remember entering the airport …Well, number one, it was very stressful because of the Atlanta's weather. … We had to fly around and stay in the air for like an hour. Then landing, getting out, and just seeing all the gigantic people of sizes I have never seen before …sitting on the floor and eating fat burgers. I was thinking: "Wow, is this my future? Is this what my children are going to look like, entering this culture of unhealthy eating…" I was wondering, where all the tall, skinny, and beautiful women, wearing $2000 belts were… Overall my attitude on this first day was mostly shock, arrogance, and conclusion that I don't accept it. Also, when I saw the car my husband picked me up in I was speechless. A pick-up truck?!*

Katya: *I thought when I was coming here that everybody was successful, everybody had everything. I was not ready for the financial difficulties I ran into here, I never experienced them back in Russia. … They did not exist in my family. …We always had money— my Dad was an army colonel, plus later, I worked in environments where money was flowing freely around me. … I could afford anything there, but here it appeared I could barely afford anything.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Nora: *My future, now ex-husband told me that Atlanta was practically like New York, only better. I thought—Great, I have been to New-York before, so let's go and see. I arrived to Atlanta—what a disaster of a city it was! I saw it as backwards and rural. My first impression too, much of my sadness, has never changed. I thought to myself that I would get the heck out of here after a month … but easier said than done.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

For some participants the honeymoon of their courtships was well aligned with the honeymoon phase of their adjustment in the host environment. The women felt excited, curious and intrigued about the similarities and differences of their old and new surroundings.

Lora: *….big impression on this first day was when we arrived to his subdivision and saw those houses … it was so surprising for us. …My son was like WOW … we could not believe that people lived like that. … Of course, people who you have never met …driving and waving to you, it was also impressive. …Smiling at you—such a different culture. …Not that I was not prepared for good things, I watched a lot of movies … but still, I was pleasantly surprised.*

Marina: *Well, in the airport, I arrived in the evening… I remember everything seemed so wide and the floors were so shiny. I had a feeling*

> *that everything around was gleaming as well. … So, I am getting in this white car and I am thinking: "Goodness, he is like a prince on a white horse!" [laughs] It felt like we could take off any minute … so fast and soft the car was going. …The roads were nice. I, honestly, had a feeling that I got into the future …where people still looked pretty ordinary to me but, because they were in the future, they all spoke English.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Analyzing my interviews with the women, I was interested to see how their initial perceptions about the new country evolved and whether those changes correlated with their personal and cultural transformations.

The Women Experienced Personal and Cultural Identity Transformation

Closely examining the women's narratives, it became clear that at some point in the process of adjusting to the new culture, the participants experienced disorienting dilemmas or trigger events. These events demanded attention and caused the participants to engage in ongoing transformative learning. This would ultimately change the way they constructed meaning, selves, and the view of the world. I considered it significant to explore the ways the women viewed and internalized their renegotiated identities as well as their ethnic believes and values.

When asked about personal and transformations, most participants had to stop and think. It was evident, that for most of them it was the first time to engage into such out-loud self-reflections. The majority of the women, when contemplating their cultural transition in America, acknowledged that their views about self, their home culture, and people have transformed. Remarkably, by and large, the women concluded that it took a trip home to overcome culture shock, bring them back to reality, and help them see transformative changes in themselves.

At least half of the participants acknowledged that they changed into more open, kind, confident, and honest people. Some mentioned such character changes as getting less judgmental and arrogant, and some also felt it made them more spiritual.

> Lisa: *I am so more open now, I am not afraid of smiling at people or start a friendly chat with a stranger—something I would never do back at home, where people would think I was plain crazy. It became so hard for me to visit Russia—this negativity just puts so much pressure on you. Of course, that's something that I lived with for years and never realized, but now I am very sensitive to it. You fly into the Russian airport and, starting with the customs there … you know what I mean, their tone and their faces… So, certain transformations undoubtedly happened. I don't know, maybe, it is the Southern influence as well, who knows… if lived in New York, would I be able to say the same?*

Marina 's reflections on the new self were intertwined with her deep sadness about her home country, Ukraine, and the ongoing armed conflict that was tearing the region apart.

> Marina: *I changed, indeed. Looking at what is going on in Ukraine now, and at my former country-fellows—I see that I was like them… Judgmental, cynical, prejudiced. … That is how we grew up in that culture. … Only here, I was able to look at myself objectively… and I did not like what I saw. I realized I was lost. … When you grow up in a culture where everybody constantly compare and compete with each other … I don't know… it permeates you. I am now more open with people, but again this is the direct influence of this new culture and traditions. … I feel now exactly how I felt in my early childhood—open and trusting. … I was very active, happy to participate in the events. Here, I think during this first year, and in conversations with my husband, especially … when he tried to help me to sort out my emotions … I suddenly understood myself better. I feel now as if a mask has fallen off, and I am as innocent and wholesome as I was in my childhood.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Lora believes that her transformations started the moment she stepped off the plane in Atlanta airport. She reflects on her identity and cultural transformations, constantly juxtaposing her life experiences in both countries.

Lora: I am not changed in my core maybe, but I feel more open, friendly. I am smiling more. Looking at the faces of my country-fellows when visited Russia, I saw gloominess, insecurity, worries—even on the faces of people who were more financially stable than the others. In 2011, I went back to visit family, I had a reverse culture shock, worse than when I first arrived here. Rudeness, uncivilized conditions…

My life really started right when I arrived in America. From that point, I became a changed person. For example, I have always loved and wanted to draw, I have been making clothes, I have always been creative. I love art… but in Russia, I don't know why, but I was never in the mood to lift a pencil. … I would sew things for myself or for others… to make some money. One year I survived solely on such orders… but to open your soul to drawing or music you have to have inspiration. … There I never had it. Life was difficult… I am not a great artist but I draw now and really enjoy it.

Some research suggest that the more successful is one's adjustment to the new culture, the more striking will be the contrast on returning home. Echoing other participants on reassessing their old cultural values, Antonina reflected on her reverse culture shock and when for the first time she thought of America as home.

Antonina: …*Eight years after I went back again with my three kids and it was reverse cultural shock— I realized I am totally American, looking at everything with American mentality. I was shocked. … Of course some people, my friends and family were above nice, but I had a lot of negative experiences. … Even in two years in America I got so used to kindness around, when people want to help other people, it is normal … it is in their nature.*

As other women in the study, Antonina talked about becoming more accepting of herself and less dependent on the opinions of others.

Antonina *I have always was so hard on myself. … My husband changed me a lot, the family bond with his sisters—I was proud to be a part of this great family. … Of course not perfect … but nobody is perfect. For me it was all black and white. … Finally, I realized that in life you cannot control everything, sometimes stuff happen, so I learned to relax. You started to accept who you are, feeling free. I would say that I have always been more compassionate and understanding to other people flaws and weaknesses than I was to myself. The other thing … you try to please, which is the other side of being insecure … you want to be good for everybody, accepted, you want their approval. … Finally here, I am who I*

am, not that I don't care … but as long as I am happy with myself and finding the balance…

All the challenges Olga went through in immigration, affected her personality in a way that made her more empathetic and less extreme in her views on life.

> Olga: *Perhaps, the relationships with people became more valuable, it can be a result of getting older. Or maybe I don't have that many good friends around, so I value every minute with those I have. Considering what I have been through … I am positively a kinder person, perhaps. I pick my battles more thoroughly, let go of easier, and forgive more. Less extremes, less black and white, although again it may be also due to growing old.*

When looking at herself through the prism of the new cultural values, Jenny was able to uncover her allegiance to her new country as well as new moral principles she tries to live by.

> Jenny: *What a great question! I do have an answer and I can tell you that this culture changed me in a good way. It made me down to Earth, it made me … more honest every step of the way. … For example, when I just came…my husband was filing for taxes. … He did show me the number that he had to pay. And I was like: "Are you crazy?! Let's do this and that, let's see what I can do so you will pay less." So, my American husband told me: "No, I don't want to do this. I want us to have good roads, good schools, and education, clean water, good security*." *I thought: "Oh my goodness! This is so different. And so honest and simple. Amazing thing to hear for Russians [laughs]. I felt ashamed. So, many things now, I don't want to do the Russian way.*

Several participants shared that they developed new meanings not only through the new culture but through adopting religious beliefs and practices.

> Alina: *There are certain things that my husband would teach me. In our culture we are more expressive, more saying what we think, and sometimes people get hurt. He taught me that what you are saying is not a big deal, but you can always say it nicely. Also Russian women by nature are more controlling. I had to give that up. But of course, when we found God, it transformed both of us. I am different now … I am calmer, more peaceful and understanding. I don't know if it has to do with new culture or it is about inner transformation inside of me. Finding God had more influence than the new culture. I have friends that did adjust to the culture in a sense that it is like a rat race for them—they want more, more. This*

country is land of opportunities—I can become a millionaire with all the education and knowledge I have. But then I realized it is never enough…

Going through hurtful experiences and subsequent existential crisis made Arina contemplate the reasons and consequences of the choices she made.

Arina: *Today if somebody told me they are going to marry somebody 28 year older—I would say honey, you need to see a therapist and work on your Daddy issues… But I obviously had no perspective at the time, I was confident I met a soul mate, a love of my life, and nobody will ever love me like this again.*

Furthermore, Arina admitted to having a lot of learning to do—about herself, relations, and the culture. She also found a lot of clarity and support from religion and faith. Reflecting and comparing her old and new self, she noted:

…I was unappreciative, I think, ungrateful, and I think I was hurting a lot. I was trying to survive, and I did not have good perspective on relationships, and I think I also did not have kindness and compassion, because I had to survive and fight. I had to be more aggressive, controlling, like "let's get shit done."… Today I think I am more successful in my life and in my career because I learned through this journey that you can be kind, compassionate, and chill, give people room to breathe, and persuade them this way. I work on a lot of projects that are truly impactful in our company and the way I do it is though kindness, smile, and patience.

A great level of maturity and self-reflection was demonstrated in Katya's contemplations as she implied that all the predicaments she dealt with in her journey became stepping stones to her personal and cultural growth. As with all of the women, after Katya's trip back to Russia, she inevitably drew comparisons between the old and the new cultures, reflected on her former circle of friends, and gained better understanding of her transformed self. Clearly, here Katya's so-called foreigner's perspective made her more aware of the texture of her own culture, where the difference in attitudes, status, and even physical appearance became more discernible.

> Katya: *I am definitely wiser and more confident now. … In this country everything is so much more orderly, clear, and right—to get anywhere here you have to make steps that are honest and consecutive. I realize now that I was spoiled rotten; and the time it took me to stabilize and improve my life here disciplined me and taught me respect and patience in achieving my goals. And all that serves as motivation to keep moving and growing.*
> *I spent a month in Russia this January—Boy, did I feel out of place there! To what extent my friends remained exactly the same as I left them 11 years ago, nothing changed in their perceptions of life or their priorities. I felt so much older than them while looking much younger… [laughs] It seemed that my head was organized completely differently. … Their goal felt pathetic to me, their gossips and intrigues petty. I could not frankly stand hanging out with them.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Nora's perspectives on the host culture and herself were truly straightforward and unconventional. She resents the shallowness and insincerity that surrounds her. Nevertheless, she resorts to these qualities as a strategy to blend in. Reflecting on her last trip to Moscow, she laments to be living outside of her native culture and away from her scintillating and intellectual Russian friends. She criticizes the scarcity of cultural events and places in Atlanta and yearns for a fuller and more stimulating life.

> Nora: *I don't think this culture has changed me, it only taught me to pretend and to imitate in order to blend in—I will smile back to their fake smiles, and I will ask "how are you," I will behave cool and make them like me, I will even make them laugh—but in reality, I can care less. I am not myself with them. My only regret is that I live outside of my culture; my friends in Russia all have such deep intellectual foundation, they read a lot, attend cultural events, theater is huge part of their lives, their cultural life never stopped. While mine has just froze up!* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

The Women Reflected on Their Adaptation in the New Country

Through a progression of transformative learning experiences that were often entwined with tribulations and setbacks, the women experienced an evolutionary process of self-development and growth. Through this process they were better able to reach beyond their original cultural limits and see themselves as a part of a larger host society.

It was also essential to inquire about the women's self-perceived degree of adjustment and their sense of personal well-being after the challenges they encountered and learned from in the new culture.

Through the conversations with the participants it became evident that nine out the ten women perceived themselves a part of American culture, talked about the country as their new home, and considered themselves well-adapted in it. One participant concluded that she always felt as an outsider to the host culture and its people, despite considering herself highly functional and well-adjusted in the new country. Nora became the only participant who claimed she would return to Moscow if it ever became practically possible.

> Nora: *I would not say this culture irritates me—it just did not become mine. … Shallow conversations with the colleagues at work, obsession with sports, and the fact that nobody gives a dime about each other, not just at work but everywhere around. They all claim to be your friends but when real help is needed there is nobody in sight. Men and women here, look how many of them are on some pills—so many mental problems. … A lot of closed alcoholics…*
> *I just came back from visiting in Russia—small apartments, I loved it. I realized I don't need so much space, I don't need to cut this grass, to take care of the yard. I am not an agricultural person. … I need none of that – give me an apartment or a condo I will be happy … and better in Moscow, somewhere close to the metro station.* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

Lisa's positive outlook on life and her determination that this country was meant to become her new home appeared to be good predictors of her successful adaptation in America. Her appreciation for American culture was magnified after her trip home.

> Lisa: *I have access to so much and I love it here, it is my country—there is no going back. … Even back at home, one of the incentives for me to apply for the Computer Engineering major in the Saint-Petersburg University, was that they had this student exchange program with the U.S. So, it was meant to be, you see. I may sometimes miss some Russian food items but not the living there: crushed glass from vodka bottles in a children's sand-*

pan in the yard are my memories from when I came back to visit with my small children. The drunkards in the streets, walking wobbly and cursing, dirt and spit around. As far as nostalgia, I did experience it the first year before my first trip back … After that visit it dissipated so quickly… I never had it again.

Katya was adamant that all the challenges she faced and was able to overcome facilitated her deep personal transformation and equipped her with better adaptive skills.

Katya: *I feel well adapted but it took me eleven years to come to this conclusion. … About a year ago I stopped myself at the thought that finally I got to this point. I am moving in right direction … But when we get together with my Russian girls and start remembering—I don't regret one step or decision I made. All happened for a reason. I was meant to go through certain "circles" in order to understand the value of things whether material or relational. … My life here was not a fairy tale, it did not happen to me all at once…* (For original Russian quote, see Appendix C.)

To Antonina, the love for her four children born in America is inseparable with her love for the country that made it all possible for her.

Antonina: *…so, two years later I went back to Russia—everything was nice, but I remember in a couple of weeks I was packing and I said I was going home. … After I blurted it, I stopped and thought: "Wow, I am going back to America and it is my home."*

… My husband says that he would not know what he would do without me because I bring the biggest happiness into his life but that is what I say to him, too. He gave me everything I ever dreamed of and wanted in this life, especially the kids. And the level of living … I am absolutely blessed.

Jenny had a surge of patriotism and revelation about her love for the country when studying for her citizenship exam. She believed that the country that was so good to her would be also good to her parents who were planning to join her. Sadly, I found out later that Jenny's mother died from cancer in Russia soon after her immigration petition was approved and did not have a chance to reunite with her older daughter and grandson. Jenny's father now lives in America, not far from her house.

> Jenny*: I love this country now more than I loved Russia, with the understanding of both now… I feel that I have well adapted to the life in the U.S. … When I was getting ready for my citizenship exam they had a question if I was ready … if the country in danger … to get up and protect this country and, you know, I had this surge of patriotism come over me—absolutely yes, with my bare hands [laughing]! I felt that I am ready, truly ready to be a citizen. Because you know … I love this country, I applied for my parents to come here.*

Adaptation to Alina came naturally. The fact that the country she now lives in is, she feels, based on religious principles and holds family values in high respect makes it even easier for her to feel at home.

> Alina: *When I came here I did not think about transformation, about the culture, I was in love. I wanted to create a family. It [adaptation] happened naturally. … I would put it this way. When I go anywhere and people smile—I smile. It feels natural, it feels good. This country is based on bible… like I shared with my sister recently, that even scary looking crowd of teenagers here will open the door for you and show respect, especially here in the South. Family values are important, not like in Minsk… there no such concept that your husband will spend weekend somewhere with his friends, these type of things.*

The realization that everything is possible in America if you put your mind to it and work hard at reaching your goals made Olga a more confident and stronger person. Olga's rediscovered sense of empowerment and maturity along with her high academic achievements in America gave an impression of a person who was well adapted and content with her new life.

> Olga: *I would say I definitely have more faith in myself. I have always been confident and stubborn in a good way. But if in Russia I could realistically tell myself 'this is absolutely out of my reach, this is impossible,' here I feel I can do anything I put my mind to. … I came to peace with myself, I am who I am, and I do not care much about what people think of me. I had to build myself from nothing—nobody knew me here, I had no feedback, and I felt like a newborn chicken. I realized that all my successes from my previous Russian life had no meaning or credit here—I had to start everything from scratch.*

Arina shared that she actively participated in church events and charities and that she volunteered for one of the Atlanta's shelters for battered and homeless women. Not only does she believe that in America she found herself but she wrote and published a book on domestic violence and the ways to reach success and self-actualization based on her own immigration journey.

The process of cross-cultural adaptation for the women in the study was characterized by a variety of experiences, circumstances, and acculturation strategies. Accompanied by the gradual progression of personal and cultural transformations, it allowed the women to form new frames of references and develop a new intercultural identity.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter will present the discussions of the findings, conclusions, and implications of the study. The following major sections are: (a) summary of findings, (b) study conclusions, (c) discussion of conclusion one, (d) discussion of conclusion two, and (d) implications of the research.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to give voice to post-Soviet marriage immigrant women with particular emphasis placed on the learning and adaptation to the new culture as they moved to the United States. Through the women's interviews I was able to explore the women's life narratives and draw on the commonalities and differences of their experiences in the following domains: expressions of agency, building resilience in the face of adversities, developing intercultural identity, and engaging in transformative learning.

The nature and the purpose of this research made it appropriate to use a qualitative methodology and conduct the study as a cross-case analysis with a narrative approach. Furthermore, the study was largely informed by Kim's (1988, 2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation. Two other theories, Mezirow's (1991b) transformative learning theory and Rappaport's (1985) individual empowerment theory, proved helpful in analyzing the findings. By presenting the shared stories of the post-Soviet marriage immigrant women, the research infused their viewpoints on

different aspects of their cultural adaptation and learning in the overall effort to challenge the stereotypical and often stigmatizing discourses on this immigrant group.

Two research questions were posed in the study. The following major findings emerged from the research question one, which asked: What are the life narratives of the post-Soviet marriage immigrant women in the United States, told through their own stories? They are as follows:

1) The women in this study represent a heterogeneous group whose shared immigration narratives are unique and multidimensional.

2) The stories of building new lives in America, told by the study participants, strongly defy the common stereotypes of so-called "mail-order brides."

Four salient themes developed with relation to research question two, which asked: What are the common adaptation and learning experiences of the post-Soviet women who immigrated to the United States through international marriage agencies?

1) The women demonstrated agency in making the fundamental life transitions.
2) The women developed resilience in the face of adversity.
3) The women pursued better cultural fitness in the new society.
4) Extensive personal transformation has accompanied each phase of the women psychological and cultural adaptation.

In this final chapter, I address these conclusions in relation to the study research questions, while making connections to the relevant literature. Finally, I present implications of the research, and concluding remarks.

Conclusions of the Study

Based on the findings tied to the research questions one and two, the following major conclusions emerged: 1) The post-Soviet marriage immigrants in this study

represent a heterogeneous group, whose adaptation trajectories in America were found to be shaped by the many ways, in which these women expressed agency and resilience; and 2) Continuous transformative learning has accompanied each phase of the women's psychological and cultural transition.

Discussion

Conclusion One: The Women Demonstrated Agency and Resilience.

The overarching goal here was to explore the life narratives of post-Soviet marriage immigrant women in America. The voices concerning the participants' first-hand experiences of their adaptation and learning in the new culture are the focus and heart of this study. Specifically, it was my desire for these women to articulate the relevant aspects of their immigration experiences through open-ended interviews.

Although the women in this study share the story of immigrating to America from post-Soviet countries through international marriage, they do not share a uniform narrative about their experiences, circumstances, and transformative changes. The concept of shared stories is used here to pinpoint some similarities and commonalities of this disparate group of migrants from similar background and explore their patterns of adaptation, meaning making, and identity transformation. This aligns with Moissinac (2012), who argues that the narrative approach is seen to be a privileged genre for identity constructions and identity analysis as "narrating seems to draw toward aspects of 'human life'—something more than what is reportable or tellable, but life- and liveworthy (Taylor, 1989)" (p. 5). Furthermore, the identities as well as the narratives are socially situated and influenced by various contexts and available discourses (Taylor, 2008).

The women's narratives in this study, although qualitatively unique, appear to share some elements of content and formal structure, including the chronological order of the life stories, a series of conventional milestone events such as the reasons for and circumstances of migration (Schulze, Skidmore, Liebscher, & Achenbach, 2008). Thus, collectively, the women spoke to the personal and socio-cultural aspects that shaped their decision to seek a partner abroad, the significance of challenging the status quo of their traditional lives, and building resilience in the face of challenges of acculturation.

In relation to the first conclusion, which found that unique adaptation trajectories of the ten marriage immigrant women in this study were shaped by the various expressions of agency and resilience, three salient themes will be discussed. They are as follows: 1) expressions of agency; 2) turning crisis into strength; 3) pursuing integration in the host society**;** and 4) engaging in transformative learning.

Expressions of agency. Driven by different and unique reasons to pursue international marriage, the participants demonstrated agency in their ability "to express resistance, exert influence, and create change" (Constable, 2006, p.4). Their ambitious choice to build a better life abroad resonates with feminist discourses on migrant women and individual empowerment. "Migration is a form of transition that always begins with a choice between leaving and staying a home country…This decision is the first act of empowerment for individuals, who until then, seemed to endure life events helplessly" (Ostrouch-Kamin´ska & Vieira, 2015, p. 93).

The women had various and complex reasons for seeking partners abroad. Their pragmatic concerns were inseparable from their emotional ones. This finding refutes common discourses in the scholarly literature presenting geographic and upward mobility

as prevailing reasons. This is closely aligned with Constable (2003a), who argues against a dichotomous or discontinuous view of love and opportunism as incompatible with each other. She concludes that "…in fact, international marriage migrants are looking for an 'ideal husband' with whom they can have a loving and economically secure marriage," like many other people, as well.

The women in this study shared a sense of protest and discontentment with the social culture they lived in. The lack of basic values the women held important and Russian men's attitudes toward marriage and relationships became significant stressors for most participants to seek a foreign husband. When talking about the scarcity of "marriageable" Russian men, the women referred to their heavy drinking habits, low moral standards, and inability to provide for a family in a deranged post-Soviet economy. These sentiments are addressed in Johnson's (2007) book *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband*, where she writes: "I had to admit that women's complaints were grounded in actual problems…" (p. 53). Even the best educated Russian men of the perestroika times were considered a lost generation, having to tread the difficult waters of the crippled post-communist economy, unable to find employment and provide for the family (Johnson, 2007).

The demographic crisis in Russia and unstable economy became strong push factors for several participants. It is important to view the respondents' reasons for seeking international marriage against the backdrop of the epic collapse of the Soviet Union and its economic ramifications. When referring to that time, Phillips (2015) tells that amid disastrous inflation of the 1990s, keeping vodka cheap was viewed as a political priority. Due to those misguided government policies and the fact that drinking

has long been a part of the Russian culture, the mortality rate among men has surged significantly. According to Veselkova and Zemlianova (2000), in 1987, the life expectancy of Russian men and women was 64.9 and 74.6 years, respectively, while in 1998 these numbers had dropped to 61.3 and 72.9 years. The greater vulnerability of males created a gender ratio that, to this day, is among the most unbalanced in the world.

Among other reasons to find an international husband, some women claimed prior failed relationships and marriages in which they felt cheated or used. “The divorce rate in Russia approximates the one in the U.S., but the remarriage rate among men is significantly higher than among women” (Hoem, Kostova, Jassilioniene, & Muresan, 2009, p. 49). Echoing the women’s frustration, researchers discuss the double standards of relationships between genders in Russian society, where extramarital affairs for men are considered a norm due to a traditional patriarchal family structure in which a woman is to blame for everything, including her husband’s cheating (Begin, 2007, p. 15).

Many women in the study shared that in the culture of early marriages, their age of mid-twenties or early thirties was considered critical, and when coupled with the fact of having a child from a previous marriage, drastically decreased the chances of finding a suitable local partner (Johnson, 2007; Ryabov, 2013). This is a recurrent finding in the studies on post-Soviet as well as on Asian immigrant women, where, resisting this social pressure, women who have passed “marriageable age” view international marriage as a coping strategy (Kojima, 2001). Three of the study participants were single mothers whose ex-husbands were not involved in the lives of their children and did not provide any child support. Thus, their search for a husband was amplified by the desire to find a farther for their child and achieve financial stability. These findings are closely aligned

with Jonhnson's (2007) research on Russian women, where she states that within the countries of former Soviet bloc the population of the women who are single, divorced, or widowed is significantly large, hence the large number of single-mother households. She confirmed that it was typical for Russian fathers of that era to avoid paying child care and participate in the upbringing of their children.

For several of the participants, the dream to find a husband abroad was triggered by their curiosity about the world, desire to learn a foreign language, and possibility "to attain a more favorable position in spatial hierarchy" (Constable, 2005, p. 177). This agrees with Johnson (2007), who states that for years the USSR "denied its citizens freedom of movement… They were trapped in the Soviet Union… When leaving was impossible doing so was tempting" (p. 151). Nevertheless, upon analyzing the women's stories, I concluded that dichotomous stereotypes of fraudulent gold-diggers or "submissive or sex-trafficked victims" stressed in many early writings on international marriage did not apply to my respondents (Kim, 2008, p. 76). Their different motivations to seek international marriage are complex and multi-dimensional and should be viewed as expressions of their ability to make choices and act on them.

As another expression of agency, the women in the study considered a variety of factors when sorting out their partner choices. Several participants stated that they had a clear set of criteria against which they considered their potential husbands, including men's personal traits, age, appearance, occupation, and overall perceived compatibility. Despite coming from the countries plagued with political and economic instability, all the women in the study brought with them significant social and symbolic capital with regards to their high education levels and satisfying careers. In their country of origin, the

women represented a nurse, a fashion designer, a casino croupier, a banker, a psychologist, a government tax commissioner, and a programmer, among other careers and occupations.

Although they came from very different walks of life, geographic locations (eight of the women came from several Russian cities, one from Ukraine, and the other from Belarus), and disparate social levels, none of the women felt desperate in an economic or political sense and thus never entertained the idea of marrying just *any* foreign man to emigrate. In addition, the women's average age in my study was about 29, which in combination with their educational and employment background strongly defies another widely spread stereotype of *young, naïve, and desperate* girls selling themselves to the rich men abroad.

This finding echoes closely those of Constable (2003), who studied matchmaking businesses between mostly Western men and women from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. She emphasized that that the vast majority of women in her study were not desperate because they made informed decisions about who to contact or respond to and who they agreed to meet with. None of them wanted to marry just any foreign man, and the "right man" meant different things to each of them (p. 28). Through a "careful screening process," the women in this study expressed their desire to find a caring, intelligent, financially secure husband, love, better opportunities for their children, and potential self-actualization (Kim, 2008, p. 98). These findings also agree with the studies of such feminist authors as Simons (2001), Constable (2003), Osipovich (2004), Johnson (2007), and Kim (2008), who warn against reinforcing a one-sided view of the women as

"passively selected by predatory men without knowledge of potential exploitation and abuse"(Kim, 2008, p. 98).

Clearly, through making a choice and taking actions to fundamentally change their life, the study participants exercised various degrees of agency. However, as evident from their stories, the women's expression of agency did not necessarily mean that they acted in their own best interests (Constable, 2003a, 2005a; Kim, 2008). For instance, Arina made an independent choice to marry an American man 28 years her senior who swept her off her feet with gifts, exotic trips, and captivating charm. The reality of their marital life in America left no traces of the once fairy-tale courtship, as quickly she found herself in a shelter for homeless and abused women. In her interview she attributed her choice to her unresolved daddy issues and unrealistic expectations. Thus, the way in which the agency is carried out is not free from the varied influences and structures of power (Constable, 2003a, 2005a).

The women's expectations prior to immigration as well as initial impressions just after they arrived became significant factors that played into shaping or hindering the women's ability to successfully integrate into the new society. On arriving to America, the women had to constantly adjust their expectations with respect to the country, their language proficiency, and their partners. For most respondents their first impressions of the country were reflective of their overall excitement and happiness during the honeymoon stage of their romantic courtships, when the "hearts are on fire and the passion is great" (Romano, 2008, p. 18). They had a positive and idealistic view of their new surroundings, articulating their first impressions with such epithets as "impressive," "luxury," and "shiny" and describing the people as smiley and friendly.

In my conversations with the participants, many participants shared that they had an idealized image of America as universally urban-looking, with skyscrapers and bright lights. This view reflects what Isurin (2011) very aptly described in her book about Russian diaspora in America: “The biggest misconception about America was that Russian immigrants viewed it as another European country with clear-cut divide between an urban and rural setting” (Isurin, 2011, p. 65). Thus, after arriving to America, several respondents felt openly frustrated because the things around them did not fit the glamorized image of America that they had in mind. The clash of their unrealistic expectations with the realities of the American life reflected the women’s lack of information and competence of the new culture. It resulted in brash assessments about their new surroundings as backwards and rural and people as obese, low-cultured, and poorly dressed.

Such difficulty and resistance in accepting the culture different from their own is often referred to as ethnocentric attitudes and is characterized by making false assumptions about others’ ways based on our own limited experience (Barger, 2014).The clash of expectations and ensuing psychological stress and anxiety is a recurring theme in immigration research (Kim, 1988; Rogers and Ward, 1993; Constable 2003; Ryabov, 2010).

Regardless of whether the participants in the study felt elated or frustrated on making their very first steps in the new country, all of them soon had to make their final decision to return home or stay in America and try to apprehend the new society and culture. The women’s narratives show how their different life story elements bind together and support their revolutionary actions because by choosing the uncertainty of

geographical, marital, and cultural transition over keeping traditional life patterns and old pathways, the women yet again engaged in the act of empowerment and positioned themselves as active actors in their own lives (Giddens, 1991).

Turning crisis into strength. Analysis of the women's life narratives revealed that moving to a new country was accompanied for them by a variety of changes, unpredictable things, and challenges. As is true for any immigrants adjusting in the new country, the women in my study inevitably had to go through a series of adaptive changes that pushed them into a state of internal disequilibrium, or culture shock. As a result of leaving behind their natural cultural, social, and physical environments, the women often experienced multiple losses that triggered their feelings of depression, inadequacy, and disorientation. As Rumbaut (1991) maintains, relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment "can produce profound psychological distress among the most motivated and well prepared individuals and even in the most receptive circumstances" (Rumbaut, 1991, p. 56).

For the women in the study, the experience of culture shock was influenced by the combination of many pressures of the new world, the loss of the familiarity of the old, and their unique life circumstances. Most participants, shortly after their arrival to America, had to adjust their expectations with regards to their language preparedness. American English appeared confusing and different from the textbook versions of the language that the women were exposed to at home. These findings are reiterated in the studies on immigrant women by Remennick (1999), Berger (2004), and others. Collectively, all of the women in the study suffered, at least temporarily, from a sudden and acute loss of self-sufficiency caused by their lack of language skills, inability to

drive, and economic dependency on their partner. This quickly evoked the feelings of intense isolation in surroundings where the women neither understood the language nor felt familiar with culture codes.

The women talked at length about feeling homesick and uprooted, the desire to shut down and give in to depression. This finding has replicated similar conclusions in a plethora of studies on immigrant adaptation (Rumbaut, 1991; Berry, 1994; Kim, 1988, 2001; Zhou et al., 2008). Fortunately, these descriptions of malaise were always followed by the recounting of the events when destiny took turn for the better. The major breakthrough in improving of their psychological well-being for most women was associated with signing up for ESL courses and being able to drive. Improvement in English skills and gaining new acquaintances strengthened the women's self-esteem and decreased dependency on her partner.

Due to unexpected hardships, several women did not have an opportunity to engage in language learning in the formal settings. Instead, their life circumstances forced them to face the harsh reality of finding a way to make their living without any proficiency of English. These women had to accept unprofessional jobs such as a school janitor, caregiver, or house cleaner to provide for themselves and their children. One participant shared that in her crisis situation focusing on her son's bright future in America became her main source of resilience. It helped her survive the initial culture shock, exacerbated by bad marital relationships and the resultant loss of spousal support. In addition, taking up a job, even if an unskilled one, helped her cope with the feelings of despair and anxiety. As stated by Simonsen (2007), "Resilience is consequently a journey

through change and development, it is about finding solutions to challenges that come our way, to give strains and difficulties a constructive meaning" (p. 7).

Overall, the stressful process of initial adjustment made all of the study participants seek to restore their inner balance (homeostasis). The disorienting dilemmas that the women encountered became a positive force in building resilience and managing the situations where their previous experiences did not apply. As Kim indicates, "stress is responsible not only for suffering, frustration and anxiety, but also for providing the impetus for adaptive personal transformation and growth—the learning and creative responses to manage new cultural circumstances" (Kim, 1988, p. 56).

In conversations with the women, it became clear that satisfactory marital relationships became a powerful tool in helping the women weather the stresses and frustrations of the culture shock. Greater spousal support as well as the support of the new extended family led to a rapid improvement in the women's communication skills, and a more intimate knowledge of the host culture. It facilitated bridging the social circles of the host community and, ultimately, meant faster integration in the new way of life. In their roles as mothers, these women felt more adequate and secure when it came to participating in their children's educational experiences, communicating with school staff, or addressing their children's health needs. This confirms the findings of Batalova and Fix (2010) in their research on adaptation of immigrant women with limited language proficiency.

At least half of the women talked about the significance of having a good rapport with their foreign in-laws, because it contributed to a better marital stability and created an additional buffer against uncertainties and stresses of the initial adjustment. The

women shared that, often, their new families had to overcome their own suspicions, fears, and stereotypes, accepting their foreign daughters-in-laws. However, after a certain "stand off" period, the in-laws were able to let their guards down and dismiss the preconceived judgment they might have had toward their son's wife. Thus, strong familial support became essential in developing the women's coping skills to resist the challenges of socio-cultural integration. These conclusions resonate with the works of Berry (1992), Ataca and Berry (2002), and Lee, Lee, and Im (2014).

Several women who found themselves void of emotional and financial spousal support early in their immigration experiences, however, inevitably endured more traumatic and strenuous adaptation paths. Discovering other sources of social support became paramount for their ability to survive, validate their experiences, and devise powerful surviving strategies (Carr, Koyama, Thiagarajan, 2003). The women demonstrated enormous strength and resourcefulness in the various ways they established their social connections, whether reaching out to other, better integrated native immigrants, through churches, or using social media. For example, various Internet resources helped one participant find volunteers who helped her with immigration paperwork and provided free transportation, English lessons, and legal help.

Most of the participants talked about yearning for socializing with co-ethnic immigrants, especially in the beginning of their immigration journeys. Their feelings of satisfaction and psychological comfort can be explained by Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory. It claims the therapeutic effect of creating co-ethnic social connections is due to the fact that there is less social uncertainty from co-ethnics than from the host culture. According to this theory, reducing uncertainty to an

acceptable level is necessary for individuals' sense of control over their environment and outcomes. As explained by Kim (1987), the women in this study sought ethnic friendships because they missed communicating in the same language, being able to adequately express their feelings, and emphasizing with each other's specific needs and challenges of that initial period.

Attending Russian Orthodox Church was another way for at least half of the participants to access ethnic social networks. As with the majority of the women from the former Soviet Union (Remennick, 2007), the women in this study grew up in a secular society and did not practice any religion at home. However, away from home, the women developed stronger interest in their religious roots and found comfort in attending Russian Orthodox Church. This became another way for them to build relationships with their local co-ethnics and feel an emotional connection in sharing traditions and practices. Several participants established and maintained relationships using social media forums and support groups for Russian immigrant women married to American men. They talked about being able to celebrate traditional holidays with ethnic friends they met online, which gave them a feel of home away from home. These findings correlate with Msengi, Arthur-Okor, Killion, & Schoer (2015), who states that "Group involvement could empower women and increase their general sense of well-being in overcoming barriers they may face in transitioning into a new environment" (p. 1).

Overall, through discovering connections and building relationships with the members of their own community, the women often received practical and emotional support, essential to manage new life abroad. Therefore, except for the one, all participants acknowledged that, to this day, their most close and dear friendships were

with Russians. Interestingly though, when generalizing over the whole immigrant Russian-speaking community, the women's discourses had rather harsh undertones. Two of the women remembered that when they fell on hard times and desperately needed help, they did not receive empathy or practical help from their compatriots. As a result, these women explained, now they express no emotions and try to refrain from engaging in conversations when they run into their country-fellows somewhere in the street or a supermarket. These sentiments resonate with Oberg's (1954) explication: "To your own countrymen who are well adjusted you become somewhat of a problem. As you feel weak in the face of the host country people, you tend to wish to increase your dependence on your fellow countrymen much more than is normal. Some will try to help you, others will try to avoid you" (p. 144).

For all of the women in the study, the encounter with the host culture triggered the process of self-scrutiny and reassessment of their own national identity through the lens of new American values. When the women progressed to more advanced stages of adaptation, they acquired a more distant, foreigner's view with regards to their own people. Often, their assessments projected self-perceived alienation and disapproval toward the larger co-ethnic community. This disapproval became most notable when the women described their experiences of reverse culture shock when visiting their home countries. They unanimously agreed that the process of juxtaposition of the two cultures quickly brought them back to reality and cured them of homesickness and other symptoms of culture shock. When they returned to America, they experienced a more rapid progress in their adaptation to the host culture. The ambiguity of these discourses became evident when the majority of the women shared that their girlfriends' circle for

the most part consisted of other Russian wives of American husbands, that their favorite food items could still be found on the shelves of the ethnic Russian stores, and that they enjoyed the possibility to communicate easily in a system of natural cultural codes.

One of the study respondents categorically announced that, based on some hurtful experiences in the beginning of her life in America, she decided to have nothing more to do with Russians, Russian culture, or Russian language. Considering that ethnic identity is a big part of an individual's self-concept, it was my assumption that this woman's dissatisfaction with her former *self* and the desire to re-create it anew have resulted in total rejection of her native roots and culture. This assumption is supported by Charlesworth (2000) and Samuels (1977), who viewed ethnic identity as one aspect of global self-concept and expected that a person with a positive self-concept, experiencing high self-esteem, would have a strong and favorable ethnic identity. Phinney and Rotheram (1987) and Phinney (1990) asserted self-esteem to be unquestionably related to ethnic identity.

Analyzing the women's narratives, I concluded that most participants managed to maintain their home culture and identity while demonstrating openness and the ability to accept the ideas, beliefs, and experiences of the host culture. This finding is aligned with Remennick's (2007) conclusion on cultural adaptation of post-Soviet Russian-Jewish women in America. It states: "…the culture of Russian-Jewish immigrants is a result of the interplay between continuity and change, a hybrid of their homeland and American values and lifestyles" (p. 275)

Pursuing integration in the host society. This study found that the majority of the women exhibited ambitiousness in pursuing educational and employment

opportunities in America. All of the participants in the study were college-educated young adults who brought with them knowledge and working experience. Despite the fact that some of them experienced loss of their professional and social status, at least temporarily, the women ultimately managed to achieve satisfactory levels of language competence, professional and formal education, and labor integration. This goes along with Remennick (2007), who argues that "[t]he need for occupational life and self-actualization, as well as economic independence, is deeply ingrained in the Russian/Soviet cultural tradition spanning at least two generations of women"(p. 275).

Thus, over time, most women found their roles of housewives or unskilled workers to be insufficient and unfulfilling. Highly motivated to better integrate in the host society, enhance their self-esteem, and achieve economic independence, the women tried to incorporate the social and human capital they accumulated at home in furthering their educational and career goals. The women put serious efforts into such goals and often had to sacrifice spending quality time with their families when taking classes toward a new academic degree or accumulating hours in a specific field to get professional certification. For instance, when asked about the driving forces behind such labors, one participant talked about her yearning to regain the feeling of being needed in the community, return to her favorite occupation, and serve people. She proudly told about her current position of an anesthetic and post-surgery nurse at one of the major Atlanta hospitals.

Another participant's motivation to spend hours in the university lab and study for exams was to move up the economic ladder to help her daughter to pay for medical school. She also talked about missing being challenged intellectually and being able to

finally fully apply her prior high academic and working achievements in the new culture, after eight years of unprofessional or unexciting jobs.

The variety of professional occupations in America that the women engaged in included a programmer, digital marketing manager, lead accountant, post-surgery nurse, optometrist assistant, occupational therapist, and the director of the Atlanta Russian School. The pathways to those demanding positions in the labor market were neither linear nor effortless, but the list of highly skilled jobs the women managed to land and excel at serves as a testament to their ambitiousness, self-discipline, and perseverance. At the same time, several participants have shared that for the time being, their favorite and most satisfying jobs were being full-time moms. Although those few women made a choice and could afford to stay at home, the study found that the majority of the respondents were active in educational and professional domains. This conclusion contradicts the finding of Ryabov's (2013) research on Russian wives in America that concludes: "…the majority of my informants were confined to the domestic sphere and made only timid attempts to get themselves established professionally" (p. 9).

In the process of gaining cultural competence, all the respondents, without exception, had to go through many instances of informal learning, whether learning to drive, discovering the strategies of the job search such as preparing resume, learning the various bureaucratic procedures, or how to access information from the media and Internet, and so forth. This is a recurring finding in many adult education studies of adaptation and learning (Ming-Yeh and Sheared, 2002; Fursova, 2013)

This study also found that the women placed significance in building meaningful relationships with the members of the host society beyond their family circles. In an

attempt to increase their sense of belonging and to better identify with the new culture, the study participants made conscious efforts to bridge the host social capital via work, studies, sports activities, or reaching out to the parents of their children's friends. These sentiments are consistent with one of the postulates of Kim's (1988, 2001) integrative theory. She argued that a full adaptation would only take place if immigrants interacted equally with the host environment.

Although most participants were able to slowly expand their host social networks to a good number of casual connections and acquaintances, the number of close ties with non-ethnics remains very limited. A variety of factors influencing this dynamic could involve the women's personal idiosyncrasies, their communicative abilities, time spent in the host country, and the fact that cultural integration is a long and gradual process that can last a lifetime (Kim, 2001).

Conclusion Two: Transformative Learning Became an Integral Part of the Women' Immigration Experiences.

Conclusion two states that continuous transformative learning has accompanied each phase of the women's psychological and cultural transition and emerged with respect to the research questions posed in the study. This section encompasses the women's personal and cultural identity transformation and their perceived level of cultural adaptation.

Engaging in transformative learning. In the process of going through the new experiences, the women in this study exhibited various degrees of "plasticity," which, according to Kim (2001), is an inherent human ability to learn and change. The study found that as the women advanced in the adaptation process, they engaged in ongoing transformative learning and demonstrated personal and cultural identity transformations.

This agreed with Kim's (1988, 2001) theory arguing that in pursuing the goal of successful adaptation in the host society, strangers should inevitably go through new cultural learning and continuous self-organizing and reorganizing.

Not everything in the women's immigration stories went the way they planned or imagined, and the challenges each woman faced varied in the degree of their intensity and uniqueness. However, in the process of opening themselves to the host culture, all the women in the study had to confront the unknown and themselves and, as a result, change their frames of reference and renegotiate identities, ethnic beliefs, and values. This study finding clearly resonates with Mezirow (1978b), who argues that "Transformation in meaning perspective is precipitated by life's dilemmas which cannot be resolved by simply acquiring more information, enhancing problem-solving skills, or adding to one's competencies" (p.108).

As the women engaged in self-analysis during the interview, they took time contemplating their answers. They welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their personal growth and transformations and it seemed very important for them. This observation echoes Lyon's (2001a) study on adaptation and transformation of women educators overseas, where she found that her participants often did not use critical reflection to make meaning of their experiences until the time of the interview (Lyon, 2002).

With respect to personality changes, the majority of the study participants emphasized feeling more confident in themselves and, as a result, more extroverted and open with other people. This agrees with Lyon's (2001) conclusion that in the course of adaptation to the new culture, her participants found they were transformed, most often in self-identity and self-confidence. Several women in this study mentioned being more

honest and less dependent on other people's opinions. Most participants talked about becoming less categorical and judgmental toward others and themselves. The women also view American culture as encouraging kindness and compassion. These findings resonate with Kim's (2001) conclusion about transformative identity changes experienced by migrant during cultural transition: "Of significance in this process is the development of a perceptual and emotional maturity and a deepened understanding of human conditions" (para 4). Another sentiment expressed by the majority was the women's growing feeling of belonging to the American culture and surging patriotism to their new home.

The women showed different outcomes in their level of intercultural transformation. Counter to the opinions of other women in the study, one respondent noted that the American culture and the pressure to blend in taught her to be insincere and hypocritical. She expressed resentment in being compelled to flash fake smiles to people she does not care about and express interest in conversations that seem meaningless or shallow to her. When referring to the American culture, she found it overly individualistic and thus contributing to widespread loneliness and depression in the society. She was the only respondent who concluded that she never felt like a true self in this culture and regretted living outside of her native culture. As Accardo (1983) noted, "It is a difficult process to come to terms with differences, and living with them, just as much as it is an evolutionary process in which our personalities evolve with the function of experience" (p. 147).

However, the study found that the majority of participants demonstrated openness, strength, and positivity, the attributes of adaptive personality crucial for successful cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001). Their immigration stories are full of evidence

of the women's ability to look at the bright side of things beyond their negative aspects, cope with adversity, and have an open and flexible mind toward change. Overall, while often recognizing that there was still room for improvement in their English proficiency, the majority of the women felt well-integrated in the new country.

Furthermore, most respondents reported experiencing an acute reverse culture shock when visiting their countries of origin. When reassessing the experiences of travelling back home through the prism of the new American values, the women were very aware of the significant differences between the two cultures. Because of their new and different cultural identities, the women felt out of place in their home countries, finding unacceptable a lot of cultural expressions that they used to perceive as the norm or simply did not notice. This echoes numerous studies on reverse culture shock that argue that the more successful is one's adjustment to the new culture, the more striking will be the contrast on returning home (Koester, 1984; Seiter and Waddell, 1989; Gaw, 2000). In sum, many women felt that their immigration experiences were catalytic to their identity growth and development and helped them broaden their horizons and discover personal strengths and talents.

In conclusion, the majority of the women in this study looked at their decision to pursue international marriage and the subsequent immigration experience as a positive development of their life trajectories. Despite of sharing some common aspects, their immigration narratives are unique and intriguing. The analysis of the data revealed that six out of ten marriages in the sample have stood the test of time and demonstrated trusting and supportive relationships. In line with other scholarly works on adaptation of marriage immigrant women, this study found that good marital relationships propelled a

more rapid social and cultural integration. The participants showed a remarkable capacity to move on after having faced challenges and create change.

They are actively participating in education and employment domains and showed strength and perseverance in achieving their goals. The women experienced gradual identity transformation as well as the change in their ethnic beliefs and values. However, they maintain strong ties in the ethnic community and embrace the bilingual context of their lives. Overall, the study participants exhibited high level of motivation to continue the integration process in the host society. These conclusions closely align with Remennick's (2007) study on adaptation of post-Soviet women in the United States who manifested great adaptive potential and hybridity of their homeland and American values and lifestyles.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined lived narratives of post-Soviet women who came to the United States through brokered marriage. The implications for this study are drawn from a combination of the study findings, interpretations, and existing literature on international marriage as well as immigrant learning and adaption.

Implications for Theory

The implications for the theory fall into two major categories. The first category shows different ways in which these women take control of their lives and exercise agency through making fundamental life transitions. The experiences of the study participants, who had to negotiate very tough life changes, could be a significant advance for women making any major life changes or going into other spheres.

Another category of implications deals with the nature of adaptation itself and expose the women' key coping strategies such as staying positive and open-minded,

discovering support networks, and being actively engaged in the intercultural communication and activities. Proved to be both challenging and rewarding for the women in the study, many aspects of the women' adaptation experiences blend with the postulates of Kim's (1988) cross-cultural adaption theory, discussed in chapter two. Accumulating the knowledge through these women's immigration experiences and identifying factors that expedite or hamper their cultural adjustment in the United States can help to inform and develop effective strategies for success for other immigrant groups.

Implications for Adult Education

This research may have implications for adult education as the women in the study represent an important and growing population that possesses valuable skill sets and a pioneer attitude and thus, has a potential to greatly contribute to the society and the nation. This may inspire adult educators to facilitate creating and tailoring of the various language and professional programs to fit this particular immigrant group, thus, helping the women to integrate faster into the new society.

In addition, this study may add to the knowledge base of adult education as it explores the link between the women' experiences, learning, and identity transformation – the concepts that lie at the core of adult education (Lindeman, 1961; Dewey, 1980). It was through the act of telling that the women in the study learned what the experiences of immigration, international marriage, and building a new life in America meant for them.

In addition, the current study will contribute to the body of literature in adult education that for some time has been concerned with analyzing links between the theories of transformative learning and cross-cultural adaptation. This is because the two

previously mentioned bodies of literature share a common thread—the notion of an unexpected phenomenon that influences individuals residing in an unfamiliar culture. From the perspective of Mezirow's (1981, 2000) transformative learning theory, this is called a trigger event. It is closely connected to a key tenet of cross-cultural adaptation theories called culture shock (Lyon, 2002, abstract). This study's findings echo the notion that that cross-cultural learning involves some aspects of transformation.

Most important, this study strongly defies the negative stigma and stereotypes commonly associated with Russian marriage immigrant women in the United States propagated by the media and some scholarly articles. The women in this study made an independent decision to seek a foreign husband as an opportunity to better their chances for a happier and more prosperous life and, like in any marriage, they considered material aspects along with non-material ones such as love, romance, compatibility, children, and opportunity for personal growth.

The findings of this study will make social workers and mental healthcare professionals more aware of the unique social, cultural, and economic characteristics of Russian marriage immigrant women and thus may help them tailor their services in accordance with the women's unique needs. Continued stigmatization and prejudices related to this specific immigrant population as well as to marriage immigrants in general should be taken into account by counselors and educators to ensure well-being and successful cultural integration in the host society. The unique experiences of the immigrant women in this study will be pertinent to legal representation services, shelters, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, and other resources. Their common and

unique ways of navigating the new cultural environment can contribute to the larger body of immigration research.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study are true for the marriage immigrants who represent successful middle class women in the USA and who consider themselves well-adapted and integrated to the new society. The future research may focus on other groups of post-Soviet marriage immigrant women who could be less successful and more isolated, or those who failed to adapt in the new cultural environment and had to go back to their home country.

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APPENDIX A. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Introduction

We are currently conducting a study about post-Soviet female marriage immigrants in the US. The study is titled "Post-Soviet Marriage Immigrants in the USA: Building New Lives through Adult Education and Cross-Cultural Adaptation. The current study intends to explore the phenomenon of transnational marriage with the main focus on learning and transformation as they related to the psychological and sociocultural adjustment of this unique immigrant group. The study is being conducted by Tatyana Pavluscenco, a doctoral student from the Department of Adult Education at the University of Georgia, under the guidance of Dr. Thomas Valentine, Associate Professor of *Lifelong* Education, Administration, and Policy (tvnj@uga.edu, 706-542-4017). The information you provide will be used in a dissertation prepared by Tatyana Pavluscenco and supervised by Dr. Thomas Valentine.

Procedures

The individual interviews each will take up to 90 minutes or less each. Questions are designed to determine what transformational and learning experiences the women went through as they navigated the new culture.

Risks/Discomforts

We do not foresee this study causing you any harm or discomfort. The list of community and counseling resources will be provided if any psychological discomfort arises as a result of some questions that may be sensitive in nature.

Benefits

It is hoped that through your participation, we will be able to give voice to the unique immigration group which may be of significance for policy makers, immigration and social services, marriage counselors, as well as for adult educators that have for years discussed the importance of adults' ability to become autonomous thinkers and learners.

Confidentiality

Please note that participation is confidential. While the researcher may ensure the confidentiality of a participant by utilizing standard procedures (pseudonyms, etc.) there is a limit to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed due to the technology itself. Your name and contact information will only be known to the researcher for the purpose of conducting the interviews. The researchers will destroy any information that could link you to your interview responses within 2 month after completion of data collection. The pseudonyms will be used in the published study.

Compensation

There is no direct compensation, however participants may request a research summary if desired.

Participation

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. We hope that you will choose to participate in the group and individual interviews. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information that can

be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about this research – now or in the future – please contact Tatyana Pavluscenco via email tpavlusc@highlands.edu or Dr. Thomas Valentine via tvnj@uga.edu. The department's mailing address is the Department of Adult Education, 407 River's Crossing, The University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602. For questions or problems that may arise during this study, please call or write: Human Subjects Office, The University or Georgia, 609, Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone No. (706) 542-3199; Email Address: IRB@uga.edu.

Please note: Answering yes below and completing this questionnaire implies that you have read this information and consent to participate in the research.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP WITH THIS IMPORTANT RESEARCH

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following protocol was used in the study of post-Soviet marriage immigrant women in the USA. The questions were posed in relation to the two research questions posed in the study.

1. Could you describe what your life was like before coming to the United States?
2. Can you tell me about your first day in America? What were your first impressions here?
3. How did you meet your husband? Why looking for a husband abroad?
4. Could you describe the obstacles you ran into learning the new language? Where and how did you learn it? How would you rate your English proficiency then and now?
5. What was it like to make new friends and build your social network in the U.S.? Do you think you successfully achieved this goal? Who your friends' circle is mostly comprised of?
6. Do you work now? What kind of education or learning did this job require?
7. What did you learn through your everyday life in America?
8. Do you think that American culture transformed you in any way? How are you different now?
9. Do you feel yourself well integrated into this culture?

APPENDIX C. ORIGINAL RUSSIAN QUOTATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

P.
Марина: Не то что бы они не звали замуж, но с ними невозможно было строить нормальные отношения. Первое время все было хорошо, но потом они начинали пить и гулять, еще до того, как отношения могли бы перерасти во что-то серьезное. И я сказала себе: "Все…, используя слова Омара Хайяма : «Уж лучше голодать, чем что попало есть. И лучше быть одной, чем вместе с кем попало! » и решила, что лучше найти возможность путешествовать по миру или стать туристическим гидом …
Marina: *It was not that they would not propose… but it was impossible to have normal relationships with them. … They would be good to you for a short while but then drinking and playing around would distract them even before anything serious would start. … I said to myself: "I am done…using the words of Omar Khayyám: 'You better starve, than eat whatever … And better be alone, than with whoever.'" I thought I would rather try to travel and see the world, maybe become a tour guide.*
P.
Катя: Я оглядываюсь вокруг ... возраст у меня критический ... за 30… каждый приличный мужчина уже женат, а другие ... другой у меня уже был ... Так было принято решение обратиться в агентство, располагавшееся недалеко от нашего дома в Твери ... Оно называлось "Партнер на всю жизнь".
Katya: *I look around me … my age is critical. Over 30, everyone who is any good is already married, the others… the others are bad, and I already had a bad one. … So decision was made to refer to the agency not far from our house in Tver' …that was called "Partner for Life."*
P.
Нора: Я работала в одном из крупнейших Московских банков, в отделе иностранной валюты. Работа была отличная, с хорошей зарплатой. … Проблема была в плохой экономической ситуации в стране в целом. Я проработала три года после окончания ВУЗа и в моем окружении все считали , что иммиграция это правильный шаг. Возможности для этого были, так как повсюду открывались многочисленные брачные агентства для желающих выйти замуж за иностранцев. … Так что я подумала, что начать новую жизнь за границей - неплохая идея.
Nora: *I was working in one of the biggest Moscow banks for the department of international currency. It was a great job. Good salary. … The problem was the economic situation in the country, in general. … I have worked three years after graduation and, you know, the common perception around was that immigration may be the right move at that time. There were opportunities to do it. Numerous international marriage agencies started opening their doors to those who wanted to marry abroad. … I thought it was a good idea maybe to start a new life abroad.*

Р.

Да, он был на 14 лет меня старше. Я скажу вам, что ... по моему опыту, американцы моего возраста или чуть старше, приезжавшие сюда по турам... их интеллектуальное развитие было гораздо ниже нашего …А те, кто были постарше, были гораздо более интересной категорией.

Nora: *Yes, he was 14 years older. I will tell you what though … in my experience, the Americans that would come here [with tours] who were my age or a little older… their mental development was far below our level. … Those who were older made for a much more interesting crowd.*

Р.

Марина: Когда я приехала по визе невесты, у нас не было никаких планов на брак … мы хотели посмотреть, как все пойдет, … смогу ли я здесь жить…Но когда было принято решение все таки остаться в Америке , мне стало очень тревожно. Потому что до сих пор я ощущала себя в долгом и красивом путешествии.. А тут поняла, что если я вернусь, то буду всю жизнь одна, а если останусь, то выйду из зоны моего комфорта . Это для меня был очень трудный момент.

Marina: *When I arrived on a fiancée visa we did not have an agreement about the marriage …we wanted to see how everything would go,…would I be able to live here? … When the final decision was made to stay in America I, of course, started feeling very anxious. … Before that, it was all like an endless nice trip. … So, I realized that either I am going back and basically remain single for life or I stay here and lose my comfort zone. … It was a very difficult moment.*

Р.

Нора: … меня мучили мысли, что во-первых, я пообещала своему будущему мужу… ушла с работы в Москве …, к моменту моего возвращения , квартиры уже бы не было … Ну, и все эти экономические и социальные проблемы России в 90-х … Другой причиной для того, чтобы остаться было то, что я привезла с собой огромного размера кошку, а с ней было так тяжело в дороге. Я думаю, что кошка была последней соломинкой … Так или иначе я решила рискнуть и остаться---двери не закроются, если я соберусь уехать . а может все сложится хорошо….

Nora: *I had all these thoughts now, that first, I promised to my husband… I quit my job in Moscow… My apartment would be gone by the time I come back. … All those economic and social problems in Russia in the '90s… Another hold was the fact that I brought my oversized cat with me and that was such an ordeal to travel with it. I think the cat was the last straw … [laughs]. Anyway, I decided to take a chance and stay—the door is not going to be closed if I decide to leave, and what if everything turns out well.*

Р.

Катя: Таким образом, мой медовый месяц закончился, так и не успев начаться , потому что мое разочарование было неожиданным и глубоким … Ни условия жизни, ни окружающая среда вокруг не были такими, какими я их себе представляла. Но все же после мучительных сердечных раздумий и волнений, я решила что моему сыну в этой стране будет хорошо, ему здесь нравилось, он получал прекрасное образование, жил в

отличных условиях. Так что, я подумала, ничего страшного, наступлю на горло собственной гордости и поработаю на грязных работах.

Katya: *My honeymoon period ended right from the start because my dissatisfaction was very sudden and deep … Neither the living conditions nor the environment around me were as I expected them to be. … So after serious soul searching and heart palpitations, I decided this country was good for my son, he liked it here, he was getting a good education, he lived in good conditions. So, I thought, it was alright if stepped on my pride and worked some dirty jobs.*

P.

Марина: …Я осознала, что хотя решение остаться в Америке и было принято, я не знала, как с этим жить дальше…у меня, наверное, было слишком много свободного времени, чтобы думать и предаваться ностальгии … я не знаю, но меня посещали мысли, что, может быть, я предала …, бросила своих родителей, даже не родителей, они были так счастливы за меня, но может быть, моих бабушку и дедушку, которые ушли из жизни…, я оплакивала свое прошлое и не отпускала его …Я чувствовала себя очень одинокой…

Marina: *I realized that the decision was made to stay in America but I did not know anymore how to live with it. I was increasingly home alone … had too much time to think and to give in to nostalgia. … I do not know, but such thoughts that maybe I betrayed … abandoned my parents. … Not even parents as they were so happy for me, but maybe my grandparents who passed away. … I was holding to and mourning the past. …It was a lonely time.*

P.

Катя: …большое разочарование постигло меня тогда, когда я поняла, что не смогу дойти пешком туда, куда мне нужно… все очень далеко от дома, я буквально начала паниковать...

Katya: *… huge disappointment was when I realized I could not walk where I needed—everything is far from the house, I literally started panicking.*

P.

Нора: Ну, в общем я был уверена в своем английском , потому что в Москве я брала частные уроки, на работе иногда мы должны были писать и говорить на английском . Так что это как раз был тот аспект, о котором я не беспокоилась, отправляясь в Америку. И поэтому, конечно же для меня было шоком, когда я поняла, что языка у меня нет.

Nora: *I was very confident in my English, I took private lessons back in Moscow. At work we had to write and speak in English sometimes—that was one aspect I did not worry about, coming to the U.S. So, of course, it was a complete shock to realize I had no language under my belt.*

P.

Катя: ...мой супруг не ожидал, что мы ему будем обходиться в копеечку и что его расходы серьёзно возрастут... а серьёзные проблемы начались когда через два месяца он потерял работу. Так что, однажды он пришёл домой и спокойно объявил:"Как только я получу свою последную зарплату, я куплю вам два билета обратно. Если вы не согласны, я ничего не обещаю."

Katya: *My spouse did not realize that we would cost him money and his expenses would increase significantly … but the real tension has started when in two months my husband lost his job. Hence, one day he came home and very calmly broke it to me as follows: "As soon as I get my last salary, I will buy you two tickets and send you back home. If you don't agree with this plan, I cannot promise you anything."*

P.

Marina: … все это время у меня была такая поддержка от моего мужа … он всегда старался так заботливо меня подбодрить, объясняя, что мне повезло - у меня теперь есть два мира … и если бы я захотела съездить домой, – то, конечно, в любое время, он бы меня в этом поддержал. Он проводил так много времени, разговаривая со мной, успокаивая , приободряя … Он говорил со мной все время, чтобы я не ушла в себя … В конце концов, это сработало, и я наконец перестала плакать и чувствовать себя несчастной … он дал мне большой толчок научиться водить машину и найти курсы английского языка …

Marina: *All this time I had so much support from my husband… But he always tried so thoughtfully to cheer me up, saying that I was so lucky to have two worlds now … and if I wanted to go home to visit,—sure, anytime, he would always support me. He spent so much time talking to me, calming me down, reassuring… He talked to me all the time so I would not shut down. … Ultimately, it worked, as I finally stopped crying and feeling miserable. … He gave me a big push by encouraging me to learn how to drive, to find English courses*

P.

Nora: …прошел почти год пока я получила свои водительские права и все остальные документы – по вине моего мужа. Понимаешь, у него нет никаких амбиций, теперь я это понимаю. Так тяжело было с ним сделать каждый шаг … эффективно …это занимало целую вечность…я очень целеустремленная, так что это было своего рода несоответствие …я хочу чтобы все было сделано и сделано быстро, я хочу получить свои водительские права, быть независимой, выходить из дома.

Nora: … *it was almost a year before I got my driver license and all the other papers—my husband's fault, you know, he has no ambitions. Now I know it. It was so difficult with him to make every step … efficiently. … Everything took him forever. I am very ambitious, so it was a clash of a kind. … I want everything done and done fast. I want to get my license, be on my feet, be independent, get out of the house.*

P.

Нора: После развода я несколько раз была в русской церкви в Атланте, и священник посоветовал мне искать себе мужа среди прихожан. Я ему сказала: " Батюшка, вы вообще видели что за мужчины сюда ходят?!"

Nora: *After divorce I went a few times to Russian church in Atlanta and the priest told me you have to find yourself an orthodox Russian man in our church—I said: "Father, did you see the men who come here?!"*

Р.

Катя: Я очень общительная по природе, и легко нахожу друзей. Но обе мои подруги - русские, замужем за американцами. Одна - это моя переводчица и соседка, которая стала моей подругой с первых дней в Америке. Они с мужем помогли мне найти работу школьной уборщицы. Так началась моя карьера здесь. Чем еще я могла бы заниматься в такой ситуации без языка.

Katya**:** *I am a social butterfly by nature, I have no problems making new friends, but my two closest friends are Russian women, both married to American husbands. One is the interpreter who was my neighbor and friend from my first days in America. … She and her husband helped me to get a job as a school custodian. So, there started my custodian career [sarcastically], who else could I become without a language … in my situation here.*

Р.

Марина: …первый маленький шаг из того несчастного состояния в котором я находилась, стали курсы английского языка …Ты встречаешь разных людей – можешь говорить с ними на своем родном языке … а не просто по телефону - по телефону я разговаривала со своими родителями, но этого было мало … скайпа тогда еще не было…Совсем по другому, когда можно общаться лично … Мои друзья - главным образом русские, или русскоязычные. Я выражаюсь на русском языке намного лучше, чем на английском языке. Я могу говорить, но это всегда – напряжение. Возможно, за 20 лет, это изменится…

Marina: *The first small step out of that miserable state of mind I was in were the courses of English language. … You see different people—you can talk to them in your own language … and not just on the phone. … I talked to my parents on the phone … but it was not enough. … Skype, of course, did not exist then. It is different when you communicate in person. … My friends are mostly Russian-speaking. I express myself in Russian much better than in English. I can speak … but it is always a strain. … Maybe in 20 years this will change.*

Р.

Катя: … в самом начале вокруг меня было намного больше руских, но они быстро отфильтровывались. Я замечала, то многие из них здесь не пытаются интегрироваться в рускую культуру, а живут по своим старым понятиям и правилам. Это абсолютно неприемлемо для меня. С первых дней здесь я была погружена в американскую жизнь и культуру.

Katya: *It has been a much larger Russian crowd around me at the very beginning but it filtered out soon. I have noticed many of them here have not integrated into the new culture, they still think and live by Russian rules and conceptions… it is absolutely unacceptable for me. I was immersed in the American life and community from the first days here.*

Р.

Катя: … Школа помогла, дети здорово помогли. Я выучила язык со своими детьми, читала им книги, смотрела с ними мультфильмы. Я ходила с ними на все их школьные мероприятия, и честно говоря, почувствовала большой прогресс в английском. Конечно, эта работа не подготовила, а скорее задержала меня в возможности заняться другой

карьерой ….

Katya: *School helped, kids helped a lot, as well. I learned language with my kids, read books to them and watched their cartoons. I would go with them to all their school events, and honestly, I felt a big progress in English. Of course, this job did not prepare and rather delayed me in being able to look into a real career.*

P.

Katya: в этой ситуации я взвесила все за и против и решила, что все нормально. Во-первых, это была возможность понять школьную систему изнутри , которую я абсолютно не понимала … она так отличалась от российской; во-вторых, эта работа давала хорошие бенефиты …

Katya: *I had to vote on all pros and cons… and decided it was alright—first of all, it can be an opportunity to learn the school system from the inside as I had no understanding of it whatsoever… it was so different from the Russian one; secondly, it gave good benefits.*

P.

Катя: ...Я думала, когда ехала сюда что здесь все успешные, у всех все есть. Я не была готова к финансовым трудностям с которыми я здесь столкнулась. Я в России их никогда не испытывала...в моей семье их не было... У нас всегда были деньги - мой папа был военный, полковник. Плюс, я работала в таких местах где крутились большие деньги... Там я могла себе многое позволить, а здесь - практически ничего.

Katya: *I thought when I was coming here that everybody was successful, everybody had everything. I was not ready for the financial difficulties I ran into here, I never experienced them back in Russia. … They did not exist in my family. …We always had money— my Dad was an army colonel, plus later, I worked in environments where money was flowing freely around me. … I could afford anything there, but here it appeared I could barely afford anything.*

P.

Нора: … Мой будущий, теперь уже бывший муж, сказал мне, что Атланта практически такая же как Нью-Йорк, только лучше. И я подумала - отлично, в Нью-Йорке я уже была, мне очень понравилось, так что поедем посмотрим. И вот я приезжаю в Атланту… Какой ужас! Она показалась мне отсталой и сельской. К моему огромному сожалению, мое первое впечатление так никогда и не поменялось. Я подумала , что уберусь отсюда через месяц …, но легче сказать, чем сделать …

Nora: *My future, now ex-husband told me that Atlanta was practically like New York, only better. I thought—Great, I have been to New-York before, so let's go and see. I arrived to Atlanta—what a disaster of a city it was! I saw it as backwards and rural. My first impression too, much of my sadness, has never changed. I thought to myself that I would get the heck out of here after a month … but easier said than done.*

P.

Марина: В аэропорт Атланты я прилетела вечером ... Я помню, что все казалось таким просторным, полы сверкали... И у меня было чувство, что все вокруг сияло. Когда мы садились в его белую машину и подумала : "Боже мой, он как

принц на белом коне" [смеется] Мне казалось, что в любой момент мы можем оторваться от земли и взлететь, так быстро и мягко шла машина. Дороги были прекрасные. И, честно говоря, у меня было ощущение, что я попала в будущее ... где люди выглядели как обычно, но, так как они были в будущем, все они говорили по-английски ...

Marina: *Well, in the airport, I arrived in the evening… I remember everything seemed so wide and the floors were so shiny. I had a feeling that everything around was gleaming as well. … So, I am getting in this white car and I am thinking: "Goodness, he is like a prince on a white horse!" [laughs] It felt like we could take off any minute … so fast and soft the car was going. …The roads were nice. I, honestly, had a feeling that I got into the future …where people still looked pretty ordinary to me but, because they were in the future, they all spoke English.*

Р.

Марина: Я изменилась, конечно. Глядя на то, что сейчас происходит в Украине, на моих бывших сограждан - я вижу, что была такая же, как они. Легко осуждала людей, была циничная, предвзятая...Такими мы росли в той культуре. Только здесь, я смогла посмотреть на себя со стороны...Мне совсем не понравилось, то что я увидела. Я поняла, что была как в тумане... Когда растешь в культуре, где все постоянно подсиживают друг с друга и соперничают... Не знаю... ты этим пропитываешься. Я сейчас более открыта с людьми, и конечно же, это прямое влияние новой культуры и традиций. Сейчас я стала такой какой была в детстве, открытой и доверчивой...Я всегда была активной, во всем учавствовала. Здесь, особенно в первый год, мои муж помог мне разобраться в своих эмоциях. Я чувствую, как-будто я сняла маску, и я такая же непосредственная и чистая, как в детстве.

Marina: *I changed, indeed. Looking at what is going on in Ukraine now, and at my former country-fellows—I see that I was like them… Judgmental, cynical, prejudiced. … That is how we grew up in that culture. … Only here, I was able to look at myself objectively… and I did not like what I saw. I realized I was lost. … When you grow up in a culture where everybody constantly compare and compete with each other … I don't know… it permeates you. I am now more open with people, but again this is the direct influence of this new culture and traditions. … I feel now exactly how I felt in my early childhood—open and trusting. … I was very active, happy to participate in the events. Here, I think during this first year, and in conversations with my husband, especially … when he tried to help me to sort out my emotions … I suddenly understood myself better. I feel now as if a mask has fallen off, and I am as innocent and wholesome as I was in my childhood.*

Р.

Катя: Я определенно стала мудрее и увереннее в себе... В этой стране все настолько более упорядоченно, ясно, и правильно - чтобы чего-то достичь ты должен продвигаться вперед, делая честные и последовательные шаги. Я была ужасно избалована, и время, которое я потратила чтобы стабилизацировать свою жизнь, дисцуплинировало меня и научила уважению и терпению. Все это подталкивает к движению и росту.
…Я провела Январь-месяц в России. Боже мой, насколько я себя чувствовала не в своей тарелке! До какой степени мои друзья остались такими же, как я их оставила 11 лет назад, ничего не изменилось в их отношении к жизни, в их приоритетах. Я чувствовала себя на много старше их, а выглядела намного моложе [смеётся]. У меня было

впечатление, что моя голова уже организована по-другому. Их цели мне казались смешными, сплетни и интриги мелкими. Я с трудом выносила их компанию.

Katya: *I am definitely wiser and more confident now. … In this country everything is so much more orderly, clear, and right—to get anywhere here you have to make steps that are honest and consecutive. I realize now that I was spoiled rotten; and the time it took me to stabilize and improve my life here disciplined me and taught me respect and patience in achieving my goals. And all that serves as motivation to keep moving and growing.*
I spent a month in Russia this January—Boy, did I feel out of place there! To what extent my friends remained exactly the same as I left them 11 years ago, nothing changed in their perceptions of life or their priorities. I felt so much older than them while looking much younger… [laughs] It seemed that my head was organized completely differently. … Their goal felt pathetic to me, their gossips and intrigues petty. I could not frankly stand hanging out with them.

P.

Нора: Я не думаю что эта культура в чем-то изменила меня - она только научила меня притворятся и постраиваться, чтобы не выделяться-я улыбаюсь в ответ их фальшивым улыбкам, и спрашиваю "как дела?", я стараюсь быть ‘cool’ и понравиться им. Но в дейтсвительности мне наплевать - с ними это не "я". Я только сожалею, что живу вдали от родной культуры; в России у меня такие интеллектуальные друзья, они много читают, ходят в театры, их культурная жизнь никогда не останавливается. Моя же просто застыла!

Nora: *I don’t think this culture has changed me, it only taught me to pretend and to imitate in order to blend in—I will smile back to their fake smiles, and I will ask “how are you,” I will behave cool and make them like me, I will even make them laugh—but in reality, I can care less. I am not myself with them. My only regret is that I live outside of my culture; my friends in Russia all have such deep intellectual foundation, they read a lot, attend cultural events, theater is huge part of their lives, their cultural life never stopped. While mine has just froze up!*
