

REVIEW

by **Velislava Atanasova Chavdarova, PhD, Professor**

St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo

Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Psychology

of a dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree **Doctor (PhD)**

Field of Higher Education: **3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences**

Professional Field: **3.2. Psychology**

Doctoral Programme: **Positive Psychology**

Author: Katerina Valerieva Atias

Title: *“Interrelations Between Mental Health, Gratitude, and Mindfulness in the Context of Breastfeeding”*

Supervisor: Prof. Kirilka Tagareva, PhD, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv

1. General description of the submitted materials

By order of the Rector of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv, I was appointed as a member of the scientific jury responsible for conducting the defense procedure of the dissertation entitled *“Interrelations Between Mental Health, Gratitude, and Mindfulness in the Context of Breastfeeding”* for the award of the educational and scientific degree Doctor (PhD) in Field of Higher Education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, Professional Field 3.2. Psychology, Doctoral Programme Positive Psychology.

The dissertation was authored by Katerina Atias, a doctoral candidate at the Department of Psychology under the supervision of Prof. Kirilka Tagareva, PhD, Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The set of materials submitted in hard copy by Katerina Atias complies with Article 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of Academic Staff at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv and includes the following documents:

- an application to the Rector for initiating the dissertation defense procedure;

- a curriculum vitae in European format;
- minutes from the departmental council reporting readiness to initiate the procedure and preliminary discussion of the dissertation;
- the dissertation manuscript;
- an abstract;
- a list of scientific publications related to the dissertation topic;
- copies of the publications;
- a list of identified citations;
- a declaration of originality and authenticity of the submitted documents.

The doctoral candidate has also submitted eight publications.

2. Brief biographical data of the doctoral candidate

Katerina Atias's professional and creative experience reflects a gradual and достойно pursued path of professional realization. The breadth of her education and qualifications is impressive and convincingly verified in an excellent interdisciplinary scientific output.

The doctoral candidate demonstrates research and intellectual capacity deserving positive evaluation, as evidenced by her career development.

The author holds a Bachelor's degree in Journalism and a Master's degree in Positive Psychology. She possesses numerous additional qualifications and has participated and continues to participate in diverse training modules. Her professional experience exceeds 20 years. Her educational and professional trajectory is characterized by consistency, perseverance, and a clear aspiration for further development and advancement.

The procedure for obtaining the educational and scientific degree Doctor (PhD) has been conducted correctly and in full compliance with all legal requirements.

3. Relevance of the topic and adequacy of the aims and objectives

The topic is not only appropriate for doctoral research but also highly relevant both within the scientific domain and in relation to the psychological challenges affecting young mothers' health, potential protective factors, and possible pathways for intervention and facilitation

during this period. The evidence-based grounding of policies in the field of maternal health and the provision of specialized support represent a mission deserving recognition.

In recent decades, interest in postpartum mental health has increased; however, research has remained predominantly focused on psychopathology. The dissertation addresses a clearly defined scientific gap—namely, the lack of systematic research on maternal flourishing and positive resources within the Bulgarian context, as well as limited data on the relationship between breastfeeding and mental well-being. This determines the study's high scientific and social significance.

The main aim—to examine maternal mental health during the first postpartum year and its interrelations with gratitude and mindfulness in the context of breastfeeding—is clearly formulated and logically derived from the literature review. The research tasks and hypotheses are appropriate to the aim and allow for a comprehensive empirical testing of the research model.

The study is innovative and creative, with clear practical orientation, positioned within the domains of developmental and positive psychology.

4. Knowledge of the research problem

The author demonstrates thorough knowledge of the investigated problem. The literature review encompasses a broad range of classical and contemporary theoretical perspectives in the fields of mental health, positive psychology, postpartum depression, gratitude, and mindfulness.

Particularly valuable is the integrative approach, which brings together knowledge from multiple scientific domains—psychology, medicine, public health, and breastfeeding research. The analysis of Bulgarian and international literature enables a clear identification of scientific gaps, thereby substantiating the necessity of the conducted study.

A sound conceptual understanding of the two-dimensional nature of mental health is demonstrated, as well as of the role of personal resources as buffers against psychological distress. The author convincingly positions her research within the frameworks of positive psychology and breastfeeding science.

5. Knowledge of the problem in the context of global psychological science

The dissertation demonstrates very good familiarity with the issue of postpartum mental health within contemporary global psychological science. The author substantiates her research through the integration of key theoretical perspectives that have shaped the scientific discourse on mental health in recent decades.

First, the transition from a pathogenic to an integrative model of mental health is acknowledged, wherein well-being and psychopathology are viewed as interrelated yet relatively autonomous dimensions. This two-factor model, developed in the works of Keyes, Ryff, Huppert, and others, is accurately presented and employed as the theoretical foundation of the study. Such an approach aligns with the contemporary positive psychological paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of resources, adaptation, and flourishing for mental health.

The dissertation establishes a systematic link between global research on postpartum depression and more recent scientific trends focusing on well-being, psychological resilience, and personal resources in early motherhood. The author correctly notes that international literature is dominated by medical and psychiatric research on breastfeeding, while positive dimensions of mental health remain insufficiently explored.

Particularly valuable is the attempt to integrate two significant constructs within global psychological science—gratitude and mindfulness. Both have been extensively studied as factors enhancing well-being, reducing distress, and preventing depressive symptoms, yet they have rarely been examined within the specific context of the postpartum period and breastfeeding.

The work also demonstrates excellent awareness of research on psychobiological mechanisms, social support, and cultural factors influencing maternal mental health. In this way, the author positions her study within the interdisciplinary intersection of psychology, public health, and developmental psychology.

In summary, the dissertation convincingly aligns with contemporary global scientific trends and demonstrates adequate knowledge of both classical and the most recent conceptual and empirical developments in the field.

The doctoral candidate has directed her research efforts within the broad discursive field of contemporary psychology, focusing specifically on some of the most актуални topics related to psychology and positive psychology.

The methodological framework of the dissertation is characterized by complexity and coherence. The study employs a two-stage design combining qualitative and quantitative methods, enabling more precise operationalization of the examined constructs and enhancing the validity of the results.

The first stage involved preparatory work, including qualitative inquiry aimed at identifying challenges and sources of support in breastfeeding, as well as a pilot study to assess the reliability and validity of the psychological instruments used.

This approach is methodologically rigorous, as it allows the adaptation of the instruments to the specific cultural and social context. The conducted factor analyses and internal consistency tests demonstrate the good psychometric suitability of the selected scales.

The second stage consisted of a cross-sectional study conducted with a large sample of women with breastfeeding experience. The instrumentarium included:

- the Flourishing Scale;
- the Gratitude Scale;
- the Dispositional Mindfulness Scale;
- the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale;
- demographic and contextual questions.

Statistical processing was carried out using a broad range of analyses—descriptive, correlational, factor, and regression analyses, as well as tests for group differences. This enabled not only the identification of relationships but also the determination of predictors.

With regard to the empirical study, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- the two-dimensional structure of postpartum mental health was confirmed;
- significant relationships were established between flourishing, gratitude, mindfulness, and the prevention of postpartum depression;
- positive personal resources were shown to function as protective factors against depressive symptoms;
- psychological predictors of continued breastfeeding were identified;
- the mediating role of social support between mental health and breastfeeding experience was demonstrated;
- differences in levels of well-being and distress were found between breastfeeding women and those who had discontinued breastfeeding.

In summary, the methodological design is appropriate to the stated aim and demonstrates a high degree of scientific rigor. The two-stage study was implemented using appropriate methodological instruments and adequate statistical data processing.

The selection of psychodiagnostic tools is well justified, with their reliability and validity having been verified. The use of established scales for flourishing, gratitude, mindfulness, and postpartum depression enhances the scientific value of the findings.

The statistical analyses allow a multidimensional examination of relationships between variables and a reliable testing of the hypotheses. The sample size and analytical complexity represent significant methodological strengths of the study.

The obtained results support well-grounded conclusions regarding the role of psychological resources in adaptation to motherhood and breastfeeding success.

5. Research methodology

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6. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation

The dissertation comprises 233 pages of main text, structured into an introduction, three chapters, conclusion, bibliography, and an appendix presenting the research instruments.

The work is logically structured into three main sections—theoretical, methodological, and empirical—consistent with established academic standards.

The theoretical section is characterized by systematic and analytical presentation, clearly outlining the conceptual model of the study. The methodological chapter provides detailed descriptions of procedures and instruments, while the empirical section contains an in-depth analysis and well-argued discussion of the results.

Chapter One presents a comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth literature review. Key concepts related to mental health, flourishing, postpartum depression, gratitude, and mindfulness are examined, along with their relationships to breastfeeding. The necessity of conducting an applied study is convincingly substantiated. Particularly noteworthy are the interdisciplinary approach proposed by the doctoral candidate and the critical analysis of existing research.

The theoretical operationalization in Chapter One is marked by analytical rigor and conceptual clarity. Major scientific approaches to mental health are presented, including pathogenic, salutogenic, and integrative models. Special attention is given to the two-factor model, according to which well-being and psychopathology coexist and interact.

The author demonstrates excellent familiarity with psychological concepts of flourishing and with research on postpartum depression as a leading mental health challenge in early motherhood. The theoretical analysis is further expanded through the inclusion of gratitude and mindfulness as personal resources that support well-being and act as protective factors against distress.

The contributory nature of Chapter One is realized through the integration of psychological, biological, and social factors, consistent with the contemporary bio-psycho-social model.

An undeniable strength of Katerina Atias's scientific writing style is her ability to synthesize and illustrate conceptual conclusions through theoretical models, diagrams, and tables, thereby facilitating reader comprehension of the analyzed issues.

Chapter Two provides a detailed description of the subject, object, aim, tasks, and hypotheses, as well as the stages of the study. Methodological procedures are clearly presented

and justified. Positive impressions are created by the attention to psychometric validation of the instruments and the description of the sample.

Chapter Three contains a detailed statistical analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the results. The author successfully links empirical data with the theoretical framework and formulates clear conclusions. Contributions, limitations, and directions for future research are also included, demonstrating critical scientific reflection.

Overall, the analysis indicates that the dissertation is characterized by a solid theoretical foundation within the context of global psychological science, a well-developed and psychometrically grounded methodology, significant empirical findings with both theoretical and practical value, logical structure, and analytical clarity of presentation.

The bibliography includes 422 sources—41 in Bulgarian and 381 in English. The text is ill

7. Contributions and significance of the dissertation for science and practice

Accepting the contributions formulated by the doctoral candidate, and beyond the achievements already discussed in the dissertation, I find grounds to emphasize the following:

Theoretical contributions:

- Through the use of an integrative research approach, a model of maternal mental health has been examined and conceptualized;
- Maternal mental health and its interrelations with the positive traits of gratitude and mindfulness have been investigated in the context of breastfeeding experience during the first postpartum year;
- Scientific knowledge regarding the interrelations between mental health and breastfeeding has been enriched;
- The identification of the relationship between positive traits and flourishing, on the one hand, and breastfeeding success, on the other, creates a basis for shifting postpartum support approaches, which are currently primarily oriented toward addressing problems and pathology.

Applied contributions:

- Predictors of flourishing and postpartum depression among breastfeeding women have been empirically identified;
- Psychological instruments for assessing maternal mental health have been validated and adapted to the Bulgarian context;
- Factors supporting breastfeeding continuation during the first year have been identified;
- Recommendations have been formulated for the development of psychological support programmes aimed at enhancing maternal well-being and supporting breastfeeding;
- Social and healthcare approaches have been developed to inform policies for comprehensive postpartum mental health care;
- The need for systematic support for mothers, encompassing medical, psychological, and social interventions, has been substantiated. The demonstrated relationship between positive traits and flourishing, on the one hand, and breastfeeding success, on the other, provides a realistic basis for revising postpartum prevention approaches, which currently focus predominantly on pathology and problem management.

It should be emphasized that the doctoral candidate has successfully achieved the objectives of the dissertation, demonstrated excellent knowledge of the research problem, personal and professional engagement with it, and well-developed research skills. I am confident that this work will be further developed through the realization of future ideas generated during the preparation of the dissertation.

8. Evaluation of the publications related to the dissertation

The submitted list of eight publications on the dissertation topic exceeds the requirements for obtaining the Doctor (PhD) degree. Their publication in reputable journals is indicative of professionalism, while their depth and quality are beyond doubt.

9. Personal contribution of the doctoral candidate

The doctoral candidate's involvement in the planning, implementation, analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of the results of the theoretical and applied research is unquestionable. Professionalism and precision have been demonstrated at each stage, and the formulated contributions correspond to the achieved results.

10. Abstract

The abstract accurately and concisely reflects the content of the dissertation. It has been prepared in accordance with the Regulations for awarding scientific degrees at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv and presents the main results achieved in the dissertation.

11. Critical remarks and recommendations

With the aim of disseminating the dissertation more broadly, I would recommend its publication as a monograph.

12. Personal impressions

The presented work demonstrates the doctoral candidate's excellent theoretical and practical preparation in the studied problems, as well as her ability to process, interpret, analyze, and synthesize results from psychological research. The dissertation is balanced and well structured.

The conclusions and findings are both adequate and bold. I believe that the author possesses the necessary skills and competencies to continue her scientific development.

13. Recommendations for future application of the dissertation contributions and results

Future research may include further analysis of cultural and socioeconomic factors influencing the mental health of young mothers.

Conclusion

The dissertation contains scientific, scientifically applied, and practical results that constitute an original contribution to science and meet all requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, its implementing regulations, and the regulations of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

The work demonstrates that the doctoral candidate Katerina Atias possesses profound theoretical knowledge and professional competencies in the scientific field of 3.2. Psychology, as well as the qualities and skills required for independent scientific research.

Based on the above, I confidently provide my positive evaluation of the conducted theoretical and applied research presented in the reviewed dissertation, abstract, results, and contributions, and propose that the esteemed scientific jury award the educational and scientific degree Doctor (PhD) to Katerina Atias in Field of Higher Education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, Professional Field 3.2. Psychology, Doctoral Programme Positive Psychology.

Reviewer:

Velislava Chavdarova, PhD

23.03.2026