

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY**

## **Doctoral Thesis**

**Kierkegaardian models of existential group  
counseling adapted for parents of children  
diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders and  
motor disabilities**

**- Resume -**

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## **General structure of the thesis**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **CHAPTER 1**

Spherical and ideological plans in approaching the concepts of self, world and existence; models and techniques of individual and group philosophical counseling

#### **CHAPTER 2**

Principles, themes and models of existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling

#### **CHAPTER 3**

Ways of exposing, discovering and re-creating existential and / or phenomenological systems

#### **CHAPTER 4**

Principles, reference quotations and Kierkegaardian models of existential philosophical counseling

#### **CHAPTER 5**

Existential themes, plans and frames of reference identified in the speeches of parents who have children diagnosed with various neurodevelopmental disorders and locomotor disabilities

#### **CHAPTER 6**

Applicability of the multidimensional Kierkegaardian model of philosophical counseling in the support group for parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders and locomotor disabilities

### **CONCLUSIONS**

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

# **Kierkegaardian models of existential group counseling adapted for parents of children diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders and motor disabilities**

KEY WORDS: philosophical counseling, existentialism, phenomenology, support group, Kierkegaard, neurodevelopmental disorders, existential models, interdisciplinarity

## **Objectives of the paper and relevance to the scientific community**

This paper has set four major objectives: a). to expose new ways in which existential-phenomenological systems can be explained to “novices” or discovered by them during group philosophical counseling sessions; b). to recover the Kierkegaardian philosophy and to invest it (through the principles and models composed and adapted to the parents of children diagnosed with various neurodevelopmental disorders) with therapeutic value within the existential approach of philosophical counseling; c). to determine the existential themes that appear in the discourse of the parents of special children; d). to verify the applicability of the multi-dimensional Kierkegaardian model within the philosophical counseling group adapted to the parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders.

The doctoral thesis completes an existing gap in the literature (there are no studies that use the principles of Kierkegaard's philosophy to build models of philosophical counseling applicable to groups of parents who have children with disabilities), aims at interdisciplinarity (the domain between psychological and philosophical counseling), develops the branch of applied philosophy (more exactly, existential-phenomenological type) and facilitates the process of adapting "philosophical counseling" (by developing models and methods of counseling) in Romania.

## **Presentation of the logical continuity of the topic approached in the context of previously started research**

If contemporary methods of philosophical counseling reveal how philosophy can be used to explore the "unknown", expanding knowledge and developing the way the client can understand and interpret being, existence, self or world, the particularity of this thesis is given by exploring the way in which the Kierkegaardian system can be used in support groups of parents who have children with motor and mental disabilities. Moreover, ways in which an existential and / or phenomenological philosophical system can be exposed or discovered in group counseling is a

second objective of this thesis. Through this study we want to highlight the role that the Kierkegaardian paradigm can play in the existential-phenomenological philosophical counseling, in order to build the self and the world by group participants.

Although studies indicate that group therapy takes precedence over individual therapy, in the sense that it makes participants more aware of the “feeling of abandonment” and responsibility for their own actions (see Maglo, 2002) and that (b). S. Kierkegaard is seen as a promoter of the process of self-knowledge, according to Jørgensen (2013) and “diagnostic of anxiety and despair”, as stated by Lippitt, J. (2016), Kierkegaardian models and principles have not been developed so far. In fact, Kierkegaard is perceived as a religious thinker, but whose philosophy has not been used to design existential exercises applicable in philosophical counseling groups addressed to the parents of children with various motor or mental disabilities; and this despite the fact that there are studies, such as McDonald, W. (2013), which indicate the direct influence of Kierkegaard on theorists and makers of therapeutic models such as Biswanger, Rogers or Rollo May.

### **Relevance of the topic for the scientific community**

The importance of the topic addressed in this paper is given by the fact that it considers the study of a topical issue, little investigated, which continues the results of previous research and which fills an existing gap in the literature. The fact that the subject is an interdisciplinary one, located on the border between philosophical counseling and the psychotherapeutic branch of (clinical) psychology, and its investigation may lead to the emergence of new intervention programs that focus on increasing self-knowledge, management of existential states and to start from other existential or phenomenological philosophical systems), shows the importance of studying the topic proposed above and at the same time its applicability.

The novelty of the topic is a first argument that reveals the importance of studying the above-mentioned topic. The main contribution of this study is to fill an existing gap in the literature, so far there are no studies that postulate ways in which existential and / or phenomenological systems can be exposed and / or discovered in group philosophical counseling, such as and existential exercises, based directly on composite models based on Kierkegaard's philosophy. It must be borne in mind, however, that Kierkegaard's philosophy was presented as having therapeutic value, Kierkegaard himself being called a "paradox therapist," but we cannot say that models with a clear structure have been presented in the literature so far.

The topic of this paper is based on the results of research that explored the dimensions approached by the Danish philosopher and expands knowledge in this area by indicating how Kierkegaardian principles and models can be used in group counseling of parents of children with various disabilities.

The subject is an interdisciplinary one, located at the border between the clinical branch of psychology and the applied branch of philosophy. He needs knowledge in both areas. Moreover, the link between the field of psychology and that of philosophy should not be ignored, given the fact that an individual may have associated existential states that can not be included in the principles of a clinical diagnosis, but which have in mind the field of counseling. Thus, the interdependence between these two domains must be emphasized, and it can be one, even if "invisible", yet have an effect on the way the individual chooses to live or rebuild his self or world. Another argument in support of (a). the importance of studying how Kierkegaardian principles can be applied in group counseling frameworks, and (b). the way in which existential and / or phenomenological models can substantiate the structure of a support group is that of the value and practical implications that existential therapy has on how individuals can know and rethink the self, the world, the relationship with others etc.

In this sense, the development of existential counseling programs, focusing on the construction of the self and the world, must be preceded by the investigation of the characteristics of a group with various peculiarities. This paper presents how the principles of the Kierkegaardian philosophical system can be applied in a group of parents (Romanians) of children with neurodevelopmental disorders and thus expand the area of research in the field of philosophy applied in existential practice. The widening of the coordinates in which an existential counseling group can be structured (and which should also include the inhabitants of Romania) is a primary reason for this work.

### **The structure of the paper and the main contribution of each chapter in achieving the objective of the paper**

We choose to present below the conclusions of each chapter and the main contributions that this paper postulates.

*The first chapter* of the paper investigates the principles and methods according to which philosophical counseling structures its approach. The contributions of Pierre Hadot, who speaks

of "spiritual exercises" practiced in ancient Greece and the Latin world, as well as methods such as "Nelsonian-Socratic discourse", "Christian meditation", "moral imagination" or "the idea of humility" are thus mentioned. , characteristic of the Stoic philosophy or the Augustinian-Christian vision.

In fact, the existential-phenomenological paradigms used in the approach of philosophical counseling are analyzed. In this sense, the contributions of Viktor Frankl in the development of the logotherapeutic method (which emphasizes the importance of determining the meaning and purpose for which life can or must be lived), of Irvin Yalom, who draws attention to the four fundamental existential concerns or worries feels "attracted" (namely the meaninglessness, freedom, loneliness and fear of death) of Rollo May about the foundations on which existential therapy originates and of Emmy van Deurzen and Martin Adams about the methodology on which the process existential analysis is also supported by the methods that are used in the existential-phenomenological therapeutic approach.

This chapter also discusses contemporary philosophical counseling systems and procedures such as "critical thinking", "creative thinking", "thinking experiments", "philosophical cafes" and "philosophy for children". The theories of established philosophical advisers are also postulated. Thus, if it is due to Peter Raabe that the field of philosophical counseling has defining characteristics, his theory presenting in detail how the philosophical counselor differs from the psychological and psychotherapist, Ran Lahav draws attention to the ways in which "the path of wisdom "Can be found and, on the other hand, the way in which an individual can find peace is based on the process of self-knowledge. In fact, Lydia Amir's contribution is not omitted from being presented. Moreover, if Lou Marinoff, by exposing two methods of philosophical counseling (MEANS and PEACE), developed the process by which the "application" of the principles of philosophy to individuals and groups can be achieved, Gerd Achenbach paved the way by which methods of philosophy various sources) can be applied in the field of "practical philosophy".

The way in which philosophical counseling is similar and also different from the process of cognitive-behavioral psychological counseling is mentioned in this chapter, which does not hesitate to mention at the end the stage in which the Romanian environment received the procedures and methods of philosophical counseling and managed to implement them.

*The second chapter* presents the differences of method between the descriptive and the interpretive phenomenology, as well as the way in which the philosophical counseling of

existential origin differs from the existential psychotherapeutic models. The postulate of the principles according to which the process of discovery, description and interpretation of the self, the world and existence is made is considered by this chapter. It also examines and questions the way in which the interpretation is interposed between epoché and the verification of assumptions and premises, arguing that a phenomenological process must include both components such as "horizontalization", "description" and "equalization" in its approach. therapeutic. The chapter deals, moreover, in addition to the way in which existential themes are found in the "feelings" of the parents of children diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders, the sources of support they turn to to improve their conditions.

*In the third chapter* of the paper are exposed, in its own sense, ways in which existential and phenomenological systems can be presented and explained by the existential counselor of the support group, can be discovered by participants in the therapy group or can be re- created (by specific techniques). Given the fact that at present there is no methodology in the literature to adapt existential-phenomenological systems to groups of "novices", we started this approach in order to improve the way in which philosophical counseling, of existential origin, can be understood and deepened by a large community of people.

We draw attention to the fact that through storytelling, schematic presentation, the use of images to double the informational discourse of the counselor, the use of gestures or philosophical fragments, the use of artistic procedures such as poetry, drawing, painting or caricature and interpretation in musical form an existential or phenomenological philosophical system can be exposed in a group meeting, as it can be discovered by participants through methods such as personifying constructs, using dramatic play and characters, "meetings" with the philosopher (in dramatic or playful acts), discussions in the virtual space with the philosopher or through the diagram of relationships. Last but not least, the conceptual delimitations between the terms "principle", "method" and "exercise" have been made, and the relationship they can establish with existential source therapy has been suggested.

*The fourth chapter* deals with how the Kierkegaardian philosophical system can be recovered through philosophical counseling and adapted to the needs of parents who have one or more children diagnosed with various neurodevelopmental disorders (eg autism spectrum disorder, epileptic encephalopathy, spastic tetraparesis, hearing loss and others) and participating in the

existential source support group based on the theory of the Danish philosopher. Thus I suggested that in the process of identifying internal conflicts, existential states, particular situations they live in and which make them think about the meaning of their "world" and the meaning they have in it, the parents of such of special children can use, as resources, principles postulated by Kierkegaard in his system and adapted by us to the main purpose of the support group. Therefore, principles such as the principle of absolute alternatives / paradox, the principle of responsibility, the principle of existence, the principle of necessity and possibility, the principle of the demonic or the principle of the moment can be tools through which parents can describe and interpret their own world. "Self-construction", a phrase used by us during this paper and invested with the meaning described by the process by which an individual builds his "subjectivity" once he understands the concept of authenticity and begins to "live it". We must not forget that models such as becoming, general Kierkegaardian stages, faith, anxiety and existential guilt, despair and love are postulated in this paper and are innovative ways in which Kierkegaardian philosophy can be recovered in the process. individual or group philosophical counseling.

*The fifth chapter* present the results of a research that included fourteen participants and which sought to determine the major themes and general principles which are found in the speeches of parents who have children diagnosed with various neurodevelopmental and locomotor disorders (such as autism spectrum disorder, paraparesis, epileptic encephalopathy, hearing loss and others). In fact, the effect that the diagnosis has on the cohesion of the family and the parents' relationship with their little one is investigated and exposed by this chapter.

The research included a father and thirteen mothers, natural parents of children with physical disabilities or neuropsychiatric disorders, originating from in the western region of our country (Arad and Timisoara), aged between 24 and 42 years (average age being 31 years), who have graduated at least high school and are Romanian or Hungarian citizenship (in the case of a single subject).

The findings of the study showed that most parents who participated in the study claimed that the guilt occurred immediately or in the first months after finding the diagnosis. In fact, relationships with friends and relatives gradually cooled (in the post-diagnostic period), each of them (parents) finding as new friends parents of other children with disabilities. The fear of what will happen to their little one in the future, after they die, appears to most of the parents surveyed. At the same time, following the thematic analysis, we can say that all the parents who participated



in the study are determined to fight for their children, although not all of them manage to define precisely why they do this. The fear of having a new child seems to frequently accompany the condition of the parent of a child with disabilities. Among the difficulties faced by the parent of a child with a neurodevelopmental disorder and / or a locomotor disability are: maladaptive behaviors of the child, which he is put to manage daily; the stress generated by the moment when the child should be integrated in a mass academic structure; difficulties in communicating with one's own child; maintaining family cohesion - which undergoes major changes as he learns and becomes aware of the child's diagnosis.

The results of the research also indicated that parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (with or without attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder), hearing loss, paraparesis, macrocephaly, spinal cord and cerebral creatine deficiency syndrome are considered responsible when it comes to caring for their own child, they are afraid that their little one will be left alone after they die, they feel guilty about certain behaviors they did before the birth of their child (but in too few cases they feel guilty about the child's diagnosis), some find meaning in having a child with disabilities and most relate to God when it comes to explaining the suffering they are going through or why they have a child with disabilities. It should also be noted that the questions that begin with "why ...?" are most commonly encountered in and during speeches of parents of children diagnosed with neurodevelopmental and / or locomotor disorders.

I argued that new lines of research should investigate how the results of this research are reflected in the speeches of parents from other geographical regions of Romania, of other nationalities or who have children with the same diagnosis.

Based on the study presented above, we decided to compose a support group (whose principles are set out in *the sixth chapter* of this thesis and) which, in addition to the fact that it aims to address the issues faced by parents of special children faces, tested how Kierkegaardian principles and models can be applied in existential source therapy groups. The participation in the group was voluntary, it was accompanied by a written consent to participate and an agreement that the data collected and the results can be studied and can be presented in the literature, of course, under the protection of anonymity of participants.

If in the first meeting the coordinates of the Kierkegaardian system were presented in the form of a story, with Angst as the main character, the second meeting involved the involvement of the participants in the "questionnaire" process. Thus, following the meeting, several questions

were determined, including "How can I understand my child if he does not speak?", "How can I get rid of the fear of having a new child?", "What will happen? with my baby after I die? " and "Why did this happen to me?", questions that were the subject of the following meetings. In the third group meeting I applied the MEANS method, composed by Lou Marinoff, and in the fourth session I checked and demonstrated the applicability of the multi-dimensional Kierkegaardian model. The fifth meeting aimed at involving parents in the process of interpreting manual work materials, composed by their children, to determine the "world" in which they are and the "bridges" that can be drawn between the world of parents and that of special children. . Following the analysis, it was concluded that "music", "gestures" and "unstructured manual work" are ways in which parents can open their children's world and enter it. If the sixth session explored the usefulness of the gesture in the communication between the child - parent and vice versa, the seventh meeting was dedicated to the application of a semi-structured interview, which verified how parents manage to represent their world, self and relationship. with their child after group meetings. In this sense, five case studies mark the results of group meetings.

### **The main contributions of the paper**

A first contribution of this paper aims at the contribution they bring with them the ways in which existential and / or phenomenological systems can be presented to a support group consisting of parents of children with disabilities. The presentation in the form of a story, a schematic presentation or the use of other procedures set out in this thesis facilitates the understanding of a philosophical system by novices. Also using such methods. we prevent group participants from encountering bodat philosophical language within the specialized term; and (b). we facilitate the understanding of the reference system by the participants.

Another contribution of this thesis refers to the investment of the postulates of the Kierkegaardian philosophical system with therapeutic value. Thus, based on the remarks of the Danish philosopher, we composed models and set out principles that can be the subject of philosophical counseling sessions (individual or group). Thus, the recovery of the theses postulated by Kierkegaard in works such as "Fear and Earthquake", "The Concept of Anxiety", "Or-or" and others and their investment with therapeutic value in the support group for parents of children with physical and mental disabilities is a major contribution of this paper.

On the other hand, the determination of the main themes that appear in the discourse of the parents of children with disabilities is another major contribution to which this paper refers. Investigating the existential value of parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders and the difficulties they face in everyday life has been one of the objectives of this thesis and can also be considered a starting point for future research that aims to design programs intervention or counseling targeting this target group.

Last but not least, verifying the applicability of Kierkegaardian models and principles of existential counseling is another major contribution to which this thesis refers. We must mention that based on the research aimed at determining the themes that appear in the speeches of parents of children with neurodevelopmental disorders, a counseling group was composed whose exercises and tasks were based on the premises of the philosophical system composed by Søren Kierkegaard. It was thus determined (among others) that through gestures, music or unstructured manual work parents can enter the world of their children (with deficiencies), can describe and interpret it. In fact, the group addressed frequently asked questions that parents of children with disabilities often refer to and adjusted ways in which existential group counseling, through Kierkegaardian philosophy, could be applied.

### **Future directions of research**

Based on the conclusions of this paper, future studies should: a). to develop existential models of philosophical counseling starting from the systems exposed by Albert Camus, J.P. Sartre, E. Cioran, A. Schopenhauer et al. and adapting the way of working to groups targeting parents, grandparents or guardians of children with or without neurodevelopmental disorders; b). to verify how Kierkegaardian models and principles (composed by the author of this thesis based on the Kierkegaardian system and set out in the present paper) can be adapted to support groups that include parents of children with the same diagnosis (eg autism spectrum disorder ), who have developed the functional expressive language and / or who come from other areas of Romania; c). to determine the central themes of the speeches of (Romanian) parents who have typical children, but who face various existential states; d). to verify the manner in which philosophical counseling methods successfully implemented outside Romania's borders (in individual or group frameworks) can be adapted and validated on the Romanian population; e). to determine the manner in which the steps to establish a progressive organization that recognizes the profession of "philosophical

advisor" in Romania can be established; f). to verify the applicability of the methods by which a philosophical system can be presented to a support group or can be discovered by the participants in the existential advisory group.

Moreover, future research should investigate the medium- and long-term effectiveness of group conclusions and the effectiveness of parents in implementing group projects such as opening a parents' association to care for children whose parents are dying ( but who have contributed financially in advance).

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