

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT AS INTEGRATION OF 7C PLAYFULNESS AND POSITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY



Iia Gordiienko-Mytrofanova

Гордиенко-Митрофанова Ія
Dr. Sc. in Psychology, Professor
Certified Positive Psychotherapist
Private practice consultant (Kharkiv, Ukraine)

Email: ikavgm@gmail.com

ORCID: [0000-0001-5332-0663](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5332-0663)



Denys Hohol

Ph.D. student in Psychology
Basic Consultant of Positive Psychotherapy,
Master Course Student
Private practice consultant (Kharkiv, Ukraine)

Email: ReinRoz1803@gmail.com

ORCID: [0000-0002-4594-0720](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4594-0720)



Serhii Sauta

Ph.D. student in Psychology
Consultant of provocative psychotherapy
Private practice consultant (Odessa, Ukraine).

Email: sergeisauta@gmail.com

ORCID: [0000-0002-1213-2655](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1213-2655)

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Abstract

This article presents the conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict as an integration of the concept of 7C playfulness and positive psychotherapy. The conflict is based on M. Smith's three-component attitude structure. The interpersonal conflict as a dynamic process occurring between at least two interrelated parties (individuals and / or groups), is described by cognitions, which make up the sphere of controversy (cognitive component); emotions covered by three possible ways of processing the key conflict (emotional component); behavioral patterns of ludic positions in balance or in their polar manifestations (behavioral component).

Keywords: interpersonal conflict, 7C playfulness, ludic positions, positive psychotherapy, key conflict, attitude

Introduction

Philistines alone may believe that conflicts and problems exist to be resolved. Both of them have other tasks in everyday life and in one's life history, which they perform regardless of their own permission. Also, not a single conflict has ever existed in vain if time does not resolve it, but replaces it in form and content with another.

Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1968)

The phenomenon of social conflict has been a subject of research in social and humanitarian knowledge for over a hundred years starting with the works of the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1968). It is his conclusions that formed the basis of this work «The Functions of Social Conflict» (Coser, 1956) of the German-American sociologist Lewis Alfred Coser, one of the founders of the conflict theories.

The traditional subject of the psychological study of conflict is its intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. The current interest in the theoretical and practical aspects of conflict is due to increasing tensions in various spheres of social life (Oi-Ling, Phillips, & Tat-Wing, 2004; Kittusamy & Buchholz, 2004; Raak & Raak, 2003; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Hahn, 2000). A certain contradiction has emerged between the practical demands for effective conflict management and attempts to conceptualize it (Rahim, 2010; Wilmot & Hocker, 2007; Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; Simons and Peterson, 2000).

The purpose of the present article is to develop and present a conceptual framework of interpersonal conflict within the psychological and psychotherapeutic approach to comprehension and management of interpersonal conflicts, understood primarily as social situations but taking into account the «key conflict» construct.

Methodology

Based on theoretical and empirical studies of the scientists, whose subject of study is interpersonal conflict (Bao et al., 2016; Brule & Eckstein, 2019; Trötschel et al., 2021; Majer et al., 2021; Welch et al., 2022, Donohue & Cai, 2022); analysis of component scales of questionnaires

designed to study personal predisposition to conflict behavior and identify certain styles of conflict resolution (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Rahim, 1985; Straus et al., 1996.); the two-dimensional framework of interpersonal conflict of H. Barki and J. Hartwick (Barki & Hartwick, 2004); the concept of key conflict in the frame of method of positive psychotherapy (Peseschkian, 2016) and the concept of 7C playfulness (Gordiienko-Mytrofanova & Hohol, 2022), the structure of interpersonal conflict was built as a result of integration of the 7C playfulness concept and the method of positive psychotherapy.

In accordance with the objectives of the study the following theoretical methods were used in the work: theoretical and methodological analysis of scientific sources, generalization and synthesis of the data obtained from the analysis, their systematization, classification, conclusions and modeling; the experience of carrying out ludic competence training sessions on the basis of H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, at the Department of Psychology, since 2016.

The ludic competence training focuses on the development of effective interpersonal conflict management skills and is designed for one academic term. However, over the course of three years we carried it out for ten months in the frame of educational experiments. During this period, more than 350 people aged between 20 and 40 took part in the training. The training involved the use of educational video content (its author's title is «Filmography of Playfulness») which was created by both the facilitators of the training and the participants. It was aimed at recognizing the ludic positions. Literary and video content, the case study method, and effective feedback during the training process in the form of video interview made it possible to significantly expand the repertoire of each ludic position. More than 1,000 conflict «scenarios» were analyzed.

Results

3.1. Three aspects of conflict dynamics

Introduction. The proposed structure of interpersonal conflict is described by three aspects of conflict dynamics, by the three components:

cognitive, emotional and behavioral. These three components were first described by M. Brewster Smith in his three-component attitude structure: *a cognitive component* (awareness of the object of social attitude); *an affective component* (emotional evaluation of the object); *a behavioral component* (behavior towards the object). All the elements of the attitude structure are closely interconnected, and a change in one of them involves a change in the others (Smith, Bruner & White, 1956). These components traditionally describe the «I»-concept in the humanistic paradigm (Lodi-Smith & DeMarree, 2017).

7C Playfulness. Before moving on to describing the components of conflict mentioned above, it is important to outline the concept of 7C playfulness in some theses:

1) **playing** is creation of one reality within another (Sauta, Gordiienko-Mytrofanova & Hohol, 2021);

2) **playfulness** is a stable personal trait aimed at transforming the problem space of interpersonal interaction into a ludic one. This implies mobilization of the whole creative potential of an individual and allows one to perceive any difficult situation as a challenge rather than a threat (Gordiienko-Mytrofanova et al., 2022);

3) **ludic competence** is a system of inner resources to which an individual turns in the context of problematic interpersonal interaction in order to find the best balance point between his or her individuality and the external conditions of the social environment on the basis of positive emotions of interest and / or satisfaction, often in their affective expression accompanied by tension or excitement (Gordiienko-Mytrofanova & Hohol, 2022);

4) **four types of playfulness** (Sauta, Gordiienko-Mytrofanova & Hohol, 2021);

5) **7C playfulness** is represented by conjunction of its two essential attributes:

- seven self-motivated abilities, which form the basis of ludic positions of conflict management in interpersonal interaction: sensitivity – «Empath»; humour – «Real Humorist»; lightness – «Equilibrant»; imagination – «Sculptor»; flirting – «Diplomat»; impishness – «Frolicsome Fellow»; fugitiveness – «Holy Fool»; first four components (and the corresponding ludic positions) represent *transformation resources*, while the last three form *the ludic space of solutions*;
- the transformation of the problem space into the ludic space is carried out in balance within one of the three ludic positions: «Diplomat», «Frolicsome Fellow», «Holy Fool» (Kobzieva, Gordiienko-Mytrofanova, Udovenko & Sauta, 2020).

The main participants or actors in the problem space (conflict) are the direct opposing parties: the *Player* and the *Other*, where the *Player* is the person who manages the interpersonal conflict / solves the problem by means of 7C playfulness and the *Other* is the *Player's* opponent who can be represented by one or several individuals. Further in the text, the *Player* and the *Other* are written in capital letters.

The cognitive component (cognitions) of the conflict / problem is described by **the problem space (PS)**, fig. 1. The content of the problem space consists of: values, attitudes, beliefs, needs, etc., as well as cultural / racial / national / religious / professional / age / gender / sex and other differences between the parties of the conflict / problem. And the greater the divergence between the expected and the observed, the higher the conflict stress and the more tangibly it is experienced by the parties of the conflict.

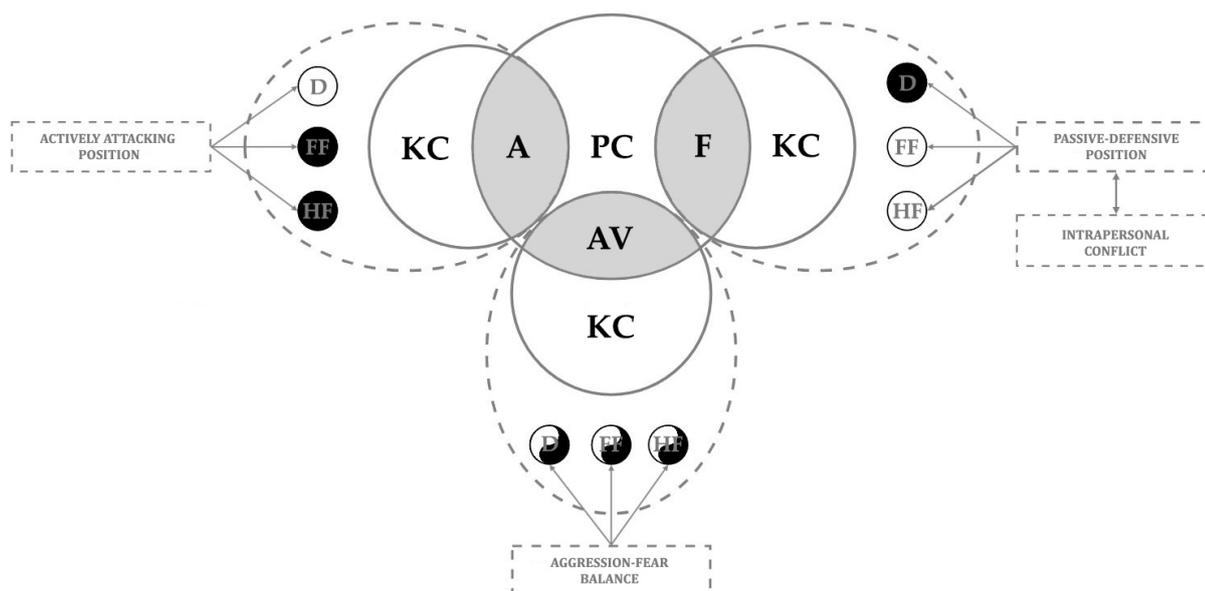


Figure 1. The structure of interpersonal conflict of integration of the 7C playfulness concept and the method of positive psychotherapy

1 conventions:

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equate verbalization.

: position Diplomat.

c position Frolicsome fellow.

ic position Holy Fool

d  ation of balance of ludic position.

d  ation of deficit of ludic position.

at  of redundance of ludic position.

The emotional component (emotions) of the conflict / problem is described by **the key conflict**. In the method of positive psychotherapy, the key point «excessive politeness (courtesy) – excessive directness (sincerity)» is the most vulnerable place for the following pattern of symptom / problem emergence: the reactions of excessive politeness / courtesy in the endocrine and mediator mechanisms of the central nervous system correspond to the reaction of fear; the reactions of excessive directness / sincerity in the central nervous system correspond to aggression (Peseschkian, 2016: 34). More details about the content of the core conflict and the three possible patterns of its processing can be found in our works (Sauta, Gordiienko-Mytrofanova & Hohol, 2021).

The key conflict is a conflict of conflicts. It is also **a perceived internal conflict** between the need to express one's own interests (directness / sincerity) and thereby remain in contact with oneself (congruence) and the need not to take the risk of

other people's attitude and due to it remain in contact with them (politeness / courtesy).

Thus, the basis for communication within interpersonal relationships is politeness and sincerity. The actual ability of «sincerity» in social relations is understood as openness and directness. It is important to say what we think to be right, but to say it in a way that does not offend your partner. N. Peseschkian notes: «It is also important to remember, that the degree of sincerity is not the same in all spheres of life». The actual ability of «politeness» is understood as the ability to build interpersonal relations. The form of its manifestation is behavior that observes socially accepted rules of behavior, such as tactfulness, respect for the partner and oneself, modesty (Peseschkian, N. & Peseschkian, H., 2013: 141-145).

According to M. Goncharov, the key conflict arises whenever there is a perceived choice tension: to say about a significant contradiction of interests or to hide it (Goncharov, 2015: 54).

Since interpersonal conflict is an *expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties*, effective conflict management requires participation of another party: either another person or another need of this person. To do this, the content of the conflict must be perceived and

verbalized, which gives a chance for adequate perception of the conflict by the other party.

Therefore, we can identify three possible patterns of processing the key conflict (Goncharov, 2015: 52), fig. 2.

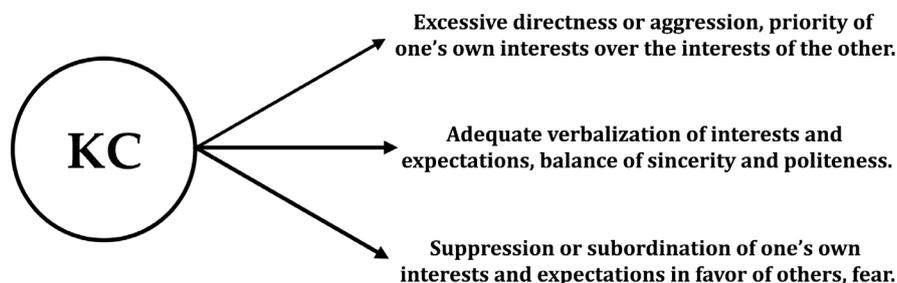


Figure 2. Three possible patterns of processing the key conflict (Goncharov, 2015: 52)

Here we only think it is important to draw attention to two points. The first has to do with so-called ethical emotions which regulate behaviour in conflict.

Referring to Aristotle's doctrine of virtues and the golden mean doctrine (Aristotel, 1983), we can conceive of the balance of «excessive directness» – «excessive politeness» as the optimally developed abilities between two poles (fig. 3)



Figure 3. Polar forms of «sincerity» / «politeness»

At one pole of politeness there are *lies* (fear), i.e. excessive politeness: on the straight line from *politeness* to *lies* hypocrisy, pretense, servility, inability to say «no», guilt, fear, etc. are «located».

At the other pole of *politeness* there is *rudeness* (aggression), i.e. deficit of politeness: on the straight line from *politeness* to *rudeness* there are selfishness, ambition, arrogance, tactlessness, incivility, vulgarity, impudence, insolence, loutishness, cynicism, aggression, etc.

The golden mean of *politeness* is the manifestation of such primary actual abilities as love

/acceptance of oneself and the other, and self-confidence in their various externalizations: culture, respect for the other, good manners, delicacy, friendliness, tactfulness, etc. (Gordiienko-Mytrofanova & Hohol, 2022).

The second point has to do with the spectrum of emotions. According to the conflict structure which we propose, the emotional spectrum is quite broad (Fig. 3), in contrast to the conflict structure described by H. Barki and J. Hartwick, where the emotional component is described exclusively by negative emotions such as «fear, jealousy, anger, anxiety, and



frustration, that have been used to characterize interpersonal conflict» (Barki & Hartwick, 2004: 5-6).

Among the emotions that characterize interpersonal conflict, interest and satisfaction play an important role in our concept.

N. Peseschkian's structure of key conflict – three possible patterns of working with key conflict - allows us to distribute the full range of emotions experienced in interpersonal conflict into three large groups.

The behavioral component (behavior) of the conflict / problem is described by the behavioral patterns of one of the three ludic positions – **Diplomat, Frolicsome Fellow, Holy Fool**, which correspond to such components – self-motivated abilities of playfulness / ludic competence as flirting, impishness, fugitivity (Sauta, Gordienko-Mytrofanova & Hohol, 2021).

Now we come to the need to give a brief description of the ludic positions in the frame of interpersonal conflict management. The first of these, is Diplomat.

Diplomat. The «Diplomat» ludic position is the ability of the *Player* to direct the attention of the *Other* through the techniques of **making a good impression in order to establish and maintain a relationship based on a sense of emotional connection**; to «move» the *Other* in the desired direction.

The «Diplomat» ludic position reflects exclusively the playfulness of an adult, the Adult state (mature personality) in E. Berne's terminology. It in general implies a proficiency in verbal and non-verbal means of communication, freedom and creative spontaneity in complex situations and, in particular, developed skills of adaptability and self-regulation. The latter allow the *Player* to estimate a situation quickly, avoid frustration and tension of the *Other* and not to be afraid to take non-standard decisions – «to play with the situation». But «playing with the situation» always means maintaining a directness (aggression) – courtesy (fear) balance, which is expressed by the *Player* in adequate verbalization of his emotions, interests and expectations.

Frolicsome Fellow. The «Frolicsome Fellow» ludic position is the ability of the *Player* to control the attention of the *Other* by purposefully **creating situations of «self-testing»** when interacting with the *Other* as a subject of tricks, for getting **peaking experiences**, for example, when dealing with the theme of inhibitions.

Within the concept of playfulness that we are developing, situations of «self-testing» are

understood rather narrowly. These are often situations with extreme conditions which demand self-overcoming when dealing with the theme of inhibitions (taboos) in social interaction.

In the situations of «self-testing» the *Player* interacts with the *Other* «on slippery ground» – on the edge of what is permissible and thus on the edge of directness (aggression) – courtesy (fear) balance towards the involving risk of aggression: «How far can I go to understand what I can and cannot do in relation to the *Other*?». Adults associate such forms of childish behavior as tricks and self-testing with childhood experience of the mischievous, frolicsome child (Fomintseva, 2001). That is why it is so common for the *Player* to fake his style of behavior imitating a child (Gordienko-Mytrofanova, Kobzieva & Sauta, 2019).

We understand taboos (taboo themes) as violation of laws / rules / regulations and/or agreements accepted in a particular large / small social group, e.g. society / social institution / subculture, etc.

Violation of rules can be characterized by extreme conditions, which are defined as a sudden threatening situation or a situation that an individual subjectively perceive as threatening to his / her life, health, personal integrity and well-being or those to the people who are significant for him / her.

Holy Fool. The «Holy Fool» ludic position is the ability of the *Player* to *manipulate the attention of the Other* due to «deliberate effort to appear stupid or insane» which is reflexed by the *Player* himself and observed by the *Other*, in order to enhance the sense of identity.

By «deliberate effort to appear stupid or insane» we mean: 1) the simulation of a mental disorder or altered states of consciousness; 2) a state with reduced or absent reactions to the surrounding world, sleeping, unconsciousness, death; 3) use of allegory as a means of structuring social relations often in an eccentric, flamboyant form.

It is necessary to make clear some points. According to the typology of L. I. Spivak and D. L. Spivak, altered states of consciousness include the following: *artificially induced states*: caused by psychoactive substances or procedures; *conditioned by psychotechnics*: religious rites, Schultz autogenic training, lucid dreaming, hypnotic trance, meditative states; *spontaneously occurring under normal conditions*, such as significant tension, listening to music, playing sports, etc. or *in unusual but natural circumstances*, e.g. normal childbirth, or *in unusual and extreme conditions*, e.g. peak experiences in

sport, near death experiences of various etiologies (Spivak & Spivak, 1996).

In social interaction, allegories are seen as a means of understanding the *Other* and a means of structuring social relations. In the context of self-understanding, allegories are seen as a means of self-definition, that is, the verbal designation of oneself, one's place in society, one's personality, as well as the objectification of one's psychological experience. Due to allegories, the psychological experience of one individual becomes understandable to others (Trunov, 2000: 16).

Allegories of the «Holy Fool» are biased and deliberate, which makes his behavior excessively incongruous. For the *Other*, the behavior of the «Holy Fool» is seen to be aimed at doing harm to the other, whereas the true intention of the «Holy Fool» is to do good to the Other (Lihakhev, Panchenko & Ponyrko, 1984; Klibanov, 1992).

By strengthening the sense of identity, we mean the ability of the *Player* to keep a balance of two realities in problematic situations involving strong pressure from the external environment: the reality of the «Self» (individual identity) and the reality of the environment. For the «Holy Fool», strengthening the sense of identity may manifest itself, among other things, in communicating his values to the *Other* by means of allegory. That is an *allegorical madness*, so to speak.

The simulation of the other «Self» as «taking possession» of a new identity (a fool / insane / a person in an altered state of consciousness) determines the genre specificity of the «Holy Fool» ludic position: on the one hand, variability of its cognitive, affective, behavioral manifestations (in general) and verbal and non-verbal characteristics (in particular), and on the other hand, the stereotyped behavior in the form of reproducing the «symptoms» of the simulated states (stupidity / madness / altered states of consciousness) (Gordiienko-Mytrofanova & Sauta, 2021).

The «Diplomat» ludic position corresponding to the *flirting* component is the basic one. The Diplomat, who starts to deal with taboo themes, shifts to the «Frolicsome Fellow» ludic position (corresponding to the *impishness* component). The Frolicsome Fellow, who «deliberately tries to appear foolish or insane», shifts to the «Holy Fool» ludic position (corresponding to the *fugitivity* component).

Adequate verbalization of one's own feelings / emotions / states / interests / expectations is manifested in maintaining the *aggression – fear* balance, that is, the balance of “*sincerity*” (*excessive directness*) and “*politeness*” (*excessive courtesy*), as

optimally developed abilities between the two poles. Adequate verbalization is embodied in the behavioral pattern of one of the three game positions – **Diplomat, Frolicsome Fellow, Holy Fool**, which are manifested in the balance of abilities that correspond to them – flirting, impishness, fugitivity. Thus, adequate verbalization provides for *effective conflict management*.

It is important to note that adequate verbalisation involves using both the verbal and non-verbal means of communication.

Aggression (A), sincerity (excessive directness), exacerbates the conflict by demonstrating *the priority of one's own interests over the interests of the other*. Aggression is embodied in the polar manifestations of ludic positions: **Diplomat** in deficit, and **Frolicsome fellow** and **Holy Fool** in redundancy. Thus, aggression implies an *actively-attacking position* towards the opponent.

Fear (C), politeness (excessive courtesy), is manifested in *suppression and subordination of one's interests and expectations in favor of others*. Fear is also embodied in the polar manifestations of ludic positions: **Diplomat** in excess, and **Frolicsome fellow** and **Holy Fool** in deficit. Fear implies a *passive-defensive position*. In addition, excessive courtesy consciously suppresses aggression and thus creates internal tension, which leads to formation of **intrapersonal conflict**.

This year we carried out game competence training sessions in the frame of the Game Psychological Techniques course (for four months, 156 hours, twice a week in two groups of 20 people each) at H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University in the Department of Psychology. We tried to relate the patterns of working with the key conflict to five conflict behavior styles according to the conflict management model of Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann.

The TKI (Thomas-Kilmann Instrument) was developed to help people deal more effectively with conflict situations, and was based on 40 years of the authors' research (Kilmann, 2014).

When developing the questionnaire, the authors kept up to the idea that people should not seek to avoid conflict at all costs, but on the contrary, they should competently manage it.

The TKI (Thomas-Kilmann Instrument) identifies five different styles of conflict: *Competing* (assertive, uncooperative), *Avoiding* (unassertive, uncooperative), *Accommodating* (unassertive, cooperative), *Collaborating* (assertive, cooperative), and *Compromising* (intermediate assertiveness and cooperativeness).

The TKI assesses a person's behavior style in conflict. This questionnaire shows a typical reaction of a person to a conflict, its effectiveness and expediency, as well as providing information about other possible ways of dealing with a conflict situation.

However, we saw that this model is not acceptable within our concept. As was mentioned above, the main tool for developing playfulness / ludic competence is use of educational literary and video content and the case study method. More than 300 conflict situations («stories») were analyzed in the frame of this training. Based on the results of the analysis, our working group came to the conclusion that each behavioral pattern we identified in conflict situations («Diplomat», «Frolicsome fellow», «Holy Fool») as well as the patterns of working with a key conflict («Aggression», «Fear», «Aggression-Fear Balance») could relate to each of the five styles.

It should be noted that, to complete the characteristics of the behavioral component of interpersonal conflict, effective management of interpersonal conflict involves keeping up to:

1. Aristotle's golden mean doctrine (i.e. to be and act «in balance, not at poles») (Аристотель, 1983: 81);
2. Principles of active listening by K. Rogers (Rogers, Farson & University of Chicago, 1957);
3. The model of «self-propositions» (self-messages) by T. Gordon (Fromm & Gordon, 1997: 73-78);
4. The concept of Ego States by E. Berne (i.e., reflexive control of both one's own and the opponent's Ego States) (Berne, 1964);
5. The «stroking» techniques by E. Berne (Berne, 1964).

From our point of view, the mentioned above strategies cover in particular those formulated by a team of Chinese scholars – Yingshan Bao, Fangwei Zhu, Yue Hu, Ning Cui – in the work «The Research of Interpersonal Conflict and Solution Strategies» (Bao et al., 2016).

A more detailed description of these strategies is the topic of our next publication.

Summarizing the description of the structure of interpersonal conflict we just have to note here that it is Aristotle's golden mean doctrine that describes the behavior strategies in conflict as well as emotions experienced in conflict (Fig. 3), not separately but as components of the behavioral / emotional continuums. This removes the issue of a so-called «point» manifestation of the balance and poles of both behavioral acts and emotions.

Conclusions

Thus, the described structure of interpersonal conflict which is based on M. Smith's three-component attitude structure, is an integration of the concept of 7C playfulness and the method of positive psychotherapy.

The interpersonal conflict is a dynamic process that takes place between at least two interdependent parties (individuals and / or groups); it is described by:

1) *cognitions*, i.e., the problem space or otherwise the sphere of disagreement. At this stage of our research, an algorithm for detailed descriptions of cognitions is being developed;

2) *emotions*, which are covered by three possible options for processing the key conflict (excessive directness / sincerity (aggression), excessive courtesy / politeness (fear), aggression-fear balance). The three possible patterns of working with the key conflict allow the whole «emotional palette» to be grouped into three large clusters: «Aggression», «Fear», «Adequate verbalisation»;

3) *behavioral patterns of ludic positions* (*Diplomat / Frolicsome Fellow / Holy Fool*), in their polar manifestations or balance. The positions described in the article made it also possible to distribute all possible behavior strategies in conflict into three large groups – «Diplomat», «Frolicsome Fellow», «Holy Fool» and to obtain nine behavioral patterns (each ludic position in its balance and polar manifestations).

A distinctive feature of the presented conflict structure is also the actualization of the emotional / behavioral continuum, which allows us to consider emotions / behavior not separately but as components of a continuum.

The greater the divergence between what the conflict participants expect and what they observe, the higher the likelihood of conflict escalation is (the conflict stress is higher).

Of course, the proposed structure of the conflict implies, firstly, the differentiation of cognitions, i.e., the problem space of disagreement: it concerns motives, needs, attitudes, values, interests, opinions, goals, etc.

Secondly, it implies the differentiation of affective states that are «involved» in the key conflict: it is manifestation of aggression – selfishness, ambition, arrogance, impudence, vulgarity, pushiness, insolence, rudeness, cynicism, anger, jealousy, etc. or fear – hypocrisy, pretense, servility, inability to say: «no», guilt, anxiety, etc.

Finally, it implies the differentiation of various forms of embodiment of behavioral patterns of the three ludic positions.

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