

REVIEW

By Prof.Rumyana Krumova - Pesheva, 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: **“Difficult childhood experiences and healthy behaviors in adulthood”**

Developed by: Mihaela Beloreshka

Scientific Supervisor: Prof. Sonya Karabeliova, DSc

The adaptability or maladaptation of the individual has a diverse etiology, where biological, social, and psychological causes are always present. In large part, these causes are related to genetic predispositions, transgenerational transmission patterns, and, in a significant way, to emotional aspects of early childhood. Mihaela Beloreshka has developed a dissertation dedicated to the idea of difficult and traumatic experiences in childhood, which naturally lead to a variety of emotional crises, to severe mental and somatic disorders and seriously affect the functioning and quality of life of the individual. Although this scientific topic has a long history of research, it also provides many new opportunities and perspectives for research in contemporary reality.

Mihaela Beloreshka's dissertation consists of 254 pages and includes an introduction, three chapters, a summary and a conclusion, the used literature and an appendix in which the tools of empirical research are presented. The data is illustrated using 66 tables and 34 graphs. The literature reference includes 15 sources in Bulgarian and 422 in English. The cited titles are completely relevant to the issues discussed in the dissertation and demonstrate the deep interest of the PhD student in the chosen topic. The abstract is composed of 57 pages and provides a synthesised and informative summary of the dissertation with its key points. There are 6 author publications presented, including three independent and 3 - in co-authorship, as

well as participation in 5 international and Bulgarian scientific forums and 1 participation in a research project.

In the introduction to the dissertation, the author examines the impact of early traumatism on lifestyle and health behavior in adulthood. As a result of this impact, she highlights a number of unhealthy coping mechanisms for problems and distress, a large number of relational and eating disorders, and illness as a "response" to early difficult childhood experiences.

In the first chapter of the dissertation, a large number of theoretical approaches regarding traumatic experiences in childhood, as well as interrelationships with patterns of eating behavior in adulthood, are considered. In a systematic and historical manner Mihaela Beloreshka traces various opinions regarding the influence of mental phenomena on the occurrence of a number of functional and organic disorders. Concepts of Charcot, Jeanette, Z. Freud, A. Freud, Bowlby and others are presented. The author devotes special attention to the types of mental trauma in childhood, the mechanisms of traumatization, symptoms in response to traumatism, and other aspects of the topic. A definition and epidemiology of traumatic experiences is presented through a convincing analysis and problematization of studies in different socio-cultural contexts. Beloreshka refers in an appropriate manner to a number of other opinions, conceptualizing the links between chronic stress and health. The theories of generalized insecurity, social safety, and especially toxic stress as a determinant of a number of mental and somatic decompensations are included. The doctoral student convincingly proves in both theoretical and empirical parts of her dissertation, that prolonged exposure to stressful events, as a result of family dysfunction, violence and systematic bullying, can lead to permanent activation of the stress response in the individual.

In the first chapter, risk and protective factors are logically indicated. The importance of the bio-psycho-social model of health is emphasized, which is a framework for understanding and interpreting a number of problems and difficulties of the modern person. Mihaela Beloreshka provides a thorough examination of the issue of impact and a rationale for the difficult experiences in childhood that can result in the development of health-risk behaviors and reactions. The role of the cumulative effect of these experiences leads to the feeling of discomfort, to severe existential crises with a significant depressive and anxious outcome, as well as to the emergence of various physical ailments. In a convincing and reflexive way, the author also describes the relationship between difficult experiences in childhood and maladaptive eating behavior patterns, linking them to processes of dissociation, pathological

experiences and tendencies, emptiness, dissatisfaction, etc. The emphasis is placed on overweight and obesity as particular risk factors for the 'unlocking' of a significant number of somatic diseases. The presented overview of the psychological theories of the last decades, related to early traumatic stress, is an extremely comprehensive and interpretive reading within the scope of the researched issue.

In the second chapter, significant theoretical models are presented as a substantial explanation for the structure of the empirical study. The purpose and tasks of the research design are correctly stated. There are 6 scientific hypotheses that are developed. The method, procedure and instruments of the study are examined in a professional and convincing manner. The research is conducted in two stages, and the methodology is constructed from 12 questionnaires. The main empirical study includes 722 subjects, while 13 subjects are part of the pilot study. Descriptive characteristics are selected for inclusion, such as: relations with parents, dysfunctional family environment, experienced violence in the family, bullying by peers, collective traumatism, etc. Significant indicators of health behaviors and health status are also described.

The third chapter of the dissertation is "Analysis and interpretation of the research results". The pilot qualitative study data clearly and convincingly demonstrate that the participants unequivocally confirm the existence of a regular correlation between difficult experiences in childhood and physical problems and the way of eating in adulthood. It becomes evident that all interviewees consistently find the correlation between various stressful events in childhood and the change in their eating behavior, emotional regulation and body image. A comprehensive and thorough discussion is presented on the connection between the obtained data and other studies on the subject. It is evident in the pilot study, that all respondents have a greater sensitivity towards the family environment, which determines to a significant extent their way of eating in adult life, eating habits, daily routine, building a healthy or unhealthy eating pattern, etc. The rate of sexual and domestic violence is higher among women, and bullying by peers, community and collective violence is reported to be more frequent among men. Higher rates of unhealthy eating are observed in individuals who have experienced more than four severe childhood experiences, as well as in those who have experienced systemic bullying by their peers.

The main empirical study represents a quantitative confirmation of the results of the pilot study, as well as a verification of the raised hypotheses. The results of it quite reasonably indicate that difficult experiences in childhood are related to symptoms of stress, anxiety,

depression, weight concerns, neuroticism and the feeling of impaired subjective health status; healthy eating and healthy orthorexia are positively associated with life satisfaction, as well as positive evaluation of appearance; predictors with the greatest effect on eating patterns were body image, psychological factors stress, anxiety and resilience, adverse childhood experiences, emotional regulation and personality traits. The psychometric properties of the questionnaires and scales used in the study were examined in a very precise manner. This analysis demonstrates the instruments' high validity and internal consistency. Appropriate statistical methods have been selected, in order to investigate the correlations between the studied phenomena.

The scientific contributions of the dissertation are accurately represented at three levels: methodological, empirical, and applied. It can be categorically stated, that this is the first study in Bulgaria, including correlates from the different levels of the Pyramid of severe experiences, with high value for clinical practice. Three new questionnaires, measuring current dietary patterns, and two others measuring attitudes towards the body, are being adapted for the Bulgarian population.

Limitations of the study are indicated in a comprehensive and professional manner, as well as guidelines for future research in the specific professional field. Clinical practice recommendations are proposed for the development of an integrative preventive strategy that aims to optimize mental and physical health.

In conclusion: In my opinion, Mihaela Beloreshka's dissertation work is of great scientific and applied significance in the field of psychological theory and practice, and in particular - in the field of psychodiagnostics, psychological counseling and health psychology. The research paper clearly demonstrates the serious qualities of the author for conducting multi-layered empirical research, as well as her abilities for a thorough and interpretive analysis of diverse mental tendencies and processes. The author's convincing capabilities and interest in a reflective and interpretive stance toward various interpersonal and intrapsychic phenomena are also demonstrated. All of this gives me the reason to confidently propose to the respected scientific jury that Mihaela Beloreshka be awarded the scientific and educational degree "Doctor" in scientific specialty 3.2. Psychology (Health Psychology).

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Prepared the review

Sofia

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