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Cognitive and Emotional Determinants Differentiating Adolescents' Coping Strategies in Social Conflict Situations

Poznawcze i emocjonalne wyznaczniki różnicujące strategie radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego

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Abstract

Aim. The aim of the study was to compare self-esteem, locus of control of a situation, and emotional reactions in relation to the coping strategies employed by adolescents (aggressive, avoidant, and task-oriented) in situations of social conflict.

Methods and materials. The research instruments included the Self-Esteem Scale (SES) by Rosenberg in the Polish adaptation by Dzwonkowska, Lachowicz-Tabaczek, and Łaguna; the Locus of Control Questionnaire (*Kwestionariusz do Badania Poczucia Kontroli – KBPK*) by Krasowicz and Kurzyp-Wojnarska; the Three-Factor Inventory of States and Traits of Personality (*Trójczynnikowy Inwentarz Stanów i Cech Osobowości – TISCO*) by Spielberger and Wrześniewski; and the Questionnaire for Examining Adolescents' Coping Strategies in Social Conflict Situations (*Kwestonariusz do badania strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego – KSMK*) by Borecka-Biernat. The empiri-

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cal research was conducted in public schools in Wrocław and nearby towns, involving 893 adolescents (468 girls and 425 boys) aged 13–15.

Results and conclusion. The findings indicated that a lower evaluation of one's own abilities, a strong belief in the influence of others on both positive and negative outcomes of events, and a tendency to respond to conflict situations with anger or anxiety coexist with a propensity for destructive (aggressive or avoidant) reactions to conflict. Conversely, higher levels of self-esteem, a stronger belief in one's own ability to control positive and negative outcomes of events, and a tendency to respond to conflict with curiosity were associated with a greater likelihood of adopting constructive (task-oriented) coping strategies in social conflict situations.

Keywords: emotions, self-esteem, coping strategies, adolescents, locus of control, social conflict situations

Abstrakt

Cel. Celem badań było porównanie samooceny, umiejscowienia poczucia kontroli sytuacji i reakcji emocjonalnych ze względu na stosowane strategie (agresji, uniku, zadaniowa) radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego

Metody i materiały. W badaniach posłużono się *Skalą Samooceny* (SES) Rosenberga w adaptacji Dzwonkowskiej, Lachowicz-Tabaczek, Łaguny, *Kwestionariuszem do Badania Poczucia Kontroli* (KBPK) Krasowicz, Kurzyp-Wojnarskiej, *Trójczynnikiem Inwentarzem Stanów i Cech Osobowości* (TISCO) Spielbergera i Wrześniewskiego oraz *Kwestionariuszem do badania strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego* (KSMK) Boreckiej-Biernat. Badania empiryczne przeprowadzono w szkołach publicznych z Wrocławia i okolicznych miejscowości. Objęły one 893 adolescentów (468 dziewcząt i 425 chłopców) w wieku 13–15 lat

Wyniki i wnioski. W świetle przeprowadzonych badań stwierdzono, że niższa ocena własnych możliwości u młodego człowieka, silne przekonanie o wpływie innych na pozytywne i negatywne skutki zdarzeń oraz reagowanie na sytuacje konfliktu gniewem lub lękiem współwystępują z tendencją do destruktywnego (agresywnego, unikowego) reagowania na konflikt. Wyniki badań wykazały również, że wyższy poziom samooceny, silniejsze przekonanie dorastającego o własnych możliwościach kontrolowania pozytywnych i negatywnych następstw zdarzeń oraz reagowanie na konflikt ciekawością stwarza większe możliwości konstruktywnego (zadaniowego) zmagania się z sytuacją konfliktu społecznego. Wydaje się, że uzyskane informacje pozwolą wychowawcy na lepsze zrozumienie zachowania się dorastającego dziecka w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego i spojrzenie na przyczyny tego zachowania z jego perspektywy.

Słowa kluczowe: młodzież, emocje, samoocena, strategie radzenia sobie, sytuacja konfliktu społecznego, poczucie umiejscowienia kontroli

Introduction

A conflict situation involving another person constitutes one of the fundamental types of social situations experienced throughout an individual's life. The term *conflict* derives from the Latin *confligere* or *conflictatio*, meaning to clash, dispute, discuss, fight, or collide – referring to an encounter between two or more opposing processes or forces inherent to living beings. Such a “collision” may initiate a fight. For many individuals, conflict is mistakenly associated solely with direct physical and/or verbal aggression and the accompanying hostility that amplifies existing contradictions. This type of conflict is filled with negative emotions. However, most phenomena that can be described as conflicts take relatively mild forms, such as brief quarrels, discussions, or debates (Olubiński, 1992). In the context of interpersonal relations, a conflict situation represents a specific type of interaction between partners in which they become acutely aware of the differences separating their interests, needs, or goals (Balawajder, 2010).

A social conflict situation—classified as one of the difficult forms of social interaction—accompanies individuals throughout their entire lives. Adolescence, in particular, is a period during which young people experience numerous, often contradictory aspirations and must cope with inconsistent social expectations imposed upon them. Research findings indicate that adolescents frequently identify interpersonal conflicts as a major source of emotionally charged, negatively valenced arousal. Such conflicts include disagreements with teachers, quarrels with school peers, and arguments with one or both parents as well as other family members (Gurba, 2013; Lohman & Jarvis, 2000; Polak, 2010; Stańkowski, 2009). Conflicts occurring across these three primary social domains—school, peer relationships, and family—constitute an integral and unavoidable part of adolescent life. These conflicts are pervasive and, in practice, impossible to avoid.

Adolescents' Coping Strategies in the Context of Social Conflict Situations

A difficult situation stimulates a young person to engage in activities aimed at restoring balance between external demands and personal capabilities and/or improving their emotional state. The activity undertaken in such circumstances is considered within a specific situational context as a coping strategy applied to the current difficult situation (Heszen-Niejodek, 2000). Numerous studies and everyday observations indicate that adolescents possess a wide repertoire of coping strategies for managing difficult social situations, including social conflict (Balawajder, 2010; Dakowicz, 1996; Lachowska, 2010). These include both constructive and destructive coping strate-

gies in social conflict situations. Destructive coping strategies in social conflict take the form of defensive behaviours that are not directed toward resolving or overcoming the conflict. Such strategies do not lead to agreement; instead, they often escalate hostile behaviours, allowing individuals merely to reduce unpleasant emotional tension and temporarily restore a sense of well-being. This occurs primarily through two mechanisms:

- The aggressive strategy, manifested in initiated physical attacks (*e.g.*, fighting, shoving) and/or verbal aggression (*e.g.*, insults, criticism) directed toward specific individuals, causing harm to their physical, psychological, or social well-being (inducing pain, suffering, destruction, or the loss of valued aspects of life).
- The avoidance strategy, involving withdrawal from confrontation with the social conflict situation, either by engaging in alternative activities that distract attention from the conflict (*e.g.*, watching television, browsing the Internet, listening to music, sleeping, walking) or by seeking social contact with others as a means of diversion.

Constructive coping strategies in situations of social conflict include the task-oriented strategy, which takes the form of active engagement with the conflict situation. This approach is directed toward resolving and overcoming the conflict and is regarded as adaptive. Its essence lies in the effective focus on problem solving. Within this framework, individuals attempt to modify their actions by making efforts to communicate and cooperate with the other party to find a mutually acceptable resolution to the disputed issues.

As mentioned earlier, the school environment is particularly stressful for adolescents, especially in situations involving conflict with teachers, classmates, one or both parents or other family members. It is therefore crucial to examine how adolescents cope with conflict situations that arise within the school setting, in peer relationships, or in the family home. Among the coping strategies reported by adolescents in the context of conflicts with teachers and school peers, one can distinguish aggressive behaviours (such as shoving, pushing, kicking, name-calling, mocking, and teasing), attempts to divert attention from the difficult situation and engage in other activities (such as listening to music, surfing the Internet, playing computer games, or doing sports), as well as escape from the difficult situation through physical withdrawal. In the school context, adolescents also display reactions that reflect a need for independent problem solving as part of their responses to difficult interpersonal situations (Sikora & Pisula, 2008). Their intellectual capacities enable them to evaluate situations accurately and recognise potential solutions. Consequently, they are often inclined to seek compromise or mutual understanding in conflict situations.

Conflicts in child–parent relationships are a common phenomenon during adolescence (Gurba, 2013). An adolescent seeks to free themselves from parental authority and demands greater autonomy and rights. In conflicts with parents—perceived as threats to autonomy (*e.g.*, restrictions, commands, prohibitions)—teenagers often

exhibit harshness, aggressiveness, indifference, or even cynicism (Jaworski, 2000). In addition to aggressive responses, coping with family-related problems may also involve avoidance behaviour or seeking interpersonal contact outside the family structure (Lachowska, 2010).

Cognitive Determinants of Adolescents' Coping Strategies in Social Conflict Situations

Encountering a difficult social situation, including a social conflict, is an integral part of everyday life for a young person. However, the way in which an adolescent copes with such experiences may determine whether they overcome these everyday difficulties successfully or unsuccessfully. An important question thus arises: Why do some adolescents choose aggressive or avoidant coping strategies, while others opt for task-oriented strategies when faced with social conflict? In addressing this question, the concept of the psychological mechanisms underlying human behaviour in difficult situations, as proposed by Tyszkowa (1986), proves particularly informative. According to this framework, the selection of coping strategies among adolescents is significantly shaped by fundamental cognitive structures of personality—namely, the self-image (the “self” structure) and the world-image (the “world” structure).

The system of beliefs and representations about oneself, along with expectations directed toward the self—that is, the self-structure—plays a crucial role in behaviour during difficult situations (Kulas, 1986). Information about one's own characteristics and the traits constituting self-knowledge serve as a basis for evaluating personal abilities when faced with challenging contexts (Tyszkowa, 1986). Self-esteem is inseparably linked to the notion of the self; it represents the evaluative and value-laden component of an individual's self-knowledge system. According to Rosenberg (1965), high self-esteem corresponds to the belief that one is a sufficiently good and valuable person, while low self-esteem is associated with dissatisfaction with oneself and self-rejection. The impact of self-esteem becomes evident in an individual's functioning in difficult situations. Research by Kubacka-Jasiecka (1986), Ogińska-Bulik (2001), Borecka-Biernat (2006), and Brytek (2007) demonstrated that both low (adequate or inadequate) and excessively high (inadequate) self-esteem can play a maladaptive role in young people's behaviour in difficult situations.

A low evaluation of oneself—one's abilities and one's effectiveness in dealing with difficult circumstances—fosters the emergence of aggressive behaviours (Bushman et al, 2009; Donnellan *et al.*, 2005; Ostrowsky, 2010). An individual with low self-esteem is unable to maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships within their immediate social environment. This low self-esteem makes it difficult for them to overcome inter-

personal barriers of mistrust or resentment, which frequently serve as sources of conflict. In an attempt to explain the occurrence of low self-esteem among aggressive individuals. Ostrowsky (2010) argues that this type of behaviour represents a form of externalisation of one's feelings of inferiority and shame, accompanied by the tendency to blame others for these emotions – ultimately resulting in aggressive attacks.

In the case of low self-esteem, there is also a marked tendency to abandon achieving the goal of an activity, refrain from taking action, and withdraw from social interaction. An individual with low self-esteem lacks confidence in their abilities and therefore avoids engaging in tasks, often becoming discouraged quickly. A person with low self-esteem tends to overestimate difficulties and is more likely to yield to them rather than confront and overcome them (Kozielecki, 1981; Tyszkowa, 1986). A lack of faith in one's own abilities, combined with indecisiveness and insecurity, as well as a tendency to give up in the face of failure, makes it difficult for individuals with low self-esteem to cope with tension and prevents them from effectively resolving conflict situations (Kobosko, 2013).

In the case of high (inadequate) self-esteem, there is a tendency toward intense negative emotions and explosive aggressive reactions (Dettinger & Hart, 2007). Extremely high self-esteem—an exaggeratedly positive self-concept—does not facilitate the maintenance of positive relationships with others. Individuals with such self-esteem are often characterised by arrogance, excessive self-confidence, a dismissive attitude toward others, and disregard for others' opinions. They display an uncritical view of themselves and a lack of resilience in situations involving interpersonal conflict. High self-esteem that is inconsistent with reality may represent an attempt to compensate for an underlying sense of inferiority or inadequacy (Perez *et al.*, 2005).

Individuals exhibiting a high (adequate) level of self-esteem have been found to be the least susceptible to behavioural disorganisation in difficult situations. A high level of self-esteem coexists with an average level of conflict proneness (Rostowska, 2001). People with high self-esteem are generally better adjusted and function more effectively in social contexts, maintaining stable and balanced relationships with others. High self-esteem fosters greater psychological resilience and enables constructive behaviour when faced with various stressful events (Baumeister *et al.*, 2003; Korczyński, 2002; Kurtek, 2012).

The foregoing considerations indicate that belief in one's own abilities facilitates more effective coping in difficult situations. The opposite occurs when confidence in one's abilities is low – then even minor obstacles or slight threats may provoke an intense reaction. Under such conditions, strong emotional arousal, uncontrolled aggression, and a tendency to withdraw from cooperation with others are likely to emerge.

An individual's functioning in difficult situations is also shaped by their subjective belief about the degree of control they can exert over a situation (Tyszkowa, 1978). When people interpret success or failure as resulting from external forces beyond

their control, they exhibit an *external locus of control*; when they attribute outcomes to their own actions and skills, they demonstrate an *internal locus of control* (Drwal, 1978). Thus, an individual's perceived control over the environment represents a key variable regulating the coping process and influencing the choice of coping strategies (Juczyński, 2000; Krause & Stryker, 1984; Kurtek, 2005; Tali, 2010; Taylor, 2010)

Studies conducted by Deming and Lochman (2008), Hisli Sahin *et al.* (2009), Talik (2010), and Wiatrowska (2017) demonstrated that individuals with an external locus of control tend to believe they are unable to influence or change a difficult situation. Consequently, they do not focus on the source of the problem but rather on their own emotional reactions. Such individuals are oriented toward reducing unpleasant emotions rather than solving the problem itself (Plopa, 1996). As a result, those who believe that their actions have little impact on what they achieve, and who perceive the outcomes of their behaviour as beyond their control, are unlikely to make efforts to resolve difficult situations, since they do not believe they can change them. This leads to the adoption of destructive coping strategies (*e.g.*, aggression, avoidance) and their habitual use when faced with challenging circumstances.

In contrast, an internal locus of control—that is, the belief that a situation depends on one's own activity and that something can be done to change it—serves as the foundation for sustained efforts to overcome difficulties and for increased exploratory activity aimed at finding a way out of challenging circumstances. It enables better behavioural regulation, as well as the ability to plan and modify one's actions. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of achieving the desired outcome, as it creates the opportunity to successfully overcome difficulties (Adesina, 2012; Cook & Sloane, 2001; Dijkstra, Beersma, & Evers, 2011; Endler *et al.*, 2000; Gasparski, 2002).

In summary, the above considerations suggest that an individual with an external locus of control, when faced with a difficult social interaction, tends to focus on the self—aiming to defend the threatened “self” through aggression, distancing, or avoidance of the problem. In contrast, perceiving a situation as one over which a person believes they have control is associated with an active, task-oriented approach to coping with difficult social interactions.

Emotional Determinants of Adolescents' Coping Strategies in Situations of Social Conflict

Human beings respond emotionally to threatening situations. Emotional reactions to such situations are linked both to personality traits and to an individual's perception of the situation (Heszen-Niejodek, 2002; Humphrey, 2006; Łosiak, 1995). A conflict situation—an inherent element of social interactions—elicits intense emotional tension with a negative valence. When confronted with provoking factors (*e.g.*, conflict),

individuals may experience feelings of anger and irritation (Deffenbacher, 1992; Lazarus, 2000; Losiak, 2009). Anger is one of several possible negative emotional reactions that emerge in stressful situations perceived as threatening or as involving loss or harm (Borecka-Biernat *et al.*, 2019). Persistent emotional arousal of high intensity and negative valence forms the basis for aggressive behaviours, irritability, outbursts of rage, and other seemingly unjustified emotional reactions that can manifest in various forms of destructive behaviour (Fischer & Roseman, 2007). An analysis of empirical findings (Berkowitz, 1992; Deffenbacher, 1992; Domińska-Werbel, 2014; Kossewska, 2008) indicates that young people's tendency to respond with anger and hostility is associated with a propensity to engage in confrontation and persistence in facing difficult situations.

Another possible negative emotional reaction elicited by situations of threat—whether objective or subjective, external or internal, current or anticipated—is anxiety (Doliński, 2000). Anxiety is generally an unpleasant state for an individual, which motivates efforts to escape from or reduce this emotion. Research findings (Larsson *et al.*, 2000; Nitendel-Bujakowa, 2001; Sikorski, 2015) have shown that emotions in the sequence of worry–anxiety–fear typically lead to avoidance and withdrawal from the object or situation that elicits the emotional response.

It is widely recognised that anxiety—despite its characteristic tendency to prompt avoidance of potential threats—underlies aggressive behaviour (Ranschburg, 1993). The possibility of co-occurrence between anxiety and aggression is supported by the findings of Nowosad (2002), Drabek *et al.* (2005), Simunovic *et al.* (2013), and Halevy (2017). The study revealed that, when faced with peer conflict, students tend to “attack the problem” rather than seek to resolve or alleviate it. They resort to physical force against people or objects and/or express their hostility toward others through demeaning, hurtful, or accusatory verbal statements.

The influence of anxiety on behaviour depends largely on its intensity. Research by Leary and Kowalski (2001) as well as Clark and Watson (2002) demonstrated that mild anxiety may serve a mobilising function, whereas high levels of anxiety tend to disorganise behaviour. Excessive anxiety leads individuals to perceive numerous situations as threatening, even when they are objectively neutral or benign.

However, some studies suggest that difficult situations perceived as challenges may elicit positive emotional reactions and a sense of satisfaction derived from the opportunity to overcome difficulties (Lazarus, 1991; Spielberger & Starr, 1994). Curiosity appears to be the positive emotion that accompanies unexpected events. It motivates individuals to seek new information and encourages the expansion of one's experiences. Curiosity reflects the desire to explore, discover, and understand new or ambiguous aspects of the environment (Fredrickson, 2001; Spielberger & Reheiser, 2009; Voss & Keller, 2006). A higher level of curiosity promotes a stronger belief in one's ability to find pathways toward goals and to mobilise effort, thereby enhancing the belief

in one's capacity to cope with difficulties (Łaguna & Bąk, 2007). Consequently, curiosity stimulates exploratory and problem-seeking behaviours that contribute to the resolution of problems (Włodarczyk, 2017).

In summary, it can be concluded that difficult situations evoke both positive emotions—particularly curiosity, which activates strategies of active coping with challenges—and negative emotions such as anger and anxiety. The latter are generally unpleasant for young individuals, leading them to seek relief from these emotions. In defending themselves against such states, they may resort to aggression, which involves approaching the source of threat to destroy or damage it, thereby reducing emotional tension. Alternatively, they may withdraw from the situation to avoid confronting their emotional tension with an actual or anticipated threat (Lemerise & Dodge, 2005; Watson & Clark, 1999).

Research Problem

The purpose of the empirical investigation was to answer the following research question:

1. Which set of cognitive and emotional variables differentiates aggressive, avoidant, and task-oriented coping strategies among adolescents in situations of social conflict?

This research question allows for the formulation of the following hypothesis, the verification of which will be based on an analysis of empirical research findings:

H1. Due to the differences in adolescents' coping strategies in situations of social conflict, levels of self-esteem, locus of control, and emotional characteristics are expected to differentiate aggressive, avoidant, and task-oriented coping strategies. Adolescents with low self-esteem, a generalised external locus of control, high levels of negative emotions (anger, anxiety), and low levels of positive emotions (curiosity) are expected to use destructive coping strategies (aggressive or avoidant) more frequently in situations of social conflict. In contrast, adolescents with high self-esteem, a generalised internal locus of control, low levels of negative emotions (anxiety, anger), and high levels of positive emotions (curiosity) are expected to use task-oriented coping strategies more frequently in situations of social conflict.

It is worth noting here that most of the research on the strategies used by young people in coping with difficult social situations, including social conflicts, was conducted over ten years ago, and therefore the research conducted allows for supplementing and updating knowledge in this area (Adesina, 2012; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2011; Fung *et al.*, 2015; Halevy, 2017; Kobosko, 2013; Simunovic *et al.*, 2013; Włodarczyk, 2017).

Method

Participants

The study involved a total of 893 adolescents, including 468 girls and 425 boys, aged 13 to 15 years. The participants were students of public schools located in Wrocław and nearby towns. Schools were selected through random sampling; however, as not all selected schools consented to participate, several additional schools were invited to ensure adequate representation. Data collection was typically conducted during homeroom periods in a group-administered format, and participation was voluntary. To maintain anonymity, respondents were asked to sign their questionnaires with pseudonyms or initials. Before the assessment, participants who had obtained parental consent were thoroughly informed about the research procedure and instructed on how to complete the measures. All research activities adhered to the ethical guidelines for psychological research.

The primary criterion for selecting the participants was age. The study examined the influence of age on the choice of coping strategies in situations of social conflict among individuals aged 13–15 years – the period of adolescence. Adolescence is characterised by behavioural instability, conflicts with one's environment and oneself, and a frequent accompanying sense of misunderstanding (Czerwińska-Jasiewicz, 2015). Therefore, adolescents aged 13–15 constitute an appropriate research group for exploring coping strategies employed in situations of intense emotional tension, such as social conflict.

Instruments

The following research methods were applied in the study:

The *Self-Esteem Scale* (SES) by Rosenberg, adapted into Polish by Dzwonkowska, Lachowicz-Tabaczek, and Łaguna (2007), enables the assessment of the level of general (global) self-esteem among both adolescents and adults. The SES consists of ten diagnostic statements describing one's self, through which respondents evaluate their self-esteem. Participants respond using a four-point scale, with each answer scored from 1 to 4 points. The total score ranges from 10 to 40 points, where a higher score indicates a higher level of general (global) self-esteem. The Polish version of the SES is a reliable tool, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients reported across various studies ranging from 0.81 to 0.83, and it demonstrates confirmed theoretical validity.

The *Locus of Control Questionnaire* (Polish: KBPK) developed by Krasowicz and Kurzyp-Wojnarska (1990) consists of 46 forced-choice questions, of which 36 are diagnostic items and 10 serve as buffer questions. The diagnostic questions refer to everyday situations typical for school-aged adolescents and are divided into two scales: the Success Scale (S) and the Failure Scale (FA). Questions concerning favour-

able events form the Success Scale (S), while those concerning unfavourable events constitute the Failure Scale (FA). The sum of the results obtained in both scales (S + FA) provides a generalised locus of control index. Low scores on the KBPK indicate an external locus of control regarding the consequences of events, whereas high scores reflect an internal locus of control. The questionnaire demonstrates satisfactory reliability, with KR-20 internal consistency coefficients of 0.54 for the Success Scale and 0.69 for the Failure Scale, as well as confirmed criterion validity.

The *Three-Factor Inventory of States and Traits of Personality* (Polish: TISCO) is the Polish adaptation of the American *State-Trait Personality Inventory (STPI)* developed by Spielberger and his team (Wrześniewski, 1991). The TISCO inventory consists of two independent parts. The first part, SPI (State Personality Inventory), measures anxiety, anger, and curiosity as emotional states experienced at a given moment. The second part, TPI (Trait Personality Inventory), is used to assess the same emotions treated as personality traits. Thus, the test includes six subscales: state anxiety and trait anxiety, state anger and trait anger, and state curiosity and trait curiosity. Each subscale contains 10 short and simple statements referring to the respondent's subjective feelings. The reliability of the Polish version of the TISCO inventory is comparable to that of the original STPI. Cronbach's alpha coefficients range from 0.82 to 0.92 for the first part (SPI) and from 0.68 to 0.88 for the second part (TPI), depending on the sample. The validity of TISCO was verified in two domains: theoretical validity and diagnostic validity. The results concerning its validity are satisfactory and comparable to those obtained for the original STPI.

The *KSMK Questionnaire*, developed by Borecka-Biernat (2012), is designed to assess coping strategies employed by adolescents in situations of social conflict. The instrument consists of 33 descriptions of social conflict situations. For each situation, four possible coping behaviours are provided, representing different strategies of dealing with social conflict: the first corresponds to aggressive coping ("A"), the second to avoidant coping ("AV"), the third to submissive coping ("S"), and the fourth to task-oriented coping ("T"). Scores are obtained separately for each scale by summing the responses selected for the 33 situations corresponding to a given coping strategy. For the purposes of the present study, three scales were used: the Aggressive Coping Scale ("A"), the Avoidant Coping Scale ("AV"), and the Task-Oriented Coping Scale ("T")—all measuring adolescents' coping styles in situations of social conflict. The questionnaire demonstrates good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients around or above 0.70, and satisfactory diagnostic validity.

Results

Three groups of adolescents (considered as a whole) demonstrating a high level of aggressive, avoidant, or task-oriented coping strategies in situations of social conflict were compared in terms of self-esteem level, generalised locus of control, and type of emotions. The groups were distinguished based on high scores obtained in the respective scales of the KSMK Questionnaire: aggressive coping group: 101 participants in total, avoidant coping group: 172 participants in total, task-oriented coping group: 237 participants in total.

To examine potential differences among adolescents employing aggressive, avoidant, and task-oriented coping strategies in situations of social conflict with respect to self-esteem level, generalized locus of control, and type of emotions, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted (F statistic). The results of the comparative analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Mean values (M), standard deviations (SD), and significance of differences (F) between adolescents employing aggressive (A), avoidant (AV), and task-oriented (T) coping strategies in situations of social conflict across the scales of the SES, KBPK, and TISCO questionnaires

Coping Strategy in social conflict situation									
Variable	Partici- pants	Aggressive (A) N=101		Avoidant (AV) N=172		Task-Oriented (T) N=237		F	p
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Self-Esteem	Total	29.89	4.85	28.62	4.41	30.24	4.49	6.61	0.002
LOC (S+FA)	Total	22.18	5.39	22.70	4.57	25.08	5.09	17.28	<0.001
State Anger	Total	18.13	7.47	15.56	8.85	14.85	5.70	10.18	<0.001
State Anxiety	Total	21.62	3.39	21.32	2.95	20.86	3.02	2.47	0.086
State Curiosity	Total	26.78	4.77	26.41	4.22	27.39	4.55	2.43	0.089
Trait Anger	Total	24.23	6.01	20.91	5.73	19.70	5.41	22.88	<0.001
Trait Anxiety	Total	20.95	5.26	20.91	4.89	19.39	4.38	6.70	0.001
Trait Curiosity	Total	28.44	5.24	27.24	4.98	28.90	4.11	6.43	0.002

An analysis of the mean scores for each variable indicates significant differentiation in their values across the coping strategies employed by adolescents (total sample) in social conflict situations. Significant differences in mean scores were observed for self-esteem ($F = 6.61, p < 0.002$), generalized locus of control (S + FA; $F = 17.28, p < 0.001$), the level of anger experienced as a transient emotional state

in response to a social conflict ($I = 10.18, p < 0.001$), the level of anger understood as a learned behavioural disposition ($I = 22.88, p < 0.001$), the level of anxiety understood as a learned behavioural disposition ($F = 6.70, p < 0.001$), and the level of learned behavioural disposition to respond with curiosity ($F = 6.43, p < 0.002$). These differences are statistically significant at below the 0.001 level. In contrast, differences in the level of anxiety understood as a transient emotional state experienced in connection with a social conflict situation, and in the level of curiosity understood as a transient emotional state, were not statistically significant at the conventional threshold of $p < 0.05$. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the three groups of adolescents—distinguished by their use of aggressive, avoidant, or task-oriented coping strategies in social conflict situations—differ significantly in self-esteem, generalized locus of control, the level of anger experienced as a transient emotional state in response to a social conflict, the level of anger understood as a stable personality disposition, the learned behavioural disposition to respond with anxiety, and the learned behavioural disposition to respond with curiosity.

This pattern of results necessitated a more detailed analysis of the identified differences. To this end, Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test was applied. The results of this post-hoc analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Results of Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test comparing the differences between mean scores on the SES, KBPK, and TISCO scales depending on the type of coping strategy employed by adolescents in situations of social conflict

Variable	Partici- pants	Coping Strategy in social conflict situation	Coping Strategy in social conflict situation			Signific- ant Group Differ- ences
			Aggres- sive (A)	Avoidant (AV)	Task-orient- ed (T)	
Self-Esteem	Total	A			0.85	
		AV	0.11	0.11		
		T	0.85	0.003*	0.003*	T>AV
LOC (S+FA)	Total	A				
		AV	0.73	0.73	0.0001*	T>A
		T	0.0001*	0.00005*	0.00005*	T>AV
State Anger	Total	A				
		AV	0.008*	0.008*	0.0005*	A>AV
		T	0.0005*	0.54	0.54	A>T
Trait Anger	Total	A				
		AV	0.0001*	0.0001*	0.00002*	A>AV
		T	0.00002*	0.11	0.11	A>T

Variable	Partici- pants	Coping Strategy in social conflict situation	Coping Strategy in social conflict situation			Signific- ant Group Differ- ences
			Aggres- sive (A)	Avoidant (AV)	Task-orient- ed (T)	
Trait Anxiety	Total	A				
		AV	0.99	0.99	0.05*	A>T
		T	0.04*	0.008*	0.008*	AV>T
Trait Curios- ity	Total	A				
		AV	0.16	0.16	0.76	
		T	0.76	0.003*	0.003*	T>AV

The results concerning self-esteem indicate that adolescents employing a task-oriented coping strategy exhibit higher levels of self-esteem compared to those who use an avoidant coping strategy in situations of social conflict. No significant differences in self-esteem were observed between adolescents utilizing task-oriented and aggressive coping strategies. It is also noteworthy that the groups of adolescents employing destructive coping strategies—that is, aggressive or avoidant forms of coping—did not differ significantly from each other in terms of self-esteem levels.

A significantly higher level of generalized locus of control characterizes adolescents who employ a task-oriented coping strategy, compared to those who use aggressive or avoidant coping strategies in situations of social conflict. Moreover, it should be noted that adolescents who rely on aggression or avoidance as coping strategies in social conflict situations do not differ significantly from each other in terms of generalised locus of control.

The results concerning anger understood as a transient emotional state experienced in relation to a social conflict situation indicate a higher intensity of anger among adolescents employing an aggressive coping strategy compared to those using avoidant or task-oriented strategies. It is also worth noting that adolescents who use avoidant and task-oriented coping strategies do not differ significantly from each other in terms of anger as a transient emotional state.

A significantly higher level of learned behavioural disposition to respond with anger characterises adolescents who employ an aggressive coping strategy, compared to those who use avoidant or task-oriented strategies in situations of social conflict. It can also be observed that adolescents adopting avoidant and task-oriented coping strategies do not differ significantly from each other in terms of anger considered as a personality trait.

The results regarding anxiety as a learned behavioural disposition reveal higher levels among adolescents who employ aggressive and avoidant coping strategies compared to those using a task-oriented strategy in social conflict situations. Furthermore, it was observed that adolescents who use destructive forms of coping in social conflict situations (aggression or avoidance) did not differ significantly in terms of anxiety understood as a personality trait.

A significantly higher level of learned behavioural disposition to respond with curiosity characterises adolescents who employ a task-oriented coping strategy, compared to those who use an avoidant coping strategy in situations of social conflict. It should be noted that adolescents utilising task-oriented and aggressive coping strategies do not differ significantly from each other in terms of curiosity understood as a personality trait. Furthermore, adolescents who employ aggressive and avoidant coping strategies in social conflict situations also do not differ significantly from each other with respect to curiosity considered as a personality trait.

In summary, the analysis of the research results indicates that the level of self-esteem, generalised locus of control, and types of emotions significantly differentiate the coping strategies adopted by adolescents in situations of social conflict. The empirical findings partially confirmed the validity of hypothesis H.1. Higher levels of self-esteem, generalised internal locus of control and learned behavioural disposition to respond with curiosity were observed among adolescents who employed a task-oriented coping strategy, compared to those who used destructive strategies (aggressive or avoidant) in situations of social conflict. Interestingly, adolescents who rely on destructive coping strategies (aggression or avoidance) appear to be relatively homogeneous, as most of the variables examined did not differ significantly between these two groups. The only statistically significant differences concerned anger understood as a transient emotional state experienced during conflict and the learned behavioural disposition to respond with anger.

Conclusion

The analysis revealed that conflictual relationships with others (*e.g.*, mutual dislike, hostility, or blaming one another), emerging within the socially organised system of a young person's activity, are forms of behaviour most frequently associated with a generalised external locus of control. A stronger belief in the influence of others on both the positive and negative outcomes of one's actions (*i.e.*, an externally oriented locus of control) fosters the intensification of aggressive coping strategies among adolescents in situations of social conflict. It therefore appears probable that a lack of belief in one's ability to achieve desired outcomes or a lack of sense of responsibility for one's failures contributes to the adoption of aggressive coping strategies in social conflict situations. Since these adolescents typically believe they are unable to influence the course or resolution of social conflicts, they tend not to focus on the source of the problem but rather on themselves, seeking to defend the threatened "self." This defensive orientation leads to the habitual use of aggressive reactions as a means of coping with social conflict and to the reinforcement of such behaviours through their repeated applica-

tion. These findings are consistent with the results reported by Zajączkowski (1992), Pufal-Struzik (1997), Deming & Lochman (2008), and Breet *et al.* (2010).

The analysis of the research results also revealed that adolescents who employ aggressive coping strategies in situations of social conflict display higher levels of anger, both as an emotional state experienced during the conflict and as a learned behavioural disposition to respond with anger. Thus, the experience of anger leads to aggressive actions aimed at eliminating the source of threat or restoring lost goals. This means that the greater the intensity of the aggressive coping strategy used by adolescents in situations of social conflict, the higher the level of anger, regardless of its origin (state or trait; see Berkowitz, 1992; Borecka-Biernat, 2006; Doliński, 2000; Domińska-Werbel, 2014; Kossewska, 2008; Ranschburg, 1993).

The study also demonstrated that adolescents who use aggressive coping strategies are more prone to anxiety as a personality trait. It is important to emphasise that a learned disposition to perceive various situations as threatening and to respond with anxiety disproportionate to the actual level of threat is directly linked to the learned disposition to cope with social conflict through aggression. The perception of threat fosters hostility and aggressive attitudes toward others. This indicates that as the level of trait anxiety increases among adolescents facing interpersonal situations that threaten the fulfilment of their personal goals, the likelihood and intensity of aggressive coping strategies also increase (see Fung *et al.*, 2015; Kubacka-Jasiecka, 1986; Ranschburg, 1993; Sikorski, 2015).

The presented research results indicate that the level of general self-esteem plays an important role in the choice of avoidant coping strategies in situations of social conflict. Adolescents are aware of their own abilities and limitations, which affect their functioning when facing social conflicts. It was found that low self-esteem, along with a lack of confidence in one's abilities and effectiveness, promotes avoidant forms of behaviour aimed at reducing emotional tension resulting from the conflictual nature of the difficulties encountered (Campbell & Lavalley, 1993; Heimpel *et al.*, 2006; Mazurkiewicz, 1996). As shown, a negative self-attitude and doubt in one's own abilities foster withdrawal from interactions, avoidance of relationships, reluctance to undertake tasks, lack of trust, and hostile social attitudes. Aversion toward others and the inability to overcome this social barrier often result in numerous conflicts with the environment. A lack of self-confidence and discontinuation of efforts following failure hinder one's ability to cope with tension. These elements, which constitute low self-esteem, make it difficult to resolve conflicts (Wosińska, 2004). Furthermore, low self-worth is associated with low activity, lack of engagement in problem solving, anxiety, and reluctance to participate in interpersonal relations. Thus, low self-esteem serves as an indicator of withdrawal from action and a lack of motivation to pursue goals in difficult situations.

A characteristic feature of the "self" structure consists of information about oneself and one's perceived ability to influence the course of events. The locus of control

is a key variable that modifies how young people function in situations of social conflict. The conducted research revealed a “shift” in the general locus of control toward external orientation—both in success and failure situations—among adolescents who employ an avoidant coping strategy in social conflict situations. This strategy often involves engaging in substitute activities or seeking social interactions as a form of distraction. Such adolescents tend not to believe that favourable or desirable events in their lives are the result of their own efforts. Instead, they attribute them to fortunate circumstances or the goodwill of others. Attributing responsibility for personal successes to luck or coincidence may lead to passivity and a lack of willingness to take control over one's own fate. The tendency toward a general external locus of control among adolescents using avoidant coping strategies also manifests in situations of failure. These individuals struggle to take responsibility for their own setbacks, perceiving their causes as external factors beyond their control—such as bad luck or the hostility of others. This lack of personal responsibility for failures results in low motivation to change one's circumstances, reflecting the belief that “what will be, will be.” Consequently, they attempt to come to terms with fate, often diverting their attention from the existing problem by engaging in other, unrelated activities (Hisli Sahin *et al.*, 2009; Taylor, 2010).

The inability to manage conflict situations or resolve difficult interpersonal problems tends to intensify negative emotions in social contexts (Oleś, 1998). The conducted research demonstrated that adolescents who employ an avoidant coping strategy in situations of social conflict exhibit significantly higher levels of learned behavioural disposition to respond with anxiety and lower levels of learned behavioural disposition to respond with curiosity. This finding suggests that when anxiety reaches a high level of intensity, it diminishes cognitive curiosity, inhibits spontaneous activity, reduces motivation to engage in exploratory or transgressive behaviours, and triggers avoidant or withdrawal reactions in social conflict situations. Such behaviours serve as a means of temporarily reducing negative emotional arousal (Leary & Kowalski, 2001; Sandy *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, as the level of anxiety increases among adolescents in interpersonal situations that threaten the realization of their personal goals, the tendency to use avoidant coping strategies also rises—often taking the form of engagement in substitute activities (*e.g.*, sleeping, eating, shopping) and/or seeking social contact (*e.g.*, meeting with friends; Heszen-Niejodek, 2002; Janowski, 2005; Nitendel-Bujakowa, 2001; Sikorski, 2015).

Adolescents are more likely to seek to resolve and overcome social conflict situations by changing either their own behaviour or the external environment that threatens the realisation of their goals. It is worth noting that the task-oriented coping strategy, sometimes referred to as creative conflict resolution, is considered the most effective approach to resolving conflicts, as it considers the well-being and needs of both parties involved. The analysis of research findings revealed that adolescents who employ task-oriented coping strategies in social conflict situations scored higher in general

self-esteem. Global self-esteem fosters readiness for action, initiative, and the establishment of social relationships (Obuchowski, 1983). Adolescents with higher self-esteem make greater efforts to address problems directly, focusing their energy on overcoming obstacles—thus, they are more inclined to use task-oriented strategies. In general, such individuals are oriented toward actions that lead to the fulfilment of their intentions and the achievement of goals. Thus, their behaviour in conflict situations is grounded in an assertive dimension (Borecka-Biernat *et al.*, 2019; Hys & Nieznańska, 2001).

The analysis of the collected empirical data revealed that the more adolescents tend to believe that the various events they experience are a direct result of their own actions, the more frequently they employ a task-oriented coping strategy in situations of social conflict. The belief in internal control over positive outcomes of events enables adolescents to manipulate their environment more effectively, as they have reason to believe that their actions are efficient and lead to the desired results. It is worth emphasising that adolescents who cope with social conflict in a task-oriented manner can take responsibility not only for their successes but also for their failures. They perceive their setbacks as the result of insufficient ability, inadequate effort, or lack of engagement on their part. In general, the perceived causal relationship between “what they do and how they do it” and the outcomes of their own behaviour influences the adoption of problem-solving coping strategies aimed at overcoming emerging difficulties (Adesina, 2012; Borecka-Biernat, 2025; Cook & Sloane, 2001; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2011; Gacek, 2000; Taylor, 2010).

Based on the analysis of the collected empirical data, significant negative correlations were found between adolescents’ task-oriented coping strategies and negative emotions (anger and anxiety) experienced situationally in relation to social conflict. This means that the higher the intensity of task-oriented coping, the lower the level of situational negative emotions (anxiety and anger). Adolescents who “regulate” their behaviour in a task-oriented manner during social conflict situations are characterised by lower levels of anger and anxiety. This finding suggests an adaptive function of negative emotions—when experienced at a lower, situationally appropriate intensity—as they may activate cognitive processes that facilitate the effective overcoming of difficulties (Borecka-Biernat, 2025; Sikorski, 2015).

The findings also indicate that adolescents who employ a task-oriented coping strategy in situations of social conflict exhibit higher levels of dispositional curiosity. Curiosity, as a positive emotion, serves as a motivating factor that drives individuals to engage in actions aimed at dealing with the events that triggered it (Frijda, 2002). It promotes thinking, creativity, and flexibility of responses, while also enhancing experimentation, discovery of new phenomena, and the search for innovative solutions (Fredrickson, 2001). Curiosity fosters a belief in one’s ability to find pathways toward desired goals, motivates effort, and strengthens the conviction that difficulties can be overcome (Łaguna & Bąk, 2007). The analysis of the findings confirmed that the higher

the level of curiosity as a disposition to respond to change and novelty, the stronger the adolescent's tendency to seek mutual understanding and cooperation with others in order to find a mutually beneficial resolution to the conflict. This relationship has also been confirmed in previous research by authors such as Doliński (2000), de Catanzaro (2003), Sęk (2008), Jelonkiewicz and Kosińska-Dec (2008), as well as Borecka-Biernat (2025).

The summarised research findings partially confirmed the validity of the proposed hypothesis. This may be due to the self-report nature of the study, in which participants subjectively assessed their own responses. The results suggest that a lower evaluation of one's own abilities, combined with a strong belief in the influence of others on both the positive and negative outcomes of events, and a tendency to react to conflict with anger or anxiety, is associated with a destructive (aggressive or avoidant) coping style in response to social conflict. Conversely, a higher level of self-esteem, a stronger belief in one's ability to control the positive and negative consequences of events, and a tendency to respond to conflict with curiosity create more favourable conditions for constructive (task-oriented) coping with social conflict situations.

The conclusions drawn from the study have both theoretical and practical implications. The findings may help educators gain a deeper understanding of adolescents' behaviour in situations of social conflict and enable them to view the causes of such behaviour from the adolescent's own perspective. It cannot be ruled out that the results of this research may also serve as theoretical guidelines for the development of preventive and therapeutic programs that support the growth of personal qualities essential for constructive (task-oriented) coping strategies – strategies that promote mutual respect and the well-being of all participants involved in interpersonal relations and conflicts.

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