



МЕДИЦИНСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ СОФИЯ

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STATEMENT

by Prof. Georgi Neichev Onchev, MD,
from the Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology
at the Medical University (MU) Sofia,
member of a scientific jury according to Order No. RD-38-151/25.03.2024 of the Rector
of the Sofia University (SU) “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”

for conferring the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the doctoral program
“Clinical Psychology” in the area of higher education 3. “Social, Economic and Legal
Sciences”, and the professional field 3.2 “Psychology” (Clinical Psychology)

Author: Julia Archondis Kamburidis

Form of the PhD research: regular

Department: Social, Organizational, Clinical and Pedagogical Psychology, Faculty in
Philosophy, SU “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”

Title: “Social cognition and alexithymia in severe mental disorders”

Research supervisor: Prof. Rumyana Krumova-Pesheva, DrSci

1. General overview of the procedure

The submitted dissertation thesis and the accompanying documents **comply** with the procedure for conferring the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” according to the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA) and the Statutes for the Conditions and the Procedures for Acquiring Academic Degrees and Occupying Academic Positions (SCPAADOAP) at the SU “Sv. Kliment Ohridski” (last revision 28.06.2023).

2. Brief biographical sketch of the candidate

Julia Archondis Kamburidis obtained a master’s degree in Clinical Psychology from SU “Sv. Kliment Ohridski” in 2020 and has undergone numerous additional trainings in cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychodrama, and other therapeutic methods, as well as in the application of structured clinical assessment and neuropsychological tools.

Her internships and work placements – in psychiatric clinics, methadone programs, kindergartens, and medical centers – indicate a sustainable and diverse clinical orientation, as well as civic engagement in voluntary and non-governmental initiatives. Since 2021, she has been a regular PhD student in Clinical Psychology at SU “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”.

3. Relevance of the topic and adequacy of the formulated aim and objectives

The topic of the dissertation is relevant because of the significance of social cognition and alexithymia for functioning in severe mental illness and for understanding some interactions between social cognition and emotions in norm and pathology. The set goals and tasks are aimed at exploring the relationship between recognizing one’s own and others’ emotions and the levels of alexithymia. The design of a two-step cross-sectional comparison between patients and healthy controls is adequate for the hypotheses regarding the sought-after relationship

4. Familiarity with the problem

The literature review is detailed and demonstrates a good understanding of the research subject. Its scope is broad: fundamental concepts and characteristics of severe mental disorders and more specifically schizophrenia, social cognition, theory of mind, mentalization, alexithymia, affective regulation, and its relationship with psychopathology and social functioning. A detailed overview of the features of social cognition in schizophrenia has been conducted, along with the achievements of contemporary affective neuroscience, metacognition, theories of emotions, the neuropsychological bases of alexithymia, and the tools for its assessment.

The constructs are examined comprehensively, within their natural context of intertwining and overlapping, for example, the association of negative symptoms with facial expression recognition or the interaction between cognition and emotions in emotional regulation and its deficits.

5. Methods of the study

The aim, hypotheses, and objectives are clearly formulated, and the methodology and specific instruments are adequate for the constructs they assess. The relationship between the ability to understand one’s own and others’ emotional states and the levels of alexithymia, as well as strategies for emotional regulation, are investigated in patients with schizophrenia and healthy controls.

The study is cross-sectional, comparative, non-interventional, and two-tiered—a pilot study to verify the psychometric properties of the scales for alexithymia and emotional regulation in 272 individuals, and a “proper” study involving 49 patients with

schizophrenia and 51 healthy controls. Inclusive and exclusive criteria are precisely formulated. The instruments used include: 8 computerized tests to assess affective experiences, presenting pictures with emotionally neutral scenes that stimulate an emotional response, the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 (TAS-20), the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), and 6 structured questions to assess attitudes toward healthcare professionals and treatment. The statistical approaches are relevant to the stated objectives and include descriptive statistics and hypothesis-testing methods such as correlation analyses. The ethical aspect of the study is aligned with participant inclusion following signed informed consent.

6. Characteristics and appraisal of the dissertation thesis

The dissertation conforms to the requirements of the SCPAADOAP at the SU “Sv. Kliment Ohridski” and includes: introduction, scientific formulation of the problem, organization of the empirical study, results, discussion and conclusions from the empirical study, conclusion, findings, contributions, bibliography, and appendices. The volume and proportionality between the individual parts are optimal. The work is illustrated with 30 tables and 22 figures, informed consents and some of the instruments are presented as appendices, and the bibliography contains 340 sources, of which 8 are in Cyrillic and 332 are in Latin script.

The presentation of the results is clear and provides a comprehensible visualization. They cover the psychometric characteristics of the instruments used with detailed presentation of the data from factor analysis for TAS-20 and ERQ, descriptive statistics with data on the relationships between individual scales and differences in subjective emotional experiences, levels of alexithymia, negative emotions, and strategies for emotional regulation between patients with paranoid schizophrenia and healthy controls. The relationship between social cognition, alexithymia, and emotional suppression is demonstrated, as well as between subjective emotional experiences, alexithymia, and strategies for emotional regulation, and between them and the levels of anxiety, depression, and stress.

Through regression analysis, the influence of alexithymia, subjective emotional experiences, and emotional suppression on the levels of depression was examined, as well as the influence of alexithymia on strategies for emotional regulation, and the influence of alexithymia on social cognition in patients with schizophrenia. The relationships between life satisfaction and other assessed mental phenomena in patients and controls are presented, as well as the role of demographic parameters and the data on attitudes toward healthcare professionals and treatment.

In the discussion, the findings are interpreted accurately and compared to the hypotheses formulated in the study. The presence of a relationship between the

assessment of perceived threat in neutral social scenes and alexithymia in patients with paranoid schizophrenia is confirmed, along with the higher assessment of threat perception and displeasure in neutral social scenes, as well as the higher levels of alexithymia compared to healthy controls. Additionally, the more pronounced emotional suppression and negative emotions in schizophrenia are confirmed, as well as lower life satisfaction and more negative attitudes towards healthcare professionals. Partial confirmation is also found for the assumption that high levels of alexithymia and negative emotions are predictors of impaired social cognition in the evaluation of neutral social scenes and subjective emotional experiences.

7. Contributions and significance of the study for science and for practice

The formulated conclusions, findings, and contributions focus on the established relationships between alexithymia and social cognition in schizophrenia and healthy controls, as well as on the practical applicability of neutral stimuli and the ERQ scale for assessing emotional regulation, and the potential for better planning of psychological interventions in patients with schizophrenia.

8. Personal participation of the author

The presented dissertation work is an original research study and an independent work of the doctoral candidate.

9. Autoreferate and publications

The structure of the author's summary (autoreferate) complies with the requirements of the SCPAADOAP at the SU "Sv. Kliment Ohridski", following the dissertation structure (with unnecessary repetition of the part of the literature review), and reflecting its content. It is appropriate for an autoreferate to be accompanied by a brief summary. Three scientific publications on the topic in Bulgarian editions, 5 scientific reports, and 3 posters at scientific conferences are presented.

10. Critical remarks

Since the title should reflect the content, it would be more accurate to replace "severe mental disorders" with "schizophrenia" in the topic, as the study was conducted specifically on patients with schizophrenia—undoubtedly a severe mental disorder, but not the only one. In the description of the methodology, the arithmetic sum of the number of healthy individuals and patients in the pilot sample does not match the total number of subjects examined (272) as stated. Some results are repeated in both the text and the tables and figures.

11. Recommendations for future research

The author argues for the perspective of expanding research on the topic with larger samples, including objective markers and other psychometric instruments, and with populations selected according to clinical profiles, for example, based on the predominance of negative or positive symptoms.

12. Conclusion

The presented dissertation thesis reflects an original research on a relevant problem, methodological rigor and own contributions. The thesis meets entirely the requirements for conferring the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” according to the DASRBA and the SCPAADOAP at the SU “Sv. Kliment Ohridski”, which provides basis for positive opinion regarding conferring the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in Psychology to Julia Archondis Kamburidis.

Prof. Dr. Georgi Onchev

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Georgi Onchev', written in black ink.