

REFERENCE

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for obtaining PhD degree in a professional field 3.2. Psychology (Counselling Psychology),

by **Tanya Nikolaeva Dimitrova**,

author of dissertation on the topic: " ALEXITHYMIA AND COPING IN A LIFE-THREATENING SITUATION. SAMPLE OF BULGARIAN MILITARY AND POLICE SPECIAL FORCES OPERATORS: PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE AND COUNSELING"

Supervisor: Prof. DSc Teodora Stoeva

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1. Significance of the researched problem in scientific and applied field

The dissertation is organized around the study of research constructs important to psychological science. Unfortunately, due to global challenges and upheavals (e.g. pandemic and lockdown measures, armed conflicts, natural disasters etc.), the concept of life-threatening stressors inevitably becomes a research priority with an emphatic urgency to uncover adaptive strategies and mechanisms. In this regard, the conducted research provides a theoretical-diagnostic scaffold and point of reference for the entire Bulgarian professional psychological community. The study focuses on constructs that have been the object of scientific interest for decades and continue to provoke scientific research due to the fact that their definition includes elements of the changing social environment and the new adaptation challenges that a person faces. Constructs such as personality profile of functioning, alexithymia, coping strategies, life-threatening stressors, are placed in a new configuration, allowing their study in a system of interrelationships and the potential to achieve valuable insights with high relevance to the applied science. Revealing the connections and interaction between alexithymia, coping strategies in life-threatening situations and the choice of a profession with a risk to one's own life, makes possible the

introduction of a new framework and specific proposals for new models of psychological diagnosis and counseling for a certain type of professional requirements and standards. The present study emphasizes the analysis of these constructs from a new perspective. A constructive challenge of the existing models allows expansion of scientific knowledge. The dissertation seeks to answer questions about the influence of alexithymia as a personality trait on life choices and, in particular, the choice of profession, as well as whether high alexithymia has an unambiguously negative impact on coping with challenges under different circumstances. The research and proposals in the paper aim to contribute to the expansion of knowledge and practice in the field of mental and somatic health by adapting assessment tools and formulating advisory frameworks specifically targeting the constructs under investigation.

The chosen topic, the conducted research and the amount of data occupy an important place in modern theoretical searches in the field of personal functioning, personality traits and states and have a great contribution to the immediate practical application of the empirically derived factors of impact.

2. Precisely formulated objectives and tasks of the dissertation

The goals of the presented work are clearly defined - to find a new perspective to connect alexithymia with certain strategies for dealing with a special kind of challenges related to the exercise of high-risk professions and to develop new procedures for diagnosis, selection, preventive and rehabilitative psychological care for people choosing high-risk occupations and professions.

3. Degree of knowledge of the state of the problem and structure of the dissertation

The dissertation follows the classic structure of a theoretical and empirical part, introduction, conclusion, literature and appendices with a total volume of 215 pages, of which 40 tables and 181 pages. actual text. The volume and selection of cited sources is impressive: 265 titles, 18 in Bulgarian and the rest in English, among which publications after the year 2000 in prestigious, specialized periodicals predominate. The knowledge of both the classic and the latest publications on the subject and research both on a global scale and in the Bulgarian context is impressive. The presented text is an almost unique example of a comprehensive and thorough knowledge of publications in at least three broad areas of psychological knowledge - personality psychology, clinical and counseling psychology, and health psychology. The

reference to previous studies, analyzes and reviews is in accordance with all recommendations and standards for citation in the scientific literature.

The theoretical presentation is structured in three parts, examining respectively the alexithymia construct, its relationship with the choice of high-risk activities, on the one hand, and high-risk professions, on the other, and the introduction of the concept of coping (coping strategies and styles), as well as its relationship with the preceding constructs.

Chapter two presents a detailed account of the design, methodology, stages and results of the empirical study. The theoretical model of the dissertation study was developed specifically in response to the set goal and represents a definite contribution both in theoretical and methodological aspects, as well as in applied aspects. An excellent knowledge of stress theories and an understanding of alexithymia as a multidimensional construct located at the borderline area of overlap between clinical and health psychology make it possible to navigate with ease among multiple theories, psychometric instruments, and phases of research.

The third chapter is of particular interest to specialists experienced in the field of counseling and therapy. This is the first of its kind systematic, overview and comparative study of a special group of professionals (employees in the structures of the MoD and MIA), which summarizes the existing practices, makes a critical review of the diagnostic and assessment practice of the employees, introduces new tools and offers guidelines and a model for preventive and psychological counselling. The proposed program of psychological care is the best approximation to the gold standard in psychological practice – an evidence-based program focused on mechanisms of change, moderators and mediators of effect.

4. Correspondence of the chosen methodology and research methodology with the set goal and tasks of the dissertation work

The research methodology fully corresponds to the set goals and objectives. The PhD student is making a Bulgarian adaptation of the Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire - PAQ (Preece et al. 2018), which allows a comparison of the two models for conceptualizing and assessing alexithymia - "Attention - Assessment" and the "Toronto" model (Toronto Scale for alexithymia – TAS-20 Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994; Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994), in a Bulgarian adaptation by Popov et al. (Popov et al., 2016). A contributing innovation is the use of the well-known COPE questionnaire (Carver et al., 1989) with a new instruction to establish the specifics of coping in a life-threatening event and the introduction of an assessment of

the type of stressor (after Foa et al., 2013). The richness and precision in the selection of the instrument is impressive, including the Patient Health Questionnaire - PHQ-9 (Kroenke et al., 2001), the Life Satisfaction Questionnaire - SWL-3 (Kjell & Diener, 2021), the Anhedonia and Anxiety Scales -trait from a personality questionnaire – PID-5 (Krueger et al., 2012), Personality Questionnaire, short form – PID-5-BF (Krueger et al., 2013), Basic Empathy Scale – BES-A (Carré et al. , 2013).

The cross-sectional design with a control and two experimental groups fully meets the set goals and objectives of the study. An impressive number of participants (N=1456) were covered in the conducted pilot and actual stages. The statistical analysis of the data impresses with precision and comprehensiveness. The exploratory and confirmatory factor analyzes of the alexithymia and coping questionnaires confirm the good psychometric characteristics of the new and the existing Bulgarian versions of the instruments, while at the same time bringing clarity to the diagnostic plan, contributing to the distinction in the structure of the instruments, corresponding to the differences in their application to different groups of respondents. Correlation and regression analysis contribute to the verification and confirmation of a new model of the relationship between alexithymia and coping in life-threatening situations, as well as to the differentiation of these constructs in different groups of people and their influence on meaningful professional choices.

A future study would benefit from including more respondents in the experimental groups, but this suggestion in no way disputes the enormous importance of the present work. It should be noted that posing the question of life-threatening events requires special attention to the ethics of conducting experimental research of a similar nature, which is properly observed in all stages of the present dissertation research.

5. Scientific contributions

The presented work is an authentic author's text, including theoretical understanding, synthesis of existing models and introduction of a new, empirically confirmed model. In empirical research, there is an own contribution in the adaptation of the methodology for the Bulgarian socio-cultural context, the collection and analysis of data. The candidate has theoretical and methodological training at the highest level, categorically proven in the high quality of the text and publications on the dissertation.

The abstract has been prepared in accordance with the high standard for the presentation of a dissertation work. The theoretical framework is synthesized, the empirical data and results of the analyzes are shown

in tables and commented in detail, the conclusion is highly informative, precise and critical. The methodological, empirical and practical contributions are detailed.

Personal impressions. Tanya Dimitrova's scientific interests and practical consulting work are characterized by thoroughness, striving for precision of knowledge and high research and therapeutic ethics. The pleasures of the intellectual challenge of working collaboratively on a problem are undeniable.

Compliance with minimum national requirements. Tanya Dimitrova has presented evidence of the fulfillment of minimum national requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education according to Art. 2b of ZRASRB, as follows: 1) According to group of indicators "A" - dissertation work, discussed above (50 points); 2) By indicator group "D" - Articles and reports published in non-refereed scientific journals review or published in edited collective volumes, four independent articles, two of which in English and one article in co-authorship, as well as one study published in a non-refereed publication with scientific review, and here the total number of points – 60, exceeds twice the requirements under the ZRASRB minimal requirements.

6. Conclusion

The presented work reveals the thoroughness and systematicity of Tanya Dimitrova's scientific interests, and undoubtedly confirms her research maturity and creativity. The merits of the work begin with a thorough critical analysis of the gaps in existing explanatory models and an active engagement in the creation of precise, evidence-based, population-focused models. The scientific research contributions are indisputable, and their practical application makes the dissertation an example of the highest standard of psychological science.

With absolute conviction, I give a positive assessment and propose that Tanya Dimitrova be awarded the scientific and educational degree "Doctor".

Sofia, May 19, 2024

/assoc prof PhD Camellia Hancheva/