Migration and Marital Distress: The Case of Soviet Immigrants

Amith Ben-David
Yoav Lavee

ABSTRACT. Israel is experiencing a major wave of immigration from the Soviet Union. Thousands of families are relocating from a different country, a different culture and different values. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 families covering issues of importance in the life of the family. Topics included areas of difficulty, areas of strength of the family, relationships and communication among family members, the nuclear family and the extended family, support systems, and critical incidents before, during, and after the relocation experience. Qualitative analysis methods, namely, analytic induction and constant comparison strategies were used. Findings will be discussed in terms of: (1) changes in family structure, family work patterns and income; (2) coping familial patterns and changes in closeness and distance, communication, role changes, and power in the family; (3) therapeutic interventions in family and marital issues.
Over the past few years major political and social changes have dramatically increased the number of international migrants. When families undergo the trauma of migration, its effects may be felt in every area of family functioning, especially in the marital dyad. More often than not, the resources available to husband and wife sink, in terms of education, income, property, self-esteem, autonomy, prestige, and all the various ties that comprise marital life.

Little is known about family changes associated with cultural transition, especially families moving from the former Soviet Union. Theoretical analyses and results of investigations have been published, particularly in Israel, on the adjustment of immigrants, both individually and as groups. However, there have been relatively few reports of studies on immigrant families or couples.

Israel is experiencing a major wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union. The moment Glasnost opened the doors of the Soviet Union, hundreds of thousands requested immigration. The present study focuses on the Soviet immigrant family and changes in structure, values, and life-style of its members, specifically of the marital unit.

The Soviet family. In the early years of the Soviet regime, when the state and its official ideology enjoyed a position of ultimate authority, the assertion was that the “family is ceasing to be a necessity for its members as well as for the state” (Lapidus, 1978). The State, in its drive to minimize private pursuits and a private life, encouraged a myriad of public activities and social duties, aimed at demonstrating loyalty to the regime, which minimized the time and energy devoted to family life. In addition, squalid living conditions, which characterized the family life of millions of Soviet people since the Revolution, made home itself less than attractive for most people (Shlapentokh, 1991).

In the mid-1930’s the official Soviet position started changing, and the undeniable attachment of the Russians to the institution of the family was acknowledged. The collapse in the 1970’s and early 1980’s of the ideology and material practice of socialism sent powerful shock waves through Soviet society, with powerful effects on the family. The data collected over the last two decades by Soviet sociologists has demonstrated that the family has replaced official

Two major social developments characterize the Soviet family in recent years (for reasons of simplification, the average Soviet family referred to here typically lives in the urbanized regions of the Slavic and Baltic Republics): (1) A continuous high rate (35%) of marriage dissolution and divorce (from the 40's the USSR experienced a 350% increase in divorces, and the number of broken marriages increased by 45% since 1970); (2) A decrease in the number of marriages and a concomitant decrease in the number of children in the Western Republics (Imbrogno & Imbrogno, 1986).

There are two main explanations for these trends: (1) female employment; and (2) the State’s moral justification of divorce as part of the liberal conception of family life.

The Soviet ideology rested on productivity and labor of men and women alike. Fifty-one percent of the Soviet labor force consisted of women. The assumption was that women’s participation in social production would have a beneficial effect on their status within the family. However, female employment affected family structure. Access to education, employment and independent income enhanced women’s freedom to enter or leave marriage by reducing the relative value of the resources gained through marriage (Lapidus, 1988; Imbrogno & Imbrogno, 1989).

Soviet society legalized and made divorce available by choice, thus women as well as men were not compelled to remain in troubled marriages or in marriages in name only. Divorce became easily obtained and morally justified (Kharchev & Matskovskii, 1982). Marriage among the young was not regarded as a lifelong union, and divorce was becoming a common, acceptable practice.

Migration and marital distress. Migration is a stressful and traumatic period, and as a consequence, countless family changes take place (Sluzki, 1979). The emphasis in family stress research has been on the impact of either negatively traumatic outside events (such as death or accidents); of the ongoing, cumulative effects of persistent, continually demanding stressors (chronic illness, unemployment); or of predictable and more or less desirable, normative developmental or maturational events (marriage, birth).

Migration tends to fall between these two categories, and is best
classified as a volitional-transitional event. It is typified by the degree of choice or control connected with the occurrence of the event together with the opportunity it provides for growth (Boss, 1987).

The assumption is that rapid social change like migration weakens traditional values about familism and puts greater emphasis on individualism. This view is also consistent with the notion that rapid social change typically produces an increase in the incidence of divorce (Trovato, 1986).

This is especially relevant for the families migrating from the former Soviet Union. Marital relations and family patterns are transitory and turbulent, and divorce is the main avenue for working out marital conflict, especially since divorce proceedings were simplified in 1965 (Bowen, 1983). It is not surprising, therefore, that with the stress of migration, marital dissolution among immigrants from the Soviet Union became one of the main ways of working out marital problems.

Currently, the most prominent models of marital breakdown are based on principles of social exchange theory (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). The migration process is loaded with painful losses, including reduced resources experienced as rewards received in a relationship. For the families migrating from the former Soviet Union, two issues were of the utmost importance: work and lodgings. The present study shows how the day-to-day occurrences influenced the process of adaptation to a new culture, and the marital pay-offs. Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to concentrate on the specific stressors that combine in the process of migration, the impact of the confrontation with Israeli reality, and how these factors influence marital stability.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Twenty couples were randomly selected from a general pool of immigrant families who had requested the intervention of the Social Services institutions. All couples in the population from which the sample was taken had been in Israel for over a year, but less than two years. Sixty-five percent of the participants had one teenage
child, and the rest had two children. The age range of 85% of the couples was 40-45 years, and 90% of the participants had an academic background. Most had studied in Institutes in the former USSR and received degrees which translated as follows: engineers, teachers, music teachers, and medical doctors. Some had worked in the USSR as manual laborers.

The Interview

The semi-structured interview included questions covering a range of experiences, behaviors, perceptions and attitudes related to the migration experience. Topics included: areas of difficulty and areas of strength of the nuclear family; relationship and communication among family members within the nuclear family and the extended family; structural changes in family composition; support systems; and critical incidents before, during and after the migration experience.

The interview was conducted with both husband and wife, in the couple’s home. It was conducted in Hebrew, and the participants sometimes had difficulty in expressing themselves, but they usually managed quite well. Areas of agreement and conflict were noticed. Whenever the participants had difficulty agreeing with something, they reverted to talking in Russian.

Analysis

Qualitative analysis methods, namely analytic induction and constant comparison strategies were used to detect forms of family interaction and behavior. Analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Dillon, 1989; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Moon, Dillon & Sprenkle, 1990) involves scanning the data for common themes, creating coded categories of the phenomena, and combining the categories into topologies. The second method, constant comparison (Glasser & Strauss, 1967), combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all observed cases.

In the present study, the analysis was conducted as follows: the authors initially read through the entire pool of transcribed interviews to detect common themes. These themes were then coded, and linkages in the data connecting similar instances of the same
phenomenon were discerned, thereby creating categories of behavioral patterns. A constant comparison was then conducted by comparing all interviews with one another. Similarities and differences in husband-wife-and other couples—interpretations were translated into working hypotheses that were refined continuously until all instances of similarities and differences were satisfactorily explained. Not only could the hypothesis be modified during the research process to fit all new facts that arose, but the research question could also be redefined (narrowed) to exclude the cases that defied explanation.

RESULTS

Analysis of the transcribed interviews revealed three changes that may be attributed to the migration process and that seem to impinge upon the marital dyad: (a) intensification of interpersonal conflicts; (b) changes in patterns of closeness and distance regulation; and (c) changes in patterns of conflict resolution. These three factors appear to affect the marital relationship and threaten its stability.

Intensification of Interpersonal Conflicts

The interview revealed two sources of conflict that seemed to be specifically related to the immigration: (a) differences between husband and wife in the desire to immigrate, and (b) differences in the rate of absorption.

Motivational differences. Most of the respondents declared that they did not have the same desire to migrate. Usually one of the partners was more determined, and the other followed. Many marriages were terminated because one of the partners did not want to migrate from his/her homeland. These differences were particularly salient at times of stress, when the less-motivated spouse would blame the other for the hardships and distress, whether they were related to living conditions, unemployment, economic strain, or children's social difficulties. The following brief exchange is an example:

Husband (to interviewer): I didn't want it at all. I had a pretty good job there. She was talking about moving all the time; she
thought it would be better for our son. But what good did it do? I have a much lower-status job than I had there, and I don't think that our son is any happier. This was not a good idea, I said . . .

Wife (angrily interrupts): You keep saying that all the time . . . you want me to feel guilty, don’t you? Instead of blaming me you’d better learn more Hebrew and find a better job . . . (turning to interviewer) You see, whenever he has a bad day, this comes up . . . again and again . . . things are getting terrible there with the Antisemitism and the economy. I know couples who got divorced because one of the partners wouldn’t leave the country. He agreed to come, but he keeps nagging me every now and then.

*Differences in the rate of absorption.* The second element that contributed to the intensification of interpersonal problems occurred when each one of the partners underwent a different rate of absorption. As a result, a change in power relations emerged. Although differences in the rate of absorption may have taken many forms, two variations were more commonly observed: First, the husband became acclimatized more rapidly, while the wife lagged somewhat behind. This pattern was found in families in which the husband found a job and was fairly satisfied while the wife became a “forced housekeeper.” Although this entailed a role change (from the pre-immigration two-earner family), this form did not generally have a disrupting effect on the family.

The second form of differences in the rate of absorption, which was linked to a greater degree of disruption, was observed in families in which the wife acquired the language more easily, and thus found employment before the husband did. The reversal of the breadwinner role may thus have injected a source of conflict between the spouses.

*Changes in Patterns of Closeness and Distance Regulation*

As a consequence of the relocation and the new life conditions, changes occur in the family's patterns of closeness and distance. The interviews revealed two major sources of change: (a) changes in work conditions, and (b) changes in living arrangements.
Work changes. For couples, work outside the home serves as a closeness and distance regulator. As a consequence of migration there were forced changes in work hours, working conditions, and energy devoted to work. As a consequence, old patterns of using work as a distance regulator were no longer available. Some of the respondents indicated that the joint venture was a strengthening experience for their marriage. Too much time together, though, which was forced on them by circumstances, intensified conflicts. The most widespread problem at the initial post-immigration period was too much togetherness. Ala described this situation as follows:

For nearly four months after arriving, we were together for 24 hours a day. We studied Hebrew together at the Ulpan (language workshop for new immigrants), we had breakfast, lunch and dinner together; we came home at the same time; we spent time with the same people. . . . It drove me crazy! . . . Luckily Igor found a job shortly afterwards.

Changes in living arrangements. A further factor influencing Soviet immigrant families was the fact that grandparents were able to migrate with their children and grand-children. In many instances, the move was accompanied by the need for the three generations to live together. Three trends were found in the pattern of closeness and distance in the marriage, as a consequence of different family structures which emerged when whole families moved to Israel.

1. The first trend corresponded to couples that lived together with their parents in the former USSR, and since coming to Israel, continued to live together. These couples were usually young, and did not have the time to establish economic stability, which was the original reason for living together with the older generation.

2. The second trend included families which had not lived together with their parents, and lived with them after migrating to Israel. These families found that living together helped them cover not only the rent, but grandmothers could help raise the children when mothers were out. It also modified the nature of the togetherness for these couples, and helped ne-
gotiate some of the closeness that could become very oppres-
sive.

Larissa and Simeon lived with Simeon’s parents. Before
coming to Israel, they had had their own apartment. In Israel,
grandmother helped not only with their little daughter, but also
with their being too much together. They said they needed
time to sit and talk; however, they seemed reluctant to do so
since they had to relieve grandmother of her job of taking care
of their child. In this family, then, it was obvious that the
presence of the grandparent generation helped relieve some of
the togetherness as well as provided immediate support.

3. The third case involved families that did not live together with
their parents before, however, the new living arrangement nei-
ther provided an immediate source of support nor did it re-
lieve the stresses of exaggerated closeness. On the contrary,
the living conditions actually intensified the problems, and
conflicts that were dormant before.

Boris and Rosa found themselves suddenly living with both
sets of parents. Boris lost part of his self-esteem since he was
not working. Problems in the household arose between the two
families. Rosa and her mother, both excellent cooks, formed
an alliance around work in the kitchen. Boris’ mother (an
elderly lady) was left to herself and, feeling estranged, she had
to elicit her son’s loyalty. In this family, intergenerational co-
alitions that emerged as a consequence of their forced living
conditions intensified the couple’s conflicts.

Changes in Patterns of Conflict Resolution

The third factor affecting marital stability in migrant families is
the obsolescence of previous patterns of conflict resolution. Migra-
tion involves a complete change of life. The suitability of previous
ways of dealing with conflict, or even previous attractions to the
marriage are often suddenly non-existent. Couples are aware that
when moving to a different country life will change, there will be
many hardships; however, soon enough they wake up to the realiza-
tion that they thought, dreamed and dreaded everything, but had not been aware of what this change would do to their marriage. Zelda and Boris said that they were expecting the worst, and in many ways were surprised by what awaited them when coming to Israel. They did not take into account, however, their impatience with each other, the quarrels, and the disagreements they have had since they arrived.

Zelda says: "We are more stressed out, we quarrel more."
Boris adds: "I think everything will be fine, we do not have to fight so much and be so tense. There is nothing we can do, there is no other option. When we were in Russia and we fought, I could shout as loud as I wanted, and then I would usually go out to one of my friends. We usually fought because Zelda wanted me to help her with household chores. That was something we could fight about. Now, I have too much time on my hands, but there is nothing we can do. It is not as if by fighting with Zelda, I can get a job. . . ."
Then Zelda adds, as if to explain what she does to help: "When I see that it is hard on Boris, I talk to him, and I take upon myself all the household chores—to make it easy on him."

In Western society we are used to the availability of appropriate support systems and agents of conflict resolution such as marriage and family therapists, welfare agencies, etc. In contrast, families from the former Soviet Union seem to view psychotherapy as an invasion of family privacy and therapists as agents of the regime. When the traditional Russian family comes for consultation they may come for one of two reasons: (1) referral by a medical doctor, as a result of repeated somatic complaints, due to either the somatization that is prevalent in traditional cultures (Kleinman, 1980), or symptomatic of a masked depression or of one of the many types of emotional disorders that frequently are presented with a cluster of somatic complaints; (2) referral from the school system when one of the children is expressing the family conflict through poor academic performance or poor social-behavioral adjustment.

Whether through somatic complaints or school failures, the patterns that Soviet families will choose to express distress is indirect.
If the therapist does not address these somatic or school complaints, the clients, who come from a different cultural orientation, are likely to see the treatment as irrelevant and may terminate therapy (Espin, 1987).

**DISCUSSION**

When discussing migration, researchers have typically focused on the family, oblivious to the marital dyad as the core unit of the family. This paper explores the migrated marital dyad from the former Soviet Union, in their moments of despair, particularly taking into account the context of the Soviet ideology, marital patterns of conflict resolution, and changes in their new life.

**Expectations and rewards.** The expectations of immigrants are that life in the new country will be better than the kind of life they had before, in the old country. The disillusionment is sometimes hard and it is mediated by two factors: the motivation for migration and the rate of absorption. Of the two factors, the one that has most influence on marital strain is the differential rate of absorption between husband and wife.

As a consequence of the difference in rate of absorption, role reversal occurs (McGoldrick, Garcia-Preto, Hines & Lee, 1991; Ben-Barak, 1989). Many marriages are not equipped to deal with the lowering and change of rewards, accompanied by a state of low esteem in the husband. This is one of the main factors leading to marital dissolution in migrant families. The husband feels frustrated and angry, and the wife has fewer resources to deal with the husband’s lower status. As a consequence, the balance in the marriage between costs and rewards is changed, and either the wife or the husband opts to get out of the marriage.

During this period, disillusionment sets in because of the inconsistency between the immigrants’ expectations and the actual turn of events. It is during this period, too, that their resources, mostly the intangible ones (self-esteem, prestige, autonomy) take their deepest plunge. The disparity between partners’ levels of resources is especially important when discussing job availability. Soviet women immigrants readily adapt to the conditions of the Israeli labor market; they are more willing to change their occupation, they
have a lower degree of frustration with labor conditions than the men, and their work satisfaction is higher (Ben-Barak, 1989). Thus we found that women had made specific changes in their work orientation (usually to lower-status professions), and were working in menial jobs to increase family income.

Migration and marital distress. The impact on the marital relationship of the change in roles and intangible resources as a result of the migration process can be substantial. Previously stable families will be experiencing the effects of the relocation process, with some families feeling stronger for the experience, and others facing the dissolution of marriage.

As a consequence of all these changes, migrant families from the former Soviet Union show different degrees of deterioration in physical and/or psychological health, especially in the period of decompensation, during which most of our families were (Sluzki, 1979). This period of crisis may occur between some months or a year after migration, and may take a long time to overcome (about three years after migration, Sluzki, 1979, p. 386). The family undergoes a period of mourning and restructure in the marital relation (role functions), and in the family functioning, through the children, who will either manage to move forward and catch quickly the language and culture, or will be agents of the poor family functioning.

Implications for therapy. Therapists may encounter many pitfalls when working with migrant families, especially during the period of decompensation, when families feel despair. For many of these families the family crisis is a painful remainder that all is not perfect in a country to which they came to improve their lives. The following recommendations are offered when dealing with a couple in crisis:

(1) Families who come from the Soviet Union are profoundly proud of their cultural and historic heritage, not necessarily of the last seventy years. Therefore it is very important to allow them to mourn the old country and all they lost, without assuming that they are better off now. This is connected with the issue of the differential adaptation rates of the husband and wife. It may happen that the slower adaptive member is mourning the loss for both husband and wife, while the wife is making the adaptations for both members of
the couple. However, the different roles each has adopted are not accepted or realized by the other.

(2) Migrant families from the former Soviet Union are in need of information and contextualizing (Turner, 1991). They lack familiarity with the social, economic, and political institutions of the West. As a consequence, they tend to blame each other, or themselves, as incompetent, as well as their new country with its different economic or social system. The last big wave of immigration to Israel depleted the sources of work opportunities in Israel. Lacking work, the immigrant’s self-esteem took a deep plunge. The results were felt at the personal, marital, and family level of most families.

(3) Finally, it is important to remember that we are moving away from the “melting pot” ideology of cultural absorption. This means, as Pinsof (1992) states, “that challenging patient’s cultural beliefs and patterns is only justified when they play a major role in the creation and/or maintenance of a symptom or presenting problem that the patient wants to change . . . A culturally sensitive intervention respects patients’ cultural values and patterns and attempts to work within the patient’s cultural framework. Challenging and changing that framework is only justified when that framework clearly plays a significant role in preventing patients from accomplishing the changes that they seek” (p. 117).

As McGoldrick et al. (1991) mention, there is no easy solution to the complex problems that migration imposes on the family, and on its therapists. However, therapy that is done around sensitive principles may begin to be helpful to culturally and ethnically different families. Markers of all of these different experiences have to be kept in mind so as not to lose sight of the complexity and diversity of human experience.

REFERENCES


