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Formation of competence in future psychologists within the domain of psychosexual education for children and adolescents

Abstract. The aim of the study was to describe the concept of professional competence in the field of psychosexual education of children and adolescents, as well as to empirically verify its structure. The study employed an analysis of international frameworks for psychosexual education, as well as the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data on four components of professional competence of future psychologists, using questionnaires and tasks. The cognitive component of competence was found to be generally well-developed within the future psychologists' candidates, as indicated by the percentage of respondents who scored at either high (34.9%) or intermediate (46.5%) levels within that component. However, an analysis of the tasks component of competence revealed fewer future psychologists who exhibited the required abilities to execute practical actions within their field; only 37.4% of respondents scored at a high level within the operational-practical component of competence, and only 28.0% scored at the highest level within that component. Finally, while the majority of future teachers scored within the intermediate level (58.0%) within the component of value-ethical competence, a majority of those who scored within the highest level (41.8%) within that component revealed contradictions in their application of those values and ethics to their tasks. The reflective component was characterised by the highest variability and the largest proportion of low indicators (24.4%), evinced by fragmented self-analysis and difficulties in forecasting professional actions. Correlation analysis confirmed the existence of statistically significant relationships between value-ethical orientations and practical readiness ($r = 0.58$), as well as between the reflective and practical components ($r = 0.49$), indicating their function as regulators of behavioural decisions. The obtained results facilitated the interpretation of professional competence as an integrative system wherein individual constituents operated asymmetrically and required targeted alignment. The practical significance lies in the potential application of these findings for the development of educational programmes and training modules aimed at instructors of psychological disciplines and developers of academic courses in the domain of psychosexual education

Keywords: cognitive component; communicative barriers; operational-practical component; reflective component; supervisory practices; value-ethical component

INTRODUCTION

The heightened relevance of the issue concerning the formation of competence among future psychologists in the sphere of psychosexual education for children and adolescents is precipitated by the transformation of the educational and sociocultural milieu, wherein sexuality is no longer regarded exclusively as a biological phenomenon but has acquired the status of a complex psychosocial

construct. The increase in risky behaviours by adolescents, the growing complexity of the process of the formation of identity, and the influence of the digital environment on the perception of sexuality all contribute to the demand for specialists capable of engaging with these issues at a professional level. Yet, the training of psychologists in this area is fragmented, focusing mainly upon providing

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theoretical knowledge of sexuality rather than providing training in the ethical and reflective aspects of the profession. A need, therefore, exists for an analysis of the professional competence of future psychologists in relation to these issues.

K. Fanchang (2025) conducted a synthesis of theoretical approaches to psychosexual development. As a result of the study, the researcher was able to explain how psychoanalytic theory could help to understand how the experiences of children and adolescents have an influence upon the formation of their personalities. Furthermore, the researcher was also able to discuss how psychosexual development has an influence upon the behavioural strategies exhibited by individuals. Another study was performed by T.T.W.A. Yeung *et al.* (2026), who investigated the specific aspects of the experience of sexuality among young individuals with autism spectrum disorders. The researchers found that these young individuals experienced higher levels of anxiety in romantic and sexual relationships due to difficulties in communicating with others. Based upon these findings, recommendations were made regarding the type of educational formats that should be implemented in sexual education programs for these individuals.

A systematic review was performed by B. Ragaglia *et al.* (2023), who investigated the effectiveness of psychosexual interventions for individuals with developmental disabilities. As a result of the research, the authors established that most sexual education programs for these individuals had a focus upon transmitting knowledge of sexuality to the individuals with developmental disabilities, but neglected to incorporate elements to facilitate the development of behavioural skills in these individuals. Consequently, the researchers concluded that most of these interventions were ineffective. Another study investigates the attitudes of professionals towards sexual education. L.L. Wolford & K.L. Jansen (2024) analysed the attitudes of practitioners towards sexual education. As a result of the study, the researchers documented contradicting attitudes towards the role of practitioners in sexual education programs. Based upon these findings, the practitioners lack professional guidelines on sexual education. Another objective was to investigate sexual competence. The study conducted by P. Tomaszewska *et al.* (2023) aimed to analyse sexual competence. The researchers established the components of sexual competence, and that a deficiency in these components led to risky behaviour in adolescents. As a result of this study, the researchers were able to conclude the necessity of developing an integrative model of sexual competence.

An analysis of the difficulties of sexual education professionals was performed by F. Shibuya *et al.* (2023). The researchers established that sexual education practitioners often encounter difficulties related to cultural and religious factors related to sexual education. For instance, the professional must define their role in sexual education, and this creates conflicts for practitioners. These difficulties underscore the complexity of the transition from

sexual education using traditional models towards more comprehensive approaches. Finally, the researchers underscore the importance of ethical and value-based training for specialists in sexual education. In a study by L. Jämiä *et al.* (2025), the professional requirements for teaching sexual education was systematised. The researchers discovered that many skills related to classroom management and communication skills with adolescents are required of teachers who deliver sexual education programs. Furthermore, many attitudes towards sexual education were found to be positive. For instance, many sexual education teachers want to be openly communicative and supportive of their students. These findings enable the researchers to provide an interpretation of the competence of teachers in sexual education as a requirement of the integration of knowledge, skills, and values. Lastly, a review of the concept of psychosexual development was performed by K. Dobrzeniecki *et al.* (2026). The researchers integrated biological and psychological aspects of psychosexual development. Furthermore, the researchers established that these aspects are interdependent of one another. As a result, sexual education can be seen as an integral part of a comprehensive plan of personality development. Finally, the researchers concluded that an interdisciplinary approach to sexual education is required.

Despite the number of research studies that have been performed on the topic of sexual education, an elucidation of the structure of the professional competence of future psychologists in this area, and the interrelationship among the components of that structure, has been lacking. The aim of the study was to provide a theoretical and empirical understanding of the structure of the professional competence of future psychologists in the field of psychosexual education for children and adolescents. To achieve this aim, it was necessary to undertake a series of analyses of the theoretical approaches to sexual education, the components of professional competence, and the level of formation of such components among students of psychology.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological construct of the study was designed as a staged procedure for integrating normative-conceptual provisions, empirical generalisations, and quantitative-qualitative assessment of the level of professional competence formation among future psychologists in the field of psychosexual education. At the first stage, the operationalisation of the basic conceptual field was carried out through a comparative analysis of the content parameters of psychosexual education as stipulated in international normative documents, notably the UNESCO *et al.* (2018) and the WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA (2010). The selection of these specific documents was determined by their status as unified framework benchmarks for the educational systems within the European area and their practical implementation in the 2020s. Methodologically, this was achieved through the content-structuring of domains and conceptual blocks with the subsequent

identification of indicators suitable for empirical measurement. In parallel, a normative-legal operationalisation of the ethical requirements governing the practice of a psychologist was conducted. The main sources of information that were utilised in the accomplishment of the purpose of the study included the publication of the American Psychological Association (2021) on psychological practice with sexual minority persons, as well as the Council of Europe (2007). These publications enabled the establishment of specific criteria to assess the value-ethical component of the competence of future psychologists to work with children within the area of psychosexual education, such as criteria regarding non-discrimination against children of any sexual orientation, the need to maintain the confidentiality of their clients, the child rights orientation of those future psychologists, as well as their abilities to interact with those children in a way that is sensitive to their cultural backgrounds.

The main aim of the empirical study that was conducted was to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the level of formation of the professional competence component among future psychologists that will work with children within the area of psychosexual education. The competence component to be evaluated included the cognitive, value-ethical, operational-practical, and reflective components of such future psychologists. The study that was conducted was of the descriptive-analytical type. Thus, between October and December of 2025, at Polissia National University, an assessment was performed of 86 students that were enrolled in the "Psychology" programme within the Bachelor's level of education. These participants were selected according to accessibility in the field of psychology, though inclusion criteria for the participants in the study specifically required that they were enrolled in the "Psychology" speciality within the university, and that they provided their consent to participate in the research study. Participants that were excluded from the study included those without any training in psychology (to ensure the validity of the assessment of their cognitive component), those who did not completely complete the questionnaire, and those who withdrew from the study at any stage.

Questionnaires were used to collect data from each psychologist regarding the future psychologists' knowledge of psychosexual education of children. These questionnaires contained both closed and open-ended questions. Some questionnaires were distributed on paper, and others distributed online via Google Forms. Each questionnaire took between 20 and 25 minutes to complete. The questionnaire included four main blocks of questions. The first block assessed the future psychologists' knowledge of psychosexual education of children, and contained 15 questions with only one correct answer. The second block contained 12 statements regarding value-ethical considerations in the psychosexual education of children, and asked the future psychologists to rate each statement on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 for "strongly disagree" to 5 for "strongly agree"). The third block contained 10 tasks (with situational

case studies) that asked the future psychologists to select the behavioural model that they would employ in their responses to such situations. The fourth block contained a series of open-ended questions, such as: "How do you understand the content of psychosexual education?", "What difficulties do you anticipate in working with adolescents on topics related to sexuality?", and "What knowledge or skills do you lack for such work?".

For each component of the competence of future psychologists to provide psychosexual education to children, scores were calculated for each future psychologist according to the answers that they provided on the questionnaire (both closed and open-ended), and these scores were normalised to percentages. According to these percentages, the psychologist could be classified as having a low, medium, or high level of formation of their competence in providing psychosexual education to children. Furthermore, each open-ended answer was coded according to a qualitative model; that is, the answers were analysed for their meanings, and were categorised according to those meanings. Furthermore, those categories were verified by two teachers to ensure that each psychologist was coded accurately according to their answers on the questionnaire. The answers to the closed questions were coded numerically (on a five-point or one-point scale). Thus, each future psychologist was coded according to their knowledge, value-ethical considerations, operational-practical skills, and reflective components regarding the area of psychosexual education to children. Each component was categorised according to a percentage of psychologists who responded with each level of formation (low, medium, high). Thus, each future psychologist was assessed for their competence in each of these four components, and categorised according to the percentage of other participants that indicated similar levels of competence. Finally, the answers on the open-ended questions were also coded according to a qualitative model. Each answer was coded according to its semantic units and meanings (1 – present in answer, 0 – not present in answer), which enabled the formation of integral scores (as percentages of the maximum possible score for that component). Thus, the answers provided by each future psychologist were represented according to the percentage of future psychologists that indicated that they also possessed such a level of formation of those components of competence.

In addition to the coding of the answers from the future psychologists to the questionnaire, the ethical aspects of the study were also in compliance with international standards for psychological research studies. Each future psychologist was informed of the aim of the research study, as well as that their participation in the study was both voluntary and they could exit the research study at any time. Furthermore, the information that was collected from each psychologist was to remain both anonymous and confidential. Such ethics were adhered to in compliance with both the WMA Declaration of Helsinki (2024), as well as to the Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct (American Psychological Association, 2017).

RESULTS

Theoretical foundations for preparing psychologists for psychosexual education. Psychosexual education can be regarded as an interdisciplinary phenomenon formed at the intersection of various subjects. Such an interpretation of the subject is enshrined in various international approaches to the subject. According to the UNESCO (2018), psychosexual education should aim to develop the knowledge and the skills that will allow individuals to make decisions, form relationships and utilise their rights in the area of sexuality. Similar principles are described within the standards of the WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA (2010). The psychosexual education component of schools is aimed at developing behavioural strategies within adolescents. As a result of the implementation of sexual education programs in schools, levels of knowledge regarding sexuality have increased, adolescents have developed intentions towards more responsible behaviours, and there have been reductions in risky sexual practices by those adolescents. The factors that contribute to the effectiveness of sexual education within schools includes the integration of components that relate to the cognitive, social, and emotional knowledge of adolescents. As a result of the implementation of sexuality education in schools, adolescents have not developed knowledge and skills regarding sexuality but also lacked the formation of behavioural strategies that are necessary for their safe and effective socialisation within society. The content of the educational programs relates to and are determined by the age-related development of adolescents.

Within the age range of childhood, adolescents begin to form perceptions regarding their bodies. According to the Federal Centre for Health Education (2021), sexuality education during the childhood years should include education regarding the bodies of adolescents. Such education is essential for the development of safe social interactions by adolescents during these age ranges. Furthermore, educational interventions regarding the formation of adolescents of their personal boundaries contribute to the prevention of sexual violence against those adolescents. Adolescents who participate in such education exhibit protective behaviour towards themselves and do not tend to be victimised by sexual abuse. During the adolescence age range, adolescents form their identity and begin to interact with others. Sexuality during these ages is related to emotional aspects of adolescents, their culture and their lived experiences (Costa *et al.*, 2001). The World Health Organization recognises the importance of teaching adolescents of specific skills regarding their sexuality, interactions with others, and their ability to make decisions regarding their sexual activities (WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA, 2010).

The psychologist has to act within a framework of guidelines that are established internationally, nationally and through professional codes of ethics. The American Psychological Association (2021), for instance, indicates that psychologists should be culturally sensitive, non-discriminatory towards populations of different ethnicities,

sexualities and cultures, and employ evidence-based techniques when addressing issues related to sexuality. Additionally, the legal framework for the inclusion of sexual education within schools is established through the Council of Europe (2007). Article 6 of this convention indicates that each state within the council must implement sexual education within schools to allow children to become aware of the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as how to protect themselves from these situations in their lives. Additionally, the information that is to be taught within schools should relate to the concepts of sexuality, as well as to the risks to which they may be exposed (especially in relation to the use of information and communication technologies).

The activity of a psychologist within the area of psychosexual education has to consider the various interests of the child, the parent and the school within which the psychologist functions. In many cases, the interests of the parent in relation to sexuality within schools may conflict with both the scientific approaches to sexuality education and the requirements of the educational systems. Furthermore, many of the Eastern European countries do not offer systematic sexuality education to their adolescents, leading to lower levels of awareness of sexuality and forcing those adolescents to learn of sexuality from peers or from digital media. The psychologist's role in these countries is more complex than in other portions of the world, and requires skills in communication with various individuals involved in the education of these adolescents.

Therefore, the training of future psychologists must include more than the acquisition of knowledge. Psychologists must develop a range of competencies within their areas of practice. According to Mulder (2012), competency-based education in fields related to sexuality education requires that individuals gain an understanding of how to effectively act within specific situations and environments, despite the uncertainties that may surround those situations. The competencies that are specifically required of psychosexual educators include knowledge of how to act with a range of attitudes, emotions towards sexuality, and an understanding of the social contexts in which they must act. Such skills can be developed through both the theoretical knowledge of the content of sexuality education as well as through the development of specific practice-related skills. The models that relate to psychosexual education, as presented in Table 1, can be constructed to determine the requirements for knowledge and skills of students, as well as to develop instruments for the assessment of these competencies. An analytical examination of the structure of competence in the field of psychosexual education reveals its non-linear nature. Knowledge without the required skills to apply that knowledge effectively can lead to ineffective delivery of psychosexual education to patients. Furthermore, the lack of a value-ethical component to the competence can lead to the application of knowledge and skills in ways that are unethical, especially regarding sensitive topics within psychosexual education. The

reflexive component of the structure is crucial for ensuring that knowledge, values and skills are appropriately applied within specific professional situations. Thus, each component of the structure of competence is essential for

effectively delivering psychosexual education; the deformation of any of these components has the potential to negatively impact the professional competence of an individual delivering such education.

Table 1. Structure of the future psychologist's competence in the field of psychosexual education

Component	Content	Indicators of development
Cognitive	Knowledge of psychosexual development; understanding of risks (abuse, early debut); awareness of legal norms.	Accurate reproduction of theoretical provisions; ability to identify risks in case studies; knowledge assessment outcomes.
Operational-practical	Counselling skills; psychoeducation; age-appropriate adaptation of information; group facilitation.	Communication effectiveness; ability to establish trusting rapport; evaluation of practical case studies; behaviour in role-play scenarios.
Value-ethical	Tolerance; non-discrimination; confidentiality; orientation towards children's rights.	Absence of stigmatising attitudes; adherence to ethical standards; results of value-based questionnaires.
Reflexive	Self-awareness; emotional regulation; understanding of professional boundaries; capacity for self-correction.	Level of reflexivity; ability to analyse one's own actions; indicators of emotional burnout; participation in supervision.

Source: compiled by the author based on C.A. Collier-Harris & J.D.G. Goldman (2017), R. Maasoumi *et al.* (2024), M. Hytti & N. Sandström (2025)

The development of competence among future psychologists within higher education institutions can be determined by various factors. The structure of the educational programmes within these institutions is of paramount importance. In most countries within the EU, specialists in the field of sexual health are prepared through education that integrates sexual health into other disciplines rather than creating a stand-alone sexual health module within psychology programmes. Research conducted within the framework of the Love Act Project across eight European countries (Italy, France, Greece, Lithuania, Belgium, Cyprus, Spain, and the Basque Country) demonstrated that the systematic training of teachers and educators in matters of comprehensive sexuality education necessitates the use of specially designed tools to enhance both the awareness and practical skills of professionals (Idoiaga & Legorburu, 2024).

Concurrently, the integration of international guidelines into national educational systems serves as a mechanism for standardisation and quality enhancement in professional preparation. The UNESCO (2018) defines comprehensive sexuality education as an interdisciplinary process encompassing eight key concepts (relationships; values, rights, culture, and sexuality; understanding gender; violence and staying safe; skills for health and well-being; the human body and development; sexuality and sexual behaviour; sexual and reproductive health) and three learning domains (knowledge, skills, attitudes). The Guidance emphasises scientific accuracy, age-appropriateness, a human rights orientation, gender equality, and the imperative to develop critical thinking and interpersonal skills.

Despite the outlined possibilities, the development of competence is accompanied by systemic constraints. One of these is the deficit of structured training courses, as documented in research within the European context. Specifically, in Spain, an analysis of 132 primary teacher training programmes revealed that specialised courses or modules on affective-sexual education are exceedingly

rare, and the relevant content is integrated only into isolated disciplines, leading to the fragmentation of knowledge (Fernández *et al.*, 2025). In Greece, research involving educational policy stakeholders confirmed that the current teacher training system fails to provide systematic coverage of comprehensive sexuality education topics, and curricula remain limited and fragmented (Katsarou & Pliogou, 2026). This engenders cognitive gaps and diminishes readiness for practical engagement. An additional constraint lies in the insufficient level of educator preparation. A proportion of teachers demonstrate a moderate or low level of confidence and knowledge, particularly in addressing sensitive topics such as the rights of sexual minorities, consent, and sexual rights. The absence of such preparation restricts the utilisation of interactive methods and reduces the efficacy of the educational process. In a study conducted in English secondary schools as part of the evaluation of the Positive Choices intervention, it was found that the contextual factors influencing the effectiveness of educational interventions are precisely the level of teacher training, their skills, and their commitment to teaching (Ponsford *et al.*, 2026).

One of the contributing factors is the influence of students' individual attitudes. A study involving 458 prospective early childhood educators confirmed that attitudes towards sexuality education act as a mediator between the level of knowledge and self-assessed teaching efficacy, with this mediated effect being more pronounced in women (Ding *et al.*, 2026). A synthesis of the presented data allows for the assertion that the formation of competence among future psychologists in the domain of psychosexual education is the result of a complex interplay among institutional structures, sociocultural conditions, and individual psychological factors. The efficacy of this process is contingent upon the systematic nature of educational programmes, the level of instructor preparation, the utilisation of practice-oriented methods, and the capacity for the integration of international standards, whereas the

principal limitations are associated with the fragmented nature of curricular content, ethical challenges, and the influence of personal attitudes.

Empirical aspects and pedagogical conditions for the formation of competence in future psychologists. During the first two decades of the 21st century, the implementation of European standards for the country of Ukraine, particularly in the area of mental and reproductive health, has led to the development of a lack of a comprehensive strategy for the introduction of sexuality education into the country's educational programmes (Shevtsova, 2025). As a result, the training of psychologists within Ukraine on psychosexual issues has been up to date through various initiatives within the country's higher education institutions. The role of the psychologist within Ukraine is beginning to gain significance within the nation due to the growing psycho-emotional burden upon the children and adolescents of the country as a

result of the war. For instance, a study performed by the Rating Group (2025) in October of 2025 reported that 37% of children between the ages of 10 and 18 in Ukraine have developed a high level of stress within the period of the past year, with 40% of girls between the ages of 10 and 13 experiencing such stress levels during that same time period. Thus, sexuality education in Ukraine is now integrated with mental health services provided by psychologists for the prevention of risky behaviours by those children and adolescents, as well as for the development of their personality. The findings from this research will allow for a comprehensive analysis of the degree of formation of professional competence in the area of psychosexual education among future psychologists. Such analysis will allow for an examination of each of the following aspects of such competence: cognitive, values-ethical, operational-practical, and reflexive competence. The results of such analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of proficiency levels across competence components (%)

Component	Low	Medium	High
Cognitive	18.6	46.5	34.9
Values-ethical	21.0	37.2	41.8
Operational-practical	19.7	52.3	28.0
Reflexive	24.4	44.2	31.4

Source: compiled by the author

The analysis of the distribution of proficiency levels across the competence components revealed an uneven profile of professional readiness among future psychologists. The highest indicators for the high level were recorded for the values-ethical component, which may signify students' awareness of the moral and ethical foundations of professional activity; however, this value orientation is not underpinned by an adequate level of operational-practical readiness, where the medium level predominates and the proportion of the high level is the lowest among all components. Conversely, the cognitive component demonstrated a balanced structure with a share of the high level indicating a sufficient assimilation of theoretical knowledge, yet the transformation of this knowledge into practical skills appears to be hindered. The reflexive component is distinguished by the highest proportion of the low level, which may indicate an insufficient development of the capacity for self-analysis and the correction of one's own professional conduct.

Quantitative substantiation of these levels was carried out through the calculation of integral scores for each component, followed by normalisation and quartile distribution. The lowest mean indicators were recorded for the operational-practical component ($M = 58.6\%$, median 56.0%), which correlates with its smallest share of the high level (28.0%). In contrast, the values-ethical component demonstrated the highest mean values ($M = 71.8\%$, median 69.0%), consistent with its largest share of the high level (41.8%). The reflexive component exhibited the highest variability ($SD = 19.8$), which is corroborated by the widest interquartile range (31.0 p.p.) and the largest share of

the low level (24.4%). The cognitive component occupied an intermediate position with a relatively uniform distribution ($M = 64.3\%$, $SD = 15.2$). This configuration of quantitative indicators provided the foundation for a detailed qualitative analysis of each component.

A primary analysis of the cognitive component demonstrated that only one-third of the students possess systematic knowledge of psychosexual development. 34.9% of the students demonstrated a high level of knowledge, 46.5% demonstrated a medium level of knowledge, and 18.6% displayed a low level of knowledge regarding psychosexual development. A more detailed analysis of the knowledge of each of the thematic blocks of psychosexual development demonstrated that knowledge regarding biological development was understood by 68% of students, yet only 42% of students possessed an understanding of the psychosocial aspects of psychosexual development. The values-ethical component of the psychosexual development of students was similarly distributed with slight contradictions within each of the levels. Students with high levels of tolerance towards diversity within the populations of adolescents were present within 41.8% of students, those with medium levels of tolerance within 37.2% of students, and those with low levels of tolerance and acceptance of diversity represented 21.0% of student respondents. An analysis of individual statements within this component revealed that 63% of students agreed with the necessity of discussing issues related to sexuality in educational environments, yet only 48% of students indicated their readiness to discuss such topics within their professional capacities.

The operational-practical component of the psychosexual development of these student respondents was the least developed component of their knowledge. Only 28.0% of students represented a high level of readiness to work with adolescents with sexual issues, 52.3% of students displayed an intermediate level of readiness to discuss such topics in their professional careers, and only 19.7% of student respondents represented a low level of readiness to treat adolescents with sexual issues. Furthermore, students were more likely to correctly answer questions about the provision of information (61%) compared to answering complex ethical questions about treating adolescents within sexual risk situations (39%). The component of the study that relates to the sexual development of these students and their readiness to treat sexual issues among adolescents was an unevenly developed component altogether. A high level of self-awareness was demonstrated by 31.4% of respondents, who are capable of identifying their own limitations and emotional reactions. The intermediate level (44.2%) is characterised by partial reflection, while the low level (24.4%) indicates a lack of awareness of one's own attitudes and their influence on professional practice.

In responses to questions concerning the content of psychosexual education, a proportion of students (57%) narrowed it down to biological aspects or risk prevention (pregnancy, infections), indicating a reduction of the comprehensive approach to a biomedical-informational model. Only 26% of respondents included elements of emotional development, interpersonal relationships, and identity formation in their open-ended statements. This directly impacts the limitations of future practice, as the psychosocial component of development is overlooked. Responses to questions about difficulties in working with children and adolescents revealed a predominance of communicative barriers. Approximately 62% of students explicitly indicated a "fear of saying the wrong thing" or "uncertainty about adolescents' reactions", suggesting an insufficient level of professional role formation. Furthermore, 48% of respondents noted that they lack clear conceptions of the boundaries of appropriateness in communication on topics related to sexuality.

Regarding the assessment of students' attitudes towards various aspects of sexuality, particularly regarding gender identity and sexual orientation, it became possible to establish the presence of latent polarisation within the group of students. In particular, while the majority of students displayed tolerant attitudes towards these aspects of sexuality within the context of the closed questions, their open-ended responses reflected contradictory judgements about the need to discuss these aspects within their future professional activities. The analysis of the students' responses about the sources of their knowledge of psychosexual development indicated that only 31% of the students indicated that they learned about such topics through courses within their university, 52% from informal sources (the Internet, social media), and 17% from their own experience. In relation to the component of students'

readiness to participate in the psychosexual education activity, the majority of students indicated a lack of knowledge regarding how to communicate with the adolescents who would participate in the activity, a lack of confidence in their understanding of the psychosexual boundaries between themselves as psychologists and the students who would participate in these activities, and a lack of experience in any actual psychosexual education activities with these types of students. However, 44% of the students expressed the need for additional training in these topics, particularly in the form of workshops and supervision.

A comprehensive evaluation of the open-ended questions enabled the identification of several systemic patterns within the answers of the students. Thus, it is possible to identify that the students have a discrepancy between their knowledge and their comprehension of these topics, that they have emotionally uncertain reactions towards the topics of sexuality and gender identity, indicating a lack of development of the operational component, and that their attitudes towards sexuality are influenced by the sociocultural stereotypes present within their society and culture. As a result of such analysis, it is possible to identify the typical knowledge, skills and competencies gaps within the training of these future psychosexual education psychologists. A lack of integration of the knowledge components into their practical activity is identified, as are deficiencies in their communication skills with adolescents regarding these topics, as well as in their knowledge of professional boundaries and ethical standards. Another identified issue is the insufficient level of reflection that the students exhibit regarding their own attitudes towards sexuality and their potential influence upon their professional activities with these future students.

Based on the results of this survey, it was also possible to delineate the profiles of the typical students who participated in the survey. Thus, it is possible to determine that approximately 29% of the students are "cognitively oriented" in their approach to their future profession, indicating a high level of knowledge of the topics of sexuality with insufficient readiness to participate in the activity. Around 34% of the students are "value-oriented" in their approach to their future profession, indicating that they have tolerant attitudes towards sexuality but a lack of confidence in their ability to act upon those attitudes within their future professional activities. Another 27% of the students are "integrated" in their approach to their future profession in that they exhibit high levels in each of the components of their competence. Finally, 10% of the student group is "at-risk" in relation to their development of competence in the area of psychosexual education.

The correlational relationships between the various components of the competence enabled the specification of directions for educational intervention. Thus, the high level of correlation between the value-ethical component of competence and the component of readiness to participate in practical activity indicates the necessity for the targeted cultivation of attitudes of tolerance and ethical sensitivity

towards those with different sexual characteristics or attitudes. The moderate level of correlation between the component of knowledge and the component of readiness to participate in practical activity indicates the limitations of

the traditional methods of educating these future psychosexual education psychologists. The summarised results of the correlational analysis of the competency components are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlational relationships between competence components (Pearson's r)

Component	Cognitive	Value-ethical	Reflective	Practical readiness
Cognitive	1.00	0.27*	0.33*	0.41**
Value-ethical	0.27*	1.00	0.45**	0.58***
Reflective	0.33*	0.45**	1.00	0.49**
Practical readiness	0.41**	0.58***	0.49**	1.00

Source: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Source: compiled by the author

Considering the results of the correlational analysis, it is possible to identify the aspects of competence that may be targeted during the training of future psychologists. The component of competence related to value-ethical considerations was found to have the strongest relationship with the component related to the readiness of individuals to perform practical activities; thus, indicating the role of these values in determining an individual's readiness to perform such activities. The component related to reflective aspects of competence exhibited moderate relationships with each of the value-ethical and practical components of competence; indicating its role as a mediator between these two other components of competence. Finally, the cognitive component of competence related to the weakest relationships with each of the other components of competence; suggesting the autonomisation of these cognitive aspects from those related to values and practical components of competence. Thus, these findings suggest that the cognitive component of competence should be developed in relation to the other components of competence – particularly those of value-ethical and reflective aspects – as they play a mediating role in the performance of professional actions by future psychologists.

Through generalising these findings, it is possible to suggest various potential directions for the improvement of the professional training of future psychologists. One such direction for improvement to the training of future psychologists is the adjustment of the educational programmes that are currently implemented for psychologists. According to research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (n.d.), educational programmes that include applied modules or interdisciplinary classes for future psychologists have ensured higher levels of adaptability of those future psychologists within their future careers. Additionally, based upon the findings of this study, the integration of a compulsory educational component related to psychosexual education for future psychologists is another direction for the adjustment of the educational programmes for those future professionals. These results help to confirm the need for such an educational component for future psychologists, as the lack of knowledge of psychosexual concepts relates to low levels of readiness to perform practical activities.

The integration of psychosexual education as a compulsory element of training presupposes not only the introduction of new disciplines but also an interdisciplinary synthesis of psychological, pedagogical, and medical knowledge. Such an approach enables the formation of a holistic vision of psychosexual development as a multidimensional process extending beyond the confines of a single discipline. The development of teaching and methodological materials should be oriented towards a combination of theoretical content with practical tools. In particular, the creation of case banks reflecting real-life situations of interaction with children and adolescents, as well as the implementation of simulation scenarios and role-playing games, is advisable. Another component is the introduction of supervisory practices, which ensure the transformation of individual experience into professional knowledge.

The prospects for further research should be appropriately linked to the analysis of the long-term effects of educational interventions, which will enable an assessment of the stability of the competencies formed in professional practice. Cross-cultural comparisons acquire particular significance, as they provide an opportunity to identify the influence of the sociocultural context on the formation of professional readiness. The effectiveness of psychosexual education depends upon the cultural adaptation of both content and teaching methods. Thus, the practical implications of fostering competence in future psychologists within the domain of psychosexual education lie in the necessity for a systemic modernisation of the educational process, encompassing the institutional integration of relevant content, the development of practice-oriented teaching materials, and the reinforcement of the role of reflective and ethical components in training. It is precisely this model that allows for the overcoming of the identified empirical imbalances and ensures the preparation of specialists capable of effective and responsible professional practice.

DISCUSSION

The juxtaposition of the research findings enabled the recognition of a common trend in the study: that the effectiveness of psychosexual education and the training of specialists in this field is determined not through the individual components of such training, but through the

nature of the interaction of those components. The research results enabled the consolidation of the approaches to psychosexual education discussed in the existing literature to formulate an interpretative framework for understanding the competence of specialists in this field. Within this framework, the disproportions between the components of such competence enabled the recognition of the fact that while many training methods aim to incorporate elements of the models of psychosexual education discussed in this study, they do not account for the interaction of those elements – limiting their effectiveness in contributing to the development of competencies that can be directly applied in the field. Accordingly, the findings contribute to the scholarly literature on the topic in recognising the need to shift the focus of training efforts towards the development of these competencies in relation to each other.

The findings of E.S. Goldfarb & L.D. Lieberman (2021) correlate with the research findings obtained in this study regarding the effectiveness of psychosexual education. The authors noted that such an education can have positive effects upon the participants in relation to their risky behaviours, their interpersonal skills, their attitudes towards diversity, and their critical thinking skills. These findings are in agreement with the proposition of the study that the approach to training specialists in the field should focus upon the integration of each of these components of psychosexual education. However, the findings of the study also revealed that despite the theoretical knowledge of psychosexual concepts by many specialist students, those students did not automatically exhibit the behavioural changes in response to those changes in knowledge. This finding is suggestive of the need for the changes in educational approaches suggested by E.S. Goldfarb & L.D. Lieberman, supporting the conclusions drawn by the authors of this study.

The propositions of the study by M. Ubbiali *et al.* (2024) can be juxtaposed with the findings of this study regarding the competence of specialists. M. Ubbiali *et al.* propose that specialists in the field should not be focused upon knowledge alone, but should also develop skills in relation to the content of psychosexual education, including skills related to pedagogy, communication, and emotional regulation. The competence model proposed by the authors of this study is consistent with these suggestions. However, the findings of this study indicate that these skills are the least developed among specialists in the field, indicating a discrepancy between the model proposed by M. Ubbiali *et al.* and the actual structure of competence within specialists in psychosexual education. Thus, the findings of M. Ubbiali *et al.* act as a means of clarifying the model of competence that should exist within specialists in psychosexual education, as the research findings indicate that such a model is not yet achieved in specialists.

The study by A.P. Adekola & A.H. Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2022) enabled the interpretation of the role of the sociocultural context of the students within the effectiveness of psychosexual education. The authors determined that without taking consideration of the environmental

and sociocultural factors that affect the students, the provision of psychosexual education was not associated with changes in the students' behaviours. Such findings are in accordance with the findings of this study, which determined that the cognitive component of the competence model was limited among specialists in psychosexual education. The correlation between the cognitive and practical components of the competence model indicates the lack of effectiveness of the knowledge-based component of training. In contrast, the correlation between the value-ethical component and the practical component of competence is more substantial, indicating its importance in the development of specialists in psychosexual education. Thus, the findings of A.P. Adekola & A.H. Mavhandu-Mudzusi support the findings of this study in suggesting the integration of each of these components as part of the training of specialists.

The tenets of the study by D. Mollen & D.M. Abbott (2022) are correlated with the findings of the study. D. Mollen & D.M. Abbott suggested that the topics relating to psychosexual education are lacking within many psychology curricula, leading to the lack of competence among specialists in psychosexual education. These findings are supported by the results of this study, wherein many specialists exhibit lacking knowledge of the aspects of psychosexual education beyond those relating to biomedical sciences alone. Concurrently, the results allowed for a more nuanced delineation of the consequences of such fragmentation: it manifested not only within the cognitive domain but also in diminished confidence in communication, avoidance of complex topics, and an inadequately formed professional role. Within this context, the scholars' conclusions received empirical confirmation and were extended through the inclusion of an analysis of the internal structure of competence. It was established that even when discrete elements of training are present, their insufficient integration fails to ensure the formation of holistic professional readiness.

The results obtained in the present study serve to refine the propositions set forth in the work of F.J. Plaza-del-Pino *et al.* (2021), which primarily addressed barriers to the implementation of sexuality education in primary schools. That study established that a deficit in teacher professional training and the anticipation of adverse parental reactions substantially constrain the delivery of educational programmes. In the present research, these assertions received further empirical concretisation through the identified disproportion between the value-ethical and operational-practical components of competence. Specifically, the documented high proportion of students with developed tolerant attitudes was coupled with insufficient readiness for practical interaction, reflecting an analogous mechanism of avoiding challenging communicative situations as described by the authors. Furthermore, the present study expanded upon these conclusions by demonstrating that the barriers are not confined to external factors but possess an intra-professional nature, linked to the

insufficient development of the reflective component and the ambiguity of professional boundaries.

A comparison with the findings of O. Ivanova *et al.* (2024) permits an interpretation of the empirical data obtained herein within a broader institutional context. The study demonstrated that the existence of international policies in the field of sexuality education does not guarantee their mandatory implementation, resulting in variability in national approaches and fragmentation of the educational environment. In the present research, fragmentation is also reflected at the level of training itself: only a segment of the surveyed respondents demonstrated a systemic understanding of psychosexual education, while a proportion of the participants had knowledge based on a medical-informational model alone. The fragmentation of knowledge corresponds to the effect of political ambiguity on psychosexual education, as evidenced by the authors of the article. Additionally, the sociocultural constraints on psychosexual education, as discussed by O. Ivanova *et al.*, are reflected within the attitudes of the students towards such education. Another research study that helps to shed light upon the formation of knowledge and skills within the area of psychosexual education is that conducted by G. Vinciguerra *et al.* (2022). The researchers performed a study to determine the effectiveness of various psychosexual training methods for students with intellectual disabilities. The authors found that knowledge levels increased among the students following the training sessions. As such, the authors recommend the reinforcement of the practical component of training for these students, such as through the use of case-study methods and the supervision of training sessions by educators.

Concurrently, the results obtained allowed for the clarification that an increase in cognitive indicators does not guarantee an automatic enhancement of practical readiness, given that only a moderate correlation was identified between these components. Thus, in contrast to the localised effect of knowledge enhancement recorded by the authors, the present study revealed the necessity of integrating cognitive, value-based, and reflective dimensions to achieve sustainable professional outcomes. Analysis of the provisions put forward by D. Bulgarelli & B. Ragaglia (2025) has allowed for a deeper understanding of the significance of individualisation and the duration of educational interventions. The study underscored the necessity of adapting programmes to the specific needs of autistic adolescents, as well as the importance of cooperation between professionals and families. In the present research, these ideas were reflected in the identified role of the sociocultural context and communicative barriers that influence the efficacy of future psychologists' professional practice. In particular, it was established that a proportion of respondents experienced difficulties in defining the boundaries of interaction with parents, which indirectly corroborates the necessity of developing intersubjective communication skills, as emphasised by scholars. Concurrently, the present study expanded upon these conclusions

by demonstrating that individualisation should pertain not only to client groups but also to the process of professional training, taking into account the varying profiles of students' competence formation.

The synthesis of the comparative results indicated that scholarly approaches to psychosexual education converge in acknowledging its integrative nature; however, they diverge in the degree of attention afforded to the internal structure of professional competence. The conducted research enabled the specification of these approaches through the empirical identification of imbalances among discrete components and the establishment of correlational links between them. This has provided grounds for refining scientific conceptions regarding the mechanisms of transition from knowledge to professional action, which, in prior works, were predominantly examined at a conceptual level.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study has provided a theoretical substantiation and empirical verification of a structural model of professional competence among future psychologists in the domain of psychosexual education. Based on the analysis of international normative legal and scientific approaches to the problem of psychosexual education, it is possible to determine the characteristics of such a phenomenon. Psychosexual education can be considered an interdisciplinary phenomenon, the formation of knowledge of which is based on the integration of knowledge from the fields of developmental psychology, psychology of teaching, medicine, and public health. The main trend in the development of psychosexual education is the shift from providing information to forming strategies for behaviour. The effectiveness of sexuality education has been established to rely upon the integration of the cognitive, social, and emotional components of the learning process. With regard to the development of knowledge according to the age of students, it was ascertained that in younger age groups, the formation of concepts regarding the body and its boundaries is the main component of sexual education that prevents cases of sexual violence against children. Among adolescents, educational efforts should focus upon the development of communication and emotional skills. The ethical norms that must guide the activity of a psychologist involved in the field of psychosexual education are primarily constituted by international human rights and psychological ethics norms and national policies regarding such education. In addition to these international norms, students within Eastern Europe face additional barriers in the area of psychosexual education due to the limited access to systematic education and the reliance upon informal sources of information.

In the empirical component of this research, four components that constitute the professional competence of future psychologists in the area of psychosexual education were identified: cognitive, value-ethical, operational-practical, and reflexive components of knowledge. In each of these components, it was determined that students exhibited an uneven level of formation of these concepts.

In the value-ethical component, students exhibited the highest rates of formation of the knowledge within this area (41.8%). However, the same students exhibited only a medium rate of formation of the operational-practical component of knowledge (52.3% had achieved a medium level of formation for this component, compared to 28% who developed an understanding of the concept of forming a plan to prevent sexual violence against women). The cognitive component of knowledge was even in its formation rates (34.9% within the higher range of development of this component vs. 46.5% who had developed only medium levels of knowledge within this area). In the reflect on the component of knowledge among future psychologists, a higher rate (24.4%) of students lacked knowledge of strategies for preventing sexual violence against women. Within these components, correlations were found between value-ethical knowledge and the operational-practical component ($r=0.58$). Additionally, correlations between the reflective component and both the value-ethical component ($r=0.45$) and operational-practical component ($r=0.49$) of knowledge were found among students. Based upon these correlations, four different groups of students within the sample can be categorised according to the formation of their professional competencies: cognitively oriented,

value-oriented, integrated, and at-risk category of students. Thus, results of this research indicate that the formation of professional competencies among future psychologists who intend to work in the area of psychosexual education requires the development of both value-ethical and reflective components of knowledge as a means of developing effective professional practice in this area. A limitation of the study resides in the relatively modest sample size and its localised character, which precludes the generalisation of findings to the entire cohort of higher education institutions in Ukraine. Prospects for further research are envisaged in the analysis of the long-term effects of educational interventions and cross-cultural comparisons, which would enable an assessment of the stability of the competencies formed within professional practice.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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Формування компетентності майбутніх психологів у сфері психосексуальної освіти дітей та підлітків

Анотація. Метою дослідження було окреслити концептуальні засади та здійснити емпіричну перевірку структурної організації професійної компетентності майбутніх психологів у сфері психосексуальної освіти дітей та підлітків. Методологічна логіка передбачала поєднання аналізу міжнародних нормативних рамок із кількісно-якісним вимірюванням чотирьох компонентів компетентності через стандартизоване анкетування, ситуаційні завдання та тематичне кодування відповідей. Аналіз відповідей засвідчив, що когнітивний компонент демонстрував відносно збалансований розподіл рівнів сформованості (34,9 % високого та 46,5 % середнього рівнів), що показало достатній обсяг засвоєної теоретичної інформації. Водночас ситуаційні завдання виявили обмежену здатність до трансформації знань у практичні дії, що проявилось у домінуванні середнього рівня операційно-практичного компонента (52,3 %) та найнижчій частці високого рівня (28,0 %). Оцінювання ціннісно-етичних орієнтацій показало їх відносну сформованість, зокрема високий рівень було зафіксовано у 41,8 % респондентів, однак відкриті відповіді виявили наявність прихованих суперечностей у застосуванні цих орієнтирів у складних професійних ситуаціях. Рефлексивний компонент характеризувався найвищою варіативністю та часткою низьких показників (24,4 %), що проявлялося у фрагментарності самоаналізу та труднощах у прогнозуванні професійних дій. Кореляційний аналіз засвідчив наявність статистично значущих зв'язків між ціннісно-етичними орієнтаціями та практичною готовністю ($r=0,58$), а також між рефлексивним і практичним компонентами ($r=0,49$), що вказало на їхню функцію регулятора поведінкових рішень. Отримані результати дозволили інтерпретувати професійну компетентність як інтегративну систему, у межах якої окремі складові функціонували нерівнозначно та потребували цілеспрямованого узгодження. Практичне значення полягає у можливості використання отриманих результатів для розробки освітніх програм і тренінгових модулів, орієнтованих на викладачів психологічних спеціальностей та розробників навчальних курсів у сфері психосексуальної освіти.

Ключові слова: когнітивний компонент; комунікативні бар'єри; операційно-практичний компонент; рефлексивний компонент; супервізійні практики; ціннісно-етичний компонент