

OPINION
for the dissertation

ALEXITHYMIA AND COPING IN A LIFE-THREATENING SITUATION.

SAMPLE OF BULGARIAN MILITARY AND POLICE SPECIAL FORCES OPERATORS:

PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE AND COUNSELING

submitted for awarding educational and scientific degree "DOCTOR" in a professional direction:

3.2. "Psychology" (Counseling Psychology)

Doctoral candidate: Tanya Dimitrova

The opinion was prepared by: Assoc. Prof. PhD Diana Tsirkova

In counseling and clinical psychological practice, there is a growing number of clients who have difficulty recognizing and processing their emotions and affective experiences. But can alexithymia be thought of solely as an undesirable personality trait? Starting from this question, Tanya Dimitrova chooses a topic that concerns the relationship between alexithymia and practicing professions with a high risk to life. The second question she asks herself is whether elevated alexithymia is unequivocally linked to ineffective coping with life-threatening stressors, or whether other connections can be sought, and that in a specific professional field related to the protection of peace and security. The doctoral student aims to derive specific proposals for psychological counseling practices through an analysis of the interaction between alexithymia, coping in a life-threatening situation and the choice of a profession with an immediate risk to one's own life. The choice of topic is the result of the doctoral student's professional formation, the questions she asks herself in her daily practical work with clients and the serious theoretical study of the researched field. As a result of this preliminary work, the formulated topic relates to current contemporary research on alexithymia and its relationships with other psychological constructs. It should be noted that the topic is significant for the scientific research process in the field of psychological knowledge and building on the professional path of Tanya Dimitrova.

The work has a volume of 215 pages and fulfills all the requirements for a similar type of scientific development. It consists of one theoretical and two empirical chapters, a literature review and appendices. 265 literary sources in Bulgarian and English were used. The doctoral student has submitted a list of six publications (four in Bulgarian and 2 in English) on the topic of the dissertation. They have been published in scientific publications or presented at various forums.

The theoretical part, based on a sufficiently rich literature review, is developed around several main areas. The first is a clarification of the concept of alexithymia and includes the following components: an overview of the concept of alexithymia; the psychometric instruments for its measurement constructed to date; the effectiveness of counseling practices and the evaluation of the therapeutic process are presented in a number of studies devoted to this topic. In the second area, the doctoral student works on the theoretical representation of the relationship alexithymia, high-risk activities and choice of profession.

It specifies the professions of special officers in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defense and the binding of the professional choice to a specific personal profile. In the third area of the theoretical overview, the essence of the concept of "coping" and the COPE tool are presented, as sufficiently reliable for the study of coping with dispositional and situational stress; the relationship between coping and alexithymia; the specific relationship between alexithymia and coping with a life-threatening stressor has also been elucidated.

To achieve the main goal of the dissertation, an empirical study was organized and conducted, its goals and tasks were defined, and three main hypotheses were formulated. The hypotheses are derived in logical accordance with the set goals, the choice of methods and the defined groups of researched persons. The first and second hypotheses refer to the factor structure and psychometric characteristics of two of the instruments that the doctoral student adapted for Bulgarian conditions. They include three and two sub-hypotheses, respectively. The third hypothesis reflects the relationship between levels of alexithymia and coping choices, in the control and experimental groups. It includes three sub-hypotheses. The organization of the empirical research was done through a pilot (carried out with 240 researched people, making up a control group) and a real research (with 1216 researched people). In each, the sub-stages of implementation are distinguished and described in detail. The research tools are carefully and adequately selected, according to the tasks that the doctoral student sets for himself. The richness of the selected toolset is impressive. The empirical study includes 11 instruments, two of which are completely new for Bulgaria.

All procedures related to ethical norms in conducting psychological research were observed.

The statistical procedures used include a set of factor analyses, correlation analyses, linear regression analyses. They are relevant to the used methodological tools and hypothesis testing, and the analysis of the obtained results is detailed and convincing.

The results confirm hypothesis 1, with sub-hypotheses 1.1 and 1.3 being partially confirmed and sub-hypothesis 1.2 being fully confirmed. The five-factor structure of the instrument is confirmed, which is in line with the theoretical one and makes it more effective in research and practical tasks than the TAS-20 instrument used so far. Hypothesis 2 is also confirmed, with sub-hypothesis 2.1 fully confirmed and 2.2 partially confirmed. Her evidence confirms the need for more precise measurement of coping with high-risk stressors when a person's life is in danger. Hypothesis 3, as well as the three sub-hypotheses, are also confirmed by the results. The hypothesis confirms that alexithymia is not uniquely linked to ineffective coping, but rather is an indicator of the need for a well-structured behavioral framework.

In chapter III of the dissertation, the applications of the data in consulting practice are presented. All sub-parts of chapter three frame different propositions to the consultative framework. Specific steps for the consultation process are proposed in two types of frameworks. An alexithymia-specific framework tailored to affect valence and a broad counseling framework focused on coping with life-threatening stressors. The differences in the steps involved in the diagnostic part and in the development of a consultation plan in the two different cases are brought out with great precision. A special place is devoted to the counseling approach aimed at individuals with elevated/high alexithymia facing a life-threatening stressor.

The doctoral student proves empirically that when choosing a therapeutic framework, the focus on stressor assessment, the focus on coping, as well as some socio-demographic characteristics such as age

and gender should be taken into account. Of extreme importance for counseling practice, not only in the cognitive-behavioral approach, is the assessment of the function that a given personality trait or condition has for the mental functioning of the subject. One of the most important conclusions drawn in this section is that when planning psychological work, the therapist must be able to account for the function that alexithymia fulfills in relation to the life-threatening stressor. Only then should he decide whether he will work to reduce it. The conclusions reached by the doctoral student give her work a didactic value. Therefore, I believe that the overall work can be seen as didactic for the formation of counseling skills in therapists from the cognitive-behavioral approach.

The analysis approach that was used is based on the cognitive-behavioral paradigm in which the doctoral student's psychotherapeutic training is based. It is in the third part of her doctoral work that Tanya Dimitrova impressively demonstrates her ability to revise psychological theory and connect it with psychotherapy practice.

The following contributing points can be noted in the doctoral thesis:

In the field of theoretical ideas:

- A comprehensive and in-depth study of the constructs of alexithymia, coping, and life-threatening stress is presented. A number of reference studies are proposed that can serve in the preparation of future graduate and doctoral students in psychology and related sciences.
- A framework is outlined to explain the process of coping with life-threatening stressors that takes into account both the appraisal of the stressor and the coping mechanism.

In the field of psychodiagnostics:

- A new psychological tool for the study of alexithymia, the "Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire" (PAQ), has been adapted into Bulgarian, which allows for more in-depth research practice, as well as more precise diagnostic and consultation work;
- Comparisons of the psychometric characteristics of the two most commonly used alexithymia assessment tools (TAS-20) and (PAQ) are offered to the collegiate psychological community, allowing them to make an informed and fit-for-purpose decision when choosing a tool;
- A coping tool is adapted to the specifics of dealing with a life-threatening type of stressor. This makes it possible to overcome the limitation imposed by the application of coping categories derived from the study of daily stress. The tool will enrich the methodological possibilities of researchers in this specific field. It will also serve the psychologists making selection and counseling of clients working in the field of high-risk and life-threatening situations.

In the field of teaching academic activity:

- The dissertation involves the creation of a model for conducting seminars and practical classes in the courses of "Counseling Psychology", "Personality Psychology", as well as in highly specialized master's programs related to national security.

In the field of practical psychological counseling:

- Development of various models for psychological selection and development of personnel in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Defense.
- Development of specialized programs for the prevention of the negative effect of life-threatening stressors on the physical and mental health of those working in structures related to security and defense.
- Development of psychological care programs for veterans who participated in life-threatening operations, employees of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defense
- Development of strategies for effective coping during the performance of official duties in high-risk professions through individual psychological counseling tailored to the specific profile of the client.
- The entire work can be considered didactic and serve to form counseling skills for therapists from the cognitive-behavioral approach.

My opinion of the dissertation work is entirely positive, and based on the high marks I give for the scientific contributions presented in the dissertation, I propose that Tanya Dimitrova be awarded the educational and scientific degree DOCTOR. I call on the other members of the Scientific Jury to vote for this proposal.

Date:

04/05/2024

Prepared the opinion:

/ Assoc. Prof. PhD Diana Tsirkova/