

REVIEW

By Prof. Rumiana Krumova – Presheva, DSc

Of Dissertation work for the award of the educational and scientific degree
“PhD”

by scientific specialty 3.2. Psychology (Counseling Psychology)

on the topic: **“Alexithymia and coping in a life-threatening situation. A sample of Bulgarian military and police special forces: psychological care and counseling”**

Developed by: Tanya Dimitrova

Scientific Supervisor: Prof. Teodora Stoeva, DSc

Tanya Dimitrova's dissertation is dedicated to a topic that has a long scientific research history, but at the same time, opportunities for new approaches and perspectives. Questions about alexithymia and coping strategies are quite relevant in modern reality, especially when they are related to people with high-risk professions. The development is located on 215 pages and contains an introduction, 3 chapters, parts "Limitations of the study", "Conclusion and future directions", "Reference to the scientific contributions of the dissertation", used literature, a list of publications, participation in scientific forums and appendices. The data obtained from the empirical study are presented in 40 tables. 265 literary sources are indicated, of which 18 are in Cyrillic, and the remaining 247 are in Latin. 6 publications in scientific publications (1 co-authored and 5 independent), as well as 3 participations in scientific forums, have been presented on the subject. This shows the permanent and sustainable interest and commitment of the doctoral student in the chosen topic. The abstract covers 71 pages and is an informative version of the dissertation with its main highlights.

In the Introduction of the development, the author convincingly points out the relevance and importance of the problem. Draws attention to the role of diagnosing the level of alexithymia and its relationship to effective or ineffective coping in life-threatening situations. It reveals the importance of counseling practice in order to prevent psychiatric and psychosomatic disorders, as well as in order to successfully influence heterogeneous maladaptive states and reactions.

The first chapter, "Theoretical framework of the study", contains a comprehensive overview of the main concepts, as well as an in-depth discussion regarding different scientific views and interpretations regarding the psychological constructs studied in the dissertation. In an informative way, the author presents the concepts of alexithymia in a historical and contemporary reading and understanding, through the disclosure of diverse perspectives on the etiology, clinical and non-clinical dimensions, as a personality trait or the result of an organic disease. Emphasizes the importance of differentiating, expressing and defining emotional states as an essential element relating to individual stability and resilience. Tanya Dimitrova convincingly offers different research approaches connecting alexithymia with distress, traumatic experiences, post-traumatic stress disorder, etc. The ideas of Williams, Freiburger, Crystal, Moorman, Bermond, Taylor and others are presented. in order to outline the parameters of the alexithymia phenomenon as a multidimensional construct. The author problematizes the issue of various etiological factors of a biological, intrapsychic and social nature. Psychometric instruments for measuring the alexithymia construct - self-reported and projective - are presented, as well as their diagnostic capabilities and limitations. Relationships and distinctions with other constructs such as coping strategies and defense mechanisms are indicated. The doctoral student is looking for the dimensions of the concept in clinical practice and its correlations with depression, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, with anxiety and addiction states.

In the theoretical setting, the issue of high-risk activities, alexithymia and the choice of a profession is naturally considered. It makes a serious impression that for the first time in this dissertation the connections between the two are investigated, regardless of the attempt in science to date to look for correlations between the desire for intense sensations and the alexithymic features of the personality. Personal determinants are comprehensively presented, features such as: a tendency towards an environment that does not require emotional differentiation, a desire for operational activity with high risk, characteristics oriented towards unpredictability and work in situations with great ambiguity and unknownness. The relationships between alexithymia and the choice of high-risk professional activity are

analytically presented. Tanya Dimitrova explicitly emphasizes the role of psychological counseling for special officers from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Defense, paying special attention to the care of the mental health of professionals in these fields. Examines the question of coping strategies through the ideas of Lazarus, Folkman, Carver, Connor-Smith, and others. It notes an appropriate construct of "coping" as a process multi-determined by heterogeneous factors. Psychometric instruments looking for connections between personality traits and emotional characteristics are also commented. Attention is paid to age, cultural characteristics, social circumstances and the relationship between coping and alexithymia is discussed. The correlation between alexithymia and coping with a life-threatening stressor is very reflectively shown, as well as the unhealthy dimensions of such interrelatedness.

Chapter two is defined as "Setting, Organization of the Empirical Study and Results". It correctly describes the goals and tasks of the research project. A pilot study and a real study were conducted, both in three sub-phases. The toolkit was chosen completely appropriately, in harmony with the main idea of the study. 3 hypotheses were formulated, two of them with 3 sub-hypotheses, and one with 2. The procedure was implemented correctly and professionally. The results are presented in the fourth part of the development. Correlation and factor analyzes were conducted in order to assess the reliability and validity of the instruments used for the Bulgarian population. A large-scale and multi-layered study was carried out with an in-depth analysis of the relationships between the studied constructs and sociodemographic indicators. It becomes clear that the obtained data confirm the hypotheses raised by the author. A precise and in-depth diagnostic activity has been implemented, on the basis of which valuable guidelines can be derived for consulting practice with people in high-risk professions. Tanya Dimitrova proves beyond doubt that the PAQ and COPE instruments she adapted are valid and reliable methodologies suitable for use by mental health professionals for screening and research purposes. The psychometric parameters of the proposed methods are statistically and logically substantiated and their application in practice is argued in a professional manner.

The third chapter deals with the applicability of the obtained results in the field of psychological counseling for persons with alexithymia. The importance of a precise psychological assessment is emphasized, in which an essential element is the consideration of the specific manifestations of alexithymia in the individual. The doctoral student reveals the importance of the valence of the affect, and also naturally emphasizes the consideration of the specific symptomatology during counseling. The need for psychological care in the structures of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, tailored exclusively to

individual and contextual characteristics, is substantiated. With great attention and care the author describes the specifics of psychological help in specific state structures, the specifics of seeking help from staff or civilian psychologists, attitudes, resistances, expectations and concerns, various types of stigmatization and self-stigmatization. The importance of anonymity and confidentiality in counseling practice is quite appropriately emphasized.

Limitations of the study were reported, such as: size and characteristics of the sample, time interval between an event with a life-threatening stimulus and the moment of completing the methodology, the application of only self-report instruments, etc. The author also points out possibilities for future research in the direction of studying the valence of affect and its importance for alexithymia, the study on the frequency of exposure to high-risk stressors, the individual assessment of the stressor, etc.

Contributing moments of the dissertation work are described, which are related to the adaptation of a coping tool to the specifics of dealing with life-threatening type of stressors; alexithymia as a construct is associated with the choice of profession; a program for psychological care was constructed, taking into account alexithymia as a personality trait of employees in the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior. I consider particularly valuable the psychometric instrument adapted by the author, specifically aimed at measuring coping with a high-risk stressor, as well as considering and emphasizing the meaning of the integrative approach.

I also want to emphasize that the doctoral student complied absolutely correctly with the recommendations I proposed for the dissertation and the auto-abstract.

In conclusion: I believe that Tanya Dimitrova's dissertation contains very important scientific and practical value in the field of psychodiagnostic practice and psychological counseling. The idea and implementation of such a multi-component empirical study are presented in a completely comprehensive, precise and professional manner. In the development, the serious abilities of the author to conduct in-depth theoretical studies and valuable research projects make an impression. Persuasive qualities and an interest in a reflexive and interpretive stance toward heterogeneous interpersonal and intrapsychic phenomena are also demonstrated. All this gives me the reason to propose with complete conviction to the respected scientific jury that Tanya Dimitrova be awarded the scientific and educational degree "PhD" in scientific specialty 3.2. Psychology (Counseling Psychology).

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Sofia

Prepared the review.....

/Prof. R. Krumova – Pesheva/