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Meaning Attribution to Intimate Partner Violence by Counselors Who Support Women With Intimate Partner Violence Experiences in Greece

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Abstract

The present study refers to the meaning attributed to intimate partner violence by counselors supporting women who have experienced abuse and seek for help. The main focus of the study is the investigation of the effect of the counselors' work experience in changing the meaning of intimate partner violence. The research involved 10 counselors working in social services (counseling centers and shelter services), in Greece, who support women who have suffered intimate partner violence in their relationships. The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and their analysis followed the interpretative phenomenological method. The qualitative analysis of the interviews showed that the counselors' work experience broadens the meaning of intimate partner violence. The broadened definition of intimate partner violence seems to affect simultaneously the counselors' sense of (their) vulnerability to violence.

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Introduction

During the past decades, since the emancipation of feminism in Greece and worldwide, the phenomenon of domestic violence and more specifically the intimate partner violence emerged. Although a variety of definitions have been attributed to describe this phenomenon, from characterizing particular types of marriage to physical and psychological abuse, in the present study intimate partner violence concerns the behavior of a former or current spouse or partner of a woman which causes, or may possibly cause, physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological damage. Among other behaviors, acts of violence also include threats, intimidation, and restriction of freedom (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). This definition is indicative because it concludes coercive control in intimate partner violence relationships (Dutton & Goodman, 2005).

The present study focuses on probing the attributed meaning of intimate partner violence against women for counselors who support women as victims of intimate partner violence. Studies like the present one contributes to improvements in quality of counselor practices that are occupied at these specialized services.

In Greece where a specialized network with social services for women started to operate a few years ago, studies like the present one are in need to enhance counseling and psychotherapy strategies associated with intimate partner violence. More specifically, the General Secretariat for Gender Equality (GSGE) in Greece, within the framework of the "National Program for Gender Equality 2010-2013," funded by "Administrative Reform 2007-2013" organized a network of social services (counseling centers and shelter services) to provide support to women who have suffered some form of abuse (i.e., physical and/or psychological and/or sexual and/or economic, etc.) and their children. Within these structures—and among other professionals (e.g., lawyers, sociologists etc.)—counselors (social workers and psychologists) offer psychosocial support to women who mention that they have suffered abuse.

This network includes the following:

- The telephone hotline (15900) that operates 24 hr a day/365 days a year and provides information services and telephone counseling to women who are victims of all forms of violence;
- Twenty-five counseling centers set up in large municipalities of the country under the management of local government and fourteen counseling centers of GSGE in Greece;
- Nineteen shelter services for abused women and their children—also set up in large municipalities—and two shelter services of the National Center for Social Solidarity (EKKA Greece) in Athens and Thessaloniki,

which were already operating earlier, but now have upgraded and expanded their operation.

The GSGE coordinates and monitors the network with the aim of ensuring its successful and efficient operation while implementing a model for the operation of the network's structures that is based on the methodological approach of counseling with a gender perspective. It also designs and develops actions for public information and awareness (conferences, radio and television campaigns, brochures, etc.; Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government, n.d.).

Intimate partner violence is multiform. In the era of capitalist/financial crisis in Greece, intimate partner violence is imprinted through manifold mediations in the human psyche, resulting in unavoidable consequences, at a lesser or a greater degree. Symbolic violence, the social violence, as supplemental to the brutal physical violence, multiplies the magnitude of the results of the latter (Thapar-Björkert, Samelius, & Sanghera, 2016). Similar to the women who have experienced abuse, the counselors live in the same socioeconomic context and are already exposed to—at least—symbolic violence. Their close association with the stories of women who have suffered violence makes it possible for them to be exposed to the more tangible forms of violence, as this is expressed in the form of brutal force in the context of interpersonal relationships.

Empirical findings show that meaning of intimate partner violence is different for men and women (Bailey, Buchbinder, & Eisikovits, 2011; Mitra, 2013; Stanley,Fell, Miller, Thomson, & Watson, 2012). Women who have been abused and have participated in a qualitative research (Mitra, 2013) emphasized more on the psychological than physical abuse they had suffered from their partner or husband. According to researchers, the abusive behaviors frequently occur within a marriage or a relationship, can be repetitive, and last for a long time, inducing an enhanced impact on women when they narrated their lives. As noted by Mitra (2013), the participants in this study described intimate partner violence as a private and not a public issue and recognized their difficulty to talk about what was happening in the privacy of their home. Furthermore, they reported that they experienced feelings such as despair, ambivalence, confusion, loss, pain, and loneliness. One more qualitative study for women who have suffered intimate partner violence (Levin, 2014) argues that the counseling relationship of these women is characterized by the repetition of a pattern of communication that resembles the one they had with their abusive partner. More specifically, these women reported that the counselors did not actively listen to them, as was also the case with their partner. The conclusion of Levin (2014) is that a counseling relationship with

a woman who has suffered abuse needs to give emphasis in listening; in other words, there is a need for the counselor to come face-to-face with the full range of behaviors involved in the abuse situation.

However, in a qualitative research examining meaning of intimate partner violence by men, it is argued that men do not define intimate partner violence in a broad manner. This research showed that although participants (men from the general population) considered physical and sexual violence against women as unacceptable, it was not easy for them to take responsibility for behaviors that may be included in an abuse definition expanding beyond physical abuse (Stanley et al., 2012). It is worth noted that the denial of responsibility for abusive behavior and the failure to recognize certain behaviors as abusive are key factors in inhibiting help-seeking on the part of men who exercise violence (Milner, 2004; Wexler, 1999). At the same time, men attribute the responsibility for any nonphysical abusive behavior to their wives or partners (Stanley et al., 2012).

Similarly, a relevant research (Bailey, Buchbinder, & Eisikovits, 2011) involving male counselors who provided support to men who exercise violence against women found that the counselors limited the meaning of intimate partner violence. More specifically, the participants in this study acknowledged that if they define intimate partner violence as including a wide range of behaviors, they would eventually be driven into questioning about their own selves. However, by designating only some types of behaviors as violent, the participants were able to reconcile with their own reality. In this way, the male counselors recognized themselves at most as aggressive but not as violent.

Summarizing the aforementioned results the attribution of meaning for intimate partner violence differs between men and women. This is consistent with the fact that information and meaning do not constitute independent, discrete, and objective representations of reality that are simply transferred from person to person. On the contrary, they are socially constructed transactions that are constantly evolving. The way in which information acquires meaning depends on the superstitions, biases, and experiences of the individual as such, as well as on the context in which information is exchanged. There are multiple interacting influences affecting human interactions and words exchange. Listening to others is more than a pathetic action but is an active interpretation (Levin, 2014).

According to the above, the way in which intimate partner violence is defined appears to be particularly important for counselors supporting women who report they have been abused. It is often noted that long-term exposure of counselors to the narration of traumatic experiences from people who have

suffered some form of violence can affect their basic beliefs about the world, as, for example, whether the world is a safe context to live in and/or whether people are trustworthy. The counselors who work in similar frameworks may even experience symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder due to their offering counseling support to people who have suffered some form of abuse. These symptoms may include persistent thoughts, as well as anxiety and anger (Baird & Kracen, 2006). McCann and Pearlman (1990) also argue that these symptoms may vary from long term to permanent. Therefore, a broad definition of domestic violence can expose counselors to greater risk in the case that they have expanded the criteria to acknowledge some behaviors as abusive.

Intimate partner violence has been studied, using different perspectives. Indicative examples of relevant research include studies focused on the causal attribution of abuse on the part of perpetrators and victims (Flynn & Graham, 2010), women in dealing with their violent partner and abusive relationship (Grauwiler, 2008; Levin, 2014), the understanding of domestic abuse and its implementation for practice and policy (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011), narratives as a therapeutic tool for people who have suffered abuse (Pasupathi, Fivush, & Hernandez-Martinez, 2016), and theoretical perspectives to the therapeutic approach for women who have been abused (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). These studies focused mainly on the therapeutic/counseling treatment of women who have suffered abuse.

Based on the above the purpose of this research is to investigate the meaning attributed to intimate partner violence by counselors who work in social services (counseling centers and shelter services) for supporting the women who narrate experiences from intimate partner violence relationships.

More specifically, the target of the present study is to understand in which ways counselors change their personal approach in defining intimate partner violence, when listening to women who narrate their experiences. Specific research questions are as follows: (a) What is the initial meaning of intimate partner violence that counselors recall that they had before they started working at specialized social services? (b) What is the contemporary meaning of intimate partner violence for counselors after working for some period at these social services? Another goal of the present study was to investigate the possible ways in which personal meaning of intimate partner violence by the counselors affects their work and their lives in general. Finally, due to the fact that counselors supporting women are coming up with multiple urgent needs and frequent setbacks (Wildwind, 1984), the present study tries to enhance their abilities in supporting women who seek help and improve the quality of the aid provided in these specialized social services.

Method

The present study uses qualitative research methodology, and in particular, the interpretative phenomenological analysis. Considering both its purpose to explore the idiosyncratic subjective experience and the social awareness of the participants, as well as its character—as it addresses the sensitive issue of abuse—this study uses the specific methodology to better approach the participants' experiences and opinions (Smith, 2008). More specifically, the choice to use interpretative phenomenological analysis—according to which the researchers' involvement with the text gives them margin for more interpretative comments—was made on the basis that this method allows access to the inner world of the individual (Smith, 2008), as it does not aim to the generalization of the research results but, rather, to the in-depth study of phenomena in pursuit of the participants' own frame of reference (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Participants

The research participants were 10 professional counselors (nine women and one man), working in social services (counseling centers and shelters) that provide support to women who are victims of violence. The majority of women counselors participated in the study can be explained by the fact that women choose, more often than men, to be a mental health professional, although men working at social services are more empowered in status (prestige, authority, etc.; Clay, 2017). Six of them were working as psychologists and the remaining four were working as social workers. Five of the participants were working at Women's Counseling Centers, while the other five were working at shelters for women who are victims of violence and their children. Three of the ten participants had basic higher education degrees, six of them had master degrees, and one had a PhD. All the counselors had at least 18-month work experience at these specialized social services. Regarding their family status, five participants were married, one was cohabiting, and four were single. Half of the participants had at least one child. All of them were Greek citizens.

Interviews

The research tool selected is the semi-structured interview because it serves more effectively the purpose of the research, as it establishes the basic framework regarding the factors of counseling while providing the participants with the necessary freedom to express their experiences. The interview consisted of

a total of seven questions, for example, "At the present time, how would you define abuse?" "I would like you to recall through images, words, and so on how you defined abuse (based on previous related or not related to your current job work experiences) before you started working here," "Could you say that working with abused women has affected your personal close relationships?" and so on. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 min. Interview included open-ended questions, and the necessary time was provided to the participants to fully respond to the questions. All interviews were recorded and the recordings were then transcribed.

Procedure Rigor and Ethics

To conduct the research, we initially got permission from the relevant responsible authority and then we contacted the social service structures, shelters, and counseling centers informing them about the purpose of the research. The proposal was reviewed by the scientific committee of the GSGE. Both the proposal and the permission acquired secured the anonymity of the participants and our compliance with research ethics. The response was positive, which can be partly attributed to the fact that the two researchers are clinical psychologists with considerable prior clinical and research experience. Hence, the interviews were conducted based on mutual understanding and trust between participants and the interviewer, resulting in a sincere interview. The conduct of the interviews took place over a period of 4 months in 2015.

Data Analysis

After the accurate transcription of the interviews, each of the two researchers read all of the transcriptions (10), separately and repeatedly, and in this process, we took notes and wrote down our observations and thoughts. These notes may include repetitive phrases, questions, emotions, and descriptions of, or comments on, the language used (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). In the second stage of the analysis, we reviewed the text and identified the themes that best represent the essential qualitative elements of the interview. It is at this point of the process that psychological concepts or terms may arise. After the identification of the key themes of each part of the text, we looked for possible links among those themes (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008).

In the third step, we attempted to give an overall structure to the analysis, associating the themes that were extracted so as to create "groups" or conceptual schemas. The purpose of this step is to get a group of thematic categories and draw hyper-categories constituting a hierarchical relationship between the first and the second (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). At the end of the

process, we exchanged the results of our separate analyses and found a significant convergence in the key categories. This approach allowed us to maximize the validity and reliability of the results by applying investigator triangulation (Golafshani, 2003). In other words, both researchers investigated the data, interpreting them at different time and location, agreeing upon the key categories but approaching them differently, following a different discourse. Finally, we jointly discussed and recorded the final results.

Results

The definitions set forth for meaning of intimate partner violence can be categorized into three themes. In the first theme, the definitions related to the period prior to the acquisition of work experience in exclusively supporting women who have suffered intimate partner violence. Here, the definition is expressed schematically in the form of "a man beating a woman." The focus is mainly on the physical form of abuse and less on other forms, such as psychological, emotional abuse, and so on, as well as in myths prevailing about the violence against women. The definitions of intimate partner violence falling under the second theme are the ones that emerged through work experience. The second theme could be labeled as "intimate partner violence has many shades." This construction seems to stem from work experience. The third and the final theme could be labeled as "intimate partner violence is a power play." This definition highlights the active role of the woman victim, and it is related not only to the experience of counselors but also to their attribution of dynamic elements to the woman who suffers violence in her domestic environment. Viewing a woman who narrates experiences of intimate partner violence as a "survivor" (i.e., emphasis on the fact that these women managed to elude intimate partner violence and narrate their experience) and not as a victim (i.e., emphasis on their suffering) may help counselors to profoundly listen to these experiences and also not feel themselves so vulnerable against violence.

Meaning of Intimate Partner Violence Before Working in the Specialized Social Services

Participants were asked to recall the meaning of intimate partner abuse before working in the specialized social services that support women who narrate experiences of intimate partner violence ("What is the meaning of intimate partner violence for the counselors before working at specialized social services that the participants recall?").

The participants believed that physical violence was the most common form of intimate partner violence that participants refer to before working at these specialized social services. This trend is depicted in the answer of a psychologist working at counseling center: "[to really identify something as interpersonal partner violence] something obvious [is needed] like a bruise or a man beating a woman…"

Although physical violence was most frequently reported by the participants, some of them focused on other dimensions of intimate partner violence, such as emotional abuse. A social worker at a shelter reported, "Emotional abuse, psychological abuse." Narrations like this one resemble more a scientific approach than a personal opinion, suggesting that intimate partner abuse might be a delicate subject to elaborate on. Other participants recalled more personal memories that could make the meaning of intimate partner violence as a more private situation, like this social worker at a counseling center: "Ok, I told you, I had recurring memories [silence], but I kept them repressed. Like this. Like something very restricted that you can't talk much about it [silence] I may have had more tolerance."

Narrations like the above are supporting the idea that work experience can alternate personal views of counselors and change even their approach and reactions toward intimate partner violence. These alternations are depicted in the answer of a psychologist working at a shelter: "The first and basic—this I must mention—that was confuted is that I also thought of an abused woman as weak . . . Because I, too, used to say "the poor, the weak, we must help them.""

Attempting to analyze the aforementioned statements, the first answer resembles what is considered to be a common approach of intimate partner violence and approaches "previous" meaning of intimate partner violence in a lay way. The second focused on a more scientific and detached way of attribution. The third statement refers to "neglected" forms of intimate partner violence from personal experience and the last in a lay representation of the battered woman. The last two statements underlined the impact work experience had on participants' personal views and definitions of intimate partner violence. For probing definitions about intimate partner violence prior to their work experience as counselors in specialized domestic violence counseling centers and shelters services, participants reported their past approach toward intimate partner violence as a result of recall. Even though there is no other way of reporting a past experience, Bell and Naugle (2008) suggest caution when data are gathered through recall, because "Retrospective data may be subject to reporting bias due to memory recall problems, social desirability, and perception bias" (p. 1105).

Contemporary Meaning of Intimate Partner Violence

Asking about contemporary meaning of intimate partner violence ("What is the contemporary meaning of intimate partner violence for the counselors after working for some period at these social services?"), participants gave detailed answers. A psychologist at a counseling center reported,

> More schematic . . . Everything was more schematic. Basically, it was very unrefined and without any shades. White–black. . . . Yes. You see, now it is not, it is not a one-dimensional issue. It is not. A woman can have really positive feelings, to some degree, for her husband.

The above statement focuses on the initial (almost by default) compassion that inexperienced counselors feel about intimate partner violence episodes affecting their attitude and interpretation and their change of view when coming more in contact with people who actually suffered intimate partner violence.

Similar to the above, another participant, a psychologist at a counseling center, expressed his surprise for the frequency of intimate partner violence incidents:

> I did not think (that) there is such an extent. No way. I did not think that it happens so much. Heee, thought that it happens and . . . it had happened in a previous center to …, to have a case of abuse, but it was easier to judge and say "what, why don't you leave?"

In this answer, the counselor focuses on the difference that his interpretation of intimate partner violence has now compared with before he started working as a counselor and on his attitude toward women who narrate episodes of intimate partner violence.

Finally, a social worker, although recognizes the frequency of these episodes like the psychologists mentioned above, takes a more activist attitude against intimate partner violence asking for collective action:

> . . . that it is very broad. Yes, that it happens everywhere, and there are forms that are not visible, that we don't know of, that we don't want to see, and that there are things happening . . . Okay, this thing can be spoken out, not stay hidden . . . To not be ashamed to say . . . even the slight.

As it can be observed, she discusses hidden aspects of intimate partner violence, and her definition is in line with the Greek campaign against intimate partner violence, which is reflected in its basic slogan: "Break the silence. You are not the only one. You are not alone" (GSGE, 2018).

Impact of Defining Intimate Partner Violence on Counselors' Everyday Life

Ultimately, investigation of the impact that this specialized work experience may have on the counselors' lives was the last question of the present study ("How the meaning of intimate partner violence by counselors reflects in their work and in their lives in general?"). A psychologist at a counseling center reported, "The hypersensitivity I mentioned [she is laughing] is, of course, present in my husband . . . ."

Different views of intimate partner violence are proved to lead counselors behave differently toward women with intimate partner violence experiences and men who act in an aggressive way, as a social worker at a shelter reports:

> Again things are broader. That is, my relationship with the other sex. On the one hand I can grasp much more easily [silence] . . . it's a bit in the role of the woman [silence] . . . it is not "let the asshole," the little becomes more . . . Many games are played, you see. The power games that both genders play. I firmly believe it now; I see it, both genders.

Viewing intimate partner violence as a power game and not as a scene where the role of offender and the role of victim are not easily identified is being narrated above. This meaning of intimate partner violence evokes a state of being alert against anyone who is perceived as aggressive regardless of their sex. Describing intimate partner violence in a broad way, including many aspects that can happen on a frequent basis, even deviating from the "classical form" of this type of violence (i.e., the offender, usually a male, physically abuses his wife), could enhance our understanding toward intimate partner violence and ultimately describe it as a desire for control deploying an unwanted behavior.

Discussion

The target of the present study is to investigate the meaning of intimate partner violence that counselors hold after working in specialized structures, supporting women with intimate partner violence experiences. Counselors/participants argue that specialized experience in supporting women who have suffered intimate partner violence affected counselors' approach in defining this phenomenon.

The counselors/participants in this study recalled their approach in defining intimate partner violence prior to their work in social services for supporting women who have suffered this type of abuse. Definition approaches

by the counselors/participants can be classified into the two categories (a) widespread beliefs and myths about intimate partner violence ("it was easy for me to say why she doesn't leave?") and (b) knowledge acquired through studies and training ("as physical, psychological, sexual, or economic abuse"), which seems to be related to the theoretical basis and content of intimate partner violence. Training of the counselors/participants in this domain affected decisively their definition and approaches toward these clients, which at the time of the sampling process changed, as participants became more aware of the many types and the multilayered term of intimate partner violence. Counselors/participants argued their contemporary meaning of intimate partner violence has been at large influenced by narrations of women, who they support, enriching their understanding when compared with what it was prior to their work experience in specialized support centers and social services. The most striking difference is the finding that counselors/participants shifted their focus from the "battered" woman (victim) to the "survivor" woman in this type of abuse.

When coming in contact with real examples of intimate partner violence episodes, counselors went deeper in their understanding of intimate partner violence, including not only physical violence but also behaviors such as threats, intimidation, and restriction of freedom (Reisenhofer & Taft, 2013). That is how their meaning is more enhanced, and behaviors connected to intimate partner violence can be seen as more frequently applied.

According to our analysis, the counselors/participants recalled that they used to mainly focus on the physical dimension of intimate partner violence. Moreover, within this meaning of intimate partner violence as physical violence, counselors linked intimate partner violence with a gendered character, indicating indirectly that men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. Theoretically, the gendered intimate partner violence is a generic term. More specifically, according to Bloom (2008), the normative role associated with man and woman creates certain expectations in the context of a romantic relationship. The gendered nature of intimate partner violence is maintained in the meaning of abuse for counselors even after their acquisition of specialized experience in supporting women who have suffered abuse. Although it is recognized that women can become violent, it is also recognized that the higher percentage of physical violence is exercised by men against women. This conclusion emerged through the review of dozens of studies that considered the intercultural factor (VanderEnde, Yount, Dynes, & Sibley, 2012). As to the importance of gender in the definition of intimate partner violence, what differentiates the narratives of counselors is that, after their specialized work experience, they acknowledge that intimate partner violence, could be a power game where women participate actively.

What appears to also change through their specialized work experience is the counselors' representation of the woman who has suffered intimate partner violence—from a weak woman to a woman "survivor" who is also able to "play" in a "power game." In other words, another, more vigorous, proactive role seems to be attached to the woman who has suffered abuse.

All the aforementioned findings are generally in line with Johnson's typologies of intimate partner violence (Gulliver & Fanslow, 2015). According to his theory, the four variables (physical violence present, physical violence absent, high degree of controlling behaviors, and low degree of controlling behaviors) have been reported by the participants/counselors in the present research. Participants after becoming experienced in specialized social services for supporting abused women reported that they went deeper in their approach of intimate partner violence, including the dimension of controlling behavior. Thus, and according to Johnson (2006), being physically violent might be a necessary but not sufficient condition for demonstrating this type of violence. As expressed by some participants, "craving for control" is equally important as being physically abusive. In addition, participants mentioned that physical abuse is only "one side of the coin" and psychological abuse must also be taken into consideration. According to Johnson (2006), intimate partner violence incidents can occur without physical abuse, a condition named "nonviolent" (NV); when NV both partners do not use physical violence but exhibit high levels of control.

The dilemma that was raised between the "old" and the "new" definition of intimate partner violence is whether a woman who has been abused takes the position of the victim/the weak or the one of the survivor. In a relevant Greek qualitative research, it is argued that the woman who has suffered abuse moves from the position of the victim to the position of the survivor in a way that allows for flexible self-determinations, in accordance with what is at stake in the interaction and also in the context of companionship relationships of power (Drouga, Papathanasiou, & Tsonidis, 2001).

Another remarkable finding of this research is that the meaning given to intimate partner violence by the counselors after their acquisition of specialized work experience influenced their attitude in the context of their own marital/companionship relationships, as well as their perspective of romantic relations as a whole. Attaching an enriched meaning to intimate partner violence, with a variety of behaviors, emotions, cognitive processes, and so on, made counselors more vulnerable to it. The counselors, possibly through their experience in providing counseling to women who have suffered abuse, seem to adopt a preventive stance on the possibility of intimate partner violence in their own romantic relationships, such as the establishment of limits,

vigilance, and so on. It seems like working experience evokes in counselors a state of being alert toward any behavior or statement that could resemble a typical intimate partner violence manifestation. For female counselors, the broad definition of abuse increased their sense of their own vulnerability to it. This finding is related to the one of a relevant qualitative research, according to which the limitation of the meaning of intimate partner violence to its physical dimension helps male counselors to consider themselves less or not violent at all (Stanley et al., 2012). The conclusion that a broad and rich meaning of intimate partner violence can raise the sense of vulnerability can be held as a hypothesis for a next research.

The specialized work experience of counselors led them to a more enriched definition of the concept of intimate partner violence compared with the one maintained by them prior to working at counseling centers and shelters. The meaning attributed to intimate partner violence by the counselors after their work experience epitomized the theoretical definition they espoused.

The meaning of intimate partner violence for the counselors concerns also certain aspects terms and aspects that cannot be expressed verbally. The stories of women who have suffered abuse, always according to the analysis of the interviews taken by the counselors, included abusive experiences that could not be described as clearly physical, emotional, economic, sexual, and so on. The focus of the counselors' attention on the experiences of women and not on the physical abuse is consistent with the findings of Mitra (2013). The women/participants in Mitra's (2013) research referred more to the psychological abuse they suffered from their partner or spouse, a fact that led to belittling of their own value. Therefore, due to their work experience, the counselors in the present study gave to intimate partner violence a meaning that is broader than the one of physical abuse. This contrasts to the analyses of Levin (2014), according to which abused women are not listened to carefully by their counselors. The identification of the meaning of intimate partner violence for the counselors who participated in the present study with the one attributed to intimate partner violence by women who have suffered from it is an indication of the fact that counselors do listen to the stories of the women they provide with counseling support.

The broadened meaning of intimate partner violence that counselors/participants recalled may be an indication of the length and the richness of women's, who experience incidences of intimate partner violence, narrations. As mentioned in the "Introduction" section, many other factors (era of capitalist/financial crisis in Greece, recall problems, so on) may affect the contemporary meaning of intimate partner violence.

Conclusions and Limitations

The main conclusion of the present study is that working as a counselor in a counseling center or a shelter for women that narrate experiences of intimate partner violence relationships can affect the meaning of intimate partner violence for counselors, resulting in a broader and deeper interpretation and approach toward this phenomenon. According to our analysis, working experience had driven counselors to question myths and prevailing beliefs about intimate partner violence and the image of the "battered" woman. As the counselors noted in their interviews working in these specialized services, a woman in an intimate partner violence relationship shifted from a victim to be illustrated as a survivor. The state of being alert that was mentioned in some counselors'/participants' narrations should be taken into consideration in the supervision and support of counselors. Another point of the present study is that change of defining intimate partner violence may strengthen vicarious traumatization for counselors (Baird & Kracen, 2006). And this could be an investigation topic for a next study. Supervisors may take this under account and apply this knowledge by asking counselors from time to time to describe the meaning of intimate partner violence.

Counselors in these specialized social services support women with different ethnicities and a diversity of cultural backgrounds. Another study should include the cultural factor in probing intimate partner violence as in the present study no counselor/participant mentioned the impact of intercultural view on the conceptualization of intimate partner violence.

The service network is lately addressed not only to women who have suffered intimate partner violence but also to women from vulnerable groups (refugees, migrants, unemployed, etc.) and their children (GSGE, 2018). Another research on the same topic would respond to the meaning of violence in a more general framework.

Our results cannot be generalized because of the methodology that was used for drawing conclusions and because of the size and the sampling of the participants. Another limitation is that the counselors who participate in this research recalled the meaning that intimate partner violence had when they were hired by counseling centers and shelter services. As pointed out in previous sections, retrospective data may face recall and other problems (Bell & Naugle, 2008). A longitudinal study could give more rich answers about the main research question of the present study.

Authors' Note

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