BULGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
INSTITUTE FOR POPULATION AND HUMAN STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

REVIEW

by Valery Denev Todorov, PhD, associate professor at the Institute of Population and Human Studies professional field “3.2 Psychology”

in regard to the procedure for awarding the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" to doctoral student Lubomir Rumenov Draganov in the field of higher education "3. Social, economic, and legal sciences," professional field "3.2. Psychology,"
doctoral program "Personality psychology"

dissertation topic: „Belief in a Just World and Life Stories“

1. Overall impression and assessment of the dissertation

The dissertation is structured into an introduction, three chapters, a summary, a bibliography, and appendices. The total volume of the work, excluding the appendices, is approximately 200 standard pages, illustrated with three figures, and 29 tables have been constructed to present the results. The bibliography includes 98 sources.

The first chapter contains an overview of the basic concepts, the main theories related to them, and their evolution. The second chapter presents the hypotheses, design, and methods of the study, as well as the rationale for their selection and the author's arguments for their relevance. The results, discussion, and conclusions are presented in the third chapter. The "Summary" section contains concluding remarks, limitations, and directions for future research.

The content of the dissertation is well presented in a concise and summarized form in a 44-page extended abstract, which provides a sufficiently complete and accurate overview of the work and its main results and conclusions.

Overall, the work meets the generally accepted requirements and expectations for structure and style.

2. Literature awareness and the candidate's theoretical knowledge

The doctoral student shows good theoretical knowledge and in-depth understanding of the subject of the dissertation. The systematic literature review is well organized and includes well-chosen relevant and up-to-date sources. The presentation of the main ideas in previous studies is well balanced with the candidate's own interpretative contributions and is well integrated into the context of the thesis topic.

3. Methodology

The empirical research in the dissertation uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The study was conducted on 291 respondents – 238 females and 53 males, aged between 17 and 45 (M = 24.6, SD = 7.93). The data was collected in the time period 2019–2020 from a student sample (full-time and part-time students in bachelor's and master's programs at Bulgarian universities).

Data from psychometric scales measuring two aspects of belief in a just world and quantified data from biographical accounts of personally experienced injustice were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM). A methodology for assessing perceptions of the present social situation was also used to examine its relationship with belief in a just world.

The analysis through structural equation modelling examines the relationships between belief in a just world and the dimensions (quantitative descriptors) of the narrative, with the expectation that there will be a relationship between them. The formulated hypotheses suggest a general relationship rather than specific relationships.

4. Significance and credibility of the results, interpretations, and conclusions

The presentation of the results is detailed and follows the logic of the study design. Its clear structure and the separation of individual sections with clear subheadings are noteworthy. It can be said that the good structure of the text is one of the positive features of the work as a whole.

Due to the complex structure of the study design, the large number of variables, and the multitude of relationships between them, understanding the text requires effort at times. The interpretation of the results could be more specific with clearer and more frequent references to

the initial hypotheses. This is probably due to the complex and labor-intensive research approach chosen, combined with the application of sophisticated and still insufficiently accessible statistical techniques. Such a choice carries a significant research risk, which, in my opinion, is not typical and exceeds the usual expectations for a study of this type. I believe that the readiness to take such a risk should be encouraged and positively appreciated.

Conducting a qualitative study with 291 participants and evaluating the text material collected from them is a serious task for independent research and is impressive in terms of the amount of work involved and the consistency shown. It should also be taken into account that much of the research work was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In its section presenting the results obtained and their interpretation, the work as a whole fulfills its research objectives and provides convincing evidence for the raised hypotheses.

5. Critical remarks on the dissertation

The critical remarks presented here do not detract from my overall positive assessment and are rather intended to provide ideas for improving the work in subsequent publications and future research.

First, I would like to point out that most of the comments made during the preliminary discussion were taken into account and the text was edited in a remarkably short period of time. The complex hypothetical model of the relationships between the variables, tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), was graphically illustrated by a diagram of the relationships. Its structure and connection with the formulated theoretical hypotheses could be explained more clearly. The main results could also be presented in graphical form, which would make them easier to understand.

The conclusions could also be formulated more clearly and logically related to the specific results obtained.

6. Nature of scientific contributions

First of all, I would like to highlight the innovative nature of the dissertation and the associated research risk. The dissertation uses a narrative approach to the study of personality. Although the first significant publications in this perspective date back to the 1990s, it is still difficult to define it as a mainstream line of research, and a research tradition has not yet been established in Bulgaria. The application of structural equation modelling (SEM) is gradually making its way into the field of personality psychology research, but the specific variety used

in the dissertation—structural modeling with categorical variables—requires considerable expertise and the use of advanced research software.

The results confirm the author's idea that the use of traditional scales for measuring belief in a just world can be supplemented and enriched by the narrative analysis approach. Through the proposed approach, data from psychometric scales are linked to specific content attributes. Combining conventional scales with thematic narratives could be particularly useful in some applied contexts such as psychotherapy and counselling.

I accept the candidate's summary of scientific contributions, where the contributions are divided into three main areas – theoretical, methodological, and applied science. In theoretical and methodological terms, the contributions supplement the theoretical understanding of belief in a just world, mainly by enriching it with the methodology of the narrative approach. In scientific-applied terms, the contributions are related to the development of an ideographic analytical procedure that can also be used to study other beliefs. In my opinion, the contributions are both confirmatory and innovative in nature, insofar as the proposal of a new methodological approach actually leads to the confirmation and enrichment of existing theoretical constructs. These contributions should be solidified and further developed in subsequent studies. This point is clearly highlighted by the limitations of the study as formulated by the author.

7. Assessment of the quality of the doctoral student's scientific works in relation to meeting the minimum national requirements for the scientific degree

Within the scope of the doctoral program, three independent publications were presented in the period 2020-2021 – two in proceedings of the National doctoral school and one from a psychology conference. All three are on the topic of the dissertation and have been published in peer-reviewed editions that meet the regulatory requirements. The number and quality of the publications, as well as the overall performance of the doctoral student during his training, meet the required standards.

8. Authenticity of the research in the dissertation

There are no valid grounds for questioning the authenticity and independence of the dissertation research, or other violations of research ethics. When comparing the work with sources on the subject known to me and checking it with specialized software, no evidence of plagiarism or incorrect citation was found.

9. Conclusion

The above-mentioned merits of the dissertation research, as well as the accompanying publications and the overall performance of the doctoral student during his training, give me reason to express a positive assessment of the dissertation. Therefore, I propose to the members of the esteemed scientific jury to award Lubomir Rumenov Draganov the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” in the field of higher education “3. Social, economic, and legal sciences”, professional field “3.2. Psychology”, doctoral program “Social Psychology”.

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