Dynamics of the Soviet Jewish Family: Its Impact on Clinical Practice for the Jewish Family Agency*

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The Soviets were found to be more fearful of, and less optimistic about, those in authority than Americans. Yet leaders were expected to be warm, nurturant, and the source of initiative. These expectations may account for the ambivalent, hostile-dependent relationships we see in our clients toward authority, whether that authority be government, Jewish Family Service Association, or mother. Authority can be manipulated by praise and bribed, and the pressure of authority can be met by evasive action.

I. Introduction

Family agencies have played a critical role in one of the most dramatic events in the American Jewish community: the absorption of 80,000 Soviet Jews into American life. The Jewish community must be vitally aware that recent arrivals with a unique cultural set of family dynamics, values, and expectations now constitute a significant proportion of American Jewry. These immigrant families will require service from Jewish family agencies for years to come. In order better to integrate Soviet families into the Jewish community we must learn to offer supports specifically designed to deal with the Soviet family structure that because of its specific nature is often undermined by the trauma of resettlement.

Several related themes which can be seen as general characteristics of Soviet family life and dynamics are family enmeshment and lack of autonomous functioning, accompanied by incomplete object constancy and difficulty in managing ambivalent feelings. Examining these characteristics within the parallel frameworks of Mahler's separation-individuation phases and Kohut's theory of the development of normal narcissism demonstrates where problems can arise in the Americanization of the Soviet family. A family structure that is adaptive in the Soviet system can become maladaptive in the American system where autonomy and competitiveness are highly valued.

I will begin by outlining the dynamics of Soviet family life throughout the life cycle stages with particular emphasis on child rearing in the early phases when the primary tasks are the development of self-esteem and object constancy. I will then report on the Harvard study of displaced Soviets after WWII. Finally, I will relate the patterns of personality traits, identified, to the resettlement process and suggest treatment implications.

II. Development of Self and Object Relations in the Soviet Family

The process begins at infancy. The first stage of development is the symbiotic phase, which proceeds smoothly in the Soviet family. The Soviet infant is given a tremendous amount of nurturing and physical contact. He is held much of the time and is given little opportunity for freeedom of

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movement.[1] Swaddling is common. Differentiation, which begins at about five months, is the first sub-phase described by Mahler in the separation-individuation process.[2] The infant's attention gradually shifts from an inward direction toward the outside. Soviet mothers, however, tend to act as if their infants were still reacting only to internal stimuli. Infants are picked up and fed whenever they cry. This emphasis on feeding demonstrates a characteristic difficulty of Soviet parents in discriminating among a range of needs in their children. Feeding then continues throughout life to be the primary method for the expression of caring. The next two phases are the early practicing phase when mobility begins and the practicing phase proper with the advent of walking. The child's needs shift from an emphasis on the physical toward needs for mastery and autonomy. The Soviet parent's great concern regarding injury to the exploring child's ability limits the child's ability to feel pride in his early attempts at exploration.[3]

The next phase is rapprochement, which is the most problematic for the Soviet mother-child relationship. The toddler at this stage is eager to express his autonomy, but his desire to be separate, grand, and omnipotent conflicts with the desire to have mother magically fulfill his wishes. The child becomes prone to mood swings and alternates between the desire to reject mother and the desire to cling to and control mother.[4] This represents the conflict between the fear of engulfment and the fear of abandonment. Soviet mothers appear to deal with this by being oversolicitous in trying to meet what they perceive must be the child's needs (usually by feeding), and by not allowing the child to express aggressive feelings. Separation and mastery are discouraged by overprotective behavior, inhibiting the developing child's ability to explore his environment, to take pride in mastery, and to individuate. It is not uncommon for parents to feed and/or dress chilren who are even four, five, or six years old. Soviet parents view this infantilizing care as a demonstration of love and feel that American parents expect far too much of their children.

This oversolicitous behavior of Soviet parents supports the child's unrealistic grandiosity and feelings of omnipotence. The developmentally normal tendency of a toddler is to deal with the collapse of his belief in his own omnipotence with the defense of splitting the good from the bad representations of the love object. In the normal progression, this is replaced by repression, ability to tolerate ambivalence, object constancy, and mourning for the lost symbiotic mother.[5] The Soviet mother who supports the dependent side of the ambivalence and discourages the independent side, increases the feelings of omnipotence and inhibits the mourning process. The result is a tendency toward depression and despair, a continued struggle to assert one's feelings of omnipotence and entitlement and prolonged use of the defense of splitting. All of these characteristics are common in the Soviet population.

The final phase of the separation-individuation process is opened and leads to object constancy in which the good and the bad are fused into one whole representation of the object. This results in the ability to remain emotionally connected to

[1] Uri Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.* New York: Pocket Books, 1973, p. 7.

[2] Margaret S. Mahler, Fred Pine and Anni Bergman, *The Psychological Birth of the Infant.* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1975

[3] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[4] Mahler *et al op. cit.*, p. 95. See also Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self.* New York: International Universities Press, 1977.

[5] Calvin F. Settlage, M.D., "The Psychoanalytic Understanding of Narcissistic and Borderline Personality Disorders: Advances in Developmental Theory," *Journal of American Psychoanalytic Association,* Vol. 25, No. 4 (1977), p. 817.

the object/loved one, even when that loved one is not gratifying but provokes anger.

Knowledge of an individual's experience through the separation-individuation phases provides a basis for understanding his subsequent object relations and sense of self-worth. The stages described by Mahler correspond with Kohut's stage of grandiose exhibitionism. For a child to master the tasks of this stage, the primary caretaker (mother or grandmother) must be a joyful mirror of the child's healthy assertiveness. She must mirror acceptance and approval and must empathetically respond to the child's needs, setting limits when appropriate. If the mother is able to do this the child emerges at about age four feeling loved and able to love, competent to deal with his feelings, and ready to relate to another object and to the world. Because some Soviet parents have such difficulty responding empathetically with their child's assertive behavior and accepting it, the Soviet child has difficulty developing self-esteem. As adults, Soviets have a tendency to continue to assert their grandiosity unrealistically to convince themselves of their self-worth. We see this in the excessive entitlement of the client who feels he is special and gives his reasons for this specialness as whom or what he knows, or what he has suffered.

Considering the way Soviet parents deal with the phases just described, and were dealt with when they were children going through these phases, it is not surprising that many are ambivalent about their children's development of independence. Having been narcissistically deprived themselves, separation and independence feel like rejection, and separation can only be encouraged in a rejecting way. It is not unusual to see mothers drop pre-school children off at day-care centers with no preparation and expecet them to manage while still feeding and dressing them at home. Parents continue to infantilize their children; yet expect them to function independently when parents need them to be separate. Some Soviet mothers even become very angry when their children have trouble with separation. We then see many children who are overwhelmed and withdrawn. The staff at the Jewish Day Nursery in Cleveland have reported that they must provide a great deal of nurturing and individual attention to help Soviet children manage and become a part of the group. It is likely that the protective environment and individual attention provided by the special class for foreign students in elementary school is an important factor in contributing to the greater success of children there than those who are immediately mainstreamed.

Soviet parents seem to discipline their children in much the same way as they encourage independence, i.e., ambivalently. Soviet parents who were narcissistically deprived as children do not fully see the object world as separate and need their children to be pleasing and gratifying self-objects. These parents do not see discipline as a tool for teaching self-control, but as a way of getting the child to respond to parental authority. Aggression is not tolerated when aimed at the parents but is likely to be dismissed as child's play when aimed elsewhere. When confronted by schools or others with a child's disruptive behavior, the Soviet parent often answers that the child is just being a child and what can one expect. When a child is punished, he is made to feel not so much that his behavior was wrong, as that he was ungrateful and had betrayed an affectional bond.[6] Discipline that continues to be external and does not become internalized is another element in a style of parenting that discourages autonomy.

The conflict of dependence vs. independence is as key an issue for adolescents and their parents as it is for toddlers during the rapprochement stage of development. The

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[6] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

Soviet parent who is very nurturing and controlling with a toddler can become overwhelmed with an adolescent's aggression. The parent's reaction to his loss of control may be abdication of parental authority. It is not unusual to hear from the parents of a sixteen year-old that their child is an adult, and capable of making his own decisions in an outside world which is alien to immigrant parents. This is similar to the parent's expectation that the pre-schooler manage independently in day care while being infantilized at home. In reaction to feeling unsupported, Soviet adolescents may either act out in an unconscious attempt to be controlled or withdraw into increasingly dependent and passive behavior. In the Soviet Union external societal controls provide the needed structure. In the United States, however, the poorly internalized controls of Soviet adolescents combined with fewer external controls, can leave the adolescent feeling overwhelmed.

Because separation-individuation is so problematic at all levels of development for the Soviet family, one would expect it to be a continued source of conflict throughout adulthood. In the Soviet Union, because of housing shortages, young married couples continue to live with and be dependent financially and emotionally on parents. Because of incomplete separation from family of origin, there is often a severe loyalty conflict between spouse and parents and this is a factor in the high divorce rate in the Soviet Union.[7] The splitting of the good and bad parents can get represented in the good parent and the bad in-laws or sometimes the bad spouse. Even as the parent becomes aged, the control lies with the parent, who continues to view his adult children as subject to parental control. When grandchildren are born, grandparents are often very involved in taking care of the child, blurring the distinction between mother and grandmother. The tendency to be unable to view their children as separate and family enmeshment remain throughout life. Among our adult clients we find a few borderline disorders stuck in symbiotic family relationships and a much larger number of clients who function effectively with a surface autonomy but with enmeshed family relationships, the defense of splitting the world into good and bad objects, and a tendency toward low self-esteem or compensatory mechanisms to overcome it.

There are, however, several factors in the Soviet family system that promote growth and separation. One which cannot be understated is the amount of nurturing given to the Soviet child. Although it can be excessive and discourage autonomy, it can also promote growth up to the level of autonomous independence and result in the warm nurturing behavior we see in our clients, who once they trust someone, open their hearts and show an unusual willingness to share and to help. Another strength is the presence of other parenting adults involved in the child's life to dilute a potentially overwhelming, symbiotic mother-child relationship. Grandparents often play a key role in rearing children so there are other people involved to help the child separate from the primary caretaker. Erikson states that "The traditional division and diffusion of motherhood in peasant Russia probably made the world a more reliable home, since mothering was not dependent on one frail relationship, but was a matter of a homogeneous atmosphere."[8] Erikson is discussing pre-revolutionary Russia, but his observations seem true of today's Soviet families.

III. Psychological Profile of Displaced Soviets

A post World War II study of displaced

[7] Mikhail Stern, M.D. and August Stern, Ph.D., *Sex in the U.S.S.R.* New York: Times Books, 1979, p. 61.

[8] Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc. 1963, p. 369.

Soviets by the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System involved psychological profiles of fifty-one Soviet young men.[9] The representative character type identified bears a striking similarity to that observed by resettlement caseworkers among recent Soviet Jewish immigrants. All those tested had been raised entirely under the Soviet system. Extensive interviewing and Rorschach, TAT, and Sentence Completion tests revealed the strongest needs of the Soviets to be:

1) Need for affiliation;
2) Need for dependence;
3) Oral needs—preoccupation with getting and consuming food.

This was in contrast to a control group of Americans matched for age, sex, occupation, and education among whome the central needs were:

1) Need for achievement;
2) Need for approval;
3) Need for autonomy.

The study found the central conflicts of the Soviets to be:

1) Trust vs. mistrust;
2) Optimism vs. pessimism—tendency toward hopelessness and helplessness;
3) Activity vs. passivity—becoming passive-aggressive or manipulative.

This is in contrast with the central conflicts of Americans which they defined as:

1) Intimacy vs. isolation;
2) Autonomy vs. belongingness.

The Soviets were found to be more fearful of and less optimistic about those in authority than Americans. Yet, leaders were expected to be warm, nurturant, and the source of initiative. These expectations may account for the ambivalent, hostile-dependent relationships we see in our clients toward authority whether that authority be government, Jewish Family Service Association, or mother. Authority can be manipulated by praise and bribed, and the pressure of authority can be met by evasive action. A good leader takes care of his followers, a bad leader denies them. This attitude toward those in authority is a central issue in the relationships between our present clients and their workers. It also affects the nature of their interactions with all the institutions and community agencies with whom they deal. For example, clients frequently do not tell their workers when they are moving, but are then angry if their phones are not transferred. This demonstrates, on the one hand, the distrust of authority and on the other hand, their belief in the omnipotence of authority.

The study also found the Soviets to have a high degree of expressiveness, emotional aliveness, and great freedom and spontaneity in criticism and expression of hostile feelings as well as warm feelings. They were also more prone than Americans to depression and despair. This is true of many of our clients, whose depression seems to be more characterological than neurotic. This possibly results from a poorly resolved separation-individuation process. The Soviets in the study were also described as having difficulty deferring gratifications and being more prone to excessive self-indulgence. They were seldom critical toward themselves or others for giving way to impulses.

IV. Effect of Resettlement on Family Structure

Being uprooted from all that is familiar presents a true crisis for any individual and family: for those with trouble in dealing with separation and ambivalence the crisis is even greater. Those traits which were adaptive in the Soviet Union are not adaptive here and with the losses inherent in immigration they are greatly exaggerated.

The tendency toward splitting ambivalent feelings on an individual level occurs on a family level as well, where one member, sometimes a child, or an unemployed

[9] Alex Inkeles, *Social Change in Soviet Russia.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968, pp. 109-127.

spouse, takes on the anxiety and/or depression (the emotional tasks) within the family, while another family member denies his feelings and gets on with the concrete (instrumental tasks) of resettlement.[10] This is exacerbated in families that already are structurally weak. If the ambivalence remains split the stage is set for the development of pathogenic families. Another, less pathogenic method for the Soviet immigrant to deal with ambivalence is either to denigrate the Soviet Union and see only good in the United States or vice versa. This defends against mourning the losses experienced in immigration. The rebinding of ambivalence is an essential part of a successful resettlement and the Soviet's difficulty with ambivalence makes this a monumental task.

Family structure undergoes significant changes during immigration and resettlement. Primary among these are major role reversals. Parents become dependent on their children who more readily learn to speak English. Aged parents who continue to view their adult children as dependents and not separate adults are forced to depend on adult children unless they are in subsidized housing. In many cases, both the aged parents and adult child prefer to have an agency assume responsibility for helping the parent because the role reversal brings on much discomfort. Marriages can become fragile during resettlement, especially if one of the spouses has left behind family members who had served as an important support structure. All these changes in structure threaten the sense of wholeness and remove needed sources of narcissistic gratifications.

In addition to threatening the Soviet's delicate peace with his ambivalence and family structure, the immigration experience can result in massive insult to self-image from an unfriendly environment. Employment is always a key issue in the resettlement process. Those who find adequate employment early generally have a smooth resettlement as they find a place for themselves where they feel secure and competent. For so many Soviets, and particularly for Soviet Jews, their occupational identity is their primary source of feelings of self-worth. If they are deprived of that compensatory structure by unemployment, they often regress to a grandiose stance, turning their aggression against their worker or whomever thay feel has failed to meet their needs.

V. Implications for Treatment

Establishing a trusting relationship is essential for all treatment, but is the central focus of work with the Soviet family whether the issues are the concrete tasks of resettlement, emotional adjustment, or family conflict. Calvin Settlage describes trust as an *outcome* of treatment rather than a pre-condition of treatment.[11] Many of our Soviet clients have great difficulty sustaining trust in their worker after that worker may have disappointed them. From the moment of initial contact, workers must set the tone for a relationship different from any other the client has ever experienced by maintaining empathy while setting limits. The tendency is for the clients to want to take the worker into the family by giving gifts and feeding. Trying to differentiate himself, the workere must tread carefully to maintain the trust in the relationship, yet not be engulfed. In other words, the worker must do what a rapprochement mother does: be tolerant of the anger that comes when limits are set which frustrate the client and be available for the client when needed without allowing himself to become engulfed. Workers must be very direct and very clear with their clients about expectations. Contracts need to be as explicit as possible, and a central focus

[10] Carlos E. Sluzki, M.D., "Migration and Family Conflict," *Family Process,* Vol. 18, No. 4 (1979), p. 386.

[11] Calvin F. Settlage, M.D., *op cit,* p. 829.

of discussion must be that there will be times when the client may feel disappointed by the worker. The type of worker-client relationship I describe is foreign to the Soviet client not only because of the cultural differences, but also because the family systems described do not prepare the client to deal with a relationship that allows and expects differentiation. The worker must expect realtionships that will sometimes be stormy, often require several false starts before engagement, and require continual re-evaluation between the worker and the client.

The issues of the management of ambivalence must always be a central focus in the casework relationships with Soviet immigrants. Binding ambivalence is crucial to successful resettlement. Because of the Soviet tendency toward the defense of splitting, this task becomes much harder. The timing of this work needs to be carefully managed as the splitting is adaptive during the initial stages when the client has to deal with tremendous anxiety and losses and only later becomes maladaptive. In addition to the specific issues of the resettlement process, help with any problem presented by a Soviet needs to include close attention to ambivalence and how it is tolerated.

The M case is an example of a case in which working and re-working the worker-client relationship is the central focus and the establishment of trust in that relationship the goal. Miss M, age 30, and her mother, age 68, arrived in the United States in the fall of 1980. Miss M's father had died of stomach cancer when Miss M was 12 and she had not married. Miss M had received the equivalent of a master degree in Electrical Engineering yet has not been able to pursue her chosen occupation.

Problems first surfaced around Miss M's obsessive and unrealistic preoccupation with her mother's health. The losses of the immigration experience seemed to have triggered past unresolved losses, particularly that of her father, and Miss M became anxious about the potential loss of her mother.

As these issues were explored with Miss M, the worker encountered a great deal of resistance and it became evident that Miss M's difficulty with resolving loss is a result of her inability to bind her ambivalence. She describes herself as a "maximalist" who is "wicked" when she can't live up to her standards. Her object relations are very stormy as she becomes furious when others disappoint her and then becomes overwhelmed with guilt about her rage. At the same time she disowns the anger by saying she has no control over its eruption or extent. Having so little sense of herself, she continually looks to others to define her; however, if a person defines her as good or honest, she feels she must tell them that she really doesn't have those qualitites. She claims to respect people whom she perceives as "better" or "smarter" but resents them for it. Her relationships are characteristically hostile-dependent.

The focus of work with Miss M has been through the management of the relationship in which the worker has had to be like a good rapprochement mother. Miss M continually tries to entrap the worker into setting rules for Miss M and has had great difficulty tolerating a relationship in which the worker remains differentiated. This is a case in which a successful outcome will be the establishment of trust. Despite Miss M's ambivalence about coming to regular sessions and the anxiety it generates, she has faithfully kept her weekly appointments and is attempting to examine her behavior. The general tone of Miss M's self-examination, however, continues to be self-punitive while still not accepting responsibility. She recognizes her inability to tolerate ambivalence as a key source of difficulty and has contracted with the worker to work on this. It can be expected that Miss M will need long term treatment with the worker helping her move toward differentiation, reinforcing her compensatory mechanisms and achievements, and being accepting of her healthy assertiveness.

VI. Conclusion

The Soviet system supports the *Soviet* family while the American system "undermines" it. Splitting and enmeshment are very adaptive and functional in the Soviet Union. Dependence on family is essential

for survival. Showing one face to the world and another at home is a common way of life. There is little incentive to defer gratification and much of existence is spent trying to get the necessities of life: manipulating the environment to meet one's needs. The Soviet government discourages autonomy and encourages dependence, connectedness, and cooperation. The government expects obedience, but tolerates a great deal of disobedience in the way of black marketing. Punishment can be swift and severe, though, when that disobedience becomes an interference. The parallels between the family system and the Soviet system are endless and striking.

Once in America, the Soviet individual tries to cope with life in the U.S. by using methods of relating developed within the Soviet family and culture. As a result, we see clients who present demanding and aggressive behavior, who have great difficulty learning to keep appointments rather than walk in, and who view manipulation as an acceptable method for getting needs met. The roots of this behavior go deep into a family system that is not structured to deal with the loss and anxiety of immigration to the American culture. Because of this, many Soviet immigrant families may be seriously disrupted by the trauma of immigration and require continued strengthening and support from Jewish family agencies for years to come.