

OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Stoil Mavrodiev, D.Sc., South-West University “Neofit Rilski”

on the dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”
in: Higher education area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences Professional field 3.2.
Psychology Doctoral programme “Positive Psychology”

Author: Katerina Valerieva Atias

Topic: “Interrelationships between mental health, gratitude and mindfulness in the context of breastfeeding”

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Kirilka Tagareva, Ph.D., Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”

1. General presentation of the procedure and the doctoral student

The dissertation of Katerina Valerieva Atias is submitted for defense before a scientific jury after the completion of the activities outlined in her individual plan. The procedure for developing and presenting the work complies with all requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the university's regulations. The doctoral student has submitted all necessary documents.

2. Relevance of the Topic

The topic of the dissertation – interrelationships between mental health, gratitude, and mindfulness in the context of breastfeeding – is extremely relevant in the contemporary scientific and social context. Positive psychology, as a relatively new field, emphasizes well-being and optimal individual functioning rather than solely pathology. The study focuses on the postpartum period – a time of significant challenges for mothers, where mental health plays a key role in child development and family functioning as a whole. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), positive parenting is a key protective factor for mental health, and breastfeeding is recommended as a biological and cultural phenomenon with protective effects. In Bulgaria, there is a lack of systematic research on maternal well-being and postpartum depression in the context of breastfeeding, making Atias's work pioneering on a national scale. The relevance is further underscored by pandemic effects, with data from 2022–2023 showing 22.5–23.5% of mothers affected by postpartum depression. The study addresses gaps in the literature by integrating positive traits such as gratitude and mindfulness, which can serve as buffers against negative dimensions of mental health. This has direct implications for policies in maternal health, breastfeeding support, and the prevention of mental disorders.

3. Knowledge of the Problem

The doctoral student demonstrates deep and comprehensive knowledge of the problem. The first chapter presents a solid theoretical framework covering key constructs: mental health as a two-factor model (well-being and psychopathology), flourishing (according to models by Keyes, Seligman, Huppert, and VanderWeele), postpartum depression, gratitude, and mindfulness. The literature review is based on 422 sources, including classics (Seligman, 2011; Keyes, 2007) and contemporary ones (WHO, 2022; Hahn-Holbrook et al., 2018), indicating

broad erudition. Atias successfully integrates interdisciplinary perspectives from psychology, anthropology, and public health, emphasizing the biocultural nature of breastfeeding and the role of social support. The problem is analyzed in the Bulgarian context, where data on maternal flourishing are lacking, and gaps in the literature are identified – for example, scarce research on positive dimensions of mental health during breastfeeding. This knowledge enables the formulation of an original main hypothesis and seven specific hypotheses addressing the relationships between the variables. The doctoral student shows a high level of competence and ability for critical evaluation of existing knowledge.

4. Research Methodology

The research methodology is well-structured and adequate for achieving the objectives. The study was conducted in two stages: pilot (for instrument adaptation) and main (empirical study with 422 mothers of children up to 12 months). Standardized scales with high reliability were used: Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (Cronbach's alpha 0.861), Flourishing Scale by Diener (0.892), GQ-6 for gratitude (0.843), and MAAS for mindfulness (0.842). The statistical analysis includes descriptive statistics, correlation analysis (Spearman), regression analysis, t-test, and Mann-Whitney U-test, which are appropriate for the data. The sample is representative of Bulgarian mothers (average age 32.4 years, predominantly highly educated), collected online via social networks. Ethical aspects were observed, with informed consent. The methodology enables hypothesis testing and the drawing of reliable conclusions.

5. Characteristics and Evaluation of the Dissertation and Its Contributions

The first chapter of the dissertation provides a solid theoretical foundation covering key constructs such as mental health, flourishing, postpartum depression, gratitude, mindfulness, and their links to breastfeeding. The author demonstrates deep knowledge of the literature, drawing on 422 sources, of which 381 are in English, highlighting the international scope. A strength is the interdisciplinary approach integrating perspectives from positive psychology, public health, and anthropology. For example, defining mental health as a two-factor model (well-being and psychopathology) is well-argued with references to Keyes (2007) and WHO (2022b), while the discussion of flourishing includes a critical evaluation of models such as Seligman's PERMA (2011) and Keyes's continuum. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of the topic and outlines gaps in the literature, such as the lack of studies on flourishing in the context of breastfeeding in Bulgaria. The second chapter describes the research methodology, including subject, object, objectives, hypotheses, stages, instruments, and sample. A merit of the work is the structured approach: the study has two stages (pilot with $n=653$ and main with $n=655$), combining quantitative and qualitative methods for reliability. The author details the hypotheses (main and 7 specific), logically derived from theory, and uses standardized instruments such as the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (Cox et al., 1987) and flourishing scales (Diener et al., 2010), with good internal consistency (Cronbach's α from 0.744 to 0.892). The statistical analysis is appropriate (correlations, regression, t-tests), and ethical aspects are observed through voluntary participation and anonymity. The originality lies in the adaptation of instruments to the Bulgarian context and the focus on breastfeeding mothers, addressing a gap in the literature. A critical point is that the sample mainly includes highly educated women from cities with average incomes, which limits generalizability to the broader population in Bulgaria. The third chapter presents the results, hypothesis testing, discussion, contributions, and limitations. An undisputed strength is the detailed statistical

analysis, illustrated with 38 tables, 7 figures, and 15 graphs, making the results transparent and easy to understand. The author confirms most hypotheses: for example, gratitude and mindfulness are positive predictors of flourishing (regression model with $R^2=0.392$), and breastfeeding is associated with lower depression levels. The originality lies in the empirical data for Bulgaria – 23.5% postpartum depression, high levels of flourishing among breastfeeding mothers, and gratitude as the strongest predictor for continuing breastfeeding ($\text{Exp}(B)=25.37$). The discussion is critical, linking results to theory (e.g., the buffering role of positive traits) and offering practical guidelines for interventions. I accept the self-assessment of the contributions, which are well outlined in three groups: theoretical, methodological, and applied. The doctoral student has a sufficient number of publications on the topic, including articles in collections and journals. There is no evidence of plagiarism. I consider the dissertation to be the personal work of Katerina Atias.

6. Abstract (Autoreferat)

The abstract is well-structured and accurately reflects the content of the dissertation.

Recommendations for future use of the results:

The results and contributions can be used in educational programs for psychologists and midwives, in developing interventions to support breastfeeding mothers (e.g., mindfulness workshops), and in WHO policies and national health strategies.

Conclusion:

The dissertation of Katerina Valerieva Atias is original and carried out at a high scientific level. The doctoral student possesses very good psychological preparation and research competencies. I confidently give a positive evaluation, which I recommend to the other members of the scientific jury. I believe that Katerina Atias should be awarded the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in higher education area 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.2. Psychology, doctoral programme “Positive Psychology,” and I will vote positively.

09.03.2026

Prepared by:

Assoc. Prof. S. Mavrodiev, D.Sc.