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## Russian Mail-Order Brides in the US: A Cultural Psychology Perspective

### ***Introduction***

In December of 2000, the American media was fixated on one story: the murder of Russian mail-order bride Anastasia King. Two years prior to her death, she had been introduced to Indle King through an International Marriage Broker (IMB) and Anastasia immigrated to the United States from Russia to live with her new husband. Indle King decided he wanted to end their marriage but was concerned that it would be expensive to file for divorce. His solution was to murder his wife (Schwamkrug). Upon investigation, police discovered that Anastasia was Mr. King's second mail-order bride. His first wife had filed for divorce along with a domestic violence protection order. Perhaps even more horrifying to the public was when information emerged that even after Anastasia King's death, Mr. King began the process of finding a third mail-order bride (Newsome).

When American news outlets fixated on Anastasia's gruesome story, a spotlight was directed at the mail-order bride industry and the domestic abuse that oftentimes results in these marriages. Authorities agree that domestic violence in these marriages is expected to be more common than in 'normal' marriages (Scholes). Studies commissioned by the United States Congress found that domestic violence rates could be very high (77% in one study) in marriages between mail-order brides and lawful permanent resident men (H.R. REP. NO. 103-395 (1993), 1993 WL 484760). This is shocking when compared to the national average of 28 percent of American couples who report domestic violence at some point in their marriages (Overview of Domestic Violence). One independent study found that mail-order marriages are *less* likely to

end in divorce than marriages overall in the United States: divorce rates in mail-order marriages for which the courtship period lasted more than 4 months were between 35.8 and 41.3 percent when compared to the overall US divorce rate which is 48 percent (Statistics Solutions, Inc). Even more surprisingly, domestic abuse was not reported as a significant factor that contributed to divorce in mail-order marriages.

After Anastasia's story and many similar reports surfaced in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Americans asked why these women were willing to come to the United States in the first place and moreover why they seem willing to remain in abusive marriages rather than divorce. The answer to these questions is best answered by the field of cultural psychology because mail-order bride's actions which may seem inexplicable to Americans are largely motivated by their cultural background. Thus, viewing the Russian mail-order bride phenomenon as a collision between American men's and Russian women's culturally-produced expectations of the marriage provides a richer understanding of why people willingly enter these marriages and additionally why domestic abuse is a frequent outcome of these arrangements.<sup>1</sup> Understanding these marriages from the perspective of both the men and the women involved can help law makers institute policies that can better protect this population that is vulnerable to domestic violence.

### *Background*

To understand why these marriages exist in the first place, one must know the conditions of the creation of the mail-order bride industry. While companies that facilitate international marriages are certainly not a new phenomenon, this industry has recently flourished due to the

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that there is a selection bias in the availability of information on the outcomes of these marriages, as successful mail-order marriages rarely reach law enforcement officials, courts or media outlets (Jackson 498). While this paper acknowledges that not all mail-order marriages result in domestic abuse, this essay examines factors that oftentimes lead to abuse in mail-order marriages.

spread of internet use (Case 487). The three most prominent regions that American mail-order brides come from are Southeast Asia, the former Soviet Union and to a lesser extent, Latin America. Russian women became popular brides in this industry in the late 1980s as the collapse of the Soviet Union opened this market to Western countries. Typically, women pay a nominal fee if anything to have their profile posted on a site, and men pay a great deal more to be set with a match. Once a woman and a man are paired together, they communicate by internet and phone to see if they are compatible. Oftentimes, the man will go to his potential wife's country to visit her before they marry.

With the recent growth in this industry as well as the highly-publicized murders in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, an increase in the amount of legislation surrounding these marriages has resulted. Once an immigrant bride enters the United States on a fiancée visa, she must marry within 90 days or she will be deported (USCIS - Fiancée Visa). Males entering these sites must complete a background check, the women's forms must be translated to her language, women must sign a document that acknowledges they agree to communication before online chats commence and more recently, Americans are only permitted 2 fiancée visas per lifetime. However these more strict regulations have not been sufficient to end domestic violence in mail-order marriages.

### ***Cultural Creation of the Industry and the Marriages***

To many, it seems unfathomable why an American man would desire to marry a person who he barely knows and who oftentimes does not speak the same language as he does. Moreover, it is difficult to understand why someone would be willing to spend thousands of dollars entering this arrangement, between paying IMB fees, the cost of a marriage license, and

exorbitant travel fees for his fiancée and himself, as well as sometimes her children.

Compounding the seeming undesirability of mail-order marriages for men is the social backlash from peers for entering a marriage that has a reputation for being loveless. But what is perhaps more incomprehensible is the question of why a woman would enter one of these contracts.

These women leave their careers, families and culture to come to a country where they most often know no one aside from the man whom they have been conversing with over the internet.

However, understanding the cultures and circumstances that these individuals come from offers unique insight into why both men and women are willing to enter into these relationships.

Culturally produced stereotypes of other societies both create the supply of Russian women in this industry, as well as the American demand for Russian brides.

### *American Male's Perspective*

To understand why an American man would want to use an IMB to find a wife, it is crucial to understand who exactly these men are in the first place. Studies conducted by various organizations generally agree that the consumer-husbands are usually white, much older than the bride they choose, politically conservative, frustrated by the Women's Movement and socially alienated. Moreover, 57 percent of male clients have experienced divorce (Chun 1168; Scholes). More linguistically biased research claims that many of these men "are social misfits... [men who] drink too much; some beat their wives and treat them little better than slaves" (Villapando 325).<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the pool of men seeking foreign wives who have a propensity for violence is not meaningfully restricted by International Marriage Brokers and US regulations.

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that there is a dearth in research of men's propensity for domestic violence before mail-order marriages. Thus it is possible there is a selection bias at play, as perhaps men who enter mail-order marriages are more likely to be abusive.

Undercover work has shown that IMBs are largely willing to provide services to men with violent histories. The surveyor sent IMBs an email inquiring if they would be willing to accept him as an applicant despite the fact that he pled guilty to disorderly conduct in response to criminal assault charges filed by two American ex-wives. Out of the 66 responses that the organization received, 59 said that they were willing to accept him as customer without any further inquiry (Equality Now). One of the more shocking responses that researchers received from a marriage broker sympathizes with the fake applicant's act of domestic abuse and suggests that Russian brides are less likely to provoke a man to beat (Equality Now):

As far as sponsoring your alien fiancée, the government couldn't care less if you're Jack the Ripper, as long as you're out of jail and free to marry. As far as bitches go, I think I understand. They assert that "No" means "No" except when they're nagging, in which case, "No" means, "Keep nagging and try to get beaten." I think that they language barrier actually helps here; it's hard to squawk through a language barrier.

As this excerpt suggests, one of the primary reasons that American men cite for seeking a mail-order marriage is a dissatisfaction with American women. As more than half of men seeking mail-order brides are divorced, many believe that marrying a foreign woman is the key to a better marriage.

Marriage brokers recognize that the industry is stoked by the backlash against American feminism and the belief that "American women are aggressive and selfish" (Chun 1176-7). To capitalize on their client's hatred of the modern American woman, IMBs use stereotyped understandings of Russian women to promote their business. Agencies appeal to the consumers' belief that Russian women are traditional as well as submissive and they sell the fantasy of the foreign bride as a more accommodating wife in comparison to American wives (Chun 1177). Such advertisements are very easy to find on the internet. The following claim was taken from a Russian mail-order bride site and exemplifies the stereotyped image of Russian women that these

companies sell to American men (Russian Brides. Mail Order Brides, Single Women from Ukraine):

Thousand of pretty girls and single women from Ukraine and Russia want to get married, create a family, and be happy. So do you? Are you looking for a Russian bride? Do you want to find a family-oriented Ukrainian woman and create a happy family with her?

Army Of Brides is the right place for you!

This excerpt illustrates how the message that Russian women are ‘family-oriented’ is very overt in advertisements for mail-order brides.

However, this obvious messaging is not only present in advertisements; it is also explicitly communicated when men correspond with representatives from these companies. In the aforementioned study conducted by “Equality Now” one IMB representative claimed that he understands why the fake respondent would be compelled to beat his American wife, and used the inquiry as an opportunity to market the Russian women by juxtaposing them with American women (Equality Now 3):

I understand you as many men suffer from career - women. You know that we have good and beautiful women. Most of them are clever and they are not looking for the career. Our women are just grown up in other way. They should care of her husband, children, family, not about her work.

It is clear that men seeking Russian brides are largely frustrated by American women’s increasing independence and distance from the traditional role of a housewife after the Women’s Liberation Movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. They are easy prey for IMBs to take advantage of preexisting American stereotypes of Eastern European women as subservient, traditional wives and market ‘their ladies’ in juxtaposition with harsh, American women. Thus understanding the cultural context of the American men who desire mail-order brides greatly facilitates one’s conception of why someone would be compelled to enter this agreement in the first place.

### *Russian Women's Perspective*

For Russian women, there are both 'push' and 'pull' factors that induce them to immigrate to the United States in a mail-order marriage. Push factors are those which compel them to leave Russia. Pull factors are those which make them want to come to the United States and enter a mail-order marriage. There are many facets of Russian life and culture that make the marriage pool very slim and make Russia a difficult environment for women to thrive. Firstly, demographics are working against Russian women's ability to marry: there are about 4 million more women of marriageable age in Russia than men (Foreign Born Population). Moreover, the workforce in Russia is very formidable for women. Although a large portion of the Russian workforce is female, they oftentimes hold positions of low prominence and do not garner much respect (Case 487). Russian women dwell at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Europe and their ethnicity both explains and exacerbates their deteriorating respect as members of workforce (Chun 1174). The difficulties that Russian women face when entering the workforce are reflected in their wages as well: women in Russia on average earn less than half of men's wages (Hughes).

Exacerbating the difficult conditions for women in Russia are the high rates of alcoholism and domestic abuse among Russian men (Schwamkrug). This further depletes the pool of marriageable men in Russia and compels women to seek husbands internationally. In fact, matchmaking agencies report that the primary reason that women cite for seeking IMBs is that they are dissatisfied with Russian men (Chun 1175). Furthermore, there is a tremendous stigma against divorce in Russia, and as such divorced women are less desirable to Russian men and it is difficult for divorced women to find second husbands (Schwamkrug). In Russia, "marriage is seen as a central feature of a woman's life" (Kojima). Russian women face intense

social pressure to marry, and the expected age of marriage is much younger in Russia than the United States (Sullivan). As unmarried Russian women grow older, it becomes far more difficult for them to find a husband. As Russian women turn 22 or 23 (the age at which it socially unacceptable not to have a husband), they can still attract American men who are not deterred by their age.

However, there are also a number of reasons why Russian women would want to marry abroad which are unrelated to the undesirability of married life in Russia. There is a widely held perception among Russian women that American men are exceptional. Much of what Russian women know about American men they learn through American television shows and books which depict these men as sensitive and caring. In comparison with the widespread alcoholism and tendency towards abuse among Russian men, the stereotyped depiction of American men is far preferable when Russian women are seeking husbands. Thus although economic factors oftentimes are the driving forces for Russian women to decide to use International Marriage Brokers to find a husband, they choose the United States in particular because they harbor a culturally-produced stereotyped understanding of American men.

### ***Creation and Perpetuation of Domestic Violence in Mail-Order Marriages***

Thus far the discussion has focused on how Russian women's experience in their own country motivates their immigration to an unfamiliar country to marry men whom they do not know well, and why American men would desire to enter these marriages. These explanations have been developed through an enhanced understanding of the cultural context that these groups hail from, as well as the stereotypes that each group harbors about the other. Now that it has been established why these marriages exist in the first place, the discussion should turn to an



explanation of how the domestic abuse that oftentimes occurs in these marriages is also motivated by this collision of culturally-produced expectations.

### *Why Men Abuse*

As previously discussed, American men primarily seek Russian brides because they want their wives to be family-oriented. These men harbor unrealistic expectations that their wives will be solely dependent on their husbands and have no interests aside from serving them (Schwamkrug). Unsurprisingly, these men are oftentimes disappointed when their expectations, which are heightened by the IMB's depiction of Russian women as subservient, are not met. Husbands become upset when their brides attempt to develop friendships and express interest in a career, both of which are signs of a desire for independence (Schwamkrug). When their expectations are not met these men can react violently (Chun 1187). Lisa Schwamkrug, a lawyer who represents Russian brides in divorce and domestic abuse cases, released accounts that clients gave her of their marriages. One such client, Natasha<sup>3</sup>, was abused by her husband for walking to the store by herself and for criticizing her husband's drinking problem (Schwamkrug). Natasha's husband was upset that Natasha was not the easily controlled wife that the IMB promised and he retaliated violently.

It is not only men's disappointment in their brides that leads them to abuse. The perception of mail-order brides as a commodity fosters abuse as well. Russian brides are viewed as a product traded in an international market. Mail-order brides perpetuate cultural, racial and gender stereotypes that in-turn diminish their agency (Schwamkrug). Russian women are dehumanized by the very nature of being a mail-order bride. This lack of agency and

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<sup>3</sup> Schwamkrug changes the names of her clients for protection purposes. The ethnographic accounts of other Russian women's marriages that are depicted in this paper all come from Schwamkrug's research and all employ pseudonyms.

personhood that results from the commodification of these women makes it easier for men to abuse them.

### *Why Women do not Retaliate*

In Russia, there is a common stereotype that American men do not beat their wives. This belief is fostered by American television shows in Russia (Schwamkrug). Hence, victims of abuse in mail-order marriages that do speak out typically report being shocked that their new American husbands began to abuse them. Unfortunately in mail-order marriages women rarely report the abuse, which seems incomprehensible to most Americans. However, by contextualizing these women in their Russian culture and understanding their experience as immigrants to the United States, it is easy to comprehend why they oftentimes withstand abuse.

Domestic abuse is far more common in Russia than it is in the US. As many as 14,000 women die annually from domestic violence in Russia, around four times more per head than in the United States. Not only is domestic violence a pervasive problem, but also there is not much being done to alleviate this pervasive social ill. There is little support for battered women in Russia: there are only about 25 women's shelters across the country, with places for a total of about 200 women per night in a country of 142 million (Kuchma).

Part of the reason why Russia has such high rates is that domestic violence is more socially acceptable in Russia than it is in the United States. In one study of the Russian population, less than half of the respondents thought violence was a serious problem. Even more surprising, some interviewees expressed that there were several scenarios in which violence against a wife was regarded as permissible (Stickley et al.). Moreover, domestic abuse in Russia is considered a family matter, and thus it is less common for women to seek outside help (in

either the police or the legal system) to alleviate their abusive living conditions. Hence, to Russians it is less obvious that domestic violence is a problem which can be remedied, and as a result Russian women are less likely to report this type of crime.

The fact that recently-immigrated Russian women are unfamiliar with the United States' laws also makes them less likely than American women to report their husband's abuse. One such example is the story of Lyudmilla, a mail-order bride who signed away her rights in a prenuptial contract drafted by her fiancée. When her attorney explained that Lyudmilla was rescinding many of her rights under state law, she expressed that she did not mind giving up her rights in the US because she had already given up everything she had in Russia. Lyudmilla never fully understood the impact of her signature because the American conception of rights is very different from the Russian understanding, and additionally she was not accustomed to having her rights enforced when she lived in Russia (Schwamkrug). Lyudmilla's story shows how laws and even basic conceptions of rights do not necessarily translate in the cultural move from Russia to the United States. The lack of shared meaning on basic legal matters in the United States puts Russian bride immigrants in a vulnerable position as they are less capable of advocating for themselves and understanding that a crime has been committed against them that is punishable by law.

Another relevant realm of American law that Russian brides are not well acquainted with is immigration law. Because they oftentimes do not understand these laws, these women are in perpetual fear of deportation and thus they are less likely to confront their husbands or turn to law-enforcement officials, both of which they view as parties who could deport them. Natasha's story provides a rich example of this situation in which a woman is willing to endure domestic abuse for fear of deportation. Natasha had an engineering degree but also was a bit older and

had teenage children. She divorced her first husband because he was an alcoholic. The lack of re-marriage prospects in Russia compelled her to make a profile at a matchmaking agency. She found a mate named Robert with whom she corresponded for a year before he went to Russia to visit her. Robert promised that he did not drink habitually and they married in Russia but Natasha waited a year before she moved to America to live with him.

Natasha arrived in a small town in Texas where she was told she would have to sleep in her own room. Robert, it turned out, was an alcoholic and would not allow her to leave the apartment without him. When she tried to leave the house to buy herself feminine hygiene products, Robert accused her of being a prostitute and then proceeded to savagely beat her. Natasha's husband threatened to have her sent back to Russia for being a prostitute. In spite of Natasha's desperately terrible living conditions, she feared being deported even more because she had rescinded her career, apartment, and children to come to the United States. Returning to Russia would mean that she would face harsh social stigma and embarrassment (Schwamkrug). Hence, Natasha was willing to remain in her abusive marriage because her husband took advantage of her lack of knowledge on American immigration laws and led her to believe that the only alternative to her abusive marriage was deportation.

Beyond a dearth in understanding American laws, Russian women who are abused by their husbands rarely report the violence because distrust in the police that is deeply ingrained in Russian culture. There is a general sense that the Russian government and law enforcement officials are not to be trusted and are inefficacious. Russian women apply their cultural perspective of laws, law enforcement authorities, and the purpose law serves in a society to the United States police which limits their ability to remove themselves from a dangerous living situation. Additionally, Russian women simply do not harbor the idea that police are capable of

ending domestic violence because, as previously explained, domestic violence is considered a family matter in Russia, and secondly because Russian police oftentimes side with men on the rare occasion that they are called to the scene in a domestic violence dispute (Schwamkrug).

Alternatives to law enforcement officials in the United States, such as battered women's shelters, are uncommon in Russia and thus Russian brides are oftentimes unaware that they exist in the first place. As aforementioned, there are very few shelters in Russia. Moreover, even when Russian wives are aware that shelters exist, they are very reluctant to use them for fear of language and cultural barriers (Schwamkrug). Exacerbating the unlikelihood that a battered immigrant will turn to structural methods to seek refuge (such as law enforcement or shelters) is the fact that they have little or no social networks by which they can learn that such entities exist.

Katya's story is a strong example of how husbands purposely deprive women of the social networks that they need not only for happiness, but also to garner information about the resources available to them in the event that they are abused. Katya came to the United States with her son to marry Keith, who also had a young son. At first, Keith's control of Katya was more subtle: he would instruct her on how to dress and wear her make-up, and the only people that Katya was allowed to meet were Keith's family and friends. When Katya began to advocate for herself and refused Keith's instructions, Keith beat her. Similar to Natasha's husband, Keith told Katya that he would call the police and have her deported if she did not do what he wanted. Because Katya had no friends of her own, she was not aware of any alternative means of finding information about American law, she was forced to believe and fear that Keith was capable of deporting her (Schwamkrug).

Katya's case is a strong example of how lack of knowledge of United States laws can imprison a Russian mail-order bride in a relationship of domestic abuse. This lack of knowledge,

combined with unawareness or fear of shelters, distrust of police, lack of social networks and the fact that domestic violence is more of a norm in Russia create the ‘perfect’ situation in which these battered women remain in their marriages. Although superficially it is difficult for people to understand why someone would be willing to withstand domestic abuse, contextualizing these immigrants’ experiences by more thoroughly understanding their cultural upbringing and the conditions in the country that they are leaving sheds a great deal of light on why this abuse persists.

### ***Policy Implications and Conclusion***

If the Russian mail-order bride phenomenon demonstrates anything, it is that there is a tremendous and desperate need for improvements in the understanding of the cultural circumstances that foster mail-order marriages during the creation of laws and social services that pertain to these oftentimes disastrous marriages. Deeper knowledge of the cultural forces that affect both the husbands’ and the wives’ decision to enter these marriages and their response to domestic abuse that oftentimes ensues can greatly improve the legislative and humanitarian response to these problems.

Stricter regulation of the International Marriage Broker industry is one of the best ways to minimize the prevalence of domestic abuse in mail-order marriages. More rigorous investigation into the firms’ practices and harsher penalties for accepting clients with criminal histories are strong ways to combat this domestic violence. Moreover, the US government should create policies that lower the Russian women’s barriers to reporting abuse. Programs that ensure that women thoroughly understand their rights as citizens and immigration law can lend these wives more agency. Because Russian women oftentimes do not trust the police, upon their entry into

the United States they should be made aware that resources other than the police are available in the event that they are domestically abused, such as shelters and social workers. By enacting policies such as these, the United States can better regulate the International Marriage Broker industry and make a large difference in the lives of Russian women who immigrate to the United States hoping to find superior opportunities for social advancement than are available to them in Russia.

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