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## **SELF-ESTEEM AND LOCUS OF CONTROL AS DETERMINANTS OF AGGRESSIVE COPING STRATEGY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN A SOCIAL CONFLICT SITUATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of the study was to evaluate the contribution of self-esteem and locus of control in generating in the youth an aggressive coping strategy in a social conflict situation. The study made use of a proprietary questionnaire to study the coping strategy of youth in a social conflict situation (KSMK), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES), and the questionnaire to Study the Locus of Control (KBPK) created by G. Krasowicz and A. Kurzyp-Wojnarska. Empirical studies were carried out in junior high schools [Polish: gimnazjum] in Wroclaw and the surrounding area. They involved 811 adolescents (414 girls and 397 boys) aged 13–15. In the light of the performed studies it was stated that low general self-esteem in youth and strong belief in the influence of others on positive or negative effects of events play a particular role in the choice of aggressive strategy of young people to cope in a social conflict situation.

### **Key words:**

junior high school youth, self-esteem, locus of control, emotional reactions, aggressive coping strategy, social conflict situations

## 1. Introduction

In psychology the concept of “a difficult situation” is closely associated with activities people are doing to regulate their relations with the environment. In such actions they often encounter obstacles, get under the influence of inhibitions and there are cases that they fail to achieve the intended goal<sup>1</sup>. Difficult situations constitute an internally clearly diversified group. It is especially worth noting that difficult social situations in which, according to M. Tyszkowa<sup>2</sup> “the values and aspirations of an individual are subject to a threat or are prevented by other people by the mere fact of their presence or because of specific forms of counter actions or only incompatible with own aspirations (goals) of the individual”. From among situations of this type M. Tyszkowa<sup>3</sup> distinguishes *social conflict situations* in which the aspirations of an individual are contrary to or inconsistent with the aspirations of other people and the achievement of his/her own aspirations is threatened.

In the life of teenagers difficult situations of social interaction containing an element of a threat to the achievement of aspirations (satisfy the needs) are particularly frequent. The results of the study show that young people in their adolescence consider interpersonal conflicts the source of a strong sense of stress: a conflict with the teacher, arguments with school friends and with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and also quarrels with one or both parents and other family members<sup>4</sup>. A school conflict is interpreted as a clash of conflicting or inconsistent aspirations and behaviours of teachers and students or students with each other taking place in connection with teaching and educational process at school<sup>5</sup>. Z. Plewicka<sup>6</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> T. Tomaszewski, *Ślady i wzorce*, Warszawa 1984, pp. 134–145.

<sup>2</sup> M. Tyszkowa, *Funkcjonowanie dzieci w sytuacjach trudnych*, „Oświata i Wychowanie” 1979, nr 6, p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, pp. 210–217.

<sup>4</sup> R. Jaworski, *Konflikt pokoleń w okresie adolescencji. Psychologiczne aspekty radzenia sobie ze stresem* [in:] *Problemy człowieka w świecie psychologii*, R. Jaworski, A. Wielgus, J. Łukjaniuk (eds.), Płock 2000, pp. 27–54; M. Guszowska, A. Gorący, J. Rychta-Siedlecka, *Ważne zdarzenia życiowe i codzienne kłopoty jako źródło stresu w percepcji młodzieży*, „Edukacja Otwarta” 2001, nr 4, pp. 155–164; A. Woźniak-Krakowian, G. Wieczorek, *Przemoc w szkole jako zjawisko społeczne* [in:] *Problemy marginalizacji dzieci i młodzieży*, A. Woźniak-Krakowian, E. Napora, I. Gomółka-Walaszek (eds.), Częstochowa 2009, pp. 115–150.

<sup>5</sup> M. Tyszkowa, *Zachowanie się dzieci i młodzieży w sytuacjach trudnych. Teoretyczno-metodologiczne podstawy badań* [in:] *Zachowanie się młodzieży w sytuacjach trudnych i rozwój osobowości*, M. Tyszkowa (ed.), Poznań 1977, pp. 7–17.

<sup>6</sup> Z. Plewicka, *Sytuacje konfliktowe uczniów w szkole* [in:] *Zachowanie się młodzieży w sytuacjach trudnych i rozwój osobowości*, M. Tyszkowa (ed.), Poznań 1977, pp. 37–50.

J. Różańska-Kowal<sup>7</sup> and G. Miłkowska<sup>8</sup> investigated school conflict situations of students aged between 14 to 19. These were conflicts with teachers and peers in the class. Descriptions of school conflicts accounted for 68% of conflicts with teachers. The most controversial situations in the teacher-student combination are school grades. Students usually blame teachers for giving too low grades, underestimating the effort, not noticing improvements, giving failing grades not for educational results but for other offenses, and for favouring particular individuals. Another controversial group of factors described by students is teachers' tactless behaviour. They are reflected in mockery, calling names, ridiculing student's production in front of the class, devaluing the traits of appearance, behaviour, character, and the general value of the student as a person. The third group of controversial factors is the domineering pressure and inflexibility of the teacher's requirements. It is expected from the students that they should assimilate and reproduce knowledge in every subject without taking into account their individual traits of character, interests and abilities. It is worth noting – as Z. Plewicka<sup>9</sup> noted – that students' conflicts with teachers are, as a rule, situations difficult for the student and quite insignificant for teachers who most often do not notice them or disregard them. However, as the students spend more time at school the frequency of student-teacher conflicts increases.

In turn, descriptions of peer conflicts at school constitute 32% of the material collected by Z. Plewicka<sup>10</sup>. She divides them into individual and individual-group conflicts as also conflicts between formal and informal groups. Most descriptions of individual conflicts are reserved to primary schools (45%). Their main causes are: taunts and ridicule, groundless accusations, backbiting, betrayal, indiscretion, competition for grades, for favours from the opposite sex or lack of manners in behaviour. Individual-group conflicts show a decreasing tendency over the passage of years spent at school. In the last two years of primary school they represent 37% of the collected material. Frequently occurring are conflicts concerning social isolation of a student from the group, social background differences between a student and the majority of people in the group, and being above average in comparison with the group. As a result of the study carried out by the author it was found that a small number of students strongly identified with the group and described inter-

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<sup>7</sup> J. Różańska-Kowal, *Szkoła jako główne źródło stresu młodzieży w wieku dorastania*, „Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny” 2004, nr 3, pp. 203–214.

<sup>8</sup> G. Miłkowska, *Agresja w okresie dorastania-charakterystyka, przejawy, przeciwdziałanie* [in:] *Zagrożenia okresu dorastania*, Z. Izdebski (ed.), Zielona Góra 2012, pp. 91–110.

<sup>9</sup> Z. Plewicka, op.cit., pp. 39–43.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 43.

group conflicts as their unpleasant school experiences. It turns out that conflicts between “bunches” of girls arise in the context of competing for the favour of boys and grades at school. In turn, antagonistic “bunches” of boys compete mainly for control over the class and prestige in sports. According to the author, peer conflicts, despite a strong emotional load, are short-lived and at the same time the frequency of conflicts gets smaller as students spend more time at school. This does not mean that conflicts are a marginal phenomenon in the students social life. The source of tension and difficult situations for young people are also situations outside school, that is disagreements with friends, partners – boyfriends/girlfriends or contempt of peers. J. Róžańska-Kowal (2004) notes that disagreements between friends arise because of differences in opinions and uncontrolled impulsivity, as well as outbursts of anger most often for trivial reasons. Difficult situations for girls are misunderstandings and breaking up with their boyfriends.

In addition to everyday difficulties associated with school, another source of everyday problems of young people are contacts with their parents. Conflicts in the parent-child, child-parent relations that in adolescence are a universal phenomenon and an important source of tensions as young people grow<sup>11</sup>. The source of stress here is the feeling of lack of communication with the parents and their excessive demands. Many of such conflicts concern everyday situations – differences in opinions, tastes associated, e.g. with clothes, music, performing household duties, spending free time, and the hours of coming back home. We are dealing here with the clash of young people’s growing need for independence with the standards determined by their parents, orders and prohibitions and tendencies to control, supervise the life and behaviour of children approaching adulthood. Moreover, adolescence period is the stage of discovering new authorities, new needs and changes in the system of values. Therefore, the occurrence of generational conflict is also affected by the difference of the system of values preferred by the world of adults and adolescent children. Apart from that, puberty causes growing interest in the opposite sex. The choice of a boyfriend/girlfriend by a child may trigger dissatisfaction of parents and constitute the embers of conflict. A growing child requires absolute tolerance and acceptance for the chosen person and complete freedom in matters of the heart. Similarly, the growing children’s lack of acceptance for their own appearance, exaggerating their imagined flaws and defects of beauty causes demands not only towards their figures but also towards the parents. Undoubtedly, changing disposition, mood swings, and impulsivity irritability triggered by the storm of hormones in teenagers annoy the parents; the fact that they are not

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<sup>11</sup> R. Jaworski, *op.cit.*, pp. 27–54; J. Róžańska-Kowal, *op.cit.*, pp. 203–214.

able to control their children's emotional processes which in turn is the basis for conflicts. It is worth noting – as Cz. Matuszewicz<sup>12</sup> noted – that misunderstandings and conflicts with a mother and father occur in approximately 55–65% of the population of primary and secondary school students, and here boys tend to be more confrontational than girls. Also the intensity of family conflicts increases.

Difficult situations cannot be ruled out from human life. From the moment of birth each person must learn to cope with difficulties and challenges that they face. A difficult situation encourages a young person to an activity aimed to recover balance between the requirements of the situation and the abilities to adapt and/or to improve the state of emotions. An activity that a young person undertakes in a difficult situation is considered in a specific situational context as a strategy of coping in a current difficult situation<sup>13</sup>. Numerous studies and even common observation suggest that adolescents have a considerable repertoire of coping strategies in difficult social situations at their disposal<sup>14</sup>. One of them is the strategy of aggression that takes the form of an initiated physical or verbal attack directed to certain persons, causing damage in the physical, mental and social well-being of others (i.e. causing pain, suffering, destruction, leading to loss of appreciated values). This is applied when the situation faced by individuals is assessed by them as a threat to their well-being<sup>15</sup>. The strategy in the form of an aggressive response to difficulties is not directed towards solving and overcoming a difficult situation, it allows to only reduce the unpleasant emotional tension. In contrast the goal that they initially had set is replaced by another – achievement of well-being. Persons adopting the strategy of aggression do not burden themselves with difficulties of solving the problem. An unsolved problem in the longer time perspective evokes a sense of dissatisfaction as opposed to the achievements of other people and the sense of helplessness and lack of control over the difficult situation<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Cz. Matuszewicz, *Konflikty w zespołach uczniowskich* [in:] *Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna*, W. Pomykało (ed.), Warszawa 1997, pp. 285–287.

<sup>13</sup> K. Wrześniewski, *Style a strategie radzenia sobie ze stresem. Problemy pomiaru* [in:] *Człowiek w sytuacji stresu. Problemy teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, I. Heszen-Niejodek, Z. Ratajczak (ed.), Katowice 1996, pp. 44–64.

<sup>14</sup> Ph. Donaldson, *Patterns of Children's Coping with Life Stress*, "American Journal of Orthopsychiatry" 2000, No. 70, pp. 351–359; A. Frączek, *Wszystko o twojej agresji*, „Charaktery” 2003, nr 7, pp. 28–30; J. Różańska-Kowal, op.cit., pp. 203–214; R. Sikora, E. Pisula, *Wiek i płeć a radzenie sobie ze stresem przez młodzież w wieku 12–17 lat*, „Przegląd Psychologiczny” 2008, nr 51, pp. 405–421.

<sup>15</sup> R. Stach, *Zachowanie agresywne*, Wrocław 1989, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> D. Borecka-Biernat, *Strategie radzenia sobie młodzieży w trudnych sytuacjach społecznych. Psychospołeczne uwarunkowania*, Wrocław 2006, p. 62.

From what we already know, human coping strategies are always analyzed in a particular difficult situation because they largely depend on the perception of such a situation. Therefore, it is worth noting how young people cope with conflict situations that take place in schools, in relations with peers or at home. Recent results of the studies indicate that particularly stressful for adolescents is the school environment, especially situations of conflict with teachers and classmates. Furthermore, empirical evidence contained in the literature shows that young people use many different strategies to cope with problems at school<sup>17</sup>. Among the coping strategies mentioned by young people in the context of school difficult situations we can distinguish aggressive behaviours towards people and objects. From the data obtained by E. Nitendel-Bujakowa<sup>18</sup>, A. Woźniak-Krakowian, G. Wiczorek<sup>19</sup>, and G. Miłkowska<sup>20</sup> it can be seen that lessons are the situations that are particularly favourable to aggressive ways to recover from stress. When asked about the causes of aggression in the classroom the students covered by the study mentioned, among others, fear of bad grades, fear of failure, large amount of homework, unexpected tests, teacher's antipathy to students, fear of reprimand, fear of spiteful remarks addressed to them, and fear of worsening the opinion and relations with friends. Students' aggression consisted, among other things, in deliberate preventing teachers from conducting lessons, destroying personal items left on the teacher's desk, stating unfavourable opinions about a teacher to friends and parents. It is also worth mentioning that more than half of the surveyed students admitted that they undertake aggressive behaviours during lesson breaks. Here dominate manifestations of physical aggression (poking, pushing, and kicking) and among the forms of verbal aggression there are nicknames, ridiculing a person or their possession, and mockery. Especially dangerous during the lesson breaks are secluded places where students spend time mostly without the presence of a teacher (cloakroom, hallway, and toilet). Students asked about the causes of aggression during the break point out to, among other things, settling scores and conflicts. A significant portion of students is getting into conflicts with other students and for these reasons they experience states of unpleasant emotional stress.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Róžańska-Kowal, op.cit., pp. 203–214; K. Polak, *Uczeń w sytuacji konfliktów szkolnych* [in:] *Sytuacje konfliktowe w środowisku rodzinnym, szkolnym i rówieśniczym*, D. Borecka-Biernat (ed.), Warszawa 2010, pp. 23–40.

<sup>18</sup> E. Nitendel-Bujakowa, *Lęki szkolne jako wyznacznik funkcjonowania dziecka*, „Problemy poradnictwa psychologiczno-pedagogicznego” 2001, nr 1, pp. 15–37.

<sup>19</sup> A. Woźniak-Krakowian, G. Wiczorek, op.cit., pp. 115–150.

<sup>20</sup> G. Miłkowska, op.cit., pp. 91–110.

These tensions are most often released by students through engaging in quarrels, name calling, ridicule or fights.

Interesting research on strategies to cope with conflict situations in a peer group were conducted by A. Frączek<sup>21</sup>. Adolescent children: nine-, eleven- and fifteen-year-olds living in Israel, Finland, Poland and Italy took part in the studies. The results of these studies show that girls cope better than boys with conflicts and more often tend to reach an agreement. With boys, however, aggressive strategy occurs more frequently than with girls. Aggression in boys and girls takes different forms. In the latter it tends to be more indirect, it is hidden and used for defence. It is of passive nature, takes the form of complaining, accusing, sulking, and emotional rejection. Boys apply open, physical, and more active and direct forms of aggressive behaviour. These studies have shown that physical and instrumental aggression is more frequent in younger children, whereas in older – verbal and hostile aggression.

Conflict situations with parents pose a more and more important source of tension as the children grow. R. Jaworski<sup>22</sup> notes that conflicts in the child-parent relations are a common phenomenon during adolescence. Children at an older school age wish to free themselves from the tutelage of their parents and demand granting more rights than before with their entire behaviour. Encountered obstacles and failures and the prohibitions and restrictions imposed by the parents cause reactions of anger expressed in arrogant responses, slamming the door, sometimes in tears or direct acts of aggression directed at objects or people. In relation to parents the aggression of adolescent children is manifested in words, ironic statements, ignoring commands or silence. The author found that in conflict situations a teenager often shows a lot of ruthlessness, aggression, brutality, indifference, and even cynicism.

Previous considerations show that a social conflict situation involves the issues of aggressive coping strategies in a specific situational context aiming to avoid or minimize tensions, losses, and adverse effects. There should be asked a question why young people in a social conflict situation chose the strategy in the form of an aggressive reaction to difficulties. According to M. Tyszkowa<sup>23</sup> in the psychological mechanism of human behaviour in difficult situations an important role is played by basic cognitive structures of personality. A person's group of concepts and ideas about themselves, the expectations towards oneself, what is the structure of the

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<sup>21</sup> A. Frączek, op.cit., p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> R. Jaworski, op.cit., p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> M. Tyszkowa, *Zachowanie się dzieci w sytuacjach trudnych*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 86–103.



“I” and their subjective beliefs concerning the control over a situation determine the manner of cognitive perceiving and interpreting external situation, which in return affects the behaviour in this situation.

Information concerning their own person and qualities that make up the knowledge about themselves constitute a prerequisite to assess their own abilities in difficult situations<sup>24</sup>. From what we know self-esteem constitutes an assessing and evaluating component of the structure of the “I”. The influence of self-esteem is visible in the functioning of an individual in difficult situations. As it turns out, unfavourable, poorly organized and irrelevant structure of the “I” undergoes a threat in a difficult situation which causes – according to M. Tyszkowa<sup>25</sup> – shifting of the target of the activity towards the defence of the individual’s own “I”. The result is disorganization of activities aimed at the target. Test results obtained, among others by M. Tyszkowa<sup>26</sup>, D. Kubacka-Jasiecka<sup>27</sup>, T. Rostowska<sup>28</sup>, N. Ogińska-Bulik<sup>29</sup>, D. Borecka-Biernat<sup>30</sup>, and S. Eftimie and S. Ionescu<sup>31</sup> showed that low and high (inadequate) self-esteem play an unfavourable role in the behaviour of young people in difficult situations. Least susceptible to disorganization of behaviour in difficult situations are persons manifesting high (adequate) level of self-esteem. As it turns out in the contact of an individual with difficulties of a situation an inadequate self-esteem leads to an increased sense of personal insecurity and progressive disorganization of behaviour. A tendency to aggressive behaviours emerges in case of low and high (inadequate) assessment of oneself, of own abilities and effectiveness of actions in the face of various difficult events. Here it is worth to mention some empirical data from the studies by H. Kulas<sup>32</sup> that show that for two-thirds of adolescent girls and boys with low self-esteem their contacts

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, pp. 65–76.

<sup>25</sup> M. Tyszkowa, *Zachowanie się dzieci i młodzieży w sytuacjach trudnych. Teoretyczno-metodologiczne podstawy badań* [in:] *Zachowanie się młodzieży w sytuacjach trudnych i rozwój osobowości*, M. Tyszkowa (ed.), Poznań 1977, pp. 7–17.

<sup>26</sup> M. Tyszkowa, *Odporność psychiczna* [in:] *Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna*, W. Pomykało (ed.), Warszawa 1997, pp. 475–478.

<sup>27</sup> D. Kubacka-Jasiecka, *Młodzieżowe zachowania agresywne w zmaganiu się z zagrożeniem Ja*, „Kwartalnik Polskiej Psychologii Rozwojowej” 1995, nr 3(2), pp. 3–21.

<sup>28</sup> T. Rostowska, *Konflikt międzypokoleniowy w rodzinie. Analiza psychologiczna*, Łódź 2001, pp. 77–80.

<sup>29</sup> N. Ogińska-Bulik, *Zasoby osobiste w radzeniu sobie ze stresem*, „Zeszyty Naukowe WSHE w Łodzi” 2000, nr 8(13), pp. 93–103.

<sup>30</sup> D. Borecka-Biernat, op.cit., pp. 200–215.

<sup>31</sup> P. Eftimie, P. Ionescu, *Self Esteem on Aggressive Adolescents*, „Buletinul Universităţii Petrol – Gaze din Ploiesti, Seria StiinŃele EducaŃiei” 2010, Vol. LXII, No. 2, pp. 146–153.

<sup>32</sup> H. Kulas, *Samoocena młodzieży*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 163–169.



with friends in the classroom were unfavourable and confrontational, whereas only 6.7% with high level of self-esteem determined their relationships with their peers in the classroom this way. Studies by H. Kulas<sup>33</sup> further show that extremely high self-esteem does not favour maintaining beneficial relationships with others. Students with very high (inadequate) self-esteem are usually characterized by arrogance, overconfidence, disrespectful attitude towards others, and disregard for the opinion of the environment. The students covered by the study blamed teachers, sometimes parents, friends and never themselves for the lack of success in learning. Blaming others was accompanied by aggression, which as a result destroyed proper relationships with them. And so, too high, wrong self-esteem makes an individual to be guided in their behaviour by their desires rather than actual abilities. This determines uncritical readiness to undertake tasks when their abilities do not justify their performance. Not obtaining what they had expected, an individual is exposed to frustration and so disappoints others due to poor performance or non-performance of the task. They are often suspected of lack of accountability, are exposed to disapproval and criticism and defending against these unpleasant consequences they try to minimize their own guilt, trying to shift responsibility to others, which as a consequence leads to a conflict with the environment.

As can be seen, current studies devoted to correlation between self-esteem and aggression allow to conclude that low or very high (inadequate) level of self-esteem is accompanied by aggression manifested by an individual in social contact situations. It means that low and high (inadequate) self-esteem reduces mental resilience to difficult situations, decreases efficiency of the actions and makes it difficult to an individual to adapt or cope in a difficult situation. Even a small obstacle or faint threat may, in people with low or high (inadequate) self-esteem, cause uncontrolled aggression.

The functioning of a human being in difficult situations is also decided by other components of personality. M. Tyszkowa<sup>34</sup> draws attention to mechanisms of control by comparing their effects to a control over a situation. A human being operates in situations in which the successes and failures they experience are treated as a consequence of the forces that are beyond the reach of personal control – we then talk about the *external locus of control* or the result of actions depends on their own behaviour and skills and then it is referred to as the *internal locus of*

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<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, pp. 169–172.

<sup>34</sup> M. Tyszkowa, *Sytuacyjno-poznawcza koncepcja odporności psychicznej*, „Przegląd Psychologiczny” 1978, nr 1, pp. 3–15.

*control*<sup>35</sup>. And so, people tend to perceive most situations as such in which they see a big influence of uncontrolled factors on the results of their activities and thus perceive themselves as “not controlling the situation”. Others, however, tend to perceive situations as such in which the results of their activities depend on themselves and thus perceive themselves as “controlling the situation”.

Control mechanisms determine “what changes human functioning is subjected to in cases of encountering a difficult situation”<sup>36</sup>. This means that subjective beliefs of an individual concerning their control over the surrounding world are an important variable regulating the course of process of coping in a difficult situation. The conviction of the possibility of influence (or its lack) on the course of events significantly modifies the efforts made by the individual to cope with the difficult situation and determines the ways to cope with it. Generally the locus of control is an important individual factor modifying human functioning in difficult situations determining the applied strategies to cope with problems. A sense of control over a situation and so the conviction that the situation depends on own activity of the subject (that something can be done to change it) is the foundation to continue the efforts to overcome difficulties and intensify exploratory activity in order to find a way out of the difficulty. This in turn increases the likelihood of achieving the desired result because it creates an opportunity to overcome difficulties<sup>37</sup>. As can be seen, people’s subjective belief in their control over a situation is governed by the course of the process of coping in a difficult situation affecting the undertaken coping strategies. On the other hand, the assessment of a situation as such to which people have no belief that they have some control over is associated with destructive form of coping in a difficult situation. Lack of belief in the possibility to influence life events that happen to an individual effectively makes it impossible to cope with difficulties and triggers aggression. The study carried out among others by K. Zajęczkowski<sup>38</sup>, I. Pufal-Struzik<sup>39</sup>, M. Gacek<sup>40</sup>,

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<sup>35</sup> R. Drwal, *Poczucie kontroli jako wymiar osobowości- podstawy teoretyczne, techniki badawcze i wyniki badań*, „Materiały do Nauczania Psychologii” 1978, p. III, t. 3, pp. 307–345.

<sup>36</sup> J. Reykowski, *Funkcjonowanie osobowości w warunkach stresu psychologicznego*, Warszawa 1966, p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> G. Bishop, *Psychologia zdrowia*, Wrocław 2000; P. Kurtek, *Regulacyjna rola poczucia kontroli w radzeniu sobie młodzieży z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną lekkiego stopnia w sytuacjach trudnych*, „Przegląd Psychologiczny” 2005, nr 3, pp. 277–294.

<sup>38</sup> K. Zajęczkowski, *Poczucie kontroli zachowania a skłonności agresywne nieletnich przestępców*, „Roczniki Pedagogiki Specjalnej” 1992, nr 3, pp. 146–155.

<sup>39</sup> I. Pufal-Struzik, *Niektóre cechy osobowości młodzieży agresywnej*, „Psychologia Wychowawcza” 1997, nr 2, pp. 151–156.

<sup>40</sup> M. Gacek, *Niektóre osobowościowe determinanty odporności młodzieży akademickiej na stres psychologiczny-doniesienie z badań*, „Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska” 2000, Vol LV, Suppl. VII, No. 10, sectio D, pp. 43–46.

N. Ogińska-Bulik<sup>41</sup>, T. Rostowska<sup>42</sup>, and D. Borecka-Biernat<sup>43</sup> shows that conflictive relationships with other young people (e.g. animosity, malevolence, blaming) are the forms of behaviour coexisting most often with the sense of external control. Assessment of a situation as to which a young people are convinced that they have no control over is associated with an aggressive form of coping with problems.

To sum up the previous considerations, we can conclude that the applied strategy of aggression in a social conflict situation largely depends on subjective variables shaped in the course of diverse experiences of an individual starting from early childhood.

## 2. Research problems

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

Is there and what is the relationship between the level of self-esteem and strategy of aggression of young people coping in a social conflict situation?

Is there and what is the association between the locus of control and strategy of aggression of young people coping in a social conflict situation?

## 3. Research methods and research group

The study made use of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES)<sup>44</sup>, the questionnaire to Study the Locus of Control (KBPK) created by G. Krasowicz and A. Kurzyp-Wojnarska<sup>45</sup>, and a proprietary questionnaire to study the coping strategy of youth in a social conflict situation (KSMK)<sup>46</sup>.

**Measurement.** The M. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) gives the opportunity to calculate the level of general (global) self-esteem in both youth as also adults. SES consists of 10 diagnostic descriptive statements concerning own person by

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<sup>41</sup> N. Ogińska-Bulik, op.cit., pp. 93–103.

<sup>42</sup> T. Rostowska, op.cit., pp. 80–83.

<sup>43</sup> D. Borecka-Biernat, op.cit., pp. 215–227.

<sup>44</sup> M. Łaguna, K. Lachowicz-Tabaczek, I. Dzwonkowska, *Skala samooceny SES Morrissa Rosenberga – polska adaptacja metody*, „Psychologia Społeczna” 2007, nr 2, pp. 164–176.

<sup>45</sup> G. Krasowicz, A. Kurzyp-Wojnarska, *Kwestionariusz do badania poczucia kontroli (KBPK)*. Podręcznik, Warszawa 1990, p. 39.

<sup>46</sup> D. Borecka-Biernat, *Kwestionariusz strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego*, „Psychologia Wychowawcza” 2012, nr 1–2, pp. 86–118.

means of which the subject makes a self-description of their "I". The person under study gives answers on a four-degree scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The subject can obtain from 1 to 4 points for every answer. Final results range from 10 to 40 points. A high score in the Scale means a high level of general (global) self-esteem. The Polish version of the SES method is a reliable tool with proven construct validity.

KBPK questionnaire is used to measure the variable of personality called the locus of control. It consists of 46 forced-choice questions, 36 of which are diagnostic items and the remaining 10 are buffer questions. Diagnostic questions on simple situations in the life of school youth make up two scales: the scale of successes (S) and the scale of failures (F). Questions about favourable events form the scale of successes (S) and questions about adverse events – the scale of failures (F). The sum of the results obtained in the scales of successes and failures creates an indicator of the generalized locus of control (S+F). High scores on the scales indicate a sense of internal control of the consequences of events. According to G. Krasowicz and A. Kurzyp-Wojnarska<sup>47</sup>, the authors of KBPK questionnaire, it satisfies the psychometric requirements.

Proprietary KSMK questionnaire is intended to examine coping strategies in a social conflict situation undertaken by young people in adolescence. It consists of a description of 33 difficult social conflict situations. Each situation was given 4 behaviours expressing coping with a social conflict situation – the first refers to aggressive coping (A), the second to avoidance coping (A1), the third to submissive coping (S) and the fourth to task-oriented coping in a social conflict situation (T). The results are obtained for each scale separately by summing up the selected behaviours in 33 situations belonging to a given scale. Since the scales are composed of 33 items the persons under study may score from 0 to 33 points on each of them. The KSMK questionnaire is characterised by favourable psychometric parameters. The scale reliability coefficients determined by an integral consistency method (Cronbach's alpha) are from alpha = 0.73 (for the scales "Aggression", "Submission" and "Task") to alpha = 0.694 (the "Avoidance" scale). The accuracy of the scales was tested in a number of ways, the convergent validity was confirmed, among other things, with respect to the results of A-R questionnaire by K. Ostrowska, Children's Assertive Behaviour Scale – CABS by L. Michelson and R Wood adapted by M. Oleś and the adolescents' conflict resolution style questionnaire by T. Honess et al. in the adaptation by B. Lachowska. The sten scale standards have been

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<sup>47</sup> G. Krasowicz, A. Kurzyp-Wojnarska, *Kwestionariusz do badania poczucia kontroli (KBPK)*. Podręcznik, Warszawa 1990, pp. 16–27.

developed based on a sample survey of 1,877 students, including 975 girls and 902 boys aged 13–15 from first, second and third class of junior high schools from all sixteen provinces in Poland.

*Sample survey of the individuals covered by the study.* A group of 414 girls and 397 boys aged 13–15 have been covered by the study. In general the study covered 811 people. The subjects were the students of first, second and third class of junior high schools in Wrocław and the surrounding area. The nature of the study was a group study and it was carried out in schools.

#### 4. Analysis of the results of the study

In order to check the possible correlation between the level of general self-esteem and aggressive coping strategy in a social conflict situation the results in SES and KSMK questionnaires were correlated. The correlation coefficient (Pearson's  $r$ ) for the entire group and for groups separated by gender are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Correlation coefficients (Pearson's  $r$ ) between the results of the SES questionnaire and the "A" scale of the KSMK questionnaire for the entire group ( $N = 811$ ) and for girls ( $N = 414$ ) and boys ( $N = 397$ )

Questionnaire SES	"A" Scale of the KSMK questionnaire		
	Girls	Boys	Total
	$r = 0.06$ n.s.	$r = -0.16$ $p < 0.001$	$r = -0.04$ n.s.

Legend: A – aggressive coping in a social conflict situation, n.s. – not significant

The data presented in Table 1 show that the correlation between the level of general self-esteem and the strategy of aggression is very low and statistically insignificant for the entire group and for girls ( $p < 0.05$ ). In turn, statistically significant weak negative correlation between the level of general self-esteem and the scale of aggression to cope for boys ( $r = -0.16$ ). A simple correlation can be seen – the lower the level of general self-esteem, the more often boys in a social conflict situation apply strategies of aggression. It can be assumed that along with the decrease in the level of general self-esteem the value of aggressive way of boys coping with conflict will increase.

For a more in-depth analysis of the existing relationship between the level of general self-esteem and aggressive coping strategy in a social conflict situation three groups of young people with high, medium and low levels of strategies of aggression to cope were compared in terms of the level of general self-esteem. Comparison of the level of general self-esteem of young people with high (HA), medium (MA) and low (LA) level of strategy of aggression to cope in a social conflict situation is contained in Table 2.

**Table 2. The level of general self-esteem of young people with high (HA), medium (MA) and low level (LA) of strategy of aggression to cope in a social conflict situation**

Subjects	Group	Level of general self-esteem					
		Low N%		Medium N%		High N%	
Total	HA (N = 382)	99	25.92	143	37.43	140	36.65
	MA (N = 283)	65	22.97	119	42.05	99	34.98
	LA (N = 146)	22	15.07	49	33.56	75	51.37
$X^2 = 14.86; df = 4; p < 0.05; C = 0.13$							
Girls	HA(N = 181)	48	26.52	43	23.76	90	49.72
	MA (N = 152)	45	29.61	49	32.24	58	38.16
	LA (N = 81)	13	16.05	23	28.40	45	55.56
$X^2 = 10.15; df = 4; p < 0.04; C = 0.16$							
Boys	HA(N = 201)	51	25.37	100	49.75	50	24.88
	MA (N = 131)	20	15.27	70	53.44	41	31.30
	LA (N = 65)	9	13.85	26	40.00	30	46.15
$X^2 = 14.49; df = 4; p < 0.006; C = 0.19$							

The distribution of the data in Table 2 shows that the low and medium level of general self-esteem is more common in young people (taking the group as a whole) characterized by high (25.92%, 37.43%) and medium (22.97%, 42.05%) level of strategy of aggression applied in a social conflict situation. The frequency of occurrence of high level of general self-esteem is higher in a group of teenagers characterized by low level of strategy of aggression to cope in a social conflict situation (51.37%). Correlations emerging when taking a group of people with high, medium and low levels of strategy of aggression to cope in a social conflict situation as a whole occurred also after taking into account the gender of the youth covered by the study. The frequency of occurrence both in girls and in boys of low and medium level of general self-esteem is higher in a group of teenagers distinguished by high (G.: 26.52%; 23.76%; B.: 25.37%; 49.75%) and medium (G.: 29.61%; 32.24%; B.: 15.27%; 53.44%) level of strategy of aggression to cope in

a social conflict situation. In turn, girls and boys with high self-esteem are more frequent in a group with low levels of strategy of aggression to cope in a social conflict situation (G.: 55.56%; B.: 46.15%).

The distribution of the results when treating the subjects as a whole and in relation to girls and boys have been checked for significance. When applying the  $\chi^2$  test for contingency table the obtained statistics value is 14.86 for the entire population covered by the study and 10.15 for girls and 14.49 for boys. It is greater than the critical value of 9.48 for the significance level  $p < 0.05$  at 4 degrees of freedom.

The data contained in Table 2 show that there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of self-esteem and the level of aggressive coping strategy of young people (taking the group as a whole and in division by gender) in a social conflict situation. A question comes to mind how strong is the relationship between the level of general self-esteem and the level of strategy of aggression of young people to cope in a social conflict situation. A method of square contingency C which is a correlation indicator of quality characteristics was applied to see about that<sup>48</sup>. The square contingency coefficient C obtained from  $\chi^2$  equals 0.13 for the entire population covered by the study and 0.16 for girls and 0.19 for boys. Since  $\chi^2$ , from which C was obtained, is significant at the level of 0.05 then C significantly differs from zero correlation. This means that between the level of self-esteem and the level of strategy of aggression of young people to cope (taking the group as a whole and in division by gender) in a social conflict situation there is no statistically significant but low correlation.

Generally, on the basis of the data presented in Table 2 a clear regularity between the level of self-esteem and the level of strategy of aggression of young people to cope in a social conflict situation can be seen. It is expressed in the tendency to increase the level of strategy of aggression applied by adolescents in a social conflict situation along with the decrease of their level of self-esteem and vice versa – the tendency to decrease the level of strategy of aggression applied by adolescents in a social conflict situation along with the increase of the level of self-esteem.

The characteristics of the correlation between the locus of control and the strategy of aggression of youth to cope in a social conflict situation was made by means of correlation coefficient (Pearson's  $r$ ). The results of the application of this method are presented in Table 3.

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<sup>48</sup> J. Guliford, *Podstawowe metody statystyczne w psychologii i pedagogice*, Warszawa 1970, pp. 323–324.



**Table 3. Summary of the correlation coefficient (Pearson's  $r$ ) between the scales of the KBPK questionnaire and the "A" scale of the KSMK questionnaire for the entire group ( $N=811$ ) and for girls ( $N=414$ ) and boys ( $N=397$ )**

Scale of the KBPK questionnaire	"A" Scale of the KSMK questionnaire		
	Girls	Boys	Total
S	-0.32 $p<0.0001$	-0.26 $p<0.0001$	-0.29 $p<0.0001$
F	-0.33 $p<0.0001$	-0.22 $p<0.0001$	-0.27 $p<0.0001$
S+F	-0.37 $p<0.0001$	-0.27 $p<0.0001$	-0.32 $p<0.0001$

Legend: A – aggressive coping in a social conflict situation, S – the scale of successes, F – the scale of failures, S+F – the sum of the results of the scales S and F

Correlation coefficients contained in Table 3 are low and statistically significant at a very high level ( $p<0.0001$ ). This fact allows to think that the locus of control separately for the situation of success (S) and the situation of failures (F) as also the generalized locus of control and the strategy of aggression of youth to cope in a social conflict situation are not the phenomena strongly associated. In the context of the considered correlations, however, important is that all algebraic signs "standing" near the values of aggression as a coping strategy of young people in a social conflict situation indicate a negative correlation. The analysis of the correlation between the locus of control separately for the situation of successes and the situation of failures as also the generalized locus of control and a coping strategy of aggression of youth revealed that the strategy in the form of adolescents' aggressive reaction to a social conflict situation is negatively associated with the locus of control separately for the situation of successes and the situation of failures as also the generalized locus of control. Correlation coefficients are respectively  $r(S) = -0,29$ ,  $r(F) = -0,27$  and  $r(S+F) = -0,32$ . So we are dealing here with an unambiguous tendency to bi-directional changes in the values of the characteristics of the subjects; the higher the scores in the KBPK questionnaire, and thus the stronger the belief in internal control of the consequences of the events separately for the situation of successes and the situation of failures as also the generalized internal locus of control, the lower the results of the measurement of the strategy of aggression, and vice versa – lower results in the KBPK questionnaire, that is the stronger belief in external control of implications of the events separately for the situation of successes and the situation of failures as also the generalized internal locus

of control are accompanied by a higher level of aggression of young people in a social conflict situation.

The data contained in Table 3 allow at the same time to believe that sex was not the factor differentiating the strength of the relationship between the tested variables. Almost identical correlation coefficients in girls and boys occurred between the locus of control separately for the situation of successes (G.  $r = -0.32$ ; B.  $r = -0.26$ ) and for the situation of failures (G.  $r = -0.33$ ; B.  $r = -0.22$ ) as also the generalized locus of control (G.  $r = -0.37$ ; B.  $r = -0.27$ ) and the strategy of aggression in a social conflict situation. Girls and boys scored low correlation coefficients that were statistically highly significant.

In general, the data presented in Table 3 suggest that the locus of control is an important variable that modifies the functioning of young persons in a social conflict situation. The stronger the conviction about the influence of others on positive and/or negative effects of their own actions, the greater the intensity of the strategy of aggression in a social conflict situation.

## 5. Summary of the results of the study

The results of the carried out analyses indicate a link between self-esteem and the locus of control with an aggressive coping strategy of young people in a social conflict situation. In the course of this analysis it was found that aggressive behaviour towards others (e.g., animosity, malevolence, blaming) appearing in a situation posing a threat to the realization of a young person's own aspirations is a form of behaviour coexisting most often with low level of general self-esteem. Adolescent youth (taking the subjects in general and in division by gender) that apply the strategy of aggression to cope in a social conflict situation have low self-esteem. It should be believed that a person with low self-esteem in a state of personal danger arising from the confrontational relations with others, instead of focusing on the problem directs their action towards the defence of self-esteem, which as a result leads to excitation of aggression directed towards the environment. Aggression then becomes an attempt to cope with the threat to the safety of their own "I". Adolescents attempt to disguise the threat to the self-image through accusations or depreciation of the value of the others, which is connected with provoking conflicts. It needs to be believed that low level of self-esteem plays a role in the preference of the selection of aggressive coping strategies in a social conflict situation<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> D. Kubacka-Jasiecka, *Młodzieżowe zachowania agresywne w zmaganiu się z zagrożeniem Ja*,

The analysis of the results of the study also revealed that lack of faith in the possibility to obtain the desired results of their own actions is conducive to revealing by young people (taking the subjects as a whole and in division by gender) of strategies of aggression in a social conflict situation. They do not believe that good and desirable things that happen to them have been happening with their contribution. The belief in the possibility of obtaining the desired results of their actions are rather ascribed to favourable coincidence of events or to the favour of other people. They are convinced that success they achieve and the granted awards are the result of a stroke of luck, good fortune or a favourable coincidence. This tendency to an external locus of control in adolescents applying strategies of aggression in a social conflict situation is also manifested in situations of failures. Lack of sense of responsibility for failures is the cause of lack of motivation to undertake tasks and actions that could prevent a failure, hence these young people have a tendency to aggressive coping in a social conflict situation. They believe that the blame for the failures they encounter is not on their side. Most often they perceive the cause of such a state of affairs in the destiny, bad luck, bad fate, spite of other people or other external factors over which they have no control whatsoever. Therefore, the regularity that lack of faith in the likelihood of obtaining the desired results of their own actions or lack of the sense of responsibility for failures is conducive for revealing a strategy of aggression in a social conflict situation seems very likely. Since they are most often convinced of impossibility to influence the change of a social conflict situation they do not demonstrate their focus on the source of the problem but on themselves preparing for the defence of the threatened "I". This results in the adoption of a defence strategy in the form of aggressive responding in a social conflict situation and reinforcing it by routine application in this situation<sup>50</sup>.

Generalizing the above results, it can be concluded that low level of general self-esteem plays a role in the choice of the strategy of aggression to cope in social conflict situations by young people. Adolescent youth are aware of their capabilities and limitations affecting their way of functioning in a social conflict situation. Assessment of own abilities plays an important role in coping in the face of confrontational events as it determines whether the result of the assessment of the requirements-abilities relationship will as a consequence be of posi-

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„Kwartalnik Polskiej Psychologii Rozwojowej” 1995, nr 3(2), pp. 3–21; D. Borecka-Biernat, *Strategie radzenia sobie młodzieży w trudnych sytuacjach społecznych. Psychospołeczne uwarunkowania*, Wrocław 2006, p. 318.

<sup>50</sup> K. Zajączkowski, *Poczucie kontroli zachowania a skłonności agresywne nieletnich przestępców*, „Roczniki Pedagogiki Specjalnej” 1992, nr 3, pp. 146–155; T. Rostowska, op.cit., p. 83.

tive or negative nature. Low assessment of their abilities and effectiveness of actions, strong conviction of adolescents about the influence of others on positive and/or negative effects of events favour the occurrence of aggressive forms of behaviour, reducing emotional tension due to the conflicting nature of the existing obstacles.

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