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Social Psychological Theories Underlying Racism in Russia

As a result of changes in legislation and societal values, Russia has witnessed a major growth in the prevalence of prejudicial attitudes. Recent times have seen a decline in democracy and a corresponding increase in “Russism” (Russian chauvinistic nationalism). The objectives of Russism are, firstly, to create an ethnically pure Russian state, more generally, to persecute Caucasians (peoples such as the Georgians, Azeris, Armenians and Chechens) who differ by their physical type from the Slavic Russian majority. According to MSNBC.com, people of African and Asian origin are also targeted. These dark-skinned minorities are subjected to a high degree of hostility, discrimination and violence throughout the Russian Federation.

Social psychological research is rich with examples of how race adversely affects social perceptions, attitudes and behaviour. This essay will first examine the social categorization theory, which suggests that Russian citizens are being categorized and segregated in terms of their ethnic groups – namely, the ethnic “white” Russians, and the rest who are not ethnic Russians. The essay will then examine the psychological fundamentals and theories underlying the individual and intergroup processes that drive racial conflict and violence in the Russian Skinhead movement.

Social Categorization by Ethnicity

The categorization of Russian citizens into ethnic groups has caused their racial differences to be highlighted and made more salient. The social categorization theory suggests that Russians have been evaluated and classified into two groups: the ingroup (the

group that one belongs to) and the outgroup (the group that is not one's own). The effects of categorization lead to assimilation within the group, and contrast between groups; ingroup members perceive outgroup members to be more similar to one another (Charles, 2003), while the ingroup generates more negative opinions and attributions towards the outgroup (Tajfel, 1981; Pettigrew, 1979), as well as tending to stereotype outgroup members (Charles, 2003). This is obviously shown in the interview with Tesak (an ethnic Russian skinhead) who viewed his race in a positive light (i.e. ingroup favouritism) while he belittled the outgroup (i.e. the Caucasians) and had a strongly negative stereotyped opinion regarding them (Blascovich, Wyer, Swart & Kibler, 1997). To put it succinctly, the differentiation between ingroup and outgroup demonstrates that ingroup favouritism is simply a result of categorization (Hamilton, 1979, as cited in Howard & Pike, 1986).

Formation of Stereotypical, Prejudicial and Discriminatory Attitudes

When an individual is categorized as a group member, the observer can assume that that person possesses many characteristic features of that particular group. Stereotyping occurs when the observer refuses to see individuality in other people and tends to see them in terms of various fixed and oversimplified ethnic categories (DeSteno, Dasgupta, Bartlett & Cajdric, 2004). The consequence of stereotypical perceptions is the formation of prejudicial attitudes (Locke, Macleod and Walker, 1994). Prejudice refers to the negative judgement that is made of a group and its individual members. In the context of Russian ethnic violence, racial prejudice is an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization towards a group as a whole, or towards an individual because he is a member of that group (Allport, 1954, as cited in Wade, 1985); in this instance it is ethnic categorization. This behavioural manifestation of racial prejudice will lead to

discriminatory behaviour. The behaviour is based on stereotyping and prejudicial thoughts that deny equality of treatment to other people and lead to their being treated differently based purely on their group membership (Fiske, 2004). It results in racially motivated violence and racial harassment (Raab and Lipset, 1959, as cited in Charles, 2003).

Devine's 1989 socio-cognitive theory of stereotypes and prejudice states that stereotyping is an automatic process that begins from a very young age and is acquired via channels of socialization. Ethnic attitudes and stereotypes are part of the social heritage of society, so that children learn the consensual stereotypes of other ethnic groups in their community at an early age. This is somewhat similar to Kohlberg's 1976 theory of moral development, which suggests that a young child's cognition is dominated and prescribed by strict adherence to conventional and societal norms. Automatic stereotypical opinions become established in memory from early childhood (Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001) and will endure into adulthood.

Social Psychological Theories of Racial Conflict

Given the pervasiveness of racism and racial violence in Russia, a vast array of social psychological theories may be used to examine the individual and intergroup processes that drive this racial conflict: ethnocentrism, realistic group conflict theory, social identity theory, social dominance theory, the frustration-aggression hypothesis, deindividuation, conformity and institutional racism.

Ethnocentrism

An ethnocentric attitude is one of the primary functions of competition between ethnic groups. In ethnocentrism, certain people judge all other community groups by the

standard of their own group (Ray & Lovejoy, 1986). It involves the assumption that thinking well of one's own group entails looking down on the members of other groups (Heaven, Rajab & Ray, 1984). The consistent derogation of the devalued outgroup and approbation of the valued ingroup occur regardless of the positive or negative nature of actual behaviour (Greenberg and Rosenfield, 1979). The members of outgroup are treated in a hostile manner simply because they are different from the ingroup (Howard & Pike, 1986). In the SBS video, Tesak belittles and devalues the Caucasians and has clearly acquired negative attributes towards them. He is proud to be an "Aryan" and he hates the other ethnic groups due to the difference in their appearance.