

COUNSELING WOMEN IN RISK SITUATIONS

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Rezumat: Consilierea sau mersul la psiholog, încă este considerat un subiect tabu în zilele noastre. De cele mai multe ori, ne izbim de părerile celorlalți care nu vad consilierea ca pe ceva benefic și asta face inițiativa de a participa la acest proces și mai grea. Totodată consilierea are ca scop principal sprijinirea clienților în înțelegerea și clarificarea perspectivelor asupra vieții și mediului. Astfel, facilitează o mai bună informare privind soluțiile posibile pentru problemele emoționale și interpersonale. Prin această lucrare de licență am dorit să identific motivele ce stau la baza acceptării, de către femei, a unora dintre situațiile de risc, inclusiv violență domestică, să evidențiez principalele semne de alarmă, ale situațiilor de risc și să descopăr care sunt strategiile de coping cu care se confruntă femeile în general, dar mai ales cele care au un partener violent. Pentru a-mi îndeplini obiectivele am intervievat cinci victime beneficiare ale Centrului de Servicii Sociale pentru Persoane Adulte Aflate în Dificultate: Centrul de Primiri în Regim de Urgență pentru Victimele Violenței Domestice, Iași.

Cuvinte cheie: victimă, coping, dificultate, semne de alarmă, violență, sprijin.

Abstract: In today's society, seeking psychological counseling or therapy remains a stigmatized topic. Often, individuals face negative perceptions from others who do not recognize the benefits of counseling, making it even more challenging to seek help. Furthermore, the main purpose of counseling is to support clients in understanding and clarifying their perspectives on life and their environment. Thus, it facilitates better information regarding possible solutions for emotional and interpersonal problems. Through this bachelor's thesis, I aimed to identify the reasons behind women's acceptance of certain risky situations, including domestic violence, highlight the main warning signs of these risky situations, and discover the coping strategies women generally use, especially those with violent partners. To achieve my objectives, I interviewed five victims who are beneficiaries of the Social Services Center for Adults in Difficulty: Emergency Reception Center for Victims of Domestic Violence, Iași.

Keywords: victim, coping, difficulty, warning signs, violence, support.

Résumé : Dans la société actuelle, la recherche d'un soutien psychologique ou d'une thérapie reste un sujet stigmatisé. Souvent, les personnes font face à des perceptions

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négatives de la part d'individus qui ne reconnaissent pas les bienfaits de l'accompagnement psychologique, ce qui rend encore plus difficile la demande d'aide. De plus, le principal objectif du counseling est d'aider les clients à comprendre et à clarifier leur point de vue sur la vie et leur environnement. Ainsi, cela facilite l'obtention de meilleures informations concernant les solutions possibles aux problèmes émotionnels et interpersonnels. Dans le cadre de ce mémoire de licence, j'ai cherché à identifier les raisons qui poussent les femmes à accepter certaines situations à risque, notamment la violence domestique, à mettre en évidence les principaux signaux d'alerte de ces situations à risque, et à découvrir les stratégies d'adaptation que les femmes utilisent généralement, en particulier celles qui ont des partenaires violents. Pour atteindre mes objectifs, j'ai interviewé cinq victimes bénéficiaires du Centre d'Action Sociale aux Adultes en Difficulté : Centre d'Accueil d'Urgence pour les Victimes de Violences Conjugales, Iași.

Mots-clés : victime, adaptation, difficulté, signes avant-coureurs, violence, soutien.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on my bachelor's thesis on the topic of Counseling Women in Risk Situations, with most of the information being collected during the writing process. Additionally, through volunteering at a center for victims of violence, I have been able to observe over the years some patterns that I have also found in the victims I have interviewed. I can say that at this point I am adding to the study I conducted a year ago because I am volunteering for the Romanian Orthodox Christian Students Association - Iasi Branch in the Social Assistance department, which has direct contact with the detainees of the Iasi Penitentiary. I participated in a module entitled „Education for Family Life”, and this module is attended by people who have a history of violence in their criminal records. This gives me the privilege of having both perspectives, which is often impossible. This experience of working with some of the detainees of the Penitentiary came after my study, which did not allow me at that time to make a parallel between the two perspectives.

The purpose of the study is to identify the chain of stages that can lead to domestic violence. These stages are the lack of counseling and support in risky situations and crises, which lead to a vulnerability of both partners, especially the victim, which later turns into domestic violence.

The field of counseling is quite unknown, and the benefits of this process are not very well recognized, so I would like to highlight some important basic aspects that everyone should know about so as not to see this process as something out of the ordinary.

2. Theoretical basis

Stănescu declares that „It has been found that the origins of counseling do not come from the Western civilization as it was initially written, but that they were initially found in tribal formations under the so-called „Councils of the Elders”. Even then, they were learning the notion of supporting those in need” (Stănescu, 2003, p. 6).

The term counseling was first found in the work of Carl Rogers in 1942. He believes that each person has enough qualities to overcome the problems they encounter in everyday life.

According to the author Şoitu (2022), the universe of this field is the client's possibility to explore, discover, and clarify certain ways of using personal resources efficiently. Counseling is based on a close relationship between a specially trained counselor and a client, usually taking place in an individual setting, sometimes oriented towards couples or groups.

“Inskipp F. and John H. (1984) mention that counseling is a way of relating and responding to another person so that they can be helped to explore their thoughts, emotions and behavior in the direction of gaining a clearer understanding of themselves and learning to find and use their stronger parts/resources, so that they can cope with life more effectively, making appropriate decisions and acting accordingly” (Inskipp and John, 1984 apud. Miculeşanu & Cuzneţov, 2015).

Being clearly directed towards helping clients understand and clarify their points of view on life and the environment, counseling strengthens the role of self-learning and learning about others, for better awareness of the ways of solving problems in the emotional and interpersonal sphere.

The client-centered approach was created by Carl Rogers, who believes that individuals are born with certain mechanisms of self-determination and progress in their own skills.

Client-centered counseling: is a conglomerate of the humanist evolution in psychology. In the first phase, the specialist called his technique „non-directive counseling”, but later renamed it „client-centered counseling or therapy”. In this counseling method, the professional is emotional support, tolerates and offers the clients the possibility to understand the problems they face, but also the consequences of the decisions they will make.

“This approach does not focus on the problem, but on the client as a person, Rogers started from the idea that people need to be helped to learn how to cope with situations. One of the main ways to achieve this goal is to support the client as a whole, as a person who does not need defensive mechanisms in everyday experiences.” (Şoitu, 2022).

Social assistance is an essential component of the national social protection system, through which the state is committed to protecting and supporting individuals and families who are at risk or vulnerable. Vulnerability can stem from various factors, including economic hardship, physical and health conditions, family circumstances (such as single-parent families or orphans), and exposure to violence.

“Vulnerability has been studied in relation to the quality of life, social isolation, and exclusion, discrimination on various grounds, including age, resulting in the identification of vulnerabilities in relation to an individual,

in this particular situation in relation to an individual, a situation, an event” (Chambers, 1989 apud Șoitu, 2015 p. 33).

Domestic violence can be described as a consistent pattern of coercive control that involves abusive physical, sexual, or emotional behaviors. Family violence encompasses a range of behaviors including physical violence, mistreatment of minors, restricting the independence of a partner, disregarding the rights, feelings, opinions, and expectations of a partner, violence between siblings, and abuse of elderly family members.

Often violence is characterized more by its consequences that refer to the physical and mental state of the victim, not all physical and mental illnesses can be based on violence, but violence can be the cause of such illnesses.

“Violence refers to behaviors characterized by aggressive relationships, based on force, verbal or physical, moral, economic, political, with the aim of dominating, subjugating the victim by the aggressor. Through violence, the victim is destroyed, reduced to the state of an object, his vital space being invaded by the aggressor.” (Asselineau, 2005, apud. Munteanu, 2011).

Language development delay can affect the learning opportunities of a child who has witnessed or been exposed to any type of violence and can disrupt their behavioral responses, exacerbating personality dissonance. Family violence can lead to verbal or physical aggression, strained family relationships, educational and emotional neglect of the child, neglect of the child's special needs, abilities, and possibilities, insults, and abuse, all of which are more aspects that affect the normal development of a person.

3. Research Methodology

Starting from the premise that in society women have multiple roles (mother, wife, grandmother, friend, employee, woman in society), this over-demand can make them vulnerable by exposing them to a series of risk factors that can lead to crisis situations such as depression, anxiety, self-neglect, and neglect of others.

The purpose of the research is to identify the degree of difficulty of the risk situations that women face on a daily basis and how they cope with these situations (if they seek counseling). I also want to study the characteristics of women who are victims of domestic violence, the risk factors that lead to this situation, and their resilience after they have experienced a crisis in their lives.

Research objectives

-Identify the risk situations faced by women in the study group and their degree of difficulty.

-Identify the coping mechanisms of women in the study group.

-Identify the types of social services/institutions that women turn to for support.

-Understanding the reasons why women accept some of the risk situations, including domestic violence.

-Identify the main warning signs of risk situations, including domestic violence.

Theoretical Sample/Studied Lot

The research sample consists of five victims of domestic violence aged between 19 and 31 years old, currently residing at the center and having experienced physical abuse at least once. These individuals are beneficiaries of the Social Services Center for Adults in Difficulty: Emergency Reception Center for Victims of Domestic Violence, Iași. Interviews were conducted between March and May 2023, with an average interview duration of 60 to 80 minutes.

Data collection tool: interview guide

“The interview is an indirect method of data collection: the researcher does not have direct access to the phenomenon studied and tries to obtain the necessary data by interviewing the people (interviewees/subjects) who have certain knowledge about this phenomenon.” (Runcan, 2023)

I collected the data using a qualitative method, namely the interview, more specifically, the semi-structured interview. I consider that through this I managed to find relevant information for my bachelor's thesis and to capture certain aspects that at first glance would not seem relevant.

The semi-structured interview gives me the opportunity to adapt the questions according to the answers of the interviewee, thus obtaining some generalizations, but also detailed information. The way of applying the interview was through direct face-to-face contact, which allowed me to observe more aspects about the victim, but also her feelings while she was telling her story.

Another reason that made me choose the interview as a research method was the particularity of the situation, the interview guide being addressed to victims of domestic violence who have been further assaulted by their partner and who were in the center for victims of domestic violence.

4. Results

For a clearer perspective, I have divided the interview guide into several thematic axes, but I would like to highlight only two of them: „Understanding the reasons why women accept some risky situations, including domestic violence” and „Identifying the main warning signs of risk situations, including domestic violence”.

The most difficult objective to achieve was „Identifying the reasons why women accept some risk situations, including domestic violence” although the main reason cited by victims was the presence of children. Although they were aware of the risks they were exposing themselves and their children to, the desire

for the father figure to be present was much stronger. They accepted the abuse in order not to break the bond between father and children, even though the violent episodes to which the children were subjected had a serious emotional impact on their psyche. Other reasons cited included the lack of a place to go after violent incidents and the emotional inability to cope with the partner's pleas for forgiveness.

All the women in the study group painfully recounted the first violent act they were subjected to when I asked them the question:

“Was it violent because we didn't have the money to contribute financially to our wedding, that was the first time he insulted me, pushed me, shoved me, put his hand on my throat, and behaved badly, I didn't tell anyone, I thought it was normal” (23 years, V.).

“The first time he was violent was when he came home very drunk, his grandmother called the mental hospital, and they came and took him to the hospital because he was behaving badly, they gave him an injection at the hospital and let him go home, he came back even more nervous than when he left, and then he started urinating around the house, on me and the child, that's when the thing with the child happened when he hit him in the head with his fists and slapped me” (19 years C.).

I was aware that this question was quite sensitive, I wanted to find out the clear reasons from the early stages, but also so that by remembering the unfortunate event they would be sincere in the next aspect „What are the reasons or what makes you forgive and overcome violent behavior?”. The overwhelming response to this question was pity and for the sake of the children. The women in the study group were aware of their partners' mistakes but chose to move on just so as not to deprive their children of a father figure, as they were not old enough to understand their fathers' actions.

In response to the question „What are the factors that contribute to your husband's violent behavior?”, it was surprising that all the women had the same answer: alcohol, sexual frustration, and interference from other family members who argued against the victim:

“I think one of the factors was the influence his brother and sister-in-law had over him. When he went to his brother's house, the atmosphere was different and he was different. But when he came back from there, he was completely changed. And usually, his brother and sister-in-law would come to our house to visit when we were having a good time and getting along well, and we would fight because of that.”(30years A.P.),

“Mile, I felt sorry for him because he cried very hard after he behaved badly or after he asked me for certain things, even though I was crying too. He tried to dramatize it in such a way that I would feel guilty and he would be the innocent one. At first, I didn't realize that he was very sexually frustrated, but after about eight months of pregnancy, I found it strange at

one point because I had noticed that he was possessive from that point of view. I thought maybe it was this period where it doesn't happen as often because I'm pregnant, but at most, I realized after I gave birth because we had moved and then I saw that he watched horror and porn movies every night, during the day, but especially at night, he watched porn movies. In the evening when I went to sleep and breastfed the baby, he simply came just to use me for a quarter of an hour, 10 minutes without involving love, compassion, and affection. He made me feel like an object, and that made me realize that he was very possessive and obsessed with this thing. The cruelest moment was when he gave me something to fall asleep and then he tried to have intimate relations with me, but I woke up right in the middle of the sexual act." (23 years V.).

According to theory *The power and control wheel* (Dutton, Saudners, Starzomski, Bartholomew, 1988; Dutton și Corva, 2006) that after an act of violence, there follows a tension-free period in which the aggressor behaves appropriately, even more tenderly than usual, I wanted to highlight this through the question, „What was the behavior of the husband/partner after the violent act and how long did this behavior last until the next violent episode?” I received the same answer from most of the interviewees:

“He always behaved so badly and then he would come and say < you know I love you, you know when I'm angry I speak like that > or it would happen, for example, if he asked me for money and there were times when I gave him and he behaved very nicely, but if I didn't give him, he would have the habit of insulting me in every way. He also had an okay behavior as long as there were moments of intimacy, if there weren't anymore, that's when we often argued.” (30 years A.P.),

“Well, he would apologize, start to dramatize, cry, and say to just get over it because he will change and won't do it again, but nothing happened, he didn't do anything to change. Everything lasted about two or three days maximum four until we started over.” (23years V.), „Somehow you could see that he regretted it, he started to be different, more tender, it lasted about 2 weeks from when he hit me the first time until now.” (31years.C.).

The most frequent excuse given by aggressors is „I'll change”, but most of the time this change doesn't happen, it's just a phrase uttered when they realize they might lose their partner. We can also attribute to maturity the fact that the four respondents chose not to believe in their partner's future change, being able to observe that the only person who believes they will change is the youngest victim among them all.

Another proposed objective is „Identifying the main warning signs, and risk situations, including domestic violence.” Through this objective, I wanted to see how victims manage to anticipate that their partner is about to be violent and if they manage to do something about it, which is why one of the questions asked

to achieve my objective is „Did you have moments when you felt that a violent act was imminent?”. Surprisingly, each of the interviewed women found such a signal, despite the very confusing behavior of their partner they had certain indicators that helped them identify the situation that would follow:

“Yes, I had such moments, most of the time I realized that violence was about to happen because he yelled in a certain way and he also had the habit of slamming or breaking things when he was angry.” (30 years A.P.)

„Yes, because I avoided having sexual contact with him, and that made him frustrated, he made a lot of thoughts and watched porn movies and then he raped me at night or gave me something to fall asleep without me knowing what was happening to me and my body, and that's how I felt that an argument was coming because there was tension between us, from words, behavior, his moods, and he was always agitated, always volcanic by nature.” (23 years V.)

„Yes, the threats, he always when he got drunk was with the threats, that he'll do this, that he'll fix this, that he'll take the knife, that he'll cut his throat, that he'll kill us, I knew he wouldn't do that, but what I knew more than that was that after every time he threatened me, he was going to hit me or the kids, mostly the oldest boy because he's not his child, once he hit him with his fists in the head when he was very young, he made some holes in his head.” (19 years C.)

To identify the reasons that prevented victims from leaving the aggressor, being aware that he could be violent just by the gestures he manifested, I aimed to identify the reasons through the question „What were the reasons that determined you not to leave him at the first signs that he could be violent?”. Of course, the answers were strikingly similar again:

“I tried in these 7 years to change him, to be a responsible father and so on because since the diagnosis of our daughter appeared, I said that maybe he will become more responsible, get more involved, be more understanding, and so on. But it wasn't like that, on the contrary, more burdens accumulated which I carried.” (30 years A.P.)

„The fact that we had a child together, the fact that she was small and naive and somehow I thought he would change and maybe it's just a thing at the beginning or maybe it's too stressful that we have a wedding and it's a more difficult period and I said that things won't be like this in everyday life, I said that maybe it's not like this in essence, maybe it's different from how it showed at that time.” (23 years V.)

“I had nowhere to go, but I also didn't want to separate the child from his father, that was the only solution, the center and I didn't want it, but I still got there.” (21 years C.), „He kept saying he won't do it anymore, he got on his knees, said he wants a family, that he wants to be with us, that he got

attached to us, that it's hard for him alone, without us, even though they weren't his kids he was willing to accept me sometimes just so I wouldn't leave him. Somehow he tried to sensitize me not to leave him.” (31 years C.).

Conclusions

Most of the time, children are the main reason why the victim doesn't leave the aggressor, but they don't realize at the moment that the traumas of the violence they endure have a much deeper impact than just growing up without their father. In two of the victims, we could clearly see that they endured different treatments precisely because they had no other support in their lives.

I was surprised from the beginning of the research to notice common traits of the victims, all five women had very close ages, but the thing that characterized all of them in choosing their partners was the age difference of over five years of the aggressors, later, only two of these victims broke ties with the aggressor. Common traits were present on both sides.

Through the purpose of my research, I wanted to highlight the possible vulnerability of women due to the overcrowding of roles they exercise in everyday life. My purpose was confirmed even by the first victim interviewed who told me about a situation she went through characterizing that moment as a crisis, she said that at that moment she would have needed counseling for two reasons because she was already vulnerable due to the situation she was facing of being a victim of violence without support from someone dear and because she considers that she would have managed to overcome that situation much easier with the support of a counselor. After the crisis period followed a program of psychological counseling, but feeling that it was without result, the opportune moment would have been at its beginning or when she was in the middle of the crisis.

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Biodata

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