

English translation

OPINION

under the procedure for acquisition of Doctor of Science degree

by **Julia Arhondis Kamburidis,**

Topic of the dissertation: **Social cognition and alexithymia in grave mental disorders**

Scientific supervisor: **Prof. Ph.D.Sc. Romyana Krumova-Pesheva**

in professional field 3.2 Psychology,

Department of Psychology,

Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski,

By Prof. Irina Zinovieva, Dr. Sc.

Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Department of Psychology, professional field 3.2 Psychology in her capacity of Member of the Scientific Jury for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor" (in Clinical Psychology) following

Order #RD-38-151_25.3.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski

General characteristics of the dissertation work

The dissertation is presented on 206 pages. It consists of an introduction, three parts, a conclusion and references. Data are presented in 30 tables and 22 figures. The literature used includes 240 sources, of which 8 are in Bulgarian and 332 in English.

The dissertation is structured in an introduction, three parts, a conclusion and references.

In the first chapter, the main concepts - schizophrenic disorder, social cognition and alexithymia, as well as the clinical manifestations of schizophrenia, the course of the disease and the problem of disability are discussed. Special attention is paid to etiological theories to explain the illness, impairments in social cognition in schizophrenic disorder, neurobiological theories and affective neuroscience. Another part of this chapter describes methods for investigating social cognition and basic theoretical models of emotion. The dimensional model of emotions, which was implemented in a dissertation, is discussed. The last part of the first chapter is devoted to alexithymia and research on the relationship between social cognition and alexithymia in schizophrenic disorder. Disturbances in emotion regulation in schizophrenia and the relationship to alexithymia are discussed.

In the second chapter presents the methodological framework of the empirical study with a detailed description of the purpose, tasks, hypotheses, instrument and sample.

The third chapter contains an analysis of the results of an empirical study of the differences between social cognition, subjective emotional experiences, levels of alexithymia and emotional regulation strategies between individuals with paranoid schizophrenia and healthy individuals.

Literate overview

The topic has been developed competently and analyzes a large number of scientific studies. It is evident that the doctoral candidate knows the literature in the field well, analyzes the content in depth and draws adequate conclusions.

Some Bulgarian literature on the dissertation topic is also included. One of the three main methods, on which the empirical study of the dissertation is based, was developed by Bulgarian authors. It is noteworthy, however, that the sources that adapted for Bulgarian conditions the other two main instruments, on which the empirical study is based, are not known to the candidate. The adaptation of the alexithymia tool is published in Ljubomira Tsvetkova, Georgi Garkov and Georgi Kirilov (2022). Psychometric characteristics of the Bulgarian version of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) - Zinovieva I., Andreeva, L., Karabelova S. (eds.) Psychology - tradition and modernity. University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski", pp. 116-124. This article is in the same volume in which is one of the three publications of the doctoral candidate.

On the second main instrument used in the dissertation's study - Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) - there is also an article published on the adaptation for Bulgarian conditions: Vasilev,

Yavor (2016). Adaptation of the Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) in the Bulgarian sociocultural context. In: Harizanova, O. (ed.) "Yearbook of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Philosophy, Book of Doctoral Students", volume 1, 290-302.

Both questionnaires have Bulgarian translation versions, and it is important to use the previously developed versions not only as a good scientific practice, but also to accumulate data that can be generalized. In this way, for the Bulgarian cultural context, it will be possible to achieve knowledge about the invariants that are behind the effects of individual samples.

Methodology

The dissertation aims to investigate the relationship between social cognition, alexithymia and emotional regulation in paranoid schizophrenia with an emphasis on the relationships between the understanding of one's own and others' emotional states from neutral (ambivalent) social scenes and levels of alexithymia.

The research was conducted in two stages. Initially, a pilot study with 255 healthy individuals and 5 patients examined the psychometric properties of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby et al., 1994) and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003). An experimental group of 49 patients diagnosed with the mental disorder paranoid schizophrenia and a control group of 51 healthy individuals participated in the main study. Special attention has been paid to the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the selection of persons in the experimental group.

The basis for the main research is a projective diagnostic tool for studying social cognition through neutral social scenarios (Haralanova and Haralanov, 2016).

To verify the psychometric characteristics of the scales, exploratory factor analysis using the method of principal components and analysis of the internal consistency of the scales with Cronbach's alpha were used. The analysis of the data is done with correlation and regression analysis for the relationships and predictive capabilities of the selected variables.

The doctoral candidate shows good skills in choosing adequate statistical methods, their application and reaching correct interpretation of the obtained results. In the discussion, the new data obtained and the confirmation of the existing data are discussed in detail. This brings convincingness to the results, and the candidate's in-depth theoretical knowledge contributes to the correctness of interpretations and conclusions.

Dissertation Abstract

The presented abstract correctly reflects the main content and academic contributions of the dissertation work.

Scientific contributions

I will note only some of the scientific contributions of the dissertation work.

1. A significant relationship was found between impairments in the appraisal of others' unpleasantness and levels of alexithymia, as well as lack of a significant relationship between the appraisal of others' perceived threat in neutral social scenes and alexithymia in patients with paranoid schizophrenia.

2. It was found that paranoid schizophrenic patients rate higher the degree of feeling of threat and unpleasantness in neutral social scenes, that is, they attach high emotional significance to affectively neutral stimuli compared to healthy individuals of the control group. This was achieved by applying a method different from the commonly used one in the field for the study of social cognition - the doctoral student included neutral social scenes. In this way, confirmation of the result of other studies with a new instrument is achieved, which emphasizes the stability of the knowledge obtained.

3. Another important result is that patients with paranoid schizophrenia use more the emotional suppression strategy and show higher levels of negative emotional experiences compared to healthy individuals. There is also a significant relationship between emotional suppression, alexithymia, and negative emotional experiences. This is consistent with the clinical observation that individuals with high levels of alexithymia avoid talking about their emotions, preferring to focus on their behavior and thoughts.

4. The results demonstrate that due to affective production, patients with paranoid schizophrenia misinterpret social stimuli as threatening and this contributes to lower levels of life satisfaction compared to healthy subjects.

Evaluation of the quality of the candidate's scientific works related to meeting the minimum national requirements for the scientific degree "doctor" in professional fields 3.2 Psychology

Scientific publications are presented, which in terms of quantity and quality correspond to the minimum national requirements. Three independent scientific publications have been made in proceedings of conferences with scientific review, for which the doctoral student receives the required 30 points. She has also presented 5 reports and 2 posters in international scientific conferences.

CONCLUSION

After having familiarized myself with the presented dissertation work, abstract, publications on the topic and citations, based on the analysis of their significance and the scientific and scientific-applied contributions contained in them, I confirm that the scientific achievements meet the requirements of the RSARB and The Regulations for its application and the relevant Regulations of the SU "St. Kliment Ohrids" for obtaining the scientific degree "Doctor". In particular, Julia Arhondis Kamburidis satisfies the minimum national requirements in the professional direction and no plagiarism has been established in the submitted dissertation, abstract and scientific works.

I give my positive assessment of the dissertation work.

Based on the above, as a member of the scientific jury, I am convinced that there is every reason to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor " in professional field 3.2 Psychology (Clinical Psychology) to Julia Arhondis Kamburidis.

6th May, 2024

Prof. Irina Zinovieva, Dr. Sc.