

REVIEW

By Prof. Dr. Romyana Bozhinova,
IINCH - BAS

On a dissertation work for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor", in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal sciences, professional direction 3.2. Psychology, doctoral program "Pedagogical and Developmental Psychology"

Author: Tanya Stefanova Ilieva

Topic: "Development of strengths in childhood and adolescence"

Research supervisor: Assoc. Dr. Kirilka Tagareva

General presentation of the procedure and the PhD student

By order No RD- 21-1055 of 14.06. 2022 of the Rector of Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski", I have been appointed as a member of a scientific jury to ensure a procedure for the defense of a dissertation work on the topic: "Development of strengths in children and adolescents", for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 3.2. Psychology, doctoral program "Pedagogical and Developmental Psychology".

The author of the dissertation is Tanya Stefanova Ilieva, a doctoral student in full-time studies in the period 2019-2022 at the Department of Psychology, with scientific supervisor Assoc. Dr. Kirilka Tagareva from PU "Paisiy Hilendarski".

The set of paper materials presented by Tanya Stefanova Ilieva is in accordance with Art. 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the PU and includes the following documents:

- Request to the Rector of the PU to disclose a procedure for the defense of a dissertation work
- CV in European format;
- Dissertation work;
- Abstract;
- List of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation;
- Copies of scientific publications;
- Declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents

According to the attached biographical data, the doctoral student completed a master's degree in positive psychology in 2016-2018 at the University of Plovdiv and a master's degree in public administration in 2003-2006 at the University of Tarnovo. From 2019 to 2022, Tanya Ilieva is a full-time doctoral student at Plovdiv University in "Pedagogical and Age Psychology". During this period, she also went through two training courses, which are essential for increasing her competence in conducting scientific research and publishing it - "Methodological guidelines for developing scientific publications" and "Application of SPSS in scientific research".

It is worth noting that T. Ilieva combines her studies with serious activity in several areas. She is the head of an international project at the University of Plovdiv under the Erasmus program (2019-2020) in support of people with disabilities. She has some experience in the field of applied psychology with his work as a school psychologist in 2018-2019 and academic experience with the courses he leads at Plovdiv University in: General Psychology, Research Methods in the field of Positive Psychology, Human Behavior.

The attached biographical reference also proves Ilieva's extremely rich experience in the public sphere as an expert, manager, project consultant, i.e. exercising activities that imply the formation of good communication abilities and organizational skills relevant to her work as a researcher and teacher in the field of psychology.

Relevance of the topic

The dissertation work proposed by Tanya Ilieva is aimed at studying the "character strengths " of the individual in the period of his intensive personality development - adolescence. The topic is current from a scientific and applied point of view. First of all, it should be emphasized that it is centered on a problem that responds to contemporary research trends in the field of psychology, and more precisely in their attempt to bring scientific research closer to life's perspectives and understandings. "character strengths " have been included in the scientific problematic in recent decades, like happiness and well-being by taking them out of the immediate life context, and this emerges as an essential attempt to interpret behavior more accurately and more pragmatically.

Secondly, the dissertationable nature of the topic is largely determined by the age period to which it is aimed. Adolescence is a period in which the individual asks himself questions such as "who am I", "what I can do", "what I can become" i.e. the period in which he tests himself, makes certain decisions, forms specific attitudes towards the world around him, and the strengths of the character are at the center of their personality formation and testing.

Last but not least, the applied value of the specific dissertation topic is indisputable. Social interest in the positive and negative manifestations of young people is on the agenda in Bulgarian society. This gives particular importance to

the strengths of the character and the opportunities for their formation in the process of development of children and adolescents. Their study, which the dissertation development offers, has a certain value for the social, pedagogical and advisory practice in the country.

Characterization and evaluation of the dissertation work

The dissertation covers 214 pages, within which there are three chapters, introduction, general discussion and conclusion, contributions, literature and appendices. The results are illustrated with 106 tables and 40 figures. 205 sources are cited, 26 of them are in Cyrillic and the rest in Latin. The work is well structured, and the ratio between the volume of individual chapters emphasizes the empirical nature of the dissertation research.

Knowing the problem

In the first chapter of the dissertation, the theoretical premises of the study have been successfully presented. The following exposition strategy is aimed at introducing the main variables of the work and also at the problematic sides in their study.

The PhD student demonstrates a broad awareness of basic and contemporary views and research on the problem of "character strengths". Historically, their treatment as human virtues, which are the focus of attention of various philosophical, religious and social currents from ancient times to today, has been traced. Certain emphasis is placed on the formation of these virtues essential to the well-being of the individual and society. A special place is allocated to the child-adolescent stage of development, implying continued education of character strengths.

Of particular importance is the presentation of the modern theoretical construct of "character strengths". A significant place is also devoted to the possibilities for its empirical study, the creation and development of instruments for its measurement.

The importance of character strengths is amply illustrated by research demonstrating a significant relationship of this phenomenon to prosocial behavior, subjective happiness, moral competence, and well-being. Interventions to develop child-adolescent strengths in a school setting leading to increased life satisfaction are discussed.

The first chapter is clearly purposefully constructed. It clearly outlines the theoretical and empirical aspects that are essential for setting up the upcoming dissertation research.

Setting the study and method

The second chapter of the dissertation is devoted to *the setting and design of the study*. It should be noted that the goal and tasks are clearly formulated and tied to specific hypotheses. According to the stated goal, the research is focused on studying «character strengths» in the period of adolescence (11-17 years) in two aspects - diagnosis and development. Both aspects of the research model are legitimately reflected in the research objectives. The first refers to the study of «character strengths» in relation to age development and in relation to the gender differences of adolescents in the studied period. The second is aimed at tracking the development of character strengths in early adolescence (11-13 years) under the influence of a certain program.

It is worth emphasizing that the second task of the research has an experimental nature. It involves testing the effectiveness of a specially designed program for developing character strengths. This research approach is relatively rarely applied and has a high value from the point of view of the quality of the results obtained.

An essential prerequisite for the quality of the research conducted by the doctoral student is the appropriate selection of the sample and *research methods*, also presented in the second chapter. The sample for the first study was formed randomly, with a sufficient volume (462 persons) and includes students of the relevant age group, living and studying in different settlements in the country. The sample for the second study was based on the need to form an experimental and control group and was also randomly selected from sixth grade students - 12-13 years old (early adolescence). The sample is small (13 and 18 persons), but this is acceptable from the point of view of the experimental nature of the study.

The research methods are consistent with the aims and objectives of the research. They were refined using a pilot study. First of all, the questionnaire "Strengths of character" by Katrin Daalgaard, including 6 subscales and 48 items, was applied. The doctoral student prepares and approves the Bulgarian version of the questionnaire, distinguished by good psychometric characteristics. In the second place, a development program was developed, which impresses with precision and coherence between pursued goals and schedule of the lessons conducted and the homework completed by the researched. The program is aptly named "Strengths of Character Development Class" and for the purposes it pursues it includes appropriate topics with activities and tasks aimed at strengthening the 24 strengths of character within 13 lesson hours of 30 minutes each. The doctoral student convincingly illustrates a large part of the activities included in the program.

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The procedure to which the research is subject according to the attached description is well suited to the research objectives and emphasizes the ambition of the doctoral student to obtain reliable results. The experimental study includes the two most important moments of measuring «character strength» – before and after the impact of the program in the experimental group and similar measurements in the control group with the absence of similar impacts. In the attached description, Ilieva sets out all the accepted requirements for conducting a similar type of experiment and the way in which they are considered in the specific study.

There are certain reservations about the way the research was conducted in general - online filling in of the questionnaire on Strengths of character and online lessons through a class link. Given the age of the subjects, it is permissible to receive incorrect answers related to the intervention of other people - parents, relatives...

A special place is devoted to the statistical methods used, as well as to the need for their inclusion in the specific data processing.

Results

The results of the study are presented and discussed in Chapter Three. The exposition in this part is well structured. Within four paragraphs, the results of all aspects of the dissertation research are successively presented. The trends regarding the studied phenomena are derived on the basis of one-factor dispersion analysis (ANOVA), Student's T-test, Mann-Whitney U-test, Wilcoxon's signed rank test. The effort of the doctoral student to describe the results for each studied group in maximum detail and accuracy in the conducted diagnostic and experimental research is visible.

At the same time, serious claims can be made about the content of the exhibition. It mainly consists of a detailed description of the applied statistical procedures, including their uniform repetition for each of the studied parameters of character strengths, and an almost complete absence of psychological interpretation of the obtained results. This is visible including from the headings and sub-headings of the individual paragraphs, which instead of reflecting the psychological phenomenon being studied note the statistics being conducted.

I will allow myself to specially note that it is legitimate to divide the studied age period into two sub-periods. But the designation of the two groups

as juveniles and minors is not justified, it does not provide an opportunity for an essential psychological interpretation of the observed differences between them. Such a possibility is provided by their designation as early and late (possibly middle) adolescence. Adolescence was derived from developmental psychology as a phenomenon with a very rich content, marking extremely serious changes in individual development and with the primary importance of the process of identification. Patterns in this development also suggest changes in character strengths.

The interpretation of the results of the experimental research is also limited. This study is the most valuable part of the dissertation, of particular importance are the changes that the "character strengths" undergo under the influence of the purposeful activity directed by the researcher. In this case, instead of the possible interpretations of changes (or absence of changes), it is noted in which activities the children were involved through the applied program, something that is already known from the methodological part of the dissertation.

The presentation of the results in the third chapter also does not allow us to understand whether they approach or differ significantly from other similar studies in the given field. This is essential, apart from in relation to the interpretation of the results and to outline the contributions of the proposed dissertation, the originality of the inferred trends or their value as support for already available evidence.

The work takes on a complete look with the general discussion and conclusion presented at the end of the dissertation. The general discussion reflect a description of what was done within the framework of the dissertation work and do not really fulfill their function of presenting the results obtained from the research in an interpretive plan. The conclusion, in a short version, presents a general view of the research and its results, and outlines their possible practical applicability.

The critical notes to the third chapter do not belittle the positive aspects of the dissertation work as a staging and implementation of empirical research. To these must be added the good scientific style and language of exposition

Contribution

Contributing points of the dissertation work can be found in the following directions:

Theoretical

- The idea of the specific expression of the "Strengths of the character" in relation to the age and gender differences of the individual in adolescence (11-17 years) and the possibility of an organized influence on the process of formation of this individual characteristic was derived and tested.

- It has been proven that the strengths of character are equally expressed in girls and boys in adolescence (11-17 years).
- Substantial differences in the development of character strengths have been found between the individual periods of adolescence – 11-13 – 14-17 years.
- An opportunity to influence character strengths in early adolescence through a specific developmental program is outlined.

Applied

- A Bulgarian version of a questionnaire for measuring the strengths of children's character was prepared and tested (according to Katrin Daalsgaard).
- A developmental program focused on character strengths has been created and approved, with the possibility of application in early adolescence, including corrections for children with problematic behavior.

Dissertation publications

Attached are seven publications on the topic of the dissertation, realized during the period of work on the dissertation. The majority of them the materials have been published in journals, and five have been published in collections. One article has been published in English.

This testifies to the high publication activity of the doctoral student, as well as to her participation in various scientific forums held during the specific period.

Applications by Tanya Ilieva **abstract** reflects the dissertation work sufficiently fully and accurately and meets the relevant requirements.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation proposed by Tanya Stefanova Ilieva on the topic: "Development of strengths in children and adolescents" shows her good theoretical training, very good knowledge in the field of psychological research methodology, possibilities for setting up and conducting serious scientific research and a marked interest to scientific and applied problems in the field of pedagogical and age psychology.

The dissertation fully complies with the requirements of the ŽRASRB and the regulations for its implementation. The above gives me reason to vote with conviction for awarding Tanya Stefanova Ilieva the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of "Psychology".

20. 08. 2022.

Prof. Dr. Romyana Bozhinova