Spousal Abuse Among Immigrants
From Ethiopia in Israel

This ethnographic study obtains first-hand information on spousal abuse from Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. Data include 23 interviews with male and female immigrants of various ages and 10 professionals who worked with this community as well as observations and documents. The findings, verified by participants, show that during cultural transition, the immigrants’ code of honor, traditional conflict-solving institutions, and family role distribution disintegrate. This situation, exacerbated by economic distress, proved conducive to women’s abuse. Lack of cultural sensitivity displayed by social services actually encouraged women to behave abusively toward their husbands and destroy their families. Discussion focuses on communication failures in spousal-abuse discourse between immigrants from Ethiopia and absorbing society, originating in differences in values, behavior, social representations, and insensitive culture theories.

Over the past few years (1999 – 2004), I was involved in evaluating an experimental program to prevent spousal abuse among immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel (Kacen & Keidar, 2006). In a conversation with an educated man from this community who participated in the program, I asked how to say “violence toward women” or “domestic violence” in his native Amharic. My informer replied that there is no such term in their language. “Then how do you describe situations in which a husband beats or insults his wife”? I asked. He answered, “There is no reason to speak about it.” The conversation aroused my curiosity, as language is a means used by cultural groups to transmit knowledge and shape social norms (Green, 1995). I asked myself whether there was no need for the concept because violence toward women was nonexistent in Ethiopia, or perhaps because there is another term with a similar meaning, or was it that the phenomenon is an accepted, self-evident norm that need not be discussed judgmentally as it is in Western cultures. Something else troubled me as well. If there is no term for domestic violence in Amharic, how do immigrants from Ethiopia understand this concept as used in Israeli society to describe negative situations of violence between husbands and wives? What is the term’s meaning to them? I decided to find out what the immigrants themselves have to say about these issues, interviewing men and women of various ages who fulfill a variety of functions in their community.

Two additional factors motivated examination of the topic: the high rates of violence toward women among immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel and the failure of social services to prevent and treat the problem, particularly within this population group.

Spousal-Abuse Rates Among Immigrants From Ethiopia

Twenty-five percent of all cases of murder of women by their spouses in Israel each year...
involve immigrants from Ethiopia, a rate considerably higher than their proportion in the general population (1.5%). Although murder of women by their husbands is an extreme indicator, it does reflect a problem that requires special investigation. According to an Israel police report, 13,592 spousal-abuse complaints were registered in 2004, of which 1,956 were filed by new immigrants of various origins, including 226 immigrants from Ethiopia (1.67% of all files and 11.6% of all those involving immigrants). This percentage, too, is higher than the share of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel’s population (http://www.ynet.co.il/Ext/comp/articlesLayout). The figures do not reflect the full extent of violence toward women, as only 10% of all battered women (Fishman, Eisikovits, Mesch, & Gusinsky, 2001) – especially immigrants from countries with traditional societies (Bui, 2003) – inform the police of their situation. Despite this high rate, spousal abuse among immigrants from Ethiopia has only been on the Israeli agenda for 5 years, and the taboo imposed on the subject was only lifted about 2 years ago when members of the community began speaking openly about the phenomenon, seeking to reduce its incidence. This study reveals, for the first time, the immigrants’ own point of view regarding problems of spousal abuse.

Social Service Failure to Prevent and Treat Violence Toward Women Among Immigrants From Ethiopia

The mass immigration of the Jews of Ethiopia (known as Beta Israel) to Israel took place during 1984 in three major airlifts: Operations Moses, Sheba, and Solomon. Others arrived between these campaigns, and the influx continues to this day. There are over 100,000 Jews of Ethiopian origin in Israel (Shabtay & Kacen, 2005; Swirsky & Swirsky, 2002). Their immigration to the “Jerusalem” for which they had yearned constituted religious and spiritual fulfillment that did not consider the material changes entailed in the transition to a modern society (Freund, 2001). For the women, “arrival in Jerusalem” symbolized a kind of new freedom and equality (Shabtay & Kacen, 2005).

Indeed, during the first years after their immigration, many of the women applied to social services for assistance, claiming they were victims of spousal abuse. Although all signs indicated that violence toward women had not changed, the application rate declined from 7% in 1995 to 3% in 2000. In this article, I will attempt to reveal the nature of spousal-abuse discourse between immigrants from Ethiopia and social welfare agencies, as well as to understand why communication failures occur. This discourse analysis will contribute to our understanding of similar cases in which communities immigrate from traditional societies to modern ones.

Domestic Violence: A Theoretical Review

The theories that dictate social service responses to spousal abuse in Israel are primarily Western social theories that consider nuclear families and the individuals comprising them to be the focus of intervention. Key examples of such theories are summarized below.

Gelles (1997) reviews a variety of theoretical attempts to explain spousal violence, recalling the psychiatric model, stress and coping theory, social learning theory, resource theory, the ecological approach, sociobiological theory, exchange theory, feminist theory, social psychology, and culture. He claims that each of these theories sheds light on the phenomenon from a different angle, and no single theory explains it completely.

According to these theories, violent spousal relations may be classified into three interconnected types of relationships, separated below for sake of clarity only: control, emotional ambivalence, and dependence.

Control. Most cases of spousal abuse are characterized by men’s aggressive control of women, the increasing literature on women’s abuse of men notwithstanding (Crowell & Burgess, 1996). Aggressive control may be accompanied by violence of a physical (Straus, 1990), psychological (McGee & Wolfe, 1991), or sexual nature (Riessman, 1994) or any combination thereof (see Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; Walker, 1979). Domestic violence, as described in this article, conforms with the above description.

Emotional ambivalence. Spousal relations between partners in a violent relationship are full of conflicting emotions, such as love-hate or attraction-repulsion (Denzin, 1984; Lempert, 1997). Such ambivalence engenders emotional confusion and unstable relations. One reflection of emotional ambivalence is the cycle of violence, described by Walker (1979) as a process
in which anger builds up within the violent man as a result of various events and eventually explodes as acute battering of his spouse, who serves as victim. Once the anger is discharged, there are feelings of regret and requests for forgiveness, often accompanied by a “honeymoon” and expressions of love, until the cycle begins again. The longer the violent relations continue, the shorter the honeymoon periods and the more frequent the violent outbursts. As a result, the women may develop learned helplessness syndrome (Walker, 1988), posttraumatic reactions (Star, 1980), or survival responses (Dutton, 1996). Men, in turn, develop feelings of isolation and separation anxiety (Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993). The daily encounter between the battered woman’s learned helplessness and the man’s separation anxiety creates communication problems accompanied by negative feelings (Denzin, 1986). In such situations, any disagreement is liable to deteriorate rapidly into a quarrel and violence.

Another kind of emotional ambivalence relates to feelings of guilt among both partners. Violent men attempt to conceal their failure to control their wives and their behavior, and battered women feel guilty, first for not satisfying their husbands and later for not leaving them (Balcom, 1991). Cycles of guilt lead to concealing violence from outsiders. The resulting isolation renders relations even more tense. Feelings of guilt, together with emotional ambivalence, create a maelstrom of emotions that powerfully undermines spousal relations without the partners having any control over it.

**Dependence.** Married couples who have a violent relationship develop mutual economic, social, and psychological dependence (Dutton, 1996). Economic dependence results when one partner is not employed or when the violent partner controls all families’ resources and withholds them from the other. Social dependence originates in the couple’s feelings of guilt and often in the violent husband’s, prohibiting his wife from socializing with others, reflecting his emotional dependence on her and his jealousy of any external social ties she forms (Barnett, Martinez, & Bluestein, 1995).

Psychological dependence is essentially the violent man’s dependence on his wife for his self-identity. Ferraro (1988) defines the self as the meaning individuals’ accord to their existence. Accordingly, a threat to the self would be anything that disrupts this meaning. According to Ferraro, battering men are more threatened by harm to the self than by any other type of harm, a situation that Lempert (1997) calls the principal reason for violent outbursts.

In summary, these theories appear to focus on spousal dynamics, ignoring environmental and cultural factors. At their foundation is the assumption that spousal relations epitomize nuclear families in modern society. Consequently, spousal violence is a problem that is spousal in nature and can be solved by rehabilitating or breaking up the couple and primarily by providing individual therapy for each partner. As the social services designed to treat spousal violence in Israel are based on these assumptions and as these services fail to provide appropriate solutions for the Ethiopian immigrant community, even 25 years after their arrival in Israel, the time has come for reevaluation of these theories in terms of their ability to understand spousal violence among communities in transition from a traditional society to a modern one, such as the Ethiopian immigrant community in Israel.

**Spousal Violence Within Communities in Transition From Traditional to Modern Society**

A review of the literature relating specifically to spousal violence among people who immigrated from traditional to modern societies indicates a correlation between the undermining of their old social order and the rise in incidence of violence within their communities. This correlation gains in intensity when the original culture was fundamentally patriarchal (Bui & Morash, 1999; Rianon & Shelton, 2003). Researchers point out cultural differences in defining violence: Modern societies refer to spousal violence as domestic violence, although in some traditional societies, such as that of Ethiopian Jews, everyday affairs were largely conducted in huts open to the community or in the open space between them. Life within the framework of extended families also included violence perpetrated by a mother-in-law or uncle toward a daughter-in-law or niece (Taylor, Cheers, Weetra, & Gentle, 2004). Another difference is inherent in the definition of social identity: In traditional societies, the behavior of a couple is evaluated according to its consistency with the collective identity (Erchak, 1984). Battered women who consider applying for institutional
assistance in the Western countries to which they immigrated have to evaluate the implications of their appeal regarding their status within their cultural community and the effects on the community as a whole. Consequently, in many cases, they will choose to forgo applying for help. Other factors affect such reluctance as well, including language problems, suspicions, and responses that do not suit expectations (Bui, 2003).

Often, immigrants from traditional societies, including immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel, become impoverished after immigrating to modern countries because they lack vocational training and language proficiency. Most Israeli families of Ethiopian origin are in difficult economic straits: 50% of families have no breadwinner, 65% of adults aged 45 and older are unemployed, and more than 80% of Ethiopian immigrant women do not work for pay (Swirsky & Joseph, 2005; Swirsky & Swirsky, 2002). Furthermore, the positive correlation between poverty and spousal abuse (Fishman et al., 2001) also accounts for the rise in incidence of violence in this community.

**Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel in Cultural Transition**

In Ethiopia, the Jews lived in small communities in villages or cities, where they conducted a traditional lifestyle and were led by spiritual leaders who derived their power from the Jewish faith (Abbink, 1984). Each village or community numbered 8 – 10 families. Families had a patriarchal structure and were part of an intergenerational families’ community whose members were responsible for one another. Division of functions within families was very clear: The man has authority and represents his family before community members and leaders. As the most respected family member, he is responsible for the financial situation of the family, assigning tasks, education, tradition, religion, and spirituality. The woman, who married at a very young age, is considered her husband’s property. She works at difficult physical chores and is responsible for cooking and raising children. Children are the most inferior in a family’s hierarchy and were permitted to speak only with permission from their parents (Freund, 2001).

On their immigration to Israel, efforts were made to preserve the communities’ intact, but their exposure to a Western lifestyle in Israel led to many changes in their traditional way of life. Their dream of spiritual fulfillment was shattered. The Kesim (clergymen, singular: Kes) were not recognized by the Israeli establishment, and their status was weakened. They found themselves unlike others because of their culture, dress, and dark skin color. The community’s traditional institutions declined in status and were no longer effective in solving problems. For example, the Shmagaleh (elders), who were involved in solving families’ conflicts in Ethiopia, lost their standing, especially among the younger generation, who preferred the Israeli establishment to the traditional one. Balance was disrupted in both nuclear and extended families: Children, who learned the language and norms of the surrounding society quickly, became the “foreign ministers” and thereby were empowered and stopped respecting their parents. Young men and women began acquiring higher education and leaving home while still unmarried. They married at a later age and by free choice (Shabtay & Kacen, 2005). In this study, I attempt to ascertain whether the increase in spousal violence reflects these transitions.

**METHOD**

The ethnographic tradition in qualitative research, as selected for this study, enables perception of culture through the eyes of study participants, revealing the cultural code that dictates their behavior (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). The database includes interviews, observations, and documents (published and unpublished).

**Interviews**

Semistructured interviews were conducted in which participants were asked to talk about life in Ethiopia and in Israel, their spousal relations, and methods of resolving conflicts. When the interviewees agreed, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, or minutes were taken as precisely as possible by a research assistant who also served as an observer. Most interviews were conducted in Hebrew and a few in Amharic, using an interpreter.

**Observations**

We observed about 25 sessions of a course for volunteers of Ethiopian origin and a similar number of meetings at a course for community elders (Shmagaleh) on the subject of spousal violence,
both offered as part of the prevention program. The volunteers’ course sessions were summed up in minutes, whereas those of the elders were videotaped with the consent of participants.

Finally, we collected documents, including published and unpublished papers, about the community and its history: in Ethiopia, en route to Israel, and settled in Israel. These documents were analyzed as data and therefore appear as references in the Findings section of this article.

Research Population
Twenty-three participants from the Ethiopian immigrant community were interviewed, most of whom had participated in courses in the experimental domestic violence-prevention program, as well as four who were proposed by professionals. The rationale for their selection was as follows: When we conducted the interviews, open discourse on domestic violence was taboo in this community, and only those who participated in the program were ready to share their knowledge and experiences. Note that the chief contribution of the prevention program was the breaking of this taboo. Once discourse became more open, we were able to collect data of even greater relevance.

The sample consisted of six young women and seven young men (most of them single); three older married women, two of whom were battered women who separated from their husbands and are now single mothers; three older married men, one of whom was a batterer; and three young unmarried and one married social workers, all from the Ethiopian immigrant Beta Israel communities. It was impossible to gain cooperation from married couples for the reasons mentioned above. These communities immigrated with their leaders and preserve the traditional community structure (Levin-Rozalis, 2000). We also interviewed 10 professionals with cultural knowledge about immigrants from Ethiopia but who were not parts of the community: three social workers who determine policy at the nationwide level and seven involved in direct community and individual intervention who had extensive experience in working with the community.

Data Analysis
The extensive data gathered were analyzed thematically, with attention to content and structure (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Data analyses were accomplished in the original language of most of the data (Hebrew), and only the excerpts appearing in this paper were translated into English by a professional translator.

Trustworthiness
Two procedures were conducted to reinforce the trustworthiness of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985): triangulation of data retrieved from interviews, observations, and documents, and participant validation achieved by presenting participants individually and in focus groups with the research conclusions. When they had thoughts on issues raised, we discussed them and together decided how to present them in a manner that reflects reality accurately while remaining acceptable to their communities. I believe this verification of conclusions is of key significance because I am an outsider and bear a grave responsibility in publishing material the community considers so sensitive. Participant review reinforces the study’s trustworthiness and is especially important in intercultural research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Before detailing the findings, it is important to note that the study does not shed light on personal characteristics of the partners involved in spousal-abuse incidents, as there are still barriers to exposure of such intimate details among immigrants from Ethiopia. Even the battered women avoided speaking about themselves. These barriers are reflected in the quotations cited below, in which it is evident that men prefer speaking about women and women about men, or in certain instances, about their mothers.

Findings
Data analysis reveals three main themes that contribute to an understanding of the differences between the Ethiopian immigrant community and the surrounding Israeli society concerning spousal violence: the immigrants’ outlook on life, spousal relations before immigration to Israel, and spousal relations after immigration to Israel.

Immigrants’ Outlook on Life
Three key values define the traditional way of life among the immigrants from Ethiopia: holism, collectivism, and a hierarchic code of honor. An understanding of these values, as described in documents and publications and reflected in data collected from the interviews, is essential for
comprehension of the context of the two other themes.

Holistic view of life. The holistic conception maintains that the values that determine the course of everyday life cannot be separated and selected among by the individual (De-Jasay, 1992). This view prevails among immigrants from Ethiopia (Kacen, Soffer, & Keidar, 2005). For example, domestic violence, work, education of children, livelihood, and religion are interwoven so closely that one loose thread may cause the entire fabric to unravel. Consequently, when I asked participants to talk about domestic violence, I often found myself involved in a discussion about education, religion, livelihood, and so on. Much patience and attention were required until the interviewees ultimately reached the topic of violence. Only after analyzing the data, did I understand that all these issues are part of the discourse on violence.

Collectivism. In Ethiopia, “their point of departure was that every individual is an inseparable part of families and social unit … One’s self-image is derived from powerful identification with families’ good name and honor and respect for elders” (Shabtay, 1999, p. 53). Individual identity is assessed according to the collective identity components it embodies. As collective identity is essentially monolithic, it emphasizes common features and condemns deviation (Bar-On, 2005). Consequently, exposure of one’s personal problems to the public was unacceptable (Ben-Ezer, 2002). The Shmagaleh (elders) told us that community welfare and maintenance of the prevailing social order were the primary factors taken into account by community institutions in solving families’ conflicts, whereas personal well-being was deemed less significant (see also Excerpt 2.2, below).

Code of honor. One key norm at the focus of the traditional social order among immigrants from Ethiopia is the granting of respect according to a hierarchy of authority. This code dictates and defines the community’s normative behavior to this day (Ben-Ezer, 1989). “There are rather clear criteria that determine the hierarchy, such as age (elders), families’ authority (father, mother, or big brother), ethnic function (Kessim, clergymen, or Shmagaleh, elders)” (Ben-Ezer, 1989, p. 20). In the patriarchal family structure that obtained in Ethiopia, the father was at the top of the authority ladder, followed by his wife, with the children at the bottom. Functionaries in the public establishment and government officials were perceived as high on the hierarchy according to this code. Behavior that deviated from the code entailed social sanctions (see Excerpt 2.1, below).

Spousal Relations Before Immigration to Israel
In Ethiopia, girls married at a very young age (9–12) and moved in with their husbands’ parents. A wife and children were considered the man’s property. It was the man who determined what they were to do and when, as indicated in the following statement by one of the older male interviewees:

Excerpt 2.1: What was accepted? A man is a man. His word is law. The man dictates and the woman accepts. He will honor her to the same extent, but the last word is the man’s. The man earns a living and the woman is at home … There is honor between father and child. One may notice it even today, although not to the same extent. A child lowers his head and will not dare look [his father] in the eye. Only if the father asks something does the child open dialogue and speak to him.

Deviation from expected behavior by a child or wife was perceived as a blow to the father’s honor. In spousal relations, rules of preserving the hierarchy of honor were clear: A woman must not say “no” to her husband; obedience to one’s husband, whose authority is higher than her own, was absolute. At most, she could refuse by remaining silent (Ben-Ezer, 1989). Even when she did not agree with the man’s decisions, she was not to suggest alternatives or express negative feelings about them such as anger, jealousy, hostility, or a desire for revenge. These conditions precluded open dialogue between partners. Interviewees told us that the woman was expected to welcome her husband on his return home by going out to meet him, kissing his knee and washing his feet, having his meal ready, and lowering her eyes in submission. Modest, shy women were considered good women. The husband, as the authoritative figure, was expected to keep his promises to his wife, accord her all due attention, and avoid offending or humiliating her.

The combination of a collectivist outlook and code of honor practiced in Ethiopia shaped spousal relations with an asymmetric division of power between man and woman. The woman
was obligated to preserve the honor of her husband, family, and community. Unable to speak her mind in her relationship with her husband, she “kept it all inside the belly,” as in this statement by a young man with a key function in the prevention program:

Excerpt 2.2: Sometimes people can die of shame … She may be beaten incessantly but she will not say so because of family values, because of honor. She will even sacrifice herself, to maintain the family unit … In Ethiopia, there’s a very, very vast belly. The wisdom of Ethiopian Jewry is inside the belly. Everything is kept inside the belly. Even if I have reservations about professionals, our culture educates us towards emotional restraint and not at all towards candor. In Israel as well, the women suffer both mentally and physically but will not say so.

Shame and “keeping it inside” are intended to preserve families’ values and honor, two key values in the traditional culture of the Jews of Ethiopia (Ben-Ezer, 1989). According to the interviewee, many women continue this practice in Israel as well, despite their severe suffering. Notwithstanding expectations of restraint among women, traditional Ethiopian Jewish society developed social systems that offered them protection and places of refuge in situations of extreme distress. Data analysis reveals that social systems included escape to the kitchen, flight to one’s family of origin, and appeal to Kessim and Shmagaleh:

1. Escape to the kitchen: Ethiopian men never entered the kitchen because they believed it was beneath their dignity to do so. Consequently, the home kitchen served as a kind of protected space for women. An elderly single mother said, “I ran into the kitchen and then everything stopped …” (Excerpt 2.3).

2. Escape to the family of origin: In cases of excessive violence, the woman was entitled to return to her family, where she usually was offered shelter and support. Handling of the problem was discreet and kept within the family to whatever extent possible. A woman who had no family could flee to the patron assigned to her at the time of her marriage. As a young woman described, “My mother took us and we walked for a few days to her parents for shelter. Only my big brother stayed at home. After her father talked with the Kes and the Shmagaleh, we returned …” (Excerpt 2.4).

3. Seeking the help of Kessim: “The Kessim mediated all quarrels within families and among neighbors, as well as issues concerning the community’s religious and social life. They wielded extensive authority over religious and traditional affairs, determined dates of holidays and new months, conducted marriage, divorce and burial [ceremonies] and imposed sanctions on those who violated the community’s religious and social principles” (Shabtay, 1999, p. 57, see also Excerpt 2.5).

4. Appeal to Shmagaleh: “The Shmagaleh, the wise men of the community, fulfilled a variety of functions, primarily in the sphere of human relations – marital issues, friction in the extended families, capital offenses and financial disputes” (Shabtay, 1999, p. 57).

Elders informed us that there are several stages of arbitration in handling cases of wife beating (Ben-David, 1999): The parties involved or those who referred them would select an elder acceptable to both sides, as well as an external party to guarantee proceedings and ensure that agreements are carried out. During arbitration, the parties would undertake to stop quarreling and accept the elder’s decision. After hearing all arguments, the elder would offer compromise suggestions. If any were accepted, an agreement ceremony would be held. Agreements could be appealed within a designated time period, but violation thereof would entail a predetermined penalty. If the reconciliation did not go well, the elder would recommend dissolution of the partnership and divorce (see also Excerpt 3.4, below).

The overall feeling derived from interviews with immigrants revealed that life in Ethiopia had a well-defined social order with highly effective mechanisms for solving problems such as spousal violence, as expressed in these comments by one of the older men, who immigrated to Israel few years before the others:

Excerpt 2.5: There, in the Ethiopian community, everything was very well defined, very clear. The father’s function was well-defined, the mother’s function was well-defined, the child’s function was well-defined, everything was well-defined. If something extraordinary happened, it was reasonable to assume that they would institute some kind of somewhat unacceptable measures to halt normative deviance among women, but these did not violate the cultural norms of the Ethiopian community. There, all the authority is vested in
the Kessim, who are the unchallengeable arbiters at all religious and social levels. So this entire issue of violence is not out of proportion. If there were highly extraordinary cases, they knew how to take care of them.

A more intense reading of the above quotation reveals that the speaker emphasizes that the importance of community mechanisms, especially those that restore order among women who complain, is “to halt normative deviance among women…” He accuses such women of upsetting the social order. Another older male interviewee was even more outspoken in blaming the battered woman for her own distress:

Excerpt 2.6: If a woman was slapped or did something bad and was beaten, she might even have to be ostracized. If it got that far, she had to have done something extraordinary, meaning it was all right for her husband to slap her because she deviated from all accepted norms … Whether the case was extraordinary or not, there was authority! … Violence in Ethiopia was not the same as in Israel. It was not defined as a phenomenon. Not at all. But I would be lying if I said there were no extraordinary cases. There were extraordinary cases of blows, beatings, divorce.

Perception of women as guilty of causing men to strike them originates in an outlook declaring that maintenance of families’ hierarchy was essential to preservation of the overall traditional social structure. As such, application of “instructive force” to uphold this hierarchy is deemed legitimate and accorded holistic educational significance. Men speak of the phenomenon in the present tense as well as the past, probably hinting that this conception has not disappeared even after 20 – 30 years of life in Israel.

Another reflection of the normative character of violence toward women in Ethiopia is the absence of a special Amharic term to describe violent relationships between spouses, hinting that there was no need for such a concept because use of instructive force was not considered socially deviant. When such force is applied excessively, it is addressed through allusion and indirect remarks. Even when speaking Hebrew, that does use the term “violence,” Ethiopian immigrants tend to avoid such direct reference. One social worker of Ethiopian origin indicated as follows:

Excerpt 2.7: I … avoid saying “violence prevention” or “violence” to immigrants from Ethiopia. I say “misunderstanding,” “conflict.” Thank God, there are many concepts that one may use. Conflict, in the final analysis, is violence, even if we just call it a “dispute” or “disagreement.” In Ethiopian [sic], “violence” means being extreme towards others, aggressive, “a bad man.” … I use terms such as “conflict,” “disagreement,” “intercultural errors,” “transition” …

There is a tendency to refine and paraphrase direct reference to domestic violence and to use concepts such as “argument,” “misunderstanding,” and so on. Such semantic refinement defines the phenomenon in a manner enabling discreet handling within families and communities without imposing a near-permanent stigma on the parties involved.

Spousal Relations After Immigration to Israel

When Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel, their extended traditional family structure almost entirely disintegrated. Some families’ members remained in Ethiopia or did not survive the long trek from Sudan to Israel (Abbink, 1984; Ben-Ezer, 1992). In Israel, housing assignment sometimes separated extended families. Each nuclear family received separate accommodations that were too small to house extended family members. The extended families’ economic units broke up as well, and nuclear families had to find independent sources of livelihood. Israeli social institutions, which work on the basis of Western economic and social culture, accelerated disintegration of the traditional community economic structure. For example, National Insurance Institute child allowances were remitted to mothers rather than to fathers who were traditionally responsible for family’s financial management, unemployment benefits were paid to individuals rather than families, and so on. The resulting changes gave rise to forces that intensified spousal abuse, including reversal of family roles, undermining of the traditional establishment, and poor handling by Israeli social institutions.

Role reversal within the families. Women became the principal breadwinners in many families of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. They learned Hebrew and became the foreign ministers of their families (Soffer & Kacen, 1993). At the same time, they demanded partnership in decision making and equality in spousal relations. For example, one interviewee said that many women started to refuse their husbands’ demands for sexual relations whenever they liked, insisting
that their feelings be taken into account as well. This was unheard of in Ethiopia.

The situation proved most confusing for the men. Most had difficulty in learning Hebrew, could not hold jobs, and did not meet the burden of supporting their families. Although they realized that the behavioral norms that applied in Ethiopia were not valid in Israel, they were not familiar with the behavioral patterns that did suit the new culture’s norms and with its laws concerning domestic conduct. Family roles thus became reversed. Although, as one male interviewee stated, “some men understood that they had to forgo honor and total responsibility for their households and to exercise greater caution in their behavior,” others reverted to patterns familiar from Ethiopia, forcing their authority on their wives and children, as one older male community leader explained as follows:

Excerpt 3.1: In Ethiopia, the woman suffered. She worked at home and was beaten. Here, she realizes she has rights. The man signified all power and control to her [in Ethiopia], while here, the opposite is true. Men say that it’s a country of women and children … One of our most difficult problems is that we are not familiar with the culture, the laws. We’re in the dark. We do not understand the language. A man in Ethiopia was responsible for his home, property, children, wife. In Israel, a man is not worth anything. Women object to everything that men do. The law does not understand the man’s side. This is how things that start from something small, from a misunderstanding, soon bring about violence and even murder.

These remarks reflect extreme distress. All the interviewee’s knowledge about families’ management has now become useless, and he has no idea how to run his life in the new situation. He realizes that the reversal of household roles is supported by Israeli society’s preferences, maintaining that even if he still can do something to improve his status at home, he is still “not worth anything” in Israeli society. He perceives a direct connection between Israeli law’s failure to understand the status of Ethiopian men and the rise in domestic misunderstandings and violence.

Along with the change in family role distribution, traditional support systems disappeared as well and with them mutual assistance. A battered woman can no longer find shelter at her generally small and crowded parents’ home. The protected space she once enjoyed in the household kitchen has also been taken from her in the name of equality and modernization. Men now have to participate in household chores, including kitchen work, to gain esteem in the surrounding society. Furthermore, homes that were previously open and inviting to neighbors are now enclosed within hi-rise buildings where no one can see what goes on inside (Erchak, 1984; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002; Rianon & Shelton, 2003), as summed up by a single mother who separated from her violent husband:

Excerpt 3.2: In Ethiopia, homes are open. You are never alone. But here, people are busy. Neighbors don’t drop in all the time.

Recently, a new phenomenon developed in which married men who feel that their honor within their families in Israel is being trampled go back to Ethiopia and set up new families that accord them honor in the traditional way. There are two violent consequences to such behavior: First, men take their Israeli families’ money to support their other families in Ethiopia, and second, some of them contract AIDS in Ethiopia and infect their wives when they return to Israel, as attested to by several participants, immigrants, and external professionals alike.

Undermining the traditional establishment. In Israel, the status of Kessim, and especially the Shmagaleh (elders), declined because the Israeli religious establishment did not accept their functions and traditional authority. Young people raised in Israel and women who learned the advantages of relying on the Israeli establishment avoided using their services. Nevertheless, these traditional functions did not disappear entirely, as explained by one young female participant:

Excerpt 3.3: The younger generation does not use the Shmagaleh at all, but adults and the elderly would rather go to them than take things outside and tell all the secrets of their homes to “offices.” There is also a language problem. They prefer going to the Sh magaleh than to bringing along someone to translate who will learn their secrets. The Shmagaleh also usually keep secrets.

The key issue is the adults’ refusal to expose their problems to the community because of the possible threat to their families’ honor. On the one hand, they bring their domestic issues before the community elders, who are known for their discretion, instead of applying to official institutions for which they will require interpreters who might
expose their secrets. On the other hand, the traditional process may prove extended (Ben-David, 1999). Women largely prefer establishment bodies because they are quick to prescribe intervention that may include economic benefits, such as housing for single mothers. A young male volunteers’ course participant said as follows:

Excerpt 3.4: In Ethiopia, disputes are brought before the Shmagaleh. These elders would assess both sides, the husband’s and the wife’s, and then say “you have to give in” to either of them. This is lacking in Israel. Women prefer “offices” to the Shmagaleh because the Shmagaleh do not operate according to law, but rather according to tradition. Here, women prefer going to the police because they have more rights.

Comparisons made by research participants – especially men – reveal several differences in handling of domestic disputes by “offices” and elders: The elders hear both sides before making decisions, conducting lengthy proceedings involving couples and their families. Their default choice is always peacemaking. Only when it has been proved that domestic peace is not feasible, will they decide to dissolve a marriage. The interviewees maintained that Israeli institutions are usually satisfied with hearing one side and are too quick to encourage dissolution of marriages.

Culture-insensitive treatment. Since its founding, the State of Israel has sustained a multicultural society, having accommodated immigrants from all over the world representing a wide variety of Jewish ethnic groups. This constant influx gives rise to tension between the need for standardization of family services and the flexibility required to ensure culture-sensitive provision thereof (Bustin, 2004). Treatment and prevention of spousal abuse among immigrants from Ethiopia is an excellent example of such tension.

Data analysis reveals culture insensitivity of the Israeli establishment to the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants. The first trauma experienced by male Ethiopian immigrants to Israel is the discovery that most family services are run by women (Ben-Ezer, 1989), as echoed by a young, unmarried male social worker who coordinated the prevention program:

Excerpt 3.5: Here is his first trauma, for example: When he [an Ethiopian man] comes to the Absorption Center, he does not know how to react to the female social worker who processes him and tells him what to do. He does not know how to cope with it in terms of his inner respect. How can he accept all these directives from a woman if such a thing is unacceptable in his culture? He knows that there [in Ethiopia] the woman is the “interior minister” of the home but is not in command positions. But here, that same man has no choice … He goes out of his mind because in Ethiopia the clerks are all men … This exerts a very powerful effect. He doesn’t know how to take it because it’s something new for him … The many, many mistakes that were made gradually gave rise to frustration among men and led to all these crises, depression, divorce, beatings and whatever … As a result of this whole mess, the men became very frustrated. They could not tolerate social services and social workers and said that they simply cause separation.

The above citation indicates that men blame the female social workers for encouraging their wives to leave them. As an older married man noted:

Excerpt 3.6: When a young woman applies to social service social workers, what do they tell her? She says she has no refrigerator, no gas. “Why? Is your husband unemployed?” “Yes, he’s unemployed.” So as long as there’s a husband around, you won’t get anything. What should I do? If I were a single mother, a widow, a divorcee, I would get something. So what do women do? Automatically [they say to themselves]: “What do I care? So what? A man? It’s because of this man that I have to suffer. He doesn’t bring me anything.” So she says “Fine, I’ll go and find something to blame on him. Then I’ll get things easily.”

The interviewee claims that a woman will perform a cold economic calculation, accuse her spouse of abuse, and have him banished from their home. The speaker points directly to the social workers as the source of information and blames them for shattering their family integrity. The ease with which families may be dissolved has increased the incidence of single-parent families among these immigrants to proportions far exceeding those that prevailed in Ethiopia (Swirsky, Krauss, Connor-Attias, & Herbst, 2002; Weil, 1991).

Men complained that fabricated accounts of violence to have husbands banished from their homes and gain economic benefits are a kind of spousal abuse perpetrated by women against them, abuse learned as a result of their financial distress and the establishment’s cultural insensitivity. One male interviewee expressed the men’s distress in harsh terms:
Excerpt 3.7: When you let a dog off its leash, it starts to bite! In Ethiopia, a woman was like a tied-up dog, she would clean, she would cook, she was under your shoe …

I believe this abrasive statement captures the extreme frustration and helplessness that men experience as they face change.

Men also complain of cultural insensitivity evident in police behavior. When a violent man is removed from his home by police officers and taken away in a police car, the damage to his honor and that of his family and community is irreversible, as clarified by one young man:

Excerpt 3.8: In families, for example, a woman phones the police and suddenly they arrest the husband. The question is: How much does this help? It doesn’t help at all! It causes extraordinary damage within families. The father is frustrated, nervous. Not only does he not understand the significance and implications of it all but he essentially experiences much anger, hatred, and bitterness, affecting his entire family circle. This whole idea of police … Before arresting the husband, that same policeman … should try to understand all the cultural aspects. When he comes to arrest an Ethiopian, he should at least be aware of how to behave toward him. He should understand this cultural system, but in practice, he does not.

When the police, judicial system, social services, or prison service is involved in treatment of domestic violence among immigrants from Ethiopia, the problem almost immediately becomes a public issue and at times may even gain media coverage. The man accused of violence feels humiliated; his honor has been damaged. He finds himself in a situation in which he feels there is no way back and he has nothing to lose. This situation exacerbates violence and is liable to lead to murder and suicide.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study sought to obtain first-hand information about spousal abuse among immigrants from Ethiopia in their cultural transition from a traditional society in their country of origin to a modern one in Israel. The study was motivated by the absence of an Amharic term for “domestic violence,” the high rate of spousal violence among immigrants from Ethiopia compared with that of the general population, and the assumption that social services failed to prevent and treat the problem. A thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and documents revealed that there have been no changes in traditional life values, including holism, collectivism, and the code of honor. In family and spousal relations, however, dramatic changes took place, some of which are incompatible with these traditional life values. The resulting disparity between community and families’ values engendered spousal tension that was intensified by the cultural insensitivity of Israeli establishment employees. In spousal-violence discourse between the establishment and the community, the study uncovered failures in intercultural communication regarding values, behavior, social representations, and theory that are also reflected in spousal relations.

**Values**

Several disparities were noted. First, the collectivism and holism espoused by immigrants from Ethiopia ascribe importance to the community context in which spousal relations take place, whereas Israeli society as a whole emphasizes the individual within these relations (Freund, 2001). Consequently, when intercultural dialogue took place regarding spousal violence, the Ethiopian immigrant community seeks to preserve its collective identity and order even at the expense of individual well-being, whereas the institutions representing Israeli society strived to maintain individual well-being despite any possible adverse effects on collective integrity (Bui, 2003).

**Behavior**

The findings reveal a gender gap in tendencies toward preservation and change among immigrants from Ethiopia. Men tended to maintain traditional customs and values in all that concerns spousal violence, including use of instructive force and appealing to the Shmagaleh to solve domestic quarrels. Even those who understood that preserving old customs does not suit their new surroundings had no idea how to change them or what the alternatives are (Bui, 2003). Participants in this study claim that this situation partly results from the Israeli establishments’ care of women and neglect of men. Empowerment has given women more options than men. In domestic quarrels, for example, women can decide whether to apply for assistance from traditional authorities or the Israeli establishment (Shabtay & Kacen, 2005). Men’s preference for the former
and women’s for the latter impel men toward preservation of traditional customs and women toward aspiration for change. These differences exacerbated spousal tension and increased the risk of violent outbursts in spousal relations.

Social Representations

Social representations reflect a social group’s everyday knowledge through language, images, values, positions, norms, and behavior (Wagner, 1998). According to Wagner, one may only understand social representations through the eyes of the group itself; moreover, such representations may be explained only in their appropriate social context. Levin-Rozalis (2000) claims that social representations of time, function, bureaucracy, group, social status, and community orientation among immigrants from Ethiopia differ substantially from those of Israeli society as a whole, causing misunderstandings and communication failures between them. As indicated in this study, the Amharic language has no social representation for concepts of violence between married couples. The findings suggest that breakdowns in discourse about domestic violence between Israeli society and the Ethiopian immigrant community originate in differences in social representation of the concept by the two respective cultures. Although in Israeli society, domestic violence is a judgmental concept that perceives violence as a negative phenomenon demanding punishment of its perpetrator, in the culture of Ethiopian Jewry, the term “education” most commonly describes the phenomenon. Education has a different meaning in the Israeli society.

Theory

Western theories summarized at the beginning of this study do not supply an adequate conceptual framework for understanding spousal violence among immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel, as they focus on spousal and personality dynamics and almost entirely ignore the cultural component. In the culture of immigrants from Ethiopia, power and dependency relations between men and women living together characterize the cultural definition of normative spousal relations (Ben-Ezer, 1989; Levin-Rozalis, 2000), whereas in Western society they typify pathological relations (Dutton, 1996; Ferraro, 1988; Lempert, 1997). For this reason, ambivalent feelings regarding spousal relations are not relevant in traditional society. The feelings that were identified in research on spousal relations among immigrants from Ethiopia are confusion and helplessness, nourished by inability to fulfill their traditional function as heads of households and by failure to understand the culture of the surrounding society. As the establishment representing this society is based on Western theories of domestic violence, most professional responses are directed individually at victims or perpetrators and not at their cultural environment. This disparity creates a serious breakdown in intercultural communications and adversely affects the establishment’s ability to help prevent and eliminate violence.

Considering these conclusions, a theoretical understanding of domestic violence among immigrants from Ethiopia is to be approached primarily in terms of the social psychology of immigration. Bar-On’s theory (2005) of social identity development may serve as an appropriate framework, as it defines three key stages in its development: monolithic, monolith disintegration, and multivoicedness. Immigration of a society with a monolithic identity into a multivoiced one is liable to disintegrate the monolith, engendering social discord and violence.

Research Implications

Although this study examined only a few participants involved in domestic violence, it remains of major significance because it provides the first comprehensive ethnographic picture of the phenomenon of domestic violence among immigrants from Ethiopia in Israel. Its conclusions have immediate implications for policy and praxis alike.

In determining policies, efforts should be made to help the community cope with changes resulting from immigration, including preliminary work before the immigrants’ arrival, explanation of the anticipated changes, and provision of information about Israeli law (Lee, 2004). Furthermore, professionals should be equipped with the tools and knowledge they require to understand domestic violence within the context of cultural transition (Lee & Greene, 1999). They should be encouraged to prevent violence at the community level by developing dialogue skills as a means of resolving spousal conflicts, preserving male honor by providing men with work skills, finding them jobs, and developing their
leadership qualities as well as those of women. For this purpose, we recommend creating frameworks in which professionals and immigrant community members may form a “common dialogue space” in which problems and cultural issues will be resolved through reciprocal learning, cooperation, and equality. It is also advisable to train professionals to improve their cultural sensitivity to this community and to help them understand the reciprocal connection between micro and macro.

Insofar as praxis is concerned, we still have to respond to victims individually. Professionals should have the means necessary to locate people at risk and to protect them when the level of violence becomes dangerous, relying on traditional leadership in handling spousal conflicts and summoning the authorities when necessary.

To complete the picture, phenomenological research should be conducted to clarify the significance that people who experience domestic violence accord to the phenomenon.

NOTE
This study was made possible thanks to support received from the Community Work and Immigrant Absorption Service and the Individual and Family Well-Being Service in The Israel Ministry of Welfare, and JDC – Israel. I extend my special gratitude to participants in this study for their cooperation; to social workers Gita Sofer, Daphni Moshayov, Ronit Salomon, and Hana Cohen for sharing with me their knowledge, and to Liat Keidar who conducted much of the fieldwork.

REFERENCES


Ben-Ezer, G. (2002). “Merchav ha’yetzira ha’meshutefet” ke’eli avoda ben-tarbutit: Avoda kvutzatit im oley Ethiopia [“Common creative space” as a tool for intercultural work: Group work with immigrants from Ethiopia]. In L. Kacen & R. Lev-Wiesel (Eds.), *Avoda kvutzit be’chevra rav-tarbutit* (pp. 149 – 161). Tel Aviv, Israel: Cherikover.


Fishman, G., Eisikovits, Z., Mesch, G., & Gusinsky, R. (2001). Seker, hekef ve’meayenim le’taja’at ha’alimut klapey nashim ve’yeladim ve’noar be’se-cum [Survey of the extent and characteristics of violence towards women and children and at-risk youth]. Haifa, Israel: Minerva Center for Youth Studies, University of Haifa.
situation among Ethiopian Israelis]. Meyda al shivyon ve’tzedek chevrati be’Israel. Tel Aviv, Israel: Adva Center.


