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# ADULT LEARNING IN THE PROCESS OF DEALING WITH CONFLICTS**

## UCZENIE SIĘ DOROSŁYCH W PRACY Z KONFLIKTEM

ABSTRACT: The author presents conflict in the structural and processual dimension as a possible situation of learning and characterises a model in which conflicts can be dealt with. The model presented includes specific elements of working with conflict, which come into being in interpersonal processes. The elements of the structure of conflict analyzed in the paper play a crucial role in direct relations between the participants of conflict. Behaviors, reactions and the selection of the way of dealing with conflict is dependent on key structural categories such as: the object, the sides of conflict, resources needed, the surrounding as well as the conditions. These categories determine the realisation of the process of dealing with a given conflict situation and impose direct reactions to changing conditions. The reflection of the participants on themselves, their opponents and the whole conflict situation is an occasion for learning.

KEYWORDS: social competences, interpersonal relations, solving conflict, learning.

ABSTRAKT: Autorka przedstawia konflikt w wymiarze strukturalnym i procesualnym jako możliwą sytuację uczenia się. Proponuje radzenie sobie z konfliktem według modelu. Zaprezentowany model zawiera określone elementy pracy z konfliktem, które ujawniają się w procesie interpersonalnym. Analizowane elementy struktury konfliktu pracują w bezpośrednich relacjach między uczestnikami konfliktu. Zachowania, reakcje i wybór drogi postępowania w konflikcie są zależne od kluczowych kategorii strukturalnych, takich jak: przedmiot, strony konfliktu, potrzebne zasoby i otoczenie oraz warunki. Te kategorie decydują o realizacji procesu radzenia sobie z sytuacją konfliktową i wymuszają bezpośrednie reagowanie na zmieniające się warunki. Refleksja uczestników nad sobą, przeciwnikami oraz sytuacją konfliktową stanowi okazję do uczenia się.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: konflikt, kompetencje społeczne, relacje interpersonalne, rozwiązanie konfliktu, uczenie się.

Conflicts are social situations that should be perceived multidimensionally. The aim of this article is to point to a specific model of dealing with conflicts which takes into consideration the aforementioned multidimensionality. The model outlined here had both a structural and processual character. It is both indispensable as well as interesting to analyse key elements of the structure that emerges while dealing with a given conflict as they necessitate specific reactions and decisions of the participants.

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** The model of dealing with conflicts has been developed by the author in: D. Borecka-Biernat, K. Wajszczyk, K. Walęcka-Matyja (2019), *Rozwiązywanie sytuacji konfliktowych – wybrane problemy*, Wydawnictwo Difin, Warszawa.

Learning combines three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and social. In the first one, the essential issues include the practical and theoretical resources that are acquired in the cognitive process (Illeris 2006, p. 24). The emotional dimension relates to the emotions, feelings, attitudes and motivations as to the elements mobilising one to learn as well as the conditions, "on which the learning has influence and which can be structured by them[1]" (Illeris 2006, p. 25). All these dimensions can be analysed separately but in fact they are rather important components of the overall situation, which comes into being in conflicts.

The author's many-year experience connected with dealing with conflict resulted in a wide and perhaps thorough tool that can serve as an example for anyone who approaches a conflict situation with the aim of coping with it. The need to create such a tool originated in the opinion formulated by the author, as well as the participants of her workshop, that the *ad hoc* conflict approach makes it impossible to deal with conflict effectively. Without deeper analysis many aspects of conflict remain invisible – for example: underlying norms and values, all important issues that become the object of conflicts, the influence of power and the attitude towards power. The lack of deeper analysis is also the lack of reflection on the resources which we have and with which we can try solutions, as well as those which we do not have and without which we are not able to deal with a given conflict situation.

This tool evolved – from simple analysis (from so called: shortened version) including: the object, the interests of conflict parties and possible solutions. In the case of quick action (for example in a crisis situation) the shortened version is sufficient. However, in a situation when there is no time pressure and when no one is satisfied with the elimination or 'symptom curing' the thorough tool is much more helpful since it incorporates both the processual element as well as the structural one in the conflict analysis.

Dealing with conflict is a complex process, where many aspects depend on what had happened before and during the conflict as well as at the time of the attempts to solve it. The approach to the very conflict and its solution depend on the acceptance of its processual and/or structural character. The first one requires paying attention to the events during the conflict. During analysis it is necessary to observe how consecutive episodes affect each other. This makes it possible to treat conflict as a complex and temporarily changeable phenomenon. At the same time "conflict can be treated as the contrary interests or antagonisms between people have objective nature" (Balawajder 1992, p. 26). In structural approach the attention is focused on the circumstances of the conflict, on the base of each conflictual situation.

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[1] All the quotes in the text are the author's translations from Polish.

It is particularly important to analyse what factors have an influence on the be-haviours in a given conflict. Such analysis takes into consideration "the subjectivity of conflict stresses that the awareness of the people involved in a conflict of the existing contradictions, the negative perception of the social situation or the threat to one's important values is a necessary condition of the conflicts existence" (Balawajder 1992, pp. 26-27). These two options do not exclude themselves. Actually, it is valuable to ana-lyse conflicts from both perspectives and such an approach is beneficial to the resolu-tion process, which is going to be clear after the model of analysis has been presented.

## Conflict analysis according to the thorough model

1. The sides of conflict
2. The object of conflict and its main issues
3. Values, norms and assumptions
4. Environment – setting – conditions
5. Participation of other people in the process of dealing with conflict
6. The third side of conflict
7. The ways of dealing with conflict
8. Necessary resources
9. The choice of the resolution method
10. If is not successful…
11. Findings for the participants

The elements listed above refer both to the institutional conditions, which are largely the elements of the structural dimension of conflict, as well as to the interaction condi-tions which are connected with the processual dimension.

## The sides of conflict

First, it is necessary to define parallelly the sides of conflict with their interests. It is of utmost importance to identify all the persons involved in the conflict. Sometimes these are not only the sides that are obvious (i.e. being in direct contradiction). Sometimes somebody is mistakenly defined as a side in conflict. This may be connected with rep-resenting someone's interests by representatives, advisors or assistants. In such cases it is vital to get to know the relations between people. For example, in school conflicts these are usually the adults (parents, teachers, psychologists, pedagogues or principals) who become, together with students, one of the sides of a conflict representing children (Wajszczyk 2018).

## Issues, interests, needs, aims and the object of conflict

The next step is to define the interests of the sides; this is particularly important as sometimes the real aim, needs or interests are not transparent. For various reasons they are hidden (purposefully or unconsciously). It is beneficial to know, where the sides are heading and what they would like to achieve in the process of conflict resolution. Sometimes we can talk about multiple objects of conflict. In such cases the sides make attempts to meet various needs or satisfy many interests. Here it is necessary to define which aims/needs/interests are essential since such situations interfere with finding constructive solutions to a given case.

## Values, norms and assumptions

From one side conflicts may relate to values which can be the subject of an argument. In such cases dealing with conflict most often includes fighting. Values and assumptions may also become clear in conflicts. For example, for an employee, subjecting themselves to their principal, their job, which they do not want to lose, might be an important value no matter if this job is satisfactory or not. Some other norms might also become "visible" – for example, the ones connected with hierarchy or the mechanisms of institutional functioning. According to the rules of institutional functioning presented by the author in other publications, the efficiency of creating so called "institutional men" becomes apparent in people's actions and thus the institution is authorised (Borecka--Biernat 2019; Wajszczyk and Walęcka-Matyja 2019). The mechanisms functioning in a given institution are clear when we analyse the decisions made during the attempts to solve a conflict.

The sources of assumptions are experiences from previous, similar situations. They may lead to the formation of an assumption according to which it is not worth fighting or asking for help since these do not bring positive consequences. The very approach to conflict – treating it as a phenomenon that "destroys" order and brings only negative emotions – is a type of undesirable assumption. They also become clear in the opinion that only a specialist or somebody in charge can generate a solution.

## Environment – setting – conditions

It is vital in which environment a conflict takes place, what features characterise it and what kind of rules are applicable to it. Another question is whether or not this space is somehow divided, dependant on specific people and/or regulations. Being aware

of these factors is essential in order to choose a convenient place for working with a given conflict.

In the structural aspect, community, in which the conflict takes place, must also be taken into consideration. **The relations that exist before the conflict can be "a base" for the decisions made by the participants of the conflict and, in this sense, they can be either a departure point or an important aim to achieve in the conflict**. The relations have processual meaning. The links joining people in a relation before a contradiction appears come into being on every stage of working with conflict. Making the participants aware that the links had been something important for them may encourage them to take actions oriented at reaching compromise and maintaining good relations. However, if the relations had not been of significant importance, the participants are more likely to be oriented to meet their own needs.

In this aspect the relations with power agents play a very important role too. The key questions are how relations of supremacy and subjectivity look, how does the power agency function, what "code of dealing with power" functions in a particular community. In many situations specific relations with power, characteristic for a given community, generate escapism and servitude. The relations of supremacy and subjectivity based on power and authority, additionally enhanced by the memories from similar occurrences from the past and/or generationally transferred fear of power, discourage from constructively dealing with conflict. They also prevent such dealing with conflict that would ensure the realisation of the subjective side's interests since they are oriented at the aim of those who possess a stronger position.

## Participation of other people in the process of dealing with conflict

Who, apart from the obvious and essential sides of conflict, takes part in its resolution? The answer to such a question plays an important role since it is necessary to balance inequality between the participants and the power agents. In the case of children, these are obviously the adults whose presence creates this lack of balance. Quite often, children search for support from their parents and less often they turn to teachers, psychologists and pedagogues. This reluctance is also based on their memories and the internalised norms of institutional functioning. It is important to define whether the side of conflict is one person, or whether they represent some group interest, because the outcome of such a reflection may play an important role – particularly in the analysis and preparatory actions aiming to solve the conflict. In the case of group interest, it is necessary to establish the aim the whole group is heading for, decide who is going to represent the group and give this person unconditional trust.

## The third – party of conflict

Here appears the figure of the mediator or negotiator. Jadwiga Królikowska points to the third side of conflict, which plays this role (Królikowska 1993). This person integrates the conflict and takes part in solving it. The third side of conflict tends to be omitted in the analysis of conflict, but this figure may turn out to be the *éminence grise* of the conflict process, actually making decisions about the time of its duration, style or strength.

The third side usually knows a lot about the subject and the sides of the conflict and has got past experience related to conflict resolution. They may be considered as trustworthy by both sides involved in the conflict and therefore can be asked or appointed to be a neutral coordinator or mediator. Neutrality, experience and knowledge are the three characteristic features of the third side.

Usually the third side of conflict has got sincere motives. They intervene, solve conflicts or prevents force from being used as well as to ensure that both sides do not destroy one another. In the situation of open conflict, the third side's role is sometimes to stop the fight. The third side can also intervene in the content of the conflict – for example by defining what the subject of the argument is or by outlining the relations between the sides. Additionally, the third side can offer ways in which a given conflict can be resolved (Królikowska 1993).

The identity of the third side is clearly defined. Królikowska underlines that the third side's "functioning outside conflict must be stable and based on a clear axio-normative system. It creates the basis [for the third side] to be able to relate to values important to them and to gain a positive attitude for these values by the opponents, and in this way find a platform for mutual understanding" (Królikowska 1993, p. 105).

## The ways of dealing with conflict

In dealing with conflict, the careful analysis of all the aforementioned elements of structure is very significant. Such insight gives the opportunity to gain a full understanding of the conflict situation, it also creates the possibility to generate solutions for all the participants of the conflict. It has got a creative as well as an integrative dimension. However, it is essential to assume that everybody is able to, and has the right to, generate a conflict solution. Each of these ideas is treated seriously and deserves serious consideration. Possible consequences and the course of events are also considered. In such a "frame" all the people involved are engaged in the process of conflict resolution. In this way all possible variants and possible consequences are analysed. The choice

of the ways of acting is then though through and the solutions applied are adjusted to the character of the process taking place in the interaction.

## Necessary resources

The analysis of the points mentioned above mayalready act as a resource but apart from that it is necessary to define what is needed in terms of material aspects: place and objects as well as of non-material aspects: key and skills.

Defining the missing elements helps in better preparing for the conflict. Nevertheless, the conflict itself shows that something is missing, or some difficulties are present. This is the lack of communicative competencies, especially assertiveness and the ability to express an "I-message", so skills that make it possible to start a conversation that most often lead to successful conflict resolution. In this place, the participation of the third side is clearly applicable. Someone who appears between the sides that are having difficulties communicating can fill the gap and help the sides to express their needs. The next step is generating a solution.

Social competences are a wider theoretical category that show weak points in conflict situations. According to Borkowski, social competence is "a coherent and functional system of knowledge, experience, personality features, abilities and social skills which help a person to create and develop creative relations and relationships with other people, to actively participate in the lives of various social groups, satisfactorily play various social roles and to efficiently solve the problems that arise" (Borkowski 2003, p. 108). And it is the efficient acting in conflict situations that is largely dependent on social competences. They make it the reaching of goals possible in conflict and at the same time do not incur excessive costs connected with this realisation.

For Jan Borkowski social competences include social knowledge, prosocial thinking, social experience, social personality, emotional and social intelligence, moral maturity, social authority and trust as well as various social abilities and skills (Borkowski 2003, p. 110). These components include many aspects of humans life. Michael Argyle says that social competence means "ability and possession of necessary skills to influence other people in social situations" (Argyle 1999, p. 133), so they give the opportunity to realise one's needs.

Social competences allow people to attain satisfaction in social situations. A. Matczak mentions three types of such situations: social exposure, demanding assertiveness and intimate. Social competences condition the efficiency of behaviours in those three types of situations (Matczak and Martowska 2013). A person in a situation of conflict faces multiple dilemmas. One of which is described by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph

H. Kilmann as connected with cooperation and assertiveness (Thomas & Kilmann 1974). In conflict situations one must deal with the problem of internal stability all the time. On one side, people seek to maintain a convenient life for themselves in good relations with others, which lets them cooperate and be accepted – cooperative tendency. On the other hand, they want to achieve their own goals and influence others – assertive tendency. Thus, one constantly faces a conflict in which suitable actions give the opportunity for a satisfactory social life. "The most important «tools», which let people deal with conflicts efficiently, are the social competences that can be generally defined as the phenomenon of both efficiently influencing others as well as accepting influence in a sensible way" (Smółka 2008, p. 27).

In this aspect some particular shortages are clear. They have been labelled as *inefficiency trio* (Borecka-Biernat, Wajszczyk & Walęcka-Matyja 2019). The difficulties in creating satisfactory relations become visible in conflict situations. The relations are accompanied by anxiety, as well as a lack of trust and authorities. It is also very difficult for an authentic situation of meeting to come into being in which the conflict could be solved.

## The choice of the resolution method

Having analysed the resources and having gained an awareness of one's deficiencies, the decision on the way of action suitable for a particular situation is made. It is of utmost importance to be conscious of the reasonableness of this choice. The choice is a result of solving the dilemma between the realisation of one's interest and taking care of ones relations (assertiveness vs cooperation). According to Thomas and Kilmann (1974) the possibilities of dealing with conflict can be summarised in five different modes: cooperation, compromise, fight, escapism or submission (Borecka-Biernat, Wajszczyk and Walęcka-Matyja 2019).

## If is not successful…

Assuming that each and every conflict is a process, varied possibilities of dealing with it must be taken into consideration. The elements of structure change in the process. Being aware of the fact that the aims of two sides meet in a conflict situation, it is advisable to be ready for modifications since it is possible that some aims are not going to be achieved or they might be achieved partially.

## Findings for the participants

All conflicts should end with some conclusions regarding both the initiating elements, analytical elements constructing within the frame of scheme, as well as from the course of dealing with conflict. Conflicts give opportunity to get to know others and oneself in relations. This has got educational value. Conflicts diagnose difficulties in relations as well as show that in shared social space its participants try to achieve different goals, so conflicts are unavoidable. This unavoidability may have integrational value. Teresa Rostowska, with reference to family conflicts, underlines that "constructive solving of a conflict undoubtedly supports the maturing and integration of all members of family" (Rostowska 2001, p. 18).

Conflict situations are a laboratory of social competences. From one side they show shortages in this aspect but also give them the opportunity to develop. Besides, each conflict – in whatever way it finishes – is an important event connected with self--reflection and can be treated as a step towards self-development. It is also an occasion to collect tools that can be used in conflicts, and in this way, it is a factor of getting satisfaction in interpersonal relations.

## When there is time pressure

Sometimes conflicts must be dealt with immediately. In such cases, it is not possible to go through complete analysis and then shortened version may come in handy. In this variation these are the sides of conflict, object and possible solutions that are taken into consideration. It is essential to give the conflict participants opportunity to cope with emotions, if there are any and then use "safety anchor" by reflecting on the interests of all the sides, as well as on their relations and finally generate possible solutions.

## Learning in conflict

The processual and structural dimension, treated as a whole, is connected with particular assumptions and reactions that are visible in actions. One must accept that particular reactions to conflict are natural, they can happen, and they are a source of information about what does not work perfectly well or to what extent we are different.

It is necessary to treat conflict as a task that everybody should at least try to solve themselves. The limiting barriers include fear, lack of good practices, internalised institutional norms, relations with power agents and undeveloped social competences. The more prevention and knowledge, the more social competences and skills connected

with dealing with conflicts are developed. Support from other members of a given institution is another important factor shaping the courage to attempt to persistently fulfil one's needs and to express objection to the infringement of one's boundaries.

Conflict that is happening needs action. The mechanisms of institutional functioning in the situation of conflict are particularly important. They may include eliminating it or symptom treatment (Reykowski 1984, pp. 73-82) based on the desire to get rid of conflict that is perceived as something bad. Fear and a negative attitude towards conflicts hinder the readiness to work with conflict and that is why preventive actions must be undertaken, as well as direct action calming down emotions and promoting a constructive approach to conflict.

The model presented: full or shortened, depending on the situation and needs helps to focus on what is really important in the process of solving conflicts. Many conflicts must be dealt with in thought-through ways aimed at dealing with tensions that appear during difficult conflict processes. Using such a safe solution creates the opportunity to return to a conflict situation with new energy and a *disconnectedness* from negative experiences gathered in the past. The more rigid the social structure, the more a safety anchor is needed. In such a structure it is difficult to find openness and freedom.

Each conflict can be a learning situation. It is the process in which various resources in the form of knowledge and experiences, but also particular emotions and attitudes come into being. Finally, it is the process that is always performed in interactions. However, if this is to happen, it is indispensable to accept a specific attitude connected with defining oneself and the other person in conflict. This would be a manifestation of reflectiveness, which is of vital importance for personal development. This happens by "observing" oneself and the other conflict participants as well as particular elements of the process in which the sides are involved.

If, in the conflict process, the participants instrumentalise themselves and their actions and they concentrate only on the realisation of their interests, learning is not possible. Actions are then focused on the need to finish the conflict with the realisation of one's need. The sides representing this kind of approach, do not make attempts to reflect and they do not perceive conflict as a process that could be a learning situation.

However, when conflict is an occasion for the participants to "observe" themselves and others form the perspective of the resources, opportunities, limitations, difficulties and interactions, it creates, through reflectiveness, an opportunity to learn. The conflict participants with such an approach undertake deep reflection on learning which "can lead to the modification of the cognitive schemata by dissociations and reconstructions through transcending prior limitations, and – as a result – new patterns of reasoning and acting occur, which leads to contextually independent activity" (Solarczyk-Szwec 2010, p. 58) This kind of learning has a necessary relation with the experience of crisis

and its accompanying emotions. This kind of learning takes place in interactions where "the process of social interaction is a crucial process and directly connected with learning process (Illeris 2009, p. 86).

Taking into consideration the specificity of adult learning, which is described by Knud Illeris, it is necessary to underline self-determination, responsibility and following themes that are particularly interesting (Illeris 2009). If learning is to appear in conflict it is important to adopt a specific attitude connected with considering oneself and one's needs, and a suitable attitude towards the other participants of conflict as well as ongoing engagement in the process of social interaction. Such an attitude means that conflict is such an important and interesting situation that it is necessary to engage in the resolution process. It is also a situation in which the participants confront their prior experience with the present situation and thus broaden both their theoretical and practical resources by the process of reflection.

Hanna Solarczyk-Szwec presents the categories of experience, crisis and reflectiveness as the categories characterising adult learning (Solarczyk-Szwec 2010). It is particularly important that "at present and with reference to adults it is not enough to learn through experience, reflect on experience, it is the reflection on reflection that is essential" (Solarczyk-Szwec 2010, p. 57). This refers to the aforementioned reflectiveness owing to which, in the conflict process, the participants define themselves, their opponents and the situation in which they have been.

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