

REVIEW

By Professor Bozhidar Ivkov

Re: competition for acquiring an academic position “Associate Professor“,
Promulgated in State Gazette 53/12.06.2020,
In the scientific specialty „Public Health Management“
Professional field 7.4.Public Health, in the area of higher education,
7. Health and Sport, for the needs of the Department of “Social Medicine and
Healthcare Organization”, Faculty of Public Health,
Medical University “Prof. Dr. P. Stoyanov” - Varna

1. Information for the procedure

According to Order №P-109-303/07.08.2020 of the Rector of the Medical University of Varna and Protocol №153/21.07.2020 from the Faculty of Public Health, Faculty Council meeting, I was appointed as a member of the Scientific Jury. According to Protocol №1/25.08.2020 from the first meeting of the Scientific Jury I was designated to prepare a Review for the competition for acquiring the Academic Position „Associate Professor” at the Medical University of Varna in the scientific specialty „Public Health Management“. The competition was promulgated in State Gazette 53/12.06.2020. It is complying with the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Rules for its application.

On the basis of the afore mentioned legal documents all procedural requirements related to the announcement of the competition, the deadlines for submitting documents and the selection of the Scientific Jury have been met. There is only one candidate in the present competition – Senior Assistant Professor Silvia Pavlova Nikolova from the Medical University of Varna (MU-Varna). The documents submitted by the candidate for participation in the competition are precisely arranged according to the requirements of the Regulations for the development of the academic staff of the MU-Varna.

2. Brief information about the professional development of Senior Assitant Professor Silvia Pavlova Nikolova, PhD

In the period 2001 - 2005 Dr. S. Nikolova studied and graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Healthcare Management. In 2006 she acquired a Master’s degree in Healthcare Management. In the period 2009-2013 she has been a full-time PhD student at the Department of Social Activities, majoring in Social Policy and Social Activities at the Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon / University of Texas at Arlington. After successful defense of a dissertation on the topic: „Geography of

Disability. An Analysis Based on the Socioeconomic Levels of Two Metropolitan Areas Dallas, Texas and Monterrey Nuevo Leon“, she acquired a PhD in Social policy and activities. The candidate also has an additional qualification in "Special Pedagogy" (for working with children with low vision and blindness), as well as a specialization in the field of Medical Informatics and Health Care Management.

In 2014, Dr. Silvia Nikolova was appointed as an "Assistant Professor" at the Department of Social Medicine and Healthcare Organization, and since 2016 she holds the Academic position of "Senior Assistant Professor" at the same department where she still works today.

Senior Assist. Prof. Dr. Silvia Nikolova has been leading classes in the disciplines "Social Medicine", "Biostatistics" and "Medico-social aspects of disability". She has participated in various scientific forums and projects: "Regional Partnership for Health and Sustainable Development Project", Partnership for health with the Ostfold region in Norway in the field of public health, financed by the Ministry of Health through BGO7 Program "Public Health Initiatives".

3. Evaluation of the scientific activity of the candidate, scientometric indicators

The total number of publications of Dr. Silvia Nikolova is 32, and in the competition for the Academic position "Associate Professor" she applies with 22 publications - a monograph in Bulgarian and 21 articles in Bulgarian, English and Spanish. All publications can be grouped in several thematic areas: (1) the monograph and 4 articles are related to issues concerning children and people with disabilities, (2) 4 articles are devoted to the impact of folk dances on health and quality of life of young people, (3) 12 articles are devoted to various medical and social problems related to one or another nosological unit and (4) one article is devoted to the extremely important, public health problem of the association between social inequalities and disability. In general, the scientific interests of Dr. Nikolova are strongly related to disability, and the areas of healthcare management and public health.

The attached document for compliance with the minimal national scientific standards indicates that Dr. Nikolova significantly exceeds the required minimum.

The reference for the study workload of the candidate clearly proves that during the whole period since her employment at the MU - Varna, S. Nikolova has a higher workload compared to the approved institutional norm for lectures and seminars.

4. Evaluation of the monograph and other scientific publications

4.1. Monograph

The monograph titled "Meta-aspects of disabilities: Part I" presented for the competition is announced as the first of a series of forthcoming editions designed to

gather and present knowledge, acquainting the reader with literature and practices in the field of disabilities. The author claims that the monograph has a social, sociological and critical focus, combining scientific references from different fields of science such as public health, sociology, anthropology, history and social policy. The book includes a preface, four chapters and seven appendices. It is illustrated with images, tables and figures, synthesizing the various main topics in the field of disabilities.

The first chapter makes a kind of clarification of the terminology used in the sciences studying the problems of people with disabilities. An overview of the history of the attitude of our ancestors to the phenomenon of "disability" and to people with disabilities is also presented. Additionally, the two main models of disability - the medical and the social models - are analyzed, and some newer modifications of the social model are also presented. The latter is achieved in **the second chapter** of the monograph.

Some less-known in the literature models of disability are also described, with their evolution and application, which Dr. Nikolova calls "models of impairment". These are the religious model, the disability identity development model, the human rights, the cultural model, and the model of human capacity.

The third chapter is devoted to the extremely important issue of measuring the severity of impairment and disability among the population. Emphasis is placed on the significant gap in accumulated knowledge and scientific interest in disability between countries with strong economies and reliable social protection mechanisms and countries, including ours, with unstable economies and weak social protection, policies and pillars. Emphasis is also placed on the correlation between poverty and disability, as well as on the lack of indicators and measurements of disability in population poverty surveys. The need for collection and availability of internationally comparable data is emphasized. Analyzing the possibilities and the limitations of the medical and the social model of disability, the monograph examines standardized tools (presented in detail in the appendices) proposed by the Washington Expert Group on Disability Research Methodology. In the **fourth chapter**, from the standpoint of the social model of disability, Dr. Silvia Nikolova discusses another very important and socially relevant problem - the problem of access and accessibility.

Different types of social barriers are considered, which have a particularly negative impact on the functioning of people with disabilities, often making it almost impossible in some social context. The great opportunities of modern digital technologies are offered here as a potential solution, creating new digital accessibility of equal importance to all people with and without disabilities.

As a concept, the monograph is interesting, with social significance, addressing important issues in the field of disability research, as well as in the field of sociology

of disability. The implementation however, raises a number of questions and some critical remarks. It is about the following:

1. I am left with the impression that Dr. Nikolova has uncritically accepted the terminology of the “Movement for independent living”, whose Bulgarian representatives imposed no less stigmatizing terms as "impairment" and "a person with impairment", compared to the term "disabled", thus validating the medical model of disability and opening even wider the doors to the process of medicalization of the lives of people with disabilities.

It is unacceptable to me, the English word "disability" – with a meaning “to be unable” to be translated as “impairment”. Everyone has the possibility to buy a music notebook if necessary. But few are able to write any music. The inability to write music in no way makes me a “person with an impairment”, as follows from the suggested approach.

Possible argumentation in defense of the author's choice is found at the beginning of the monograph. "There is one problem - namely, the use of words in their 'meta-meaning,' or what I call words beyond their meaning." (pp. 8-9) From the following explanation in the text it becomes clear that negative stereotypes and social notions are viewed under meta-meaning. For me, the concept of "meta-words" is somewhat vague – and at least I am finding here it for the first time.

Finally, the term "impairment" has a well-established and universally accepted meaning and significance and reflects the biomedical aspect of disability. Any attempt for a medical term to be used with a new, social meaning and significance might lead to confusion, to put it mildly.

2. The second problem that I see is related to the interdisciplinarity of the analysis and the need to expand its sociological and anthropological aspects and in general, the social substantiation and argumentation of one or another thesis. Numerous examples can be given here:

- People with impairments are named a „group“ (e.g. 4; 55). They are actually a social category, because the only characteristic that unites them in a community is the presence of impairment. The search of a “collective identity” (p. 56) in a social category is arguable, at least according to me;

- there is no specification and explicit definition of the object of study - exactly which people with disabilities are referred to in the monograph. Both the completely blind person and the person with two diopter glasses are people with impaired eyes (impaired visual sensitivity);

- already in the preface a not so well sociologically grounded thesis is offered – that is the sign of equality between impairment and accessibility, presenting the problems of people with disabilities as exclusively related to accessibility, choice and available opportunities for social participation (p. 7). The issues of access to the

systems of society and the accessible social and physical environment are very important, fundamental problems in the philosophy of disability, in the sociology of disability and in other scientific disciplines, but they do not exhaust the essence of the complex social phenomenon “disability” and not “impairment”.

For example, a person in an advanced stage of rheumatoid arthritis or ankylosing spondylitis, or a person with fibromyalgia, in periods of a serious disease "attack", will be "bedridden" or "exiled" in their home by severe chronic physical pain. Then, even if the social and physical environment is without any problems and barriers, it will not make a difference to the person and his social inclusion if medicine is not able to control or reduce pain. So what are the problems of these people? How to live in a state in which the whole living world of a man and all his social worlds are "closed" and there is only one world – the world of pain?;

- A common mistake often made by researchers, and in this case by Dr. Nikolova, is to define disability studies as a scientific discipline, albeit of a multidisciplinary character. In essence, this is a research trend, where many scientific disciplines meet with the specification of the research object and subject related to the complex social phenomenon of disability (sociology of disability, anthropology of disability, etc.). The multi - or interdisciplinary nature of the research in this trend does not make it a scientific discipline;

- A common approach to the social model, adopted by Dr. Nikolova, is the statement that "In fact, the social model places the disability in the external environment, outside the individual, making it a socially constructed phenomenon" (p. 28); "The understanding of the social model that disability is socially constructed, differs significantly from it in that disability is perceived as a positive identity" (p. 55).

“Impairment” is „(...) any loss or abnormality of mental, physiological and anatomical structure or function "(Recommendation (1992) Consistent policy for the rehabilitation of the disabled. Recommendation N^o R (92) 6. Sofia, Preliminary edition. // World Program (1993) *World Program of Action Concerning Disabled Persons*. United Nation, New York, p. 3.)

Given such a generally accepted definition of the term "impairment", it is clear that it is a medical term and has its place in the study of disability as such, which largely reflects the biomedical aspect of disability. Every attempt to attribute to it - social dimensions, meaning and significance brings vagueness and ambiguity.

In the case of a severe fracture of a large bone, how can the fracture itself and the bone itself be defined as a social construct? The attitude of the person and the community towards the fracture and the broken bone might be constructed. I recommend that Dr. Nikolova carefully study Burger and Lukman's concept of the social construction of reality;

- I can not miss several more of the stated theses. For example: "The ICF emphasizes the environmental barriers as the determining factors for the presence (?!) of disabilities." (p. 39) It seems to me that this is a rather frivole interpretation.

The ICF model focuses on social barriers as a major complex factor for discrimination and social exclusion of people with disabilities, and not as it is claimed.

Dr. Nikolova states: "The theory itself is a methodology that examines not physical or mental impairments, but *social norms causing impairments* (italics - B.I.), as well as social conditions that stigmatize certain groups of the population and assign them roles and place in society (Schalk, 2017) ". (p. 87) As far as I know, there is no social norm that causes impairment, but there are many social norms that can (and very successfully do) label, stigmatize, discriminate and socially exclude.

In addition, it is not so much the social conditions that stigmatize, but the stereotypes, prejudices, social ideas stigmatize and often set, and even impose, certain social roles and place for the person with a disability in society.

Dr. Nikolova further writes, referring to Hughes and Patterson: "Impairment is a 'social' product that is rather de-medicalized and de-individualized (Hughes & Paterson 1997)" (p. 94). The majority of impairments that lead to disability do not have any of the three characteristics. Even the socially constructed response of man and his associations to the various types of visible impairments is very often highly medicalized and not at all de-individualized. At least the situation in Bulgaria (and not only in our country) is exactly like that. There are other similar passages in the book that might lead to disagreement.

3. A problem that provokes serious discussion is the translation and the interpretation of concepts from English and Latin. I have already mentioned the terms "impairment" and "disability". Here is how the Latin term "invalidus" is interpreted: "dependent individuals called invalids (from Latin, invalidus, in-not, validus-strong), i.e. people who are unable to take care of themselves and contribute with their qualities to society. (pp. 17-18) The Latin term "invalidus" is translated as sick, not healthy, powerless, invalid - only for administrative purposes (in documents) according to ancient Roman law.

4. Finally, I cannot miss to mention two more important facts. (1) There is no definition of the term "impairment" as a term with "meta-meaning", i.e. a concept or word beyond its meaning. The lack of such a definition also introduces some vagueness and creates possibilities for ambiguous interpretations. Very general categories and concepts are used throughout the text - "people with impairments", "barriers", "norm", etc., which often hides important and significant specificities. Some of the propositions even loose from their meaning at certain points. (2) The text contains almost no information for and analysis on the achievements of the Bulgarian researchers in the field of disability and the different types of impairments causing disability.

Despite the critical remarks, Dr. Nikolova's work is of significant importance. The last two notes made in point 4, are offered more as a recommendation. I aimed to draw the candidate's attention to expand the field and scope of her theoretical and empirical research in her future work. Defining the basic concepts in the field of

disability, as well as using the achievements of the Bulgarian authors is an important prerequisite for greater comprehensiveness and clarity.

4.2. Other publications related to the competition

Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Silvia Nikolova presents 21 articles in Bulgarian, English and Spanish for the competition. Most of them have co-authors and the contribution of Dr. Nikolova in the writing of each article should have been more clearly differentiated - no matter how difficult it is. It has not been made clear enough. However, more importantly, all of the articles are dedicated to important medical and social problems and many of them offer reasonable and feasible solutions to these issues. In these works Dr. S. Nikolova develops even more fully and more adequately her potential as a researcher.

I find the materials dedicated to the influence of folk dances on the health and quality of life of students particularly interesting and important. Here the search for effects is in the direction of strengthening health, as well as it can be traced in the direction of establishing the Bulgarian spirits and traditions among young people, i.e. positive influence in two main directions - health, being the basis of everything else, and culture.

Here I have some more critical remarks, related to the way of expression. For example:

1. „Gender inequalities“ is translated as sex inequalities (in the abstracts of the publications in Bulgarian BI) instead of gender inequalities (Small E, Sharma BB, Nikolova SP. Covid-19 and Gender in LMICs: Potential Lessons from HIV Pandemic. AIDS and Behavior. 2020). Sex, as a biological concept, reflects only differences. The concept of gender, considered as the social dimension of the biological fact - the presence of two sexes: male and female, can and does reflect the existence of inequalities between men and women in society. Here probably Dr. Nikolova wanted to avoid the use of the term "gender" in Bulgarian language, which has recently been overloaded with pejorative connotations and this seems understandable, but still care must be taken.

2. „Dances increase the motivation of dancers and have a beneficial effect on their overall health. It's an activity that makes people engage in healthy behaviors. " Folk dances are undoubtedly an activity related to a healthy lifestyle, but they can hardly be a motive for "people to engage with their health behavior“. (Videnova J, **Nikolova** SP, Vankova D. Folk Dancing and Health Promotion. In: 13th International Technology, Education and Development Conference (inted2019). Valenica: Iated-Int Assoc Technology Education & Development; 2019. p. 225–8.).

3. „Adolescents' health risk behaviors, specifically school bullying, substance abuse and negative peer influences, are a public health problem“. This text is translated in such a way in Bulgarian language as if indicating that school bullying and drug abuse (without specifying what concretely) are part of healthy behavior, and

in essence there is no such meaning and there can be no such meaning in the English text. (Kim YK, Okumu M, Small E, **Nikolova** SP, Mengo C. The association between school bullying victimization and substance use among adolescents in Malawi: The mediating effect of loneliness. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*. 2018).

4. From the summary of the article (Nikolova S, Filkova S. Groups of inequalities leading to reduced physical activity and risk of disability in children and adolescents. In: First National Conference "Public Health - a Global Priority in Science and Practice 2017". Varna: MU-Varna; 2017. pp. 18–25), it does not become clear which are the groups of inequalities leading to reduced motor activity and risk of disability in children and adolescents, while in the text things are presented quite fully and comprehensively. Here the authors correctly discuss sex differences, not sex inequalities.

5. Evaluation of scientific contribution

In general, Senior Assistant Prof. Dr. S. Nikolova demonstrates serious potential as a social researcher. The self-assessment of her scientific contributions presents her work adequately and the new moments in the knowledge created by her.

The indicated contribution in the first thematic area "Inequalities in people with impairments" (according to the wording) are formulated accurately and strictly reflect her achievements. An exception to this is the first contribution. The fact that Dr. Nikolova did not have enough information about the achievements of Bulgarian researchers in the field, which might be explained by the more difficult access to their publications compared to those in English has made a disservice to her. This fact, as paradoxical as it may seem, is a consequence of the poor communication between scientific and educational institutions in Bulgaria, especially when it comes to such different areas as medicine and social sciences.

In the second strand, "Gender Inequalities and HIV Risk in Sub-Saharan Africa", excluding the inappropriate use of the term "sex inequalities" instead of "gender inequalities", the contributions are correctly worded. Here however, an insufficient information about the very important achievements of Bulgarian researchers in the field of gender inequalities and gender issues in general can also be noted.

In the third area defined by Dr. Nikolova as "Health promotion and health motivation of students", her contributions are correctly presented. It has been proven that "Bulgarian folk dances can stimulate the motivation of students for the development of health behaviors focused on the prevention of chronic diseases such as obesity and depression."

This contributes to knowledge development in the area of chronic disease prevention. Her work related to nutrition and dental health deserves special attention and positive assessment.

The contributions in the forth area „Varia”, reveal further the research capacity of Dr Nikolova. Along with the correctly defined contributions of social and scientific importance, I have a note on the wording of the first contribution. To analyze anything, even for the first time, is not yet a contribution, as the analysis is an inherent task and obligation for the work of the researcher. The results of the analysis and the evidence for them can be the contribution .

6. Dissemination of the research results

Senior Assistant Dr. Silvia Nikolova presents for the competition 35 citations, 4 of which cover the minimum scientometric requirements. Such a number of citations is impressive for a young researcher like her. I am convinced that Dr. Nikolova has acquainted and will continue to acquaint the target groups and audience with the results of her research work.

7. Evaluation of teaching activities

I cannot make a realistic assessment of Dr. Nikolova's teaching activity solely on formal criteria.

8. Recommendations

I have the following recommendations to Dr Sylvia Nikolova:

(1) to carefully select and scientifically justify her choice of terminology based on and subordinated to the breadth of knowledge and not to other, non-scientific criteria and bases;

(2) to expand her knowledge in the field of medicine, disability studies, incl. philosophy and sociology of disability, general sociology and history of sociology, as well as in the field of medical anthropology - something that, given her capabilities as a researcher, would not be a problem;

(3) to avoid extreme, "hard" summaries and statements, because the exclusion of other (or all other) possibilities for interpretation of a social fact or phenomenon can lead to serious errors and criticisms.

Conclusion

Based on the full compliance with the requirements of the Law for the development of the academic staff of the Republic of Bulgaria (2018), the Regulations for its implementation and the Regulations for the development of the academic staff at the Medical University - Varna, the qualitative characteristics of the candidate's scientific activity, the important - theoretical, methodological and practical contributions, the demonstrated serious capabilities of a social researcher, good command of English and Spanish and knowledge and experience in the field of medical statistics, are the basis for my overall **positive assessment**.

I am convinced that holding the academic position of "Associate Professor", Dr. Nikolova will be able to further develop her creative potential as a researcher and lecturer and will contribute to the development of the University and maintaining and enhancing the high scientific and social prestige of the Department of Social Medicine and Healthcare Organization.

Based on the above, I propose to the esteemed members of the Scientific Jury to vote positively and unanimously to propose to the Rector of MU-Varna, Senior Assistant Professor Dr. Silvia Pavlova Nikolova to take the academic position of "Associate Professor" in the scientific specialty "Public Health Management" for the needs of the Department of "Social Medicine and Health Care Organization", Faculty of Public Health.

Prof Bozhidar Ivkov: