

## **OPINION**

**By Assoc. Prof. Dr Rossitsa Simeonova**

**Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"**

**On PhD thesis for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor"**

**in professional track 3.4. Social activities**

**Candidate: Anna Mihailova Georgieva**

**Theme: Communication barriers between the social worker**

**and the family members of social service users**

### **1. General presentation of the doctoral student and the procedure**

The candidate Anna Georgieva has a rich professional biography based on several acquired professional qualifications and specializations - acting for a drama theater from NATFIZ "Krastyo Sarafov", master's degree in psychology with a specialization in Applied psychology from VSU "Chernorizets Hrabar" and specialization in "Gerontological social work" from SU "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Anna Mihailova Georgieva is enrolled as a full-time doctoral student in the Doctoral Program "Social Activities" at the Faculty of Education, Department of Social Work by order of the Rector of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" No.RD20-1120 from 28.06.2019 with scientific supervisor Assoc. Dr. Silvia Tsvetanska.

The set of materials presented by the doctoral student, necessary for participation in the procedure for the defense of a dissertation, is in accordance with the requirements of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Sofia University and includes all the required documents. The candidate meets the national minimum requirements for the ONS "Doctor" and has provided a certificate of absence of plagiarism, according to the accepted procedure at SU.

### **2. Actuality of the researched theme**

The presented dissertation work is dedicated to a important topic, while at the same time the problem is insufficiently researched in Bulgaria, especially empirically, which outlines the contribution of the theoretical and applied nature of the PhD thesis in the context of social work as science and professional practice. A specific process is studied - the professional communication between the social worker, the client, and his relatives, which is a very important part of the competences of the social worker as a helping professional.

### **3. Characteristics and accomplishments of the PhD thesis**

The presented dissertation has a total volume of 196 pages, which are structured in an introduction, 2 chapters, conclusions, conclusion, bibliography and 1 appendix. The literature used includes 121 scientific sources, current and relevant to the studied topic, of which 94 are in Cyrillic and 27 are in Latin.

The focus of the theoretical-empirical research is the characteristics of communicative interaction in professional social work, and in empirical terms - the social worker's professional communication with elderly people and with their relatives in an organizational environment of residential social services, and in particular - the influence of communication barriers on the trust of relatives and users towards the presented social service.

The Introduction (p. 5 - 18) very successfully introduces the researched issues by outlining the importance of professional communication in the helping process between the social worker and his clients, including the important role of relatives and possible barriers to the effective implementation of this process. The object, subject, purpose, tasks and hypothesis of the dissertation study are very well formulated and correctly reflect the research intentions, reflected in the adequately chosen structure of the PhD work. Already in the introduction, the doctoral student has presented in a synthesized form the theoretical justification of the conducted dissertation research, including the main theories and models of social communication and the resulting determinants, principles, and potential barriers in the social worker's professional communication with clients and their relatives.

In the first chapter of the dissertation study (pp. 19-130) the theoretical dimensions of the problem of communication between a social worker and a client are analyzed, and based on a wide range of current and relevant scientific sources, basic communication approaches, models and theories are systematized, analyzed and visualized about the communication as a social phenomenon and a process of social interaction with specific elements and stages, and adequate and self-reflexive comments on their possibilities, limitations and possible applications in the practice of the social worker.

The features and characteristics of professional communication and related skills for effective helping in the professional fields of social work are very well emphasized. Logically in the context of the studied topic, in the first chapter the issue of barriers in interpersonal communication and the skills of the social worker to effectively overcome them is analyzed.

The barriers in professional communication in social work are very well classified and synthesized, as well as the prerequisites for the emergence of these barriers, successfully summarizing the most common barriers in the working relationship between the social worker and users of social services. Special attention is paid to the possibilities of different approaches and techniques for overcoming communication barriers in the practice of social work (theatre and drama techniques/psychodrama, development of emotional intelligence).

*The main merits of the theoretical part of the PhD dissertation* are the scientific style and readable statement of the presentation, the demonstrated high level of argumentation of the author's theses, the synthesis and presentation of theoretical concepts, based on a thorough analysis of a wide-ranging and up-to-date selection of scientific publications on the subject and professional self-reflection.

In the second chapter (pp. 131-177) the design and results of the empirical study of barriers in communication between a social worker and the relatives of users of the third age in the provision of residential social services, conducted by PhD student Georgieva, are presented. The research methodology, appropriate and adequate to the research objectives, combines the qualitative methods case work (case analysis) and semi-structured interview, as well as participative observation and action research (based on professional self-reflection).

The complex empirical research was implemented in two homes for the elderly, and a total of 6 cases were studied in a real work environment, respectively three in a state and three in a private residential social service. The sampled homes are detailed in terms of status and funding, organizational environment, and professional context, exploring the impact of these factors on barriers to professional communication between social workers, clients, and their families. The described cases were observed and studied longitudinally (over a year), through regular and repeated meetings. Each case is presented through a summary description of observed behavior, social inclusion, expectations, and attitudes, and identified barriers to communication.

Based on the data from the very well planned and implemented complex qualitative empirical research, the most common barriers in professional communication between the social worker and the relatives of the individual clients from the sample have been synthesized, and the reasons and influencing factors have been emphasized. Based on the research results of the studied cases, the doctoral student has excellently summarized the indicators, criteria, and indicators through which the main barriers in communication in social work are highlighted (table 5, p. 161).

The summarized conclusions from the conducted empirical research and the formulated recommendations for overcoming the identified barriers in the social worker's professional communication are adequate and relevant to the set research goals and *contribute to enriching the theory of social communication in the context of social work organizations.*

An excellent summary of the results of the conducted theoretical-empirical research was achieved in the "Conclusions" part, emphasizing the influence of the manifestations of the outlined barriers depending on the stage of the professional interaction between the social worker, the client and his relatives, from the work experience of the helping specialists, from the institutional context and organizational-management factors in the provision of social services, as well as the complex manifestation of barriers.

#### **4. Abstract**

Correctly reflects the structure and the main content emphasis of the dissertation work.

#### **5. Publications and contributions of the doctoral student**

The candidate presents an impressive number of publications on the topic of the dissertation - 7 in total, of which 1 study at Annual Book of Sofia University, "Social activities" volume, and 6 articles (of which 3 in refereed and indexed journals). The publications are of high quality and contribute to the researched issues and to the theory, practice, and social work education.

I fully accept the dissertation contributions formulated by the doctoral student - they are relevant to the achievements of the realized theoretical-empirical research on the topic.

#### **6. Recommendations**

I would like to propose several recommendations for the PhD thesis and for continuing the research work on this topic:

- 1) Paragraph 3.6 of the first chapter - includes heterogeneous content, some of which can be referred to the empirical part (the methodology of empirical research) and the other - to the theoretical part (e.g., characteristics of people of the third age and specifics of social work and professional communication with them).
- 2) The toolkit for the conducted interviews with the three groups of respondents should be referenced more clearly (in the appendices), and the studied variables and their operationalization should be more explicitly outlined, including in relation to the hypothesis.
- 3) 3) I would recommend that the theoretical-empirical dissertation research presented by Anna Georgieva be adapted and published as a monography, so that its merits become more widely known to the professional collegium and to the helping professionals from the practice.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The PhD thesis developed by Anna Georgieva presents scientific, scientific-applied, and applied results, which represent an original contribution to scientific research in the professional track Social Activities and to the practice of social work.

The presented dissertation work is a completed and contributing scientific research to the studied topic, which demonstrates the qualities and skills of the PhD student Anna Georgieva for independently conducting scientific research at a very high level, for professional self-

reflection, to defend a position with arguments and to successfully synthesize conclusions and recommendations for the qualitative professional activity of the social worker in an organizational environment in the provision of social services. The results and recommendations of the research would also be valuable for the purposes of training and continuing qualification of specialists in the professional track 3.4. Social activities, as well as in the development of syllabi and postgraduate specializations focused in the field of social work with elderly people.

Everything noted so far gives me reason to justify my positive evaluation and high appreciation of the qualities of the presented PhD thesis, the results and contributions achieved by it. **I strongly recommend to the respected scientific jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Anna Mihailova Georgieva in professional track 3.4. Social activities.**

September 15, 2022

Reviewer:

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Rossitsa Simeonova)