PHD THESIS REVIEW

on the PhD dissertation titled: "Existential Fulfilment and Full human functioning in Actors (Guidelines for Psychological Counselling)"

Concerning: Public defence of a PhD thesis for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the area of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.2. Psychology, scientific specialty "Counselling Psychology"

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The PhD dissertation is the first theoretical and empirical study in the field of counselling psychology among Bulgarian actors, conducted through the lens of the existential-humanistic paradigm. The aim of the work is to explore the methodological possibilities of the humanistic and existential-analytical approach for the needs of evidence-based psychological counselling for actors, operationalizing and examining the interrelations between two constructs of high complexity and abstraction - "existential fulfilment" in the terms of the existential-analytical theory of A. Laengle and "full functioning person" operationalized through humanistic-positive views such as "psychological well-being" and "resilience." Three main pillars of the thesis have been defined: 1. foundational ideas for counselling; 2. understanding actors in the context of their personal and professional lives, and 3. the existential model of interaction with the world.

The topic of the study, especially under the conditions of a global crisis, as well as the participants - people in a particularly stressful creative profession, rarely subjects of scientific research, make the work not only timely but also significant from the perspective of methodology and applicability of the results in creating specific guidelines for psychological counselling. Moreover, such guidelines are derived by the candidate and correctly indicated as an applied contribution.

The dissertation is an impressive volume of 281 pages, including the references (23 pages) and 3 appendices (24 pages). The total number of scientific literature sources is also impressive – 282, of which 211 are in Latin script and 71 in Cyrillic. A positive impression is made by the fact that most literature sources, except for those foundational to the respective theoretical frameworks, are from recent years. There are 52 tables and 19 figures.

The dissertation has the following structure: introduction, three parts (theoretical, methodological, and empirical, including results and discussion), conclusions, contributions, limitations of the study and directions for future research, conclusion, and appendices.

The first part (theoretical review) contains three chapters that sequentially present the key concepts for the topic, which I evaluate as excellently structured and thoroughly presented.

In the *first chapter*, in line with the topic and the aim of the dissertation, the candidate skilfully outlines the field of counselling psychology and its practice in the system of scientific knowledge, with a focus on mainstream research trends. The context of the dissertation research is convincingly justified through an overview of the different accents in defining counselling psychology as an academic discipline and as a practice. The idea is to outline the possibilities that the methodology of counselling psychology provides for the needs of evidence-based practice. The metatheoretical model of the fully functioning person by C. Rogers is considered, and the conceptual possibilities of the foundational paradigms and explanatory models for its operationalization are analysed: 1. through their theoretical constructs and basic assumptions, and 2. through the applicability of their methods for evidence-based practice in support of the fully functioning person. Psychological well-being and resilience in its two forms – resistance and the ability to recover, are regarded as constructs that approach the characteristics of the fully functioning person and the conditions for full functioning in the terms of positivism and, accordingly, as conceptual possibilities for operationalizing the model of the full functioning person due to the breadth of their conceptual frameworks, their applicability in counselling, the benefits for practice, the research interest in the two constructs, and the existing methods for their study.

In the *second chapter* of the theoretical review, the possibilities of the existential-humanistic paradigm for the purposes of the research and psychological counselling are convincingly analysed. A special emphasis is placed on existential theories, particularly on the existential-analytical theory of Alfried Laengle and the procedural operationalization of the construct "existential fulfilment" in terms of personal existential abilities. These abilities are considered a bridge between existential and positive psychology. A relevant overview of existing and most commonly used psychometric instruments of the existential paradigm in a research context is presented, as well as the possibilities of using the concept of "existential fulfilment" in counselling practice. The choice of the applied research approach is clearly argued, providing an answer to the question of the importance of studying the relationship between two closely related constructs such as psychological well-being and existential fulfilment.

In the *third chapter* of the theory, the candidate skilfully and in detail justifies the choice of the topic and the actors as the subjects of the dissertation research. The need for research and specialized evidence-based psychological support for actors is discussed based on a thorough review of psychological studies on actors related to counselling psychology and the dissertation topic in two directions: 1) positive and negative impact of artistic performance on actors and 2) psychological well-being, resilience, and stress related to acting. The conclusions and guidelines for the empirical study presented by the PhD candidate on p. 80 are particularly noteworthy. This is where the theoretical model of the dissertation research and the choice of the research tools are justified from the perspective of the specificity of the selected target

group. The findings from the literature review on actors are related to the findings from the analysis of humanistic theoretical concepts.

The PhD candidate presents her viewpoint on the strong relationship between the actor's profession and themes essential for existential thinking, supported by existing positions and understandings derived from theatrical methodology and pedagogy. The main research questions are appropriately formulated from the perspective of counselling psychology. Considering the focus on the group of trainee students in the context of study and practice, a brief overview of Klimov's model (1996) is presented, reflecting the age-professional dynamics of entry into the profession.

Research topics related to the challenges to the full functioning of actors are outlined. Statistical data are presented based on sociodemographic characteristics of professional actors in Bulgaria, with a focus on data that, similar to foreign studies, confirm the existence of specific life-professional stressors on Bulgarian actors. The author's adaptation of the questionnaire "Stress related to acting" for the Bulgarian sample is supported, and a brief overview of the presence of psychology in the actor's profession in Bulgaria is provided.

The **second part** (methods and design of the study) impresses with a clear and precise description of the objectives, tasks, model, hypotheses, and the sample, as well as the appropriate selection of methods and procedures for conducting the necessary preliminary analyses and testing the research hypotheses. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among a specific sample of a total of 144 trainee and professional actors aged 18-85, with approximately evenly distributed gender and age groups, segmented according to the stage of entry into the profession (18-27 years – apprentices; 28-37 years – professionals; after 37 years – masters). A nearly fully structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data, consisting of 5 research instruments with good psychometric properties, for which data are presented. Two of the instruments - "Existence Scale" and "Stress related to acting" - were adapted by the PhD candidate. Data from their initial adaptation for Bulgarian conditions, including the construction of the second questionnaire, are presented. Exploratory factor analyses were conducted on those instruments that met the requirements for analysis (i.e., item-to-sample ratio). The internal consistency of the scales is compared with that of the original studies, as well as with that of other studies.

In the **third part** (results and discussion), the hypotheses have been tested. The high level of the candidate's skills in working correctly and precisely with various methods and procedures for exploring and analysing quantitative data is evident. The candidate conducted a cross-sectional survey among a specific sample, using a nearly fully structured questionnaire. Data from the study showed significant correlations between the examined constructs, and a comprehensive analysis was conducted for each personal existential ability. The candidate demonstrates competence in using statistical methods, including parametric/non-parametric tests, homogeneity of variances, Bonferroni correction for overcoming Type I errors in intergroup comparisons, a test for collinearity before multiple linear regression, strict adherence to conditions for mediation analysis, and cluster analysis. The candidate compares levels of different variables depending on the level of existential fulfilment, explores relationships

between the studied constructs, and examines differences in the dynamics of their expression in terms of each personal existential ability. Differences in the levels of the studied constructs based on sociodemographic factors (gender, age, type of professional engagement, marital status, monthly income, subjective attitude toward material status) are examined. Personal-existential predictors of psychological well-being, resilience, ability to recover, and acting-related stress are scrutinized, and their differences are traced in the group of trainee actors and the group of working professionals. The mediating role of existential components in the effect of acting-related stress on the operational constructs of full functioning is also explored for both groups. Attention is paid to the existential-analytical method "Steps to Existential Meaning" as a specific application of the theory of existential fulfilment in counselling practice.

The results of the empirical study are presented in an appropriate tabular and chart format, well-structured from the perspective of the objectives, tasks, and hypotheses. I particularly appreciate the original and structurally sound decision to discuss the results for each hypothesis immediately following their presentation.

The high correlations between existential competencies and psychological well-being are not surprising, given that, according to A. Laengle, the Existence Scale measures "positive emotional co-participation and authentic coordination of the individual with oneself, and personal satisfaction with one's own life." This indicates the high substantive proximity of the construct of existential fulfilment to the construct of psychological well-being in the terms of Diener et al., whose cognitive component is life satisfaction.

I must note that I highly appreciate the candidate's skills in analysing, describing, and summarizing the results of the dissertation research, discussing them in terms of the hypotheses, existing theories, and studies on the topic, as well as in the context of counselling practice.

The inferences drawn from the conducted empirical research, its limitations, directions for future research, and the conclusion are well-synthesized and accurately reflected.

The contributions of the dissertation work are undeniable and are correctly presented in four directions – theoretical, methodological, research, and applied.

The overall work has been significantly improved compared to its draft presented for the preliminary defence. My only minor notes relate to the overly detailed presentation of the introduction and theoretical review, as well as some grammatical and stylistic inaccuracies, including overly long sentences that, in some places, hinder the understanding of the text.

The PhD candidate has fulfilled the educational and scientific program according to the credit system outlined in the agreement with IPHS-BAS. There are four publications on the dissertation topic, with three in Bulgarian and one in English.

The abstract of the PhD dissertation accurately reflects the structure and content of the dissertation.

In conclusion: The dissertation stands out with well-argued relevance and significance, a purpose-aligned, excellently structured and exhaustive theoretical overview, an appropriate

research design, and a broad set of research methods and procedures. It demonstrates a wealth of explored and discussed interrelations, as well as undeniable scientific contributions to the theory, methodology, and practice of counselling psychology. **The dissertation meets the requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor," and I confidently recommend to the esteemed members of the scientific jury to confer the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor of Counselling Psychology" upon Diana Tsvetanova Dobreva-Hristova.**

17.11.2023 Prepared by:

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