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ARTYKUŁY
[*Articles*]

COPING STRATEGIES IN ADOLESCENTS IN SITUATIONS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT AND THE LOCUS OF CONTROL

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Summary. The purpose of the study was to determine the role of the locus of control in the process of choosing a constructive (task-oriented) or destructive (aggressive, avoidant, submissive) coping strategy in adolescent youth in situations of social conflict. The Questionnaire for Studying the Locus of Control (*Kwestionariusz do Badania Poczucia Kontroli*, KBPK), designed by G. Krasowicz and A. Kurzyp-Wojnarska, as well as the Questionnaire for Analysis of Coping Strategies in Adolescents in Situations of Social Conflict (KSMK) by D. Borecka-Biernat were employed in the study. The empirical studies have been conducted in junior high schools on a sample of 893 adolescents (468 girls and 425 boys) aged 13–15. The obtained results indicate that a stronger conviction of one's ability to control the negative and/or positive consequences of events facilitates the application of the task-oriented coping strategy in adolescents in situations of social conflict. The results of the study indicate that adolescents who in a situation of social conflict adopt destructive strategies are universal in their conviction of their inability to control the positive and/or negative consequences of their actions.
Key words: adolescent youth, locus of control, coping strategies, social conflict situations

Introduction

Adolescence is an important stage in life; it is considered a period of transition between childhood and adulthood. It is during this time when numerous developmental changes occur, starting with changes in physical appearance caused by

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puberty which can be observed in young people between the ages of 13 and 15 (Harwas-Napierała, Trempała, 2000). It is also during this time that changes occur on the level of relationships with adults and peers and a young person learns to find their place in the adult community (Czerwińska-Jasiewicz, 2003). Young people expand their social universe and gain more freedom and independence in decision-making in different areas, which increases the likelihood of conflicts (Jackson et al., 1998). In social contacts, conflicts with teacher begin, as well as arguments with schoolmates, romantic partners, one or both parents, and other family members (Jaworski, 2000; Guszkowska, Gorący, Rychta-Siedlecka, 2001; Różańska-Kowal, 2004; Polak, 2010; Miłkowska, 2012).

The areas which generate the most conflict between students and teachers are grades and disrespectful behaviour of the teacher as well as their controlling attitude and rigidity of requirements. The main reasons for arguments with peers include taunts, betrayal, breach of trust, competition for grades, for the interest of the opposite sex, for position among the classmates, and sporting achievements. Most problems with mutual understanding between children and parents are caused by the change of young people's attitude towards their parents. Adolescents are less open towards their parents, while the parents frequently are not able to cope with the growing autonomy of their children and try to limit it (Ornstein, Carstensen, 1991; Obuchowska, 2010). Many conflicts with parents are caused by various aspects of daily life: differences in tastes, opinions – including those on the adolescent's educational performance – clothes, music, watching television, using the computer, ways of spending free time, or returning home late in the evening.

Situations of social conflict are classified as difficult situations in social interaction. Social conflict occurs at all stages of life and, since birth, each person has to learn to cope with difficulties and challenges which they encounter. Adolescence is a period in which young people have various, often contradictory goals, and have to cope with inconsistent social expectations. A difficult situation encourages a young person to take action oriented towards regaining the balance between expectations and abilities and/or towards improvement of their emotional state. The activity undertaken in a difficult situation is considered, in a specific situational context, as a coping strategy in a current difficult situation (Wrześniewski, 1996; Heszen-Niejodek, 2000). Numerous studies as well as casual observation indicate that adolescents have at their disposal a considerable number of coping strategies which they apply in difficult social situations, including situations of social conflict (Honess et al., 1997; Frączek, 2003; Trylińska-Tekielska, 2007; Balawajder, 2010). These strategies include constructive and destructive ways of coping in situations of social conflict. A constructive strategy – in the form of task-oriented coping with a situation of social conflict – is aimed at solving the conflict and overcoming the difficulty. It involves attempts to effect changes within the situation of conflict, either through changing the individual's own behaviour or through leaving the threatening environment. A destructive strategy in a situation of social conflict

– in the form of defensive behaviours – is oriented only towards decreasing the unpleasant emotional tension and/or improvement of one's mood. It is achieved through the following channels: **aggressive** behaviour in the form of a physical and/or verbal attack directed at specific individuals, which causes damage to their mental or physical wellbeing; **avoiding** confrontation with the situation of social conflict, lack of communication, avoiding thinking about and processing the situation through ignoring the problem, engaging in alternative activities (thinking about pleasant things, daydreaming, listening to music, sleeping, going for walks) and interacting with other people; submissive behaviour in which the individual abandons the defence of their own interests or realization of their own goals and instead attempts to satisfy the other participant of the situation of social conflict.

The research to date suggests that social conflict situations are connected with the issue of coping strategies in specific situational context which restores the balance between expectations and capacity for adaptation, and which allows to avoid or minimize the tensions, losses, and unfavourable outcomes. The results of studies and observations indicate that reactions to difficulties and defence mechanisms against excessive emotional tension are varied among young people (Rostowska, 2001; Sikora, Pisula, 2008). According to M. Tyszkowa (1986), the subjective perception of one's ability to control the situation is a factor that plays a significant role in experiencing difficult situations.

A person's impact on the surrounding world depends not only on the objective conditions in a specific situation, but also on the individual's general belief that their outcomes depend on their actions. A person who interprets their successes and failures as consequences of agents beyond their control has an external locus of control, while someone who perceives them as a result of their own actions and abilities has an internal locus of control (Drwal, 1978). Overall, the perceptions of the situations in which we find ourselves are varied. Some people tend to see the events they experience as heavily influenced by factors which they cannot control, thus perceiving themselves as having no control over their situation; others are more likely to interpret their circumstances as dependent on their own activity and believe that they are "in control".

Locus of control regulates and modifies a person's activity in challenging circumstances. This means that an individual's subjective perception of their control over the situation regulates the process of coping with the experienced difficulties and has impact on their decisions (Kurtek, 2005). The belief that one is able (or unable) to influence the course of events significantly modifies the efforts a person makes in order to cope with the difficult situation and determines the coping methods that they choose. It can be said that the locus of control is an important individual factor modifying human functioning in difficult circumstances and determining the applied coping strategies (Gacek, 2000; Ogińska-Bulik, 2001; Borecka-Biernat, 2006). It affects the stress process by impacting the assessment of the threat, as well as the choice of the employed coping mechanisms (Walsh, Wilding, Eysenck, 1994).

The cognitive assessment of the situation as one that can be controlled or not is one of the factors which differentiate the applied coping strategies in difficult situations. The locus of control – that is, the belief that the situation depends on the individual's own actions (i.e., something can be done to change it) – is the basis for continuing efforts aimed at overcoming hardships and finding a way to emerge from the difficult circumstances. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of achieving the desired outcome by creating the possibility of defeating the difficulties (Cook, Sloane, 2001; Gasparski, 2002; Kurtek, 2005; Taylor, 2010; Adesina, 2012). In the context of the obtained results, P. Miller et al. (1986) have concluded that, in a situation of conflict, individuals with an internal locus of control apply constructive coping strategies. This result corresponds to the data obtained by M. Dijkstra, B. Beersma, and A. Evers (2011). Individuals who have an internal locus of control are characterized by the tendency to choose conflict-solving strategies focused on resolution of the problem. Overall, the tendency to perceive difficult situations as possible to control facilitates an active style of confronting stressful situations.

Assessment of the situation which is seen as beyond one's control is, however, connected with destructive coping methods. N. Ogińska-Bulik (2001), H. Saile, T. Hulsebusch (2006) have observed that individuals who have an external locus of control in difficult situations are likely to react emotionally; they are convinced that they are unable to change the situation and concentrate on their emotions instead of the source of the problem. Thus, while confronting stressful situations (assessed as beyond their control), these individuals more frequently apply strategies focused on emotions rather than on solving the problem. The results of the studies conducted by K. Osterman et al. (1999), T. Rostowska (2001), D. Borecka-Biernat (2006), A. Deming, J. Lochman (2008), L. Breet, C. Mayburgh, and M. Poggenpoel (2010) show that individuals who believe that their actions do not have significant influence on their outcomes, and who think that the consequences of their actions are beyond their control, in stressful confrontations (assessed as impossible to control) abandon the efforts to solve the problem, withdraw, or employ an aggressive coping strategy. It can be concluded that a cognitive assessment of a situation as one which cannot be controlled is a significant individual factor which determines destructive behaviour (avoidance, submissiveness, aggression) in difficult situations.

Research problem and hypothesis

The purpose of the study was to answer the following research question:

1. Is there a relationship between the locus of control and destructive (aggression, avoidance, submissiveness) and constructive (task-oriented) coping strategies in adolescent youth in situations of social conflict (and what is the nature of that relationship)?

In this form, the question allows to formulate the following hypothesis which will be verified through an analysis of the results of the conducted empirical study:

H.1 In a situation of social conflict, adolescents who have an external locus of control are more likely to apply a destructive strategy (aggression, avoidance, submissiveness), while adolescents who have an internal locus of control are more likely to apply a constructive (task-oriented) strategy.

Method

Subjects and the course of research. The studied sample consisted of 468 girls and 425 boys in the age range of 13 to 15. Overall, 893 individuals participated in the studies. The respondents were first-, second- and third-grade junior high school students from Wroclaw and neighbouring towns. Random selection of schools was used, however, not all randomly selected schools agreed for the research to be carried out in their premises, therefore, in a few cases non-randomly selected schools with which this kind of cooperation was possible were chosen. Voluntary and anonymous participation were ensured for all participants; the study was conducted in compliance with standards for psychological research. The basic criterion for selection of the participants was age. The influence of age on the choice of aggressive coping strategy in situations of social conflict was studied on a sample of participants aged 13 to 15 (early adolescence). As a time of transition from childhood to adulthood – also described as the period of rebellion and resistance – adolescence is an important stage in an individual's life. It is during adolescence that many biological, psychological, mental, motivational, and social changes occur, which causes numerous difficulties with adjusting one's behaviour to accommodate new situations that one encounters, as well as new tasks and social roles (Czerwińska-Jasiewicz, 2003).

Research tools. The following tools were used in the study:

The Questionnaire for Studies on the Locus of Control (Kwestionariusz do Badania Poczucia Kontroli, KBPK), designed by G. Krasowicz, A. Kurzyp-Wojnarska (1990), which consists of 46 forced response questions; 36 are diagnostic questions and the remaining 10 are buffer questions. The diagnostic questions refer to simple situations connected with school life; they form two scales: the Scale of Success (S) and the Scale of Failure (F). The questions which describe favourable events are included in the Scale of Success (S), while the questions which refer to unfavourable ones are included in the Scale of Failure (F). The sum of results obtained from both scales creates the ratio of the generalized sense of control (S + F). Low results obtained in KBPK indicate a sense of external control of the consequences of events, and a high result suggests a sense of internal control of the consequences of events. The Questionnaire is characterized by a sufficient reliability (the internal consistency coefficient KR-20 for the S Scale is ,54, and ,69 for the F Scale) and criterion validity.

The KSMK Questionnaire designed by D. Borecka-Biernat (2012) examines coping strategies in situations of social conflict applied by adolescent youth. It is comprised

of descriptions of 33 situations of social conflict. Each description is accompanied by four types of coping behaviour in a situation of social conflict: aggressive coping ("A"), coping by avoidance ("U"), coping by submission ("UI"), and task-oriented coping ("Z"). The results are obtained separately for each scale, by summing up the behaviours marked by the participant in the 33 situations. The Questionnaire is characterized by sufficient accuracy (Cronbach's α was around or above ,70) and criterion validity.

Research results

The relationship between the locus of control (KBPK) and the coping strategies applied by adolescents in situations of social conflict (KSMK) was presented with Pearson correlation coefficient. It allows to measure the level of variables, an increase in which was displayed in sten scores (interval scale). Information on interdependence between the analysed variables is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of values of the Pearson correlation coefficient in the KBPK and KSMK scales for the whole sample (N = 893), for girls only (N = 468), and for boys only (N = 425)

Scales of the questionnaire KBPK	Scales of the questionnaire KSMK					
	Girls	Boys	Overall	Girls	Boys	Overall
	„A"			„U"		
Success scale	−.31	−.31	−.31	−.25	−.36	−.30
	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .001$
Failure scale	−.34	−.25	−.28	−.21	−.32	−.26
	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .001$	$p < .0001$
S + F	−.37	−.31	−.34	−.26	−.40	−.32
	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p < .001$	$p < .001$
	„UI"			„Z"		
Success scale	.10	.17	.14	.30	.32	.30
	$p < .03$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .001$
Failure scale	.14	.07	.11	.26	.30	.26
	$p < .003$	Ir.	$p < .001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$
S + F	.14	.14	.14	.32	.35	.32
	$p < .003$	$p < .005$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .0001$	$p < .001$

Legend: „A" – aggressive coping strategy in situations of social conflict, „U" – avoidance in situation of social conflict, „UI" – submissive strategy in situation of social conflict, „Z" – task-oriented strategy in situation of social conflict, S + F = sum of the results from both scales, Ir. – irrelevant.

The Pearson correlation coefficient values, presented in Table 1, are mostly weak and low (.10–.40); they are, however, statistically significant ($p < .001$). This allows to draw the conclusion that the locus of control being different for success (S) and failure (F), as well as the generalized sense of control (S + F) and strategies (aggression, avoidance, submissiveness, and task-oriented) are not strongly connected with each other. It is worth noting that, in the context of the analyzed correlations, all the algebra signs placed next to the values for the strategies of aggression and submissiveness as a way of coping with social conflict indicate a negative correlation.

A low correlation appears between the locus of control separately for success and failure, and the generalized locus of control and the aggressive coping strategy in youth in situations of social conflict. The correlation coefficients for the entire sample were $r(S) = -.31$, $r(F) = .28$, and $r(S + F) = -.34$. A similarly low correlation was observed in connection with the avoidant coping strategy in adolescents in situations of social conflict. The correlation coefficients for the entire sample were $r(S) = -.30$, $r(F) = -.26$, and $r(S + F) = -.32$. A clear tendency for two-directional changes of values of the studied traits can be observed here: the higher the results obtained from KBPK – thus, the stronger the belief in internal control of consequences of events, separately in success and failure, and the generalized internal sense of control – the lower the results for the aggressive and avoidant strategies. The opposite also appears to be true: lower results in KBPK (a stronger belief in external control of the consequences of events, separately in success and failure, and the generalized internal sense of control) coincide with a higher level of the aggressive and avoidant strategies in adolescents in situations of social conflict.

A different relationship can be observed between the locus of control with the submissive strategy of reacting in conflict and the task-oriented coping strategy in social conflict. An analysis of the obtained empirical data has revealed that a separate locus of control for success (S) and failure (F) and the generalized locus of control (S + F) positively correlate with the submissive and the task-oriented oriented strategy in adolescents in situations of social conflict. An insignificant relationship has been observed between the locus of control being separate for success and failurehu and the generalized locus of control and the submissive strategy as a coping method in adolescents in situations of social conflict. The coefficients for the entire sample were $r(S) = .14$, $r(F) = .11$ and $r(S + F) = .14$. The low correlation refers to the relationship with the task-oriented strategy in situations of social conflict. The correlation coefficients for the entire sample were $r(S) = .30$, $r(F) = .26$, and $r(S + F) = .32$. It seems likely that the higher the KBPK results – that is, the higher conviction of internal control of the consequences of events separately in success and failure, and of the generalized internal sense of control – the higher the results of the measurement of the submissive strategy and the task-oriented strategy; the opposite also seems to be true: lower results in KBPK – that is, a higher conviction of the external control of events in success and failure, and of generalized external sense of control – coincides with a lower level of submissive and task-oriented strategies in adolescents in situations of social conflict.

The data presented in Table 1 allows to conclude, at the same time, that gender is not a factor that determines the strength of the relationship between the studied variables. Almost identical correlation coefficients in girls and boys have been observed between the locus of control separately for success and failure, and for the generalized locus of control, and the destructive (aggression, avoidance, submissiveness) and constructive (task-oriented) coping strategy in the situation of social conflict. The statistically significant ($p < .001$) Pearson correlation coefficient results were weak and low for both girls (.10–.37) and boys (.14–.40). The only statistically insignificant correlation coefficient was the coefficient between the internal locus of control in failure and the submissive strategy in social conflict (in boys).

In the light of the verification presented above, hypothesis H.1 can be considered positively verified in reference to adolescents who in situations of social conflict apply the task-oriented strategy; for the adolescents who apply the destructive strategies (aggression, avoidance, submissiveness), the hypothesis is only partially verified.

Discussion and conclusions

The locus of control is a significant variable modifying functioning of a young person in a situation of social conflict. A stronger conviction that it is other people who influence the positive and/or negative consequences of one's own actions (external locus of control) facilitates an increase in application of aggressive coping strategies in adolescents in situations of social conflict. It appears likely that lack of belief in one's ability to obtain the desired outcomes, and lack of the sense of responsibility for failures facilitate employment by young people of aggressive coping strategies in situations of social conflict. It has also been concluded that a generalized lowered sense of one's ability to control events is connected with an increase in application of aggressive coping strategies. Thus, young people who are believe that they are unable to change a difficult situation choose to react aggressively to the problems they experience. Similar results were obtained in studied conducted by T. Rostowska (2001), D. Borecka-Biernat (2006), A. Deming, J. Lochman (2008), L. Breet, C. Mayburgh, and M. Poggenpoel (2010). The results of those studies prove that conflicts in relationships with others (e.g. mutual aversion, hostility, blaming), which appear in the social system of human activity, are forms of behaviour which usually coincide with the external locus of control.

The analysis has revealed that the stronger the belief in an external source of control in situations connected with success, the more frequently the avoidant strategy is employed by adolescents in situations of social conflict. Assigning the responsibility for one's success to fate or luck may cause young people to lose the motivation to control their own lives and result in passive behaviour in conflict. It may also create the conviction that positive outcomes do not come as a consequence of their actions and becoming involved in activities is futile because it does not have impact on the end result. The tendency, in young people who employ the

avoidant strategy in social conflict, to believe in an external source of control is evident also when they experience failure. The sense of lack of responsibility for their own failures causes adolescents to lose the motivation to make efforts oriented towards changing their circumstances. The belief that one does not have any influence on the outcomes of their actions results in lack of motivation to change their behaviour and in this way, actively impact the situation. Lack of belief that effort pays off may cause young people to passively wait for the consequences of a given situation; it may result in passive behaviour during attempts to change the situation. In other words, an adolescent does not believe that the occurring conflict may be, to any extent, changed and does not try to solve the problem. Instead, they accept their fate and engage in other activities which serve as a distraction from the existing issue. They may also withdraw (physically or emotionally) from the events happening around them (Dakowicz, 1996; Gacek, 2000; Borecka-Biernat, 2006; Saile, Hulsebusch, 2006; Taylor, 2010).

An analysis of the obtained empirical data has revealed that the bigger the tendency in an adolescent to think that their experiences are a direct result of their own actions, the more frequently they choose the task-oriented strategy in a situation of social conflict. The conviction that one has control over the positive outcomes of events allows young people to manipulate their environment more efficiently, as they have reasons to believe that their actions are effective and bring the expected results. The success they experience and the rewards they obtain are perceived as a consequence of their own abilities, skills, and perseverance. It should be noted that adolescents who choose the task-oriented coping strategy in a situation of social conflict are not only able to take responsibility for their success, but also for their failures. The unfavourable outcomes they experiences are, consequently, perceived as a result of lack of skills, insufficient effort, or not enough involvement on their part. Overall, the perceived causal relationship between what they do (and how) and the results of their own actions has impact on the choice of the coping strategy oriented towards solving the encountered difficulties (Cook, Sloane, 2001; Dijkstra, Beersma, Evers, 2011; Adesina, 2012).

The conducted study has also revealed a "positive shift" of the locus of control for situations of success and/or situations of failure in adolescents who, in social conflict, display submissive behaviour which reduce the emotional tension caused by the conflict. It means that adolescents who apply the submissive strategy have an overall tendency for the internal locus of control and an internal sense of control separately for success and failure. A young person who, in conflict, behaves submissively, surrenders and limits realization of their own needs, tolerates threats to their interests, or refrains from defending their rights and feelings. As can be seen, an internal locus of control facilitates submissive behaviour and a tendency to capitulate in situations of conflict. This result has not been observed in other studies – on the contrary, they indicate that it is the sense of external control that facilitates destructive coping methods (aggression, avoidance, submissiveness) (Osterman et al., 1999; Rostowska, 2001; Kurtek, 2005; Saile, Hulsebusch, 2006; Taylor, 2010). The difference

in results may have its source in the different samples which were used in the study. The results are, however, preliminary, and further, more detailed research is needed to verify that dependence.

Generalizing the presented results, it can be said that the conviction of one's ability (or inability) to affect the course of events may significantly modify an adolescent's functioning in a situation of social conflict, and determine the coping strategies they choose (Krause, Stryker, 1984). The sense of internal control – contrary to the sense of external control – allows one to impact the social conflict situation, changing either the situation or one's role within it. Adolescents who display this tendency in situations of social conflict actively seek the information needed to solve the issue and approach it in a more task-oriented way. A sense of internal control and the resulting conviction that one is able to affect events facilitates independent, active, and frequently effective reaction, in particular in case of social conflict. Individuals with an internal locus of control present themselves as goal-oriented and strive towards overcoming the experienced difficulties. An internal locus of control increases the capacity for coping with conflicts and facilitates finding solutions, mainly through the belief an individual has in their actual impact on the current or eventual outcome of their actions. Individuals with an external locus of control cope destructively in situations of social conflict. As they usually believe that they are unable to change the situation, they do not concentrate on the source of the problem, focusing, instead, on themselves and on defending the threatened "self". It results in adopting aggressive strategies in conflict or avoiding confrontation with the social conflict situation; these strategies tend to be reinforced by routine application in similar situations.

Finally, it is difficult not to notice that the sense of control of a situation is not a significant factor determining the coping strategies employed by adolescents in situations of social conflict; this means that there may exist a relatively large number of other variables which could help understand the methods of coping with conflict in adolescent youth. An area worthy of further scientific exploration is the genetic (related to temperament) nature of functioning of an individual in conflict and the influence of the family environment on the ability to overcome biological determinants and become a person able to actively cope with conflicts. The results of a study that explores these issues might become the beginning of research into the areas of adolescents' coping strategies in situations of conflict which have so far been neglected.

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STRATEGIE RADZENIA SOBIE MŁODZIEŻY DORASTAJĄCEJ W SYTUACJI KONFLIKTU SPOŁECZNEGO A POCZUCIE KONTROLI SYTUACJI

Streszczenie. Celem badań było ustalenie roli poczucia kontroli sytuacji w wyznaczaniu konstruktywnej (zadanie) i destruktywnej (agresja, unik, uległość) strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży dorastającej w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego. W badaniach posłużono się Kwestionariuszem do Badania Poczucia Kontroli (KBPK) G. Krasowicz, A. Kurzyp-Wojnarskiej i Kwestionariuszem do badania strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego (KSMK) D. Boreckiej-Biernat. Badania empiryczne przeprowadzono w szkołach gimnazjalnych. Objęły one 893 adolescentów (468 dziewcząt i 425 chłopców) w wieku 13–15 lat. W świetle przeprowadzonych badań stwierdzono, że silniejsze przekonanie o własnych możliwościach kontrolowania pozytywnych i/lub negatywnych następstw zdarzeń sprzyja nasileniu zadaniowej strategii radzenia sobie młodzieży w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego. Badania wskazują, że młodzież stosująca w sytuacji konfliktu społecznego strategie destruktywne jest w miarę jednorodna w zakresie przekonania o braku realnego wpływu na pozytywne i/lub negatywne rezultaty własnych działań.
Słowa kluczowe: młodzież dorastająca, poczucie umiejscowienia kontroli, strategie radzenia sobie, sytuacja konfliktu społecznego

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