CZU: 159.922.8:316.485.6:303.4 **https://doi.org/10.59295/sum5(195)2026_54**

DEVELOPING A CONFLICTOLOGICAL CULTURE IN ADOLESCENTS: RESULTS OF A FORMATIVE EXPERIMENT

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This article addresses the issue of developing a culture of conflict resolution among older adolescents. The relevance of the study stems from the specific nature of the identity crisis and the lack of self-regulation skills among adolescents aged 16–18. The paper presents a theoretical rationale for a training program that integrates principles of cultural-historical psychology with humanistic and cognitive-behavioral approaches. During a formative experiment (n=12), an interactive program aimed at developing communicative and behavioral flexibility was tested. Its effectiveness was confirmed using methods of mathematical statistics (Wilcoxon”s T-test). The results indicate a significant increase in the overall level of conflict resolution culture, a decrease in personal conflict, and a transformation of primary behavioral strategies: a shift away from avoidance toward cooperation and compromise. The author concludes that group training is highly effective as a means of correcting social interactions among adolescents.

Keywords: *conflictological culture; conflict behavior strategies; personal conflictness; late adolescence; socio-psychological training.*

FORMAREA UNEI CULTURI CONFLICTOLOGICE LA ADOLESCENȚI: REZULTATELE UNUI EXPERIMENT FORMATIV

Articolul este dedicat problemei formării unei culturi conflictologice la adolescenții de vârstă mai mare. Actualitatea cercetării este determinată de specificul crizei de identitate și de deficitul de abilități de autoreglare la adolescenții cu vârste cuprinse între 16 și 18 ani. Lucrarea prezintă fundamentarea teoretică a programului de formare, care integrează postulatele psihologiei cultural-istorice, ale abordărilor umaniste și cognitiv-comportamentale. În cadrul experimentului formativ (n=12) a fost testat un program interactiv, orientat spre dezvoltarea flexibilității comunicative și comportamentale. Eficacitatea a fost confirmată prin metode de statistică matematică (criteriul T al lui Wilcoxon). Rezultatele indică o creștere semnificativă a nivelului general al culturii conflictologice, o scădere a conflictualității personale și o transformare a strategiilor principale de comportament: renunțarea la evitarea conflictului în favoarea cooperării și a compromisului. Autorul a concluzionat că trainingul de grup este un mijloc foarte eficient de corectare a interacțiunilor sociale ale adolescenților.

Cuvinte cheie: *cultura conflictologică; strategii de comportament în situații de conflict; predispoziția personală către conflict; adolescența târzie; formare socio-psihologică*.

Introduction

At the present stage of psychological science, particular attention is being paid not only to the theoretical understanding of psychological phenomena, but also to the development of effective applied methods designed to address the pressing challenges of practical psychology. An analysis of the scientific literature indicates the widespread use of training and educational programmes aimed at helping adolescents develop skills in constructive interpersonal interaction, awareness of personal boundaries, regulation of emotional states, and the development of a culture of conflict resolution [8].

The problem of interpersonal conflicts becomes particularly relevant during adolescence, due to the specific nature of this stage of ontogenesis. This period is characterised by intensive identity formation, emotional instability, and the expansion and increasing complexity of the system of social interactions. Insufficiently developed self-regulation skills, limited understanding of the mechanisms underlying conflict, and high sensitivity to social evaluation lead to destructive forms of response, including aggression, avoidance, and the suppression of one”s own needs.

The psychological characteristics of adolescence necessitate the use of methods tailored to the specific

needs of this age group, including an emphasis on group dynamics, the influence of peers, emotional engagement, and a practical focus in the sessions. In this context, the development of a culture of conflict resolution as an integral part of personal development takes on particular significance [1, 5].

Group work is regarded as the most effective way of achieving the set objectives in small groups led by a psychologist. As communication with peers is of great importance during adolescence, we have opted for a group-based approach [2]. During group work, it is easier for adolescents to receive feedback from their peers, which is particularly valuable for the development of self-esteem, awareness of their own reactions and behaviour in interpersonal situations [7]. Interaction within the group creates conditions for self-disclosure, a better understanding of oneself and others, as well as the development of self-confidence and self-presentation skills [3].

Thanks to its distinctive features, training, as a method of psychological intervention, creates an environment of non-judgemental acceptance and empathy, and fosters genuine interactions. This proves to be a vital complement given the sensitivity of adolescents to judgement and their social vulnerability. The identity crisis, linked to a sense of the integrity of one"s boundaries and social stability, is given the opportunity to find one"s own position and support in the formation of a positive identity and the strengthening of a sense of self-worth, which are realised through the training [5]. For adolescents, this is important because difficulties can be viewed not as problems, but as opportunities for growth, contributing to an awareness of one"s own resources and the development of emotional and cognitive flexibility. The training work enables participants not only to recognise and accept their own experiences, but also to develop resilience to frustration [4]. Thus, training focused on developing a culture of conflict resolution helps to foster these qualities through the development of emotional awareness, communication skills and responsibility for one"s own behaviour.

A significant proportion of training courses and programmes aimed at fostering a culture of conflict resolution focus on teaching conflict resolution techniques, developing empathy and assertiveness skills, and increasing personal accountability for one"s own choices. In this regard, a key aspect is understanding conflict not only in terms of its destructive nature, but also as a resource for personal growth and the development of interpersonal relationships. In the context of this study, a culture of conflict resolution is understood as an integrative form of personal development comprising cognitive, emotional and behavioural components that facilitate the constructive perception, analysis and resolution of conflict situations.

Methodological basis

The methodological basis of the training programme developed is provided by the principles of cultural-historical psychology (L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, A.G. Asmolov, and others), according to which personal development takes place through collaborative activity and is mediated by social experience. Within the training, the group acts as a collective entity, creating a „zone of proximal development" for each participant. A conflict situation, simulated in a safe environment, thus becomes the „cultural medium" that enables the adolescent to internalise (translate into an internal framework) the external social norms of constructive dialogue.

Theoretical approaches to the study of conflict (N.V. Grishina, A.Ya. Antsupov, B.I. Khasan, K. Thomas, et al.) allow us to view conflict as an inevitable element of interpersonal interaction, possessing both destructive and developmental potential.

The humanistic approach (C. Rogers, V. Frankl, E. Erikson, and others) emphasises the importance of non-judgemental acceptance, empathy, and creating conditions conducive to personal growth. In turn, the cognitive-behavioural approach (A. Bandura, A. Beck) focuses on changing irrational cognitive attitudes and developing constructive behavioural strategies. The cognitive-behavioural approach focuses on preparing adolescents psychologically for various unforeseen circumstances, enabling them to master new forms/strategies of behaviour in conflict situations, overcome difficulties in expressing their own opinions, reduce the level of negative reactions, and improve communication skills [6].

The integration of these approaches allows us to view training as an effective tool for fostering a culture of conflict resolution among adolescents.

Research Design and Methods

The aim of this formative experiment was to develop and test a training programme designed to foster a culture of conflict resolution among older adolescents.

The research hypothesis was based on the assumption that targeted intervention within a training programme focused on developing communication skills and emotional regulation contributes to an increase in the level of conflict resolution culture.

The programme was piloted at the Mihai Grecu Lyceum in Chișinău. Twelve adolescents aged 16–18 with low and moderate levels of conflict management culture took part in the study. Particular attention was paid to participants with significant difficulties in interpersonal interaction.

The programme comprised 12 sessions, each lasting 120 minutes, and was delivered over a two-month period. Each session followed a structured format, comprising a warm-up, reflection, main activity and conclusion.

A key feature of the training programme we have developed is its high degree of interactivity, which is reflected in the use of a variety of forms and methods of active engagement with participants. During the programme, the following interactive methods were employed: group discussions, role-playing, case studies, small-group work and elements of the case method.

The programme we have developed comprises several modules, each of which is designed to address specific objectives. These modules are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure and main objectives of the training programme ”Developing a culture of conflict resolution in late adolescence”

	Module title and objectives	Key objectives
1	**Introductory module (Session 1)** ***Objective:*** to introduce participants to one another, create a conducive environment for the group to get to know each other and work together, outline the training topic, and build team cohesion	- Introducing the group; - Establishing group rules; - Motivating participants; - Familiarising participants with key concepts, ideas and topics
2	**Main module (sessions 2–9)** **Objective:** to change irrational beliefs, develop interpersonal communication skills, broaden knowledge and express feelings, develop communication skills in various emotional states, foster a culture of communication, and build conflict resolution skills. 1. The nature of conflict and its subjective understanding 2. Thinking. Irrational beliefs 3. Thinking. Working with cognitive distortions. 4. Thinking. Keeping a diary 5 -7. Communication skills 8. Conflicts. Ways of resolving them 9. Conflicts. Ways of resolving them	- Conflict and its subjective understanding - The role of thinking in understanding conflict, its causes and methods of resolution - Irrational thinking and how to deal with it. Keeping a diary - Expanding vocabulary, discussing emotionally charged situations in the emotional sphere; - Developing the ability to understand and express feelings; - Mastering the „I-statement” technique; - Developing an understanding of non-verbal communication; - Removing communication barriers; - Practising persuasive speaking skills; - Building mutual understanding between communication partners; - Setting personal boundaries; - Practising conflict management strategies; - Developing assertive behaviour skills; - Practical exercises to practise skills; - Integrating acquired skills

3	**Final module** (1 session) **Objective**: to summarise the work and consolidate the information covered	- Summing up; - Consolidating what has been learnt; - Conducting a follow-up psychological assessment; - Participants providing feedback on the training process and content; - Closing remarks

Research findings

Analysis of the results revealed an increase in the overall level of conflict management culture among adolescents following their participation in the programme. The results of the assessment of conflict management culture before and after the experiment in the experimental group are presented below in Figure 1. Analysing the results presented in Figure 1, we can observe an increase in the overall level of conflict management culture among adolescents who took part in the formative experiment. A significant increase in scores can also be observed on scales such as „Behavioural culture" and „Communicative culture".

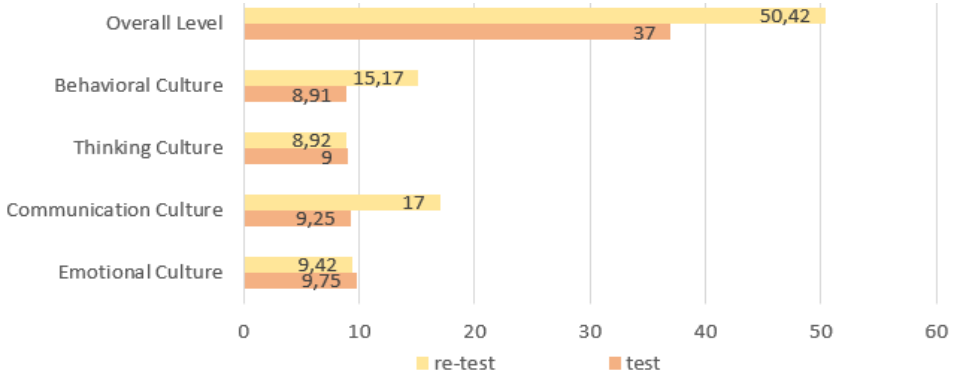


Fig. 1. Average scores on the „Level of Development of an Individual´s Conflict Culture" scale before and after the experiment (experimental group)

A statistical analysis conducted using Wilcoxon"s T-test for paired samples confirmed the trends we observed. According to the results obtained, there are significant differences between the results of the initial and follow-up assessments of the Overall Level of Conflict Culture ($z = -3.59$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that the overall level of the property under study increased following participation in the formative experiment.

Furthermore, significant differences were identified on the „Behavioural Culture" scale ($z = -3.29$, $p = 0.001$), indicating an increase in its level following the formative experiment. There are also significant differences on the „Communicative Culture" scale ($z = -3.69$, $p = 0.000$), which also indicates the effectiveness of the formative experiment programme.

The absence of statistically significant changes on the „Culture of Emotions" and „Culture of Thinking" scales may be due to ontogenetic characteristics. Cognitive and emotional personality structures are more rigid and require prolonged exposure. Whereas „Communicative" and „Behavioural" culture are operational skills that are more readily amenable to correction during short-term training (12 sessions). Below, we present the results of the assessment of adolescents" levels of interpersonal conflict before and after the formative experiment (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Results of the „Level of Personal Conflict" assessment before and after the experiment in the experimental group

The graph clearly shows a difference in the level of conflict among adolescents before and after the experiment; following the training, the adolescents” level of conflict appears to have decreased, which is also confirmed by statistical calculations using the Wilcoxon T-test, indicating that there are significant differences in the level of the characteristic under study (z=-2.99, p=0.003), namely a decrease in the level of conflict after the experiment.

In our study, we also examined an aspect of conflict management culture–namely, behavioural styles in conflict situations – and hypothesised that participation in a training programme designed to develop conflict management culture would contribute to a change in adolescents” behavioural styles during conflict. An analysis of the diagnostic results for the experimental group before and after the formative experiment confirms our hypothesis. The results of the study on conflict behaviour strategies in the experimental group before and after participation in the training programme are presented graphically in Figure 3. According to the test results, after participating in the experiment, adolescents were less likely to choose avoidance as a style, whilst they were more likely to resort to accommodation, cooperation and compromise.

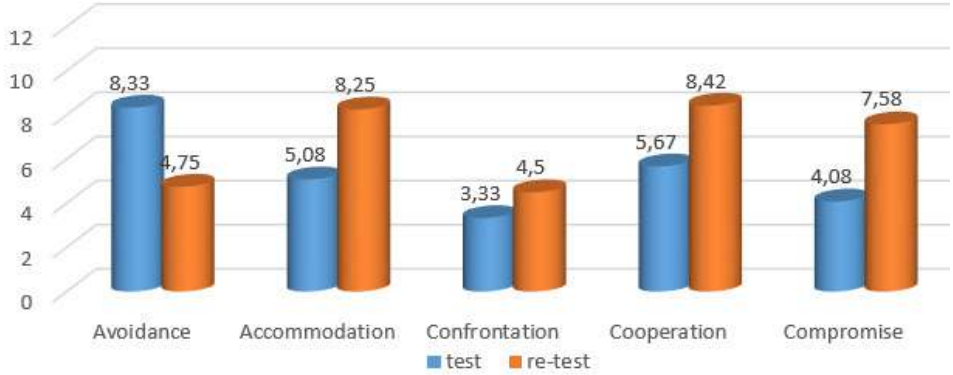


Fig. 3. Results of the Thomas-Kilmann method for identifying dominant behaviour in conflict situations before and after the experiment in the experimental group

The results on these scales increased significantly among adolescents after completing the formative experiment; thus, it can be noted that the tendency to avoid conflict was shifted towards strategies such as accommodation, cooperation and compromise. Statistical analysis also shows that the trends we observed are significant. According to the calculations, there are significant differences on the „Avoidance” scale in the experimental group before and after the experiment – z = -3.27, p = 0.001 – indicating that, following the formative experiment, adolescents are less likely to avoid conflict and instead try to choose other strategies. Differences were also found to be significant on the „Accommodation” scale (z = -2.89, p = 0.004), the „Cooperation” scale (z = -2.90, p = 0.004) and the „Compromise” scale (z = -2.69, p = 0.014). In the context of this study, higher scores on the „Adaptation” scale are interpreted not as a passive stance, but as the development of a prosocial orientation and the ability to consciously maintain meaningful relationships in situations where the subject of the dispute is subjectively less important than the emotional bond. Thus, the training enabled the adolescents not to fear conflicts, but to engage in them by choosing a response appropriate to the situation.

Discussion of the results

The results of the formative experiment suggest that the training programme has a positive impact on the development of a conflict management culture among older adolescents. The statistically significant changes identified in the overall level of conflict management culture, as well as in the behavioural and communicative components, indicate that group training is an effective means of developing constructive strategies for interaction in conflict situations.

It is important to note that the greatest changes occurred specifically in the behavioural and communicative components. This may be due to the specific nature of the methods used, which are geared towards the active involvement of participants in simulated interaction scenarios (role-playing, group discussions, case studies).

Such forms of work contribute not only to the acquisition of new behavioural models, but also to their direct testing in a safe environment, which increases the likelihood of transferring these skills to real-life situations.

The reduction in conflict levels among adolescents following the training may be linked to the development of emotional regulation skills and greater awareness of their own reactions. In a group setting, participants have the opportunity not only to observe different ways of reacting, but also to reflect on their own behavioural patterns, which helps to reduce impulsivity and increase awareness of behaviour.

Of particular interest is the observed change in conflict behaviour strategies. A reduction in the tendency to avoid conflict and an increase in the use of strategies such as cooperation, compromise and accommodation may indicate the development of a more flexible and adaptive repertoire of behavioural responses. This is likely linked to adolescents" re-evaluation of the very nature of conflict: from perceiving it as a threat to understanding it as a situation requiring choice and responsibility for one"s own behaviour.

From the perspective of the cultural-historical approach, the findings can be interpreted as evidence of the effectiveness of collaborative activities in the development of higher mental functions. Group work creates a zone of proximal development within which adolescents, drawing on their interactions with peers and the facilitator, learn new ways of understanding and resolving conflicts.

From the perspective of the cognitive-behavioural approach, the identified changes may be attributed to the transformation of irrational beliefs associated with conflict (for example, „conflict is always bad", „if I do not give in, I will be rejected"). Awareness of and partial correction of these attitudes contributes to a change in emotional reactions and, consequently, behavioural strategies.

At the same time, the absence of significant changes on the scales related to the culture of thought and the culture of feelings requires further consideration. It may be assumed that these components are more stable and deeply rooted constructs, the formation of which requires a longer-term intervention or other forms of psychological work focused on the reflective and value-semantic aspects of the personality. It is also possible that the methods used were focused to a greater extent on the behavioural level, whilst affecting the cognitive-reflective and emotional-existential levels to a lesser extent.

It should also be borne in mind that adolescence is characterised by a high degree of sensitivity to the opinions of significant others, which makes group-based work particularly effective. Feedback from peers, the opportunity to compare oneself with other participants, and the experience of being accepted within the group can all be significant factors contributing to personal change.

Another important aspect is the creation of a safe psychological space in which adolescents can openly express their feelings, try out new behavioural patterns and receive support. It is precisely this combination of a structured process and emotional safety that appears to be the key to the effectiveness of the training programme.

At the same time, a number of limitations of the study should be noted. These include the small sample size, the absence of a control group with an alternative intervention, and the lack of a follow-up assessment to evaluate the sustainability of the changes observed. In this regard, promising avenues for further research include expanding the sample, incorporating longitudinal analysis, and developing programmes aimed at deeper levels of conflict resolution culture.

The findings of the study thus confirm that a training programme based on the integration of various psychological approaches helps adolescents develop a more constructive attitude towards conflict, improve their communication skills and reduce the incidence of destructive behaviour.

Conclusions

The study of the theoretical foundations and the piloting of the training programme allow us to draw the following conclusions:

1. The specific characteristics of late adolescence (identity crisis, the high importance of peer groups, emotional lability) require a move away from directive teaching methods. Group training, based on the principles of interactivity and subject-subject interaction, is the most appropriate form for developing a culture of conflict resolution, providing a safe space for social experimentation.

2. A statistically confirmed reduction in the level of personal conflict and a move away from „avoidance” strategies indicate qualitative changes in the structure of the adolescent”s personality. The shift towards strategies of „cooperation” and „compromise” indicates an increase in social maturity and an understanding of conflict as a resource for developing relationships, rather than a threat to self-esteem.

3. The observed stability of the „culture of thought” and the „culture of emotion”, alongside a significant increase in the „communicative” and „behavioural” components, suggests that psychological structures undergo transformation at different rates.

4. Operational communication skills are acquired more quickly, whilst value-semantic and deep emotional attitudes require longer-term psychological and pedagogical support. The developed programme can be integrated into the educational process of upper secondary schools and colleges as a tool for harmonising the interpersonal environment. The development of a conflict-resolution culture during this period lays the foundation for the successful professional and personal socialisation of future specialists.

A prospect for further research could be the study of the sustainability of the changes observed over the long term (longitudinal study), as well as the search for specific methods of influencing the cognitive and affective components of an individual”s conflict-resolution culture. Prospects for further research may also involve expanding the sample and developing methods to influence the deeper components of conflict studies culture.

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Presented: 27.02.2026
Reviewed: 30.04.2026
Accepted for publication: 20.05.2026