



## Perception of Neighbouring Ethnic Groups in Polyethnic Regions

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### ABSTRACT

The article investigates relationship between neighboring ethnic groups (Russians and Komi-Permians) traditionally living together in a common area. Relevance of the topic is due to transforming intercultural communication between large and small ethnic groups, as any social problem tends to acquire ethnic specificity today. The article presents the results of an experimental study of hetero-stereotypes of large (Russians) and small (Komi-Permians) ethnic groups. It was found that the small ethnicity perceives the large one with great care, rather negatively than positively. Respondents of the large ethnic group give four times fewer negative estimations of the small ethnic group. Awareness of the fact that a large ethnic group treats a small ethnic group better than a small ethnic group treats itself can help reduce the anxiety of small ethnic groups in dealing with large ethnic groups. Adequate knowledge about small ethnic groups will ensure scientific management of social processes involving large and small ethnic groups. Policies to improve self-esteem of small ethnic groups and a competent cultural and linguistic policy may form conditions for effective strategies of interethnic interaction in a multicultural environment.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Stereotypes, Komi-Permians, Russians, Psycholinguistics

**JEL Classifications:** A29, I19, I20

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Problems of intercultural communication, ethnic identity, cultural and ethnic stereotypes have been actively researched in modern science recently (Collier, 1997; Lebedeva et al., 2003; Hecht et al., 2005; Maloof et al., 2006; Skorobogataya 2008; Brenda, 2011 and others).

In Russia studying large national conglomerates has mostly dominated for a long time. Small ethnic groups attracted attention of researchers in connection with the change of theoretical and ideological approaches, where taking into account the diversity of ethno-social becomes the key to social stability, as the times of crisis and economic insecurity become a source of ethnic conflicts (Soldatov, 1998).

Intercultural communication is generally understood as communication between people of different ethnic groups (Skorobogataya, 2008; Gudykunst, 2003). However, some

researchers are expanding the concept of intercultural communication including inter-ethnic, inter-religious and inter-regional and even sexually oriented communication (Martin, and Nakayama, 2007; Samovar and Porter, 2004). These communications can be included in the cross-cultural discourse (Gudykunst and Kim, 2003), since all the selected types of interactions have a particular cultural code defining values, prejudices, traditions, a language, non-verbal codes and so forth.

We adhere to the "narrow" understanding of intercultural communication, i.e., as an inter-ethnic cooperation. Our focus is large (Russians) and small (Komi-Permians) ethnic groups of Perm krai, the Russian Federation. The dominant ethnic group is Russians (87.1% of the population), Komi-Permians make up 3.2% of the area's population. Komi-Permians are the main population of Komi-Permian District located in the northwest of Perm krai. Komi-Permians are indigenous people of the Permian land, whereas the first Russian settlements appeared in the Kama area only at the beginning of the XV century while active colonizing

began at the XVI century, when the verkhnekamie region (Great Perm) became a part of the Russian state.

The language of Komi-Permians belongs to the Perm branch of the Finno-Ugric subfamily of the Uralic languages. It is spoken by more than 63,000 people, which is approximately equal to the population of Bermuda, the Cayman Islands or Greenland and almost twice the population of Monaco, Liechtenstein, San Marino or Gibraltar.

Perm krai is an ethnic and multicultural region, in the context of international relations it is considered to be satisfactory. The article presents results of an experiment to study heterostereotypes (representation of other ethnic groups) about appearance and character of the representatives of the two basic Perm krai cultures (Finno-Ugric and Slavic) - Russians and Komi-Permians.

Polyethnicity is an essential feature of human society, but the multicultural space often creates an uncertain existence of a small number of ethnic groups in the environment or in the vicinity of the titular nation as well as false stereotypes that they are treated wrong. One of the objectives to study intercultural communication is the need to stimulate growth of ethnic identity of small ethnic groups (Skorobogataya 2008; Martin and Nakayama, 2010)

Relevance of the topic is due to transformation of intercultural communication between large and small ethnic groups, as today any social problem tends to acquire ethnic specificity. "To understand the essence of ethno-cultural processes it is helpful to consider the region as a multicultural social system with each group acting as a system element, <...> and to consider specificity of a group subject as performing a system-useful function" (Skorobogataya 2008).

Effective solution of interethnic problems lies not only in the plane of state-legal, but also in the plane of scientific understanding of this problem, the results of which can be taken into account while developing conceptual foundations of the state national policy.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Using the technique of face-to-face questioning 165 people were interviewed (64 Komi-Permians and 101 Russians), aged 15-35 (average age 25) resulting in 165 questionnaires, which showed 1262 responses. Perception of neighboring ethnic groups was detected at the level of estimation nature (positive, negative, neutral), as well as analyzing connotations in the respondents' reactions.

Participants were offered a profile: (1) What is the appearance of a typical Komi-Permian/Russian, (2) What is the character of a typical Komi-Permian/Russian?

The dynamic mode of the survey provided spontaneous reactions, first associations, "what comes to mind."

## 3. RESULTS OF THE EXPERIMENT

### 3.1. Hetero-stereotypes of appearance

17% of the Komi-Permian and 8% of the Russian give a high estimation of each other's appearance. Russians estimate Komi-Permians as: Normal, like everyone else, as a Russian, a typical European appearance (35.4%); dark hair/eyes (6.3%), noticeable, bright appearance, a characteristic face (11.3% of respondents). Stereotype periphery: Beautiful, pretty, rustic, rural, unmodern (5%); short, chubby, overweight, out of shape, with a round face, (2.5%); brown haired, fair-skinned, pale, blond or red (17.5%); dark or darker than Russians (13.1%).

Russians estimate appearance of Komi-Permians as the people who have no obvious (relevant) ethnic appearance: Statistically significant signs-like Russians, a typical European appearance.

Komi-Permians identify Russian appearance in a more diverse way than Russians themselves: Different, no certain type (5.8% of the responses), beautiful (7.7%), plain (1.9%), mighty, a little overweight (5.7%) and puny, thin (11.5%), tall (7.7%) and short, medium height (12%), blond (5.8%) and brunet (5.8%).

The core of perception of a Russian appearance by Komi-Permians includes the following characteristics: Normal, like everyone else, like a Russian, like a European (33.7% of respondents), short or medium height (23.4%), thin, puny (22.4%), tall, handsome, good-looking (15%). Peripheral features: Fair-eyed and overweight (7.4%); different, blonde, brunette, fashionable (by 11.3%); big, plain, intelligent, fair-skinned (3.7%). Statistically significant signs: Normal, like a European.

Russians perceive appearance of Komi-Permians as European or Russian (35.4%); only 11.3% of Russian respondents indicate a specific appearance of Komi-Permians. Komi-Permian see Russians as typical Europeans. At the same time the responses of Komi-Permians indicate the diversity of regional variants of Russian appearance types: Short, average height (23.4% of respondents), tall (15%), thin (22.4%), overweight (7.4%); brunette (11.3%), etc.

20% of Komi-Permians and 35% of Russians do not see any difference in the appearance of Russians and Komi-Permians (responses: Like all people, like Europeans, not different from Russians).

### 3.2. Character Hetero-stereotypes

A typical Komi-Permian perceived by Russians is kind, friendly, helpful (20%); merry (10%); nice, pleasant to talk to (8.9%), but modest, shy (11%); a bit closed (7.8%). In the periphery of the stereotypes the following responses are observed: Restless, active, a little arrogant; choleric, irascible, expressive (4.4%); lazy, like Russians (3.3%); serious, responsible; thoughtful, hard-nosed; greedy, economical; welcoming, warm (2.2%).

As perceived by Russians Komi-Permians are free, sociable and nice people. This contradicts auto-stereotypes (notions about themselves) of Komi-Permians: Unsure, clamped, closed, anxious,

with low self-esteem (29.7%), flabby, soft, passive (12.5%). Dominating positive qualities of Komi-Permians in perception of Russians are kindness, friendliness, cheerfulness, openness; dominant negative features: Closed and unsociable.

In general, Russians estimate ethnic Komi-Permian features rather high. It blurs the stereotype of the negative, arrogant attitude of a large ethnic group (Russians) to a small ethnic group (Komi-Permians).

A typical Russian for the Komi-Permians is arrogant (14.8%), bold, brash, rough (11.1%), harmful, cantankerous, moody, stubborn and cheerful, positive (9.3%). On the periphery of the stereotype there are such reactions as whatever, uncertain, complex (5.5%); quick-minded, adaptive, fast (5.5%); slow, cowardly, weak (5.5%); confident, calm and relaxed (by 3.8%), kind, sympathetic (3.7%); generous, catty, the Russian land defender (1.8%).

Komi-Permians have no “average” ideas about Russians: For Komi-Permians Russians are different, uncertain, complex; however, the nuclear characteristic is arrogant. The experiment shows that Komi-Permians see Russians in nuances, in more detail, that causes to perceive them with caution and distrust.

The stereotype nucleus has a variety of negative features and monotony of positive ones. A typical Russian for Komi-Permians is arrogant, cocky, rude, hurtful, cranky, cantankerous, stubborn and cheerful, positive.

This characteristic does not coincide with Russian auto-stereotypes characterizing them as sociable (37.5%), kind, sympathetic, honest (25%), merry (12.5%), but lazy (20%), explosive (12, 5%).

Positive characteristics of Russians are on the periphery of the stereotype of Komi-Permians: Kind, sympathetic; quick-minded, adaptive, easy-going; confident, calm, relaxed; generous, the Russian land defender.

Stereotypes of Komi-Permians and Russians about the nature of Komi-Permians include common properties in the nucleus of the stereotypes: Kind, friendly (Komi-Permians-29.7%, Russians-20% of respondents). Not the same is the nucleus: Communicative, pleasant to talk to (Komi-Permians 0%, Russians 8.9%); modest, shy (Komi-Permians-35.9%, Russians-11%); merry, cheerful (Komi-Permians-4.7%, Russians-10%); closed, reserved (Komi-Permians-29.7%, Russians-7.8% of respondents).

#### 4. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The responses of Komi-Permians (a small ethnic group) demonstrate discontent with Russians (a large ethnic group), who, according to the Komi-Permian respondents humiliate Komi-Permians, their way of life and culture; believe that they are the most intelligent, think they are perfection itself; not tolerant, look with disdain hearing the Komi-Permian language; place themselves higher than they are; they do not like Komi-Permians; they behave rudely towards Komi-Permians, unfriendly to Komi-

Permians, not very cultured with Komi-Permians. However, our experimental data show different results.

Responses of Komi-Permians detect positive (dressed with taste, fashionable, handsome, cheerful, positive, etc.) as well as clearly negative (paunchy, frail, skinny, ugly, arrogant, stubborn, sneaky, rough, etc.) estimation of Russians.

Russians do not give any sharp estimating statements about Komi-Permians, tending to a neutral, “softer” vocabulary (unsure, reserved, anxious, etc.). Russians “delicately” estimate Komi-Permians as chubby, overweight, in the body; lean, thin, whereas Komi-Permians use negative connotations: Russians are paunchy; skinny, sickly.

Our experiments show that the Russian respondents estimate ethnic advantages of Komi-Permians higher than Komi-Permians do themselves. This confirms one of the characteristic features of the national psychology of Russians: Rather a smooth and friendly attitude towards people of other nationalities.

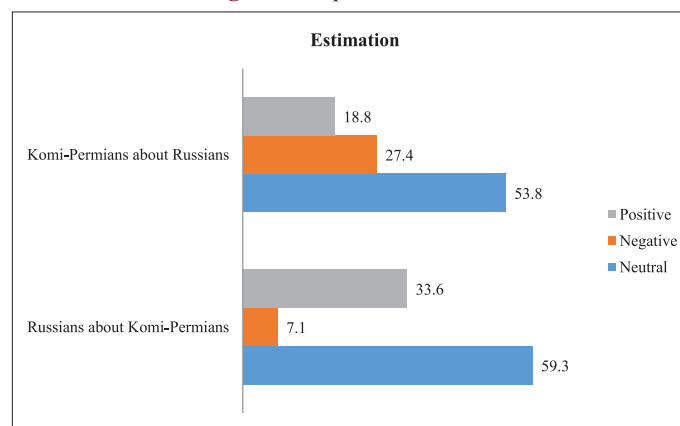
Russians give a negative estimation of Komi-Permians (7.1%) four times less often than Komi-Permians to Russians (27.4%); positive estimation of another ethnic group by Russians (33.6%) also exceeds the positive estimation of Russians by Komi-Permians (27.4%) (Figure 1). The data show that Russians treat Komi-Permians significantly better than Komi-Permians treat them. Awareness of this fact, in our opinion, will help to reduce the anxiety of a small ethnic group (Komi-Permians) communicating with a large ethnic group (Russians).

Dominance of certain hetero-stereotypes depends on the nature of ethnic self-esteem.

Auto-stereotypes of Komi-Permians include 52% of positive responses, 38.7% - neutral and 9.2% of negative ones. Komi-Permians consider uncertainty, isolation, anxiety, low self-esteem (29.7% of respondents) and softness, passivity (12.5%) to be their main features.

Auto-stereotypes of Russians include 68% positive and 20% negative reactions. Their main qualities are communicativeness (37.5% of respondents), kindness, compassion, sincerity (25%),

Figure 1: Experiment's results



cheerfulness (12.5%), laziness (20%) and explosive nature (12.5%).

The number of responses shows that the ethnic Russian self-esteem is much higher than the self-esteem of Komi-Permians. Russians attribute to themselves much more positive qualities; Komi-Permians often give estimations, which cannot be considered as clearly positive (isolation, infurty, low self-esteem, passivity).

Causes of inertia, isolation, distrust of Komi-Permians are rooted in their national-psychological characteristics. All of the Finno-Ugric peoples are characterized with diligence, discipline, sense of duty; simplicity in everyday life, as well as high sensitivity in interpersonal relations. Komi-Permians pay much attention to public opinion, “what others say,” “what was said,” “what they will think.” This often creates the impression of Komi-Permians as irresolute, hypochondriac, reactive people, but not inclined to enmity, quarrels and aggression.

Among national characteristics of Komi-Permians there is delicacy, which can be perceived as passiveness, excessive shyness, isolation, uncommunicativeness, although this is often not the case. The results of our experiment are a further evidence of that: 20% of the Russian respondents perceive Komi-Permian as kind, friendly, sympathetic, 10% as cheerful, 8.9% as nice, pleasant to talk to people. All these reactions are found in the nuclear area.

“The predominance of positive heterostereotypes with a positive group identity indicates the presence of a positive image of the other group and ethnic tolerance <...>” (Skorobogataya 2008).

The reason of high estimation of Russians by Komi-Permians is “orientation” to the Russian type of culture and behavior. Perhaps, low self-esteem of Komi-Permians is caused by their biliguism and self-awareness as Russians and Komi-Permians at the same time (Komi-Roch “Komi-Russian”): Their responses are: “Komi-Permians artificially transform themselves into Russians;” “They speak Russian, and pretend to be Russians.” The duality of ethnic identity is the evidence of incomplete integration and consolidation processes (Skorobogataya, 2008), as well as indication of a possible loss of their ethnic identity.

Ethnopsychologists argue that the basis of manifestations of national consciousness is a phenomenon of ethnic identity, i.e., building of sustainable human representations of themselves as members of a particular ethnic group separated from other ethnic groups.

As a result of Russian colonization and Russian cultural influence Komi-Permians have formed a neglect towards their language and culture. Due to the ethnic shift and intense inter-ethnic contacts Komi-Permians have an uncertain ethnic identity leading to active processes of assimilation with the Russian ethnos and changes in the ethnic and cultural orientation.

Today belonging to their own ethnos is not perceived by Komi-Permians as one of the most important values. Ethnosociologists

note that in multiethnic regions social well-being of people depends on their ethnic status. Ethnic status includes consolidation of the ethnic group and the degree of its ethnic culture preservation, especially the language. Now Komi-Permians refuse to learn their mother tongue at school.

This is worrying, because only “a positive ethnic identity (positive auto-stereotypes and positive feelings associated with the ethnicity) will contribute to building ethnic tolerance in a multicultural region” (Skorobogataya, 2008).

Our experiment shows benevolent responses of Russians estimating Komi-Permians, negative characteristics of this ethnic group are peripheral. In multicultural regions the set of national cultures is preserved largely thanks to the Russian goodwill and teamwork. “Individualism of Russians correlates with ethnic tolerance and with growth of ethnic significance” (Skorobogataya 2008).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The article investigates the relationship of neighboring ethnic groups (Russians and the Komi-Permians) traditionally living together on a common territory. Relevance of the topic is due to transformation of intercultural communication between large and small ethnic groups, as any social problem tends to acquire ethnic specificity today.

The results of an experimental study of hetero-stereotypes of a large (Russians) and small (Komi-Permians) ethnic groups show that a small ethnic group (Komi-Permians) perceives a large ethnic group (Russians) cautiously, rather negatively than positively. A large ethnic group treats a small ethnic group better than a small ethnic group treats itself: Respondents of a large ethnic group give four times fewer negative estimations of a small ethnic group.

These studies will help to reduce the anxiety of small ethnic groups dealing with large ethnic groups, as well as promote positive auto-stereotypes and positive ethnic identity of a small ethnic group. In turn, positive ethnic identity of a small ethnic group will contribute to the formation of ethnic tolerance in a multicultural region.

Adequate knowledge about small ethnic groups will ensure scientific management of social processes involving large and small ethnic groups. Improving self-esteem of a small ethnos and a competent cultural and linguistic policy might be conditions of forming effective strategies of interethnic interaction in a multicultural environment.

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