

Staff Burnout in Israeli Battered Women's Shelters

Rachel Dekel
Einat Peled

ABSTRACT. The article reports the results of an exploratory study on the impact of shelter work on shelter staff. Specifically, the study examined the relationships between workers' personal variables, aspects of workers' position and workers' emotional burnout. The findings suggest that shelter workers in Israel experience low levels of emotional burnout, high levels of work-related emotional disturbance after work hours and high levels of social support. Age, education, position percentage and years in current job were found to relate to various dimensions of emotional burnout. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]*

KEYWORDS. Battered women shelters, staff burnout, domestic violence intervention

Over the last two decades the problem of woman battering has become the focus of international attention and concern. Efforts to aid battered women have taken many forms, including legislative reform, restructuring police training and practices, research on woman batter-

Rachel Dekel, MA, is a doctoral candidate and Einat Peled, PhD, is a lecturer at the Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University. Correspondence should be addressed to: Einat Peled, PhD, Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel (E-mail: einatp@ccsg.tau.ac.il).

The authors are thankful to the WIZO organization and to staff members of the Israeli battered women shelters for their contribution to this research project.

Submitted: 4/98; Revision Received: 11/98; Accepted: 12/98.

Journal of Social Service Research, Vol. 26(3) 2000
© 2000 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

ing, and the development of various services. The first services to be developed specifically for battered women were emergency shelters (or refuges) (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Ferraro, 1981; Schechter, 1982). By the late 1980s, 1,200 shelters in the USA had housed 300,000 women and children per year (Ferraro, 1989) and about 200 refuges in England had the potential to accommodate about 4,600 women and children at each point in time (Dobash & Dobash, 1992).

From their inception, battered women's shelters aimed at both protecting and supporting women and children who have escaped from violence, and serving as an organizational and political site for the battered women's movement. By provision of a physical space so thoroughly enmeshed in the problem, shelters became a fundamental means by which feminist politics were developed, sustained and rekindled (Dobash & Dobash, 1981; Pahl, 1985). Today, battered women's shelters are by no means homogeneous in their ideology and practices, and may be funded and run by feminist groups, traditional social service providers, Al-Anon groups or religious organizations (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Epstein, Russell & Silvern, 1988).

Much research has been conducted in the last two decades on residents of battered women shelters. However, very little is currently known, both theoretically and empirically, about shelters' staff, the challenges they face in their demanding and complex work, and the ways in which they cope with these challenges. Lacking specific knowledge, our understanding of some aspects of shelter work may be supported by literature available in the related domain of intervention with victim/survivors of trauma.

Dutton (1992), one of the few who referred to the difficulties encountered by practitioners in the area of domestic violence, states that no professional experience is more demanding than that of working with trauma victims. The heavy demands involved in such work may stem from several sources. First, the nature of the domain exposes the worker, on a routine basis, to the difficult stories and excruciating pain of victim/survivors (Schauben & Frazier, 1995). Second, battered women's advocates and counselors are likely to face a continuous threat of physical injury by angry partners of victim/survivors (Douglas, 1987). Finally, common structural aspects of shelters' environment and job description are likely to further challenge the staff. These include working in a multi-function, emotionally intensive, crowded and closed space, making ends meet with poor to limited resources,

earning relatively low salaries, and juggling the often conflicting demands of direct practice and ideology (Hughes & Marshall, 1995; Pahl, 1991; Peled & Edleson, 1994; Pinton & Salai, 1985; Srinivasan & Davis, 1991).

A likely outcome of these multiple sources of stress is emotional burnout. Surprisingly, the few available sources which have mentioned the impact of domestic violence intervention on the practitioner do not refer to the concept of emotional burnout (but see Dutton, 1992). However, several authors in the domain of trauma intervention have discussed the concept of “vicarious traumatization”—a manifestation of emotional burnout which may result from a long term exposure to the traumatic experiences of victimized clients.

McCann and Pearlman (1990) referred to “vicarious traumatization” as disturbances in counselors’ basic schemes about the world. Ferraro (1981) suggested that such an intense exposure—being “bombed by images of battering”—may shift workers’ view of the world to one in which battering is a ubiquitous aspect of life: “What I see must be everywhere.” Vicarious traumatization may also be manifested through a range of PTSD symptoms such as intrusive thoughts and strong emotional reactions. These are likely to permeate all aspects of the worker’s life and may be permanent. Indeed, symptoms paralleling post-traumatic response have been identified in therapists working with various populations of trauma victims (e.g., Holocaust survivors—Danieli, 1988; Vietnam veterans—Lindy, 1988; adult survivors of incest—Briere, 1989; Courtois, 1988; Schauben & Frazier, 1995).

Little is known about possible buffer variables that may moderate the impact of vicarious traumatization. One study pointed at a possible relationship between workers’ caseload and the likelihood of experiencing vicarious traumatization (Schauben & Frazier, 1995). Others have suggested supervision, peer support and personal therapy as important defenses against possible worker burnout (e.g., Dutton, 1992; Sonkin & Walker, 1985).

In summary, little is currently known, both theoretically and empirically, about the impact of domestic violence intervention on the practitioner in general and on workers in shelters for battered women in particular. The few available sources on this topic do not refer to the concept of emotional burnout. Literature in the domain of trauma intervention discusses the related concept of “vicarious traumatiza-

tion” but does not provide us with information on possible buffer variables that may moderate the impact of this negative effect. The exploratory study reported in this article aimed to contribute to our understanding of work with trauma victims, in general, and battered women, in particular, through an examination of the impact of shelter work on shelter staff. The study focused on the relationships between workers’ personal variables (i.e., age and education), aspects of the position (i.e., position percentage and type, years in current position, social support by co-workers), and workers’ burnout.

METHOD

Sample and Data Collection

Data for this study is based on a self-report questionnaire completed by 44 workers in Israeli battered women’s shelters in the summer of 1996. The majority of the questionnaires were completed during a one day seminar for shelter workers on intervention with children of battered women. Twenty-seven of 31 participants from eight of the nine battered women shelters operating in Israel at that time agreed to fill in the questionnaires. Additional questionnaires, seventeen of which were returned, were sent to workers who did not participate in the seminar. Since the total number of paid shelter positions in Israel at the time of the study was 55 (The Labor and Welfare Ministry, 1997), our sample represented 80% of the research population.

All study participants were women. Their ages ranged from 24 to 69 ($M = 42$, $SD = 10.49$). They had 10 to 20 years of formal education ($M = 14.9$, $SD = 3.05$). Eighteen (42%) of the workers, most of them social workers, held a counseling position in the shelter; thirteen (30%) held administrative positions; and twelve (28%) were shelter “house mothers.” Participants’ level of education was correlated to the type of position they held in the shelter. Workers in counseling positions had more years of formal education ($M = 16.78$, $SD = 1.99$) than both administrative staff members ($M = 12.33$, $SD = 2.06$) and “house mothers” ($M = 14.58$, $SD = 3.37$). Thirteen (32%) participants held a part-time position (less than half-time), seventeen (40%) worked more than half-time, but less than full-time, and twelve (28%) held a full-time position. Years on the job in current position ranged

from one to 22, with half of the participants working in the shelter less than five years ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 5.4$).

MEASURES

All participants have completed a questionnaire which included sociodemographic data and measures of emotional burnout, “after hours” burnout and social support.

Emotional Burnout

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) was used to assess the degree of burnout participants were feeling regarding their work in the shelter. The MBI consists of 22 items divided into three scales: *Emotional exhaustion* (e.g., I feel emotionally drained by my work), *depersonalization* (e.g., I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally) and *personal accomplishment* (e.g., I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job). Respondents rated their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores on the three sub-scales indicate more occupational burnout. Studies by Maslach and Jackson (1986) support the validity and reliability of this instrument. The Hebrew version of the questionnaire was also found valid (Stav, 1982) and reliable (Bar-Gal & Guterman, 1996; Gorelik, 1997; Stav, 1982). Alpha coefficients for the three sub-scales in this sample were 0.73 for “emotional exhaustion,” 0.55 for “depersonalization,” and 0.48 for “personal accomplishment.”

“After Hours” Burnout

The impact of work-related concerns on workers’ functioning outside of work was measured by two questions constructed by Gorelik (1997). The first question, “Are you disturbed by clients’ problems and difficulties beyond work hours?” measured emotional disturbance. The second question, “Does your work interfere with your functioning in other domains?” measured functional disturbance. Respondents rated their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores on scales indicate more “after hours” burnout. Since this variable was

measured by two single items, only face-validity was tested and found satisfactory (Gorelik, 1997).

Social Support

Social support was measured using an adaptation of the House questionnaire (House, 1981) to the work environment (Gorelik, 1997). The scale consists of twelve items (e.g., help me when I need; appreciate my work). Higher scores indicate higher social support. The adapted Hebrew version was reported by Gorelik (1997) to be highly reliable (Alpha = 0.91). Alpha coefficient in the current sample was 0.84.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive data for the emotional burnout, “after hours” burnout and social support measures. Contrary to our expectations, study participants reported overall low levels of burnout, with an exception of somewhat higher level of concern with clients problems after work hours. The average level of social support reported was relatively high.

Few correlations were found among the burnout and social support measures. The degree to which work in the shelter disturbed workers’ functioning in other domains was correlated positively with the MBI’s personal accomplishment scale ($r = 0.31$; $p < 0.05$) and negatively with social support ($r = -0.30$; $p < 0.05$). Thus, the lower the workers’ sense of personal accomplishment and social support, the more significant was the disturbance to their functioning in after work hours.

The relationships between several structural variables and workers’

TABLE 1. Descriptive Data for Burnout and Social Support Measures (n = 44)

	minimum level	maximum level	mean	SD
Emotional Burnout (MBI)				
emotional exhaustion	1.00	3.10	2.00	0.55
depersonalization	1.00	2.80	1.52	0.52
personal accomplishment	1.13	3.00	2.19	0.45
“After Hours” Burnout				
emotional disturbance	1.00	5.00	3.36	1.03
functional disturbance	1.00	4.00	2.18	0.90
Social Support	3.08	4.92	4.10	0.50

TABLE 2. The Relationship Between Age, Education, Position Percentage, and Years in Current Job, to Burnout and Social Support Levels

	Emotional Burnout (MBI)			"After hours" Burnout		Social Support
	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal accomplishment	Emotional disturbance	Functional disturbance	
Age	\square 0.19	0.00	0.03	\square 0.06	\square 0.27**	0.19
Education	0.04	\square 0.31**	\square 0.13	\square 0.02	\square 0.13	0.15
Position percentage	0.13	0.38**	0.07	0.22*	0.35**	\square 0.04
Years in current job	\square 0.18	\square 0.31**	0.05	\square 0.11	\square 0.31**	0.28**

* = $p < 0.1$; ** = $p < 0.05$

perception of work-related burnout and social support were computed using Pearson correlations (for age, education, position percentage, and years in current job) (see Table 2) and ANOVA (for type of position).

Workers' years of formal education, position percentage and years in current job were found significantly related to their sense of depersonalization. The more hours workers worked in the shelter, the higher was the level of depersonalization they reported. However, workers who were more educated and with more years in current position, reported less depersonalization.

Workers' sense of emotional disturbance after work hours was related to their position percentage. The more hours a worker worked, the more she was disturbed by her clients' problems after work hours.

The impact of work-related concerns on workers' functioning in other domains was found to be related to workers' age, position percentage and years in the current job. Similar to the depersonalization scale, the older and more experienced a worker was, the less likely she was to be disturbed by her work after work hours. Workers who worked more hours reported more difficulties in functioning after work hours.

None of the structural variables were found related to workers' levels of emotional exhaustion and sense of personal accomplishment.

Social support was positively related to years in current position. The more experienced a worker was, the more likely she was to feel she is supported by her co-workers.

Analysis of variance revealed significant differences in the levels of depersonalization among workers with different types of positions ($F(2,37) = 5.77$; $p < 0.01$). Post-hoc Scheffe analysis suggested that "house mothers" reported higher levels of depersonalization (1.86) than workers who held a counseling position (1.29). The level of depersonalization reported by administrative staff was at the middle (1.48).

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest shelter workers experience low levels of emotional burnout, high levels of work-related emotional disturbance after work hours and high levels of social support. The low level of emotional burnout reported in this study was similar to findings in samples of social workers, both in Israel (Bar-Gal & Guterman, 1996; Gorelik, 1997) and in other countries (Powell, 1994; Williams, 1989). Hence, it failed to reflect the particularly stressful and potentially traumatizing aspects of shelter work as reported in the literature. Social support of work colleagues is known to buffer workers' emotional burnout (e.g., Himle, Jayaratne & Thyness, 1991; Parry, 1989). However, in this study, the high level of social support was not related to the low level of emotional burnout. This lack of relationship is probably statistical, caused by the low variance in both of these variables. So, how can we account for the low levels of emotional burnout?

First, several authors (e.g., Friedman & Lotan, 1985; Miller, Reesor, McCarrey & Leikin, 1995) pointed at workers' hesitation to report negative feelings fearing that such reports may be interpreted as an indication for deficiencies in their job performance. Thus, workers may underreport their actual experiences of burnout. Secondly, it is possible that workers experiencing higher levels of burnout were among the 20% of the population not included in our sample.

Another explanation may be related to reliability and validity problems of the measure (MBI) we used. For example, Wallace and Brinkerhoff (1991) have pointed to a possible problem with the validity of the de-personalization scale which may be conceptualized not only as an aspect of burnout, but also as a mode of coping with burnout. Finally, some unique aspects of shelter work in Israel may partially

account for the unexpected low levels of worker burnout found in our sample.

Israeli battered women shelters are, for the most part, public social service agencies funded and supervised by the Labor and Welfare Ministry. Hence, unlike many feminist grass-root shelters in Britain and North America, Israeli shelter workers devote most of their time to delivery of direct services and are rarely involved in advocacy work (Epstein & Marder, 1986; Pinton & Salai, 1985; The Labor and Welfare Ministry, 1997). The non-political and less complex job description of Israeli shelter workers may explain the relatively low levels of reported burnout. Further, paid personnel in Israeli battered women's shelters typically are professional workers, who are not victims/survivors themselves. This may imply greater emotional distance from clients' lives and problems and, as a result, less emotional burnout.

Two additional findings in this study seem to support the possible link between professional education and lower levels of work-related burnout. One is the negative correlation found between years of education and the level of depersonalization reported by workers—the more educated staff members, who tended to be those who worked in counseling and administrative positions, experienced less burnout (see also Hagen, 1989; Streepy, 1981). The second related finding is that shelter “house mothers” reported the highest levels of emotional burnout in our sample. It is possible that a “house mother” position entails a more frequent and intensive contact with shelter residents and, hence, exposes the worker to more stress relative to other shelter positions. However, it may also be that, not having formal education in one of the caring professions, “house mothers” were less equipped than other shelter workers to cope with the emotional burnout stemming from their work (e.g., Streepy, 1981). Finally, it is possible that an additional mediating variable between level of education, professional role and burnout, is the worker's status or power position in the organization. Workers with higher education and a professional role are likely to be perceived as occupying a higher status in the shelter. Workers with a higher status may, in turn, experience less burnout.

Other personal and structural variables were found to correlate with emotional and “after hours” burnout. Similar to other studies (e.g., Gorelik, 1997; Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Streepy, 1981), and as can be logically expected, workers who worked more hours tended to report more burnout in and out of work. Specifically, workers who

worked more hours reported a greater sense of depersonalization, possibly a reflection of their efforts to create a distance between themselves and their clients' troubled and troubling lives. More exposure does not necessarily mean more burnout. We also found that workers' level of depersonalization and "after work" functional disturbance negatively correlated with the number of years in current position. Here, the more experienced workers reported lower levels of burnout. This suggests that accumulated exposure to potentially stressful work can serve as either a risk factor (e.g., Mcgrath, 1970; Streepy, 1981) or as a buffer (e.g., Janis, 1971) to work-related emotional burnout. Though not found in this study, it is possible that workers' capacity to cope with work-related stress may grow over time only when their day-to-day exposure to stressful work conditions is limited.

Before considering the practical implications of our study, a discussion of its methodological limitations is in order. Although we have reached 80 percent of the population, our sample was small and its resemblance to samples of staff in battered women's shelters in other countries is unknown. Further, the validity and reliability of the measure we used for "after hours" burnout has not yet been determined and, hence, results based on this measure should be used cautiously. Further research on larger and more diverse samples is required to validate the findings of this study and empirically examine the hypotheses they have raised.

Its methodological limitations notwithstanding, the results of this study provide us with at least two tentative directions for helping staff in battered women's shelters cope with work-related emotional burnout. First, the experience of emotional burnout in shelter workers should not be assumed but, rather, examined. Our study suggests that, on the one hand, some shelter workers may not experience intense emotional burnout and, on the other hand, that the experience of emotional burnout is not limited to workers in therapeutic positions. Hence, training and support services dealing with work-related stress should be provided to *all* shelter workers, but the experience of burnout should be individually examined for each worker. Such an examination should be conducted in a manner allowing the expression of diverse experiences of and attitudes towards burnout.

Second, the provision of appropriate support to shelter workers affected by burnout should take into consideration (a) the specific dimensions of the burnout experience, e.g., in and outside of work,

(b) potentially contributing factors such as the complexity of the workers' job description and the duration and intensity of exposure to the stressful conditions, and (c) available coping resources such as relevant education, status and experience on the job. These various factors could be included in a preliminary intake conducted with workers prior to the provision of support services. The information collected can be then utilized to design an intervention tailored to workers' specific constellation of problems, needs and resources.

REFERENCES

- Bar-Gal, D. & Guterman, N. (1996). Perception of job satisfaction, service effectiveness and burnout among Israeli social workers involved in direct practice. *Society and Welfare, 16*, 541-566. (Hebrew).
- Briere, J. (1989). *The effects of childhood sexual abuse on later psychological functioning: Defining a "post sexual abuse syndrome."* Paper presented at the Third National Conference on Sexual Victimization of Children. Washington, DC.
- Courtois, C. A. (1988). *Healing the incest wound: Adult survivors in therapy*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Danieli, Y. (1988). Confronting the unimaginable: Psychotherapists' reactions to victims of the Nazi Holocaust. In J. P. Wilson, A. Harel, & B. Kahn (Eds.), *Human adaptation in extreme stress*. (pp. 219-238). New York: Plenum.
- Dobash, R. E. & Dobash, R.P. (1979). *Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy*. New York: Free Press.
- Dobash, R. E. & Dobash, R.P. (1992). *Women, violence and social change*. London: Routledge.
- Douglas, M. A. (1987). The battered woman syndrome. In D. Sonkin (Ed.), *Domestic violence on trial: Psychological and legal dimensions of family violence*. New York: Springer.
- Dutton, M. A. (1992). *Empowering and healing the battered women*. New York: Springer.
- Epstein, M., & Marder, R. (1986). *Shalom Bayit. A follow up study of battered women in Israel*. Haifa: Breirot (Hebrew).
- Epstein, S., Russell, G., & Silvern, L. (1988). Structure and ideology of shelters for battered women. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 16*, 343-367.
- Ferraro, K. J. (1981). Processing battered women. *Journal of Family Issues, 2*, 415-438.
- Ferraro, K.J. (1989). The legal response in the United States. In J. Hanmer, J. Radford & E. Stanke (Eds), *Women, policing and male violence*. London: Routledge.
- Friedman, Y. & Lotan, A. (1985). *The emotional burnout of the Israeli teacher*. Jerusalem: The Sold Institute. (Hebrew).
- Gorelik, Y. (1997). *Occupational stress and burnout in social work*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. The Hebrew University, Jerusalem. (Hebrew)
- Hagen, J.L. (1989). Income maintenance workers: Burned-out, dissatisfied and leaving. *Journal of Social Service Research, 13*, 47-63.
- Himle, D. P., Jayaratne, S., & Thyness, P. (1991). Buffering effects of four social

- support types on burnout among social workers. *Social Work Research and Abstracts*, 27, 22-27.
- House, J.S. (1981). *Work stress and social support*. MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Hughes, H. M. & Marshall, M. (1995). Advocacy for children of battered women. In E. Peled, P. Jaffe, & J.L. Edleson (Eds.) *Ending the cycle of violence: Community responses to children of battered women* (pp. 121-146). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Janis, T. (1971). *Stress and frustration*. NY: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich.
- Lindy, J.D. (1988). *Vietnam: A casebook*. NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Maslach, C., & Jackson, S. (1986). *Maslach Burnout Inventory Manual* (2nd ed.). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- McCann, I. L., & Pearlman, L. A. (1990). Vicarious traumatization: A framework for understanding the psychological effects of working with victims. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 3, 131-149.
- Mcgrath, J. E. (1970). *Setting measures and theses: An integrative review of some research of social and psychological factors in stress*. NY: Helth, Rinehart & Winston.
- Miller, L., Reesor, K., McCarrey, M. & Leikin, L. (1995). Nursing burnout. *Employee Assistance Quarterly*, 10, 29-52.
- Pahl, J. (1985). Refuges for battered women: Ideology and action. *Feminist Review*, 19, 24-43.
- Parry, J. K. (1989). Mutual support groups: Do they relieve staff stress? *The Jewish Social Work Forum*, 25, 43-49.
- Peled, E. & Edleson, J. L. (1994). Advocacy for battered women: A national survey. *Journal of Family Violence*, 9, 285-296.
- Pinton, N, & Salai, Y. (1985). *The Ashdod battered women's shelter: A research report*. Jerusalem: The National Insurance Institute, Research and Planning Administration.
- Powell, W. E. (1994). The relationship between feelings of alienation and burnout in social work. *Families in Society*, 75, 229-235.
- Schauben, L. J. & Frazier, P.A. (1995). Vicarious trauma: The effects on female counselors of working with sexual violence survivors. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 19, 49-64.
- Schechter, S. (1982). *Women and male violence: The visions and struggles of the battered women's movement*. Boston: South End Press.
- Srinivasan, M., & Davis, L.V. (1991). A shelter: An organization like any other? *Affilia*, 6, 38-57.
- Stav, A. (1982). *The relationship between rehabilitative intervention with cases of loss, death and disability, and the phenomenon of professional burnout in rehabilitation workers*. Unpublished Masters thesis, Haifa University, Haifa.
- Streepy, J. (1981). Direct service providers and burnout. *Social Casework*, 62, 352-361.
- The Labor and Welfare Ministry (1997). *Intervention with and prevention of family violence: An annual and four-year programs for service development and delivery*. Jerusalem: Author. (Hebrew)
- Wallace, J. E. & Brinkerhoff, M. B. (1991). The measurement of burnout revisited. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 14, 85-111.
- Williams, C. A. (1989). Empathy and burnout in male and female helping professions. *Research in Nursing and Health*, 12, 169-178.

Copyright of Journal of Social Service Research is the property of Haworth Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.