

RECENSION

by Prof. Dr. Minko Hadzhiiski on Tanya Dimitrova's dissertation on the topic "ALEXITHYMIA AND COPING IN A LIFE-THREATENING SITUATION. SAMPLE FROM BULGARIAN MILITARY AND POLICE SPECIAL UNITS: PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE AND COUNSELING"

with supervisor Prof. Ph.D.Sc. Teodora Stoeva

Scientific field 3. Social, economic and legal sciences

Professional direction 3.2. Psychology

The construct "Alexithymia", although known and discussed in the psychological and clinical literature since the second half of the last century, in our country has not been adequately presented to its meaning, especially in the context of extreme situations related to adequate survival behaviors. Its close connection with another phenomenon that has powerfully entered the academic and scientific research practice, "emotional intelligence" and even the substantive overlap to a certain extent, obviously leave it a little outside the current psychological topics. In this sense, the attempt of PhD student Tanya Dimitrova to emphasize alexithymia in aspects of coping, psychometric research and help in dangerous and emotionally charged professions is necessary and in itself a contribution to our theory and practice.

The submitted dissertation has a content volume of 181 pages and a total volume of 204 pages. They are structured into an introduction, four main sections, a conclusion, bibliography and limitations. The presented text also includes a list of the six publications on the topic and the candidate's self-assessment of the scientific contributions.

The bibliographic reference shows the use of 246 specialized sources, including 16 in Cyrillic, 230 in Latin, together with Internet sources. I consider the theoretical basis of the development as impressive, extremely informative, particularly relevant and academically appropriate, in accordance with the objectives of the research.

I believe that the topic is not only dissertable, but also quite non-trivial for the Bulgarian scientific space, and in the provided opportunity for its popularization in psychological and psychotherapeutic practice, I see a certain contribution of this work.

The introduction eruditely leads and adequately orients the reader in his specific intention. Even here, although in outline, the model of the studied phenomenon is clearly presented in the perspective of the dynamics of the definitive concepts related to alexithymia. The mechanism regarding the nature, manifestation, mode of action, formation of various psychological, psychopathological and personal attitudes and behaviors has been accurately captured and revealed. It is categorically stated that the purpose of the dissertation is related to testing the hypotheses that elevated alexithymia values favor inclusion in occupations of high social significance and that coping with life-threatening stressors is specific in nature and should not be identified with coping with everyday life. stress. In addition, the author leans towards the practical side, in particular the psychotherapeutic or advisory side, related to particularly stressful situations and supporting coping strategies. Thus, the construct is presented as a personality trait that should be investigated in order to take into account in life-threatening situations, the choice of a profession with an increased risk to life and deriving concrete proposals for psychological counseling practices. Thus, the current significance of

the studied problem is convincingly argued. The theoretical part of the exposition/ II hour of the text/ is given in three problematic circles.

In the first, an extremely detailed and highly informative interpretation of the key dimension "Alexithymia" is presented, including etiology, scientific discussion, relationship with other constructs, and clinical manifestations. Special attention is paid to the consultative angle, as a difficult and debatable problem, a consequence of personal representation.

In the second problem circle, the concept of alexithymia is skillfully linked to high-risk activities and behaviors. Adhering to the personal principle, factually and analytically, Dimitrova makes a successful attempt to connect persons with high alexithymia with a tendency to strong experiences. And hence the connections between alexithymia and sensation seeking and high-risk activities. Going through an analysis of some professional activities in the context of personal characteristics, she naturally comes to the conclusion that one can look for connections between this personal trait and the choice of professions in which one's own life is clearly or directly endangered. All this is done with the caveat that there is a lack of specific research on the matter, which raises the self-authorship of the links between alexithymia, sensation seeking and high-risk activities. Regarding psychological intervention, the author categorically states that at the moment there is a lack of a consultative framework that would bring together the available information in search of a specific approach aimed at dealing with the high levels of this construct. And of course there is no established strategy for psychological care and counseling aimed specifically at alexithymia in persons practicing such professions.

The third problematic circle relates the construct to natural coping strategies and coping styles. It provides a theoretical-analytical review of various views related to stress and reactions. Starting from the classic "general adaptation syndrome" of H. Selye, through the transactional-cognitive model of Lazarus and other theories, it is concluded that coping is a multi-determinant process, the study of which requires more psychometric tools. The most important are described, along with the relationships between personality traits and responses to stressors, in sociodemographic terms. The view outlined by the author is interesting that Alexithymia is a form of situational coping when the stressor is of high subjective importance. In this sense, although Alexithymia and coping are different categories, they have a relationship that allows predicting behavior in emotional, behavioral and social aspects. The fact that the Alexithymia-Coping interaction is a complex process that has not been fully understood suggests that further research is needed, especially in life-threatening situations, especially in professional areas where they occur more often.

I definitely believe that the theoretical framework of the dissertation not only enriches the model of alexiothymic influence, but provides a solid basis for empirical research.

The empirical study is presented in the III part of the work. The same is clearly and precisely formulated in terms of goals, objectives, organization, methodology and hypotheses.

The objectives are threefold and reflect the multi-layered content nature of the research design. In short, they can be linked to further research on the mentioned "white" spots in this matter, adaptation of existing tools and development of a consultative model for working with clients.

The organization envisages two stages /pilot and real/, and each of them has three sub-stages. This complication is dictated by the need for psychometric procedures to test the reliability and validity of the two main instruments with a sample of different categories of respondents.

The toolkit was selected purposefully and appropriately in view of the research objectives and implicit tasks. It includes, along with the special tests for alexithymia, a number of personality and clinical questionnaires and a survey. All of them are well argued.

The research hypotheses were three according to the a priori assumptions regarding the instruments measuring alexithymia and coping choices. For greater detail and clarity, due to the presence of two studied groups and the different test values, they are ranked in sub-hypotheses.

The results of this complex research are shown and discussed in Part IV of the dissertation. For this purpose, two statistical programs were used. The data were obtained through several types of analysis, including correlational, confirmatory and exploratory factorial, linear regression. They have been tested in stages, separately for the pilot and for the actual research and shown in a table. Both studies conclude with summaries, with the limitations of the pilot taken into account in the main one. The inspection was carried out with a well-argued and rich toolkit tailored to the specifics of the research. The discussion /c. 140-146/ shows the confirmation of the three main hypotheses, together with their rankings.

In part V, the practical applicability of the obtained results for psychological counseling is considered. I find this part of the work particularly important, since any scientific and methodological achievements would be an end in themselves if they did not help to supplement or change psychological practice. The author approaches this problem, as in the entire dissertation work, clearly and categorically, demonstrating deep knowledge of the issue, good command of terminology and respectable professionalism. On the basis of the results of the study of alexithymia in representatives of risky professions from the law enforcement agencies, a general scheme for advisory assistance was developed. In it, the diagnosis is prioritized procedurally and substantively, and the presence and severity of this personality trait is identified in 4 specific steps. If this is proven with the checked and adapted tools, a detailed consultation plan is applied, which provides for work with the most pronounced difficulties, taking into account the valence of emotional stimuli and reactions, the presence of possible depression, life satisfaction and distress.

Due to the importance of coping with life-threatening stressors, a special conceptual framework for counseling is proposed. It is also a variant of crisis intervention, due to the strong influence of stress, which blocks habitual coping strategies. Therefore, the goal is also about mastering in a way that turns what happened into an opportunity for the person. Normally, the focus is on stressor and coping research. Because of the relationship of coping strategies to elements of mental health, it is recommended that the counseling process focus on avoidant and problem-focused coping. In the case of established high alexithymia, depending on the valence of the affect, an appropriate approach is recommended - cognitive-behavioral or existential-humanistic.

In this context, it is worth noting the critical analysis of institutional psychological care for employees exposed to stressful and threatening situations in the activities of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Reasons such as a focus on vocational fitness

and 'training' rather than mental health, unguaranteed confidentiality and risk of stigmatization and seeking outside help were given as determinants. Failure to consider the relationship between traumatic experience and the degree of alexithymia is also pointed out as a shortcoming of psychological help.

To overcome these shortcomings, the author offers an integrative approach, which includes methods and techniques rarely used in standard problem-oriented counseling, such as computer cognitive-behavioral therapy, group and individual psychoeducational sessions, private self-consciousness, sports and humor.

The conclusion summarizes the most important aspects of the study, regarding the reliability of the used /adapted and translated/ instruments - PAQ, COPE and TAS-20, the influence of elevated levels of alexithymia on the professional performance and guidance of employees in the special units of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and coping in stressful situations. Alexithymia is being rehabilitated as an "unwanted" personal trait, especially with regard to coping strategies in high-risk situations. Along with this, directions for future research are provided regarding the relationships of alexithymia with life satisfaction, affect valence, frequency of exposure to stressors, and applicability in counseling practice.

The contributions of this work are comprehensively and argumentatively formulated by the author. In summary, and at the risk of repetition, they can be presented as follows:

- Investigation of a little-known and unreported construct in relation to the work of a specific professional group;
- Adapting and proving the reliability and validity of specialized psychometric instruments for the diagnosis of alexithymia;
- Establishing connections and dependencies of this personality trait with coping strategies in risky, life-threatening situations;
- Compiling a conceptual framework and proposing an integrative approach for psychological intervention.

Notes. I have no critical remarks on the substance of the thesis. Regarding the requirements for citation and correct reference to authors, I find that the development perfectly meets the criteria and meets the standards.

Conclusion. In conclusion, I state my categorical reason to propose to the esteemed jury to vote on a decision to award the ONS "doctor" to Tanya Dimitrova in Professional direction 3.2. Psychology.

14.05. 2024
V. Tarnovo

Reviewer:.....
/prof. Dr. Minko Hadjiyski/