

## **REVIEW**

**of dissertation on the topic: EDUCATIONAL AND THERAPEUTIC ASPECTS OF PHOTOGRAPHY**

**for awarding the educational and scientific degree PhD in professional field**

### **1.2. Pedagogy (Theory of Education and Didactics)**

**PhD student: RUSANA GEORGIEVA GADZHANOVA**

**Research supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Vladislav Gospodinov, PhD**

**Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Alexandra Ivanova, PhD**

Rusana Gadzhanova a candidate for the Ph degree, has a bachelor's degree in Social Pedagogy (Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", 2000), a master's degree in Clinical Psychology ("St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo", 2004), a Specialist in Social Psychology (Sofia University, 2003) and a Diploma in Art Therapy (NBU, 2016). Her doctoral studies are carried out at Sofia University, Department of Theory of Education. She has participated in numerous projects, seminars and trainings, is a member of the USB, section "Pedagogy and Psychology" since 2024, and of the Society of Psychologists in Bulgaria since 2005. She has been working as a specialist in the field of social activities, education, psychology and art therapy for 15 years. Since 2024 she has been employed as an assistant professor at the Sofia University at the Department of Social Education and Social work. In summary, I can confidently conclude that the doctoral candidate has excellent theoretical training and extensive practical experience in the field in which she developed her dissertation.

### **Relevance of the dissertation problems**

The transformation of photography in recent decades into a major communication language (in both its positive and negative aspects), define it as a powerful and somewhat unpredictable factor in terms of its educational and therapeutic functions. After observing the effects on this impact in terms of young people, but also on an increasingly wider audience, we should think about implementing a greater amount of research on the topic. The present work undertakes the difficult task of asking questions and obtaining answers, in a theoretical and applied way, to what extent the influence of photography can be used in a creative and effective way in the formation of ideas, artistic taste, the enhancement of self-awareness, self-expression and the skills of interaction with others. The accomplished stages of the research in its diversity and the drawn conclusions and generalizations concerning the scientific and applied usefulness of the achieved results, confirm in practice the high scientific and applied relevance of the posed problem.

## **Content and qualities of the dissertation thesis**

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion, a bibliography and appendices. In the introduction, Rusana Gadzhanova justifies the relevance of the problems under consideration and outlines the most significant elements of the research.

In Chapter I, the doctoral student examines theoretically the prerequisites for the use of photography and its educational and therapeutic aspects. The development of photography as a tool for documentation, but also for impact for artistic purposes, is supported by the research on the subject of numerous authors coming from different philosophical paradigms. A broad reading of the literature on the subject objectifies the importance of photography and reveals its full potential. The educational dimensions of art and photography are explored, as well as its projective and therapeutic potential. Among the theoretical studies of the doctoral student can be distinguished the correct references to both world famous authors and Bulgarian researchers. Clarifying convincingly the prerequisites for the transformation of photography in modern times into the main expressive and informative medium, the author logically deduces the necessity of conducting methodical and targeted research on its educational and therapeutic functions.

Chapter II presents the design of the experimental model that the doctoral student approbated. At the beginning of the chapter, the broad conceptual framework with which the research operates is outlined (pp. 78-115). The need for extensive clarification of concepts is driven by the marked multidisciplinary nature of the thesis. The author formulates correctly and logically hypotheses, goals and objectives of the research, the program and methodology of the research, planned activities, and expected results. It should be noted here that the educational and therapeutic aspects of photography were followed in the counseling practice in face-to-face and distance form.

In Chapter III, the doctoral student presents the empirical part in individual and group format, analysis of the data collected and summarized from the study, conclusions and results. The selection of phototherapeutic techniques used in the different formats of the programme is very impressive. More well-known techniques are presented ("Metaphorical Self-Portrait", etc.), but also not so popular ones (e.g. "The Object and its Shadow", pp. 164-167), as well as the application of the author's modification of the "Shores" technique (p. 168). Of note is Rusana Gadzhanova's soft approach to conducting the process, her lack of preconceived expectations, and her respect for the insights of the research participants regarding their personal topics.

In the photography group work workshop, the PhD student notes that the focus falls on educational rather than therapeutic effect. The participants were students from the "Princess Marie-Louise" and 144 "Narodni Buditelli" Secondary Schools at Sofia. The themes of the photo workshops are focused on activities of self-observation, reflection, self-expression and self-expression, of interaction with educational and self-educational elements. The PhD student realized a successful attempt on revealing the inner connections between art, philosophy, psychology, sociology, pedagogy and other humanities and social sciences through the application of photography. In this way, students' knowledge and skills are complemented and built upon. The main tools for the research are focus group questions with teachers, questionnaire 1 and 2 (for students and participants of the photo workshop). Here again, the PhD student carefully selected techniques appropriate for the participants in the experiment - a projective process with ready-made images, photo narrative, portrait photography, "Bridge" and others - that correspond to themes valid for the adolescent phase, according to Lowenfeld's theory on the developmental stages of

representational activity. The results of the study indicate an unequivocal increase in self-knowledge, self-expression and self-expression skills, interaction skills with others and higher interaction and relationship satisfaction. The relationship between the educational and therapeutic application of photography, the development of artistic perceptions, and the socialization of young people has been empirically demonstrated.

In its concluding part, the thesis again transfers a bridge to the humanistic understanding of man as a person striving to become himself, as a basis for the development and approbation of the applied model. The conclusion appropriately systematizes the main conclusions drawn conceptually and largely empirically in the course of the research conducted. 200 references were studied. The sources are listed correctly and completely.

### **Contributions of the dissertation thesis**

The dissertation thesis logically identifies four contributions, of which the provision of a systematic theoretical justification for the application of photography in its educational and therapeutic aspects can be seen as scientific-theoretical, while the remaining three are more of a practical-applied character:

- It proposes a structured model for working through photography for self-knowledge, skill development and (self-)education that presents the action-procedural side of the educational-therapeutic aspects of photography.
- Working with the proposed program or elements of it can enrich the practice of various professionals in educational, social and other fields with a new tool.
- The dissertation directs the research focus to different of the popular uses of photography (for entertainment, to inform, etc.) that have not been sufficiently studied in our country so far.

Of these, I would like to emphasize the approbation of a structured model for working through photography, which undoubtedly has the potential to become a popular tool and to enter widely into the practice of various professionals in the pedagogical, social, counselling and other fields. The application of the model with young people living and studying abroad, who report anxiety and negative experiences related to social isolation, has an undeniable practical-applied contribution and illustrates their positive impact from the application of phototherapeutic techniques.

### **Abstract**

The submitted abstract fully meets the requirements and adequately presents the content of the thesis in its individual parts as well as its scientific contributions. The volume covers 48 pages, in addition to 4 pages of personal publications and references studied by the PhD student.

### **Publications devoted to the subject of the dissertation**

The doctoral candidate has submitted three publications to the dissertation, which address both the therapeutic aspects of photography and art therapy practice in working with clients experiencing crisis

life situations. In the scientific contributions of Rusana Gadzhanova should be noted three more articles in print in scientific collections and journals, as well as two contributions to already published collections (2019, 2021). Hence, it should be concluded that the PhD student systematically develops publication activity and participates in scientific forums directly related to her research work. The topicality of the issues goes far beyond the aims and objectives of the dissertation. This is a research field whose potential I believe will continue to be successfully developed in the future by the PhD student.

### **Notes, questions**

Phototherapy is presented by the doctoral student as a part of art therapy. This is undoubtedly because it is a product of the visual arts, of which photography is undoubtedly a part. It should be noted, however, that for the last 25 years in most European countries there has been a clear emancipation of the specialty and its study in separate programmes in most universities that graduate art therapy specialists. This provokes the question, is this moment timely for its separation from the bosom of art therapy in Bulgaria according to the PhD student, taking into account the extent of its impact and popularity?

### **Conclusion**

Rusana Gadzhanova's dissertation work fully satisfies the requirements of the Law on Scientific Degrees and Titles and the Regulations for its implementation. What makes an impression is the professional commitment to the researched issues, the thorough knowledge of the essence of the research problem, the high level of theoretical analysis skills, as well as the creative approach to the creation of a structured model for working through photography for self-knowledge, skills development and (self-)education, which in practice appears to be of key importance for clarifying the educational and therapeutic aspects of photography. The quality of the thesis is complemented by a correct analysis and interpretation of the research results. The doctoral student's empirical research can serve to develop further studies on the topic.

This gives me a reason to highly evaluate the dissertation work and to propose to the Honorable Scientific Jury to award Rusana Gadzhanova the educational and scientific degree PhD in the field of higher education 1. Pedagogical sciences, professional direction 1.2. Pedagogy (Theory of Education and Didactics).

17.03.2025

Reviewer:.....

Assoc. Prof. Alexandra Ivanova, PhD