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► **To cite this version:**

Solveig Lelaurain, Léa Restivo, Thémis Apostolidis. When “the Dream Dies” But the Ideal Persists: Representations of the Couple Relationship and Its Connection To Intimate Partner Violence Experiences. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2021, pp.088626052110234. 10.1177/08862605211023484 . hal-03331850

**HAL Id: hal-03331850**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03331850>**

Submitted on 21 Oct 2022

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**When “the dream “dies” but the ideal persists: Representations of the couple relationship and its connection to intimate partner violence experiences.**

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the participants for their willingness to disclose their experiences and for making this research possible.

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### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research is financed by the region of Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur (PACA).

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## **Introduction**

Long ignored, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is now at the heart of political, social and health concerns. It is recognized internationally as a human rights issue and as a form of violence against women, that is, any acts of gender-based violence resulting in, or likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women. In addition, since the 1980s, in many countries, a growing number of specialized associations and emergency shelters have been created as well as legal and legislative measures passed to take care of victims and fight this phenomenon, which today appears to be a “new intolerable” (Herman, 2016). Yet, this violence remains frequent, under-reported and little prosecuted. For instance, a recent cross-national survey led by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014), conducted in 28-member states of the European Union, concluded that 22 % of women had experienced physical and/or sexual violence from either a current or a previous partner. This was even more significant for psychological violence which had been experienced by 43% in some form or another. Moreover, still according to this research, almost 40% of the survivors did not report their experience to police and 32% had not talked to anyone about the violence. In France, the last statistical survey led on this topic in 2015 (see Brown et al., 2021) revealed that 40 in 1000 women aged 20 to 69 report acts of IPV during the year, including 25 moderate, little repeated violence, nine cumulative, repeated or serious violence, and five very severe violence. Moreover, a total of 6% of women report having experienced repeated abuse by an intimate partner during their life. This study also shows that the steps taken are often not followed up, disclosing violence is still limited to the private sphere and that links with the aggressor are often maintained. For women with children, separation is more complex and when it occurs, joint parental authority implies maintaining the bond that can overexpose to violence. Considering IPV as the most severe

expression of gender inequalities, the French Government recently reaffirmed the necessity to develop more scientific knowledge in order to fight this social phenomenon.

#### The under-appreciation of the socio-cultural context to understand IPV

This brief overview illustrates the ambivalence surrounding IPV: on the one hand, it is the subject of strong social and political recognition as well as of strong moral condemnation, and on the other, it is a persistent phenomenon which is little disclosed and socially accepted. The understanding of the psychological and social mechanisms underlying the persistence of this violence and the help-seeking barriers faced by survivors is thus an important issue. Many of these barriers are linked to socially shaped beliefs, norms and values (Liang et al., 2005). However, these aspects are often underestimated. A recent systematic review of the literature aiming at identifying and discussing factors that inhibit help-seeking (Lelaurain et al., 2017) has shown that a significant number of studies in this area of research are descriptive and focused on internal and individual processes. In other words, these studies do not take sufficient consideration of the social context (i.e., norms, values, ideologies, representations, social relations) surrounding the seeking of help to cope with IPV. To conclude, this state of the art highlights the need to mobilize theoretical approaches which question the complex, dynamic and social aspects of the construction of IPV as well as its impact on help-seeking through a multi-level analysis linking psychological processes and social interactions to normative and ideological issues (see Doise, 1982/1986).

Such a perspective refers to a longstanding concern highlighted for instance by Peterson Del Mar who stated that “violence against wives will remain commonplace until we muster the will to examine how closely it is bound up with some of our most cherished values and most powerful cultural traits” (1996, p. 174). These considerations invite us here to study IPV through the broader representation systems in which it is anchored, such as the couple relationship, love or gender relations, and to analyze it regarding the patriarchal norms and

values shared through socio-cultural affiliations. From this perspective, although some researchers have investigated the relationship between love and violence (see Towns & Adams, 2000; Wood, 2001), very little is known about the connection between couple relationship representations and the experience of IPV as well as the possible impact on the victims in terms of coping strategies and help-seeking barriers. Indeed, some studies have explored the experience of the couple relationship and the “effective” couple through, for example, specific features of romantic relationships associated with the perpetration of IPV (see Giordano et al., 2010) or factors predicting relationship satisfaction and long term commitment (Stoeber, 2012; see also Furler et al., 2014). However, to our knowledge, no studies have directly questioned how victims represent, imagine, and fantasize about the romantic relationship.

#### A socio-representational approach of IPV

The Social Representations (SR) Theory (Moscovici, 2008), developed in the field of social psychology, offers a relevant framework for exploring how survivors of IPV construct the meaning of the couple relationship, and more generally speaking, the representations system in which the experience of IPV is anchored. SRs can be defined as "an organized set of opinions, attitudes, beliefs and information referring to an object or situation. They are determined both by the subject himself (his history, his experiences), by the social and ideological system in which he is embedded, and by the nature of the subject's links with the social system" (Jodelet, 1989, p. 188). This approach offers the possibility of accounting for the individual and collective forms that contribute to the experience of IPV and the couple relationship. It invites us to consider these objects not only as an individual experience, but also as a socially regulated experience. From the perspective of SR, taking an interest in personal experiences of IPV and the couple relationship is indeed considered within a dialectic between three spheres of belonging of representations: the subjective sphere, the

inter-subjective sphere and the trans-subjective sphere (Jodelet, 2008). More precisely, in our case, the intra-subjective sphere refers to the set of meanings that the victims draw on to give meaning to the couple relationship, IPV and to their experience. When we look at the inter-subjective sphere, we must analyze these representations as systems of expectations and anticipation that govern the social or symbolic relationships between the victims of IPV and the perpetrator, their family members, certain professionals or others in general (i.e., minimization or non-recognition of the violence, making the victim feel guilty, denouncing the violence and help-seeking). Finally, the trans-subjective sphere makes it possible to contextualize IPV and the couple relationship within a broader social system structuring the social and symbolic relationships between gender, where SRs are considered as a set of beliefs, norms and values that have a function of social integration and maintenance of the patriarchal social order. The relationship to IPV is thus constructed both through personal dimensions and also through relational, social and ideological dimensions.

Based on this theoretical framework, the aims of this study, part of wider research (authors), were to explore the subjective and social experience of IPV and the systems of representations that victims mobilize to give it meaning. Associated with this aim, the specific research questions were defined as follow:

**Research Question 1:** How do women survivors of IPV represent the couple relationship?

**Research Question 2:** How and in what way are the experience and representations of IPV anchored in these couple-relationship-focused representation systems?

## **Method**

### **Participants and Recruitment Strategy**

Women who had suffered from IPV and had attained the legal age of 18 years old or older were recruited through an IPV-focused agency located in the South of France. More

specifically, thirty-five women supported by this association were contacted by email or directly on site, by one of the organization's workers in order to offer them the opportunity to participate in the research and to explain to them its objectives as well as the ethical conditions governing it. They were not proposed financial incentives to participate in the research. Nineteen women agreed to participate in the research and were interviewed between September 2016 and June 2017.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants in private meeting rooms located in the association's premises and made available for this purpose. The first author (SL), a psychologist and PhD student specializing in IPV, conducted the interviews which lasted between 36 and 99 minutes (on average 61 minutes), depending on the participants and their time constraints. Prior to the interview, the participants signed an informed consent form that set out the objectives and procedures of the study, the participant's rights, and the researchers' contact information. In addition, due to the sensitive topic, the importance of voluntary consent was emphasized before and during the interviews. Women were also notified that confidentiality would be fully maintained and that they could end the interview at any time they chose. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the University Ethics Committee of Aix-Marseille University, France (n° 2018-06-02-02-007).

The interviews were conducted using a semi-directive approach (Smith, 1995) with open-ended questions rather than closed-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews were used because they enabled the participants to speak spontaneously about the topic under investigation during the first stage, and the researchers were subsequently able to ask specifically targeted questions based on an interview schedule. In line with this, the topics

featuring on the interview guide were only defined fairly roughly and included: (a) representations of the couple relationship and of the man-woman relationship as well as the place and role of both within it (e.g. “What are women and men roles in the couple relationships according to you?”); (b) IPV from a general point of view (e.g., representations, perceived severity, perceived causes) (e.g. “What makes a violence serious from your point of you?”); (c) and IPV from an experiential point of view (e.g., context in which the violence emerged, strategies used to deal with it) (e.g. “In your particular situation, when violence was taking place?”). According to our objectives to question IPV within the larger representational systems in which it is anchored and to study the spontaneous emergence of IPV themes in the participants’ speeches, the initial instruction was the following: “What words or expressions spontaneously come to your mind when you hear the term ‘couple relationship’? In general, what does the couple relationship mean for you?”. Once the interview was over, the participants were asked for the following socio-demographic and violence-related information: age, professional activity, type of violence experienced, reporting having children, current relationship with the violent partner, duration of the relationship and duration of the violence. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in French. The extracts of the women’s speeches were translated into English by a professional.

## **Data Analysis**

A thematic content analysis was applied to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following main principles were adopted in this analysis: (1) identifying patterns (themes) in the data collected, taking the theme to be a unit of meaning having a psychological reality rather than a linguistic one, and (2) studying inferences in order to go beyond the manifest content of the participants’ discourse. Complementing the identification of the themes, the participants’ language use (e.g., pronoun use, verb tense use) were also taken into account in

the analysis. More precisely, in order to study the couple relationship and IPV from the women's subjective perspective, we decided to conduct an inductive analysis to identify and explore a data-driven set of thematic categories corresponding to this topic. Guided by the SR theory's epistemological roots described in the introduction, special attention was also paid in the analysis to the expression of judgements and values as they were considered to reflect, in a constructionist perspective, the sociocultural context enabling participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Concretely, the data analysis was organized around two main steps involving three researchers with a social psychology background (SL, LR & TA) in a process of investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1970). Firstly, the two main coders (SL & LR) conducted an open coding horizontal analysis based on the reading of the whole data set. The second step of the analysis consisted of a vertical analysis based on a close and repeated reading of each interview separately and was carried out independently by the two coders (SL, LR). They met regularly to discuss, compare and contrast their interpretations and to draw up a codebook in which they recorded the themes they had identified and agreed on. More specifically, the analysis of the first nine interviews resulted in the creation of an initial codebook, the applicability of which was tested on interview 10 and then supplemented with the vertical analysis of the other 9 interviews. The content of this codebook was discussed and stabilized during five workshops attended by the third analyst (TA). This triangulation strategy used in the analysis of interviews allowed us to add credibility to our results by reducing the risk of over-interpretation of the data or dependence on analyses specific to the subjectivity of a single researcher (Apostolidis, 2006). In addition, beyond a reduction of some of the limitations inherent in the analysis being conducted by a single researcher, this approach was also particularly useful for extending our understanding of the data and their interpretation. The use of the points of view of more than one researcher as an additional source of

knowledge of the object allowed us to access a particularly detailed and rich analysis of these interviews. This space for exchange and comparison of the way in which each of us understood the speeches encouraged reflexivity as to how our own representations might intervene in the analysis.

From this analysis, different analytical ideas emerged for future examination. In particular, some linguistic elements such as the redundant use of “before”/“after” and “inside”/“outside” distinctions, the use of the conditional tense and the mostly positive valence of the words spontaneously mentioned to characterize what a couple relationship meant to participants at the time of the interview (68.75% of positive words mentioned such as “sharing”, “happiness”, “laughter”, “trust”, “listening”, “complicity”), led us to refine our research questions from the representations of “the couple relationship” to the representations of “the ideal couple” as follows : **Research question 3:** What are the representations of the ideal couple relationship from the perspectives of women survivors of IPV? How can or cannot these representations be affected by the experience of violence? What position does this ideal occupy in the definition and the experience of violence, in the way of dealing with it and in particular in help-seeking barriers faced by survivors? The results discussed in this article correspond to a deep and detailed exploration of the themes connected to these research questions. Only these themes will be presented here.

## Results

The participants' ages ranged from 24 to 67 ( $M = 42.32$ ,  $SD = 11.72$ ) and most of them reported having a professional activity (77.8%). All women stated that they had experienced multiple types of violence. More specifically, they reported psychological (100%), verbal (100%), physical (73.7%), sexual (68.4%) and economic (57.9%) abuse. They all had children and were all separated from their abusive partners at the time of the interview.

Length of relationship ranged from 1 to 27 years ( $M = 8.89$   $SD = 9.50$ ) and the violence from 1 to 25 years ( $M = 6.63$ ;  $SD = 5.72$ ).

## **1. Representations of the couple relationship: an ideal that persists in spite of IPV**

**1.1. Description of the ideal.** Despite the experience of violence, the majority of participants seemed to have retained an idealized vision of the couple relationship. In fact, when asked about this object after having had one or more experiences of IPV, most of them used positive words when talking about it ( $n = 14$ ). The couple relationship was perceived in two ways that coexisted within certain discourses: that of "fairy tales" ( $n = 17$ ) and that in opposition to the lived experience ( $n = 17$ ). More precisely, the couple was described above all in terms of reciprocity and communion (e.g., "sharing", "exchange", "complementarity",  $n = 12$ ), as well as investment in the other person (e.g., "wanting their success", "pleasing the other", "becoming better for the other",  $n = 9$ ).

The ideal couple relationship was also portrayed as one which faced obstacles and stayed together until the end (i.e., "sharing the worst and the best",  $n = 5$ ). In this sense, some interviewees evoked the negative representations of loneliness and celibacy: not being in a couple meant lacking something ( $n = 3$ ). The idealization of the couple relationship was also found in the use of terms to describe it which evoked normative (e.g., "normally", "in theory", "deep down", "a real couple") and prescriptive (e.g., "it must", "it should", "it should not") aspects. In contrast to the lived experience of violence, respect/non-disparagement ( $n = 10$ ), balance/symmetry of "rights" ( $n = 10$ ), or not changing for the other person and remaining oneself ("not forcing oneself") ( $n = 3$ ), were identified as the conditions for establishing a good couple relationship. In this context, violence appeared as an exception, or "not being part of the couple relationship".

The male/female couple represents above all happiness, sharing, listening, love, support, trust, deep down it's the basis of everything for a couple. But in some cases,

well that's not what happens and the woman tends to believe in the dream a little, in Prince Charming, I think, and when she falls for men who are really fairly violent, the dream dies and it's difficult to understand and analyze what happens. So, the couple, normally that means happiness, but in some cases it can be tragic" (Lucie, 36 years old).

The victims' representations of the ideal couple relationship appeared to be interdependent of their conceptions of love and gender relations. More specifically, the meanings associated with love served as a reference for constructing the idealized couple model. Fifteen participants spontaneously addressed this theme, five of them at the initial instruction. More precisely, they evoked the criteria and characteristics of the ideal relationship based on the validation of romantic love ( $n = 11$ ), such as "not being able to live without the other", "putting the other before oneself", or "proving it by attention". There was also the use of the popular adages ( $n = 11$ ) that love is "stronger than everything" or "something that everyone needs".

"Love means being kind to the other person, it's natural, wanting to please and that there should be mutual exchange, that really... that you really take the time to find out what the other person is like, to accept the other person as they are. It's not a question of making an effort or of... you have to remain yourself, if you want to fit in with someone else, it's natural, for me, it's the definition of a couple, above all it doesn't mean changing for the other person, it really means being yourself and being accepted as you are, huh, and I didn't think that that existed in fact until now, so I had an ideal perhaps when I was little because I was brought up like that, to get married and have children" (Emmanuelle, 36 years old).

**1.2. Reconsidering the ideal for a minority of women.** A minority of the women interviewed discussed how the experience of violence had challenged this past ideal by transforming their conception of the couple relationship based on romanticism and conventional gender roles ( $n = 4$ ). This change in their representations of the couple was characterized by a discourse structured by opposing time markers such as "before"/"now". The survivors thus questioned a marital model in which the two partners are "one and the same", and in which the woman sees only through her partner and devotes herself to his well-being without ever thinking of herself. Some victims then expressed the need for a return to

themselves and for reconnecting with their own individuality. A woman thus evoked the satisfaction of leaving her role as a wife and devoted mother to finally take care of herself and find herself as a woman again. Another explained that she had always been attracted by a certain profile of men "with problems" ("people who drink a lot or smoke a lot, who have addictions") and had idealized "spicy" relationships in which she was not bored and in which she could take on the role of "savior". She then revealed her renunciation of wanting to rescue this "type" of man who would not really want to be helped.

**Before**, I rather saw my happiness as being dependent on the other person but now that's no longer the case [...] **now**, I would be more able to live with someone, I see the couple relationship more as something in which I get pleasure, and happiness from sharing good times with someone and then afterwards I return to my own little bubble. There's always a barrier now which **before** had completely disappeared, before I was ... in my relationship I was totally in harmony, I mean really it was like if he was unhappy I was unhappy, and then if he was happy I was happy, I would have done anything for the other person even jump out of the window [...] **now**, I have questioned everything I wonder especially about women's issues, what our role is, but **before**, for me, I don't know whether it's women in general or myself in particular, I took care of my child and my husband but no real pleasure otherwise [...] everything revolved around the man concerned (Lisa, 24 years old).

In this way, in addition to the separation from the violent partner, leaving the relationship can also mean breaking with the traditional roles attributed to women in conventional heterosexual couples. Breaking away from the couple relationship ideal, and particularly the renouncement of it, nevertheless constitutes a source of suffering in the experience of IPV.

## **2. Suffering in the experience of IPV: tensions and renunciation of the ideal**

**2.1 Tension between an ideal and lived experience.** The speech of many women interviewed was marked by a tension between an ideal of the couple relationship and the reality of lived experience ( $n = 12$ ). Violence was seen as a break-up of the idealized couple and this renunciation of the ideal often became a source of suffering. The expression of this

disenchantment appeared quite marked among the victims who, following the initial instruction, referred to the idea of "Utopia" ( $n = 2$ ) to describe the couple and the illusion that surrounds it; and among those who expressed not being able to define the couple relationship and not knowing what it represented for them today ( $n = 2$ ). Other expressions: "that was not the case", "that didn't happen at all as planned", "I was fooled", "in reality it's not always the case", highlighted this disillusionment. Moreover, the redundant use of the past conditional within the discourses testified to the guilt and the regret caused by the failure to match up to a certain idealized model of the couple relationship.

“A couple is two human beings who love each other, **normally** who respect each other [...] without putting anyone down, something I wasn't familiar with. For the couple, it's a bit like a fairy tale, they live happily and have lots of children, yeah, it's the most beautiful thing **which unfortunately doesn't exist for me**, the couple **I would have liked to be part of** [...] **I dreamed** of meeting someone and told myself that at 80 years old, there were old couples at the time who still held each other's hand, and **I dreamed**, I said to myself, **I'd like to be like that**. That's it, for me it's about going through tough times together, [...] I look at my aunt, well, she died one month after her husband, yet they used to argue all the time, that's love, for me that's what it is” (Monique, 55 years old).

This tension between ideal and experience was revealed particularly in two spheres: that of domestic life and that of feelings of love. In the first sphere, it was when the interviewees addressed the roles of everyday life within the couple, that suffering was expressed in the gap between the ideal and the lived experience. Indeed, the ideal of the couple relationship and of love was described as being "natural", "spontaneous", "specific to each person" (e.g., "there is no set idea", "each couple functions as they wish") ( $n = 8$ ). This ideal of spontaneity was particularly expressed when they addressed the functioning of the couple and the distribution of tasks as something that "happened naturally", unlike, according to them, in the fifties and sixties when roles were imposed, "the woman at home, the man working". Many survivors therefore felt that female and male roles had changed over the generations, giving way to roles that are more balanced and freely chosen ( $n = 10$ ). However,

when they described their own experience, most of them described a conjugal space strongly determined by conventional gender roles and by very asymmetrical task distribution, breaking with their ideal ( $n = 12$ ).

Solveig: what is the woman's role in a couple compared to the man's?

Camille: For me, each couple has to find a balance, so I don't think there is any set idea, in fact, [...] if a balance is achieved it's because, as I see it it's about the woman doing this and the man doing that, ok, now things can be done together or the other way round, from time to time.[...]

Solveig: so, balance, what's that?

Camille: For me, it's really about sharing jobs, as I see it these things should be discussed, [...] not letting problems fester, because I know that in my relationship before I used to say nothing, I didn't like it, but I said nothing [...] There were some things which were unbearable about my life in my relationship, I want to say, I got lumbered with all the work for moving house on my own, I did everything in the house, all on my own, he didn't help with anything, I was a skivvy, huh (Camille, 40 years old).

Within the discourses, this ideal of balance was considered in two ways: some advocated an indistinction of gender roles ( $n = 7$ ), while others expressed the importance of "everyone staying in their place" and not "encroaching on the other's territory" through respect for traditional gender roles ( $n = 5$ ). The justification for these differentiated roles was based on the physical and biological distinctions between sexes. The role of women would then be characterized by the upbringing of children, and the care and support of men because of their natural disposition for it. As for men, their natural strength would lead them to show protection and parental authority while providing financial security for the family.

“Me, I see equality anyway, but not equality always... I would say, all the same, that women aren't as strong as men, so there are some jobs which are more suitable for men than women, so I think there has to be a balance, but with each one doing their own jobs...[...] it's true that it's often like that with couples, it's the men who put the bins out and things like that, but I think that everyone has their place” (Christine, 48 years old).

Secondly, concerning the ideal of love, it was the way in which the experience of love and the experience of violence seemed to merge, in the "romantic" idea of a relationship that was both passionate and destructive, which appeared to be at the heart of the experience of

suffering. Aware of the destructive effects of this relationship model, several survivors stated that they no longer felt that they were subjects of their own existence. They then mentioned the fact of being kept in a situation of emotional dependence on the violent partner, the fact of seeing and thinking only through him or the fact of having to be constantly available and at his service in order to meet his expectations ( $n = 4$ ). Furthermore, within certain discourses, women saw violence as a particular form of love ( $n = 4$ ) certainly deviating from the norm, but specific to their partner. As illustrated in the following excerpts, these victims analyzed the coercive control exercised by the spouse, under the pretext of amorous jealousy, as being their particular way of loving women. These representations of love that coexist with IPV thus hinder its identification and testify to the ambivalent nature of this experience. The majority of the women interviewed cited feelings of love for the perpetrator as a barrier to departure ( $n = 13$ ).

“He wanted to control me all the time, I had to ring him when I arrived somewhere, I had to ring him when I left, [...] He, on the other hand, he did just what he wanted, but me, I was tracked. It’s a crazy thing, then you get sucked in, and you think, well that means he loves me, that means he cares about me, if he wants to know where I am, it’s because he cares about me”. Camille, 40 years old)

“[...] well, in love nothing is clear, and for example, Mikael, that’s how he loves. And I think that the women he’s going to love in the future will be loved in the same way as me, that’s certain, worse, in my opinion. And that’s his way of loving, huh, really. Imprisonment, jealousy, all centered around him” (Isabelle, 35 years old).

Although these tensions between the ideal and experience appeared as a major source of suffering, the renunciation of the ideal of one's couple relationship but also of an enchanted vision of one's partner was presented as being particularly difficult.

**2.2 Renouncing one’s ideal as a source of suffering.** The example of marriage considered as a lifelong “sacred” commitment, which it seems inconceivable to break, illustrates particularly well the suffering linked to the renunciation of the ideal of the eternal couple. Divorce and separation were thus perceived as a "failure" and referred to a poor self-

image. This feeling of failure - women also spoke of feelings of humiliation and guilt - seemed to be reinforced by the social comparison between one's own "failed" couple and their parents' still existing couple relationship. Several victims then reported not seeking help and not having broken off the relationship for fear of the judgment and scrutiny of others in a context of family or religious pressure ( $n = 9$ ), or simply for fear of destroying their own idealized vision of the couple relationship and the family ( $n = 9$ ). In this discursive context, leaving meant in some way renouncing one's family and marital ideals. The idea of "mourning" evoked by several survivors, "mourning the ideal family", "the image of the couple they were part of... I was mourning, huh", "I was mourning my idyll", testified to this renunciation.

“For me, marriage was already sacred, so I really did everything for it to work, yes, the children obviously, it’s certain that held me back as well, and, well, material things as well, because we had our house. Well, material things didn’t hold me back so much, more because ... we didn’t have that much, it was [...] above all the failure, the failure to say, listen I was wrong, to all the friends I had before [...] Acknowledging that, well, it was a major failure. [...] Finding myself alone with two little ones and three suitcases, it wasn’t funny, I didn’t have any family who had gone through that sort of thing, I wouldn’t say that it’s a very posh family but it’s a quite well-balanced family and they are all married. There aren’t many divorces in the family, that’s ok. So, it’s true that going through something like that was a bit humiliating...” (Christine, 48 years old).

It was also the confrontation with the violence of renouncing the idealized image of their partner that the participants mentioned. In fact, several described him as someone "nice", "generous", "charming", "caring" at the beginning of the relationship ( $n = 7$ ) an “initial impression” that was shattered following the beginning of violence. They thus reported their difficulty in abandoning this positive vision of their partner, the latter having been precisely "chosen for his qualities" and "because deep down he was a good person". They then stated that they were hopeful he would change and become once again "the man they knew at the start" as well as hoping to be able to "save" him with their love. This hope was mentioned as slowing down their departure from the relationship ( $n = 12$ ).

Well, there were feelings, we loved each other and still wanted each other. Me, I always remembered the early days, when he was charming, and nice, I used to say to myself, he can't possibly become like that [...] he couldn't change that much. And so, well, there were worries, there was of course the routine, and the job, but deep down, I was persuaded that he was nice really because he was at the beginning, and I wanted him to become like that again, so I tried to recreate moments and in fact he chucked it all away every time. You want to go back to all that, but you tell yourself it isn't possible to return to a given moment, no, you can never go back" (Maria, 30 years old).

Thus, the representations, norms and values associated with the couple relationship make breaking away from the violent partner complicated. These difficulties can be found in the expression of an ambivalence in participants' accounts of leaving experiences. More precisely, breaking up was experienced both as a good decision, because it brought back positive emotions and a feeling of freedom, and also as a pain emanating from the guilt for still feeling in love with the author of the violence or from the expected judgments of other people. In line with this, the extract below represents a prototypical example of the co-existence between these two thoughts where the contradiction between the satisfaction of being left and the pain of seeing the partner suffering raised doubts and pain for the woman interviewed:

I thought for a long time that it was normal, I thought for a long time that it was my fault [...] today I find myself thinking it and saying to myself, my God, what did I do for him to become like that, because I saw him doing it, he changed from someone good to a human wreck [...] When I filed my complaint, I didn't tell myself that he was in detention through his own fault, I told myself that he was in prison because of me and still today it comes back to me sometimes and that's what lasts, it's like extreme schizophrenia, always having to juggle between the two thoughts, and that is very, very painful [...] he's been in prison for six months already, and me, I'm watching my daughter grow up, him, he doesn't see her, but I tell myself he certainly didn't have to do all that and he just had to get a grip on himself and so on, but I can't, deep down there's a little voice which says "it's you who put him inside" [...] And not long ago I said to myself if he comes out, obviously I'll get back together with him because that's the easiest thing to do, it's easier to get back together and then to start again than to live with the guilt of telling yourself every day that the other person is suffering (Lisa 24 years old).

In order to preserve their ideal of the couple relationship and the "first image" of their partner who they did not want to give up and to avoid the associated suffering, a set of strategies were developed by the women. The consequences of these different strategies were to minimize and conceal violence.

### **3. Preservation strategies of the idealized couple relationship and help-seeking barriers.**

**3.1 Minimizing and concealing the violence.** Even though several participants stated that they had had an intuition about their partner's violence from the beginning (e.g., "it's crazy because something inside me was telling me "stop, it's not good" and deep inside me I knew", "from the beginning I felt that something was going wrong) (n = 7), when they described their lived experience of violence, they reported at the same time that they did not recognize it, were aware of it or identified themselves as victims (n = 18). The issue of the non-recognition of IPV was significant in the experience of the women interviewed, in particular through the structuring of their speeches around a distinction between inside and outside ("when we were inside the relationship" vs. "when we had left the relationship"). They thus mentioned their difficulties in identifying violence from inside the relationship (n=15), which led them to spot it only once they had left it (n = 7). The extract below is a representative example of this inside/outside differentiation:

"It was little niggles all the time, a lack of respect ... I used to leave for work in the morning, when I got back at night breakfast was still on the table, huh, as if it's your job to tidy up, skivvy. [...] **but when you're there you don't even understand** why and you're in the thick of it, huh, you go out to work in the morning, you return in the evening and collect the kids, that's the routine. [...] So **it was when I left that I understood** that actually he was horrible, huh, he was always horrible [...] **You realize a lot of things afterwards**, but you see some things at the time, but you say no, you tell yourself he really takes me for an idiot, you don't say it's violence" (Camille 40 years old).

This "blindness" during the situation ("having one's eyes closed", "wearing blinkers", "not seeing") was explained in different ways by the participants. Some of them referred to

the difficulty in handling the disillusion and disenchantment with the marriage they had hoped for and the person they had chosen. Several women explained in this regard the desire they had to protect their couple or their violent partner, finding excuses for him in order to avoid changing their representations of him ( $n = 9$ ).

To begin with, I couldn't apply the word violence to what I was experiencing [...] And then you always say that when you're feeling angry you say things that you regret afterwards, anyway you get carried away and you want to forgive and see good things in the person and not categorize them as a monster or someone bad, or dangerous, that would be too extreme" (Sophie, 37 years old).

More specifically, different strategies of preservation of the ideal, no matter the experience of violence, were identified in the participants' accounts.

**3.2 Psychologization of the partner and individualization of the violence.** The psychologization of the partner on the one hand and the individualization of the violence on the other hand are two strategies that we identify as allowing women to cope with the experience of disenchantment they express. The psychological and psychoanalytical terminology that they use in their speech (e.g., "*post-traumatic syndrome*", "*narcissistic and perverse*", "*neurosis*") as well as the use of implicit personality theories to describe the authors of the violence illustrates this. Some of them described their partner as being sick and thus unaware of the violence they were perpetrating which allowed the women to not question the fact that their partners loved them. Indeed, admitting the lucidity of the violent partner involves managing disillusion and disenchantment. Labelling the author as "unaware" appears here as a way of preserving one's ideal as illustrated by this excerpt in which the sickness of the woman's partner is called on to explain the violence. In this context, some survivors stated that they suffered when they discovered that their partner was conscious of the violence they perpetrated; others mentioned the intention to hurt as a major criteria in describing the gravity of the violence.

*Caroline:* I even wonder, uh, ... Well, I don't know, I think he's... I think he's ill.

*Solveig:* What do you mean by ill?

*Caroline:* Well anyhow! I don't know whether it's normal behavior. And, well, I think he doesn't know any other way to act, and, and, I'm sure that he didn't realize all the humiliation he put me through. I don't know, it's not possible, huh? He mustn't be aware of it. It's not, I don't know, you have to... When you love someone, you don't do that (Caroline, 67 years old).

The interviewees also referenced personality traits to describe their ex-partners' behaviors, which help to conceal the violence. In concrete terms, in some speeches, the term "violence" appeared very few times, the women focusing more on the temperament of their partners when describing their violent actions. The spouse appears as an "unpleasant/nasty person" with "mood changes". Some victims also mentioned their "execrable", "authoritarian" or "strong personality". We also find the idea of "losing control" and referring to the aggressor's state through expressions such as "going berserk", "angry", "impulsive", someone who "flies off the handle easily". This euphemizing vocabulary helps to diminish the partner's responsibility and suggests that violence is unpredictable and uncontrollable.

"I was frightened of his reactions too even though he was the father of my son, he was very impulsive, so I have always said as a friend he is nice, but on the other hand living with him as a couple was very, very complicated [...] he was adorable as a friend, but as a partner he was very bad-tempered, very impulsive, so you never knew how he was going to react, in fact (Anne, 43 years old).

Like this participant describing differently her ex-partner depending on whether she was speaking about him as a friend or as a lover/intimate partner, it is interesting to notice that the survivors seemed to have different representations of the author of the violence according to the context of their accounts. Indeed, if they depicted their ex-partner as intentionally violent men when they spoke about episodes of violence, they talked about them as a "sick man" or a man who was "unaware of their actions" when they talked about the man they love(d).

Finally, the individualization of violence was expressed in the speech of some participants when they stated that they had not found “the right person”, labeled through several popular expressions as “the rare pearl”, “their soulmate”, “the perfect man”, “their life partner” (n = 5). Others contrasted the violent relationship they experienced with their new couple relationship which was judged as being more in keeping with their vision of the ideal thanks to the “love” they had found with a man who matched their expectations better (n = 4). Two types of men were thus distinguished in the speeches: the “good ones”, who helped in everyday tasks, who were respectful and protective and who knew how to “control their animalistic nature”.

“In real love, there is protection from the man, it’s nice when you feel protected [...] Something you can rely on, somewhere you can cry if you’re not feeling good and well, he’d give a damn about me, he’d take me in his arms and if there were any problems he’d be by my side, supporting me through the best and the worst times, as the proverb says. [...] That would be the ideal man but it’s a fantasy I think, unfortunately...[...] the good ones are all taken, that’s normal, they’re hanging onto them and all that’s left are broken arms and there are broken arms, I tell you, it’s tragic!” (Monique, 55 years old).

These different strategies, drawn on to cope with the disenchantment and the loss of their love-related ideals, inhibited the identification of violence, help-seeking and illustrate the ambivalent nature of this experience.

## **Discussion**

This qualitative research aimed to explore the representations that women survivors of IPV draw on to give meaning to the couple relationship and the links that these representations maintain with IPV and the help-seeking process. Three questions, regarding the representations of the ideal couple relationship, the connection between these representations and women’s experiences of violence as well as their impact on women’s help-seeking strategies were more particularly investigated. Our results show that most

participants had retained a positive and idealized image of the couple and corroborate other works showing that the discourse of IPV victims can be marked by this strong idealization of the couple relationship (Manseur, 2004). The tensions between the representations of the ideal couple and the experience of IPV and its impact on the survivors in terms of suffering, coping strategies and obstacles to leaving the relationship are discussed here.

### **Romantic love as a frame of reference for talking about the couple relationship and its links with IPV**

The theme of love, present in most speeches of the interviewees, emerged spontaneously, appearing as a frame of reference or as a perspective for the construction of the idealized couple relationship model. Survivors seem to refer in part to a romantic conception of love insofar as they included ideas about the idealization of the love relationship as well as the duty of self-denial and total involvement with the loved one (Sprecher & Metts, 1998). These accounts about love are rooted in a conventional conception of gender roles, which is consistent with several studies showing that heterosexual romantic love is often used to maintain stereotypical gender relations and to justify the order of subordination of women to men (Singh, 2013; Wood, 2001), for example, by placing them in charge of the emotional work of the relationship (Myra & Jackson, 2001). This is something that is found in our results when the survivors mention having done everything they could to change their partner and their hope that he could be "saved" because of all the love they gave them. In certain discourses, violence is even interpreted as a particular form of love. The feelings of love and attachment that victims believe they receive from their aggressor represent true legitimizing myths that have the effect of making them feel guilty about the violence they have experienced (Pyles et al., 2012). Indeed, the romantic vision of love has been shown to be a hegemonic construct that helps to facilitate the negotiation of social norms

outlawing IPV against women (Lelaurain et al., 2018) and to be linked to patriarchal ideologies and helping to legitimize IPV (see Lelaurain et al., 2019). IPV appears as rooted in broader systems of representations related to representations of the couple relationship and love and the gender relations that shape them. These are networks of "already there" and pre-existing meanings (Jodelet, 1989) at play in the patriarchal definition of socio-symbolic gender relations and more globally in the idealization of sexual life (Luhmann, 1990).

### **Renouncing one's ideal as a major source of suffering**

The women interviewed also refer explicitly to the violence they may have suffered, which necessarily creates a discrepancy between their vision of the ideal couple and the reality of their own experience of conjugality. Among the different forms of abuse, such as physical, psychological, financial and sexual, usually distinguished in the typology of violence (WHO cited by Pocock et al., 2019), the pain related to the delusional romantic relationship does not appear. Yet, other studies conducted among women victims of IPV corroborate our results mentioning the difficulty for women of "*grieving the loss of a dream*" (Kearney, 2001). More specifically, the unwillingness of the participants in our study to give up on their initial visions of a forever couple and tight-knit family finds an echo in studies describing the "internal conflicts" (Dekel & Andipatin, 2016) or "ideological dilemmas" which faced survivors when the desire to leave the relationship (i.e., individualistic ideology favoring autonomy and independence vs collectivistic ideology corresponding to the desire to stay in the relationship and take care of their family (Towns & Adams, 2009). Many studies have accounted for the power and the salience of these ideals of the love relationship to be found in the "romance culture" disseminated through movies, novels, TV series, advertisements, etc. (Boonzaier, 2008; Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001). Women's mobilization of these representations of love, couple relationships and gender roles can be analyzed as a

way for them to provide a meaningful and structured framework in order to make sense of the violent situation they are facing, of their relationship and their position within it (Wood, 2001; Jackson, 2001). Moreover, taking into account the specificities of the self in late modernity enrich the analysis of the power of the ideal of love (Illouz, 2012). Analyzing disillusion as a cultural practice and a recurring characteristic of modern lives, Illouz (2012) distinguishes two types of disillusion including one stemming from the experience of the accumulations of daily life (i.e., where domestic tasks and routine compete with the expected passion), that we found in the accounts of participants in the current study. The growing gap between expectations and reality are said to characterize the modern way of suffering from love, not because people are thought to have unrealistic desires but because the structure of reality would make these desires impossible. The juxtaposition of idealized love and the institution of marriage (i.e., monogamy, cohabitation, merger of economic resources) is an example of the social and cultural contradictions which structure modernity and recall the different tensions imbued with the experience of IPV.

### **Women's strategies to maintain their ideal and connections to help-seeking barriers**

In order to preserve their idealized vision of the couple relationship, romantic love and the partner that they fell in love with, despite the reality of the situation, and to prevent the suffering associated with this disenchantment, the women interviewed draw on several “strategies of enduring love” (Kearney, 2001). Among these strategies, psychologization of the partner was found to be the most pregnant within their discourses, allowing them to “put away the monster” and thus shift the problem outside of the intimate sphere. Psychologization thus appears as a real socio-cognitive strategy for resolving the tension between the ideal and reality and even more as a form of resistance of one's ideals and values.

These results resonate with studies in the literature highlighting strategies used by survivors of IPV to “maintain the fairy-tale ideal” and a positive image of their partner (see Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001). Among them, we find different forms of rationalization such as denial, the reconstruction of violence as a sickness, or any kind of “logical explanations” sought for partners' abusive behavior (Kearney, 2001); and narratives of “dual-identity dynamics” (Boonzaier, 2008) in which the relationship and the partner are constructed as “both good and bad”. More specifically, this double construction allows them to dissociate the man from his actions (see Dekel & Andipati, 2016), by describing “excesses of violence” as deviations from the norm due to the “bad side” of his personality and in turn to “overcome the paradox of the coexistence of love and abuse within the same relationship” (Yassour Borochowitz & Eisikovits, 2002, cited by Boonzaier, 2008, p. 194).

These strategies, which constitute one of the many ways of coping with the situation of IPV, help to minimize or conceal the violence (Dekel & Andipati, 2016) and thus inhibit the help-seeking process and departure from the relationship. Love for the spouse (Kiss et al., 2012) and the desire to preserve the relationship (Spencer et al., 2014) are some of the main reasons that lead victims not to denounce the violence they have suffered.

## **Limitations**

Although the women interviewed in this study have diversified profiles in terms of ages and length of relationship and violence, they were recruited at a single women's agency and most of them had a professional activity at the time of the interview. Moreover, they were all separated from their abusive partners at the time of the interview. These women are thus speaking from a specific social place which may differ from women being in a more precarious socioeconomic situation or who have not engaged in a help-seeking journey. Also, we did not diversify our sample in terms of race, which did not allow us to adopt an

intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991) and to identify specific issues related to the legitimization and experience of IPV when it is intertwined within several relationships of domination. Although this population is more difficult to reach, it would be interesting to interview survivors of violence who are still with their abusive partner in order to analyze the meanings they associate with the couple relationship and violence as well as women facing precarious socioeconomic situations or women belonging to minority groups in France. A second limitation refers to the absence of a specific section in the interview guide devoted to love, which limits our understanding of the meanings that participants associate with this object and the links it has with IPV representations.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The results of this study inform the theoretical and practical importance of paying attention to the diversity of suffering women can experience through IPV without neglecting the pain derived from breaking-up which involves the renouncement of an idealized vision of the couple relationship, one's own couple relationship and partner.

Theoretically speaking, this issue would imply focusing more on consensual and apparently insignificant cultural objects such as love and the couple relationship with the development of more social psychological research directly questioning cultural material such as songs, TV shows and movies which shape women's representations of love and intimate relationships (see Bonomi et al., 2013). In line with "a movement towards a more societal view of social psychology" (Staerklé, 2012), this perspective of research offers an interesting opportunity to overcome the individualistic approaches of IPV concealing the normative aspects at stake in this phenomenon. In the Social Representations (SR) Theory area of research, the development of works focused on this cultural material would constitute a fruitful way to enrich the questioning regarding the connection between social representations

and culture (Jodelet, 2002). The SR approach allows not to underestimate the social structures and relations at stake in these cultural mental productions. Indeed the gender relationships and the patriarchal systems, referring to the trans-subjective sphere in which SR are anchored, shape cultural productions such as romantic love found in women's facing IPV narratives. The idealization of the loved one is characteristic of this form of love (Sprecher & Metts, 1989). This idea meets Heider's (1958) thoughts about the ideality at stake in love and the existential meaning associated with it for the loving subject. The specific idealization and mythologization of women for their purity or fragility in the context of gender relationship (Goffman, 1977), makes male domination such complex and invisible and especially IPV experience.

In terms of practical implications, our results call for social workers taking care of women experiencing IPV to open their minds to this type of suffering and to focus on the loss of ideals, as mentioned in the therapies recommended by the American Psychiatric Association, which can be overlooked faced with the spectacular aspects recounted by women when speaking about their experiences of violence. The apparent trivial characteristic of love leads us to underline the importance for social workers to engage in reflexive and deconstructive thinking about these cultural aspects in order to support women in this way (Thapar-Björkert & Morgan, 2010). This work is not as easy as it seems: the greater or lesser axiological proximity between the values to which we personally adhere and those of society always runs the risk of blinding us when we try to study familiar social phenomena. Romantic love does not escape this warning, since it is not only a consensual cultural object but also a socially desired and valued object in relationships.

These results underline finally the interest and the necessity of developing, within the French context, feminist psychotherapeutic approaches that take into account the relations of power and domination involved in the etiology of women's psychological suffering. Feminist

psychology explains IPV through structural causes while reversing the cause and effect relationship between this violence and certain psychological manifestations encountered in the victims (Sturdivant, 1983). Taking feminist epistemologies into account in the care of IPV is all the more important since feminist psychologists have often denounced therapeutic interventions that function as a means of control favouring the subjection of individuals to social norms rather than as a path of social change in the service of the development of autonomy (Aim & Lelaurain, 2020). Concretely, these therapies allow to work on internalized representation and social norms linked to gender roles and relation of power and domination that impede violence recognition and help-seeking process. Helping women to identify and deconstruct the representations at the heart of their violent experiences is a way of considering engaging women in imaginary changes that question our own morality as well as in renewing the narratives they create of their experiences and the position they occupy in these narratives.

### **Conclusion**

This study represents one step toward improving our understanding of the different tensions characterizing women's experiences of IPV. A relevant way of analyzing the processes involved in the legitimation of violence as well as help-seeking barriers consists in broadening IPV to the socio-cultural context which gives it meaning through the study of the representations of couple relationships and love, social relationships of gender, and patriarchal norms and values. While IPV is a revealing transgression of the norms of contemporary conjugality (Séverac, 2003), the apprehension of violence within the couple as a relationship "apart", as if its protagonists were people "out of the norm" and far from oneself, therefore seems to be an obstacle to understanding the mechanisms underlying it.

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