

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

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ABSTRACT

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 assimilative pressures and temptations – particularly for their children. In an attempt to continue their maintenance of high-fidelity cultural and linguistic transmission, a few families established a geographically isolated, closed community in South Central Alaska (*SCAK*) that grew into a Village with varying acculturative strategies.

In evaluating the fidelity with which *SCAK* Old Believers have maintained 17th-century traditional (i.e., transmitted from parent to child) lifeways 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 induced varying cultural transmission strategies at the individual level that had interesting effects on acculturative 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.