

REVIEW

Of dissertation work by **Sofiya Dimitrova** on the topic:

Specifics of the cognitive model in social anxiety

For awarding the education and science degree DOCTOR in the scientific major of Psychology 3.2., Clinical Psychology.

Each year almost 20% of the world population suffers from a mental condition like depression or anxiety. These disorders cause the patients and their families suffering and lead to economic loss. According to the latest research data 6.2% of the population in Bulgaria suffers from depression while most common remain anxiety disorders - 11.4%.

Social anxiety is an underestimated problem because of its common prevalence. Individuals who suffer from social anxiety disorder experience setbacks in interpersonal relationships due to the maintaining factors of the condition as well as to victimization and stigmatization.

The cognitive paradigm believes that social anxiety is a consequence of unrealistic beliefs held about social behavior that cause intense negative emotions and avoidance. Often people with that disorder formulate powerful images about how others would perceive and respond to them.

The dissertation work by Sofiya Dimitrova investigates the manifestations of social anxiety within the framework of the cognitive model and the influence of anxiety on the ability for mentalization. As an indication for metacognitive functioning, she has chosen to research the attitude towards humor. The current research aims at enriching our knowledge and understanding of the nature and deficits of social anxiety disorder as well as at contributing to the specification of an appropriate therapeutic model.

The behavioral perspective on the factors causing social anxiety is based on the two-factor conditioning model. According to its ideas these behaviors hinder the cognitive restructuring of negative beliefs related to communication and social engagements. The

central factor is not the lack of social skills, rather an image of one's own social inadequacy.

People with a different degree of social anxiety differ in the perception of their own social skills and often underestimate them. The real social skills of the individual have a much lower impact on the emergence of anxiety compared to the perception of the individual of his own social skills.

This fact supports the existence of a "dangerous" cognitive schema which distorts the information processing. Regardless whether this distortion is due to perception or attention, it plays an important role in maintaining anxiety since it has an impact on the interpretations during information processing. Socially anxious individuals show selective attention to dangerous stimuli and bodily changes, demonstrate selective processing and cognitive distortions leading to dysfunctional beliefs about others, the world and the future resulting in negative automatic thoughts and emotions.

It is well-known that the ability for mentalization develops in an interpersonal framework and depends on the availability of an accessible and responsive caregiver who is capable of thinking and verbalizing the mental state of the child.

Humor as a high-level metacognitive function is directly related to the concept of mentalization - the ability to simultaneously integrate two points of view, to self-reflect and discriminate between internal and external reality. The results show that people with social anxiety disorder do understand and develop some sense of humor but feel threatened by activities that involve the mental state of other people.

The most evidence-based therapy to date is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). Many meta-analyses prove its efficacy in the treatment of anxiety disorders. Nevertheless, the most common critique towards its approach is that the symptoms may relapse after time or be substituted with other problematic behaviors.

The current empirical research aims at revealing the specifics of the cognitive process among individuals with social anxiety. It investigates the irrational beliefs and negative emotions and fears and their relationship to behavior. A main focus of the study are the

metacognitive abilities of this group, more precisely their ability for mentalization investigated through their attitude towards humor.

The research perspective reflects a modern approach in cognitive` therapy which underlines the utmost importance of emotional processes for the understanding of a certain pathology and the application of appropriate treatments. The scientific work is based on 2 pilot studies.

On the basis of the information in the literature related to social anxiety and sense of humor and the results of the mentioned pilot studies, the researchers suggest 5 hypotheses that are concerned with social anxiety and its relationship with automatic thoughts, negative experiences, mental defenses, coping, humor and mentalization.

The current research uses a battery of tests aiming at establishing the level of social anxiety, the quantity and kind of dysfunctional anxious thoughts as well as coping strategies. To reveal the use of mental defenses a questionnaire measuring the level of dissociation has been added. Also, part of the battery is a questionnaire evaluating sense of humor as a typical metacognitive ability reflecting the degree of mentalization.

The sample consists of 74 individuals - 30 males and 44 females, ages from 16 to 62. The mean age is 37.5, among males the mean age is 39, while for women it is 36.

It has been established that there is a tight relationship between dysfunctional thoughts and negative affect related to anxiety as well as the use of immature defense mechanisms like dissociation. High levels of social anxiety suggest a more frequent use of dysfunctional coping strategies. The results also point out that gender, age and culture play a significant role. Among women the accumulation of life experience helps their adaptation and overcoming anxiety while in men there is a tendency in the opposite direction - they show anxiety in different social situations.

Although there are not any results related to cause and effect, it can be assumed that socially anxious thoughts determine avoidance which in turn confirms the dysfunctional cognitions. The data supports the fact that individuals who show a great

number of thoughts related to fear of evaluation and judgement use humor less and they do not exhibit positive attitude towards humor as a whole.

The data confirms problem solving as an adaptive coping strategy since it correlates positively with the questionnaire about sense of humor - a measure of personal and cognitive maturity. Individuals who actively seek problem solving are more inclined to use humor in social situations and have a positive attitude toward it as a whole.

The connection between social phobia and the use of immature defense mechanisms might be moderated by the level of development of the ability for mentalization, although this hypothesis has not been confirmed which means that the connection between anxiety and dissociation is not dependent on humor.

There is evidence for significant negative correlation between social anxiety and dissociation as well as between the scale for social phobia and the fourth subscale of the questionnaire about sense of humor - the attitude to humor as a whole. This finding suggests that there is a possibility that sense of humor mediates or to some degree explains the negative correlation between social anxiety and the level of personal maturity.

It has been established that the relationship between social anxiety and the coping strategy "avoidance" is mediated by the level of maturity of defense mechanisms. The more avoidant the behavior as a result of anxiety is, the more immature the defense mechanisms. The level of maturity explains the choice of avoidant behavior among people with high levels of social anxiety.

The research conducted by Sofiya Dimitrova shows that the cognitive component of social anxiety is not influenced by individual history or personality characteristics. The fear of negative evaluation by others has a minimal predominance compared to overall discomfort and execution anxiety. These results support the use of the cognitive paradigm for the conceptualization and treatment of social anxiety disorder. On the other hand, the need for psychological defense is strongly influenced by personal history and predisposition.

The study reveals some of the mechanisms of social anxiety, however, it has its limitations related mostly to the small sample size and methodology. Future research with a larger sample and better-defined groups would allow for the investigation of the mediating and moderating factors between social anxiety and the ability for mentalization.

Conclusion:

The presented dissertation work by Sofiya Dimitrova explores a live and important topic. It shows the excellent theoretic knowledge of the author in the area of psychopathology and psychotherapy as well as her skills to present and analyze empirical data.

I am fully convinced and recommend to the Honorable Scientific Jury that Sofiya Dimitrova be awarded the education and science degree Doctor of Psychology-PhD.

23.10.2021.

Reviewer:.....

(Full Prof. Vanya Matanova, PhD, DSc)