

Public Abstract

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Title:RUSSIAN OLD BELIEVERS IN ALASKA: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY OF TRADITIONALIST REFUGEES

For two centuries, Russian Old Believers existed as religious refugees in search of a permanent and tolerant home; one group of Old Believers made their way to the United States. However, while these Old Believers found religious refuge in a nation with vacillating tolerance of religious freedom, they encountered new complications of cultural and linguistic pressures and temptations to assimilate – particularly for their children. In an attempt to continue passing on the language and culture they had preserved from the 17th-century, a few families established a geographically isolated, closed community in South Central Alaska (SCAK) that grew into a Village with different ways of adapting to the American culture outside.

In evaluating how well SCAK Old Believers have maintained 17th-century traditional (i.e., passed from parent to child) language and culture I found that: 1.) the community has surpassed the third-generation language shift paradigm that most refugees and immigrants to the United States succumb to; 2.) overt expressions of religiosity quantifiably distinguish Old Believers from their non-Old Believer counterparts in the Village, which indicates that high-fidelity transmission still occurs; and 3.) traditional transmission is still positively influencing community retention (i.e., population maintenance). Additionally, I found that significant Village events initiated specific differences in adaptations to the surrounding American culture at the individual level that had interesting effects on strategies and behavior at the group level.

Not only is this research a significant contribution to further clarifying human behavior and cultural evolution. This research and these findings are timely and relevant as social justice for refugees and immigrants are at the forefront of many current national and global sociopolitical conversations. The SCAK Old Believers demonstrate that it is possible to maintain linguistic and cultural heritage within a dominant post-industrialized society, and their case reinforces the importance of choice for refugees and the value of life without fear.