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## Post-Traumatic Affects and Intimate Partner Violence: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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### Abstract

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), violence perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner in an intimate relationship, is the most common form of violence against women.

The role of affects in PTSD in particular shame, guilt and fear has proven to be even more relevant among women who experience IPV.

The aim of the study was to explore the meaning of affects according to women who experienced IPV, particularly in the relationship with their partner and during the process of separation and help-seeking.

Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003), a semi-structured interview was developed to investigate the experience that women victims of violence have of the affects of shame, guilt and fear in relationship to their history of violence and the process of help seeking.

Eight women were selected, based on the following inclusion criteria: having suffered violence in a marital relationship and having terminated the relationship with the partner.

Five main themes emerged, that highlighted the role of the affects investigated and the difference between guilt, shame, fear and terror. The deepening of the role of these affects could facilitate interventions with women who have experienced IPV, making the responses of the services more sensitive and structured.

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Intimate Partner Violence; Trauma; Post-traumatic affects; Violence against women, Help seeking.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (2013), violence against women is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is the most widespread form of violence against women. In 1996, the American Psychological Association defined IPV as an actual or threatened physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or

stalking abuse by an intimate partner. An intimate partner can be a current or former spouse or non-marital partner, such as a boyfriend/girlfriend or dating partner. IPV concerns, for the vast majority of cases, men's violence against women (World Health Organization, 2013).

In the Member States of the European Union, 22% of women have suffered physical and / or sexual violence/abuse from partners (FRA, 2014). In Italy, where our study was conducted, 31.5% of women between 16 and 70 years have experienced at least one episode of sexual or physical violence by partners or ex-partners (ISTAT, 2015).

Although many studies have measured only physical and sexual violence, as the most visible and easily identifiable forms of IPV (Ruiz-Perez & Plazaola-Castano, 2005), all forms of violence are always accompanied by psychological violence, which is identified as the main source of suffering for women who have experienced IPV (Dutton et al., 2006; Follingstad, 2007; Samios et al., 2020).

In addition to the way violence occurs, it is also important to consider the differences with respect to the relational context in which such violence unfolds, since it is useful for understanding the specific consequences that violence can have on a psychic level. Johnson (1995) has distinguished two forms of male violence against female partners: intimate terrorism and situational couple violence. In intimate terrorism, the perpetrator imposes strict control over the partner through emotional abuse, threats, intimidation, economic abuse and guilt. On the other hand, situational couple violence concerns a conflict that turns into an unstoppable series of growing violence but without the presence of control strategies (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Heshmati, 2016). It is also closer to the conceptual structure of the theory family conflict (Bradbury et al., 2001; Straus & Gelles, 1990). Intimate terrorism is probably best conceptualized through the patriarchal model of male domination (Frieze & Browne, 1989). This violence is rarely an isolated incident, as it often becomes an escalation of increasingly serious episodes of violence (Coleman, 1997; Walker, 1977), with severe consequences for the victims. Women who experience violence within Intimate Terrorism are more frequently assaulted and more likely to be injured, to exhibit more symptoms of PTSD, to use tranquilizers and antidepressants and to lose their jobs.

Alongside depression, panic attacks, suicide attempts, non-suicidal self-harm and alcohol or drug abuse (Campbell, 2002; D'Aguanno et al., 2017; Ellsberg et al., 2008; Gargiulo & Margherita, 2019; Pico-Alfonso et al., 2008) trauma appears as the main consequence of IPV (Ehrensaft, 2009; O'Keefe, 1998; Resnick et al., 1993).

Over the years, several authors have brought to light that PTSD, as defined by the main diagnostic manuals, is not exhaustive of the symptomatology that women who have suffered

violence present and prefer to talk about complex PTSD, due to its characteristics of prolonged and repeated trauma (Herman-Lewis, 1992; Van der Kolk, 1996). The presence of trauma compromises the process of construction of meanings (Bohleber, 2007) by hindering the ability to represent, mentalize (Levine, 2014) and regulate emotions (Cloitre et al., 2002).

Several studies show the important relationship between emotions and trauma, as it can lead to a lack of awareness of emotional states (Bouton et al., 2001; De Luca Picione et al 2019; Litz et al., 2000; Somma et al 2019; Veazey et al., 2004), but also to the apparition of specific emotions with specific consequences on the woman's psyche (De Vincenzo & Troisi, 2018; Troisi, 2018). Also, in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) for PTSD, the symptom of criterion D (affectation D4-negative), which underlines the important presence of affects such as anger, shame and fear in those who have suffered trauma, has been included (Badour et al., 2017). In particular, negative affects, including shame and guilt (Benau, 2020; Lee et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2006) seem to be implicated in the maintenance of PTSD symptoms (Dagleish & Power, 2004; Resick & Miller, 2009).

Furthermore, emotional, alongside with cognitive, social and psychosocial factors seem to keep the woman from leaving the violent relationship (Kwon & Park, 2019) and seek help (Band-Winterstein, 2006; Bell & Naugle, 2005; Buchbinder & Winterstein 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998; Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Women who have undergone IPV can have access to informal (like family and friends) or formal (like police, social services, anti-violence centers and health workers) help. However, the process of help seeking, which involves becoming aware of one's problem, putting it into words and asking for assistance, appears to be very complex (Liang et al., 2005).

## **1.2 Objectives of the study**

Literature has identified that specific emotions such as fear, guilt and shame play a major role in maintaining abusive relationships (Andrews et al., 2000; De Vincenzo & Troisi, 2018; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Troisi, 2018), in help-seeking (Kabile, 2012; Prosman et al., 2014) and in processing the trauma (Hien & Ruglass, 2009; Lee et al., 2001; Wilson et al., 2006).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the term affect, understood from the metapsychological point of view as a set of emotions, feelings and passions, which could be verbally represented through the metaphorical image, is preferred to the term emotion (Green, 1973; Imbasciati, 1991).

In psychoanalytic literature, the affect of shame appears to be associated with the feeling of passivity and powerlessness, and also with the narcissistic failure that being exposed to the other

and being treated as an object (Margherita & Troisi, 2014; Morrison, 1999). Shame is an archaic affect, linked to impotence, to feeling helpless, naked and exposed to the gaze of the other which makes one disarmed and deprived of sufficient protection (Ferrant, 2004).

More recently the psychodynamics of affects is moving towards a more precise differentiation between guilt and shame (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In fact, the sense of guilt can be associated with transgression and makes the subject remain active, absorbed in the action, even during the reparative gesture that follows the act considered guilty (Tisseron, 1992).

Alongside shame and guilt fear is also often reported by women who have suffered violence as an emotion generated by the violent behavior of the partner and which prevents the woman from asking for help (Barnett, 2001; Rennison & Welchans, 2000).

Considering that affects play a fundamental role in keeping women who have suffered violence in a state of passivity and confusion, the objectives of the study were to explore, through the narrative reconstruction of violence experienced by women from the Neapolitan territory:

1. The meanings that women attribute to the affects experienced during the relationship with their partner and if and how they changed following the separation and during the process of help-seeking.
2. The meanings that women attribute to shame, guilt and fear in the stages of violence escape and help-seeking.

## **2. Materials and Method**

The study included qualitative research using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The IPA approach is a form of research with an idiographic focus on specific details and a hermeneutic approach on how the participant gives meaning to his / her own experience; the researcher's interpretation of the participant's meanings is important.

It is phenomenological because it gives importance to narrative truth and considers the participants the true experts of the phenomenon being researched (Margherita et al., 2017).

Moreover, it has allowed us to deal with a delicate phenomenon such as violence with the necessary prudence.

The IPA methodology involves several phases both in the research planning phase and in the data analysis phase.

## 2.1 Procedure and Participants

This study is the result of the collaboration between the authors and an Anti-Violence Centre (AVC), which offers support to women victims of violence in terms of legal counseling, psychological assistance, employment counsellor and counselling groups. In Italy, the AVCs receive and support women who have suffered violence are financed by Local Administrations, sometimes discontinuous. They are in fact often organized on a voluntary basis (ISTAT, 2018).

30 women who had used AVC services were contacted by telephone and 10 agreed to take part in the research.

Therefore, 10 Italian women residing in Campania were interviewed.

All women were asked to sign an informed consent and to fill out a personal data sheet in which they were asked age, educational qualifications, profession, marital status, presence and number of children (Table 1). According to the IPA methodology, more attention should be given to quality rather than quantity in the choice of participants (Smith, 2011): since homogeneity is more important than the number of participants, 8 of the 10 participants were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria:

1. they have suffered violence in a marital relationship
2. at the moment of the interview they have ended the violent relationship

Exclusion criteria: two women were excluded from this study because they both did not meet one of the inclusion criteria; one of them still had an intimate relationship with her aggressor; the other one had suffered violence in a non-marital relationship which in terms of duration and intensity was very different from that of the women who had suffered it in their marital relationship.

The interviews, each lasting an average of two hours, considering the sensitivity of the topic addressed, were carried out in a protected setting at the same anti-violence center to which the women had resorted. The interview was audio recorded and then transcribed to give us, in the analysis, a continuous reference to the words of the participants, as required by the IPA methodology.

The purpose of the informed consent form is to provide confidentiality and anonymity to the participants involved in the study. We adopted the informed consent based on the guidelines published by the National Register of Psychologists in Italy. The study was conducted in accordance with the World Health Organization ethics guidelines (2011).

The characteristics of the participants are shown in Tab1. At the time of the interviews, they were between 37 and 50 years old (M: 42.25; DS: 4.9).

The level of education is medium-high: 6 women have a high school diploma: 1 is university graduated and 1 has completed middle school.

They all had one or more children from their partner and, at the time of the interview, they were living with their mothers.

In all cases, the women experienced both psychological and physical violence and in 2 cases there was also sexual violence. In two cases the husband implemented stalking dynamics following the separation. All women have an ongoing legal separation.

The request for help, for all the women interviewed, was made after many years of violence (from 7 to 23 years). The women turned to various formal and informal services, both institutional and private, and came into contact with types of help that were often dysfunctional in situations of violence: one woman turned to ecclesiastical services and two to family mediation and couples' therapy.

In five out of eight cases, the perpetrator was reported to the police.

At the time of the interview, six out of eight women had a job.

The protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the Section of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Naples Federico II, Italy.

## **2.2 Description of the instrument**

The semi-structured interview was divided into three areas that explore the experience of violence, the process of seeking and accessing help and the emotional experiences:

- The narrative reconstruction of the history of violence and the affects felt during the relationship (e.g. *What affects did you feel during the violent relationship?*)
- The narrative reconstruction of the help-seeking process and the affects felt in its different phases, i.e. through searching, finding and getting help. (*What affects did you feel in the different phases of the help-seeking process?*)
- Exploration, more specifically, of the effects of fear, shame and guilt, when those affects are not directly mentioned or are little explored by participants (e.g. *Have you ever felt ashamed? In which situations? You referred to the guilt, can you explain more precisely what you felt?*).

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Level of education	Working position	Duration of relationship	Children	First request for help	Forms of violence	Step of help seeking	Complaint
Serena	48	separate	middle school	Cook assistant	25 years	3	After 23 years of IPV	physical, sexual, and stalking	Police Informal help AVC	present
Mariagrazia	50	separate	high school diploma	Counselor, actress	15 years	2	After 8 years of IPV	physical and psychological	Police Private services (legal, couple psychotherapist) AVC	absent
Libertà	37	separate	high school diploma	unemployed	19 years	2	After 19 years of IPV	physical and psychological	Police AVC	present
Frettella	38	separate	high school diploma	teacher	14 years	2	After 12 years of IPV	physical, sexual, psychological,	Family mediator, Ecclasiastical services, Private services (legal) AVC	absent
Deborah	42	separate	high school diploma	shop assistant	22 years	2	After 15 years of IPV	physical and psychological	Private services (legal and psychological), Police AVC	present
Giovanna	40	separate	high school diploma	secretary	8 years	1	After 7 years of IPV	physical and psychological	Police AVC	present
Dafne	38	separate	university degree	unemployed	9 years	1	After 8 years of IPV	physical and psychological	Police Informal help AVC	present
Rosy	45	separate	high school diploma	Call center operator	18 years	2	After 18 years of IPV	Physical, psychological and stalking	Informal help AVC	absent

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

### 2.3 Analysis

The data collected were examined using the procedure described in the IPA process (Smith, 2011). All the interviews were analysed individually. The IPA case study approach requires researchers to conduct an in-depth analysis of each participant's interview. The first step in data analysis requires the researcher to immerse himself in the data and become familiar with it. The IPA takes into account the researcher's hypotheses and impressions (the first author personally conducted the interviews), but also aspects related to the non-verbal plan that resonated in his internal world, which are afterwards considered and discussed in comparison with the research team.

We first made paraphrases and preliminary comments based on the interview's transcriptions, then we extrapolated topics from the paraphrases and grouped them into main themes and sub-themes in order to create a coherent list.

### 3. Results

The study was ordinated under five main themes, each with different sub-themes.

Table 2 shows the main themes with their respective sub-themes and their frequency for each participant, so as to preserve the ideographic aspect of the research. When possible, the participants' own words were used to name the themes, in order to be as faithful as possible to the meanings they attributed to the experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

#### 3.1. *"Me under Special Surveillance: Dictatorship in My Private Space"*

All the women interviewed describe their relationship with their partner as a relational system based on control and domination, in which the inflicted psychological violence played an important role. The women lived in a constantly tense atmosphere: every attempt towards independence and autonomy was perceived as insubordination and betrayal because the partners asked them to fully adhere to the ideal of the woman they had (1a. *I had to be the woman he wanted me to be*). Jealousy was omnipresent in every situation, so much so as that women were forced to avoid cultivating other relationships, in particular with family and friends, and this often resulted into inevitable isolation (1b. *Undifferentiated jealousy: solitude and obligation of silence*).

*"He was allowed to do everything he wanted to, and I had to be flawless. I lived a life that wasn't mine, I had to be the woman he wanted me to be. If he could, he would have drawn me. Everything I did in his eyes was suspicious." He was building suspicious thoughts on the most unthinkable things: if someone looked at me on the street he said "He looked at you because who knows what you made him understand". That is, it seemed an obsessive, possessive jealousy, but for no apparent reason ... that is, he saw rottenness everywhere and became suspicious about everything"* (Deborah, 254).

To the forced isolation, which brought a feeling of profound solitude in women, is added the solitude also caused by the emotional absence of the partner. (1c) *The Uncanny: The Metamorphosis from Family Member to Stranger* expresses how the partner appears in the eyes of women as a distant image from the one he had presented at the beginning of the relationship. Not finding the man with whom they had fallen in love and who they had married made women lose their points of reference and live in a state of bewilderment that is compensated through a retreat into their internal world. Daydreaming, or abandoning oneself to an illusory world, seems to be the only way out of such a frustrating reality, as expressed in the theme (1d) *Broken Dreams: Fantasies and Disappointments*.

*"I didn't have anyone to talk to because he kept me away from everyone. He said that people were bad and that I didn't have to trust anyone. He was no longer a friend to me and no longer the one I had married. When I met him, he was somebody else"* (Libertà, 578)

*"In the fetal position with cushions, on the bed, I liked to dream, because in dreams you can do what you want, without anyone telling you what you can do or judging you. I don't hide from you that I also dreamed of a new love, I dreamed of well-being, of what a woman would like ..."* (Rosy, 511).

### 3.2. Between Guilt and Shame

Shame takes many forms and, according to the input collected, for the women it is not always distinguishable from guilt. (2a) *The Shame of Feeling Victimized* refers to the affect of shame that women associate with feeling defenseless and being treated as an object or a "thing", thus no longer a woman, nor a partner, nor a mother. The women reported how the constantly devaluating look of their partner made them feel inadequate, unsuitable in any situation, postponing an experience of failure. It seems, however, that such a gaze can be found in the eyes of anyone who becomes aware of their own history of violence, so much so that they begin to live (2b) *the gaze of the other as a universal deforming mirror* that is making it difficult to speak with anyone about their experience of violence:

*"I have been through a thousand facets of shame, shame for the humiliations I have suffered, shame for a life lived in such a way that if I talk to anyone about it today I feel ashamed, shame for ending a marriage, shame for what people say, for not having found another way, for not having been able to react, for not being able to get out of the relationship"* (Daphne, 192).

(2c) *His Filth, Insecurity and Shame Were Mine*, shows how the shame felt by women was also the shame that the aggressor, on the other hand, does not seem to feel: they sensed that the fantasies and behaviors they embraced did not belong to them but they lived them as if they were their own. Consequently, the border between guilt and shame appears blurred as women blame themselves for the violence, they have suffered not for having caused the violence, but for having chosen this partner. Besides, the theme "(2d) *It's My Fault, I Deserved It*" appears often in their discourse.

*"When others don't understand and when you can't do anything to change things, you wonder if he's right about the fact that you're not adequate, that you're wrong. Furthermore, you find yourself thinking that did not understand the signs to avoid this situation, and you think that you deserve the things that he put you through ... that he, my husband, was my punishment"* (Mariagrazia, 61).

*"He was not ashamed of anything, I felt the shame he should have felt for the things he said to me and for all the times he would make a scene in front of people's eyes"* (Giovanna, 83).

Women warn that others hold them accountable for what they have suffered. They are criticized both for the choices they have made and the ones they have not made, both for the violence they have endured and for having endured it, and also for having the feeling that any of their actions would have been considered wrong. The influence of religious thought and social stereotypes on women, in fact, take on a central role and a thought such as "(2e) *Women Must Carry the Cross*" resonates for a long time through guilt in their internal world, even after the end of the relationship.

*"I went to talk to the priest who married us and it was a mistake because the priest supported his family. He said to me: "You must carry the cross. Jesus has carried the cross and you must carry it too. Women must carry the cross." I spoke to my mother and she said "You must carry the cross". I spoke to my sister-in-law and she said "What are you complaining about? You don't know what we had to suffer from our husbands"* (Frettella, 600).

*"When the relationship ended, I had to justify the fact that we were no longer together and then the fact that I had to put up with this situation, the fact that I couldn't report because I didn't fill out the medical report in time. So, anything I did or not, I was wrong"* (Giovanna, 201).

### 3.3. Terror ... Still Paralyzes Me

Starting from the words of women, questions about fear appeared to be answered by referring to a much more pervasive and immobilizing affect, so it seemed more appropriate to speak about the affect of terror rather than fear, because the sensations that the women described were those of immobility and impotence rather than flight. All women said that in the face of danger (3a) *out of all possible reactions, paralysis took over*, inhibiting any activity in the reaction.

(3b) *I could not foresee his reactions: the pervasiveness of the danger* indicates how much the real danger could not be circumscribed, also because of the strategies implemented by the perpetrator. Because the partner or whoever for him could harm them at any time and in any place, terror thus became a constant threat:

*“Even today I would like to be free to walk, go out, eat ice cream, but I'm afraid ... I'm afraid to walk and that's not life. I can always meet him, and at that moment I couldn't foresee his reactions. I could react too; I could attack him or defend myself. But every time ... I ... I freeze, I freeze”* (Daphne, 698).

*“He was watching me and ambushing me, and sometimes he would come home suddenly to see what I was doing. I was in a state of constant anxiety ... If he was breathing, I could feel his breath. I was in prison. Now I go out on the street afraid of everything, because he always told me that if it wasn't him, he would send someone else to hurt me. So, I expect that anyone can hurt me. I still feel me trembling. Then there are times when my voice gets stuck, so I no longer speak, my throat tightens and I no longer speak”*(Libertà, 592).

(3c) *The Prison of My Fear: Always Hunted Down*, highlights how this pervasiveness of real danger translates into an internalization of the threat that limits the woman's movements. Terror is self-feeding, regardless of whether or not the partner is still there. This state of tension does not seem to abandon them even after the separation.

### 3.4. Affects and maternity: Sons as Brake and Driving Force;

The participants are all mothers and the children play different roles. Throughout the history of violence, women have considered (4a) *The Good of Children as an Obstacle to Separation*, so much so that after the separation they felt a sense of guilt for the hardships they had suffered, in particular for not adequately protecting their childhood and for not giving them a real family.

They associate this with the choice not to disrupt their relationship with their father, so that they don't feel responsible for further deprivations. However, this ensures that the bond with the violent partner is not completely severed. It remains alive through the children as expressed by the theme (4b) *The Torturer Is the Father*.

*"If I thought about leaving him, then I thought about the future I could give my children, the situation in which I would put them in. They deserved a family and even now I think they need a father and I'm not going to be the one to take him away from them. They will choose the relationship they want with him, but sometimes he uses them to hurt me and I don't know how to prevent them from suffering"* (Rosy, 556).

(4c) *The Responsibility of Being a Mother Saved Me from Death* highlights how children also play an important role as a driving force in the process of separation. Almost all women interviewed talked about being pushed towards separation, precisely because they wanted to protect their children and set a better example.

*"Several times I felt like I was running out of air. I had the impression I was dying. Then I looked at my daughters and said to myself " Don't worry ". They are the ones who give me the strength not to let go ... "* (Mariagrazia, 230).

*"If I accepted such a thing, it was like saying to my son" Women can be beaten, it's normal. "It was as if I was teaching him this ... it's something I would never do"* (Daphne, 321).

(4d) *The Difficulty of Regaining an Image in the Eyes of Children* proves to be one of the great challenges that women must face in order to restore a maternal relationship in which their children can recognize them once again in their role as mothers.

*"I was no longer anyone for my children, I was the slave of the house, the one who did what she had to do because he was in charge. When he left, the children felt entitled to do whatever they wanted and I couldn't handle this situation. I had to find the strength to impose myself, to be able to make myself respected, to be seen as a person"* (Libertà, 340).

### **3.5 Reborn After Psychic Death**

The affect of fear, however, seems to characterize the moment when women separated from their partner, a moment described by everyone as (5a) *The Act That Saves*, which is not premeditated but rather made in a state of confusion without knowing what the next step would be after a serious episode of violence:

*"I don't know how it happened; I don't know ... I don't have an explanation. At that moment I left, not knowing where to go. I hadn't really asked myself this question " Where am I going? ". I just knew I had to run away to survive"* (Serena, 438).

(5b) *Hope and Desire to Rise Again* seem to be the agents that sparked the transformation and the willingness to change, because these affects keep alive the possibility of a redemption, of an alternative life. The ability to continue to desire seems, in the words of women, to give them the strength not to let go, not to abandon themselves.

*"... the fact that you have a dream, an idea of how you want your life to be, you hold on it and go on. I had this desire for redemption and I wanted to take care of my children, to have a better life"* (Frettella, 345).

Compared to the process of escape from violence and access to help channels, women tell their experience as the strange situation of having experienced both death and rebirth in their lifetime. The verbalization of the traumatic situation is considered difficult, because it is often accompanied by disgust and pain, but five out of eight women recognize that only the possibility of rebuilding the experience through empathic and non-judgmental listening can lead to recovery of subjectivity, as expressed by the theme (5c) *Out Loud: Rebuilding Identity*.

(5d) *Wash the Guilt: Forgiving Yourself* shows how forgiveness seems to be an important achievement for all women, both for themselves and the partner for whom it seems necessary to erase their feelings of love and hatred to feel free.

*"Talking to others about what I went through makes me feel disgusted to this day. At the beginning I was unable to speak, I wanted to vomit. I couldn't say anything, especially because certain things I had to say were really upsetting even to me. There are many things that I really tried to forget, but then when you talk to someone you feel better. The act of talking makes you feel less bad about what you have experienced. So, if you engage in some introspection, you can even forgive yourself a little"* (Libertà, 110).

The theme (5f) *After the Separation, the Amazement: At the Mercy of the Others once again* explain how women often struggle to find help after the separation as they complain about the difficulty of understanding the functioning of the various assistance services present in the territory, which appear to be poorly coordinated. The greatest risk seems to be that of not understanding the possible steps which can be taken after the separation and of not being able to control the complexity of the situation:

*"I was alone to fight this situation. Nobody could understand me, or at least that was my feeling. I was referred to a thousand services and nobody helped me on a practical level. I felt lost ... He kept all his lucidity to protect his business, while I was not followed and I was badly advised. In the end I gave up everything to put an end to this story. I no longer have the house I had partially purchased with the help of my parents, nor adequate financial support. I have not even considered the idea of a women's refuge... it would be concrete proof of my failure"* (Mariagrazia, 43).

Sovraordinate and subordinate themes	Serena	Mariagrazia	Libertà	Frettella	Deborah	Giovanna	Dafne	Rosy
<b>1. Me under Special Surveillance: Dictatorship in My Private Space</b>								
1a I had to be the woman he wanted me to be	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
1b Undifferentiated jealousy: solitude and obligation of silence	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
1c The Uncanny: The Metamorphosis from Family Member to Stranger	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
1d Broken Dreams: Fantasies and Disappointments.		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
<b>2. Between Guilt and Shame</b>								
2-a The Shame of Feeling Victimized	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2b The gaze of the other as a universal deforming mirror	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2c His Filth, Insecurity and Shame Were Mine	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
2d Its My Fault, I Deserved It	*		*			*	*	*
2e Women Must Carry the Cross		*		*	*	*	*	*
<b>3. Terror ... Still Paralyzes Me</b>								
3a Out of all possible reactions, paralysis took over	*	*		*	*	*	*	*
3b I could not foresee his reactions: the pervasiveness of the danger	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
3c The Prison of My Fear: Always Hunted Down	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
<b>Affects and maternity: Sons as Brake and Driving Force</b>								
4a The Good of Children as an Obstacle to Separation	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
4b The Torturer Is The Father.	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
4c The Responsibility of Being a Mother Saved Me From Death		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
4d The Difficulty of Regaining an Image in the Eyes of Children	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
<b>Reborn After Psychic Death</b>								
5a The Act That Saves	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
5b Hope and Desire to Rise Again	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
5c Out Loud: Rebuilding Identity	*				*	*	*	*
5d Wash the Guilt: Forgiving Yourself		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
5f After the Separation, the Amazement: At the Mercy of the Others once again	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

#### 4. Discussion

According to what emerged from the data collected, it seems necessary to circumscribe the type of violence that the participants talked about: they all described a relationship in which the presence of control and the mechanisms of power put in place by the partner are involved in all parts of their life, from the private sphere to the public one. This situation is similar to the intimate terrorism described by Johnson (1995), in which psychological violence plays an important role (Hirigoyen, 2005; Walker, 1977), even in the absence of physical violence. It can be understood as a sort of private dictatorship (Nunziante Cesaro & Troisi, 2016) that goes through progressive and subtle attacks.

*“Women are not allowed to speak up, there is an obligation to keep silent, like in a political dictatorship there is a repression of freedom, of thought and of speech. The partner induces several frustrations in order to determine a state of insecurity in the woman: he does not respond to her expectations, ignores her needs and shows an emotional distance, all together causing a feeling of loneliness even in his presence. The implicit purpose of the perpetrator is to deprive the victim of her individuality and to destroy her subjectivity, which ultimately makes her an impotent object at the mercy of the dominant partner”* (Herman-Lewis, 1992; Hirigoyen, 2005).

The woman also experiences the disturbing transformation of the partner, on the one hand, from a family member to a stranger, and on the other hand, from the one who should have protected her to the one from whom it is necessary to protect herself. Therefore, it becomes clear that the basic trust acquired in the environment of growth and development has been corrupted because the danger does not come from the outside, but within a context that is familiar. The aggressor's desires and thoughts take the place of the woman's in a sort of identification with the aggressor (Ferenczi, 1932). The woman is left the only possible escape route on the reverie, which seems to be a protective mechanism.

The women interviewed often referred to the affects of shame and guilt in an interchangeable way, which is in agreement with the literature that considers these affects to be intimately linked on a psychic level; so much so that they have an undifferentiated common fund (Ferrant & Ciccone, 2015).

When they talk about their experience of feeling no longer treated as a wife, a partner, a mother or a woman, the affect of shame also appears predominant in the testimonies. This observation is also shared by the psychodynamic literature, that associates shame with an experience of dehumanization (Ferrant & Ciccone, 2003). Indeed, once all internal and external references are completely lost, what dominates the victims is no longer a simple inadequacy, but a global feeling of confusion, and this translates into extreme shame that leads the subject to hold on to everything that can prevent a psychic breakdown. This loss of identity references can facilitate

identification mechanisms (Coen, 1992) with the perpetrator, which may explain why the woman is ashamed instead of her perpetrator and why she feels dirty about the situations he has created (Harper et al., 2004).

Furthermore, the affect of shame is deliberately inflicted by the partner through continuous humiliations so as to achieve the subjugation and annihilation of the other (Margherita et al., 2014). The partner sends back to the woman an image of herself as an inadequate and unworthy being, "dirty" and punishable, and this relegates her to a state of passivity, where only the other is able to return a positive image of herself. However, the partner's gaze becomes a universal gaze, as if everyone could send her an imperfect image of herself. This situation prevents women from relying on another relationship and from breaking silence about their experience of violence.

Women often accuse themselves of the violence they have suffered, but not in terms of having provoked it, as is often reported in the literature (Phillips, 2000; Romito, 2005), but their guilt lies in having chosen that man as a partner, which resonates in their testimonies as a mistake they made against themselves, an error closer to the feeling of failure. In this, we can observe a defensive mechanism, as shame slowly turns into guilt. Shame is, in fact, considered a more archaic and destructive effect of guilt (Lewis 1995, Pandolfi, 2002; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney, 1996; Tisseron, 1992): it relates to a total failure of the identity of the individual, who is challenged by his own impotence. Transforming shame into guilt is useful to find a cause for one's malaise and restore an active position, attributing responsibility for the mistake to oneself and therefore also the possibility of preventing the recurrence of violence.

It can be assumed that the reason why the guilt does not appear in terms of "I provoked it" is due to the fact that, at the time of the interview, all women were out of the situation of violence and followed different paths of processing trauma.

The guilt is more likely to be present in terms of something external to the women caused by the victim blaming from both the family and the social environment, which concretize the tendency, at different social levels, to blame the woman for the violence she has suffered (Manfredi, 2020; Park & Ko, 2020).

It seems that when women refer to fear, they speak of something more intense and pervasive, more attributable to terror. In this scenario, terror is used by the partner as a tool to apply coercive control, which taken to the extreme violates human rights (Stark, 2013).

Terror blocks the woman and this state of passivity prevents her from becoming aware of the situation and reacting. Fear presupposes a real danger in the "here and now" and foresees a behavioral and psychic reactivity.

Neurophysiological studies also confirm that the three reactions to danger, i.e. attack, escape and freezing, activate different neuronal movements (Hagenaars et al., 2014) of the amygdala, hypothalamus and periaqueductal gray matter, all of which have distinct subzones. Next to the attack and escape, a third possibility was explicitly named by the women interviewed, the paralysis, comparable to freezing, which seemed to be the only viable alternative in the household. If the attack is linked with the emotion of anger and the escape is linked with fear, terror is the emotion associated with paralysis. Terror entails a specific passivation, thus distinguishing it from anger and fear which are considered to be active defenses, (Clit, 2002; Diel, 1985; Fraiberg, 1982).

Terror appears consistent: fueled by the constant threats of the partner and by the impossibility of being able to predict his reactions, it then becomes a condition of distress in which women lose the ability to detect any form of danger coming both from inside or outside the household. Even in the absence of a partner or a real danger, terror remains in the woman's life, producing a blockage, not only from a physical point of view, but also on a psychological level. This indicates the defeat of the subject, who wants to protect herself from a danger, whose proportions seem overwhelming.

The fact that all women interviewed had children within the abusive relationship shows how they took on different roles: while, at some stages of the relationship, the sense of protection towards children translated into an obstacle to separation, other times their presence facilitated the process of escape from violence. This is largely asserted by the literature that sees a conflict between ensuring the well-being of the child (Chang et al., 2010; Djikanovic et al., 2012) and the desire to support the family (Rodi et al., 2010).

The relationship between the children and their father can also serve as a way to preserve one last piece of the relationship after the separation. Through her children, who can represent a vulnerable part of herself, the woman still maintains a relationship with her former partner. This could be the reason why all the women interviewed try to preserve the relationship between the children and their father, but in this we can also read the possibility for women to make an autonomous decision and alleviate the guilt they feel towards their children for their previous choices. However, the possibility of giving children a better example, in terms of their relationship with the opposite sex and creating a less confrontational family atmosphere, urges women to think about separation. Redeeming the image of oneself as a mother in the eyes of children, which has been devalued in the relationship with the violent father, becomes their main purpose, even if it appears very tiring.

It is only during the act of escape and in the following time in which separation takes place that fear emerges. At first sight fear seems to be a protective, integrated and adaptive affect (Gullone, 2000) that puts women in a state of activity by stimulating the sensory and perceptive system, but it is also linked to the awareness of a real event, which is perceived as concretely dangerous and objectively traumatic. The women, in fact, claimed to have run away and asked for help when the violence took its most serious forms. The literature considers how suddenly the decision to exit violence occurs and how much it runs the risk of being quickly reversible (Katerndahl et al., 2017).

The possibility of hope and desire, which is accentuated by the presence of children, is also an expression of a sense of continuity of one's existence and allows a way out of violence (Katerndahl et al., 2015). Alongside with the idea of escaping, the idea of resisting makes its way in the woman's mind, which seems to take the energy from that anarchist drive (De Rosa, 2018; Zaltzman, 2011) that manifests itself in the extreme experiences.

Following the separation, the woman has to go through a long and hindered path of rebuilding her identity after having experienced psychic death, therefore experiences the possibility of rebirth in the course of her life (Gutiérrez Otero, 2015). In the reconstruction work, the role of the other seems fundamental both as a witness (Mucci, 2014) and as a reclaiming vision. The verbalization of the traumatic situation is considered difficult, but it allows a processing trauma by identifying the events and the affects related to them. Forgiveness also seems to play an important role as it simultaneously helps in forgiving themselves and the former partner in order to finally be free from any desire for revenge or anger. But the moment in which forgiveness is given to the violent partner is fundamental: in the course of the relationship, it can be dangerous for physical security and psychological well-being (Baldry et al., 2015); after the end of the relationship and through a therapeutic path, forgiveness appears useful for them to restore the relationship with the other and be open to new possibilities.

Many women, however, complain about the difficulty of finding a space of understanding between the various professional figures, both in public and specific services. The lack of coordination between the services indeed leads to a deep bewilderment caused by the inability to understand the phases, the sequence of the phases, the obligations of the intervention and the results to be achieved. This confusion leads to a state of passivity and dependence on the various services and their representatives which hinders the delicate process of regaining autonomy and being in charge of their own fate as they go soul-searching perhaps at the most critical moment of their life (Margherita et al., 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

The results have largely confirmed the fundamental role of shame, guilt and fear in the lives of women who have suffered IPV.

The women showed no particular difficulty in naming the affects explored, probably because they all had already completed a program of psychotherapy at the Anti-Violence Center where the recruitment took place. The difficulty in outlining the boundaries between the affect of guilt and the affect of shame shows the circularity between these two affects, intimately connected on a psychic level, although they both differ in the origin and the way they are processed. The emerging of the affect of terror, together with the affect of fear, has allowed us to thoroughly explore its characteristics, giving a new shade of color to the emotional world of women who have experienced conjugal violence.

It seems necessary to differentiate fear from terror; fear acts as an alarm that allows women to play an active role, prepare to flee and therefore take on a protective function, whereas shame, guilt and terror are involved in keeping the woman from escaping the relationship.

The affects of shame, guilt and terror seem to cross the different themes. They first develop in the household and are thereafter sustained in the public sphere, both by family and friends.

From a clinical point of view, it is essential to recover the affects so as to be able to process the traumatic experience and allow their transformation from their toxic value to a humanizing one (Kilborne, 2002).

In the affective-cognitive clinical relationship between patient and therapist, the traumatic event can be reprogrammed and rewritten in the subject's narrative. The interpretative clarity linked to the distinction between agents of violence and fundamental internal objects (Amati Sas, 2004) allows the clinician to embody the testimony of the victim in order to preserve their memories, thoughts and affections, so necessary in cognitive and ethical terms (Mucci, 2014).

The treatment of the traumatized woman requires clinical counselling aimed at developing the narrative reconstruction of the experience of violence, which is influenced by an adequate harmony with the affective state of the woman. Such harmony supports the therapeutic alliance and allows the therapist to rebuild the sense of security compromised by the traumatic event (Caretti et al., 2013; Margherita et al., 2018).

We must also consider how these affects, although they occur within the traumatic situation, have traumatogenic qualities, as they create an intolerable psychic state that threatens to disorganize and destroy all psychic functions.

This study is not without limitations: the affects chosen and investigated do not cover the whole range of affects that the victims of violence have experienced. We propose, in future studies, to broaden the range of the explored affects and to examine whether these affects emerge to the same extent in situations of intimate terrorism and in other forms of violent relationships.

However, this study has several significant implications: it allows experts, who work with women experiencing violence, to reflect on their emotional sphere, and offers them a way to understand how the affects progress in the different phases of women's experience. Furthermore, it allows us to understand the importance of naming and recognizing affects to initiate a process of subjectivation that restores their humanizing value.

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