

Dimensions and Correlates of Client Satisfaction

An Evaluation of a Shelter for Runaway and Homeless Youth

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Client satisfaction surveys give clients a voice in the planning and management of services. While their use is quite widespread, they have hardly at all been used in the evaluation of shelters for homeless youths. In this article, the authors present findings of a client satisfaction survey conducted among residents of a shelter for homeless youths in Tel Aviv, Israel, shortly after their departure from the shelter. Satisfaction was affected mainly by three aspects of life in the shelter—the staff, the food, and the other residents. Satisfaction was related to adjustment to the shelter but not to outcomes. The survey highlights the potential and limitations of client satisfaction surveys with young persons in distress.

Keywords: *client satisfaction, homeless youths, runaway youths, shelters*

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of services, especially shelters, for homeless youths (Varney & van Vliet, 2008). With the growth in the number of shelters has come a growing interest in their evaluation. Most of the evaluations focus on outcomes, such as the living arrangements of young persons exiting a shelter. Few of the evaluations focus on the experience of the youngsters while in the shelter.

In this article, we present the findings of a client satisfaction survey that was conducted among young persons who had been staying at a shelter for homeless youths in Tel Aviv, Israel. Following a short discussion of client satisfaction surveys as instruments for the evaluation of human services in general, and for the evaluation of services for children and youths in particular, we present and discuss the background, methodology, and findings of the survey, with special attention to the relationship between general satisfaction and satisfaction with particular aspects of life in the shelter and to the relationship between client satisfaction and outcomes. In the discussion we point to implications for future research and practice.

Why Client Satisfaction Surveys?

Human services are set up to provide complex answers to idiosyncratic configurations of problems. Expressions

of satisfaction or dissatisfaction elicited from clients are a reflection of these unique outcomes. Even if the evaluator is not always aware of what's behind such expressions, they do represent the variety of services received and the richness of meanings that clients may attach to their varied experiences. Furthermore, clients have a wealth of information regarding the functioning of social service programs, and client satisfaction survey provides the client perspective on those aspects of the service that are important to them. This information can then be used by service providers for the improvement of practices, which may be seen by clients as not helpful (Harris & Poertner, 1999; Johansson & Andersson, 2006).

Moreover, in a variety of settings client satisfaction may be seen as an end in itself (Garland, Lewczyk-Boxmeyer, Gabayan, & Hawley, 2004; Stallard, 1996). Services such as day centers for elderly or disabled persons, out of home placements for children, and many others, aim to give their clients a positive experience of being loved and cared for. Client satisfaction surveys may be of great value in the evaluation of such services, in spite of (possibly because of) the fact that some studies

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found them to be unrelated to treatment outcomes (Lambert, Salzer, & Bickman, 1998; Nelson & Steele, 2006; Shapiro, Welker, & Jacobson, 1997).

Most important, client satisfaction surveys empower clients by giving them a voice in the evaluation and, indirectly, in the management of services. This is of special significance in the case of children and youths, who are among the most powerless clients of social services (Bush, Gordon, & LeBailly, 1977).

Methodological Issues and Concerns

Most of the studies of client satisfaction reported in the literature used a questionnaire as their main or only instrument, with a preference for closed questions (e.g., Attkisson & Greenfield, 2004). Over the years, a number of standard instruments for the measurement of client satisfaction have been developed (Harris & Poertner, 1999). The best known and most widely used is the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ) developed by Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, and Nguyen (1979). Stuntzner-Gibson, Koren, and DeChillo (1995) saw the need for a special instrument to elicit the assessment of services by children and youths. They developed the Youth Satisfaction Questionnaire (YSQ), which differs from the CSQ in the topics covered, the wording of questions, and the response categories. While their arguments for this instrument are convincing, a literature search using a number of different data bases yielded reports of only scarce uses of this instrument. Most client satisfaction surveys preferred to develop their own instrument, reflecting dimensions of client satisfaction deemed most appropriate to the service studied (e.g., Reynolds, Windebank, Leonard, & Wallace, 2004; Shapiro et al., 1997).

Discussions of client satisfaction surveys often raise two interrelated methodological issues. These are low response rates and positive response bias. Reviews of the literature, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, report, for various types of services, response rates that range between 21% and 83% (Harris & Poertner, 1999; Stallard, 1996). The reasons for low response rates are the lack of effective tracking systems and low motivation on the part of ex-clients. These are of special concern when dealing with adolescents as service consumers (Baker, 2007; Godley, Fiedler, & Funk, 1998).

Low response rates cast doubt on the representativeness of the findings. Studies that compared respondents with nonrespondents on demographic variables found only small differences between the groups. However, when respondents and nonrespondents in mental health studies were compared on treatment variables, respondents were

found to have longer treatment and more mutual termination of therapy, and treatment was judged by the respondents and their therapists to be more successful (Baker, 2007; Lebow, 1982; Stallard, 1996).

The other concern is the inclination of respondents toward a positive response bias. This may result from cognitive dissonance, when the utilization of a service requires considerable investment of resources (money, time, or energy) on the part of clients (Festinger, 1962). There may also be a desire to please the interviewers, especially when they are seen as connected with the program being evaluated (Harris & Poertner, 1999). It has been argued that as a result of such bias, client satisfaction surveys suffer from low levels of variability in responses (Felix, White, McCullough, Morgan, & Stewart, 2004; Stallard, 1996). This, however, may be less of a problem with surveys directed at children or adolescents, who have been found to be more critical of services than their elders (Godley et al., 1998).

In spite of a possible positive response bias, client satisfaction surveys produced evidence of changes in satisfaction over time, of differences between subpopulations, and of differences between aspects of a service. Thus, for example, in studies that included questions about general satisfaction and about satisfaction with specific components of a program, it was found that general ratings tend to produce higher levels of satisfaction than questions about specifics (Hawley & Weisz, 2005; Locker & Dunt, 1978; Williams & Calnan, 1991).

The Evaluation of Shelters for Runaway and Homeless Youth

Evaluation studies of shelters for runaway and homeless youths rarely ask about client satisfaction. Such studies mostly focus on outcomes, such as schooling, employment, family relations, sexuality, and runaway behavior (Thompson, Pollio, Constantine, & Von Nebbit, 2002). The most commonly used outcome variable is the place where the clients stay after leaving the shelter. The outcome is considered positive when residents return to the homes of their families, are placed in foster homes or institutions, or depart to other destinations which have been mutually agreed upon with the staff. Running away from the shelter, returning to the streets, or going to some unconventional destination is considered a failure. Studies that were conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom report that a majority of the youth living at a shelter leave the place with staff concurrence, usually to the home of a parent or a relative. Smaller but significant numbers of homeless youths conclude

their residence in shelters by running away from them, seemingly without having attained a solution to their problem (e.g., Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991; Nebbitt, House, Thompson, & Pollio, 2007; Newman, 1989; Teare, Authier, & Peterson, 1994).

We have been able to find only two studies that elicited the opinions of the young persons during or after their stay in a shelter. Newman (1989) evaluated a safe house established under the auspices of the Central London Teenage Project (CLTP). As part of her study, Newman tried to ascertain what the young people themselves thought about CLTP. She interviewed residents 3 months after they had left the shelter. Of a sample of 94, she was able to interview 52. Unstructured interviews were used, and the results were reported as a narrative, with many examples and quotes. On the whole, the former residents expressed very high satisfaction with the staff, praising the accessibility of the staff and the non-judgmental and supportive attitude. A majority felt that their stay at CLTP helped them sort things out, develop a different relationship with their family, or find appropriate living arrangements. Most of the respondents felt safe at the shelter, although some girls complained about being hassled by boys, and others (boys and girls) were worried that their families might find them. Most of the residents mentioned good things that had happened to them at the shelter, and only a few remembered bad things. A few of those who had stayed at the shelter for a long time complained about boredom.

In an American study, Teare and his colleagues (1994) asked residents of a shelter for their opinions about the staff. The findings of this study were highly positive, ranging (on a scale from 1 to 7) from 5.98 for communication to 6.50 for pleasantness. Unfortunately, the questionnaire was administered at the shelter by members of the staff, and the findings probably suffer from a greater than usual positive bias.

While there seem to be very few studies of client satisfaction of shelters for homeless youth, more has been done to elicit the opinions of children and adolescents who were placed in group homes. Findings of such studies may be relevant to the evaluation of shelters because of similarities in the characteristics of the residents, and because in some group homes a majority of the residents stayed for relatively short periods of time (Sinclair & Gibbs, 1999). Some studies were devoted exclusively to group homes (Johansson & Andersson, 2006; Shenum & Carlo, 1995; Sinclair & Gibbs, 1999). Other studies are of large samples of children and youth in *out of home care* or *foster care*, terms which in North America refer to group care as well as family foster care and kinship care (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004; Delfabro, Barber,

& Bentham, 2002; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). In these studies, it was found that residents, or former residents, were on the whole satisfied, but that those living in group homes were less satisfied than those placed with kin or foster families. Children and youth who were former residents of group homes remembered both good and bad things that had happened to them (Shenum & Carlo, 1995). Some aspects of life in group homes emerged as being of special importance to the residents and having a strong impact on their satisfaction. These were the quality of relations with staff; the behavior of the other residents; and, to a lesser extent, physical conditions, activities, and rules (Chapman et al., 2004; Johansson & Andersson, 2006; Sinclair & Gibbs, 1999).

Method

The Case Study: Context and Purpose

Makom Acher (MA; Hebrew for A Different Place) opened at the end of 1993 in a spacious third-floor apartment in the commercial center of Tel Aviv. It had 22 beds, 11 for boys and 11 for girls. The staff included a director, a social worker, a housemother and eight part-time counselors. From the day it opened, the shelter was used quite extensively, with average monthly occupancy ranging between 6 and 18 per night.

The shelter was organized to pursue multiple goals, some of them declared, others implied in the allocation of resources and in decisions made by management and staff (Peled & Spiro, 1998). The declared goals were to get the youngsters off the streets and return them to a normative housing arrangement that is responsive to their needs. An undeclared but operative goal was to provide the residents, many of them severely deprived, with a positive experience of being accepted, loved, and nourished. While the declared goal was evaluated with the help of hard data about the whereabouts of the residents after leaving shelter, the implied goal was ascertained through participant observation. As part of a comprehensive evaluation, a client satisfaction survey was conducted among the residents of MA, shortly after they left the shelter.

Procedure and Sample

Data were collected through telephone interviews with young persons who had stayed at MA for a day or more over a period of 3 years. At the times of entry and departure, residents of the shelter were asked to provide contact addresses and telephone numbers, and were told that they may be asked to participate in a follow-up

survey. The evaluation research was presented to the residents as part and parcel of the shelter experience. Approval of parents (or guardian) to the evaluation research was implied in their consent to their child's stay at MA. In some cases, parent's consent was not required because the respondent was over 18, or because parental rights were terminated by court action.

After 6 to 12 weeks of their departure from the shelter, attempts were made to contact the former residents at the phone numbers that they had provided, or to locate them with the help of their parents, staff of residential homes, or community services. These attempts continued until the youngster was contacted, or until it became clear that there is no chance of locating him or her. Once contacted, former residents were given complete information on the survey, and their consent to take part in it was requested. They were also told that they could refuse to be interviewed or terminate the interview at any time.

The interviewers were social workers with experience in youth work or in public welfare. They were not connected to MA in any capacity, except for their role as interviewers in our study. Following the interviews, questionnaires were delivered to the research team, and they were not available to the staff of MA or to anybody else.

Response Rate and Its Effects on the Sample

Of the 247 youngsters who were listed as having left MA during the time of our research, we were able to interview 102 (41%). Most of the others (72% of those who were not interviewed) could not be found, in spite of efforts to enlist the help of their families or of social services in the community. In an additional 17% of the cases, the parents, or the personnel of a social agency, knew the whereabouts of the young person but refused to cooperate. Only in two cases did the former resident refuse to be interviewed.

What effect could our failure to interview almost 60% of the sample have on our findings? As we had information about the total sample from intake and case-summary records, we could compare the youngsters who were interviewed with those who were not interviewed on the process and outcome variables described below as well as on sociodemographic background variables. We found no significant differences in gender, length of stay at the shelter, or the manner of leaving (mutual agreement as against a one sided decision by the resident or the shelter).

From the case summary records we learned that those who were interviewed successfully had, according to the staff, adjusted better to the shelter. Furthermore, a higher proportion of them returned to their families (as against

being placed away from home or returning to the streets, i.e., to an unconventional or unknown destination). These findings point to a possible positive bias in the assessment of client satisfaction. It is plausible that those who adjusted better to life at the shelter were also more satisfied. Similarly, it is possible that those who left the shelter for unconventional destinations (including going back to the streets or trying to enter another shelter) may have been less satisfied than those who were reunited with their families.

Characteristics of the Sample

The sample of 102 who were interviewed successfully included 54 girls and 48 boys. Twelve percent were 13 or 14 years old, 40% were 15 or 16 years old, 32% were 17 years old, and 16% were 18 to 20 years of age. When they entered the shelter, almost all had been homeless for one night or more, but during the preceding 3 months, 78% stayed mostly with their families, 8% were in group homes or foster care, and 14% had been living in the streets or in some nonnormative housing arrangement. When they left the shelter, 69% went to their families, 13% were placed in group or foster care, and 18% departed to an independent, nonnormative or unknown living arrangement.

Variables and Measures

The topics covered in the telephone interview were places of residence and daily activities after leaving MA, general satisfaction with life at MA, and evaluation of specific aspects of the shelter. Respondents were also asked to assess the influence that their stay at MA may have had on them. The interview schedule consisted of 27 multiple choice questions. For some of these, the respondents were asked to elaborate on their answers and provide examples.

In the construction of the instrument, we used the findings of previous studies that elicited opinions of clients about shelters or group homes (Newman, 1989; Shenum & Carlo, 1995; Sinclair & Gibbs, 1999) as well as the findings of a pilot study, in which unstructured interviews were administered to ten former residents of the shelter. The wording of some items in our questionnaire was similar to items in the CSQ (Larsen et al., 1979), the YSQ (Stuntzner-Gibson et al., 1995), and the Youth Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (YCSQ) (Shapiro et al., 1997). Although these instruments had been used before, and had known psychometric properties, we decided against using them because there was only a partial fit between them and what we knew, on the basis of the literature and the pilot study, about aspects of shelter life that would be most relevant to the residents. On the basis of consultation

with staff of the shelter and the steering committee, we determined that the instrument had good face validity. Furthermore, the findings, as reported below, support a claim for construct validity.

General satisfaction. The residents were asked a general question which, when translated from colloquial Hebrew into plain English, read: "How was it for you at MA?" The exact meaning falling somewhere between "How did you like MA?" and "How beneficial was your stay there?" Respondents were asked to choose an answer from a 4-point scale: *very good*, *good*, *about average*, and *not so good*. To get at their general level of satisfaction, the respondents were also asked whether they would recommend the place to a friend, and whether good or bad things happened to them during their stay.

Satisfaction with specific aspects of life at MA. Based on the literature review, participant observation, and interviews with staff and residents, we identified a number of aspects of life in the shelter that seemed to be of special importance to the residents. These included the quality of their relationships with the staff and their opinion of the other boys and girls who stayed at the place, the quality of the food and the physical amenities, the daily schedule of activities (was there much or little to do), and the enforcement of rules and regulations (were they strictly enforced or could everybody do as they liked). All of these became part of the interview schedule. For response categories the 4-point scale described above was used.

Self-reported change. Respondents were asked whether they or their relationship with their family changed for better, for worse, or not at all as a result of their stay at MA.

Adjustment to the shelter. The variables described so far were all part of the follow-up interviews. When we looked for correlates of satisfaction, we turned to the case summary forms filled by the shelter's social worker for each resident upon his or her departure. In these forms, the social workers reported on three aspects of adjustment to the shelter: compliance with rules, participation in activities, and social relations with peers. Each was graded on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). A composite index of adjustment was constructed by adding the four scores, with a possible range of 3 to 12, and an actual range of 5 to 12 with a median of 8.

Length of stay. Residents' length of stay at the shelter was measured using the number of days between the dates of entry and departure, as they appear in the intake and case-summary forms.

Manner of termination and destination at time of departure. Destinations to which residents went upon leaving the shelter included the homes of parents or relatives, placements in institutions or foster-home, the streets or other unconventional or unknown destination. The act of departure could be mutually agreed upon by the resident and the staff, it could be the youngster's decision to leave or the staff's decision to terminate the stay because the resident broke shelter rules, overstayed the allowed time, or did not fit criteria of admission. These items were also covered by the case summary forms.

Data Analysis

Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to analyze relationships among the various client satisfaction scales. As these were measured on 4-point ordinal scales, and Pearson's r assumes interval scales, we replicated the analysis using Spearman's r , which is a measure of association for nominal scales. The differences in outcomes were negligible, and Pearson's r turned out to be the more conservative of the two. Thus, we decided to stick with Pearson's easily interpretable r , for both univariate and multivariate analyses. A multiple regression analysis was employed to develop a model predicting general satisfaction on the basis of satisfaction with specific aspects of MA. Sociodemographic data and outcome variables (manner of departure and destination) were measured on nominal scales. Their relationship with satisfaction was examined with the help of cross-tabulations, and chi square was used to test for statistical significance.

Findings

General Satisfaction

We found that our respondents were, on the whole, satisfied with their shelter experience (Table 1). When asked "How was it for you at MA", 40% of the 102 respondents chose *very good*, 31% chose *good*, 18% chose *about average*, and only 10% *not good*. Thus 71% saw their experience as positive. When asked whether they would recommend MA to a friend the majority (65%) responded favorably, a minority (17%) negatively, and the rest (17%) said they didn't know or it depends.

The youngsters were asked whether good or bad things happened to them while they stayed at MA. Twenty-seven percent reported that both good and bad things happened to them, 46% good things only, 13% bad things only, and the rest (15%) remembered neither good nor bad things. In other words, a majority of the respondents (71%) reported positive experiences and a

Table 1
Satisfaction With Specific and General Aspects of Life at Makom Acher

	Activity	Regime	Housing	Food	Staff	Peers	General
Not good	13	9	7	3	1	9	10
Average	13	17	18	8	10	18	19
Good	39	19	39	36	31	39	32
Very good	33	55	36	52	56	34	41
Total	98	100	100	99	98	100	102
Mean	2.94	3.20	3.04	3.38	3.53	2.98	3.02

Note: Percentages were not computed as *N* was very close to 100.

Table 2
Correlation Coefficients Between Aspects of Satisfaction With Makom Acher

Aspects of Satisfaction	Activity	Regime	Housing	Food	Staff	Peers
Regime	.231*					
Housing	.330**	.090				
Food	.239**	.287**	.607**			
Staff	.175*	.340**	.167*	.174*		
Peers	.284*	.352**	.310**	.314**	.172*	
General	.242**	.262**	.353**	.437**	.373**	.375**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

sizable minority (40%) reported negative experiences. Examples of good things ranged from tangibles, like gaining weight or terminating an unwanted pregnancy, to social and emotional gains, such as making friends, gaining confidence, or smiling again. Examples of bad things included having things stolen from them, being exposed to bad language or promiscuous sexual behavior, being falsely accused or unfairly punished.

Thus the attitude of the respondents towards MA was on the whole favorable, but not as uniformly favorable as literature quoted above made us expect (Stallard, 1996). The variability of responses is sufficient to make it worthwhile to ask how general satisfaction is related to the evaluation of specific aspects of life in the shelter.

Satisfaction With Specific Aspects of the Shelter

Levels of satisfaction were quite high for all aspects of life at the shelter (Table 1), with some interesting and significant differences among items ($F = 6.86$, $p < .001$). The residents were most satisfied with their relationships with the staff and with the quality of the food. They were slightly less happy with the regime of the shelter (the enforcement of rules and regulations) and even less satisfied with the quality of the housing, their peers (the other boys and girls who were staying at the place), and the level of activity (was there much to do?). Contrary to

findings reported in the literature (Hawley & Weisz, 2005; Locker & Dunt, 1978; Williams & Calnan, 1991), the level of satisfaction with MA in general was somewhat lower than the evaluations of specific aspects of life in the shelter.

Correlations Between the General and the Specific

How is general satisfaction with MA related to the evaluation of specific aspects of the place? Table 2 presents Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients between responses to one general and six specific questions evaluating experience at MA. All the correlation coefficients in the matrix are positive and all but one statistically significant. Furthermore, general satisfaction with the shelter is most strongly associated with the evaluation of the food, the relationship with the staff, and the opinion about the other young people who stayed at the shelter. The strong association of general satisfaction with the evaluation of the rooms may be a result of the strong association between the evaluations of room and food.

Which Specific Items Best Predict the Overall Satisfaction With the Shelter?

A multiple regression analysis (Table 3) shows that the three variables that contribute significantly to the

Table 3
Satisfaction With Specific Aspects of Life in Makom Acher As Predictors of Overall Satisfaction—A Multiple Regression Analysis

Variable	Beta	<i>t</i>
Food	.317	3.493**
Staff	.279	3.191**
Peers	.228	2.510*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

prediction of overall satisfaction were the quality of the food, relationship with staff, and opinions about the other young people who stayed at the shelter. Jointly, these three items explain close to a third of the variance in overall satisfaction ($R^2 = .328$). The other three specific aspects of life in the shelter (housing, regime, and activities) did not make statistically significant contributions to the prediction of overall satisfaction.

Self-Reported Change

Respondents were asked whether they changed as a result of their stay at MA, and whether their stay had any effect on their relations with their families (Table 4). Slightly more than half of the respondents attributed to their stay at MA a change for the better in themselves and in their relations with their parents. Very few saw a change for the worse, but there was a sizable minority that saw no change. Examples of improvements were either behavioral (I took control of myself and started working) or emotional (I am more self-confident). When talking about their relations with their parents, some respondents focused on their own attitude (I try to be more relaxed and see their point of view), others on the attitude and behavior of their parents (All of a sudden they are so concerned and caring).

The two kinds of self-reported change are quite strongly related to one another ($r = .365$) and both are positively correlated with general satisfaction, but only the correlation with change in family relations is significant at $p < .05$. When we tried to treat self-reported change as a specific aspect of satisfaction and include the two change variables in the multiple regression analysis, they did not make a significant contribution to the prediction of general satisfaction.

Correlates of Satisfaction

In another article (Peled, Spiro, & Dekel, 2002), we conceptualized a young person's shelter stay as a sequence of four clusters of variables—sociodemographic

Table 4
Self-Reported Effects of Stay at Makom Acher

Direction	Change in Respondent	Relations With Parents
For worse	1	7
No change	35	38
For better	58	51
Don't know/irrelevant	6	4
Total	100	100
<i>r</i> with general satisfaction	.119	.215*

* $p < .05$.

background, referral and entry, experience during the shelter stay, and outcome. Can the variables in these clusters predict general expression of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the shelter experience? We looked at the relations that seemed the more plausible.

The two most commonly used background variables are age and sex. Similar to reports in the literature (Chapman et al., 2004), we found no relationship between them and overall satisfaction. As for the shelter experience, length of stay had no significant effect on satisfaction. Adjustment to life in the shelter, as evaluated and reported by the social worker, was positively, albeit weakly, related to satisfaction. Of the three specific variables comprising this scale, conformity with rules had a positive and statistically significant correlation with overall satisfaction ($r = .218, p < .01$). The correlations of overall satisfaction with the quality of relations with peers ($r = .175, p = .059$) and with participation in program activities ($r = .085$) were too low to reach statistical significance. The same goes for the composite adjustment score ($r = .165, p = .072$).

We found no significant correlation between satisfaction and outcomes, which were operationalized as destination at the time of departure (whether a youngster left to the home of his or her parents, was placed in a group or foster home, or departed to an unconventional or unknown destination). Neither did we find any differences in the levels of satisfaction between those whose departure was mutually agreed upon with the staff, as against those who were expelled from the shelter or left on their own accord.

Discussion and Applications to Social Work

In a sample of young persons who had used the services of a shelter for homeless youth, a majority were satisfied with their shelter experience. This is in accord with what the literature on client satisfaction surveys led us to expect (Godley et al., 1998). However, contrary to claims of uniformly high levels of satisfaction (Stallard,

1996), in our sample the level of satisfaction was not uniformly high, and the respondents differentiated among aspects of their experience.

The moderate levels of satisfaction reported by the former residents of MA may be attributed partly to the fact that our respondents were adolescents. In the few comparisons reported in the literature, adolescents tended to evaluate services less positively than their elders (Copeland, Koeske, & Greeno, 2004; Godley et al., 1998; Gowers & Kushlik, 1992). Furthermore, client satisfaction questionnaires are often administered at a time when the respondents are utilizing the service, while ours was a follow-up survey. Even an interval of a few weeks may provide the clients with a different perspective, and help them take a more critical view of the services they received.

We were especially interested in the structure of satisfaction, that is, the manner in which overall satisfaction is related to, or can be predicted by, satisfaction with specific aspects of the service. We found that the strongest expressions of approval were reserved for the relationship with the staff and for the quality of the food. These two variables, along with opinions about fellow residents, were also the best predictors of overall satisfaction.

The centrality of client–staff relationships is not surprising. Our respondents were young persons who had run away from home, very often because their parents and other adults had failed them. The shelter to which they went had a high staff to clients ratio, and the atmosphere was highly supportive. The high level of satisfaction with client–staff relationship fits well with the findings of our participant observation study at the shelter (Peled, Spiro, & Frumer, 1996). The importance of these relationships in predicting overall satisfaction may reflect the great need of these young people for security and emotional support. Furthermore, our findings are in accord with Newman's findings in London (Newman, 1989), and the findings of various studies of group homes and foster care (Chapman et al., 2004; Johansson & Andersson, 2006) as well as those of client satisfaction surveys in other service areas, such as health (Dufrene, 2000) and mental health (Stallard, 1996). The accumulated evidence points to the need to pay special attention to client–staff relationship in the planning and administration of human services in general and services for adolescents in particular. It also points to the need to try to find out, in future research, which aspects of the relationship are of greatest importance to the clients.

While the centrality of client–staff relationships could be expected, the finding that food was such an important aspect of satisfaction with the shelter came as a surprise. We wondered whether this was a chance finding, or

whether it reflects a state of physical and emotional deprivation characteristic of young shelter users (Rees, 1993; Robertson, 1992; Thompson, Zittel-Palmara, & Forehand, 2005) and their need to be nourished. A partial replication of our evaluation may shed some light on this issue. We conducted follow-up interviews with the residents of another runaway shelter in Jerusalem, using the same instrument and the same procedures as in MA (Peled, Spiro, & Dekel, 2005). When we compared the results of the two surveys, we found many similarities and one notable difference. The regression of general satisfaction on satisfaction with specific aspects of life in the shelter yielded a significant beta value for two variables: the quality of relationships with the staff and daily activities (was there much or little to do). The contribution of all other variables, including the quality of the food, was not significant.

Could the centrality of food in the evaluation of one shelter but not the other be explained by the different ecology of the two shelters? At MA, the kitchen and dining area were located in the center of the premises, and most daily activities took place around the kitchen table. The housemother put a lot of emphasis on nourishing the youngsters, physically and emotionally. In the Jerusalem shelter, the kitchen and dining areas were located in the basement and were used only at meal times. The housemother played the role of an efficient administrator. This is, admittedly, a post hoc explanation, but it points to interesting hypotheses for future research, having to do with the manner in which organizational and physical aspects of a service may affect client satisfaction.

Two other findings merit special attention. The respondents tended to see their stay at the shelter as having had a positive effect on themselves and on their relationships with their families. However, these self-reported changes were only weakly correlated with overall satisfaction. Thus, while self-reported change can conceptually be seen as a component of client satisfaction, it should be treated as a separate aspect of the evaluation.

Finally, the relationship of satisfaction to outcomes was found to be weak and inconsistent. This reinforces an argument which we made elsewhere, namely, that social services in general, and shelters for runaway and homeless youths in particular, pursue multiple, possibly inconsistent, goals (Peled & Spiro, 1998). Some of these are declared goals, others implicit in the allocation of resources. Some goals, such as the return of young people to normative housing, are best evaluated with the help of hard data on the whereabouts of former residents at the time of follow-up. Other goals, such as providing an experience of being loved and cared for, are best evaluated through client satisfaction surveys.

Furthermore, different stakeholders may have different agendas for a service and may evaluate it according to the degree that it satisfies those agendas. Thus, for example, the young persons attending a shelter may see it as a place providing food, a bed, a shower, and a short respite from the tensions and struggles of life in the streets. Their response to CSQ will reflect this agenda, of which the staff, and possibly the evaluators, may not be aware. This, as we argued in our introduction, may be one of the great contributions of client satisfaction surveys to the comprehensive evaluation of social programs.

Our study of client satisfaction with a shelter for runaway and homeless youth points to some of the difficulties encountered in the process and to the need to design more effective ways of reaching adolescents, especially those who lead unstable lives. But it also highlights the importance of obtaining the input of adolescents to the evaluation of services designed to help them. Adolescents in general, and residents or former residents of shelters in particular, can and should play a more important role in the evaluation and design of the programs serving them (de Winter & Noom, 2003).

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