

## Abstract

The thesis titled *Current and future research directions in applied psychology* is organized into two main parts: Part 1, *Scientific background and achievements*, includes the most relevant research results I have obtained in the last years. Part 2, *Academic and research career development plan*, includes the future directions for my professional growth.

Part 1 consists of four chapters, each describing several studies which are, to some extent, related to each other. Thus, the first chapter of Part 1 includes a series of three research papers representing my contribution to the understanding of the quality of life of patients diagnosed with rare diseases in Romania. These studies were part of a larger research project, funded by The Norwegian-Romanian Partnership for Progress in Rare Diseases, that also included an extensive survey on the quality of life of rare disease patients in Romania. In the first paper, we explored how religious and spiritual beliefs could be used to improve the quality of life of affected persons. In the second paper, we explored the role of religious beliefs, practices, symbols, and metaphors on the coping strategies of rare disease patients in Romania. Finally, in the third paper of this series of research papers we evaluated the quality of life of Romanian patients diagnosed with rare diseases, on the following dimensions: physical, psychological, social, economic, spiritual, and functional well-being. The main conclusions of these three studies are as follows: (a) in general, rare disease patients rated their health as poor and were not very optimistic about their future. However, most respondents noted that their satisfaction with life was good enough; (b) the lower their level of perceived health, the more willing were these patients to attend religious services. An explanation for this finding can be the fact that participation to religious services could provide them with needed peer support, and can create a context for significant interactions with others. These interactions can, in turn, enrich their lives and provide them with a sense of new meaning in the face of suffering (Sermabeikian, 1994); (c) religious beliefs represent a major coping strategy for patients diagnosed with rare diseases, who often use religious symbols and metaphors to describe their experiences and suffering; (d) some respondents interiorized and reinforced the widely shared values of the community regarding illness and health, while others challenged the uncritical acceptance of messages about the suffering body, choosing to argue that “normal” is not synonym with “able” and that the “disabled body” should be perceived as “normal” but “distinct”, just like another “color of the rainbow”; (e) regarding their quality of life measured on several dimensions, respondents reported yearly health deterioration, episodes of insomnia, physical pain, feelings of fear, sadness, frustration, depression, and guilt due to the distress their health condition was causing to their families.

The second chapter includes three studies addressing important questions on several practical issues within the higher education system. The first study investigated whether, and to what extent, Romanian educational psychologists are being concerned with the comprehension of, and adherence to, the ethical principles and standards stated in the Deontological Code for the profession of psychologist, issued by the Psychologists’ College of Romania. The second study investigated the attitudes of students belonging to an ethnic minority group (i.e., Roma) toward

education, and the difficulties they faced during the period of university studies. The third study analyzed the progress of a high quality, hybrid certification program for the elementary pre-service teachers. The Pedagogy of Primary and Pre-School Education Weekend Classes program works as a hybrid program with face-to-face practical seminars, laboratories, practical classes, and online theoretical classes. The conclusions that can be drawn from these three studies are: (a) practitioners in the field of school psychology demonstrated a proper understanding of the ethical principles regarding confidentiality, of the ethical principle regarding the avoidance of power and authority abuse, and of the ethical principle regarding their responsibility to continue to provide psychological support to a child until the case is undertaken by another specialist, provided a referral has been made or considered; (b) nevertheless, there are still some issues that need to be addressed in order to be certain that school psychologists are knowledgeable of the standards of the Deontological Code so as to be able to apply them in practice; (c) Roma students evaluate their education within the University of Oradea as highly useful, very efficient, fairly difficult, and leading to success; (d) regarding Roma students' academic self-efficacy, they were very confident in their ability to pass their exams, to graduate, and to gain the necessary skills for practicing their profession of choice; (e) discrimination and poverty were frequently mentioned by Roma students as reasons for encountering difficulties during their studies; (f) the certification program is developing an exciting model for its instructors and students, model which is probably going to attract more students in the following years, and which has the potential to change how universities prepare their future public school teachers.

The third chapter focuses on children at risk and comprises two research studies. The first study aimed at capturing several aspects of the socio-emotional development of children and adolescents who have been temporarily separated from parents who had migrated to other countries in search of work opportunities. The second study investigated the hypothesis that social workers in the Romanian child protection services base their decision-making processes with regard to the child on subjective arguments, such as their assessment of parental engagement. The main conclusions of these two studies are: (a) children and adolescents whose parents are working abroad are characterized by their teachers as having more severe behavioral problems than the ones who come from complete families; (b) the lack of parental involvement in children's daily activities, and a poor monitoring and supervision of their behavior were the two most frequently invoked predictors for externalizing problems; (c) when assessing parental engagement, the social workers found engagement more salient when the decision was to keep a child in the family compared to when a child was separated from the family.

Finally, the fourth chapter describes the validation studies of two instruments on Romanian population, namely the *Moral Values Internalization Questionnaire* and the *Young Cognitive Schema Questionnaire - S2*. Our analyses showed good validity and reliability indices for these instruments.

Part 2 of the thesis, titled *Academic and research career development plan*, includes the future research directions that I would like to follow through. These directions can be grouped in two categories: research projects that focus on school performance (research directions 1 and 2)

and projects that focus on the career choice and career development of university-level students (research directions 3, 4, and 5). Through the research directions I chose to follow in the future, I hope to provide some new perspectives, adapted to the practical necessities and to the general need of up-to-date information.