View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by CiteSeerX

Article

Journal of Interpersonal Violence
XX(X) 1–23
© The Author(s) 2010
Reprints and permission: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0886260510365859
http://jiv.sagepub.com

Shattered Vision: Disenchantment of Couplehood Among Female Survivors of Violence in the Shadow of Their Family-of-Origin Experiences

Eli Buchbinder[1]
and Hadass Goldblatt[1]

Abstract

This article describes and analyzes the relationship disenchantment of couplehood among female survivors of violence and their family-of-origin experiences of abuse. Twenty Israeli women who were survivors of violence participated in this qualitative research. Each woman underwent three in-depth interviews, two for data collection and one for validating the themes emerging from content analysis. Data analysis revealed that female survivors of violence aim to overcome the distress and pain of emotional and physical violence experienced in their family of origin, by constructing a couplehood vision imbued with a feeling of power, meaning, hope, and freedom. Partner violence shattered the women's vision of couplehood, leading to crisis, disillusionment, and disenchantment in their marital relationships.

[1]University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

Corresponding Author:
Hadass Goldblatt, PhD, Department of Nursing, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel 31905, Haifa, Israel
Email: goldblat@research.haifa.ac.il

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Keywords
female survivors of violence, abused women, intimate relationships, family of origin, qualitative research

Introduction

A fundamental axiom of human development theories is that the nuclear family of origin is the most intimate and powerful influence on adults' attitudes, values, emotions, and behaviors (Boszormeny-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Bowen, 1978; Bowlby, 1979; Framo, 1992). Empirical research in recent years confirmed the connection between family-of-origin negative experiences of female survivors of violence and adulthood problems (e.g., Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2001; Downs, Capshew, & Rindels, 2006; Saunders, 2003). Although not all female survivors of violence experienced abuse in their family of origin (Okun, 1986; Stith et al., 2000; Straus & Gelles, 1986), those who had encountered such an experience are considered to be at greater risk of becoming a victim of violence in their marital relationships as well as of perpetrating violence in intimate relationships with adults and offspring (Avakame, 1998; Dankoski et al., 2006; Jackson, 1996; Kalmuss, 1984; Sugarman, Aldarondo, & Boney-McCoy, 1996). Additional impact of such dynamics includes higher levels of depression, anxiety and anger, poor social competence and adjustment, negative self-esteem, lack of self-control, life-threatening behaviors, hopelessness, and general psychiatric symptomatology (e.g., Avakame, 1998; Kwong, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Trinke, 2003; Lang, Stein, Kennedy, & Foy, 2004; Stith et al., 2000; van der Kolk, 2005).

Most research in this field is based on quantitative methodology, focusing on the correlation between the family-of-origin experiences and intergenerational transmission of symptoms. Although this is a worthy goal in itself, such correlation might deemphasize the complexity of the phenomenon. Research has provided a modest in-depth understanding of meaning-making processes of female survivors of violence regarding the impact of family-of-origin experiences on their lives. Therefore, the aim of this article is to describe and analyze pathways to disenchantment in marriage among female survivors of violence in view of their past family-of-origin experiences.

In the following literature review, we explore the universal meaning of marriage. In light of this meaning, we then discuss the emotional bonds of female survivors of violence to their abusive partners, and finally, we refer to past family-of-origin experiences and their construction of couplehood vision.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

The Meaning of Marriage

The move from being merely a couple to the commitment of marriage is a dramatic act, through which people undergo a redefinition of self (Berger & Kellner, 1975). Marriage creates a shared field of experience based on a dialectical encounter between self and other, present and future, and covert and overt strengths and weaknesses (Charny, 1991; Levinger, 1979). Hyden (1994) described marriage as a joint project, where two separate individuals become "each other's collaborators in the formation of the joint project. The success of the joint project depends on how well this collaboration functions" (p. 29). Such a joint project persistently coconstructs the individual life project and interacts with it. Closeness that evolves from this joint project may be the foundation of the couple's most intimate and positive moments, yet paradoxically, it may increase vulnerability. Thus, intimate partners, the significant others who matter the most, might be the source of the most negative and shameful moments with their partners (Catherall, 2007).

Emotional Bonds of Female Survivors of Violence to Their Abusive Partners

Many female survivors of violence express love and commitment as critical emotions in their decision to stay in the couple relationship, alongside negative emotions as a result of the violence (e.g., Cavanagh, 2003; Frieze, 2005; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000; Strube & Barbour, 1983). As Langhinrichsen-Rohling (2005) declared, "Surprisingly, the evidence from community samples suggests that one of the main reasons that physically victimized women give for staying is love, rather than fear or obstacles to leaving, such as money or children" (p. 114). Female survivors of violence who are involved with their abusive partners have coping strategies that serve as a way of helping them appraise their relationships positively (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Frieze, 2005; Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991; Taft, Resick, Panuzio, Vogt, & Mechanic, 2007). Barnett and LaViolette (1993) pointed out that behaviors of female survivors of violence are dominated by learned hopefulness, which is represented by loyalty and commitment to marriage, and the belief in the partner's ability to change. Love, as well as other positive feelings toward the batterer on the part of the survivor of violence, seem paradoxical and hence have surprised many researchers and advocates who therefore try to describe these women's reactions as a denial of anger or a manifestation of a disturbed mental state (Loseke, 1987; Yassour-Borochowitz & Eisikovits, 2002).

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Female survivors of violence focus on the emotional domain during the process of giving meaning to the existence of physical violence. In Yassour-Borochowitz and Eisikovits's (2002) study, female survivors of violence reported the frequent existence of feelings of love between spouses, even in a violent environment. Moreover, these women often made a connection between love and violence or used similar strategies to separate the two in creating meaning for their relationships. Changes that occur in the willingness of female survivors of violence to continue living with violence are also related to feelings of love and commitment. Using in-depth interviews and participant-observation data, Baker (1997) identified a cultural script dominating the relationships of female survivors of violence with welfare services and police. This script, implemented by services that aim to help women, directs them to stay away from their abusers. Baker further found that many female survivors of violence resist this dominant script. One of the contributing factors, along with fear, partner's harassment, the existence of children, and financial issues, was these women's emotional connection and attachments with their partner. However, Eisikovits, Buchbinder, and Mor (1998) found, in interviews with survivors who were reaching a turning point in their relationships, that such a process may be understood as a series of losses, mainly related to the other: loss of love, of belief in positive traits in the other, and of hope for positive change in the partner.

Past Family-of-Origin Experiences and the Construction of Couplehood Vision

This article aims to explore the process whereby female survivors of violence construct their marital relationships and couplehood vision. The term *couplehood vision* refers to the mode by which these women envision their ideal couplehood relationships in relation to past experiences in their families of origin and how life can be meaningful in the future, in spite of the past. This includes their perceptions of husband's and wife's roles as well as the overall meaning of couplehood in the women's life narratives. This vision is critical to understanding these women's decision to live with their abusive partner or leave the abusive marriage.

The underlying existential and phenomenological assumptions are that female survivors of violence are active meaning makers whose existence in the world is reflective and intentional toward the self and others, as expressed in the interweaving of personal, interpersonal, and social realities in their narrative constructs (Becker, 1992; Widdershoven, 1993). This conceptualization is important as it opposes the notion that presents these women as passive

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

"transmitters" of their past into their marital relationships, as assumed by intergenerational transmission of violence approaches (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Downs et al., 2006; Rosenbaum, Cohen, & Forsstrom-Cohen, 1991). Such a notion robs them of their self-reflexive skills and ability to construct their own meanings regarding life in general and intimate relationships in particular. It is only through listening to meanings and narratives of female survivors of violence that a more complete understanding of their complex and sometimes paradoxical situation is possible. It is also critical to avoid a stigmatizing perspective, which portrays these women's family-of-origin experiences as negative, leading them to choose abusive partners.

Method

The present study was performed from a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, perceiving the human world as composed of multimeaning realities. As such, qualitative research seeks to understand and interpret the subjective meaning of people's experiences of phenomena, rather than to test hypotheses and generalize findings (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000; McLeod, 2001; van Manen, 1997).

Participants

Qualitative research is based on small, purposive, nonrepresentative samples (Patton, 2002). In the same line, the sample in the present study met a predetermined criterion of importance, which was the status of relationships between the interviewees and the abusers. We identified three situations: women who still live with the abuser and remain married to him, those who are still married but left the abuser and currently live separately, and women who left the abuser and divorced him.

The sample was comprised of 20 women, survivors of violence who had sought help from several municipal Domestic Abuse Intervention Units in northern Israel. All 20 interviewees were Jewish, ranging in age from 20 to 56 years. All women had completed intervention programs for survivors of violence that lasted at least 6 months. All reported experiencing continuous emotional abuse in the course of their marriage and 18 participants reported suffering from severe physical violence at the hands of their intimate partner. Similarly, in regard to their family-of-origin experiences, all participants reported severe physical and emotional violence, and 2 had also experienced sexual abuse. Here, the perpetrators were mainly the participants' parents and in some cases also siblings, who used mainly emotional abuse. No dominant

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

gender pattern existed with regard to the abusive parent: The abuser was sometimes the mother, sometimes the father, and in other cases both parents.

Seven women had married and lived continuously with their spouse for 6 to 26 years; six women were separated but not divorced and had been married for 7 to 25 years. Seven women had been divorced for 3 to 12 years after having been married for 6 to 20 years. The women had two to five children, between the ages of 1 and 25. Levels of education also varied: two women had some high school education, three had academic degrees, and the remainder had high school diplomas.

Procedure

The researcher (the first author), who is also a social worker, conducted the interviews. The participants and the researcher had no former acquaintance. The researcher contacted the managers of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Units to inform them of the research aims and rationale. After receiving the managers' approval, the researcher met with the social workers in each service and gave them further details about potential participants' characteristics. After receiving the women's agreement, the workers put the researcher in contact with those who agreed to participate in the study.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted according to the rules of the University Ethics Committee. The researcher contacted each woman, explained to her the general aims of the research, asked her to confirm her consent to take part in the study, and promised confidentiality. All participants agreed voluntarily to take part and signed an informed consent letter. At the end of the interview, the women were given phone numbers of professionals whom they might wish to call if they encountered any emotional distress. The participants' names were changed in the study findings report.

Data Collection

Data were collected by in-depth semistructured interviews designed to understand participants' meanings (Kvale, 1996; Padgett, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The women were interviewed twice, with the focus on collecting interviewees' narratives of family-of-origin experiences and their perceptions of how these experiences influenced their subsequent lives and relationships. Each interview lasted between 2 and 4 hr. All interviews were conducted in Hebrew, were tape-recorded, and later transcribed. Some transcripts were

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

translated into English for the purpose of reporting the findings in this article. The authors read the Hebrew transcripts separately and chose selected quotes that best represented the essence and depth of the phenomenon under investigation. Then, they compared their choices and decided which quotes should be translated into English for inclusion in the article. A professional native English editor, who had been living in Israel for many years and was well acquainted with colloquial Hebrew expressions, read the translated quotes to ensure their accuracy.

In the analysis, responses to open-ended questions constructed core ideas, which were then developed into themes to describe core ideas across cases (Creswell, 1998; Flick, 2006; Weiss, 1994). In the first step of the analysis, each interview was transcribed and analyzed for themes, which were then given to the women for their evaluation. In a member check interview, each woman was given the opportunity to confirm, negate, modify, or edit themes derived by the researchers in regard to their analysis of the interview with her. The second step entailed cross-case analysis. "Instances" from all interviews were collected and reduced until the core elements were identified and coded into themes (Maxwell, 2005; McLeod, 2001; Shkedi, 2005; Weiss, 1994) and integrated with the reflective remarks that emerged in the member check interviews.

Qualitative research aims to achieve credibility without arguing that a full version of the truth has been achieved (Angen, 2000; Hammersley, 1995). Although it does not allow generalization about the lives of all female survivors of violence, this research enables learning about a phenomenon in greater depth (Patton, 2002). This is accomplished by showing that various aspects of the data collected in the analysis complement each other to create a consistent and rich description (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; van Manen, 1997). In achieving validation, interpretations were substantiated through direct quotes from the interview data (Stiles, 1993). Understanding was further elaborated through member check interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999).

Findings

Data analysis revealed two main themes: (a) hope of couplehood vision as a positive transformation and (b) the collapse of the couplehood vision. All but three interviewees agreed that based on their family-of-origin experiences, they constructed a couplehood vision that gave meaning to their intimate relationships, a vision that was eventually shattered. As for the first theme, hope of couplehood vision as a positive transformation, in the beginning, interviewees expected couple relationships to be a corrective experience,

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

re-creating both partners' personal biography and thus overcoming childhood pain. This was a means of distancing themselves from distress and pain experienced in their family of origin. As such, couplehood was imbued with a feeling of hope, power, and freedom as well as of moving away from a growing sense of being trapped and threatened by the future. Often, these women had a faith that their partner shared their own hope of couplehood vision, which was consequently experienced as a shared, integral part of "we-ness."

As for the second theme, the collapse of the couplehood vision, in the beginning of violence in marriage, the women marginalized a growing recognition that the vision of couplehood would not materialize. As violence escalated, they discovered that the shared vision of "we-ness" was an illusion and did not guarantee their protection within the intimate relationships' space. As a result of this understanding, the vision of hope collapsed, replaced by an experience of entrapment, leading to a crisis that forced them to face their shattered vision of couplehood and life reality.

Hope of Couplehood Vision as a Positive Transformation

The women perceived couplehood as a means of liberation from the pain in their family of origin. As such, they described how their partners won their trust and made them believe that they had the power to amend their experiences of pain and distress. For Ronit,[1] marriage was intended to provide security and protect her from violence and abuse. To the question "What was the best and most meaningful quality you perceived in your husband?" she replied,

> What were the good things? That he wouldn't let anyone hurt me . . . by saying that as long as he lived, and as long as I was with him, nobody would harm me . . . Only *he* had the right to harm me.
> Interviewer: And that was your core need?
>
> Ronit: Yes, it was what I was looking for in life. That somebody would protect me so I could sleep well at night . . . Before I was married, I was relying on my future husband and hadn't thought about being able to cope on my own . . . But it didn't work out as I had imagined.

In another part of the interview, Ronit said,

> I didn't know that his [the partner] psyche has to be healthy and strong to succeed, and not go crazy or become violent over every little thing. People need . . . a principle on which to base a life together, but I didn't

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

> know all that. I used to say to myself—you need to start a family, to protect one another, you don't need anything else . . . That's what I had been looking for all my life.

This interviewee described the distress resulting from the insecurity and vulnerability she experienced in her family of origin. She experienced herself as too weak to cope alone with her sense of entrapment; hence, she expected her ideal intimate partner to play a powerful protective role in her own empowerment. She described her ideal of couplehood as a symbolic quality even before the appearance of the actual partner, reflecting the opposite of her distress. The interviewee moved between the two poles: the family-of-origin distress and the couplehood vision, intensifying the voice of deprivation and longing for security. This dictated her choices and reduced her focus to a single attribute, by which she evaluated her partner. Her expectations of protection were fulfilled at the price of admitting the existence of abuse in her couplehood. At this stage, abuse in the family of origin was perceived as a separate experience, thereby enabling Ronit to preserve her present vision of hope, ignoring violence in her couplehood. Nevertheless, in the course of her marriage, she realized that the security of "protecting one another" against an external enemy did not secure her own protection within the family space. As a result of this understanding, the vision of hope collapsed and Ronit acknowledged the full meaning of abuse in her marital life.

The interviewees defined the emotional relationship they sought to share with their spouses as a reaction to what they were trying to avoid, as is evident from Ruth's words: "I'd go out with men, and the whole time I was *chasing* love . . . I had been raped and subject to incest and everything, and being beaten all the time, and I needed love so much."

> Interviewer: What does searching for love mean? Please define it for me.
>
> Ruth: What is searching for love? It's searching for the feeling of being hugged, that somebody is relating to you, that someone will care about you, will care *for* you. All the things I never had. To be seen as a human being! Look, I was an abused child. My father's family saw me as a monster, something that had to be expelled . . . When the wedding arrived, all I knew was that this was a man who would be devoted to me . . . who would care *about* me, and who said he loved me, and I needed him . . . I felt that he was protecting me.
>
> Interviewer: Did you feel that he loved you?
>
> Ruth: I don't know. Look, because I'd never been loved, I didn't know what to expect from love. For me, if he hugs me and gives me a

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

> sense of security, that's love. If he says, "I'm here for you," that was love. I didn't know all the things that I know today.

As demonstrated by this quote, the greater Ruth's distress, the more intensely meaningful the couplehood vision becomes for her existence and the more she yearns for it. Ruth described her distress as resulting from violence, sexual abuse, and the absence of love in her family of origin. Consequently, she experienced her own existence as hinged on desperately "chasing love" to fill her emotional void, to heal her pain caused by violence and rejection.

In the interviews, Ruth described repeated disappointing experiences with men, whose intentions were merely sexual. Thus, her pursuit of love was a source of hope, yet it also made her vulnerable to the intentions and exploitation of others. Moreover, "the chase" led to burnout that depleted her stamina and eroded her belief in her ability to realize her hopes. Thus, we can also understand why she entered into the relationship with her husband: A sense of fatigue born of previous failures impaired her ability to evaluate and judge her partners accurately. The interviewee uses the word *love* as a social taken-for-granted concept, the fulfillment of an ideal shared by others.

Frequently, interviewees believed that their partner shared their own hope of realizing the couplehood vision. In this way, the vision was conceptualized as a shared, integral part of "we-ness." As Deborah said,

> My dream was always to build a warm and loving family, where we would be aware of the other's existence and there would be mutual appreciation . . . but, especially, I wanted understanding and trust . . . He said he wanted to get married, have a family, he wanted children . . . He said he didn't want a life like his father and mother had had. His father used to go with other women and they never saw him, and his mother would run away from home and abandon them, so the children grew up on their own . . . I said to myself that by helping him, I'd be helping myself too because I also suffered in my family. I hoped he would help me and by so doing he would help himself . . . I encouraged him to believe that our life together would be different because now we were together and would be there for each other . . . But it was all in vain.

Deborah perceived both poles of her existence—her distress and her dreams. Although she and her husband had different experiences, the kernel

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

of their stories was similar: The family was not a warm and accepting place, as is socially and emotionally expected, but rather the cause of distress. Moreover, both of them expected their own couplehood and family life to be a corrective experience, re-creating both partners' personal biography and resolving childhood pain. As a lifeline, the vision of couplehood was rigid. Only such vision can ultimately defend against the threat of future distress, similar to that experienced in the family of origin.

The Collapse of the Couplehood Vision

The strength of the interviewees' vision can aid us in understanding their initial inability to recognize the collapse of their couplehood vision, once the partner abuse has begun. This was poignantly described by Dina:

> On the first night after the wedding, I felt as if I could *breathe*, I simply began to feel liberated from my family of origin. The next day, I went for a walk and felt fantastic, but in the first week, when we were on honeymoon, he hit me, and I saw that it wasn't as I had expected. But each time, I repressed it: "Maybe he'll change; maybe he'll be different when we have children." . . . When the disappointment came, I shut myself off inside myself. I didn't tell a soul . . . For many years, I lived alone with this feeling and tried to make it better—to change him, and I didn't succeed . . . I was simply running away from home . . . because I didn't love him when I first married him . . . I liked him as a person, he was good looking, but there was no love.

Dina used the word *breathe* as a metaphor to illustrate the liberation she experienced at the beginning of her marriage. She never experienced her family-of-origin home as a source of emotional security and had no foundation on which to base her idea of home on an emotional level. After repeated violent experiences, she felt trapped between the painful experiences of both homes that were, symbolically, "nonhomes." Violence threatened to crack the defense that she had carefully constructed as a dream to be fulfilled through a couplehood relationship. This explains why she marginalized her growing recognition that her vision of couplehood would not materialize, despite the violence. At first, she hoped to succeed in changing her partner and ultimately attain her vision. Nevertheless, the internal gap between the violent reality of her life and her receding vision of couplehood widened, and Dina intensified her efforts to defend this vision.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Interviewees who remained in the relationship, despite disillusionment with their vision, experienced an increasingly intense sense of distress and a fear of change, as Miriam described:

> Even if there was more serious violence, even if he had raped me, hit me until I bled, and abused me even more, nothing could ruin the fantasy I'd created. It was the only life I believed existed, and to this day, I still have this obsession: I'm scared of divorce . . . I'm afraid of change. When I was with my husband, I always had the feeling that he was better than me, that I wasn't really worthy of him. And so, I had to accept things because I was inferior . . . he was doing me a favor by marrying me, [and] I took it, I thought . . . whatever his actions, he would still be better than me . . . I didn't allow myself to express any criticism. I told myself: "You got what you wanted; now you have to be happy." And I really did have to be happy . . . I taught myself to be satisfied.

Miriam related to her present experiences in the past tense, as if she was divorced, in spite of being still married and cohabiting with her partner. She created a happy scenario for herself, assuming a meaning of protection and support of her existence, to tolerate abuse, both in the past and the present, and to maintain hope. She would rather have been harmed by her husband's violence than risk being overwhelmed by her past. Therefore, she created this situation by repressing her anger, and accepting her inferiority and abasement. Paradoxically, these negative feelings regarding the self enabled her to experience herself as having control over her life, as choosing the meaning in her present life of violence.

For Miriam, any price was considered tolerable to avoid divorce. She experienced marriage with her husband as a life-and-death battle that she had won because she was married and had built a family, but her husband's violence and alienation added an element of defeat.

Pnina described her sense of failure and disappointment after recognizing the collapse of her vision that led her to choose divorce:

> I believed in him, but he breached that trust and once again he shattered all my dreams. That dream of a friend, of a different family, all that became an illusion, living a pretend life . . . I said it may well be that I will just be by myself. Getting along with somebody after that is something I'll never manage . . . I realized that I had to divorce him. After I realized that my dreams were illusions, I wasn't afraid of him any longer; I didn't care about him any more.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

The partner's physical violence destroyed Pnina's vision and portrayed her hope as an "illusion." Couplehood vision is central to the totality of life; therefore, the totality of Pnina's existence was experienced at an "illusionary" level, expressed as a total loss of direction and living in deceit and self-deception. With the collapse of hope came the recognition that she was alone but also free of violence. This situation eliminated her fear of her abusive partner. The experience of being trapped between their contrasting poles of existence is likely to continue, even for women who experience positive changes in their partners' behavior and remain in their marriage, as described by Rachel:

> Sometimes I get the feeling of missing out on family life. This is not what I wanted. The feeling leaves me on my own again and takes me back to where I was as a child. I have this ideal in my head, a perfect picture of what a family should be, but it was shattered in the face of reality . . . I want to make up for what was lacking there . . . In fact, I think that the message I received as a child from my life circumstances was that you can't rely on your mother or your father . . . But at such a young age, a child can't rely on herself or on others that much, so she can't trust life . . . It could be that now I remain [in the relationship] because of that fear of abandonment. In spite of becoming a person with self-confidence, my anxieties have often stopped me from . . . being myself . . . Now I know that I'm a very strong person: I survived and took care of myself so well all these years . . . I survived many crisis situations and came out on top . . . [But] this fear of abandonment prevents me from feeling that I'm a whole, self-reliant person.

Rachel described a cessation of her husband's physical violence and a reduction in the verbal and mental abuse. However, there were two voices in her life that represented the disparity and struggle in her existence. The first voice gave expression to her awareness that it was she who shaped the vision of the ideal family that was incompatible with present "reality." In her second voice, Rachel described couplehood as an experience of returning to loneliness and lack of confidence in herself and the world. Thus, we can understand how Rachel experienced her existence between opposite poles: dependent versus independent, weak versus strong, purposeful versus aimless, assertive versus breaking down. The whole was split, comprised of contradictions; past family-of-origin experiences and present marital relationships were trapped in the conflict between power and weakness, which resulted in a sense of ensnarement, of stagnation. She was aware of the past and of the powerful forces pulling her in opposite directions.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

The threat was manifest in the absence of boundaries between past and present, and in the obliteration of boundaries between her strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, when she explained why she remained in the relationship, she described living at two levels. On one hand, she was conscious of her fear of abandonment, her anxieties, and her negative self-image, yet on the other, she described a change that had taken place within her. Thus, she was not sure whether her decision to remain was a result of her fears or of a process of acceptance.

Discussion

Female survivors of violence interviewed in this research described their couplehood as constructed in light of their negative experiences in their family of origin, particularly relating to emotional and physical abuse. Therefore, couplehood became the horizon of a vision of an ideal future that protects, empowers, compensates, and heals their past. Thus, this vision created coherence in their lives and helped the women overcome threats of disintegration, despair, and guilt, which were part of past, present, and future life without meaning (May, 1983; Spinelli, 1989). As such, the past and the vision of couplehood alternately became the "figure and ground" of the marital narrative of female survivors of violence and, for a critical period, of their life narrative (Valle & King, 1978). Hyden (1994) found that the act of marriage for female survivors of violence is a "joint marital project," a vital choice for their present and a means of constructing a future. The findings of the present study indicate that a "joint marital project" relates not only to the present and the future but also involves the past. The women in the present study included their partners in their own self-conception. In the women's eyes, the partners had a unique status, which distinguished them from other people and from previous relationships (Aron, Mashek, & Aron, 2004). As such, survivors described their couple relationship as "living in each other's subjective contexts of meaning" (Schutz, 1970, p. 167). This sense of intersubjective given meaning already existed at the onset of their partners' violence, and they tended to accommodate rather than retaliate at first.

In clinging to the vision of couplehood, these female survivors of violence attempted to overcome distress by counterstructuring hope through reinforcing their sense of belonging to the couple "we-ness." Nevertheless, "we-ness" also enables batterers to dominate their partners because the shared vision of couplehood requires surrender and a relinquishing of individuality. As Nurius and Gaylord (1998) pointed out, the intimate nature of threats and the realization of possible losses force women to recognize the risks involved, and, as a

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

result, may lower their ability to cope with such risks. A fundamental threat to the self exists, especially the future self and image that the women constructed, of hopes and goals they would achieve. This dynamic constitutes a new way of understanding findings cited in the literature regarding women's ambivalent feelings toward violent men. These feelings range from one extreme to the other: love and hate, despair and hope, dependence and disappointment (Choice & Lamke, 1997; Rhatigan & Axsom, 2006; Strube & Barbour, 1983; Turner & Shapiro, 1986; Yassour-Borochowitz & Eisikovits, 2002). These opposites reflect the complexity of the men's behavior, the complex role of the self in relationships, and, as the present study shows, the contradictory motifs in meanings that women ascribe to couplehood.

Persistence of physical and emotional violence forces female survivors of violence to confront the collapse and shattering of their vision. At some point, they evaluate their commitment to marriage. As Bauserman and Arias (1992) showed, these women's commitment decreased as their level of failed investment in the relationships increased. As long as the vision of couplehood exists, female survivors of violence may succeed in containing the violence in their intimate relationships. When this vision is shattered, loss of meaning occurs, preventing female survivors of violence from further containing the violence. The shattered vision is a self-perpetuating disparity between the partners (Denzin, 1984). As a result, these women's current marital perception of their relationships is rigidly disengaged, reflected in extreme emotional separateness (Shir, 1999). Therefore, maintaining intersubjective openness toward the partner becomes an obstacle in the relationships, while survival and self-protection become a critical mode for safety (Catherall, 2007; Choice & Lamke, 1997). The violence causes pain and cracks the women's conceptualization of couplehood as a bridge to a better future. The most essential emotion of female survivors of violence is betrayal (Lloyd & Emery, 2000) and the intentional violation of faith, trust, and commitment of their partners. Such dynamics also magnify the fears of the power of family-of-origin experiences as well as the sense of existential helplessness and loss of control of these women's ability to orient their lives.

Marris (1974) held that the ability of human beings to cope with life events is linked to the stability of meanings across life situations, so that anything that does not confirm the essential elements in the conceptual structures of interpretations is potentially damaging and threatening. Physical and emotional violence, however, in a dramatic way, force female survivors of violence to recognize their need to defend themselves against their intimate partner. Women's vision of creating a life of shared meaning collapses and is accompanied by a sense of loss. But in this process, female survivors of

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

violence learn to use their strength, to be resilient, and to protect the self (Davis, 2002).

In reference to the sociocultural angle of our findings, one may speculate that in the main, they reflect the Israeli sociocultural context, thus raising the question of relevance for non-Israeli Western women. Western cultures are under the strong influence of the Judeo-Christian value system, which stresses marriage institution and overall patriarchal social arrangements, which have the potential to enhance a perception of marital relationships as a protective anchor for women. Moreover, intimate violence creates a culture that crosses national boundaries; hence, we can say that women living in intimate violence in various cultures perceive their couplehood in similar ways. As such, the findings can also be explained from a perspective of interaction between individual and gender and universal social models. The individual motive may have concurred with social models of relationships that contain perfect, nurturing, forgiving, saving, and healing love (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1997; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Towns & Adams, 2000; Wood, 2001). This ideal relationship model binds them emotionally to their partners, constituting an interpretive framework for the violence in their lives and their own silence, and helps them reconcile the contradictions in their partners' identities as violent, jealous, yet loving husbands.

Despite their past family-of-origin experiences, female survivors of violence do not respond with desperation, as generally indicated by the literature (e.g., Saunders, 2003; van der Kolk, 2005). They rather invest the power of their experiences in continuous attempts to break away from violence, and continuously and actively seek to realize their couplehood vision. Therefore, the overall intervention with female survivors of violence must conceptualize them primarily as survivors who are active and competent to make choices, even in the most adverse and violent situations (Dunn, 2005; Hamby & Gray-Little, 1997; Peled et al., 2000; Roche, 1999). The couplehood vision is perceived as women's efforts to reorganize their world in ways that are significant for them and that can be seen as strengths and as hopefulness (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Gondolf, 1998; Lloyd & Emery, 2000; Mills, 2003). Thus, interventions with female survivors of violence are based on perceiving them as active meaning makers. Assisting female survivors of violence through simplistic interventions or advice such as "just leave," without an understanding of women's interpretations, may ignore the complexity, the conflicting emotions in relationships, and the need to cope with emotional burdens (Shannon, Logan, Cole, & Medley, 2006). Female survivors of violence have the knowledge to construct a life vision for themselves—they have been doing this all their lives.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Limitations of the Study

Data collection and preliminary analyses were performed entirely by the first author. He identified and conceptualized the main emerging themes, leading to the connection between past experiences of abuse in the family of origin and present couplehood vision. Because such a process might result in a limited perspective of the phenomenon under investigation, to base the findings further, the second author analyzed the data separately, gaining an independent impression and could therefore confirm the first author's conceptualizations. A member check with the participants themselves was also conducted.

Owing to the small-scale, exploratory nature of the present study, the findings cannot be generalized to all women who have experienced intimate violence. The participants who volunteered to be part of the study exhibited a high level of motivation to talk about their experience that may not be found representative of the general population of female survivors of violence. Congruent with the characteristics of the sample, our findings are limited to a description of the commonalities in life situations that might lead to the construction of couplehood vision and its disenchantment. Specific aspects, such as duration, intensity of past family-of-origin experiences, and marital relationships, were not examined. As such, these deserve further research. Moreover, most women in this study reported an exposure to family violence in their childhood. Additional studies should address marital perceptions of women whose family of origin was not abusive. Despite these limitations, this study can shed some light on the importance of family-of-origin experiences and their connection to marital experiences of female survivors of violence.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Funding

The authors declared that they received no financial support for their research and/or authorship of this article.

Note

1. The names of all participants have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

References

Angen, M. J. (2000). Evaluating interpretive inquiry: Reviewing the validity debate and opening the dialouge. *Qualitative Health research, 10*, 378-395.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Aron, A. P., Mashek, D. J., & Aron, E. N. (2004). Closeness as including other in the self. In D. J. Mashek & A. P. Aron (Eds.), *Handbook of closeness and intimacy* (pp. 27-41). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Avakame, E. F. (1998). Intergenerational transmission of violence, self-control, and conjugal violence: A comparative analysis of physical violence and psychological aggression. *Violence and Victims, 13*, 301-316.

Baker, P. L. (1997). And I went back: Battered women's negotiation of choice. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 26*, 55-74

Banyard, V. L., Williams, L. M., & Siegel, J. A. (2001). Understanding links among childhood trauma, dissociation, and women's mental health. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 71*, 311-321.

Barnett, O. W., & LaViolette, A. D. (1993). *It could happen to anyone: Why battered women stay.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Bauserman, S. A. K., & Arias, I. (1992). Relationships among marital investment, marital satisfaction, and marital commitment in domestically victimized and nonvictimized wives. *Violence and Victims, 7*, 287-296.

Becker, C. S. (1992). *Living and relating: An introduction to phenomenology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Berger, P., & Kellner, H. (1975). Marriage and the construction of reality. In D. Brisset & C. Edgley (Eds.), *Life as a theater* (pp. 219-233). Chicago: Aldine.

Boszormeny-Nagy, I., & Krasner, B. R. (1986). *Between give and take: A critical guide to contextual therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy and clinical practice*. New York: Jason Aronson.

Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. New York: Tavistock.

Campbell, J., Rose, L., Kub, J., & Nedd, D. (1998). Voices of strength and resistance: A contextual and longitudinal analysis of women's responses to battering. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 13*, 743-762.

Catherall, D. R. (2007). *Emotional safety: Viewing couples through the lens of affect*. New York: Routledge.

Cavanagh, K. (2003). Understanding women's responses to domestic violence. *Qualitative Social Work, 2*, 229-249.

Charny, I. W. (1991). *Existential/dialectical marital therapy: Breaking the secret code of marriage*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Choice, P., & Lamke, L. K. (1997). A conceptual approach to understanding abused women's stay/leave decisions. *Journal of Family Issues, 18*, 290-314.

Cohen, M. Z., Kahn, D. L., & Steeves, R. H. (2000). *Hermeneutic phenomenological research: A practical guide for nurse researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Dankoski, M. E., Keiley, M. K., Thomas, V., Choice, P., Lloyd, S. A., & Seery, B. L. (2006). Affect regulation and the cycle of violence against women: New directions for understanding the process. *Journal of Family Violence, 21*, 327-339.

Davis, R. E. (2002). "The strongest women": Exploration of the inner resources of abused women. *Qualitative Health Research, 12*, 1248-1263.

Denzin, N. K. (1984). Toward a phenomenology of domestic violence *American Journal of Sociology, 90*, 483-513.

Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1992). *Women, violence and social change*. London: Routledge.

Downs, W. R., Capshew, T., & Rindels, B. (2006). Relationships between adult women's mental health problems and their childhood experiences of parental violence and psychological aggression. *Journal of Family Violence, 21*, 439-447.

Dunn, J. L. (2005). "Victims" and "survivors": Emerging vocabularies of motive for "battered women who stay." *Sociological Inquiry, 75*, 1-30.

Eisikovits, Z., Buchbinder, E., & Mor, M. (1998). What it was won't be anymore": Reaching the turning point in coping with intimate violence. *Affilia, 13*, 411-434.

Flick, U. (2006). *An introduction to qualitative research* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Framo, J. L. (1992). *Family-of-origin therapy: An intergenerational approach*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Frieze, I. H. (2005). *Hurting the one you love: Violence in relationships*. University of Pittsburgh, Australia: Thomson/Wadsworth.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gondolf, E. W. (1998). *Assessing woman battering in mental health services*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hamby, S. L., & Gray-Little, B. (1997). Responses to partner violence: Moving away from deficit models. *Journal of Family Psychology, 11*, 339-350.

Hammersley, M. (1995). Theory and evidence in qualitative research. *Quality & Quantity, 29*, 55-66.

Herbert, T. B., Silver, R. C., & Ellard, J. H. (1991). Coping with an abusive relationships: How and why do women stay? *Journal of Marriage and Family, 53*, 311-325.

Hyden, M. (1994). *Woman battering as marital act: The construction of a violent marriage*. Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian University Press.

Jackson, N. A. (1996). Observational experiences of interpersonal conflict and teenage victimization: A comparative study among spouses and cohabiters. *Journal of Family Violence, 11*, 191-203

Jordan, J. V. (1997). *Women's growth in diversity: More writings from the Stone center*. New York: Guilford.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Kalmuss, D. (1984). The intergenerational transmission of marital aggression. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 46*, 11-19.

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kwong, M. J., Bartholomew, K., Henderson, A. Z., & Trinke, S. J. (2003). The intergenerational transmission of relationship violence. *Journal of Family Psychology, 17*, 288-301.

Lang, A. J., Stein, M. B., Kennedy, C. M., & Foy, D. W. (2004). Adult psychopathology and intimate partner violence among survivors of childhood maltreatment. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 19*, 1102-1118.

Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J. (2005). The top greatest "hits": Important finding and future directions for intimate partner violence research. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20*, 108-118.

Levinger, G. (1979). A social exchange view on the dissolution of pair relationships. In R. L. Burgess & T. L. Huston (Eds.), *Social exchange in developing relationships* (pp. 169-193). New York: Academic Press.

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lloyd, S. A., & Emery, B. C. (2000). The context and dynamics of intimate aggression against women. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 17*, 503-521.

Loseke, D. R. (1987). Realities and construction of social problems: The case of wife abuse. *Symbolic Interaction, 10*, 224-243.

Marris, P. (1974). *Loss and change*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

May, R. (1983). *The discovery of being: Writings in existential psychology*. New York: W. W. Norton.

McLeod, J. (2001). *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage.

Miller, J. B., & Stiver, I. P. (1997). *The healing connection: How women form relationships in therapy and life.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Mills, L. (2003). *Insult to injury: Rethinking our responses to intimate abuse*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Nurius, P. S., & Gaylord, J. E. (1998). Coping with thread from intimate sources: How lowered self-protection related to loss for women. In J. H. Harvey (Ed.), *Perspectives on losses: A sourcebook* (pp. 281-291). Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.

Okun, L. (1986). *Woman abuse: Facts replacing myths*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Padgett, D. (1998). *Qualitative methods in social work research: Challenges and rewards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Peled, E., Eisikovits, Z., Enosh, G., & Winstok, Z. (2000). Choice and empowerment for battered women who stay: Toward a constructivist model. *Social Work, 45*, 9-25.

Rhatigan, D. L., & Axsom, D. K. (2006). Using the investment model to understand battered women's commitment to abusive relationships. *Journal of Family Violence, 21*, 153-162.

Roche, S. E. (1999). Using a strengths perspective for social work practice with abused women. *Journal of Family Social Work, 3*, 23-37.

Rosenbaum, A., Cohen, P., & Forsstrom-Cohen, B. (1991). The ecology of domestic aggression toward adult victims. In R. T. Ammerman & M. Hersen (Eds.), *Case studies in family violence* (pp. 39-56). New York: Plenum Press.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Saunders, B. E. (2003). Understanding children exposed to violence: Toward an integration of overlapping fields. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 18*, 356-376.

Schutz, A. (1970). *Phenomenology and social reality: Essays in memory of Alfred Schutz* (M. Natanson, Ed.). The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.

Seale, C. (1999). *The quality of qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Shannon, L., Logan, T. K., Cole, J., & Medley, K. (2006). Help-seeking and coping strategies for intimate partner violence in rural and urban women. *Violence Against Women, 21*, 167-181.

Shir, J. S. (1999). Battered women's perceptions and expectations of their current and ideal marital relationships. *Journal of Family Violence, 14*, 71-82.

Shkedi, A. (2005). *Multiple case narrative.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Spinelli, E. (1989). *The interpreted world: An introduction to phenomenological psychology*. London: Sage.

Stiles, W. B. (1993). Quality control in qualitative research. *Clinical Psychological Review, 13*, 593-618.

Stith, M. S., Rosen, K. H., Middleton, K. A., Busch, A. L., Lundeberg, K., & Carlton, R. P. (2000). The intergenerational transmission of spouse abuse: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*, 640-654.

Straus, M. A., & Gelles, R. (1986). Societal change and change in family violence from 1975 to 1985 as revealed by two national surveys. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 48*, 465-479.

Strube, M. J., & Barbour, L. S. (1983). The decision to leave an abusive relationship: Economic and psychological commitment. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 45*, 785-793.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Sugarman, D. B., Aldarondo, E., & Boney-McCoy, S. (1996). Risk marker analysis of husband-to-wife violence: A continuum of aggression. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 26*, 313-337.

Taft, C. T., Resick, P. A., Panuzio, J., Vogt, D. S., & Mechanic, M. B. (2007). Coping among victims of relationship abuse: A longitudinal examination. *Violence and Victims, 22*, 408-418.

Towns, A., & Adams, P. (2000). If I really loved him enough, he would be okay. *Violence Against Women, 6*, 558-585.

Turner, S. F., & Shapiro, C. H. (1986). Battered women: Mourning the death of a relationship. *Social Work, 31*, 372-376.

Valle, R. S., & King, M. (1978). An introduction to existential-phenomenological thought in psychology. In R. S. Valle & M. King (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological alternatives for psychology* (pp. 3-17). New York: Oxford University Press.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2005). Developmental trauma disorder. *Psychiatric Annals, 35*, 401-408.

van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experiences*. London, Ontario, Canada: The Althouse Press.

Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative intervew studies*. New York: Free Press.

Widdershoven, G. A. M. (1993). The story of life: Hermeneutic perspectives on the relationship between narrative and life history. In R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *The narrative study of lives* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-20). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Wood, J. T. (2001). The nomalization of violence in hetrosexual romantic relationships: Woman's narratives of love and violence. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 18*, 239-261.

Yassour-Borochowitz, D., & Eisikovits, Z. (2002). To love violently. *Violence Against Women, 8*, 476-494.

Bios

Eli Buchbinder, PhD, is a social worker and a senior lecturer at the School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, University of Haifa, Israel. He specializes in qualitative research on intimate partner violence. He has published numerous journal articles in this field. He is the coauthor (with Zvi Eisikovits) of *Locked in a Violent Embrace—Understanding and Intervening in Domestic Violence* (Sage, 2000). Formerly, he worked in different social work institutions: a public welfare agency, a children residential care, family therapy, and a domestic intervention unit and served as a mental health officer in the army. He can be reached at ebuchbin@research.haifa.ac.il

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016

Hadass Goldblatt, PhD, is a lecturer at the department of nursing, Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, University of Haifa, Israel. Her recent writings have dealt with spousal violence, adolescents' exposure to interparental violence, and the experience of professionals intervening with domestic violence and trauma issues. Formerly, she was the head of the Unit for Research, Intervention, and Prevention of Domestic Violence, Haifa, Israel. She is a qualified family therapist and an experienced supervisor in social work.

Downloaded from jiv.sagepub.com at PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIV on October 5, 2016