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## Development of gender identity in Nenets adolescents – representatives of indigenous small-numbered peoples of the north

### РАЗВИТИЕ ГЕНДЕРНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ У ПОДРОСТКОВ – ПРЕДСТАВИТЕЛЕЙ КОРЕННЫХ МАЛОЧИСЛЕННЫХ НАРОДОВ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОСТИ НЕНЦЫ

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#### Abstract

The current article is concerned with studying specific features of gender identity development in ethnic Nenets adolescents – representatives of indigenous small-numbered peoples living in the Russian High North. The study involved a comparative analysis of gender identity development in ethnic Nenets and ethnic Russian male and female adolescents.

The article presents the results of an empirical study conducted using the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). The respondents in the empirical study were 99 Nenets adolescents aged 12-15 years (54 boys and 45 girls); 121 ethnic Russian adolescents aged 12-15 years (63 boys and 58 girls).

The analysis of the dynamics of gender identity development in Nenets adolescents highlighted changes in representation of masculinity and femininity, as well as changes in distribution of

#### Аннотация

Статья посвящена проблеме изучения особенностей развития гендерной идентичности подростков – представителей коренных малочисленных народов национальности ненцы, проживающих на Крайнем Севере России. Исследование предполагало проведение сравнительного анализа развития гендерной идентичности у подростков мужского и женского пола национальности ненцы и русской национальности.

В статье представлены результаты эмпирического исследования, проведенного с использованием Анкеты половых ролей С. Бем. В качестве респондентов в эмпирическом исследовании выступили подростки – ненцы в возрасте 12-15 лет в количестве 99 человека (54 мальчика и 45 девочек); подростки русской национальности в возрасте 12-15 лет в

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gender identity types in the period of transition from the age of 12-13 years to the age of 14-15 years. The comparative analysis of gender identity in ethnic Nenets and ethnic Russian adolescents highlighted the presence of both similar and differing trends in the process of gender identity development. The results of the study enrich the understanding of the development of gender identity in Nenets adolescents and provide new information about the particularities of this process in minority indigenous peoples of the High North.

**Keywords:** Gender identity, masculinity, femininity, adolescence, nenets adolescents, russian adolescents.

## Introduction

Among the issues typical of modern day society, those related to gender identity development in a person hold a special place. Understanding the phenomenon of gender identity contributes to a deeper understanding of human development in social and cultural contexts. Gender identity is one of the basic personality characteristics and one of the aspects of self-comprehension, incorporating self-perception as a representative of a certain gender. The formation of gender identity continues during one's lifetime. Adolescence is a sensitive life period for gender identity development. During adolescence, as part of the formation of a new level of self-comprehension, a relatively stable concept of oneself as a representative of a certain gender starts to form, an individual choice of the structure of gender behaviour is made, and an "image" of one's own gender role emerges. Adoption of a gender role is a process closely related to norms and customs of a corresponding culture. Therefore, research interest is focused on studying gender identity development in adolescents who represent indigenous small-numbered peoples whose lifestyle, customs and traditions are very specific. The Nenets are one of indigenous ethnic groups living in the Russian High North. They lead a nomadic lifestyle. Consequently, we can assume that the content of

количестве 121 человек (63 мальчика и 58 девочек).

Анализ динамики гендерной идентичности в течение подросткового возраста у подростков национальности ненцы позволил выявить изменения в представленности маскулинности и фемининности, а также в распространенности типов гендерной идентичности при переходе от 12-13 лет к 14-15 годам. Сравнительный анализ гендерной идентичности у подростков национальностей ненцы и русские позволил выявить как сходные, так и отличные тенденции в этом процессе. Результаты проведенного исследования обогащают научные представления о феномене гендерной идентичности, дополняют и расширяют представления о процессе становления гендерной идентичности у представителей коренных малочисленных народов Крайнего Севера.

**Ключевые слова:** Гендерная идентичность, маскулинность, фемининность, подростковый возраст, подростки ненецкой национальности, подростки русской национальности.

gender roles in this community reflects the specifics of its social characteristics.

## Literature review

Characteristic aspects of the gender identity phenomenon are reflected in contemporary research (Bakunova et al., 2017; Baranovskaya, 2016; Vasilenko & Brovkina, 2017, and the others). Describing the concept of gender identity, I. S. Kon (Kon, 2004) emphasizes the fundamental character of one's sense of belonging to a particular sex, identifying oneself as a male, a female, or as a representative of an "intermediate" sex. L. B. Shneider points at the fact that a subject with a certain gender identity fits in with the corresponding gender role and demonstrates the consonance of self-comprehension and behaviour (Shneider, 2007). V. F. Petrenko points out that gender is reflected within a personality, and is a process and a result of self-reflection at the same time (Petrenko, 1983). Gender identity is represented by a multi-level system of correlation between personality and physical, psychophysiological, psychological, and sociocultural concepts of "masculinity" (manhood) and "femininity" (womanhood) as independent variables. When considering gender identity, masculinity and femininity come to the fore (Kletsina, 2018) as

they contain characteristics of behavioural, psychological, and somatic attributes typical for males and females. Research by S. Bem (Bem, 2004) demonstrates that masculinity involves displaying traditionally masculine behaviour, femininity – traditionally feminine behaviour, and both constructs are not opposite to each other, but independent. In addition, the researcher describes another construct – androgyny, which she considers a successful combination of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine psychological qualities. S. Bem has proposed the concept of psychological androgyny, according to which she distinguishes four types of gender identity: the undifferentiated, the androgynous, the masculine, and the feminine. The undifferentiated type of gender identity is characterized by low levels of both femininity and masculinity. The androgynous type, on the contrary, is characterized by high levels of both femininity and masculinity. The feminine type of gender identity is characterized by high levels of femininity and low levels of masculinity. As for the masculine type of gender identity, there are correspondingly high levels of masculinity and low levels of femininity (Bem, 2004).

Contemporary studies point out that gender identity is formed by social processes, is related to society, and is a most critical regulator of human behaviour in the social environment (Asmolov, 2007; Kletsina, 2018; Tereshenkova, 2005; and others). Development of gender identity depends on practices and customs of the corresponding society and culture. Gender identity forms as a result of a complex biosocial process combining ontogenesis, gender socialization, and development of self-comprehension (Shneider, 2007). As a consequence, the characteristic aspects of a society, determined by its cultural traditions, history, and values, will inevitably influence the varieties of gender roles and their substantive characteristics.

Development of gender identity and adjustment of the content of one's own gender role continues during one's lifetime. At the same time, adolescence is the most significant period for acquiring gender identity (Peregudina, 2011; Romanov, 1997; Rymarev, 2006; Syomina, 2003; and others). In adolescence, as part of the formation of a new level of self-comprehension, a relatively stable concept of oneself as a representative of a certain gender starts to form, an individual choice of the structure of gender behaviour is made, and an "image" of one's own gender role emerges (Remschmidt, 1994). When

adolescents begin to grow aware of their physiological make-up, interest towards the opposite sex appears as well as adoption of gender behaviour styles – this becomes the basis for one's sense of belonging to a particular gender (Flotskaya, 2006).

E. A. Vasilenko, E. I. Brovkina emphasize that formation of gender identity in adolescents proceeds to completion by the age of 13-14 years; in girls this process goes faster than in boys. The authors draw attention to the fact that gender identity development in most Russian teenagers today is based on traditional gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (Vasilenko & Brovkina, 2017).

A study of gender identity by I. V. Romanov revealed the presence of a negative phase in the age-related gender identity crisis, which boys and girls experience at the age of 12-13 years. A distinctive feature of this phase is the weakening of orientation towards masculine images in boys, and the presence of an undifferentiated type of gender identity in girls. The author points out that adolescents overcome the crisis by the age of 14-15 years, and begin to move towards a positive gender identity (Romanov, 1997).

Since the formation of gender identity in an adolescent is a complex process of acquisition of a gender role derived from the norms and customs of the corresponding culture (Asmolov, 2007), researchers are particularly interested in studying gender identity development in non-mainstream cultures and societies. Indigenous small-numbered peoples can be seen as specific communities of people who in many respects have preserved the ancient mode of life, ethnic customs, beliefs, and traditions. As a consequence, the content of gender roles in these communities may have particular aspects. Thus, the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the High North, who live in harsh climatic conditions, far away from centers of industry and culture, have retained a nomadic or a semi-nomadic lifestyle and traditional activities (reindeer herding, fishing, hunting). Therefore, their ideas of masculinity and femininity models, and of the distribution of gender roles are likely to have specific features. A.G. Asmolov emphasizes that gender identity development is a complex process when a teenager adopts a gender role derived from practices and customs of the corresponding culture (Asmolov, 2007). I.P. Khabarov in his study (Khabarov, 2003) analyzed gender specifics in ethnic Sakha adolescents. The author notes that gender identity development in those adolescents is influenced

by harsh climatic conditions and life circumstances. Significant efforts have always been made to cultivate masculine traits in Sakha boys, since the survival of the ethnic group in harsh conditions depended on this. However, an interpenetration of “masculine” and “feminine” images takes place in the minds of today’s Sakha teenagers; they become more androgynous. Male adolescents begin to demonstrate the presence of feminine traits, while female adolescents begin to demonstrate the presence of masculine traits.

One of the indigenous small-numbered peoples living in the Russian High North are the Nenets. The Nenets lead a nomadic life, which has allowed them to preserve traditions, culture, and identity of their ethnic group. They are the descendants of the indigenous population of the White Sea coast and live in the Nenets Autonomous District. The traditional occupation of the Nenets is reindeer herding, in summer they practise hunting and fishing.

It should be noted that research on gender identity in adolescent representatives of indigenous peoples of the High North is practically non-existent in modern psychology, and research on gender identity in ethnic Nenets adolescents has no previous history.

In view of the above, we assumed that gender identity in Nenets adolescents as representatives of indigenous small-numbered peoples would have particular dynamic developmental features and specific character in comparison with gender identity in ethnic Russian adolescents. We have conducted an empirical study to test this hypothesis.

### **Materials and methods**

To identify specific characteristics of gender identity in male and female Nenets adolescents, we conducted an empirical study in the Nenets Autonomous District of the Arkhangelsk Region of the Russian Federation. To achieve the research objectives, we compared ethnic Nenets adolescents to ethnic Russian adolescents living in the Arkhangelsk Region of the Russian Federation. The respondents in the study were 99 ethnic Nenets teenagers aged 12-15 years (54 boys and 45 girls); and 121 ethnic Russian teenagers aged 12-15 years (63 boys and 58 girls). During the formation of sample groups, the respondents indicated their ethnicity. The respondents in the current study include teenagers who identify themselves as ethnic Nenets.

At the organization stage, we prepared a documentation package, which included a study relevance reasoning, a description of its aims, objectives and stages, and a description of the experimental techniques. This documentation package was submitted to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Arkhangelsk Region. As a result, we have received a permission to conduct the study.

We identified comprehensive schools located in the Arkhangelsk region, which served as the base for the study. Before the study we organized meetings with the parents of our future respondents at schools, and explained aims, objectives, and procedure of the study to them. Parents or other legal representatives of the students gave their written consent for the adolescents to participate in the study.

The diagnostic study was carried out in subgroups of 10 – 12 people. The researcher gave the instructions for completing the tests, and the students filled in the answer sheets. When respondents had questions, the researcher approached them and provided the necessary explanations individually.

In our study we used the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). This tool helps to measure the degree of expressiveness of masculinity and femininity in adolescent boys and girls, and then, based on the ratio, to identify their type of gender identity. Within the study, the respondents assessed their personality characteristics. The list of sixty characteristics to be assessed included both traditionally masculine and feminine qualities, as well as neutral qualities. The processing of the results included the calculation of the total number of points on each of the scales, which determined the degree of expressiveness of femininity and masculinity characteristics in each test subject. To identify the type of gender identity, individual scores of femininity and masculinity were compared to the group average identified by calculating the median value. Individual scores equal to or above the median were considered high, while scores below the median were considered low. High masculinity scores combined with low femininity scores correspond to the masculine type of gender identity. High femininity scores combined with low masculinity scores correspond to the feminine type of gender identity. If both masculinity and femininity scores are high, it identifies the androgynous type of gender identity. Low masculinity and femininity scores identify the undifferentiated type of gender identity (Ilyin, 2003).

The research data were processed using SPSS Statistics 22. We used the Student's t-test for independent samples to assess the significance of differences in the comparison of masculinity and femininity scores in groups of respondents; Fisher's test was used to compare the degree of expressiveness of gender identity types.

## Results

While studying the dynamics of gender identity development in adolescent representatives of indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian North, we analyzed changes in masculinity and femininity scores as well as changes in distribution of gender identity types in Nenets boys and girls in the period of transition from the age of 12-13 years to the age of 14-15 years. The dynamics of gender identity indicators in male and female Nenets adolescents are presented in Table 1.

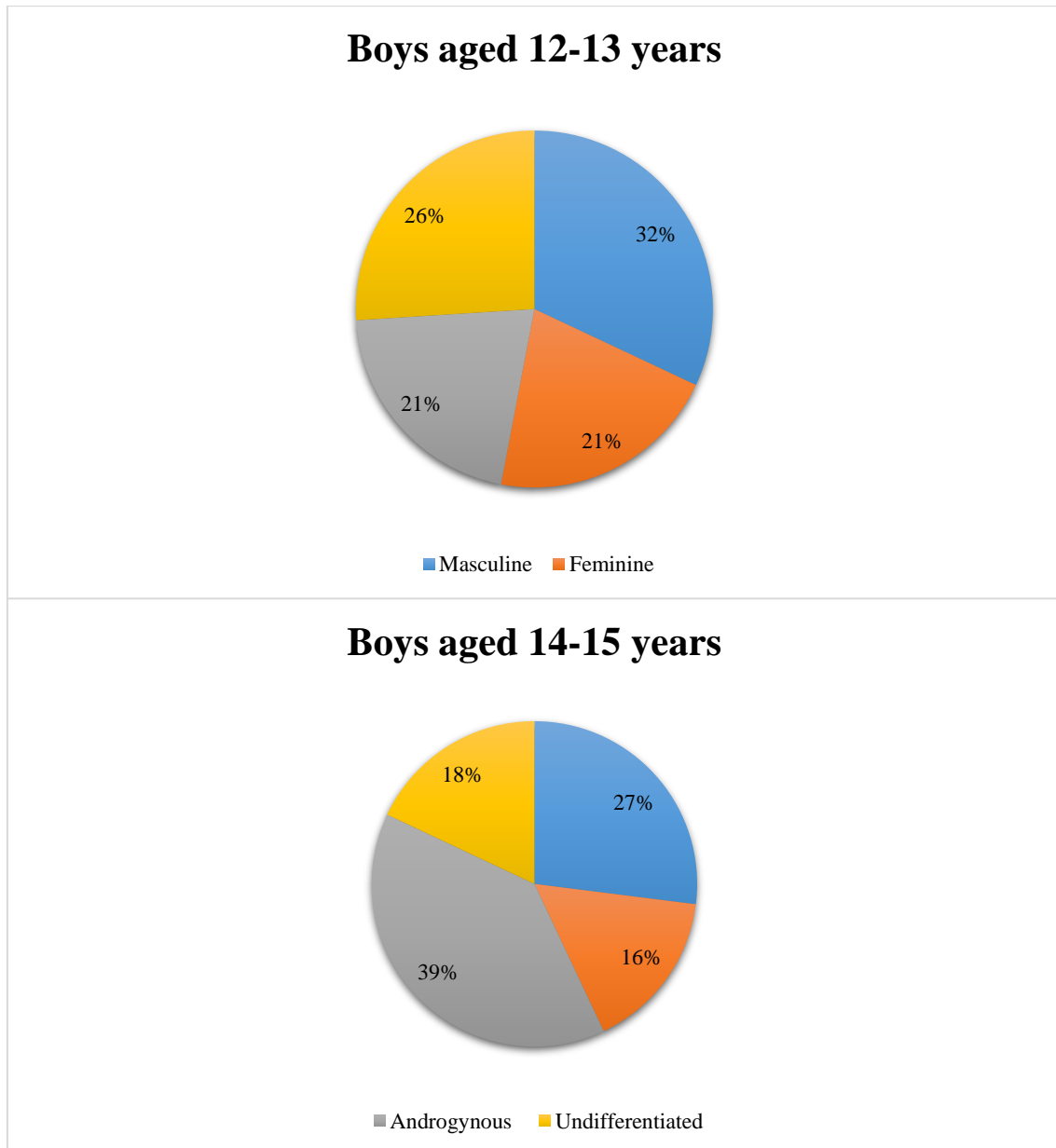
**Table 1.**  
*Expressiveness of masculinity and femininity characteristics in Nenets boys and girls aged 12-13 and 14-15 years.*

	Nenets boys		Nenets girls	
	12-13 years	14-15 years	12-13 years	14-15 years
Masculinity	0,67±0,04	0,74±0,03	0,62±0,04	0,60±0,03
Femininity	0,53±0,03	0,57±0,03	0,74±0,03	0,75±0,03

The analysis of the results of studying gender identity in Nenets adolescents demonstrates that, in total, masculinity scores ( $M=0,67\pm0,04$ ) prevail over femininity scores ( $M=0,53\pm0,03$ ) in Nenets boys aged 12-13 years. In Nenets girls aged 12-13 years, in total, femininity scores ( $M=0,74\pm0,03$ ) prevail over masculinity scores ( $M=0,62\pm0,04$ ). In the period of transition from the age of 12 years to the age of 15 years, there are no significant changes in masculinity and femininity scores in Nenets boys and Nenets girls: in boys, masculinity scores ( $M=0,74\pm0,03$ ) continue to prevail over femininity scores ( $M=0,57\pm0,03$ ), and in girls, femininity scores ( $M=0,75\pm0,03$ ) continue to prevail over

masculinity scores ( $M=0,60\pm0,03$ ). These results indicate that manifestation of traditionally masculine behaviour in boys and manifestation of traditionally feminine behaviour in girls remain stable in Nenets adolescents during the adolescence period.

The analysis of distribution of gender identity types in Nenets boys aged 12-13 years shows that the predominant type of their gender identity is masculine (32%) (Fig. 1). The undifferentiated type is less represented (26%). The least common types of gender identity in Nenets boys aged 12-13 years are the androgynous (21%) and the feminine (21%) types.

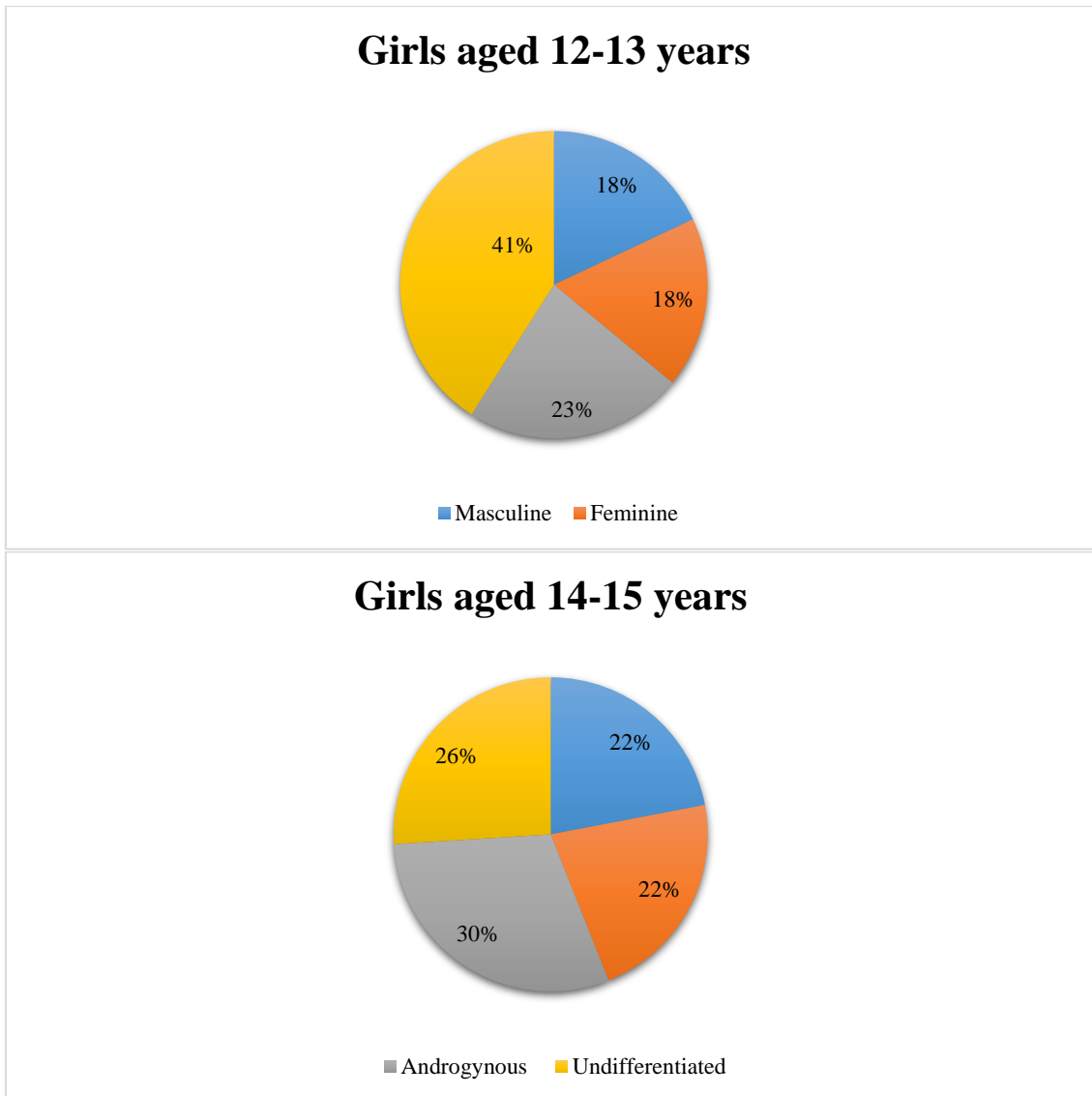


**Figure 1.** Distribution of gender identity types in Nenets boys in the period from the age of 12 years to the age of 15 years.

A number of changes are observed in distribution of gender identity types in Nenets boys in the period of transition from the age of 12 years to the age of 15 years. The number of respondents with the androgynous type of gender identity increases significantly (from 21% to 39%) ( $p \leq 0,01$ ), this type of gender identity becomes predominant. By the age of 14-15 years, the representation of the masculine type of gender identity in Nenets boys decreases (27%), the undifferentiated (18%) and feminine (16%) types of gender identity become the least common. An increase in the number of respondents with the androgynous type of gender identity is accompanied by a simultaneous decrease in the

number of respondents with an undifferentiated type of gender identity. These results indicate that more individuals with pronounced masculine and feminine traits appear among Nenets boys in the adolescence period.

The analysis of the distribution of gender identity types in Nenets girls aged 12-13 years shows that the predominant type is the undifferentiated type (41%) (Fig. 2.). The androgynous type is less represented (23%). The least common types of gender identity identified in Nenets girls at the age of 12-13 years are the feminine (18%) and the masculine types (18%).



**Figure 2.** Distribution of gender identity types in Nenets girls in the period from the age of 12 years to the age of 15 years.

In the period of transition from the age of 12 years to the age of 15 years, a number of changes are observed in distribution of gender identity types in Nenets girls. The predominant type of gender identity in Nenets girls at the age of 14-15 years is androgynous (30%). There is a trend towards a decrease in representation of the undifferentiated type of gender identity (from 41% to 26%) ( $p \leq 0,05$ ). The least common types of gender identity identified in Nenets girls at the age of 14-15 years are the feminine (22%) and the masculine types (22%). The decrease in the number of respondents with the undifferentiated type of gender identity takes place simultaneously with an increase in the number of respondents with the androgynous type of gender identity. These results indicate that the number of

individuals with a low degree of manifestation of masculine and feminine qualities decreases among Nenets girls during the adolescence period.

Studying the characteristic aspects of gender identity development in adolescent representatives of indigenous small-numbered peoples of the Russian North, we analyzed the characteristic aspects of masculinity and femininity manifestation, as well as of distribution of gender identity types in Nenets boys and girls aged 12-15 years in comparison with ethnic Russian adolescents of the same age. The specificity of gender identity indicators in ethnic Nenets and ethnic Russian male and female adolescents is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

*Expressiveness of masculinity and femininity characteristics in ethnic Nenets and ethnic Russian boys and girls at the age of 12-15 years.*

	Ethnic Nenets adolescents		Ethnic Russian adolescents	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Masculinity	0,71±0,03	0,61±0,02**	0,69±0,03	0,69±0,02**
Femininity	0,55±0,02**	0,75±0,03	0,63±0,02**	0,78±0,03

Note: \*\* -  $p \leq 0,01$ .

The analysis of the results of studying gender identity in boys aged 12-15 years shows that the femininity score in Nenets boys is significantly lower than in their ethnic Russian peers ( $p \leq 0,01$ ). These results indicate that traditionally feminine qualities are less represented in the sex-role model of Nenets boys aged 12-15 years. Regarding masculinity, no significant differences were found in the studied groups of respondents, which speaks for similar trends in representation of traditionally masculine qualities in sex-role models of Nenets and Russian boys at the age of 12-15 years.

The analysis of the results of studying gender identity in girls aged 12-15 years shows that the masculinity score in Nenets girls is significantly

lower than in their ethnic Russian peers ( $p \leq 0,01$ ). These results indicate that traditionally masculine qualities are less represented in the sex-role model of Nenets girls at the age of 12-15 years. Regarding femininity, no significant differences were found in the studied groups of respondents, which attests to similar trends in representation of traditionally feminine qualities in the sex-role models of Nenets and Russian girls at the age of 12-15 years.

The analysis of distribution of gender identity types in boys and girls aged 12-15 years makes it possible to identify particular features in distribution of gender identity types in Nenets adolescents in comparison with their ethnic Russian peers (Table 3).

**Table 3.**

*Distribution of gender identity types in Nenets and Russian boys and girls at the age of 12-15 years.*

Gender identity types	Ethnic Nenets adolescents		Ethnic Russian adolescents	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Masculine type	30%	20%	25%	29%
Feminine type	18%	20%*	16%	33%*
Androgynous type	30%*	27%	42%*	29%
Undifferentiated type	22%	33%**	17%	9%**

Note: \* -  $p \leq 0,05$ ; \*\* -  $p \leq 0,01$ .

A trend can be seen towards the androgynous gender identity type being less represented among Nenets boys aged 12-15 years than among their ethnic Russian peers ( $p \leq 0,05$ ). No significant differences were found in distribution of other types of gender identity in adolescent boys. These results indicate that respondents with pronounced both masculine and feminine qualities are met less often among Nenets boys than among their Russian peers.

The undifferentiated type of gender identity is significantly more common ( $p \leq 0,01$ ) among Nenets girls aged 12-15 years than among their ethnic Russian peers. In addition, there is a trend toward the feminine type of gender identity being less represented ( $p \leq 0,05$ ) among Nenets girls. No significant differences were found in distribution of the androgynous and the masculine types of gender identity in Nenets girls and their ethnic Russian peers. These results

indicate that respondents with feebly pronounced both masculine and feminine qualities are found among Nenets girls more often than among their ethnic Russian peers, while respondents with pronounced feminine qualities are less common among Nenets girls than among their ethnic Russian peers.

## Discussion

The analysis of gender identity dynamics in Nenets adolescents over the adolescence period has made it possible to identify certain trends in the process. The trend for preserving the predominance of manifestations of traditionally masculine behaviour in Nenets boys and predominance of manifestations of traditionally feminine behaviour in Nenets girls is characteristic of the majority of Russian adolescents in total (Vasilenko & Brovkina,



2017; Peregudina, 2011; Romanov, 1997; Rymarev, 2006; and others).

The trend toward an increase in the number of adolescents with the androgynous type of gender identity, and a decrease in the number of adolescents with the undifferentiated type of gender identity, characteristic of both Nenets boys and girls, can be related to age-specific changes taking place in adolescence. This period is generally characterized by personal identity formation, elaboration of a self-concept, and choice of behaviour patterns, which in the context of gender identity is manifested in a clearer identification of one's own sex-role model (Lukyanenko, 2007; Tereshenkova, 2005; Rymarev, 2006; and others).

The comparative analysis of gender identity in ethnic Nenets and ethnic Russian adolescents has made it possible to identify both similar and differing trends in this process. Similar trends include the predominance of traditionally masculine behaviour in boys and traditionally feminine behaviour in girls among both Nenets and Russian adolescents. At the same time, it is important to note the presence of specific features in gender identity development of Nenets adolescents in comparison with their ethnic Russian peers. Thus, there is a trend toward traditional gender characteristics of the opposite sex being less pronounced in Nenets boys and girls. This can be due to certain traditions of upbringing which do not encourage manifestation of personal characteristics non-standard for born gender, which is conditioned by specific natural, climatic and socio-cultural living conditions of indigenous small-numbered peoples (Khabarov, 2003; Mironov, 2012; Buchek, 2012; and others).

In addition, a trend can be noted toward slowing down the rate of gender identity formation in Nenets boys in comparison with their ethnic Russian peers, which is manifested in the lower frequency of occurrence of the androgynous sex-role model, characteristic of dynamic processes of gender identity development in Nenets adolescents. The same trend toward slowing down the rate of gender identity formation can be noted in Nenets girls in comparison with their ethnic Russian peers, which is manifested in greater prevalence of the undifferentiated sex-role model, which should be decreasing in adolescence. The presence of such a trend in both Nenets boys and Nenets girls can be related to difficulties of socialization, typical for representatives of indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North (Buchek, 2012;

Vinokurova, 2003; Deryabina et al., 2011; Indenbaum, 2008; Lobova, 2010; Shipulina, 2010; and others).

A comparison of the results of the current study of gender identity in Nenets adolescents to the results obtained by other researchers is not possible since at present there are no other studies of gender identity in Nenets adolescents.

Thus, summarizing the results of the study, we would like to point out that these results were obtained from an experimental sample group of adolescents aged 12–15 years by comparing the survey results of ethnic Nenets adolescent respondents to those of ethnic Russian adolescent respondents, focusing on the indicators of masculinity, femininity, and the prevalence of gender identity types in accordance with the S. Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) technique. This determines the limitations of our study.

### Conclusions

The analysis of gender identity dynamics in Nenets adolescents over the adolescence period highlighted changes in representation of masculinity and femininity, as well as in distribution of gender identity types in the period of transition from the age of 12-13 years to the age of 14-15 years. The comparative analysis of gender identity in ethnic Nenets and ethnic Russian adolescents highlighted the presence of both similar and differing trends in this process. The results of the study enrich the scientific understanding of the gender identity phenomenon, elaborate and expand the vision of gender identity formation process in representatives of indigenous small-numbered peoples of the High North. Identification of specific features of gender identity development of Nenets adolescents will help to update the programs of psychological assistance and support for adolescents in the aspect of socialization and building life strategies.

The prospects for future research on gender identity in representatives of indigenous small-numbered peoples include studying other components of gender identity in adolescents, analyzing the dynamics of gender identity development at different stages of ontogeny, and comparing the results of studying gender identity in ethnic Nenets to representatives of other indigenous small-numbered peoples.

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