

THE VALUE OF A CHILD:
UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HOW
UKRAINIANS AND AMERICANS VIEW CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

Visiting Katya's Mother

A year ago our family took in an 8-year old girl named Katya from a Ukrainian orphanage. Because we live in Kiev, we were able to become foster parents for her even though she still had a mother. Through the advice of our lawyer and because of our own desire to make her part of our family, we decided to ask Katya's mother to give up her parental rights so we could adopt her. On March 30, 2006, we made the trip. We met our Russian language school teacher, Galina, at 8:00 am to drive three hours north to Katya's home in constant rain and fog. Galina had agreed to be the one to ask Katya's mother for permission to adopt. The road was terrible, but thankfully we were able to keep driving to within a mile of their wooden *hata* near the Belorussian border. My wife, Judy, wrote the following account of our meeting in a group email.

Galina went straight to the point of our visit when we sat down together inside the cabin. Mike, Katya, and I were present. Tanya's response was pretty explosive, and it was a definite "no." They had been waiting for this. Apparently, the neighbors had all warned them at the beginning, saying that it wouldn't take more than 100 days before we'd be wanting to adopt Katya and take her away from them forever. Tanya and Veetya were sure that if they agreed to let us adopt Katya, they would never see her again. Mike, Katya, and I were silent as Galina (who proved to be the perfect woman for the job) talked very

calmly yet firmly to them, assuring them that we did not want to break the relationship and admonishing them to think about Katya's future.

Tanya and Veetya's blatant refusals always seemed to center around one focal thought, "What would the neighbors think of us?" It became obvious that this little village is all they know of the world. Relationships are key in Ukrainian culture, and the neighbors' opinions are of highest importance to Tanya and Veetya. If they allowed us to adopt Katya, the neighbors would call them bad parents. Galina assured them that it would require a greater love to let Katya go than to keep her in their situation. None of them have a job. They live on Veetya's mother's pension -- 4 adults living on \$40-\$60 a month. They do not seem interested in trying to better their situation by moving to find work.

Galina asked the obvious question -- if they are so committed to their children, then why are they allowing their children to be raised in an orphanage? Tanya answered that this was the neighbors' fault. The neighbors had told the police that the children were not living well, and the police had taken them away. Katya leaned over to me at that point and whispered, "Mommy, she's doing what you tell me not to do. She is blaming someone else for her own actions." Poor little Katya, having to face this situation! She sat quietly, chewing her nails as she watched back and forth between Galina and her mother....

The conversation went on for about an hour. At one point, both Veetya and Tanya stormed out of the cabin, leaving the rest of us sitting inside. Galina sent Katya outside to tell her mother that she wanted to be adopted. Tanya replied, "You are little. You don't understand anything." After a time they came back in and Tanya sat back down on a bed and asked, "Why can't we just leave things the way they are? Why must you try to adopt?" (Manna 2006:par. 3)

At this point in the conversation, Judy said that the legal documents for Katya will expire in three years and we did not want to see Katya return to the orphanage.

Tanya assured us that when the three years are up, she will sign documents giving Katya permission to live with us for another three years. She said, "We will do this until Katya is 16. At the age of 16, Katya can decide for herself about adoption." This was very good news and inwardly we rejoiced, though we also understood Tanya's

logic and WHY she would be OK about Katya being adopted later. In Ukraine, children are considered to be adults at age 16. They no longer need parental consent for decisions about where they will live. At age 16, Katya will be considered to be "raised". Her mother's job will be completed, and her reputation will not be spoiled by the fact that she gave her child away. In fact, she will be able to enjoy the special status of having a child who has obtained American citizenship.

So that is where we left things. Mike and I agreed to go on with Katya living with us as she is now, but we told them that everything is now out in the open. They know of our desire to adopt, and we asked them to please consider it some more. We encouraged them to think about Katya and her future and not to think so much about what the neighbors will say. We can see plainly, though, how very concerned they are about protecting their reputation with their neighbors....

Tanya does not seem upset about the lack of time with Katya. It seems that it is acceptable to let your children be raised away from home (like in an orphanage or with another relative), but putting them up for adoption means you are bad parents. Our relationship with Tanya and Veetya did not feel strained at the end of our walk. We all hugged sincerely and said our goodbyes. (Manna 2006:par. 9)

Through this situation it has become very clear that the value of a child was very different between my wife, Judy, and Katya's mother, Tanya. Is this difference based solely on their spiritual conditions or are there some other cultural factors to consider? This research will try to examine this question.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF THE VALUE OF CHILDREN

Many psychologists over the past several years have attempted to study this area. This paper will consider these reports, but not attempt to become a psychological analysis of this subject. Psychologists agree that there appears to be three major dimensions of the value of children, and I will add a fourth dimension:

- 1) Psychological-emotional value of children
- 2) Economic-utilitarian value of children
- 3) Social-normative value of children
- 4) God-given value of children

Klaus and Sukow, authors of a Value of Children study done in six different countries, have defined the first three dimensions in the following way.

Psychological-emotional reasons for getting children are for instance; 'to have someone to love and care for', 'because of the pleasure you get from watching children grow' and 'because it's fun to have young children around the house'. Statements such as 'because a child helps around the house', 'to have one more person to help the family economically' or 'children can help when you're old' illustrate the economic-utilitarian dimension. The dimension of social-normative value of children is expressed by items such as 'to carry on the family name' or 'because parenthood improves your standing and betters your reputation among your kin'. (Klaus and Sukow: 2002:244)

These three dimensions will be used as a basis for analyzing the differences between Ukrainian and American attitudes towards children at this time.

Psychological-emotional value of children

In any country, it will be impossible to find complete consistency in the way individuals value children. The following comments express general opinions regarding the emotional value children give Ukrainian families:

“When the baby is born, it brings a new relationship between the wife and the husband. The relationship will get stronger with a child” (T. Voloshin, personal communication, April 22, 2006). “A young couple will first consider how they can provide for their child. If it is a problem to provide for the child, the child

becomes a burden” (M. Slyazin, personal communication, April 22, 2006).

“Ukrainians have two approaches to children. One approach is that children are obstacles to the parents’ pleasure. If they feel this way, they will kick out the children to the grandparents’, friends, or even on the street. The other approach is when the parents see their own lives in their children’s lives. The children become higher in value than the marriage. The marriage is only for the children” (Andre, personal communication, April 22, 2006).

The emotional value of children has increased in Western countries only recently. One way of revealing this fact is considering the effect of the death of a child. “Until the eighteenth century in England and in Europe, the death of an infant or a young child was a minor event, met with a mixture of indifference and resignation” (Zelizer 1985:24). In the 1800s, this changed dramatically. The remorse and mourning of children became especially common among the middle and upper class. One hundred years later, the revolution in emotional mourning of children expanded to the lower-class families. In America, the emotional value of children grew at an even faster rate. “While Victorian sentimentalists eulogized children, turn-of-the-century American activists were determined to avoid their death” (Zelizer 1985:27).

The market for babies has also drastically changed in America over the past 100 years. In the 1870s, people were paying others ten dollars to take their babies from them. (Zelizer 1985:169) “Yet some fifty years later, adoptive parents were eagerly paying \$1,000 or more to purchase an infant. As an article in *Collier’s* put it:

‘It’s the 1939 bonanza ... there’s gold in selling babies.’ By the 1950s, a white healthy infant sold for as much as \$10,000” (170). I have personally heard from Americans who have tried to adopt in Ukraine over the past few years, that after the fees and bribes have been paid, they have given from \$12,000 to \$30,000 for their child.

Economic-utilitarian value of children

Just as in the dimension of psychological-emotional value, it will be very difficult to find complete agreement in the way individuals place the economic-utilitarian value on children. Sergei Revyt, a 21-year old Ukrainian from Rivne gave the following observation concerning this subject:

The Ukrainian government currently gives financial support for children. Families now want children for the money they can get, but later the family sees the child as a liability. Sometimes, the children are sent on the street to beg for the family. This is a way they can bring income for the family. The government gives the family \$1600 when they have a child. They get \$800 when the child is born and \$80 per month for the next ten months. This is a lot of money since the average income is still around \$150 per month in Ukraine. (S. Revyt, personal communication, April 22, 2006)

Many Western mission agencies have started ministries to help the thousands of children and youth who are living in orphanages throughout Ukraine. The organization *Music Mission Kiev* which runs an orphan rescue ministry had this to say about how many Ukrainians look at these orphan children:

These youth live in a country that labels them as “useless” and gives no assistance to turn their lives around. It is a society that has created its own problem by placing thousands of children in orphanages, and

then when they come of age, they give them no assistance to lead a successful life. It is almost as if the system places them in trade schools to become “slaves of the State” to fill the low-income jobs of unskilled labor and remain the under-trodden, second-class citizens that the majority of the population of Ukraine believe that they are. (Music Mission Kiev 2005:par. 1)

For the past four years my family has helped start a ministry to a very poor orphanage in the Chernigiv region of Ukraine. Our family and two other missionary families from Kiev with the help of our stateside churches have provided some medical supplies, installed indoor bathrooms for 120 children, and given clothes, books, and other supplies. Several times during the year we also have shared spiritual programs with testimonies, films, drama, music and more. One of the most hurtful comments I heard was when one of the staff at the orphanage said, “Why are you helping these kids. They are hopeless. Go find some poor kids in the village and help them – at least they have a chance.”

The Christian Broadcasting Network offices in Kiev recently produced a video in three languages (Ukrainian, Russian and English) entitled “The Gift of Adoption.” Their desire was to encourage everyone to adopt from the orphanages in Ukraine and to minister to these children. In the video they interviewed graduates from the orphanages, and asked them, “What is important to you?” Their answers were: “Someone to trust.” “A person who is committed to help them.” “An apartment – a place to live.” “Someone to hold my hand.” “Moral support of friends.” “God’s help.” “Moral support, not just clothes.” “To learn to be independent” (Springs 2005).

They were also asked, “What was the most painful thing about being an

orphan?” The answer was, “To listen to people our own age talking about their family life” (Springs 2005).

In the United States, the economic value of children has grown exponentially in the past 100 years. In 1896, one family sued the Southern Railroad Company of Georgia for the wrongful killing of their two-year old son saying that his services were worth \$2 per month. The courts awarded nothing to the parents. “In striking contrast, in January 1979, when three-year old William Kennerly died from a lethal dose of fluoride at a city dental clinic, the New York State Supreme Court jury awarded \$750,000 to the boy’s parents” (Zelizer 1987:139).

Mathematicians have teamed up with sociologists to try and determine the net worth and costs of children as well. Bruce Bradbury did a study in Australia entitled *The Price, Cost, Consumption and Value of Children*. He shows the differences between all of these areas that possibly only an economist would probably understand:

If the parent devoted all their time to market work, their total income would be $F = Y + wT$. This full income is an index of the total resources available to the household. The allocation of time and expenditure described in the previous paragraph means that we can decompose this full income into adult and child components, FA and FC where $FA + FC = F$, $FA = xA + whA + whL$ and $FC = xC + whC$. The adult component of household full income (FA) comprises expenditure on the adult, plus time spent on adult home production and on adult leisure, with both of these valued at the wage rate. As in the previous section, it is assumed that the parent makes decisions about time and expenditure allocations so as to maximize a household welfare function $W(uA, uC)$ where $uA = UA(xA, hL, hA)$ and $uC = UC(xC, hC)$. (Bradbury 2004: 6-7)

Bradbury shows the complicated nature of determining the economic value of a child. But as the emotional value of children grows, the need for determining the economic value tends to diminish. Bradbury also made the observation that “parents might be happy to have a relatively low standard of parental living when they are raising their children” (17). This will often depend on how much value is given in the other dimensions; that is, emotional and social.

Social-normative value of children

Andre, a married Ukrainian with two teenagers who lives in Kiev gave the following comments concerning the social value of children:

If a person has a child in Ukraine, they are looked at positively. The neighbors may even help in the raising of the child. But if a child is crying the neighbors will complain. Our biggest difference from America is that we don't have child protection laws which are enforced. The society protects the child since the government does not. The school and neighbors try to help. Usually, only the mothers take responsibility for the child. I am the only father at school meetings. (Andre, personal communication, April 22, 2006)

The orphanages of Ukraine are full, but this is not the case in the United States and other Western countries. “Since the 1950s, after a series of scandals involving orphanages coercing birth parents and abusing orphans ... there has been a general trend, at least in the United States, of deinstitutionalization - that is, closing down orphanages in favor of placing orphans in foster care” (Wikipedia 2006:par. 8) In Western countries it had also become less common for parents to give up their children, thus, the need for orphanages has become less. In Ukraine this is not the case. The statistics are so difficult to comprehend

for a normal American since orphanages have been non-existent in the states for years:

1. There are over 100,000 orphans in Ukraine.
2. The older an orphan gets, the chances for his/her adoption drastically decrease.
3. Each year many orphans between 15 to 18-years-old leave the orphanages.
4. Most of these orphans have no one to turn to for help.
5. About 10% of them will commit suicide after leaving the orphanage before their eighteenth birthday.
6. 60% of the girls will end up in prostitution
7. 70% of the boys will enter a life of crime
8. Only 27% of these youth will find work ...
9. Only 10% of orphans are in orphanages because of death of a parent, 90% are social orphans – due to alcoholism, abandonment, or imprisonment of parents.
10. There are 450 orphanages or orphan homes in Ukraine. Of these:
 - 50 are baby houses
 - 100 are regular orphanages for ages 8-17
 - 100 are boarding schools for specialized needs including learning disabilities
 - 100 are shelters where 30,000 children live temporarily between leaving home and being assigned to an orphanage.
 - 100 are private institutions, housing a total of 1000 children, mostly Christian efforts. (Music Mission Kiev 2005: par. 1,2)

In Ukraine, relationships tend to be more important than they are in America.

But, as in the introductory example, this may mean that the relationship between the parents and their neighbors are stronger than the parent and child. One way to see this tendency in the culture is to see that Ukrainians are a polychronic people. In the book Understanding Cultural Differences: Germans, French and Americans, the authors spend a good deal of time dealing with the differences between Monochronic and Polychronic people. With the help of my Ukrainian secretary, Lena Yakim, helped me in evaluating whether Ukrainians were monochronic or polychronic people.

Ukrainians fit the context of polychronic much better than monochronic. Americans must remember this when comparing cultures. (Hall and Hall 1990: 23) Yakim's comments are found on the following page in blue:

Monochronic People

Do one thing at a time

Are accustomed to short-term relationships

Concentrate on the job

Take time commitments (deadlines, schedules) seriously
 They take deadlines seriously, even if they need to finish their work overnight. They are afraid of losing their reputation.

Are committed to the job

Adhere religiously to plans

Are concerned about disturbing others; follow rules of privacy and consideration

Show great respect for private property; seldom borrow or lend

Polychronic People

Do many things at once

Ukrainians tend to do many things at once

Are highly distractible and subject to interruptions

In the environment with their friends jobs take second place

Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved, if possible

Are committed to people and human relationships

Usually relationships and people can be more important, they even would quit job, if relationships were not successful

Change plans often and easily

This is very common, even though they themselves might be not very happy about

These strong relational bonds within the community can affect the bond

between the parent and the child if those same bonds are not created early. Yet many

Ukrainian family bonds are generally considered stronger than the typical American family ties.

God-given value of children

The secular psychologist's worldview will not allow him to consider the most powerful dimension of the value of a child; that is the fact that children are created in the image of God and are a blessing to their parents. Solomon, considered to be wisest man that ever lived, spoke of children being a gift from God:

Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,

this, but usually they change plans because of their friends' plans.

Are more concerned with those who are closely related (family, friends, close business associates) than privacy
They are more concerned with their friends and family members; they see these bonds as very important

Borrow and lend things often and easily
They don't want to look greedy, so they give things to people, but also with the thought that if they would need something they can go to those people and ask for something.

Have tendency to build lifetime relationships
Lifetime relationships are crucial for Ukrainians; usually they stay good and close friends with those from their childhood (L. Yakim, personal communication, March 23, 2006)

The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one's youth.
How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;
They will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the
gate. (Psalm 127:3-5, New American Standard Bible)

A definite social value is given in the Psalm as well. Children give status when speaking to those who are against us. I have personally noticed that my children have helped my own reputation in Ukraine. Ukrainians seem to be more interested in the character of my children in order to determine what kind of character I have.

Jesus was also very clear of how He viewed children.

¹³And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵"Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it *at all*." ¹⁶And He took them in His arms and *began* blessing them, laying His hands on them. (Mark 10:13-16, New American Standard Bible)

In this passage, the disciples see the children as unimportant and wasting a very important person's time; namely, Jesus. But Jesus turns the tables on his disciples and rebukes them harshly. He basically says that if you want to even get into the kingdom of God (when they were thinking about position, not just permission to enter), they would have to become like a child.

Focus on the Family, one of the largest ministries in the United States, has been an advocate for the God-given value of children for many years. Dr. Reginald Finger has written for the ministry concerning these issues:

The value of children is rooted in much deeper values than the pragmatic principles Longman outlined [referring to *The Empty Cradle* by Phillip Longman]. . . . The Jewish and Christian faiths have expressed the value of children among their most deeply held ethics – seeing childbearing as one of the primary purposes of the husband-wife union. These cultures have viewed the birth event as a time to celebrate their relationship as humans with a relational and creative God. In this God-centered worldview, marriage, children, and the propagation of the human race are intentionally spiritual and done to God’s glory. Throughout the Old Testament, the inability to bear a child was considered among the worst of calamities that could befall a woman. Psalms and Proverbs extol the value of children. (Finger 2005:par. 1)

In my own experience, Ukrainians are a religious people, and at the same time it does not affect their daily lives. The religion seems to be in form only. Within the Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches, the high value God places on children is accepted without question. Yet, as in other areas of life, many families in Ukraine have ignored these truths and have abandoned their children. This is not the case with most Ukrainian families, yet over 100,000 children are in orphanages.

Another consideration for determining how much a culture values children is the number of abortions performed. It is true that there are many reasons why abortions are performed; such as inconvenience or economic reasons. Yet I believe that any abortion goes in complete contradiction to the God-given value of a child. In recent years, Ukraine has had many more

abortions than the United States. I have heard it called a form of birth control in Kiev. The figures are staggering:

Recently released preliminary results from the 1999 Ukraine Reproductive Health Survey document an alarming level of abortions among Ukrainian women. Almost 40 percent of all women age 15 to 44 have had at least one abortion, and 18 percent had at least two abortions. Since January 1994 almost half of all the pregnancies that ended were terminated by induced abortions, and there were more abortions reported than live births.

To put these figures in perspective, in 1995 there were 311 abortions per 1,000 live births in the United States. In Ukraine the level of abortions was close to four times the level in the United States....

The survey shows that nationwide there were more abortions than live births: 110 abortions for every 100 live births. In urban areas there were 140 abortions per 100 live births, while in rural areas there were 70 abortions per 100 live births. (Wolowyna 2000:par. 1)

I believe the figures tell a story. In Ukraine, women are killing their unborn babies more than they are caring them to term. I believe that there would be more abortions in rural areas if the people had greater accessibility to them. From discussions with Ukrainians, I have learned that it is more often that the orphanages are filled with children from these rural areas.

I recently had a discussion with a Canadian missionary who is adopting a young boy from the Czech Republic. He said they would have to adopt in Czech unless they wanted to be put on a 10-year waiting list to adopt in Canada. This also shows a great desire for children within the Canadian society.

CONCLUSION

It is hard to make judgments on any culture in regards to values. Yet at the same time, when a culture goes against God's values, we must take note. Ukraine's value of children appears to be at a lower level than America. But America was in this position only 100 years ago. You will no longer find child labor or orphanages in the States, but you can still find child abuse, neglect and legal abortions. The laws are enforced in America, yet in Ukraine, the infrastructure has a hard time keeping up with the problems.

It appears as if Ukraine was frozen in time during the Soviet Union years. It has not only woken up to a poor economy and health care, but has also retained the old "value of children" which the Western world espoused to 100 years ago. Prayerfully, the new openness to the West since Ukraine's Orange Revolution will cause its people to give a greater value to children in all dimensions. President Yushchenko has made a commitment to clean up the corrupt government system that is in charge of the orphanages.

"State officials are indifferent and keep doing what they have been doing in the past fourteen years," he [Yushchenko] said. "All hopes and expectations we had in July [to clean up the National Adoption Center] proved to be vain and useless."

Citing statistics, Yushchenko informed those present that 22,108 orphans and homeless children had been registered in the past ten months. Some of them were adopted. He noted that most of the children were sent to ordinary children's homes.

"I can't tolerate this policy. It is not humane, it is not ours," he said. (Press office of Ukraine 2005:par. 7)

President Yushchenko does not only need to clean up the corruption. His hardest task will be to change the hearts and minds of the Ukrainian people toward children. May God give us all wisdom as we seek to have His values become our values.

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