

OPINION/REVIEW

By Professor Radka Ivanova Masaldzhieva, PhD
Department of Health Care Management
Faculty of Public Health, Medical University - Plovdiv
of a dissertation for awarding the educational and scientific
degree 'doctor'
by scientific specialty: 3.2. Psychology (Health Psychology)
Author: Mihaela Angelova Beloreshka
on the subject:
"Adverse Childhood Experiences and Health Behaviors in
Adulthood"

SU "St. Kliment Ohridski"
Department of "General, Experimental, Developmental and
Health Psychology"
Scientific supervisor: Prof. Ph.D.Sc. Sonya Karabelova

General presentation of the PhD student

Mihaela Beloreshka holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Psychology and Health Psychology from New Bulgarian University and Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Since 2021 She is a full-time PhD student in Health Psychology. Her postgraduate studies and specialization are in the field of nutrition and eating disorders, as well as in organizational development. She is a member of the Society of Psychologists in Bulgaria and two international professional organizations in the field of health psychology. She has five scientific publications on the topic of her

dissertation. In 2023 she participated in two international conferences in Bulgaria and in Germany and in one scientific project on psychology of Health.

Beloreshka has developed a dissertation and has over 30 points from published articles and reports, which meets the minimum national requirements for the PhD degree in Professional Field 3.2. Psychology.

Significance of the topic of the presented dissertation

The importance of the topic of the factors determining health behavior and in particular the indirect influence of difficult childhood experiences on eating and other health-related behaviors is undeniable.

In the theoretical review of this work, arguments in support of the above are systematized. Examples of this are: Data from international and national studies on the wide prevalence of severe childhood experiences; the established negative effect of these experiences on mental health and the risk of bodily illnesses. Another example is the results of the study of the relationship between childhood traumatic events and experiences and nutritional behaviour.

Eating behavior is among the important determinants of somatic health – it is a risk factor for diseases that have been proven to cause a decrease in quality of life and well-being and an increase in mortality. At the same time, eating disorders in adolescence and early adulthood, but also throughout life, are a problem with repeatedly confirmed social significance.

In summary, the dissertation explores complex, multi-layered problems that require knowledge as a basis for therapeutic strategies and health and social policies.

Methodology of the study

The methods of this dissertation research are impressive. The multifactorial conditioning of health behavior creates difficulties for its scientific study and presupposes, first of all, a very good theoretical preparation and then careful

planning of all activities for the implementation of the experimental study and its interpretation.

The study is cross-sectional; The design includes a pilot survey with an interview of a small sample and a basic online survey with questionnaires through a form on the Internet platform "Google forms".

The design and procedure of the study and the statistical processing of the collected data are presented in detail by the PhD student. The statistical processing corresponds to the set scientific tasks.

The respondents were 722, aged between 16 and 72 years, divided into three age groups in the processing of the results. In order to include respondents with sufficient motivation to participate in such a study, the assistance of specialists in the field of nutrition was used in the process of recruiting study subjects.

Eleven scales were used in the main study – some of them created for the dissertation research. The range of the rocks is within the limits outlined by the developed theoretical model and includes difficult childhood experiences; eating behavior, physical activity, personality traits, emotional states associated with depression and anxiety; the ability to manage and express emotional experiences - a scale for emotional regulation; the ability to recover from adverse events – a resistance scale; attitudes towards the body and health and the cognitive aspects of the sense of subjective well-being.

In summary – The methodology and procedure of the study correspond to the objectives and allow solving the tasks.

Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation, contributions and conclusions from it

The dissertation submitted for discussion contains 254 pages. The structure includes three chapters, a summary, a conclusion, a bibliography and an appendix. The work is illustrated with 66 tables and 34 graphs of good quality.

The first chapter is a literature review with a description of the theoretical approaches to difficult experiences in childhood, as well as their connection with the other variables studied – health behavior and personality characteristics.

The theoretical part is the result of a review of an impressive number of literature sources on the problem. Basic concepts from the field of stress and childhood trauma are deduced, their development is examined and parameters of the relationship between childhood traumatic experiences and health/nutritional behavior and the mediation of personality characteristics are analyzed. examines a large number of available literature data on severe childhood experiences, their negative effects, risk and protective factors for health and the possibilities of preventive interventions against violence against children.

The second chapter describes the created theoretical model and presents in detail the purpose, hypotheses and tasks, as well as the methodology and procedure of the pilot and basic empirical research.

The theoretical research model connects difficult childhood experiences with variables that can affect health.

The goal - to study the relationships between difficult childhood experiences, eating and other health behaviors, taking into account psycho-emotional factors, is operationalized in 6 hypotheses and 5 tasks. The hypotheses are thoroughly argued, the tasks follow the logic of the goal.

The analysis and discussion of the results are in Chapter Three.

The results are described and illustrated in detail. The psychometric characteristics of the scales used have been reported, the reliability of the subscales is acceptable.

The results of the pilot study are summarized, which confirm the assumptions about the influence of difficult childhood experiences on eating behavior.

The results of the main empirical study present data on:

1. The differentiating effect of socio-demographic characteristics on difficult childhood experiences and eating behavior;
2. The relationship between chronic diseases and underweight, on the one hand, and the number of DCE and the frequency of domestic, emotional and physical violence.

3. Higher levels of unhealthy nutrition in younger respondents, in those surveyed with secondary education, with a higher body mass index and with chronic diseases.

4. Higher levels of orthorexia nervosa, symptoms of uncontrolled overeating and emotional eating, and higher scores on the "Restricted Eating" scale in women and people with chronic diseases

Trends are derived from the analysis of the effect of difficult childhood experiences on eating behavior. Unhealthy eating is higher in people with more than four DCEs; Orthorexia nervosa, emotional eating, and uncontrolled binge eating were lower in people who experienced emotional neglect, but orthorexia nervosa and uncontrolled binge eating were higher in people who experienced physical neglect;

Accordingly, the following findings have been established:

- Higher rates of orthorexia nervosa, emotional eating, restricted eating, and uncontrolled overeating in individuals who witnessed domestic violence and experienced childhood sexual abuse.

- Higher values on the scales "Emotional Eating", "Restricted Eating" and "Uncontrolled Overeating" in people with a history of emotional and physical abuse in childhood.

- Correlation and regression analyses were used to investigate the relationship between DCEs and their impact on eating behavior, life satisfaction and health status.

- The number of DCEs, the experience of domestic, emotional, physical and sexual violence are in weak positive associations with symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression and worsened subjective health status.

- Healthy eating is in a positive relationship with life satisfaction, conscientiousness and a positive assessment of appearance, and in a negative relationship with health status, concern about weight and emotional suppression.

- Unhealthy eating behavior correlates positively with symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, weight anxiety, emotional suppression, neuroticism, and poor health status.

- Unhealthy eating behaviors correspond to psychological characteristics and attitudes associated with reduced mental well-being and physical health,

while healthy eating behaviors are characteristic of people with higher resilience, satisfaction and better health status.

In Conclusion: Unhealthy eating can be directly and indirectly influenced by difficult childhood experiences, body attitudes, type of emotional regulation, and personality characteristics.

The results obtained are discussed and compared with those of other authors.

The summary and conclusion are analytical and in-depth.

Methodological, empirical and practical contributions are made that correspond to the study and its results.

In short, they are expressed in the following:

1. A theoretical analysis of psychological theories related to early traumatic stress is made;

2. The first study was carried out in Bulgaria, based on the Pyramid of Hard Experiences.

3. Adapted three new questionnaires for eating patterns (orthorexia nervosa, healthy orthorexia, uncontrolled overeating), two new questionnaires for emotional regulation and body attitudes (assessment of appearance and weight concern).

4. Enriching knowledge about the influence of socio-demographic characteristics on the history of childhood trauma and eating behavior.

5. Bringing out difficult experiences and eating behaviors with the most pronounced effect on overall satisfaction and health status.

5. Practical importance for future preventive interventions, for consultative and psychotherapeutic work with people affected by traumatic experiences in childhood.

Limitations of the study are taken into account.

The bibliography includes 15 titles in Bulgarian and 422 titles in English.

The Appendix contains the methodologies used.

There is no data that would raise doubts about the leading participation of the PhD student in the preparation and conduct of the study and in the presentation of the results obtained and their discussion.

I have no critical remarks on this dissertation.

Abstract: meets the requirements in terms of content and form; contains a theoretical part, a description of the main goals, tasks and achieved results; contributions and recommendations to the consultative work.

Conclusion

The dissertation explores an important topic for health psychology, is based on a reasoned theoretical model and the research hypotheses derived from it. The methodology and design are relevant to the goal. The results are described and discussed in detail.

Overall, this dissertation contains scientific novelty and could contribute to further elucidating factors on health/nutritional behaviour and satisfaction, taking into account the relationship with demographic variables. In my opinion, the main advantage of Mihaela Angelova Beloreshka's work is the consideration in the theoretical model and in the study of multifactoriality in determining healthy behavior and the place of traumatic childhood experience as a significant predictor.

On the basis of careful familiarization with the dissertation provided to me for evaluation, with the above-mentioned detailed argumentation, I have reason to categorically give my high assessment of the dissertation, the abstract; results and contributions in them and to propose to the scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree of 'Doctor' to Mihaela Angelova Beloreshka in the scientific specialty Psychology, Health Psychology.

10.10.2024

Signature:.....

Prof. R. Masaldzhieva, PhD