ORIGINAL ARTICLE

On the Lived Experience of Battered Women Residing in Shelters

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Abstract We present a qualitative study of battered women, which examined their experiences while staying at shelters. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 battered women staying at shelters. The interviews elicited four main themes: the women's perceptions of the shelter; the woman's perceptions of herself and her life experiences; the woman's perceptions of her relations with other battered women at the shelter; and the woman's perceptions of her relations with the staff of the shelter. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, implications for future research, implications for theory development, and implications for therapy and intervention with the problem of wife battering.

Keywords Wife battering · Shelters for battered women · Lived experience · Staying at a shelter

Wife battering is a traumatic experience for the battered woman and her children. Research has shown that the woman's experience with abuse by her partner has severe behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and marital consequences, in addition to serious physical consequences which endanger the woman's own life and the lives of her children (Dutton 1992; Golding 1999; Haj-Yahia 1999, 2000; Humphreys and Thiara 2003). Battered women are sometimes able to cope with partner violence using their own internal resources, and choose to do so. However, sometimes they also need outside resources, and apply to formal

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and informal services for assistance, support, and protection against their violent spouses (Gordon 1996; Gordon et al. 2004; Lempert 1997; Rhodes 1998). In crisis situations, when their lives are in danger and they lack sufficient protection and support, battered women are often forced to request assistance from shelters, among other services.

Shelters for battered women usually provide protection and serve as a hiding place. They are usually a last resort when women are in danger and need immediate physical protection (Shostack 2001). The services provided by shelters for battered women include, among others, physical protection and refuge for the woman and her children, support and reinforcement for the woman and her children, preparation for her return to the community, and enrichment programs. Furthermore, shelters for battered women provide information about alternatives to life with a violent partner. In addition to bolstering the battered woman's self image and helping her overcome her fear, anxiety, and other reactions that are aroused by her partner's violence, shelters offer a supportive social atmosphere in which the women can develop positive relations with each other. They also provide advocacy services, legal counseling and representation, and mediation between the women and services in the community. In most shelters, there is a kindergarten for young children, and placement in local schools is usually arranged immediately for school-age children who arrive with their mothers (Tutty et al. 1999).

Most shelters have similar regulations, which include times for leaving the premises, assigned duties, child care, babysitting, safety rules and precautions, rules for contact with her spouse, use of the telephone, living allowance, equipment, and procedures for leaving the shelter (Robert 1998; Shostack 2001). The most common rules among most shelters for battered women are: (1) violence is prohibited in any form; (2) no smoking in private rooms (although most shelters have a public area where smoking

is permitted); (3) alcohol and psychoactive substances are prohibited; (4) each woman is responsible for her personal effects, and provides clothing for herself and her children; (5) all of the women are expected to participate in routine maintenance of the shelter; (6) mothers living in the shelter with their children are responsible for their care when there are no organized arrangements (usually in the afternoons); (7) women who disclose the location of the shelter will be asked to leave; (8) women who leave the premises for personal arrangements must return as early as possible, and in most shelters no later than 11:00 PM; (9) any woman who violates the rules will be asked to leave the shelter (Shostack 2001). The address and telephone number of most shelters are unlisted, and confidentiality is expected to be maintained by the women residing there as well as by the staff of the shelter and any other professionals who are in contact with the facility (Agnew 1998; Dobash and Dobash 1992; Robert 1998; Shostack 2001).

At the shelters, the battered women and their children receive food, laundry, cleaning materials, and even clothing if necessary. The lifestyle at most shelters is collective, and all of the women are usually assigned duties, which include cleaning, shopping, cooking, and other tasks involved in maintaining a communal household (Agnew 1998; Tutty et al. 1999). Processes experienced in most shelters can raise the women's collective consciousness and bolster their self esteem. Above all, women in shelters discover that the problem of violence against them is not related to their personal failure in marriage or to their intimate partners' idiosyncratic behavior. The women discover that they can be assertive, even if they express views that contradict those of their partner. Often, the women feel freer and more comfortable at shelters than they felt in their own homes, and quickly find that they share a lot in common with each other. The feminine solidarity that develops while staying at a shelter is also expressed in instrumental terms. First, the women continue to protect and look after each other when they are outside of the shelters. Second, they spend hours together and encourage each other. Third, they usually maintain close friendships after they leave the shelter, and remain in contact regardless of whether they return to their husbands or decide to separate (Dobash and Dobash 1992).

The period of residence at a shelter is time-limited, usually up to 6 months; and during her stay at a shelter, concerted efforts are made to provide the woman and her children with all of the resources necessary to cope with the challenges of independent life in the community. Additionally, in most shelters, an individual care plan is designed with each woman, in an attempt to empower her and give her the skills she needs to function on her own (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Shostack 2001). At the end of her stay in the shelter, when circumstances permit, battered women move to transitional apartments where they receive professional counseling from services in the community (Shostack 2001).

Some researchers and practitioners ascribe a broader function to the shelters, on a par with a laboratory for social change. In that capacity, the shelter is described as an egalitarian system, which serves as an alternative to the women's previous living situation. This alternative system serves as a living laboratory for changing battered women's beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. According to this perspective, shelters for battered women play a significant modeling role, i.e., they provide an option for learning a new lifestyle based on equality, ability to influence others, and democracy (Dobash and Dobash 1992). As such, to understand how shelters influence their lives, it is necessary to explore the battered women's subjective experience in that settings.

Although shelters are not the service or resource most commonly used by battered women, they usually evaluate it as the most helpful and effective means for coping with violence against them (e.g., Gordon 1996). Sixty percent of the women surveyed by Bowker have evaluated their stay at the shelter as highly successful in ending the violence against them, at least temporarily (Bowker 1988). They also indicated that participation in therapeutic groups at shelters helped them considerably to improve their self image and become more independent. A group of women surveyed by Garza (2002) reported that after staying at a shelter their self-image had improved considerably, they felt empowered, and their feelings of depression had been alleviated. Other studies have revealed that battered women residing at shelters expressed appreciation to the shelter as an organization for the opportunity to stay at an essential setting that helped save their lives and enabled them to leave their violent partners, regardless of the social, organizational, and physical conditions of the shelter (Agnew 1998; Avni 1987).

Besides these positive impressions, studies have revealed more ambivalent and critical responses. It has been found that social workers perform certain tasks that generate a sense of disappointment with the care at the shelter. Concomitantly, the women disappoint the social workers in many ways (Eisikovits and Buchbinder 2000). It has also been found that shelters for battered women generate processes which inhibit empowerment because of the social and economic gaps between the staff and the women (Davidson and Jenkins 1989). Hoff (1990) found that the main complaints expressed by women at shelters focused on the lack of emotional support, as well as on the frequent, unstructured, and ineffective therapeutic groups.

It is clear that the findings of previous research are partial and sometimes inconsistent. Moreover, and most importantly, previous studies have not considered the entire subjective and lived experience of staying at shelters, and

fail to present it from an integrative, comprehensive perspective. Rather, they present a reductionist picture, which highlights impressions related to specific situations. For example, some of the previous studies have dealt with specific aspects based on quantitative measures, such as estimated percentages of women who return to their homes after staying at the shelter versus those who begin a new life on their own or with their children (Agnew 1998; Strube 1988). Other previous research has investigated the therapeutic effectiveness of services provided to women in shelters (Abitbol-Devine 2004; Baker 2002; Garza 2002), or changes in the women following their stay at the shelter (e.g., the dynamics between the professional staff and the women in the shelter—Eisikovits and Buchbinder 2000). On the whole, however, there is a lack of comprehensive research on battered women's subjective experience of staying at a shelter, and the present study attempts to fill that gap.

Method

Conceptualization and Nature of the Study

We conducted a qualitative study according to the phenomenological tradition, which assumes that analysis of the internal, subjective experiences of individuals is of value as they are perceived by the investigator and the participant in the study (Bogdan and Biklen 1982). The research aim was to examine battered women's subjective perceptions of their stay at the shelter. We conducted semi-structured interviews, which focused on the women's experience from their own point of view, in their context, and during their stay in the shelter among their own collective of battered women.

Research Sample and Sampling Method

The sample consisted of 18 women residing at two shelters in Israel: three new immigrants (two from the Former Soviet Union and one from Ethiopia), three Arab Moslem women, one Arab Christian woman, one Arab Druze woman, and ten Jewish women. All of the women were Israeli citizens, and their age range was between 22 and 63 years at the time of data collection ($M=32.5$ years, SD=9.77). All of the participants were married with children ($M=2.28$ children, SD=0.99), and they arrived at the shelter from all regions of the country. All of the women defined their socioeconomic status as low-middle class, and earned minimum wage or subsisted from various National Insurance allowances. They had 10.44 years of schooling on the average (SD=2.87), most of them had been employed or were currently employed in part-time jobs, and they worked in unskilled

occupations such as housekeeping or sewing. The length of residence in the shelter at the time of the interview ranged from two weeks to eight months ($M=2.75$ months, SD=1.95). Notably, no criteria for participation in the study were set in advance, except for being victims of spousal violence, residence in a shelter, satisfactory verbal ability, willingness to be interviewed, no records of psychological or mental disorders, and no records of addiction to psychoactive substances.

The sampling method was not statistical. Rather, the sample was theoretical and purposive (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua 1990), i.e., participants were selected one by one, in accordance with their willingness to be interviewed and based on preliminary identifying information derived from an intake session conducted by the investigators. In the process of selecting the participants, we attempted to achieve maximal variance and arrive at a heterogeneous representation of opinions, thoughts, and impressions that "influenced" the women's experiences in the shelter. The wide variance was expressed in the distribution of women by socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, level of education, socioeconomic status, ethno-national origin, number of children, period of stay in shelter). In this way, we could identify similarities and distinctions between the experiences of different women. Participants were recruited on the basis of a preliminary interview held while they were residing at the shelter. All of the women participating in the interview consented to do so, and they were ensured that any information they provide would remain anonymous and confidential. Although a purposive, non-statistical, sample was obtained, we reached a heterogeneous sample in terms of the above-mentioned socio-demographic characteristics.

Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from September, 2002 to March, 2003. After receiving permission from the directors of the two shelters as well as approval from the Ethics Committee (which is equivalent to a human subjects review board) at the authors' institute, the investigators convened three meetings with the residents in group forums to tell them about the study and ask for their consent to participate in it. Based on the women's responses, it appeared that they were concerned with the topic.

There were three occasions in which the investigators asked the women to meet for two sessions, to complete the discussion of certain topics and to expand on some statements. In an attempt to create an atmosphere conducive to intimacy, the interviews were held in comfortable surroundings, at a place chosen by the women, mostly in the women's own rooms or in a vacant office at the shelter. Each interview began with general questions about the woman's personal background (e.g., socio-demographic

characteristics, family-of-origin of both partners, and process of courtship), as well as questions about the woman's experience with violence, her help-seeking behavior and coping with intimate partner violence, and responses of informal parties and formal organizations to her help-seeking. In addition, each woman was asked about her experience with staying at the shelter (e.g., how she was referred to the shelter, her first steps at the shelter, her perceptions regarding the process staying at the shelter, her expectations of the shelter, and what she got or didn't get from the shelter). Other questions related to the contribution of the shelter to helping the woman cope with violence against her (e.g., her evaluation of changes in her life as a result of her stay at the shelter and whether the shelter meets her expectations, her recommendations for the staff as well as for other battered women). Each interview lasted between an hour and-a-half and 2 hours on the average. We tape recorded the interviews, and marked the cassettes with the participant's number, without any identifying details; nevertheless, we assigned to each woman a pseudonym. Afterwards, we transcribed the tapes and conducted a preliminary analysis. This process included categorization of content, and identification of core categories.

In the data analysis, we looked for major, significant, and interesting components that repeated themselves in the collected data (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua 1990). These components were defined as categories for analysis based on the following five stages: the first stage involved identifying and defining primary categories; the second stage involved formulating the categories, defining criteria for each category, and continuation of theoretical sampling, which is the stage of axial coding; the third stage involved formulating final sets of categories; the fourth stage involved creating a hierarchy of core categories; and the fifth stage involved identification of the core categories. The final stage is considered the essential one, in which the process of analysis moves from the level of processing to the level of conceptualization and relating concepts to a theory (for further details, see Sabar Ben-Yehoshua 1990). Both authors, in cooperation with two experts in the fields of family studies in general and violence against women in particular, were involved in the process of data analysis. Concerted attempts were made to obtain and maintain high levels of reliability (with special emphasis on inter-rater reliability) among all four persons who were involved in this process, as well as high levels of validity, with special emphasis on confirmability (Flick 1998).

Results

This section presents the main themes elicited from the data analysis. We attempted to encompass the content that relates to the battered women's experience of living in a shelter. The analysis generated four main content areas: the woman's perceptions of the shelter as a total institution (i.e., the environmental–institutional context); the woman's perceptions of herself and her life experiences; the woman's perceptions of her relations with other battered women at the shelter; and the woman's perceptions of her relations with the staff of the shelter. The presentation of findings is accompanied by examples, based on representative excerpts from interviews with the women participating in the study. The main themes elicited from the findings are closely related, and in some cases lead to the mistaken impression that they are overlapping. This is not the case, however, and the distinctions are highlighted later in the descriptions of the themes. Nonetheless, there is an interaction between the themes, and in some cases the material from the interviews is relevant to several themes concurrently. To maintain the reliability and validity of our analysis, we were careful to define the internal categories of themes and sub-themes in a way that faithfully reflects the context and the spirit of events as they evolve.

The Shelter as a Total Institution

This theme focused on the women's perceptions of the shelter, and *its institutional–environmental context.* In this regard, the women describe their responses to being in a coercive environment, being dependent on each other, being bound by rules, regulations, and obligations, and at the same time living under the supervision of the professional staff members who deal with the women's physical needs and provide protection, support, counseling, and therapy. This theme reflects the participants' perceptions of life in a therapeutic institution, in which they live with a group of women and their children and receive intensive care. That setting infringes on their privacy, as they have to share rooms, showers, bathrooms, and a kitchen with other women and their children. In the institution, the women's private, personal realm becomes public and they experience a process of exposure, decision-making, and change, as well as introspective and extroversion processes.

The women's responses indicate that the collective life at the shelter constantly moves from the private sphere of the self on the one hand, to the general, collective sphere— from the personal to the political. Some of the women are exposed for the first time to others in the same situation, and together they experience a difficult process of exposure, insights, and decision-making. Participants in the study expressed a broad array of opinions, thoughts, and feelings about the shelter. They expressed their ambivalence, and described a complex, multi-faceted rationale for the mode of operation and management at the shelter—

negative aspects and difficulties together with the positive aspects, advantages together with disadvantages, and benefits together with costs.

For one resident, Ma'ayan, the shelter facilitated growth and development. It opened new doors for her, and provided stimulation and opportunities. The restrictions and prohibitions were marginal and insignificant for her, and she did not mention any problems related to communal life, invasion of privacy, difficulty with exposure, or intensity of relationships in the shelter. Ma'ayan described the shelter as a panacea for her problems, and believed that it provided her with solutions in many spheres of life, regardless of its drawbacks.

In a similar vein, Tamar described life at the shelter as highly encouraging. She mentioned the familial atmosphere, the feelings of intimacy, warmth, security, love, and acceptance, as well as the freedom. Tamar described the place as giving her strength to cope and persevere, and emphasized that the shelter set no boundaries, restrictions, or prohibitions. She did not feel closed off, and felt that the duties were clear and understandable. Another woman, Suha, agreed with Tamar and appeared to be taking advantage of the temporary break from her partner to work on herself and develop her insights, to gather strength, and to make decisions.

Lilia was ambivalent about the shelter, and described its advantages as well as its disadvantages. The first advantage she described was the atmosphere of trust, which surprised and impressed her. Afterwards she mentioned the physical and emotional security that the shelter provides. In addition, the rules and duties at the shelter seemed natural and clear to her. However, despite these advantages she complained about crowded conditions, noise, lack of privacy, lack of financial resources, a temporary atmosphere, and restrictions related to employment opportunities. Inbal also expressed ambivalence. Her main complaints related to the rigid enforcement of rules about maintaining relationships with other men, the prohibition against staying out late, and the forced isolation from the outside world. Furthermore, Inbal mentioned the lack of an arrangement for her children in the afternoons and the lack of guidance in parenting.

Another woman, Or, also mentioned the sense of isolation and "imprisonment" in the shelter, and the feeling that she is cut off from normal life outside. She did not complain about the rules per se, and did not object to performing her assigned duties. However, she did object to the way the rules were enforced, and thought that there was some injustice in the enforcement procedures. Nonetheless, she acknowledged the advantages of the shelter, and believed that its main contribution was the cultural enrichment provided to the women, and the organized activities for children. Aya was unhappy about the lack of privacy, the intrusion into her life,

and the forced exposure to women she didn't know. She felt inundated by external and internal demands—the rules, the framework, assigned duties, obligations, and tasks. Aya felt that she had no control over her time, and that she couldn't make plans because of all the obligations. Aya: *I don't really know what's happening with me, Can I go outside? Can't I go outside? Can I make an appointment? I have so many things to organize for myself, I need to buy things for my house, so can I make arrangements with people? The same thing happened to me in my personal life, but I knew how to solve it… here I'm in a framework, there are rules, there are regulations, they assign jobs and duties to us, there are demands, there are arguments, so everything gets mixed up. I came from that awful place and I got to this place… it's so hard for me to sort things out on my own.*

Aya compares her childhood experience with control in her parental home with the experience of control in the shelter, and describes how the inspection for cleanliness in her room in the shelter reminds her of her mother's rigid inspections of her room when she was a child. Aya also associates this with rape, which she experienced in childhood, as another example of invasion of privacy. Aya: *Talking about privacy, intimacy, I found out that the daytime coordinator goes into our rooms and inspects them. Here's my mother coming in to tell me what's wrong. That's just how it was. The coordinator comes and tells me listen, this isn't right… it hurts… I don't want to go on living like that. That's exactly what I want to build for myself, without that invasion. I was also raped when I was eight years old, I've been through some really tough things in life. So for me, anything is… now that I want to build myself up, anything is an invasion of privacy for me.*

Hanin describes the shelter as a closed boarding house, a school, or a jail. She mentions that people at the shelter try to exercise control. There is a hierarchy, gaps, and classes. Hanin portrays the shelter as rigid, alienating, distant, and authoritarian, and she cannot understand what the rules are for and what they mean, nor can she understand the meaning of isolation in the shelter. She feels neglected, abandoned, and exposed to insults from the other women at the shelter and to the whims of the staff. Amal criticizes the prohibition against cellphones, the procedures for assigning women to rooms at the shelter, lack of privacy, forced cooperation, the obligation to report every departure from the shelter, and the failure to disseminate the rules.

The Woman and Her Life Experiences: Between Independence and Dependence; between Strength and Weakness

This theme focuses on how the women view themselves and their life. Emphasis is placed on feelings, thoughts, and behavior over a period of time, from their escape to the shelter until the date of the interview. In that context, they

mention milestones, and talk about how the shelter affected them and shaped their identity and self definition. The women's feelings about their identity and their lives are ambivalent, uncertain, and ambiguous, and they seem to be in a perpetual state of crystallization and change, which is accompanied by tremendous emotional turmoil. Apparently, because the women are in the process of deciding about the future course of their lives, their ambivalence about the possibilities is so keen. The women's responses range from fatalistic descriptions of having a bitter destiny and being stuck, to descriptions of themselves as having freedom of choice and opportunities; from loss of control, lack of choice, and incompetence, to a sense of fluidity and control over their lives and destiny. Thus, the women seem to be engaging in an internal dialogue with themselves, which moves from one extreme to the other.

Notwithstanding this sense of ambivalence, there is evidence of a general trend, in which the women experience a process of personal change and, for the most part, they become more adaptive and optimistic. They feel stronger and more competent, and accordingly they become more practical and functional. Tamar describes a process of gradual reinforcement, and self discovery, as well as development of a sense of mental and functional freedom and independence. She attributes this process to staying in the shelter, and indicates that the staff and the other women gave her a sense of security, provided protection, and treated her with respect. They did not restrict her, nor did they impose duties and obligations on her that she did not want to undertake. Additionally, they helped her satisfy her emotional and financial needs through supportive discussions, encouragement, and concrete assistance. All of this was accompanied by a feeling that she plays a role at the shelter because she was a sort of mother figure to one of the other women, an experience that strengthened her and generated a positive change in her self image. The change in Tamar was expressed by her showing responsibility and her determination to shape her own destiny. Deciding about how to spend her time was something new to her, and symbolized the significant change in her life. Tamar was 63 years old, and in her perception she had just begun to define her own wishes and desires at that age. She describes how she finally began to get in touch with herself, identifying her abilities and desires, learning to be assertive, perceiving herself as less dependent on others and less helpless. Additionally, she feels independent, shows initiative, and expresses a strong desire to leave her husband, obtain her freedom, and manage on her own.

Lilia expresses similar feelings, and describes a gradual process of gathering strength, and developing serenity, determination, and self confidence. She attributes this to the sense of love and warmth that she received from the staff of the shelter, and to the opportunity to be herself without

having to hide anything. Maria emphasizes that as a result of staying at the shelter she can see that her husband has nothing to give her or her son. For Ma'ayan, the period of residence at the shelter gave her confidence and enabled her to overcome her fear. She began learning to stand up for her rights and feeling less helpless and afraid. Ma'ayan: *Before I arrived at the shelter, I told the lawyer that my husband can take everything. I don't want anything. It's all his. The debts are on me. I just want him to leave me alone. I just want to live, to raise my kids in peace. Now, after less than two months at the shelter, I'm not afraid any more. I went and said that I want everything I deserve.*

By contrast, Suha describes a dual process. On the one hand, she feels growing ambivalence, confusion, and difficulty making decisions. On the other hand, she feels she is maturing, gaining experience, and learning to make wise decisions. She sees herself as being at a crossroads, and her responses reflect her intense pressure to choose among different options. Hanin describes the opposite process, and defines herself as a weak, vulnerable woman who is hurt by every little thing. Thus, she indirectly questions the relevance of the shelter for her. As she describes it, she is weakened by the feeling that she is being controlled, that there is a gap between her and the staff, that her needs are not taken into consideration, and that she is in an environment of young girls. Hanin goes on to talk about direct and indirect processes of change. In her view, she did not change as a direct result of the care she received at the shelter. In fact, she feels that she is treated as a little girl and not as a woman. Nonetheless, she indicates that the shelter strengthened her in an indirect way, through the changes that her son experienced from the time of their arrival there.

Or describes herself as feeling lost and helpless in her current situation. She feels she has no direction and is pessimistic, sad, lonely, and afraid. She has difficulty making decisions and taking responsibility for her life, and describes herself as a girl who needs encouragement, direction, and guidance. She felt that way before she escaped from her husband, and continued feeling that way at the shelter. In a similar vein, Gila describes herself as a victim of harsh circumstances, which include living with severe verbal and physical abuse from her husband and eldest son. Gila feels neglected, abandoned, and betrayed. However, some of her comments reveal a stronger side of her that is active, resourceful, and aware of herself. Still, the thread of passiveness and helplessness stays with her and runs through all of her responses.

Based on these responses, it seems that the women are in the midst of a difficult process of decision-making. Therefore, their responses seem to be contradictory, ambivalent, and ambiguous. The women who felt capable of influencing the direction of their lives, who attempted to take full advantage of their stay at the shelter and gather

strength, tended to describe their experience as beneficial. By contrast, the women who felt helpless and inept tended to describe their experience as negative and difficult.

The Women's Perceptions of their Relationships with other Battered Women in the Shelter

This theme reflects the women's perceptions of the personal relationships among the residents of the shelter. These perceptions are reflected in a variety of feelings, thoughts, and behavior that characterize the women's relationships with each other. This theme relates to the participants' perceptions of intimacy and friendship with the other women versus feelings of distance and alienation. It also relates to the extent to which the women feel free to share with each other, the feeling of openness, understanding, and availability toward each other. Indeed, most of the women expressed feelings of dissatisfaction, unpleasantness, distance, and alienation among the residents of the shelter, and most of them did not have positive memories of those relationships. However, some participants did express ambivalent and positive feelings, even if most of them mentioned more negative aspects.

Aya's encounter with the women in the shelter made her feel overwhelmed, and aroused confusion and chaos. She felt that the stay at the shelter, together with "women who do not function normatively", in her perception, was damaging to her and her children and debilitating for her. Her encounter with the other women's stories exposed her to anxiety and fear, and evoked traumatic memories that she cannot or does not want to deal with. Aya provides a vivid and candid description of how the intensity of the voices and sight of the other women were difficult and damaging for her. Aya: *There are some pretty difficult people here, all kinds of people at all kinds of levels, usually real low levels. So just try and get along with that, just try and live with that 24 hours a day. I am trying to get strong, and I know that this is my weak point. Let's say someone is talking and says, like "I'm afraid, I don't have any money". Right away my feelings of weakness start up and I feel overwhelmed! On the other hand, I've been working so long to get over my fears—four years now— since I started my personal development, and since I started making a healthy environment for myself, seeing where I went wrong, seeing what I can correct, working, hanging in there… then suddenly I come to this place, which is overwhelming.*

Suha also describes difficult relationships between the women at the shelter, which are accompanied by power struggles and tension. In her view, the women get angry and argue with each other about even the pettiest things. They vent their pressure and distress through power struggles and accusations. According to Suha, these relationships develop as a result of previous frustration and pain. The women who arrive at the shelter have had their fill of humiliation and pain, of always being asked to submit, to surrender, and to keep silent. According to Suha, in order to compensate for those experiences they are almost never willing to compromise, and behave aggressively toward the other women in the shelter.

Gila also describes these complex, tense relationships between the women at the shelter, and talks about lack of consideration, loneliness, discord, and pain. She describes an atmosphere of exploitation, lies, deceit, selfishness, and concealment. The relationships among the women at the shelter remind Gila of her relationships at home, where she also felt lack of consideration, mistrust, unfairness, and constant exploitation. Gila: *You have to be careful. They gossip. I learned my lesson. Sometimes you reach a point where you don't have to trust everyone. Because another woman can go, "what's new, dear?" and then she can stab you in the back.*

By contrast, Lilia portrays an extremely harmonious picture of the relationships among the women in the shelter. According to Lilia, the women are candid and sincere with each other. They can share their true feelings with the other women, even if they are harsh. She claims that arguments in the shelter are settled peacefully, through dialogue, clarification, and persuasion. The residents forgive each other, are fond of each other, and are able to accept criticism. Lilia: *We have discussions in the morning and open our hearts. Each of us talks about what happened to her the night before… each of us lets out our anger. It solves things most of the time. If you argue with someone and you suddenly want to tell her something, then you tell her in the morning discussion sessions…you've told her what you have to say, and she either takes it well or…*

Maria talks about the sense of partnership and cohesion among the women. For her, the knowledge that she is coping with her problem together with other women is helpful to her. She compares herself with them and compares her responses with theirs. Maria mentions how the discussions with other women make her forget her own difficulties, and enable her to see that she has several options for coping. Maria: *I like the other women. I can forget my own problems when we talk. The other women also told me what their situation was, why they are here. So I thought that I'm not the only one having a hard time, but so do other women. I understood that I came to a place where I know that they have problems too. And they don't cry, so why should I cry? I've had enough. For nine years all I've done is cry. Enough. It's time to start moving up.*

For the most part, it seems that the women in the shelter do not have very good interpersonal relationships. The participants feel that they don't receive enough support, and the sense of solidarity and friendship among the women does not come through enough. Instead, the prevailing

sentiment is one of alienation and hostility. The women who succeeded in creating a sense of group solidarity and mutual help learned to make the most of the difficult conditions and to view their relationships as an opportunity for a beneficial experience. By contrast, the women who described the relationships as negative indicated that it spoils the overall experience of staying at the shelter. Interestingly, on the one hand the women described their desire for a relationship based on trust and solidarity, and on the other they were extremely suspicious and cautious about forming relationships with other women.

The Women's Perceptions of their Relationships with the Staff of the Shelter

This theme focuses on the relationships that the women developed with the staff members during their stay at the shelter. When a battered woman arrives at the shelter, a social worker holds an intake session with her. In that session, the woman tells as much as she can bear to disclose about the circumstances of her arrival at the shelter, and becomes familiar with the atmosphere of the place and the rules that govern life there. During her stay, the woman begins rehabilitative therapy in an attempt to improve her personal, spousal, family, occupational, and legal situation.

In the interviews, most of the women talked about their positive experience with the staff and indicated that they are satisfied with their relationships with staff members. They described the staff members as available, accessible, sincere, and caring. For the most part, the women mentioned that the relationships are based on equality and partnership, the staff members are not authoritarian, and there is a sense of intimacy that gives them a sense of strength. They felt they could share their feelings and thoughts with the staff members, and that the staff members contain them. Additionally, they mentioned that the staff members are devoted and open to differences. For most of the women, the staff members were like family or intimate friends. However, some of the women qualified their statements by saying they had not yet decided about the nature of their relationships with staff members. Some women portrayed those relationships as problematic and complex. Tamar describes the love, availability, flexibility, and intimacy between the staff members and residents. She mentions that the director shares the same dining room with her, and that they drink coffee together. Thus, the director exemplifies the atmosphere of equality and partnership, and generates appreciation, respect, and admiration. As such, Tamar does not feel gaps in power or class distinctions, and she perceives the shelter as a safe environment that provides containment and reinforcement. Michal also talks about the partnership, the sense of cohesion, equality, warmth, encouragement, absence of boundaries, and lack

of a coercive and authoritarian approach. In her view, the staff adapts the treatment to each woman and takes her needs into consideration. When asked what she expected of her relationship with staff members, she responds that she thought there would be more gaps between the staff and the residents—and found the opposite. Michal indirectly criticizes the other services she approached for help before she escaped to the shelter. Her responses suggest that women who do not go to the shelter "fall between the cracks", because the authorities send battered women from one organization to another, and no organization is willing to take full responsibility for offering comprehensive care.

Or, however, is much more ambivalent about the staff at the shelter. On the one hand, she says that the staff is wonderful, and on the other she indicates that she is dissatisfied with the care she receives. She complains about the controlling approach of the staff members, who force her to maintain contact with her family and return to her husband. They ask her to report every little move she makes. Hence she defines the primary role that the social worker performs with her as a controlling one. Or: *My social worker here is a little annoying. She wants me to talk to my father, and I'm not in touch with him. I don't want my parents, they scare me… the workers at the shelter ask, "Where were you? Where did you go? Where have you come from?" So when I go to the grocery store I say I'm going to the grocery store, I give my report and I go. It bothers me… it's like they treat me like a little girl… Sometimes I feel like going back to my husband, I don't think I'm going to stay at the shelter…*

Hanin describes a somewhat different relationship with the staff members. She feels there is a gap, inequality, distance, and even some hostility and tension. Hanin: *I don't like the way they control me. The director should manage the place and not control the women. You feel like the director tries to control the women, I feel like I'm at school, at a boarding school. At the boarding school I was closed… they aren't considerate about the woman and what she says… two days ago my daughter had a fever, and my son wasn't even here… he was at kindergarten, and they said your son went outside alone. I felt totally awful… they told the social worker that I can't be here if my son is like that, but what am I supposed to do about it? At that moment I really hated her; I couldn't even look at her. I thought I couldn't stay here even for one more minute. I feel like some are on top and some are on the bottom here… and the staff discriminates among women.*

Discussion

In this section, we will discuss each of the four themes elicited from the findings of the study, in an attempt to conceptualize the lived experience of battered women in shelters. In addition, we will address the limitations of the

study, the implications of the findings for future research, and implications for practice with victims of wife battering. Figure 1 summarizes the main themes deriving from the research findings.

The Women's Perceptions of the Shelter as an Institution

This theme focuses on the women's perceptions of their stay in an institution that is closed on the one hand, and a rehabilitative, therapeutic setting on the other. Emphasis is placed on the women's perceptions of themselves in a controlled environment, where they are dependent on each other, subject to rules, regulations, and obligations, and supervised by responsible staff members who provide them with physical support and therapeutic counseling services to help them cope with emotional, professional, and legal issues.

Goffman (1961) proposed a typology consisting of four patterns of adjustment that typify inmates of total institu-

tions. The first pattern is *situational regression*, where the inmate relates only to events that are directly relevant to her own body and its existence, and views those events from a unique perspective, which is not the same as that of the people around her. The second pattern is *rebellion,* where the inmate rebels against the institution and expresses overt and covert refusal to comply or cooperate with the staff. This behavior pattern typifies the first stage of staying in an institution, and is later replaced with other types of adjustment. The third pattern is *colonization,* where the inmate structures her life in a comfortable way, which provides her with as much satisfaction as she can derive from the institution. The fourth pattern is *change and transformation*, where the inmate fully adopts the perspectives of the staff, and tries to portray an image that conforms to that spirit in every way.

Any classification of the women who participated in the study according to one specific style or pattern would be

Fig. 1 Battered women's perceptions of their stay at shelters—an integrative portrayal
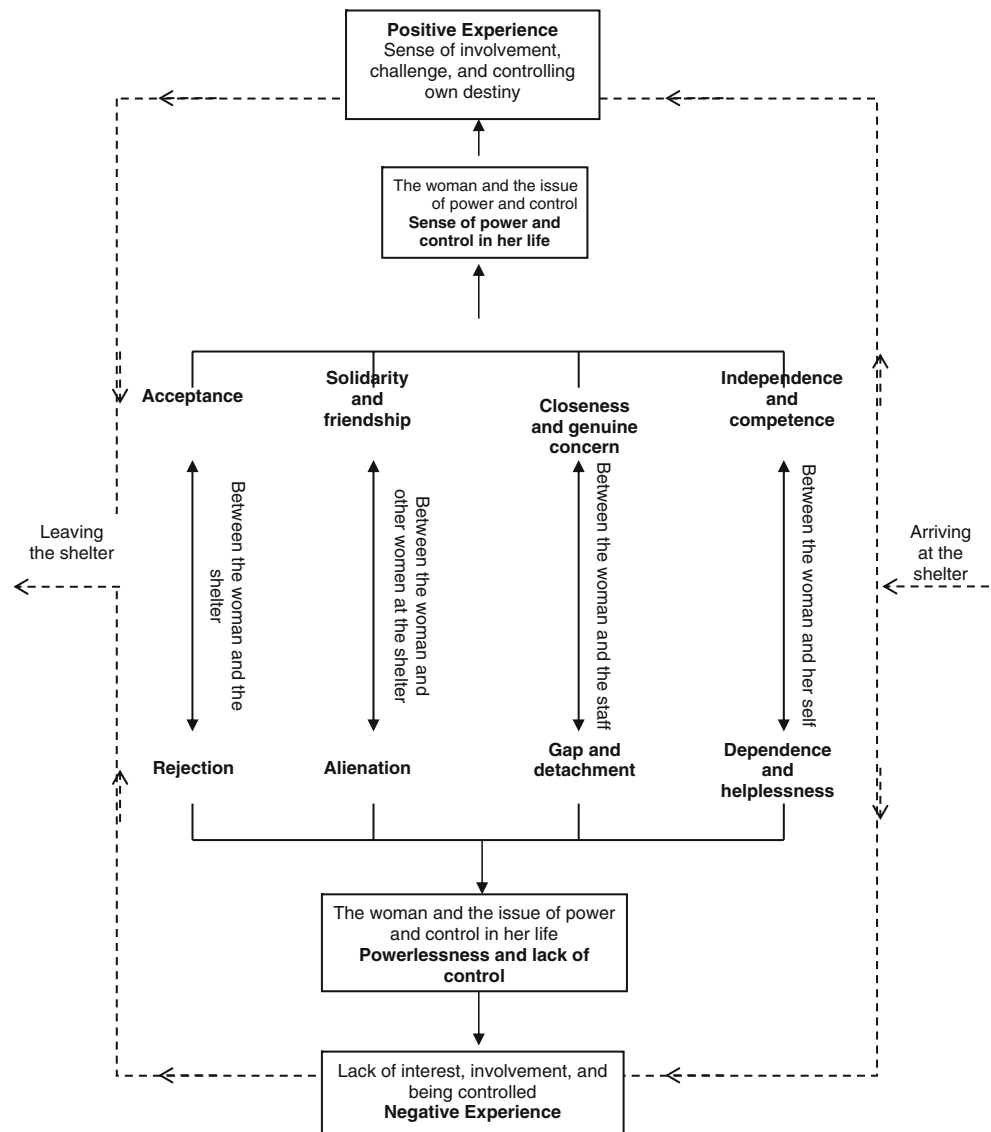
unrealistic. The research findings indicate that several patterns are relevant for the women at different periods of their residence in the shelter, and they sometimes move from one pattern to another during their stay at the shelter. However, the dominant pattern is that of colonization (adopted by 14 of the women). Most of the women tried to gain the maximum benefit from their stay at the shelter in order to improve their situation, and structured their life there as comfortably as possible. Seven of the women adopted the pattern of rebellion at various points during their stay at the shelter. For some of them, the rebellion was intense and prolonged, whereas others used rebellion as a stepping stone on the way to colonization. Some of the women adopted the pattern of rebellion when they arrived at the shelter. Nevertheless, there were those who expressed their rebellion through anger and lack of communication with the staff, whereas others had difficulty cooperating because they felt sad and upset, and not so much because they felt like they were against the place. Only two women reflected the pattern of change and transformation in some of their responses, when they indicated that the staff members think they are doing well, and that they try to conform with their perspectives. Finally, the pattern of situational regression partially characterized only two of the women, who described themselves as adjusting to the shelter by partial withdrawal, focusing on their needs, and passively waiting for assistance.

In total institutions, all areas of life are administered in one place and subject to the same authority, where every stage of daily activity is closely administered among a large number of like-situated individuals (Goffman 1961). The organizational reality observed at the shelter is close to Goffman's description. The only women who come to the shelter are those who need to be there. They are forced to stay there because of the risk and danger in their lives, although they could have chosen not to live at the shelter, and could have continued to live as victims of violence or even in a worse situation. Besides, the physical conditions at the shelter infringe on the women's privacy; the residents are subordinate to the staff and subject to rules, with limited options for negotiation. Furthermore, the women arrive at the shelter in the midst of a crisis, when they are especially weak and vulnerable. Most of them are cut off from their families, and come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Evidently, they perceive themselves as needy people who have reconciled themselves to their situation and accept it almost unconditionally.

Despite the parallel drawn here between the shelter and a total institution, most of the characteristics of the shelters as portrayed by the women there do not resemble the negative properties of a total institution. The women conform to the rules and demands of the shelter, and appear to comply with authority. They do not criticize the burden of household chores, the time schedule, the assigned duties, or participation in therapy groups, enrichment programs, and organized trips outside of the shelter. The main complaint was about their forced isolation from the outside world, about life in a communal setting, and about the way the rules are enforced at the shelter.

Furthermore, the women indicate that they are not involved in managing the shelter. They do not participate in staff meetings about the shelter or about their care. They are passive when it comes to setting policies and making decisions that deal with the shelter and their lives, and besides performing routine household chores they do not participate at all in managing the place. The women appear to be managed by the shelter, so that the shelter works for them, rather than working together with them. The contradiction between the experiences that the women describe and their exclusion from decision-making processes may be understood if one considers that no practical attempts have been made to promote such collaboration, and therefore the women do not expect to be involved. They may not be in a position to deal with roles and tasks related to managing the shelter, or they may prefer to refrain from expressing criticism that could hurt them. It is also possible that the women do not consider themselves to be worthy of involvement in the administration of the shelter. In this connection, Hoff (1990) argues that the women in the shelter are concerned about personal problems (financial and emotional), and are not available to take on new roles and responsibilities. They have frequent arguments, which prevent them from making joint decisions and reaching a consensus based on majority rule. Schechter (1982) also mentions that not all of the women agree with feminist views, and some prefer not to participate in decision-making processes at the shelter in their condition. However, Ben-Porat (2002) found that the women's involvement in life at shelters is conducive to empowerment. Thus, it is possible that when participation is adapted to the woman and her needs, she will benefit most.

The Woman and Her Life Experiences

This theme focused on the women's self-definitions and self-image, their sense of competence, and their abilities. The findings reveal that the women are still ambivalent, and they appear to be seeking self-definition. They assess themselves and their abilities, with special emphasis on what they can do—how strong they are, whether they are capable of coping with all of the challenges and tasks that await them as they begin a new phase of their lives, whether they should return home and be victims of their husband's whims, or whether they can be independent and manage on their own. The women's responses range from

fatalistic descriptions of a bitter fate and being stuck, to descriptions that mention freedom of choice; from descriptions of lack of control and helplessness, to descriptions of new opportunities and control over their lives and their destiny. Thus, the women conduct a dialogue with themselves, which shifts from one extreme to the other, where they are ambivalent about where to place themselves, and which course of action to follow after sorting out their dilemmas and weighing their options.

These processes are related to the experience of staying in the shelter. Studies have found that a woman's arrival at the shelter, and her first encounter with her situation may intensify her depression. The feeling of depression may affect her psychological well-being, her life satisfaction, her sense of control over her life, her self-image, and her self-esteem (Campbell et al. 1995). It was further found that wife abuse blurs the woman's self-definition (Dutton 1992; Haj-Yahia 2000). A large share of the women living with violence often lose their ability to anticipate what will happen to them. Thus, other than knowing that the violent incidents will recur, they are often incapable of preventing or controlling those events. Additionally, women who are victims of violence experience a process of destroying their sense of self, because they are forced to adapt themselves to others, their personal space is not defined, and their ability to behave according to their needs and wishes is impaired because they focus on their husband's needs (Haj-Yahia 2000). In a study of the self-image of battered women in shelters, Laks (2000) found that after the experience of battering, the dominant feelings mentioned by women were helplessness, entrapment, and being at a dead end. According to Laks, the women's personality narrowed, and focused on survival. In the same study, the women describe themselves as passive and dependent. They have lost confidence in their judgment, their intuitions, and their emotions, and doubt that they will be able to adjust to the new circumstances of the shelter. However, some researchers have revealed the opposite results. For example, Gondolf and Fisher (1988) found that battered women are not necessarily helpless victims of their circumstances; some of them are strong, competent, and able to cope.

There is a lack of research literature examining whether women change their self definitions during their stay at the shelter, although one of the main goals of therapeutic intervention in the shelter is to help women develop their sense of self-worth. The emotional ambivalence that the participants in our study expressed about their lives and their future may be attributed to a general feeling of vagueness and ambiguity, or to the process of change at the shelter, in which they formulate new thoughts and attitudes about themselves. This process involves profound contemplation, as well as a search for internal and external confirmation of their thoughts. It is also possible that the women's statements reflect the ambivalent nature of the entire period.

The Women's Perceptions of their Relationships with Other Battered Women in the Shelter

This theme deals with the relationships among the women living at the shelter. Emphasis is placed on their perceptions regarding the extent of intimacy and friendship versus distance and alienation. The findings in this category are consistent with those of Hoff (1990), who argues that relationships with the other battered women are the first thing that participants have to deal with when they arrive at the shelter. The literature in the field deals extensively with the personal relationships between the women in the shelter. For the most part, these relationships are portrayed in a positive light. Specifically, the most significant type of assistance provided in the shelter is that which the women provide to each other, and the interpersonal dynamics at the shelter enhance the women's collective consciousness and self-esteem. Above all, they discover that their problem is not a personal one related to the failure of their marriage. At the shelter they can communicate more freely than they do at home, and they easily find a common language with the other women. Besides developing feminine solidarity, the women also develop instrumental solidarity. First of all, they accompany each other when they go outside the shelter, so that they can protect and watch over each other. Second, the women spend hours together and encourage each other. Third, they remain in contact after they leave the shelter, whether they leave their husbands or whether they begin living on their own (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Laks 2000; Shostack 2001).

It has also been found that battered women have difficulty talking openly with their families about their problems, and the group support that they receive from each other at the shelter enhances their ability to open up and accept themselves and others (Cannon and Sparks 1989). According to Avni (1987), the women experience drastic changes in their exchange systems while they are in the shelter. That process allows for the women to make changes in their close interaction with their husbands, and transform that interaction for contact with groups of other women similar to themselves. From this perspective, the women in the shelter become a reference group, and each member experiences herself and what is happening to her from the perspective of that group, where the members provide support and each member serves as a personal model for the others. Regardless of whether one woman perceives the situation of the others as more difficult than her own, or whether she perceives her own situation as more difficult, she has a basis for comparison which enables her to draw conclusions and make decisions.

The relationships between the women in the shelter are affected by a large number of variables, so that the personal dynamics and organizational environment that vary from one shelter to another. Therefore, it is possible that at other shelters and at other points in time, the participants' perceptions of their relationships with the other battered women in the shelter may have been different. However, there are several possible reasons for the emergence of these relationships, which are connected with the women's objective and subjective reality. First, in some cases the women in the shelter encounter other women with similar problems for the first time. Thus, the women see a reflection of themselves, which is comforting at some times and unbearable at others. The women can use the reflection of themselves in others as a basis for drawing comparisons, establishing their status, identifying their place at the shelter, and evaluating their situation—a process that is oftentimes threatening and complex. Second, life at the shelter is not normative. The intensity of treatment and the women's exposure to their own painful memories and traumas as well as to the memories and traumas of other women can cause them to become immersed in their own painful memories, which may make it difficult for them to form relationships. Third, each woman is completely different from the others. The background characteristics and personality traits of each woman are so different, that they seem to have difficulty determining what they have in common and establishing a basis for a relationship.

Fourth, the women are going through a crisis, and their situation is difficult by any standards. Most of them are torn, upset, and trying to put their lives back together. These difficulties are accompanied by the poor physical conditions at the shelter—the crowded quarters, meager accommodations, and lack of privacy. Under those conditions, it is almost impossible to form productive relationships that will alleviate the women's loneliness. This perspective is supported in the professional literature, which claims that the women's emotional and financial situation generate quarrels and tension (Hoff 1990). Furthermore, the burden of assigned duties and some women's failure to perform those duties may cause a severe sense of discrimination and exploitation that generates tension among the residents (Tutty et al. 1999).

The relationships between the women at the shelter appear to be dependent on their personal characteristics, on their motivations for bonding and establishing common ground, and on the activities that the shelter organizes to promote cohesion, as well as on the organizational culture of the shelter, which also establishes norms of behavior. The perceived relationships among the women also depend on the relationships among staff members, and on the way the staff members treat the women. Notably, the staff members are a model for the residents, and have a decisive

influence on the women's satisfaction at the shelter as well as on their motivation to support and encourage each other. Additionally, the process of empowerment is validated when it is experienced by individuals in a collective setting where they derive encouragement and strength to overcome their problems, and develop skills and strategies for dealing with the new situation. A successful process of empowerment depends not only on the people that experience it but also on the collective that they organize, which lend them a sense of support, structure, and meaning. This emphasizes the primary importance of the group of women who operate as a collective to change their situation (Haj-Yahia and Sadan 2003).

The Women's Perceptions of their Relationships with the Staff of the Shelter

Most of the women expressed satisfaction with their relationships with the staff, which they described as trusting, significant, and positive. Despite their criticism, which was sometimes sharp, and although their praise was not always unqualified, the positive aspects of the women's experience with the staff is evident in most cases. Even if they do not understand the reason for every demand or every decision, the women evidently rely on the discretion of the staff members and accept their authority.

Numerous studies have found that women at shelters are satisfied with their relationships with the staff, and that the main advantage of the shelter is the emotional support that the staff members give the women (Avni 1987; Tutty et al. 1999). Other studies have found that the women's positive impressions of the staff are accompanied by criticism of their lack of active involvement in quarrels between the residents. Furthermore, women have mentioned the lack of therapeutic groups on the one hand (e.g., therapy for children), and an excessive, ineffective number of group therapy sessions on the other hand. Battered women expect the therapists to be empathetic, supportive, and encouraging, and to give them guidance and assistance with advocacy. However, research findings indicate that the assistance they receive does not meet their expectations (Agnew 1998; Eisikovits and Buchbinder 2000).

In the present study, the women draw a parallel between their thoughts and feelings about the staff members at the shelter, and their thoughts and feelings about their husbands before they escaped to the shelter. They describe a general sense of confusion, ambiguity, uncertainty, passive acceptance of their situation, compliance with authority, and submission. These feelings combine with a sense of coercion, of being controlled and dominated, and invasion of privacy, which rekindle past emotions during their stay at the shelter.

These responses reflect a common call for a new and different experience at the shelter. The women are asking

for a therapeutic relationship in which they are shown respect as a full-fledged individual. They want their needs to be taken into consideration, to be involved in decisions about their lives, to be trusted, and to be treated as equals. Evidently, their prolonged experience with constant beating and humiliation is the cause for their request to be treated differently.

Limitations of the Study

The complex situation of the battered woman and her life in the shelter, as well as the context of the study and the unique nature of qualitative research elicited several limitations and barriers related to the research method, the sample, and the interview.

The research method The study was based on a phenomenological perspective, and our interpretation determined the relative significance and emphases that we gave to the various findings. Therefore, our personal views may have influenced the research process from the initial stages (e.g., formulating the research question) to the final stages (e.g., interpretation and presentation of the findings). The second source of bias is the context of the women themselves, who were interviewed at the time of their stay in the shelter when they were still dependent on the services there and grateful for the help they received. Therefore, they might have chosen to refrain from revealing information that they felt could be harmful. Hence, in future research we recommend interviewing battered women after they leave the shelter and while they are living in their natural environments. A third possible limitation is the potential bias created by interpreting the transcripts of the interviews. To overcome that limitation, and to enhance the reliability of the research findings, the results were reviewed by two social workers. One of the workers specializes in the field of wife abuse, and the other specializes in family care and had previous experience working at a social service bureau. The two workers identified content areas that are highly consistent with those mentioned above, which enhance the reliability of the research findings. Nonetheless, professionals specializing in other fields may have identified different content areas, and may have arrived at different interpretations and conclusions. Therefore, in future studies we recommend that professionals from different fields in the social and behavioral sciences be involved in analysis and interpretation of the findings, in an attempt to further enhance the reliability of the study findings. Additionally, most of the participants were interviewed only once, and the experience of life in the shelter was examined at only one point in time without being described or identified from a long-term perspective. Thus, because the experience of living at the shelter is dynamic, evolving, and changes over time, we can only make speculative assumptions at this point.

The sample Even though we tried to achieve maximum variance in selecting the sample, any selection of participants naturally reduces the possibility of addressing different aspects of the problem. For example, our attempts to examine the experience of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women were unsuccessful. Because the sample was heterogeneous and included some Moslem, Christian, and Druze women as well as immigrant women from the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, both the participants and the interviewer (whose mother tongue is Hebrew) encountered language difficulties, which posed an obstacle in conducting the study. This problem might detract from the reliability and validity of the findings.

The interview At times, it seems that the intensity of the pain that arises when the women recall traumatic events and discuss various sensitive issues caused them to avoid responding or to give selective responses to certain questions. This happened particularly with questions related to the women's childhood, the violence in their lives, painful relationships with their families of origin or with their spouses, etc. In these cases, every attempt was made to show respect for the participants and remain sensitive to their experiences and needs. Additionally, we kept in mind that battered women have experienced violence that is accompanied by threats, suspicions, badgering, exploitation, and false accusations. The undesirable "need" to submit to their partner's demands and whims, to be prepared at all times for an attack, and to constantly remain on the defensive was sometimes transferred to the situation of the interview. Thus, in some of the interviews the women were hesitant and asked questions that reflected their suspicion about the underlying purpose of the questions, as well as their fear that any information they provide might be used against them. In these cases, the interviewer tried to mitigate their fears and create a supportive, understanding, and safe atmosphere while emphasizing that the aim of the study was to help them and not to make their situation worse.

Implications for Future Research and Theory Development

Researchers have dealt with various aspects of battered women's lived experiences in shelters, such as: the extent of their satisfaction; the extent to which they leave the shelter and return to their partners versus the extent to which they leave their partners and begin a new life; and their expectations of the shelter (Agnew 1998; Eisikovits and Buchbinder 2000; Gordon 1996). However, no com-

prehensive attempts have been made to examine the experience of battered women at shelters, as reflected in the various relationships they develop there and the impact of those relationships on the women's perceptions of life at the shelter. Thus, the present study provides comprehensive and integrative findings on the women's experience of life at the shelter, from the time of her arrival there to the date of the interview. The data were derived inductively from the interviews, and constitute a step toward developing a comprehensive theory on battered women's lived experiences at shelters. This theory will be supported or rejected using validated and reliable qualitative and quantitative instruments. Our findings indicate that the women's experience in the shelter is not shaped by one factor alone. The experience is multidimensional, and evolves out of an interaction between various factors, including: the women's relationships with the staff, the woman's relationships with other battered women at the shelter, the women's responses to the shelter as an organization, and the women's own life experiences.

Implications for Intervention with Battered Women

The findings have several implications for intervention in cases of wife battering. Notably, the women have called for multi-level care that integrates several systems. Such intervention includes care on personal level, i.e., the women ask for support, understanding, acceptance, trust, consideration, enhancement of their self-confidence, and assistance in the process of sorting out their thoughts and dealing with their dilemmas as well as guidance about their future. The women also mentioned the level of the family and marital context, where they sought help in developing parental skills as well as in coping with their spouses and deciding how to behave with them, with their family of origin, and with their nuclear family. Additionally, the women related to the level of employment, i.e., they sought assistance in finding solutions for employment and studies, and they sought concrete instrumental assistance following their escape to the shelter in light of their extremely poor and meager financial resources.

Furthermore, the women in the shelter are a heterogeneous population from many points of view. Therefore, mental health practitioners need to develop awareness and sensitivity to the women's diverse needs. In so doing, they should consider the battered woman's subjective evaluation of her needs, together with the objective professional evaluation of the woman's situation as perceived by the staff of the shelter. Involvement of battered women in evaluating their situation as well as in developing interventions can contribute to encouraging processes of empowerment and may help generate a corrective experience for the women themselves.

The study also emphasizes the importance of structuring and planning group therapy sessions with battered women. All of the interviewees mentioned that the group therapy sessions were important to them. Some of them talked about the contribution of the groups on a therapeutic level, mainly as a framework for venting their feelings, gaining encouragement and support. A few of the women mentioned the social contribution of the group sessions toward social bonding, and two women emphasized the negative aspects of group therapy—emotional flooding, arguments about assigned duties, and settling accounts. This finding highlights the need to adapt groups at the shelters to the women's situation, as well as the need to devote focus more on the impact of the groups. The findings highlight the crucial importance of the relationships between the staff and the women at the shelter, as a factor that shapes the experience of living at the shelter. Consequently, there is a need to invest in improving and upgrading the therapeutic skills of staff members.

The findings also highlight the need to improve the physical infrastructure of the shelters and to establish additional ones. The women express sharp criticism about the crowded conditions, the tumult, invasion of privacy, and lack of opportunity to create their own private space. This criticism is especially noteworthy in light of findings that a respectful environment helps reduce resistance to outside intervention and facilitates acceptance of assistance from the social services (Haj-Yahia and Sadan 2003). This is a particularly important part of the therapeutic rehabilitation process among women who have been exposed to violence in their personal domain (Laks 2000). Concomitantly, it is important to take into account the women's considerable satisfaction with the services at the shelters, as well as the immediate need to protect their lives.

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