

Chapter 8

Personal and Ethnic Identity in Representatives of the Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Far North: The Nenets and the Sami



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Abstract In the modern multicultural Russian society, the preservation of ethnocultural continuity, the formation of modern-day understanding of history, and the integration of ethnic and civic identities in the Indigenous peoples of the Far North and the Arctic, which are currently characterized by the intensification of ethnic processes, are becoming increasingly relevant. When describing the contemporary Russian North, we should note that it is characterized by highly contradictory processes, which combine both the integration of the Indigenous population and newcomers and the separation of different ethnic groups. Trying to understand this highly contradictory situation, we have conducted an empirical study of ethnic and personal identity in adolescents, as described below. Within the study, we have focused on the Nenets and the Sami communities as representative of the Indigenous peoples of the Russian Far North.

Keywords Indigenous communities · Nenets · Sami · Adolescents · Identity development

8.1 Introduction

In the modern multicultural Russian society, the preservation of ethnocultural continuity, the formation of modern-day understanding of history, and the integration of ethnic and civic identities in the Indigenous peoples of the Far North and the Arctic, which are currently characterized by the intensification of ethnic processes, are becoming increasingly relevant. In exploring its history, we find that the Russian Far North is an interesting example of early (twelfth to seventeenth centuries) poly-ethnocultural sphere development, a phenomenon that is closely connected to the development of the modern Russian Far North territory.

The northern territory of European Russia was far from the center of fighting during the Mongol-Tatar conquest and its devastating internecine wars. This fortunate situation, along with a sufficiently high degree of freedom across social, economic, and religious spheres influenced the development of the region. As a result, representatives of different nations and nationalities – Slavs, Karelians, Komis, Nenets, Vepps, Saami (Lapps), and others – migrated to the territory of Arkhangelsk region. Over centuries of coexistence, these diverse groups have developed a tolerant culture of interaction and communication across different social spheres. This has resulted in the Russian Far North becoming an example of a multi-ethnic cultural region. The movement to the north and the development of northern territories by several migration waves of different ethnic groups created a basis for intercultural interaction across the region.

The modern Russian Far North includes multiple groups of distinctive peoples, especially the Indigenous people of the far north. This chapter will focus on two representative groups of Indigenous peoples of the Russian Far North: the Nenets and Sami.

The more numerous of the two ethnic groups under study are the Nenets, who are descendants of the aboriginal population of the White Sea coast. Most of the Nenets population live in the Nenets Autonomous District. The Nenets Autonomous District was formed on July 15th, 1929, in an area bordering The Komi Republic and is called the Yamal Nenets Autonomous District. To the north, the border of this district borders the White, Barents and Kara Seas. The population of the district is 43,997 people, including 7504 Nenets.

The Nenets Autonomous District has adopted the “On the Nenets language in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug.” (NAO Law of 18.03.2013 No. 4-OL). This law states that the Nenets language is part of the culture and traditional way of life of the Nenets people and should be used in the process of everyday communication, in the sphere of public relations, and in education and training. All legislation and administrative documents within the Nenets Autonomous District have been translated into the Nenets language. Official records management is conducted in the Nenets language in the areas where the majority of the population is of Nenets origin. Official printed publications in the Nenets language include three socio-political newspapers and, within the education sphere, the publication of textbooks and teaching aids in Nenets. When using the Nenets language on radio and television, the information provided is simultaneously translated into Russian, the state language of the Russian Federation.

The Russian language is used in the education system in the Arkhangelsk Region. However, in kindergartens and in schools of the Nenets Autonomous District, the education and upbringing of children also include the use of the Nenets language. The native (Nenets) language is taught in 7 kindergartens and in 13 general education schools. All students of grades 8–9 of schools within the Nenets Autonomous District must study the traditions, culture, and life of the Nenets people in a dedicated set of lessons called “Our Land”.

The Sami people also live in the Far North of Russia, mainly in the Murmansk region in the village of Lovozero. The number of native speakers of the Sami languages in the area is just over 350 people. The Sami language is studied in the secondary school of the village of Lovozero. In primary school (from first to fourth grade), the study of the Sami language is an optional choice for students and their parents as part of additional education (1 hour per week). The Sami language can also be studied at the Lovozero National Cultural Center. The challenge of preserving and developing the Sami language has been discussed within the government of the Murmansk region. A research laboratory on the Sami language has been established at the Arctic Center for Scientific Research and Expertise in Murmansk. The laboratory staff members are working on the publication of educational and methodological literature (fairy tales, poems, stories, etc.) in the Sami language.

When describing the contemporary Russian North, we should note that it is characterized by highly contradictory processes, which combine both the integration of the Indigenous population and newcomers and the separation of different ethnic groups. Trying to understand this highly contradictory situation, we have conducted an empirical study of ethnic and personal identity in adolescents, as described below. Within the study, we have focused on the Nenets and the Sami communities as representative of the Indigenous peoples of the Russian Far North.

8.2 Methods

This study was conducted between 2018 and 2020 by Northern (Arctic) Federal University researchers in the Nenets Autonomous District, the Arkhangelsk region, and the Murmansk region, all located in the Arctic zone of Russia. Sami and the Nenets live there side by side with ethnic Russians. The participants in the study were school students (both male and female) aged 12–15 years. In total, the sample consisted of 192 children – 98 boys and 94 girls.

In advance of data collection, the research team prepared a set of documents consisting of thematic justification of the study, description of its aims, objectives, and stages, and description of the research methods. This set of documents was submitted to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Arkhangelsk region. As a result, the research team received authorization to conduct the study.

A number of secondary schools in the Arkhangelsk region and Murmansk region were chosen to serve as a study base. The research team met the principals of each participating secondary school and explained the aims, objectives, and procedure of the study. The parents and legal representatives of the students gave written consent for the school students' participation in the study. The survey was carried out in groups of 10–12 individuals. Prior to the survey, all students indicated their age and nationality in writing. The researcher gave the instructions to the students, and they filled in the answer sheets. When the respondents had questions about the study question, a researcher was available to individually give the necessary explanations.

The research team used two complementary methods within the study: a survey and also a psycho-diagnostic technique. The survey was developed on the basis of the Twenty Statements Test (TST) by Kuhn and McParland (1954). This technique is a non-standardized self-description with the free-response answers. It allows one to measure the different identities adopted by adolescents. During the survey, the respondents were asked to give 20 different answers to the question “Who am I?” within 12 minutes. The answers were written spontaneously in the order in which they came to their mind.

While analyzing the theoretical construct of personal identity, the research team considered the representation of its components: gender, social, ethnic, family, professional, individual, physical, activity, and undifferentiated. The “gender identity” component included a direct designation of gender (boy, girl, young man, future man, etc.). The “social identity” component included a designation of social roles and statuses (pupil, citizen, student, etc.). The “ethnic identity” component included a designation of ethnicity (Nenets, Russian, etc.). The “family identity” component included references to kin relations and intrafamilial ties (son, sister, grandson, niece, etc.). The “professional identity” component included a designation of professional perspectives and intentions related to future occupations (auto mechanic, future doctor, programmer, etc.). The “individual identity” component included a description of one's own personal qualities and traits of character (kind, brave, lacking self-confidence, aggressive, etc.). The “physical identity” component included a description of one's physique and appearance (tall, beautiful, strong,

long-haired, fat, etc.). The “activity identity” component included a designation of one’s interests, hobbies, leisure time activities (I like to walk, I love cats, I am a fan of computer games, I play football, etc.). The “undifferentiated identity” component included a designation of characters from animated and feature films, inanimate objects, abstract images (Spiderman, darkness, princess, wolf, etc.).

The psycho-diagnostic technique in the study drew on “Types of ethnic identity” developed by Soldatova and Ryzhova (Soldatova, 2011). The technique is designed to assess the manifestation of ethnic identity indicators and includes six scales: ethno-nihilism (denial of one’s own ethnic identity), ethnic indifference (uncertainty about one’s own ethnic identity and indifference towards ethnicity of others), positive ethnic identity (respective attitude for any ethnicity), ethno-egoism (emphasizing the advantages of one’s own ethnic group), ethno-isolationism (assurance in the superiority of one’s own ethnic group), ethno-fanaticism (readiness for aggressive actions on behalf of one’s own ethnic group). During the test, adolescents were asked to express their opinion on 30 statements. Points were used to evaluate the statements. For the answer “I do not agree,” the respondent received 4 points, for the answer “I rather agree” – 3 points, for the answer “I agree with some things and disagree with other things” – 2 points, for the answer “I rather disagree” – 1 point, for the answer “I disagree” – 0 points. After the test was finished, the respondents’ scores on each scale were summed up. The degree of manifestation of each of the six ethnic identity characteristics was assessed according to the number of points scored on each scale.

8.3 Results for Nenets and Sami Youth

The analysis of the personal identity study results indicates that differences in personal identity components in Nenets, Sami, and ethnic Russian adolescents are indeed present. It should be noted that these differences are expressed differently in male and female adolescents.

8.3.1 Results from Nenets Respondents

We found differences between Nenets boys and their ethnic Russian peers regarding the ethnic identity, family identity, professional identity, and individual identity components. It should be noted that these differences showed up in boys aged 12–13 years as well as in boys aged 14–15 years. In Nenets boys, in contrast to their ethnic Russian peers, the ethnic, professional, and family identity components are more pronounced, while the individual identity component is less pronounced. These results indicate that it is more important for Nenets boys to realize themselves as members of their ethnic group than for their ethnic Russian peers. Their family roles and kindred relationships are more important for them as well. For Nenets boys, professional perspectives and intentions related to their future occupations are

more important than for their ethnic Russian peers. At the same time, for Nenets boys, their own personal qualities and traits of character are less important in characterizing one's own personality than for their ethnic Russian peers. We assume that such differences are related to the preserved traditional nomadic way of life of the Nenets living in communities. This leads to the greater importance of ethnic and family ties, an earlier and more stable choice of occupation, and a lesser significance of individuality. It is noteworthy that for Nenets boys aged 12–13 years the undifferentiated component of personal identity is less pronounced than in their ethnic Russian peers, which means they are much less likely to associate themselves with characters from animated and feature films, with inanimate objects and abstract images. We assume that this is related to the specifics of the nomadic way of life of the Nenets, who spend most of their time in the tundra, engaged in traditional activities – reindeer husbandry and hunting.

Nenets girls demonstrate significantly fewer differences from their ethnic Russian peers in the manifestation of the personal identity components. For example, for Nenets girls aged 12–13 years as well as in Nenets boys of the same age, the undifferentiated component of personal identity is less pronounced than in their ethnic Russian peers. Nenets girls are much less likely to associate themselves with characters from animated and feature films, with inanimate objects and abstract images. It should be noted that Nenets girls aged 12–13 years show a tendency towards a greater manifestation of the physical component of personal identity than their ethnic Russian peers. That is, for Nenets girls their own physique and appearance are to some extent more important. Conspicuous is the fact that for Nenets girls aged 14–15 years, the degree of manifestation of all personal identity components is close to that in their ethnic Russian peers. We assume that such results are related to the fact that girls tend to be affected by the socio-educational environment at school more than boys.

In Nenets adolescents, we observe a shift in the manifestation of personal identity components between boys aged 12–13 years and those aged 14–15 years. In Nenets boys, the changes are related to components of personal identity such as ethnic and individual identity, while in girls they manifest in components such as physical, undifferentiated, and activity identity. For older Nenets boys (age 14–15) identifying oneself as a member of one's ethnic group becomes less important while personal qualities and traits of character become more important. Both younger and older Nenets boys differ significantly from their ethnic Russian peers, but in dynamics, these differences demonstrate a gradual decrease. Comparing Nenets girls ages 12–13 years with those age 14–15 years, their own physique and appearance become less important as they age, while interests, hobbies, and leisure time activities become more important. At the same time, older Nenets girls show a slight increase in the tendency to associate themselves with characters from animated and feature films, with inanimate objects and abstract images. As was noted earlier, Nenets girls show little difference from their ethnic Russian peers in the manifestation of personal identity components. At the same time, even the existing differences tend to gradually decrease in dynamics.

The analysis of the study results indicates the presence of differences in the manifestation of personal identity components in male and female Nenets adolescents. The differences between Nenets boys and Nenets girls at the age of 12–15 years are observed in such components of personal identity as social, ethnic, professional, and individual. For Nenets boys, the professional, ethnic and social components of personal identity are more pronounced than for Nenets girls. For Nenets girls, the individual component of personal identity is more pronounced than for Nenets boys. It means that professional prospects, belonging to the ethnic group and social roles are more significant for Nenets boys, while personal qualities and traits of one's own character are more important for Nenets girls. We assume that such differences are related to the greater significance of Nenets' traditional lifestyle specifics for boys, while Nenets girls are more focused on conditions and values of the socio-educational environment in which they find themselves at school. This combination of tendencies in representatives of Indigenous minorities towards emphasizing their ethnic uniqueness on the one hand, and the desire to adapt in the social environment of the national majority, on the other hand, was noted in other studies as well (Mukhina, 2001; Mironov, 2012).

8.3.2 Results from Sami Respondents

The results of the study of personal identity in Sami adolescents indicate that Sami boys differ from their ethnic Russian peers in characteristics of personal identity such as social identity, professional identity, and undifferentiated identity. For example, undifferentiated identity is less pronounced in Sami boys aged 12–13 years than in their ethnic Russian peers. That is, they are much less likely than their Russian peers to associate themselves with characters from animated and feature films, with inanimate objects and abstract images. For Sami boys aged 14–15 years, professional identity is more pronounced in comparison with their Russian peers, while social identity and gender identity are less pronounced. That is, for Sami boys, professional perspectives, and intentions related to their future occupation are more important, while their own social roles and gender identity are less important than for their Russian peers. We assume that these peculiarities are related to the earlier professional self-determination of Sami boys, which is due to the traditional role of men in the Sami ethnic group.

For Sami girls, the indicators of the main personal identity characteristics are close to those of their Russian peers. Only at the age of 12–13 years can we observe a tendency towards a greater manifestation of the activity component in Sami girls compared to their ethnic Russian peers. We posit that these results are related to the fact that girls tend to be more affected by the socio-educational environment at school than boys.

We observe dynamics in the manifestation of personal identity components in Sami adolescents between the ages of 12–13 and the ages of 14–15. In Sami boys, the changes are related to components of personal identity such as professional

identity, while in Sami girls it is to such components as individual identity and activity identity. At the same time, in Sami boys, we observe tendencies towards a decrease in the manifestation of the family identity and social identity indicators and an increase in the manifestation of the undifferentiated identity indicators. In Sami girls, we observe a tendency towards a decrease in the manifestation of the social identity indicators. That is, for older Sami boys (aged 14–15) professional perspectives and intentions related to their future occupation become more important, while their family and social roles become less important. At the same time, Sami boys begin to associate themselves with characters from animated and feature films, with inanimate objects and abstract images more frequently. For older Sami girls (age 14–15), their own personal qualities and traits of character become more important, while hobbies, activities, and social roles become less significant. We posit that these peculiarities indicate an increasing influence of the social environment on the forming personality of a teenager and are a reflection of the natural processes of growing up.

The analysis of the study results indicates the presence of differences in the manifestation of personal identity components in male and female Sami adolescents. Thus, the differences between Sami boys and Sami girls at the age of 12–15 years are related to such components of personal identity as professional identity, family identity, undifferentiated identity, and social identity. The professional component of personal identity is more pronounced in Sami boys, while the family component and the undifferentiated component of personal identity are more pronounced in Sami girls. At the same time, there is a tendency among Sami girls towards a greater manifestation of the social component of personal identity. Thus, professional perspectives are more important for Sami boys, while family and social roles – are for Sami girls. It should be noted that Sami girls are more likely to associate themselves with fictional characters and abstract images. We assume that such differences are related to the greater significance of traditional Sami male and female roles and responsibilities for Sami adolescents. However, Sami girls are influenced by the modern adolescent subculture and social environment to a greater extent than boys.

8.4 Comparing Results for Indigenous Youth and Ethnic Russian Peers

The empirical study highlighted distinctive features of ethnic identity development in adolescents from the Sami and Nenets communities living in the Arctic territories of the European North of Russia in comparison with their ethnic Russian peers.

Positive ethnic identity is statistically prevalent in Nenets boys aged 12–13 years. The indicator of ethno-nihilism was least pronounced in Nenets boys at the age of 12–13 years. The differences between Nenets boys aged 12–13 years and their ethnic Russian peers in this indicator are significant. It means that for 12- and 13-year-old Nenets boys their ethnicity is more important than for their Russian peers.

Positive ethnic identity and ethnic indifference are statistically prevalent in 12- and 13-year-old Nenets girls. Significant differences were recorded between Nenets girls aged 12–13 years and their ethnic Russian peers regarding positive ethnic identity. That is, at the age of 12–13 years Nenets girls are less tolerant towards their own and other ethnic groups than their Russian peers.

Positive ethnic identity and ethnic indifference prevail in Nenets boys aged 14–15 years, and the difference between Nenets and ethnic Russian boys in these indicators is statistically significant – these indicators are significantly less pronounced in Nenets adolescents. It means that Nenets boys are less tolerant towards their own and other ethnic groups. For them, their own ethnicity and the ethnicity of those around them are more important. At the same time, the indicator of ethno-fanaticism in Nenets adolescents is significantly more pronounced than in ethnic Russian adolescents. It means that Nenets boys are more willing to act aggressively in the interests of their ethnic group.

Positive ethnic identity and ethnic indifference prevail in Nenets girls aged 14–15 years. Significant differences between Nenets girls aged 14–15 and their Russian peers were observed in the positive ethnic identity indicator. That is, Nenets girls at the age of 14–15 years are less tolerant towards their own and other ethnic groups than their Russian peers.

Positive ethnic identity and ethnic indifference prevail in Sami boys aged 12–13 years. At the same time, the difference in these indicators between Sami and ethnic Russian adolescents is significant only in the positive ethnic identity indicator. That is, a respectful attitude towards any ethnicity is less characteristic of Sami boys aged 12–13 than of their ethnic Russian peers. Positive ethnic identity and ethnic indifference dominate in Sami girls aged 12–13 years. Significant differences between Sami and Russian girls were recorded in the ethno-fanaticism indicator. Sami girls aged 12–13 are less ready for aggressive actions in the interests of their ethnic group than their Russian peers.

Positive ethnic identity and ethnic indifference prevail in Sami boys aged 14–15 years. The differences between Sami boys and ethnic Russian boys are observed in the ethno-nihilism and ethnic indifference indicators. That is, for Sami boys, their own ethnicity and the ethnicity of those around them are more important than for their Russian peers. Positive ethnic identity and ethnic indifference prevail in Sami girls aged 14–15. There are no significant differences in any indicator of ethnic identity between Sami girls and their Russian peers.

In summary, the analysis of ethnic identity components in adolescents from the Sami and Nenets communities in the Far North of Russia has allowed us to uncover several findings. For Nenets and Sami boys aged 12–13 and 14–15 years, their ethnicity is more important than for their ethnic Russian peers. At the same time, Sami boys aged 12–13 and Nenets boys aged 14–15 are less tolerant towards their own and other ethnic groups. Nenets girls aged 12–13 and 14–15 years demonstrate less tolerance towards their own and other ethnic groups than their ethnic Russian peers. Sami girls aged 12–13 years are less ready for aggressive actions in the interests of their ethnic group than their Russian peers. At the age of 14–15, Sami girls are the closest to their Russian peers in the indicator of ethnic identity.

8.5 Implications and Recommendations

The study results indicate the presence of specific features in the development of personal and ethnic identity in Indigenous adolescents. When considering identity development in Indigenous adolescents, it appears that ethnic and personal identities in this social group require special attention. This is due to the need for a well-timed and adequate response to new challenges such as the risks of losing national and cultural identity, reduced quality of life, and the decline of Indigenous populations. To preserve and develop the identity of adolescents within Indigenous peoples living in the Arctic territories of the European North of Russia it is necessary to create a multi-ethnic educational environment that (1) encompasses the local multi-ethnic space, including the ethnic communities of Indigenous peoples; (2) recognizes objective environmental factors influencing the formation of ethnic identity in adolescents; and (3) applies approaches that correct the impact of environmental factors.

Among the factors that objectively influence the development of ethnic identity in Indigenous adolescents, one can name such factors as the specificity of personal development of adolescents, influence of parents, family, influence of peers, influence of society, and presence and quality of ethnic resources. The specificity of the personal development of adolescents inevitably affects all types of identity, including ethnic identity. Each individual has his/her own system of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral stereotypes, and most of them are formed during adolescence. The influence of parents and family as a factor lies in the fact that family and, first of all, parents, through the styles of family education transmit their own perception and attitude towards their ethnic group, towards the degree of its significance among other ethnic groups. The influence of peers, as a factor, includes the representation of members of an ethnic group in the adolescent community, the attitude of other adolescents to the ethnicity of their peers, and the belonging of representatives of an ethnic group to a reference group. The influence of society lies in the degree of society's tolerance towards a certain ethnic group, in the attitude towards various ethnic groups, reflected in the media, in public policy, in the presence of a system of social and state preferences for a certain ethnic group. The factor of ethnic resources includes the presence or absence of ethnic and language centers, museums, community centers, and creative centers for children, which are engaged in reviving and preserving the culture and traditions of ethnic groups, the existence of research institutions (groups of researchers) studying the development of particular ethnic groups and the degree of their community commitment; and, the degree of involvement of certain ethnic group representatives in research activities.

Among the main paths to correct the impact of these factors and affect the formation of identity in Indigenous adolescents, we can single out such approaches as psychological counseling and diagnostics of adolescents, working with parents, with adolescent associations, with teachers from educational organizations, the implementation of information policy and the creation and modernization of ethnic resources. The creation and development of a system of psychological counseling and

diagnostics for Indigenous adolescents is aimed at ensuring their positive personal development and formation of a stable personal identity, leveling the potentially negative influence of objective environmental factors, assisting in defining and building life and professional strategies. The work with parents can include the creation and development of parenting associations, clubs that help to support their ethnic identity, share experiences of ethnic education, and study effective strategies for family education. The work with adolescent associations is focused on supporting the ethnic identity of adolescents, on the formation of tolerance, development of effective interaction and communication in multi-ethnic adolescent groups, on preservation and development of interest in the traditions and culture of different ethnic groups, on the engagement of adolescents, and development of ethnic resources.

Teachers need training on how to work with adolescents from different ethnic groups in their educational activities. Such training could include courses on addressing specific challenges in education for these youth, the psychological and pedagogical support of adolescents studying in multi-ethnic contexts, and the development of guidelines for the preservation and development of ethnic identity in teaching and raising Indigenous adolescents. The implementation of an information policy presupposes promoting a positive image of Indigenous peoples, ideas of tolerance and multiculturalism; an expanded vision of history, culture, and traditions of certain ethnic groups; provision of information about state policy in the field of preservation and development for people from small Indigenous populations and about the system of social and state preferences for certain ethnic groups; and the presentation of success strategies and prospects for the development of various ethnic groups.

Creating and modernizing resources could include opening ethnic and language centers, museums, clubs, hobby groups, studios at community and children centers, which are engaged in reviving and preserving ethnic culture and traditions, and improving the work of already existing centers, clubs, and other institutions. In this direction, an important element is the research activity carried out at research institutes and by specially trained scientists who understand the challenges of preserving and developing ethnic groups at risk.

Thus, an important condition for the preservation and development of identity in adolescents within the Indigenous communities living in the Arctic territories of the European North of Russia is the organization of a multi-ethnic space in a way that considers the impact of objective environmental factors affecting adolescents and uses approaches that address the impact of these factors and nurture the formation of personal and ethnic identity in adolescents.

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