

FORMAL AND INFORMAL SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS IN ISRAELI ABSORPTION OF IMMIGRANTS FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

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The article explores the sources of assistance selected and preferred by new immigrants in meeting a variety of daily needs, including seeking employment, selecting schools, and choosing a health care provider. In several key areas, in particular negotiating and obtaining information about local systems, volunteers are the preferred source of assistance, whereas governmental services are used when more tangible outcomes in finding employment and housing are sought. Immigrants who were adopted by Israeli families perceive their initial adjustment as more successful in several key areas and are more likely to seek assistance from volunteers for their daily needs than non-adopted immigrants. Therefore, the family adoption program should be expanded.

Since the early 1990s, more than a half-million immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) have settled in Israel, and although immigration has declined from a peak of almost 200,000 in 1990 to just over 78,000 in 1994, the flow has been significant, both by historical standards and in proportion to the existing Israeli population of 5,500,000 (Markovitz, 1990).

The new immigrant group represents a cross-section of the Jewish population in the FSU. It includes a sizeable proportion of skilled professionals with academic degrees (Showstack, 1990), as well as a large number of households with special needs. Yet, regardless of their previous background, most newcomers go through a traumatic relocation experience. Furthermore, the non-ideological nature of the current immigration, in contrast to several earlier waves, makes the absorption process even more difficult (Belozersky, 1990).

Although Israel has long and unique experience in absorbing immigrants, this fact alone does not ensure a smooth transition. Both the official governmental position and public sentiment still welcome immigration as beneficial to the society at large. Yet, pro-immigration sentiments are tempered by life's realities that include competition between long-time residents and newcomers

for jobs, housing, and other government services. There is also widespread resentment of the special benefits that newcomers receive from the government. In the final analysis, day-to-day attitudes and behaviors displayed toward immigrants, especially by working-class Israelis with whom immigrants have much of their informal interaction, may not differ significantly from those in countries where public policies and sentiment are less favorable toward mass immigration (Leshem, 1994).

Historically, when immigrants confronted ambivalent or hostile reactions from host societies, most tended to rely on other immigrants, both friends and family, for various forms of support in meeting their immediate needs (Belozersky, 1990). Such support was mainly supplemented by assistance from governmental agencies and volunteers. In Israel, until the current wave of immigration, volunteers in the absorption of immigrants were used within two primary frameworks. The first was the array of national and community service organizations, such as Rotary, B'nai B'rith, WIZO, Hadassah, and others. The second framework included the numerous immigrant associations active in Israel; there are scores of such groups, which are usually established around a country or city of origin.

Since the beginning of the current wave of immigration, all community service organizations and immigrant associations, regardless of their country of origin, have expanded their goals to assist newcomers from the former Eastern Bloc in response to the growing need and the increasing pressures on governmental agencies (LeDoux, 1992; Rosenberg, 1991).

The assistance provided to immigrants by the various service and immigrant volunteer organizations takes many forms, from tutoring immigrant children to organizing job fairs. Such assistance is not different from that offered by voluntary agencies in other Western countries, both Jewish and non-Jewish (Lakritz, 1991). The most extensive project associated with the current wave of immigration has been the recruitment of veteran Israeli families to serve as adoptive, mentor families to new immigrant households. The adoptive families are matched with an adopted family and are expected to assist it to meet daily needs arising from the relocation, to supplement governmental effort, and to make the whole process more personal. Similar programs are also being operated by many Jewish communities in North America (Kahan, 1990; Lakritz, 1991).

The Israeli program had involved, at its peak, thousands of adoptive and adopted families. In Haifa alone, there were more than 1,300 such pairings of families. For the new immigrants, as well as for most of the adoptive families, the introduction of the involvement of volunteers on such a scale was a new and unfamiliar experience. Although there are strong patterns of assistance among friends and family members, most newcomers from the FSU are unaware of the existence and purpose of Western volunteerism (Showstack, 1990; Siegel, 1988). The willingness of total strangers to invest time and other resources on their behalf is quite new and incomprehensible to most immigrants (Belozersky, 1990; Showstack, 1990). The majority of immigrants take for granted the notion that it is the ex-

clusive role of the state to meet basic needs through the direct provision of free education, subsidized housing, employment placement, and health services. There has never existed in the Soviet Union the need for outside informal mediating sources for advice, information, and advocacy in negotiating government systems.

This article explores the role and importance of volunteers as a primary source of informal assistance, during the initial settlement phases of immigrants, in relation to other sources of help. Another objective is to assess the impact of the adoptive family on the overall adjustment of the immigrants during the initial stages that are so critical for successful immigration (Drachman, 1992; Hareven, 1992).

There are several reports about the early stages of the absorption process and about the efforts, especially by Jewish communities in North America, to assist immigrants taking their first steps. Most of the reports, however, consist of descriptions and impressions by workers from the sponsoring agencies (Kahan, 1990; Lakritz, 1991; Showstack, 1990; Zuckerman, 1990), and a search of the literature has revealed few empirical investigations of the patterns of assistance. Furthermore, much of the knowledge gained during earlier waves of immigration is of limited use because of the profound social, political, and economic changes that have occurred since the emergence of the welfare state.

METHODOLOGY

A sample of 273 new immigrants from the FSU was selected for the study. The participants were all students in adult education classes, called *Ulpanim*, where newcomers learn basic Hebrew as well as other relevant knowledge of the country. Participants in the study were asked to respond to 62 items contained in a research instrument (divided into four parts) that was designed especially for this study. An earlier search of the literature did not yield existing suitable items.

Of the 62 questions, 41 scaled items

dealt with preferred sources for assistance in seven areas, from finding employment to selecting schools. Six additional scaled items assessed the level of adjustment, from language acquisition to the adjustment to the new economic system. There were seven items that gathered conventional demographic information about the immigrants, such as age, sex, and length of stay in Israel, and eight questions gathered information about the relationships with the adopting families for immigrants who had such a relationship. The instrument was constructed by a team that included Russian-speaking immigrant psychologists and psychiatrists (social work as a profession did not exist in the Soviet Union). The instrument was pretested, modified, and pretested again to enhance reliability and validity. The final version was administered by Russian-speaking interviewers.

SAMPLE

Respondents ranged in age from young adults to the young aged. Of the group, 21.9 percent were under the age of 30, 45.7 percent were in the 30–49 age bracket, 25.7 percent were between the ages of 50 and 59, and 6.7 percent were 60 or older. Immigrants under 21 years generally attended school and the older immigrants (65 and over) who were not part of the labor force attended special absorption programs.

The respondents were almost equally divided between women and men. Almost three-quarters (74.0 percent) were married, 10.2 percent were divorced, 8.3 percent were widowed, and 7.4 percent were never married. Of the respondents who were or had been married, 19.8 percent had no children, 41.5 percent had one child, and 34.0 percent have two children. Only 2.55 had three children, and none had more than three.

Almost all the immigrants came from the European parts of the FSU, primarily the Russian Republic, the Ukraine, and Belarus. Less than 10 percent were from the Asian republics.

Almost three-quarters (73.1 percent) of the newcomers were skilled professionals; blue-collar technicians and laborers accounted for another 10.5 percent, and those engaged in commerce and clerical workers accounted for 6.7 percent and 5.8 percent, respectively. At the time of the study, 38.4 percent of the respondents had been in Israel for more than six months and 61.6 percent for less than six months.

FINDINGS

Pattern of Assistance

Respondents were asked to rate the use they had made or planned to make of a variety of sources in seven areas of concern that affect their adjustment: employment, housing, consumer information, emotional support, negotiation with government and non-government agencies, school selection, and health care selection. Table 1 highlights the levels of preference for each source of assistance in all areas of concern.

As Table 1 indicates, the two main sources of assistance are formal organizations (including government offices and public agencies) and volunteers (affiliated with service and immigrant associations or part of the adoption programs). Formal organizations lead all other sources in the more material areas, such as employment, housing, and consumer information, as well as the provision of emotional support. The last finding can be explained by the fact that governmental agencies, which are part of the absorption effort, employ an array of caregiving service professionals, including social workers and psychologists. Volunteers head all other sources of help in the areas of school and health care choice and as advocates when negotiating bureaucratic systems for securing services and entitlements. Volunteers are placed before neighbors and immigrant relatives and friends as the preferred source in all areas of need, including emotional support. With the exception of emotional support, Israeli neighbors lead immigrant friends and relatives as

Table 1. Utilization of Volunteers by Need Area

(Percentage of immigrants giving highest rating to source of assistance) (n = 273)							
Preferred Source for Help	Emotional Support	Employment	Housing	Consumer Information	Negotiating System (Advocacy)	Educational Selections	Health Provider Selections
Volunteer	69.6	69.5	84.5	77.7	85.5	78.7	85.7
Government units and agencies	82.8	81.6	93.5	85.1	—	62.3	85.3
Neighbors	33.2	56.6	67.5	46.7	65.1	67.1	64.7
Other immigrant friends and relatives	37.4	45.6	43.55	28.0	28.4	48.1	43.5
Mass media	—	44.3	54.7	50.2	NA	NA	NA
Private business and agencies	NA	84.0	53.6	NA	NA	NA	NA
Health and human services practitioners	64.1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Spiritual and religious leaders	78.2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Note: NA = non-applicable source of assistance.

sources of advice and assistance. Overall, formal and informal local sources rank significantly higher than immigrant sources.

Relationship with an Adopting Family and the Use of Assistance

Although the adopting families are not the only source of voluntary assistance for the immigrants, the existence of adoptive relations is positively correlated with the use of and the inclination to use volunteers in general. Table 2 summarizes the relationships found between the existence of these adoptive relationships and the utilization of volunteers in the seven areas of assistance.

Perceived Adjustment

Respondents were asked to rate their initial adjustment in six key areas (Table 3). The only area in which more than half of the respondents reported a higher level of adjustment than expected was the adjustment of children.

In response to the argument that length of residence in the country is the best pre-

dictor of adjustment, the author measured the relationship between adjustment and both length of time in the country and the existence of adoptive family. The only area of adjustment that was significantly related to the length of time in the country was work. All other relationships proved statistically insignificant. Positive relationships existed between the existence of adoptive family and three specific areas of adjustment: social, economic, and employment.

DISCUSSION

The participants in the study represent a population with a high level of human capital. The professional and personal status that many of these immigrants enjoyed in the FSU could account for their high expectations and can partially explain their adjustment difficulties. In this study, the best evidence for such difficulties are the relatively low levels of perceived adjustment in all but one key area, children's adjustment. In follow-up interviews many of the immigrants did indeed emphasize their children's successful adjustment as the redeem-

ing aspect in an otherwise harsh reality.

Considering the relatively short time the respondents have been in the country, the good relationship they experienced with volunteers and their willingness to approach them with a host of problem situations are somewhat surprising in view of the fact that few of them, if any, had any contact with volunteers previously. Immigrants avail themselves of or plan to avail themselves of volunteers more often than other informal sources, including friends and relatives, for advice and information in consumer matters and before choosing schools and care organizations. In fact, immigrants also turn to volunteers for action and information in such "harder" areas of concern as employment and housing and for help in negotiating government systems. A possible explanation for the wide use that newcomers make of volunteers could be their swift assessment that government bureaucracy is indeed impersonal. More importantly they soon recognize that under the new, direct absorption system in which immigrants receive basic grants and are free to negotiate in the open market for the purchase of goods and services, additional sources of information are needed to supplement government agencies. The new immigrants from the FSU learn quickly that Western systems are indeed less omnipotent than those to which they were accustomed.

Although levels of utilization of volunteer's services are high among immigrants in general, they are higher for those who had adoptive families. There are two explanations for this finding. The first is that the volunteers from whom the immigrants in the study receive assistance include the adoptive families themselves. The second is that the intensive, intimate, and more structured experience with an adoptive family (compared with the more ad hoc nature of other volunteerism) increases their degree of comfort and the motivation to turn to other volunteers and accept their assistance in resolving a variety of absorption needs.

Although high levels of utilization of volunteers may be related to a successful immigration process, a good process does not always predict a successful outcome. The findings on the relationship between involvement with an adoptive family and perceived levels of adjustment provide an initial look into the outcome of the more structured and intensive type of voluntary involvement. Perceived successful adjustment in three specific areas was associated with having an adoptive family: social adjustment, work-related adjustment, and adjustment to the economic and bureaucratic systems. Although the availability of an adoptive family is not associated with other facets of adjustment, these three areas are

Table 2. The Existence of Special Relationships with an Adoptive Israeli Family and Intensive Utilization of Volunteers (n = 271)

Area of Assistance	χ^2	df	p <
Employment	41.2	3	.000
Consumer affairs	23.3	2	.000
Emotional support	36.6	3	.000
Advocacy and negotiations with government agencies	16.6	2	.000
Housing	24.0	1	.000
Health information	24.0	1	.005
Educational information	8.0	1	.005

Table 3. Levels of Perceived Adjustment in Selected Areas (N = 270)

Area	Higher than expected	As expected (%)	Lower than expected
Mastering a new language	23.9	46.3	29.8
Cultural adjustment	19.6	30.8	49.6
Social adjustment	27.0	30.7	42.3
Economic adjustment	25.9	32.3	41.7
Adjustment of children	54.0	24.2	21.7
Employment	9.7	15.7	74.5

highly important for the successful absorption of immigrants (Hareven, 1992). In all studies, work leads all other issues as the primary area of concern. Although the findings also establish a positive relationship between the length of residence in the country and successful work adjustment, volunteers do seem to make a significant contribution to finding employment, even when controlling for length of residence in the country. The volunteers' contribution is even more impressive when one considers the high (10.8%) rate of unemployment at the time of the study.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study lend support to the use of informal support mechanisms, in particular volunteers, in many facets of immigrant absorption, including the more difficult areas, such as finding suitable work and accommodations. Moreover, the structured pairing of old and new families, in an adoptive framework, seems to enhance the acceptance levels on the part of the immigrants more than the less structured use of volunteers operating on an ad hoc or temporary basis.

The author is in the process of completing a second study focusing on the adoptive families in the project. Although not all the data have been analyzed, some initial findings indicate that there are problems in the process of pairing and in preparing both the

adopting and adopted families. Many volunteers tend to express disappointment at the difficulties they encounter with their adopted families and with the meager emotional remuneration they receive for their efforts. As with many other cross-cultural interventions, there seems to be a lack of understanding on the part of both the adoptive and the adopted families of each others' background, values, and expectations. The Israeli experience in this area corresponds to the American experience in the absorption of Soviet Jews, in which professionals and volunteers also expressed misgivings and frustrations with the attitudes of the new immigrants (Belozersky, 1990). This study shows, however, that even when the work of volunteers and other support mechanisms is laden with hardships, attitudes and behavior do change and intervention can be effective. Its results lend support to the argument that even with massive government assistance, the personal touch extended by volunteers is very essential (Ellenbogen & Feinstein, 1984).

One way to prepare the new immigrants to accept the utilization of volunteers in general, and to form a degree of comfort with adoptive families in particular, is to generate information on the role of volunteers before their emigration or make this part of their initial orientation upon arrival. Government agencies should make voluntary organizations a part of the absorption system. In turn, prospective volunteers

should be better prepared to meet their objectives, for example in dealing with matters of cultural adjustment, where the findings of this study are disappointing.

Another way to increase the use of volunteers is to raise the awareness of professionals and educators of the benefits of greater involvement by volunteers. The results of this study indicate that new immigrants see government agencies and informal sources of assistance as complementing rather than replacing each other. Professionals working for governmental and voluntary agencies need to be convinced that the increasing use of volunteers, rather than posing a threat, can make their own efforts more productive and therefore enhance their own success.

Finally, although this article describes the use of volunteers in the absorption of Russian Jewish immigrants in Israel, the increasing use of volunteers and the special project described here can be adapted to other communities (Jewish and non-Jewish) engaged in the large-scale absorption of immigrants.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the City of Haifa Absorption Authority and Ms. Youline Goldberg, MSW, for their support in writing this article.

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