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**RUSSIAN RACISM:
TACTICS OF SELF-ACCUSATION
AND THE SELF-JUSTIFICATION OF WITNESSES
OF AN ATTACK ON BLACK STUDENTS**

Темнокожие студенты в России подвергаются расистским преследованиям, включая нападения на улице и применение физического насилия. В данной работе исследовательское внимание сфокусировано на свидетелях нападений на иностранных студентов. Изучались причины, благодаря которым свидетели заступаются за темнокожих студентов, а также причины, вынуждающие свидетелей избегать помощи студентам.

Было выяснено, что обычные российские граждане сами опасаются нападений и агрессии на улице. В ситуации свидетельства нападения на иностранцев большинство из них чувствуют себя беспомощными. В данной угрожающей ситуации их ценности (толерантность, желание помочь невинному) не являются определяющими в их поведении.

Ценности толерантности, дружбы и диалога между культурами актуализируются в тех случаях, когда свидетель может оказать помощь вместе с другими свидетелями (например, рядом находится группа добровольных помощников милиции или свидетелей несколько). Таким образом, безопасность иностранных студентов на российских улицах напрямую связана с защищенностью российских граждан со стороны органов правопорядка.

Some issues tend to stay invisible. Thus, until early 1990s, we regarded ourselves as internationalists, free of xenophobic or racist convictions. Social and economic transformations of the 90s shattered that ideal.

Residents of Nizhni Novgorod, a defense industry town, which had restricted entry policy until perestroika, were only vaguely familiar with such notions as “foreigner”, or “migrant”. Rare foreign visitors, when seen downtown, got curious stares and keen attention from locals. However, once the city’s borders opened up, exposure to diversity brought out not only hospitality and friendliness in its residents, but also xenophobia and racism. According to a survey carried out by sociologists from Kazan, the Nizhni Novgorod youth, including college students, displayed more xenophobia than youth in any other city in the Privolzhski Federal District. This survey proves the importance of preventive work with youth in areas of diversity and tolerance.

My focus in learning process is to give students a hands-on understanding of the subject, which would motivate them to apply their new knowledge in real life. To prevent xenophobia and racism, I work with students on the following techniques:

- empathize with feelings and thoughts of persons affected by xenophobia;
- gain understanding of own place in social hierarchy, and reflect on own experience of being regarded as a stranger by others;
- study political, economic, social, and psychological consequences of racism and xenophobia;
- assess own resources to help those affected by xenophobia and to prevent further aggression;
- assess community resources that may be used to prevent xenophobia and racism.

I use the above-mentioned tools in collaborative surveys we conduct with students at Nizhni Novgorod State University. This group work is usually part of the required practical study for the course in “Psychological Aspects of Cross-Cultural Communication”. Students conduct surveys, and through that process, attain understanding of social issues surrounding them, while also getting a sense of their own potential for making change. We have conducted such surveys with students majoring in advertising, public relations, international relations, and regional studies. During the past three years we conducted the following collaborative studies:

— “Reconstructing the Map of Nizhni Novgorod as a Meeting Space for Foreign Guests” (2005);

— “Life in Russia’s Provinces: Experience, Reflections, and Plans of International Students in Nizhni Novgorod” (2006);

— “Reasons for Offering Help or Indifference among Witnesses of Attacks on Foreigners” (2007).

We begin our preventive work with ourselves and our own small group engaged in the learning process. The next step in this work would be to bring our findings to the attention of the government agencies, whose policies can influence attitudes toward diversity in the society at large. The study conducted in 2006 led to an establishment of a special assistance program for international students enrolled in institutions of higher learning in Nizhni Novgorod.

Below is a brief description of the 2007 study.

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The problem of xenophobia and extremism in the modern Russian society is becoming increasingly urgent. According to the report of the Moscow Human Rights Bureau, in the past 5—6 years the number of respondents with “extreme nationalist opinions” has grown and the idea of “Russia for Russians” is completely supported by up to 16 % of the population. The media regularly report new cases of attacks on migrants, representatives of ethnic minorities, foreign citizens, insults, beatings, and even murders. In September 2006, students of foreign branches of Nizhni Novgorod universities appealed to the Nizhni Novgorod Governor V. Shantsev requesting protection against extremists’ attacks.

The problem was recognized as significant for the Nizhni Novgorod region and as demanding immediate decision. It was emphasized that it is important not only to analyze the functioning of extremist organizations and the reasons for racial and ethnic violence, but also to research why witnesses of attacks refused to offer help to victims of violence. Our research was devoted to studying opinions about violence towards foreigners. We used the projective interview method. Participants of research were asked to finish off a story that began as follows:

(1) “I became an eyewitness of an attack on a foreigner. It was ...”;

(2) “I became an eyewitness of an attack on a foreigner and did not help the victim because ...” (variants of explanations);

(3) “I became an eyewitness of an attack on a foreigner and helped the victim because ...” (variants of explanations).

In case of absence of personal experience for (1) it was possible to use a situation that the respondent has heard of (or seen in TV reports); the second and third stories were to be completed based only on personal experience or assumptions.

Overall, we interviewed more than 250 persons of various ages (from 18 up to 50) and occupations. Their stories were written down and processed using “coding” techniques.

Let us consider the results of the research. All reports of attacks on foreigners were divided into four groups depending on the scene content.

1. Causing harm to the personal property of a foreigner. This group of answers included descriptions of thefts, vandalizing cars, raiding markets. “*They broke counters with cudgels and bats, trampled down products.*” Such plots constituted one fifth of the total number of answers.

2. Insult, mockery (without causing physical harm; one tenth of the stories). “*Foreigners cannot go out in the evening ... young Russian guys watch them constantly, they can come and start to insult.*”

3. Beating, rough physical force. It is the most widespread group of described situations (more than half of the stories). “*They pushed, offended, started to punch him on the face and when the guy fell on the floor they began to hit him with their legs,*” or “*He was so beaten that he lost consciousness and ended up in hospital with an injured head, a brain concussion and a huge number of bruises.*”

4. Murder (each fourth story). “*... during the fight, someone got out a knife and killed him and then all they left calmly.*”

In all situations described, men were named as aggressors, mostly teenagers or young men; as a rule, they acted as a group

against one person. The victims in the majority of stories were men; women and children were exceptions.

In the above situations, there are no precise indications of racist rhetoric: aggression in relation to foreigners is described by students outside of ideological context. Foreigners (citizens of the CIS, countries of Asia and Africa) are presented as defenseless people with low social status; violence against them is done by aggressive groups, and foreigners are used as "whipping boys".

The Nizhni Novgorod experience leads us to believe that the aggressors do not realize the racist foundation of their attacks, assaulting anyone who differs from them and showing spontaneous racism outside of organized groups.

Answers about the reasons for denying help to foreign victims were categorized as follows:

1. Fear for one's own safety. This reason was mentioned as overwhelming by the majority of respondents, almost half of them mentioned a high level of aggression, cruelty, and insanity of the attackers: "Fear of severe Nazis," "Drunk, crazy guys participated in this fight, they could simply kill me also," "The attackers were too cruel, I could suffer with the others."

2. Physical inability to protect a victim (more than half of the answers): "I did not possess enough physical strength to resist them," "They surpassed in force and number," "It is difficult to resist a whole crowd of furious people when you are alone," "I am only a fragile girl wearing high heels," "A woman is a weak person and has no voice in men's eyes."

3. Refusal to take responsibility for an event (about one third of the answers): "There is law machinery to take care of this," "There were many others who did not help," "Fighting this should be done at a different level."

4. Escaping the event (each fifth answer): "I felt sick," "I had money on me and an expensive mobile phone," "Next day I had an important meeting where I could not look awful," "I was in a hurry to take an exam."

5. Aversion to the victim (each tenth answer):

"I am in many ways on the side of the young men," "I thought the situation amusing."

A quarter of all answers indicate that any intervention would have been senseless.

Among respondents were those who shared aggressive attitudes to foreigners. Others mainly referred to fear (not cowardice, but fear) or considered themselves potential victims thus choosing the strategy of denying help in a real situation. When they saw "another person being beaten", the respondents felt not so much a desire to help, but mostly relief that they themselves were not victims of the aggressors. These witnesses may be regarded as dispirited and weak people.

Reasons for respondents providing assistance to foreigners were given more seldom than reasons for denying help. According to conditions of research, stories about helping foreigners could be invented: this was a way to study the reasons for possible (possible, but not realized) help to foreigners.

Among those reasons the following were indicated:

1. Injustice (each third story): "I am against violence and I hate injustice," "I cannot look indifferently at injustice in any form."

2. Tolerance, equality of all people (each third story): "I respect every nationality," "I do not accept violence and it is not important for me whether it is against a foreigner or not," "Each person deserves to live without fear of violence and persecution."

3. Rejection of xenophobia and Nazism (each tenth story): "I consider the phenomenon of Nazism unacceptable," "I consider national grounds for attacking a person absurd," "Xenophobia is an attribute of internally immature people."

4. Pity to a victim, conscience (each fourth story): "Conscience did not allow me to look calmly at what was going on," "I felt pity for the victim," "People should be helped and I feel better if I help a person."

Half of the respondents mentioned futility of help. Their stories included the following scenarios:

1. Aggressors did not pay attention to the witness, pushed him/her aside and continued the attack: "The skinheads rudely

told me not to interfere with the fight and mind my own business, "I was pushed aside and had no opportunity of rendering real help."

2. The witness suffered trying to help a victim: *"The hooligans could not be stopped and I would have ended in hospital, "Probably I would have been killed also."*

Only each sixth history ends with aborting the attack safely: *"After me others joined in, and the teenagers ran off,"* or *"were detained and taken to a police station."*

It is necessary to note that the thought-up stories of help were based on values and ideological attitudes of the respondents: the would-be help was described in terms of "struggle against racism". Had there been enough strength to resist, the witnesses' motive would have been what they counted as "values". But in a situation of aggression threat values did not determine a person's behavior.

The research results make it possible to draw the following conclusions concerning the reasons for giving or denying help in most situations of violence towards foreigners:

— Real violence towards foreigners is perceived in a more general context of physical violence in the street (i.e. anyone can become the object of violence).

— Acts of violence are performed by a group, which complicates provision of help to a foreigner from separate passers-by.

— On the one hand, in the opinion of witnesses of violence foreigners from Africa and Asia are "potential victims", on the other, racism of aggressors, as a rule, is not identified by witnesses.

— The scenarios analyzed in the research describe spontaneous racism, therefore, as a rule, the stories do not mention any racist slogans during violent acts against foreigners.

— Ordinary "people in the street" in a situation of violence against other persons prefer the strategy of non-interference because they feel fear of the aggressors.

— Most likely, the respondents have significant negative experience as witnesses and victims of violence, therefore they

do not feel the urge to resist violence and actively protect the victim.

— As soon as the situation is excluded from the context of "real life" and becomes imaginary, the interviewees recollect their antiracist values and are ready to render help to the victim in accordance with these values.

— If interviewees could resist the aggressors, their democratic values would direct their behavior, however in real life situations those values do not determine their behavior (the fear "paralyzes values").

— At the present moment, foreign victims of violence, as a rule, cannot expect assistance from the witnesses.

— Special programs need to be developed focused on preparing foreigners in general and foreign students in particular for primary self-defense and instructing them on how they can act in situations of attack.

— To cope with the "paralyzing" syndrome of witnesses of violence, special programs need to be developed that would educate Russian students on how to help their peers — foreign students in situations of attacks in the street.

Thus, safety of foreigners and foreign students in the Russian streets is directly connected with security of Russian citizens provided by bodies of the law and order; relying on mutual assistance does not work at present.

Safer environment in the Russian cities becomes a guarantee of security both for the Russian citizens and foreigners, including foreign students.