CZU: 316.482:364.642.4:159.9.018 **https://doi.org/10.59295/sum5(195)2026_34**

EPISTEMOLOGICAL LANDMARKS REGARDING THE RESOLUTION OF INTRAFAMILIAL CONFLICTS

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The present study presents the results of an analysis of the specialised literature in the field of intrafamilial conflict resolution. The most important theories addressed by us (philosophical, systemic, psychological, communicational, social and pedagogical) aimed at a holistic approach and an in-depth understanding of the field, in order to determine their functionality in immediate contemporaneity. Scientific syntheses and directly contextualised projections, related to the realities identified by various specialists, allowed us to formulate practical recommendations that could help today's families prevent the escalation of conflicts, reduce the consequences experienced by each individual member, and engage, on a partnership basis, in their constructive resolution. Well-established and promoted counselling and mediation good practices, supported by a solid theoretical framework, can offer individualised and differentiated support, with a long-term impact on family well-being and cohesion.

Keywords: *family, intrafamilial conflict, epistemology, theories, mediation, counselling, practical recommendations.*

REPERE EPISTEMOLOGICE PRIVIND SOLUȚIONAREA CONFLICTELOR INTRAFAMILIALE

Studiul de față prezintă rezultatele unei analize a literaturii de specialitate în domeniul problematicii soluționării conflictelor intrafamiliale. Cele mai importante teorii abordate de noi (filozofice, sistemice, psihologice, comunicaționale, sociale și pedagogice) au avut ca obiectiv abordarea holistă, cunoașterea profundă a domeniului, pentru a determina funcționalitatea acestora în contemporaneitatea imediată. Sintezele științifice și proiecțiile direct contextualizate, raportate la realitățile constatate de diverși specialiști, ne-au permis stabilirea unor recomandări de ordin practic, care ar ajuta familiile de astăzi să prevină escaladarea conflictelor, să diminueze consecințele, resimțite de fiecare membru în parte, dar și să se implice, pe bază de parteneriat, în soluționarea constructivă a acestora. Bunele practici de consiliere și mediere, destul de dezvoltate și promovate, cu suport teoretic solid, pot oferi ajutor individual și diferențiat, cu impact pe termen lung asupra stării de bine și a coeziunii familiale.

Cuvinte-cheie: *familie, conflict intrafamilial, epistemologie, teorii, mediere, consiliere, recomandări practice.*

Introduction

The epistemology of intrafamilial conflicts represents a field of intersection between the philosophy of knowledge, social psychology and the sociology of the family. A gnoseological analysis of this phenomenon presupposes not only the identification of the causes and manifestations of conflict, but also a critical examination of the ways in which conflict is known, conceptualised and interpreted. Thus, the process of knowledge as it unfolds within the sciences, as a prerequisite for optimising the resolution of such conflicts, includes the theoretical and methodological foundations through which we recognise, interpret and analyse the processes of dispute resolution within the family. In general terms, intrafamilial conflict represents a state of tension, misunderstanding or confrontation that arises between members of the same family (spouses, parents and children, siblings or extended relatives). Unlike occasional quarrels, conflict becomes a problem when it is recurrent and obstructs the normal functioning of the family. It is not sufficient to grasp conflict merely as a phenomenon; rather, it is necessary to understand how family members arrive at solutions, what types of conflicts they experience, and how the process of reconciliation is negotiated. In resolving intrafamilial conflicts, it must be acknowledged that these situations involve multiple typologies of conflict, such as communication conflicts, conflicts related to child-rearing and, not least, financial conflicts. The resolution of such conflicts requires a profound and professional approach.

Theoretical foundations

According to scientific research in the specialised literature, as well as pedagogical and pastoral practice, intrafamilial conflicts may be classified into several basic categories:

- *Communication conflicts*: when family members do not express themselves clearly, do not practise active listening or fail to understand one another. These may also arise due to misinterpretations, lack of sincerity and emotional blockages;
- *Conflicts of roles and responsibilities*: caused by misunderstandings regarding who holds which role within the family or how tasks are distributed;
- *Intergenerational conflicts*: between grandparents, parents and children, related to differences in values, lifestyles, expectations or rules;
- *Financial conflicts*: lack of money is a frequent source of conflict, caused by improper management of the family budget, such as expenditure, debts or long-term financial planning.

The resolution of conflicts within the family involves a series of theoretical perspectives and approaches, each offering a distinct understanding of conflict dynamics. These theories may be grouped into three major categories: *psychological theories, systemic theories and sociological theories*.

Among *psychological theories*, which focus on individual processes and interactions between family members, emphasising communication, emotions and behavioural patterns, particular importance is given to *attachment theory*, developed by J. Bowlby. This theory highlights how attachment patterns formed in childhood influence adult relationships and conflict management. A secure attachment style favours open communication and empathy, whereas an insecure style may generate mistrust and conflict. Attachment theory has fundamental applications in modern psychology, providing concrete tools for understanding human behaviour through *parenting interventions*: parents are encouraged to be responsive and predictable, helping children develop *secure attachment* by validating their emotional needs. Based on this theory, psychotherapists use the concept of the "internal working model" to help adults identify how childhood trauma or deprivation affects their current couple relationships. In *healthcare and social work*, the theory has radically changed protocols in hospitals and orphanages, emphasising the constant presence of caregivers and the avoidance of prolonged separations that may cause separation anxiety. In *education*, teachers may act as a "secure base", creating a protective school environment that facilitates learning and exploration without fear.

Cognitive-behavioural theory, which chronologically originates with the pioneers of behaviourism B.F. Skinner (1904–1990) and I. Pavlov (1849–1936), later integrating the contributions of A.T. Beck's cognitive therapy (1921–2021), developed in the 1960s to treat depression through the correction of distorted thoughts, and A. Ellis's *rational-emotive behavioural therapy* (1913–2007), focuses on how irrational beliefs generate suffering. This theory concentrates on the thoughts, beliefs and behaviours underlying conflicts and, in the family context, helps members identify and change negative thinking patterns and improve problem-solving skills, thereby reducing conflict escalation. Behavioural interdependence suggests that the symptoms or problems of one member are often maintained by interaction patterns and collective beliefs of the entire family. Family members act based on "schemas" or core beliefs about each other's roles, which may lead to distorted interpretations of others' actions (such as "mind-reading" or "catastrophising"). Therapy aims to "unlearn" dysfunctional behaviours through techniques such as positive reinforcement, negotiation and cognitive restructuring. A major emphasis is placed on improving direct communication, active listening and collaborative problem-solving. Unlike other methods, this approach focuses on current family problems, using homework and practical exercises to consolidate new skills in everyday life.

Communication theories approach conflict as a problem of faulty communication [8]. Particularly emblematic is P. Watzlawick's theory, a pillar of the Palo Alto School, which revolutionised the understanding of human interaction through five axioms: *the impossibility of not communicating* – every behaviour is a form of communication; because one cannot „avoid having a behaviour, and as a result, it is impossible for one not to communicate, even by silence and retreat; *content and relationship levels* – every message conveys information (content) but also defines how one sees the other (relationship), which is often the cause of conflicts. *punctuation of communication sequences* (Axiom 3) – interlocutors interpret interactions as

chains of cause and effect; for example, one retreats because the other one annoys him/her, while the other „annoys because the first has retreated”, the 4ths axiom - *digital and analogue communication* – people use verbal (digital/symbolic) and non-verbal (analogic) language, the latter being especially significant for expressing feelings, and the last axiom of the School of Pala Alto refers to *symmetrical and complementary interaction* – relationships based on equality or difference in power or roles, both requiring balance to remain healthy.

Complementary to the axioms of communication, in the contemporary context frequent recourse is made to the concept of *communication competence*, which, in the view of the American researcher M. Parks (2006), represents the degree to which individuals achieve their intended goals within the limits of the social situation, without risking the loss of the abilities or opportunities to pursue other, more important goals from an individual perspective [Apud 7]. Thus, in Park's view, communication competence is not merely a sum of theoretical knowledge, but rather the capacity of an individual to achieve personal objectives while maintaining healthy social relationships appropriate to the context. The tridimensionality nature of communication competence consists of: *control* – the ability to steer interaction towards the desired outcome; *responsibility* – the assumption of the effects that communication has on others; and *foresight* – the ability to anticipate the long-term consequences of the communicative act. Consequently, both at the broader social level and within the family, in a narrower sense, genuine competence requires effective action and the monitoring of one's own behaviour, as well as situational adaptability. Rather than being viewed as a fixed trait, competence is understood as an adaptive ability, involving the use of knowledge about oneself, about others and about the context in order to generate communicative performances that maximise mutual understanding. Among its many findings, the volume cited above demonstrates that individuals in relationships feel closer and, in general, more connected when they have more intensive contact with members of each other's personal networks and when they believe that network members support their relationship [8].

Systemic theories view the family as an interconnected whole, in which the actions of one member affect all the others. Conflict is not seen as the problem of a single person, but as a dysfunction of the family system. In the same sense, *family systems theory* affirms that family members are emotionally connected to one another and that a conflict in one area can produce symptoms in another area. These include: *differentiation of self* – the ability to maintain emotional autonomy and to think rationally, even in the presence of conflict. Low differentiation leads to emotional fusion and to difficulties in managing conflicts. *Triangulation* occurs when a tense relationship between two persons (for example, parents) draws in a third person (for example, the child), in order to stabilise the relationship, often through the diversion of the conflict [Apud 5].

Structural family theory focuses on the structure of the family, namely on the rules and boundaries that govern interactions. Conflict often arises due to unclear boundaries, which lead to excessive involvement, or overly rigid boundaries, which lead to detachment and isolation. Structural therapy aims to reconfigure these boundaries in order to create a healthier and more functional system.

Sociological theories analyse conflict within a broader social context, taking into account roles, norms and the distribution of power. From a sociological perspective, the family is not only an emotional unit, but also a fundamental social institution. Intrafamilial conflicts are viewed as the result of the interaction between social roles, cultural norms, economic structures and power factors: *social conflict theory* – when applied to the family, it views conflict as a struggle for limited resources, such as power, attention, money or time. Intrafamilial conflicts are the result of an unequal distribution of these resources and of power dynamics; *social role theory* argues that family members play certain roles (parent, partner, child) and that the expectations associated with these roles can lead to conflict. A conflict may arise when partners have different expectations regarding who should take on domestic tasks or childcare responsibilities; *feminist theory and gender studies* address conflicts arising from power asymmetries between spouses or between parents and children. The traditional family is seen as a space of male domination and gender inequalities. Contemporary families, however, are more oriented towards balancing relationships and tasks, establishing effective couple partnerships.

The family crisis is perceived by specialists in the socio-human sciences as a symptom of the crisis of contemporary society. In this context, we highlight that the dimensions of the phenomenon of family dis-

organisation are expanding and becoming increasingly complex. Lost parent syndrome, inhibition, guilt, deviant behaviour, revenge, running away from home – all these are just some of the state's characteristic of a child who is a victim of intrafamilial conflicts. In these difficult situations, we mention the importance of the role of the social worker and, respectively, of the mediation process carried out by specialists in the field of social work with families in which conflictual situations predominate [1]. For this purpose, it is beneficial to study and elucidate the tasks and responsibilities of the social worker in the process of mediating intrafamilial conflicts, thus having the possibility, in this case, to contribute to diminishing the phenomena elucidated above. Mediation is a confidential and private method through which mediators, independent persons with specialised training, help the parties to define their objectives and interests more clearly and guide them so as to jointly construct mutually advantageous solutions to the conflict. This strategy offers individuals and groups the opportunity to assume responsibility for resolving disputes and to maintain permanent control over the decisions that affect their future. Thus, the use of abusive measures is avoided, as well as the deterioration of relationships between the parties, while dialogue, collaboration and mutual respect are encouraged.

The role of the social worker in the mediation process can be carried out effectively through the application of various techniques, such as: active listening, reflection, summarising, and the ability to decentralise the person from the atmosphere of the existing problem. Social work has primordial importance both before the mediation process, in order to collect all the necessary information for studying the problem, and during the process. At these moments, collaboration between the mediator and the parties is effective when both parties accept participation in the process and when each specialist of the multidisciplinary team fulfils their responsibilities appropriately [1].

All the theoretical reference points analysed by us, with direct projection onto functionality in daily practice, offer a solid basis for understanding and addressing the complexity of intrafamilial conflicts, guiding families towards constructive solutions. At the root of most unhappiness and illnesses of the couple lie internal causes (which concern only the two partners of the couple) and external causes (which refer to objectively identifiable circumstances).

Conflicts determined by causes internal to the couple:

- *Lack of conjugal love* – this is the most important of the causes that lead to conflictuality in the couple; the two partners do not present a community at the level of objectives and interests.

- *Too great differences in intellectual level, culture, traditions, opinions, etc.* – individuals are hardly compatible, disrupting any communication. It becomes difficult for partners (especially when it comes to conflicts of political opinions, religious beliefs, value systems) and they try to convince each other of the truth of their own beliefs.

- *Incompatibility of character, personality, systems of expectations.*

- *Sexual disagreement* – causes may be different – some related to personal complexes (refusal of femininity, of motherhood, fear of sex, frigidity – in women; refusal of virility, sexual impotence – in men), others related to problems of an origin other than sexual (affective insecurity of the relationship, inferiority, anxiety), others being more directly linked to conjugal sexual practices that ignore the difference in experiencing sexuality in men and women, differences in sexual appetite and rhythm, clumsiness in the sexual act, fear of pregnancy in women, etc., all of which are compounded by very deficient communication.

- *Role conflicts* – disagreements regarding conjugal and parental roles.

- *Exclusive passion of one of the partners* – forms a so-called "couple" with the object of their passion (person, object, pet, etc.), an abnormal couple from which the partner feels excluded. The most banal form is the extramarital relationship, but there are also other variants such as: passion for an animal, for a profession, for sport, for politics, research, money, etc.

- *Permanent reproach, expressed verbally or perceived only through non-verbal communication.*

Conflicts determined by causes external to the couple:

- *Early marriages and forced marriages* – marriages that are too early (usually in adolescence), marriages carried out under social or moral pressure, due to an unwanted pregnancy, or marriages seen as a way to escape from something or someone, marriages of pity or compassion, are sure sources of conjugal difficulties.

- *Mental illness of one of the partners* – situations in which the mental illness existed before marriage, being reactivated against the background of stress induced by assuming new conjugal roles, or illness acquired within the couple.

- *Problems of accommodation, environment, external relationships* – the existence of the couple unfolds in a space perceived as unpleasant or unacceptable.

- *Socio-professional difficulties of one of the partners* – tensions of dissatisfaction and failure produced by the general situation tend to be discharged in aggression against the closest beings. They become “scapegoats” for all forms of aggression that are difficult to express elsewhere.

- *Conflicts of interest* – conflicts arising from concerns about material goods and money, both in conditions of poverty and in situations where interests are divergent and partners’ assets are separate.

- *Presence of third parties* – the involvement of a third person in the daily existence of the couple can become a source of conflict, especially due to the breaking of intimacy. This situation becomes more serious when the third person becomes the ally of one of the partners (the parents of one of the partners) [2].

In the context of resolving intrafamilial conflicts, we must consider the possibility of family counselling by psychologists specialised in the field. Family counsellors address problems that arise within the family: relationships between family members, appeasement and resolution of conflicts within the family, drawing up an internal family regulation, spouses’ behaviour in the event of divorce, etc. We agree that the process of family counselling involves assistance activities aimed at facilitating the balance of the family system. The pursued goal is the formation and development in parents of effective attitudes and behaviours in parent–child relationships, in order to improve the quality of the psycho-emotional and intrafamilial climate. Another type of counselling that addresses partners in a couple for the development of the necessary skills to successfully resolve marital conflicts – marital counselling – is identified by C. Zdrehuși [4].

With regard to family counselling, the opinions of authors are diverse. Psychologists view family counselling as an essential method for preventing the escalation of conflicts and for promoting the emotional health of family members. It does not aim only at resolving a specific conflict, but also at developing long-term relational skills, such as communication, negotiation, emotional regulation and strengthening family cohesion.

Professor L. Cuznețov proposes the term *moral counselling and therapy of the family*, which represents a set of actions aimed at supporting and restoring the state of psychological balance of the person; the reintegration of family members into the order imposed by moral norms and the restoration of relationships and of the family climate on the basis of their mutual respect [5].

Another approach belongs to the researcher E. Vrasmas, who considers family counselling and parental counselling to be two components of a form of support, namely: **s**ocio-educational intervention, carried out both through counselling and through education, which is oriented towards strengthening family relationships for the realisation of the educational process. Family counselling refers to a series of preventive and direct actions to support family members. Parental counselling addresses mainly parents and provides for the strengthening of their roles in actions in favour of education and the preservation of family cohesion. It differs from couple counselling, which refers to maintaining marital relationships and resolving various crisis situations between partners. Family counselling may also involve information actions, to ensure success in intrafamilial communication [10].

Researchers of family issues have frequently signalled the significance of the micro- and macro-group factor in the evolution of the couple. Some authors (Murell, Stachowiak, 1965) insist on the factors of marital dissolution and cohesion generated by situations and events within the family micro group. Levinger (1965) considers marriage as a particular moment of social groups; consequently, he approaches conjugal cohesion, as well as divorce, as expressions of conflict, in terms of the properties on which the cohesion of social groups in general depends, thus delineating a series of „external attraction sources” that become dissolution factors for the conjugal relationship.

The results of extensive and intensive research have revealed, within conflictual couples, the incidence of microsocial, precipitating and dysfunctional risk factors, among which the following can be mentioned: tense relationships of the couple (through one or both partners) with the family micro group of origin (be-

longing), most frequently encountered being conflicts daughter-in-law–mother-in-law, son-in-law–father-in-law, daughter-in-law–father-in-law. The presence of different models of conjugal role determined socio-culturally, contrasting and mutually exclusive, the de facto adoption of certain conceptions, attitudes and "conjugal styles" from families of origin, non-concordances, psychological, social and residential interference of parents (in-laws) in the conjugal interpersonal space of the newly created nucleus create favourable conditions for a deficient inter-accommodation of spouses, favouring early dysfunctional phenomena.

The incidence of dysfunctional phenomena in couples with relational "problems" with parents (in-laws) is significantly higher than in the case of couples who do not report such relationships. In some cases, repeated conflicts between two family generations become psychopathic, bi-univocally or univocally, which requires family reorganisation psychotherapies, possibly through separation.

At present, there is a worrying tendency among some young couples to maintain a degree of psychosocial "symbiosis" with one of the families of origin, which hinders the process of conjugal and parental relational maturation. Grandparents usually take over to a large extent parental role tasks or, in the case of childless dyads, an organisational-administrative and even psychological tutelage is maintained over them [6].

The first "steps" of a family are similar to the first steps taken by a child who is trying to move independently. Initially, newly married couples are full of enthusiasm born of their ardent love. But negative factors often act upon them, forces that appear either deep in their minds or in the social environment in which they live, confusing them and putting them to the test, which sometimes diminishes their enthusiasm. We distinguish several pathological states that gnaw from within the life of spouses in their first years of family life. At the same time, it is good to realise that certain negative aspects that may arise at the tender age of the family, if neglected, can have serious consequences for the whole of life.

The way in which the contemporary world develops is linked to the way education can meet the requirements of this development. Family life, like social life, includes the moral life of the individual with all its aspects. Moral life presupposes a focus on ethical values, which means an order with regard to the observance of value priorities. Moral ideas, as well as a person's moral life, relate to conscience and psychic life, considered as a spiritual dimension that correlates with character and personality traits. Moral norms become functional through education insofar as the person respects them, forming and continuously observing them.

Education for values and Education for family help us in the creation of the family. They concentrate general values that reflect the pedagogical, bio-psycho-socio-cultural needs inherent to any human personality: *Good – Truth – Utility – Beauty – Health*. Education for values is based on common values such as: life and the physical and psychological health of women and men, which relate to their abilities of cooperation, understanding, acceptance, tolerance, etc. [1].

Education for family is defined as a concept from the field of educational sciences, which brings together practices, representations, judgements and educational strategies regarding the formation and development of personality for the effective fulfilment of family roles, which presuppose gender education to the same extent as the other dimensions [3].

Gender education is in a significantly conditioned relationship with education for family from two perspectives: the fulfilment of functional family roles through their division/complementarity between partners (gender resocialisation of spouses); the fulfilment of parental roles through gender education of daughters and sons [2].

In the same vein, we consider valuable the observance of certain principles for harmonising family relationships and for creating and maintaining family well-being, extracted from a reference work by Prof. L. Cuznețov, based on specialised literature and psychopedagogical counselling practice:

- The principle of the conscious and autonomous choice of the conjugal partner;
- The principle of assuming responsibility for creating and maintaining family well-being;
- The principle of assuming commitment to respecting a healthy and dignified way of life within the family;
- The principle of focusing all family members on positive thinking and moral action;
- The principle of harmoniously valuing sexuality and conjugal intimacy in family life;

- The principle of respecting and accepting the personality of all family members and close relatives (by each of them);
- The principle of involving both spouses/parents in the education of children [5, pp. 121–122].

Findings and practical recommendations

Conflict in relationships is a natural component of any human interaction, all the more so of an affective type. Two people cannot think in unison all the time, and beyond the arguments that may arise, there is the advantage of progress resulting from different points of view. Conflict even becomes beneficial in relationships when it is transformed into an opportunity to make a positive change. Otherwise, it can be an inexhaustible source of tension, psychological imbalance and emotional dissatisfaction [4].

In order to identify practical opinions related to intrafamilial conflicts, we carried out a mini qualitative study through an interview with open-ended questions, addressed to 7 experts from the fields of psychology, theology, jurisprudence and social work. Synthesising the responses received, we conclude the following:

- Conflict within the family represents a lack of compromise between partners, a misunderstanding, the desire to impose one’s opinion or goal on the other partner;
- The families that most frequently face problems are those married for 1-5 years and those married for 16-25 years;
- With regard to the causes of conflict, psychology experts specified the following causes: lack of communication, tendency to dominate, selfishness, negative life habits. Lawyers mentioned the following causes: financial shortages, alcohol abuse. Social work specialists highlighted causes related to poverty, unemployment, different models of cohabitation that existed in the families of origin of the spouses. The priest mentioned that the main causes are immorality and lack of moral-spiritual education;
- Another important idea mentioned by specialists was the fact that very few families attempt to resolve their conflictual problems.

In order to resolve intrafamilial conflicts, we propose the following *recommendations:*

- Establish and develop emergency or support services such as community family counselling centres, temporary placement centres for children, day centres for children, recreational services for families with children with disabilities, assistance and support centres for the readaptation of children with psychosocial problems, support services for pregnant women predisposed to abandon their child, services that would prevent the separation of the child from the family in crisis and maintain the child within the family after reintegration, centres that would prevent abuse, neglect and exploitation of the child within the family, etc.;
- Implement specialised consultative services that would allow the assessment of the psychological compatibility of partners and of the family life value system;
- Organize trainings, seminars or conferences for the development of mediation skills of social workers, given that at present there are very few qualified specialists in the field of intrafamilial conflict mediation;
- Develop programmes on family planning, the provision of premarital counselling of a formative nature;
- Create support groups made up of different families that have either faced certain conflict situations or are currently in a conflictual state;
- Develop psychosocial services, the opening of psychological practices, the establishment of a hotline, the creation of multidisciplinary teams to act in accordance with the interests of the person, the placement of centres in an accessible manner for everyone and alongside Courts;
- Raise public awareness regarding access to social services and the acceptance of a healthy family lifestyle, through advertising spots, television programmes, seminars or conferences at community level.

In order to overcome situations of intrafamilial conflict, it is important that family protection, including child protection, be a priority of social policy, which would contribute to the formation of a viable social protection system. At the same time, we note that in our society there are no services for resolving conflicts or for mediating them at territorial level, but only in the Municipality of Chişinău, where, as a model of good practice, there is the Commission for the Resolution of Disputes within the Municipal Directorate for the Protection of Children’s Rights, which has proven its effectiveness over time.

In **conclusion**, the epistemological approach demonstrates that the resolution of intrafamilial conflicts is a complex process of knowledge, transformation and reconstruction of the meaning of the human relationship. The epistemological analysis of intrafamilial conflicts highlights the fact that the way in which we understand and explain these tensions largely determines the ways in which we resolve them. Knowledge of conflict is not neutral, but bears the imprint of the theoretical paradigm approached, of social values and of the individual experiences involved. The resolution of intrafamilial conflicts presupposes the integration of objective knowledge, acquired through research, with the subjective understanding of the participants, based on empathy, communication and critical reflection.

Epistemology provides a necessary framework for moving from the simple management of conflict to a profound understanding of the cognitive, emotional and relational processes that generate it. Through the articulation between rationality and lived experience, between science and experience, a holistic perspective on family conflict takes shape – one that allows not only reconciliation, but also personal and relational development.

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Presented: 19.01.2026
Reviewed: 30.04.2026
Accepted for publication: 20.05.2026