

STANDPOINT

From Assoc. Prof. Harieta Emanuilova Manolova, PhD, Medical University - Sofia, Faculty of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology.

For the dissertation work for awarding of educational and scientific degree "DOCTOR", scientific field 3.2. Psychology (Clinical Psychology), with author Julia Archondis Kamburidis and topic: "Social Cognition and Alexithymia in Severe Mental Disorders".

The construct of "alexithymia" has been an object of research in recent decades with a focus on exploring its importance as a predictor of onset of psychiatric disorders, its relationship to the severity of the disorders and the negative prognosis for their course, and its value in incorporating "education" in psychotherapeutic process concerning the recognition of one's own feelings and those of others. Its influence on life satisfaction of affected patients makes these studies relevant and of not only clinical but also of existential importance. With varying degrees of conclusiveness, research studies have demonstrated links between alexithymia and psychosomatic disorders, schizophrenia, autism, eating disorders, addiction, depression, etc. The interest of researchers encompasses both the cognitive and the affective domains, which implies that alexithymia is a complex and compound construct. In Bulgaria, alexithymia is a topic of a number of doctoral dissertation (Trayanka Grigorova BAS 2018; Galabina Kendalova, VSU 2021; Lyubomira Tsvetkova SU 2023, etc.) and publications (M. Ignatova and Sv. Savov 2021; D. Ignatova 2022; L. Tsvetkova and Ir. Zinovieva, etc.). The current dissertation thesis is also related to the work of the late Kaloyan Kukov, whose scientific interest lies specifically in paranoid schizophrenia.

Research studies show correlations between alexithymia and demographic characteristics such as age, gender and educational attainment, which are not being interpreted in the present dissertation work. It is recommended for such a study to include a multi-informant assessment in order to avoid distortion of results when patients with elevated levels of alexithymia and suppression as the adopted coping strategy evaluate their experiences. The results would have been substantially more objective had the questionnaires been completed by patients' cohabiting relatives and by their attending psychiatrist or psychotherapist. The results are also affected by the merging of gender data in the samples, which has not been accounted for, although women have proven advantages in recognizing, understanding and describing feelings. The same applies to the substantial age range of the participants and the lack of control for intellectual functioning. For example, a quick assessment using Raven's Progressive Matrices test would have informed the researcher about participants' intellectual level, which inevitably affects their understanding of feelings and social relationships.

The author herself mentions some problematic aspects of her work in the section “Limitations and opportunities for future research”, however in the future the discrepancy between the clinical and the control groups could be avoided by having the same number of participants in both groups while selecting controls by matching their age, gender and education to the available patients’ with schizophrenia. The listed remarks apply to future research and do not undermine the effort of J. Kamburidis, which addresses a relevant and sparsely researched area that is in need of fresh data for establishing the association of “alexithymia” and “social cognition” with the onset and the course of the schizophrenic disorder.

The dissertation work has a clear structure, which includes an “Introduction” where the author describes the logical process of her undertaking, the relevance of the investigation and its practical clinical application. The three following chapters contain a review of literature and describe the organization of the empirical study. A separate chapter includes the results, discussion and implications. Of interest is the review of literature, which is very detailed and logically guided by the empirical study. J. Kamburidis does not constrain herself to the currently applied in Bulgaria ICD-10, but also demonstrates familiarity with the latest diagnostic classifications DSM-5 and ICD-11 as she comments on their recent modifications related to the understanding of schizophrenia. A good impression is made by the detailed description of the cognitive deficiencies of patients with schizophrenia and the role of the psychologist in their identification through a psychological assessment. The work continues with a comprehensive chronological exhibition of the various theories of the etiology of the schizophrenic disorder and of emotions, in which respect the contemporary understanding of the dimensional approach in the explanation of emotions is well substantiated. The author focuses on two of the main schools of psychotherapy – psychoanalysis and cognitive behavioral therapy, providing a critical look of the weaknesses and contributions of both approaches. The section dealing with “social cognition” competently comments not only on the available research and contributions, but also on the significance of intelligence and age, although these are not objects of the current investigation. The author discusses in detail the neuropsychological basis of alexithymia and freely and comprehendingly makes use of medical terminology, which is a rare ability in the humanitarian academic fields. The results are described comprehensively and follow the logic of the theoretical framework. In the “Discussion” section, the results of the current study are compared to those found in the reviewed literature, the limitations of this study are correctly remarked and directions for future research are outlined. The dissertation also includes an evaluation of the utilized methodologies, which is an additional contribution of this scientific work.

Of the theoretical contributions of the dissertation an emphasis should be put on the demonstration of the application of the dimensional approach in the investigation of emotional

experiences and social cognition of patients with paranoid schizophrenia, as well as on the identification of a statistically significant relationship between the two investigated constructs. Among the positive contributions, the capacities for improvement of planning of psychological interventions for patients with schizophrenia should be underscored.

Given the scientific merits of the presented work, the demonstrated competence and practical applicability of the obtained results, I give a positive evaluation of the dissertation and suggest to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award Julia Arhondis Kamburidis the educational and scientific degree “DOCTOR”.

Sofia

1.05.2024

Members of the Scientific Jury:

Assoc. Prof. Harieta Manolova, PhD