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Social psychological theories underlying racism in Russia.

Russia has encompassed major changes in the prevalence of prejudicial attitudes through changes to legislations and societal values. At present, there has been a decrease in democracy and the rise of “Russism” (Russian chauvinistic nationalism). The Russism objective is to create an ethnically pure Russian state; to persecute the “Caucasus” (such as Georgians, Azeris, Armenians and Chechens) and who differ by their physical type from the Russian (Slavic) majority. People of African and Asian origin are also targeted (*MSNBC.com*). 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 behaviours. This essay will first examine the social categorization theory which categorized and segregate the Russian citizens in terms of their ethnic groups; the ethnic “white” Russian and the non-ethnic Russians. This will be followed by 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 the Russian citizens into ethnic groups caused the racial differences to be highlighted and made more salient. Based on the social categorization theory, the ethnic Russian is evaluated and classified into two groups which is the ingroup (the group that one belongs to) and outgroup (group that is not one’s own). The effects of

categorization led to within group assimilation and between group contrast; ingroup members perceived the outgroup members to be more similar to one another (Charles, 2003), the ingroup generates more negative opinions and attributions towards the outgroup (Tajfel, 1981; Pettigrew, 1979) as well as the tendency 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. in-group favouritism) while he belittled the out-group (i.e. Caucasus) and had a strong negative stereotyped opinion regarding them (Blascovich, Wyer, Swart & Kibler, 1997). To put it succinctly, the differentiation between the ingroup and outgroup demonstrated that ingroup favouritism is simply a result of categorization (Hamilton, 1979, as cited in Howard & Pike, 1986).

Formation of stereotypical, prejudicial and discriminating 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. Stereotype occur when the observer refused to see individuality in other people, and tend to see them in terms of various fixed and oversimplified ethnic categories (DeSteno, Dasgupta, Bartlett & Cajdric, 2004). The consequence of stereotypic perceptions is the formation of prejudicial attitudes (Locke, Macleod and Walker, 1994). Prejudice refers to the negative prejudgement that is made of a group and its individual members. Specifically in the context of the Russian ethnic violence, racial prejudice is an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization towards a group as a whole, or toward an individual because he is a member of that group (Allport, 1954, as cited in Wade, 1985) in this instance it is the ethnic categorization. This behavioural manifestation of racial prejudice will lead to discriminating behaviour. The behaviour is based on one's stereotype and prejudicial

thoughts which denies equality of treatment to other people and treats them differently purely based on their group memberships (Fiske, 2004); thus, resulting 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 stated that stereotype is an automatic process which is attained from a very young age and gained via channels of socialization. Ethnic attitudes and stereotypes are part of the social heritage of society thus 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 cognitions are dominated and prescribed by strict adherence to conventional and societal norms. The automatic stereotypical opinions become established in memory since early childhood (Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001) and will follow through to their adulthood.

Social Psychological Theories of Racial Conflict

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

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentric attitude is one of the primary functions of competition between groups. Ethnocentrism implies that certain people judge all community groups by the standard of their own group (Ray & Lovejoy, 1986); thus, embodies the assumption that

thinking well of one's group entails looking down on the members of the other groups (Heaven, Rajab & Ray, 1984). The consistent derogation of the devalued out-group and approbation of the valued in-group is regardless of the positive or negative nature of the behaviour (Greenberg and Rosenfield, 1979). The members of outgroup were being treated in a hostile manner simply because they were different compared to the ingroup (Howard & Pike, 1986). With reference to the video, Tesak belittled and devalued the Caucasus and acquired negative attributes towards them. He was proud to be an "Aryan" and he hated the other ethnic groups due to the differences in appearance.