

CONFRONTING THE UNKNOWNNS IN JEWISH FAMILY VIOLENCE A Call For Knowledge Development

NEIL B. GUTERMAN, PH.D.

Columbia University School of Social Work, New York

Although increasing attention is being paid to the problem of Jewish family violence, the effectiveness of the Jewish communal response is limited by the existing knowledge base, which provokes more questions than it answers. We need to know more about the actual incidence of Jewish family violence, the unique factors that place Jewish families at-risk for family violence, the kinds of programs that are effective in preventing or reducing this problem, and the communal attitudes that can facilitate addressing Jewish family violence. Relatively simple research efforts can be made to provide sound information on this problem.

The North American Jewish community is waking up to the problem of Jewish family violence. The news media, both within the community and beyond, have drawn attention to a problem that is both significant in scope and devastating in impact (Humphries, 1986; Jolles, 1988; Kasera, 1991; Kuperstein, 1989; Lowenstein, 1990; New York Times, 1992; Spitzer, 1988). In response, a growing array of local Jewish communities have developed specially targeted programs (Blum, 1992), and concerned professionals have been conducting ongoing dialogue, all in an effort to confront family violence's differing manifestations within the community (e.g., CJF Satellite Broadcast on Domestic Violence, 1989; Jacobs & Berliner Dimarsky, 1991-1992; Jaffa, 1991-1992; Lithwick, 1991-1992; Stern, 1991-92).

Much of the challenge in mounting an effective response to the problem of Jewish family violence lies in uncovering a problem that continues to remain obscured. For example, many of the ground-breaking Jewish family violence programs, while clinical in nature, have found it necessary to devote significant efforts to consciousness-raising about family violence within their local communities. Critically, however, both treatment and consciousness-raising efforts have been constrained by a wholly question-

able knowledge base about Jewish family violence. As sound program development inextricably rests on sound knowledge, it is essential to step back and scrutinize carefully what we actually know and do not know about Jewish family violence.

An assessment of our current knowledge base about the problem and its solutions reveals that it is still nascent, reminiscent of the old story of a man searching for his lost car keys in the night:

An officer of the law greets an intoxicated man under the street lights and asks him, "Can I help you out?" The man, bent over in a search, says, "I've lost the keys to my car." The officer replies, "Well, where did you lose them?" The man looks up at the officer and says, "I lost them way down the street, in the dark." The officer, perplexed, asks, "Well, then why are you looking for them over here under the street light?" The man replies, "Because it's much easier to see over here!"

As the story suggests, although interest has heightened in finding the "keys" to the problem of Jewish family violence, existing efforts to understand the issue have been limited to looking for such answers in the convenient light. The community has not yet undertaken a more direct, painstaking,

and rigorous examination of the problem. Although many "conclusions" are being drawn about the nature of Jewish family violence, the existing knowledge base used to discern such positions simply provokes more questions than it answers.

The aim of this article is to summarize the existing knowledge base of Jewish family violence and to probe four essential questions about the problem. Although this article provides few final answers to the problem of Jewish family violence, it does point out feasible next steps for future knowledge development. I have chosen to use the term "family violence" in a comprehensive and inclusive fashion, one that involves systematic acts of commission that harm family members, most commonly children, spouses, and parents.¹ These acts can include physical forms of violence (such as hitting, slapping, shoving, or worse), sexual forms of violence (such as rape or incest), or psychological forms of violence (such as emotional coercion or humiliation). This review is presented with hopes of stimulating more rigorous examinations of Jewish family violence in the future in order to anchor planning, programming, and clinical decisions in hard data, rather than opinion or myth. Until we initiate such examinations, practitioners will continue to face the problem of violence in Jewish families under a spotlight without the keys.

FOUR ESSENTIAL UNKNOWN IN JEWISH FAMILY VIOLENCE

Unknown #1: How much family violence is there in the North American Jewish community? How severe is it? How is it manifest?

From clinical and anecdotal sources, we know that family violence in all its forms—physical, sexual, and psychological—exists in significant proportions in

the North American Jewish community (Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies, 1988; Johnson, 1990; Scarf, 1988; Lowenstein, 1990). Family violence, however, is not always easy to detect and has been found to differ profoundly across cultures (Korbin, 1981, 1991). A great deal of work in the past several decades has clarified the nature and extent of family violence in American society at large (Gelles & Straus, 1988). However, cross-cultural variation makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the nature and extent of family violence in the Jewish community from normative American samples. Indeed, there is good reason to suspect that family violence in the Jewish community manifests differently, given the unique ethnic patterns of American Jewish family life (Caroll, 1980).

Several classic studies on spousal and child violence conducted with American samples have shown differing incidence rates by religious affiliation (Smith et al., 1974; Straus et al., 1980). The data reported in these studies have tended to show lower rates of overall violence in Jewish families in comparison with other religious groupings.

However, a close look at these classic studies reveals the problematic nature of these findings. In beginning a search for clarification on the extent of Jewish family violence, I initially turned to the two original data bases of the National Surveys of Family Violence, out of which has resulted some of the most extensive and reliable information on violence in American families to date (Gelles & Straus, 1985; Straus & Gelles, 1976). When I examined the raw data, I found that two-thirds of the Jewish respondents in each study did not provide answers to questions regarding violence within the family. Further, because Jewish subsamples were so small (only 2% to 3% of each sample), less than a handful of Jewish families in either national survey reported any violence in their homes at all. The respondents' inordinate rate of *self-se-*

¹The problem of neglect, acts of *omission* that result in the harm of family members, is largely unexplored in this article, although it demands the same careful examination as that given to family violence.

lection out of these benchmark studies (i.e., their own nonrandom decisions not to participate) presents a fundamental empirical bias that is complicated by the infrequency of violence reports in small samples. Such problems raise deep suspicions as to whether those one-third of respondents who *did* provide data are at all representative of American Jewish families as a whole.

Other key studies attempting to characterize violence in Jewish families have been plagued with the same problem, only more so. For example, Renzetti's (1992) study of 431 Jewish women provides perhaps the most detailed empirical examination of Jewish spousal violence to date. Nonetheless, only 14% of those from whom she sought information participated in the study, i.e., 86% of those asked to provide information did not. Again, it remains entirely questionable how representative or biased this 14% of self-selected participants might be in relation to American Jewish families as a whole. Similarly, of the 12,000 Jewish households surveyed for domestic violence by the Greater Minneapolis Section of the National Council of Jewish Women in 1988 (NCJW, Greater Minneapolis, 1989), only 456 people responded, resulting in a 4% response rate, i.e., a 96% nonresponse rate.

Such studies raise a fundamental set of questions that must be addressed before we can draw conclusions about the American Jewish community as a whole:

- Who are the people who do not provide information in Jewish family violence surveys, and what are the reasons why they do not participate?
- How do they differ from those who have provided information? Are family violence cases more or less likely to be uncovered in survey nonrespondents?
- How do we best assemble an accurate picture of family violence in the American Jewish community if the large majority of those we sample representatively do not provide information?

Raising another empirical concern, the often-cited Giller and Goldsmith study (Goldsmith, 1983/84) assessed Jewish family violence rates by asking whether the respondents experienced, witnessed, or knew about violence in Jewish families. In addition to nonrepresentative sampling concerns in this study, the lumping together of direct experience with first- and second-hand knowledge about family violence extends the sample size to an indefinite number of Jewish families and does not preclude double-counting of cases. This approach, while uncovering the existence of violent events, unequivocally precludes calculating an incidence rate for Jewish family violence. Nonetheless, it is this work that is often cited for its "discovering" a 10% to 20% violence rate in American Jewish families.

Although these studies have been critical in generating interest and hypotheses about Jewish family violence, such pieces to the puzzle provide scant and probably significantly biased information on the nature and extent of Jewish family violence. In all likelihood, we are still missing the most crucial pieces that will enable us to construct an accurate picture of the problem. In short, the existing studies of Jewish family violence have yet to look effectively beyond the convenient "street lights" of biased respondent samples and confounded measurements into fully representative and accurately measured samples.

Fortunately, several means can be adopted to overcome these problems and significantly strengthen the soundness of the data on Jewish family violence. For example, one simple method involves revealing important differences and similarities between responders and nonresponders, i.e., accounting for the degree and nature of *biases* in a self-selected sample. If sample biases are known, it becomes easier to account for them when seeking to draw conclusions about the larger Jewish community. Such a method could be implemented easily by comparing responders and nonresponders

on a host of key proximal factors likely associated with family violence, such as socioeconomic status, single parenthood, or employment status (Roberts, 1988; Tolman & Bennett, 1990). Such comparisons can easily be built into studies of family violence or broader sociodemographic surveys of Jewish populations (either nationally or locally) by the inclusion of selected family violence questions.

A second related strategy addressing sample bias, one that is less direct, although more relevant for clinicians, administrators, and planners, involves mapping the unique constellation of proximal or "risk" factors within Jewish families that increase the likelihood of family violence. Both these approaches can provide a handle from which to assess the extent of the problem, as well as its degree of "hiddenness." However, this latter approach presents a second crucial unknown in Jewish family violence.

Unknown #2: What are the unique factors that place Jewish family members at-risk for family violence?

Rigorous knowledge about risk factors that predict the likelihood of violence is important not only in clarifying which kinds of families will most likely be touched by violence (Oates, 1982). It is also helpful in designing targeted intervention strategies to prevent violence before it happens (Rodwell & Chambers, 1992). A significant knowledge base now exists concerning such factors from studies conducted outside the Jewish community. For example, single and/or teen parenthood, poverty, and the presence of birth handicaps have been identified as important factors that increase the risk of child abuse (Roberts, 1988). Likewise, substance abuse, depression, and negative attitudes toward women have been identified as increasing risk for spousal abuse (c.f. Tolman & Bennett, 1990).

No studies have yet established the unique variation of such factors within the

Jewish community. Again, good reasons exist that suggest that, in some instances, these factors may manifest differently within Jewish families. For example, despite its methodological flaws, Giller and Goldsmith's work (Goldsmith, 1983/84) hints at the possibility that socioeconomic status may play out in a *reverse* fashion to that found in non-Jewish families; namely, they suggest that *higher* socioeconomic status may increase the risk for family violence. Also, a large array of studies outside the Jewish community have consistently pointed to the key role that social isolation plays in increasing the risk for physical child abuse (Guterman, 1990). It is entirely unclear, however, how unique Jewish patterns of communality, cohesiveness, and isolation may differently affect Jewish families' risk status for violence. Are there more cohesive patterns in the Jewish community that buffer families from the risk of violence? Can recent immigration (e.g., from the former Soviet Union) to an individualistic country, such as the United States, deepen isolation and loneliness and thereby increase the risk of abuse? How does intermarriage shape a family's interactions with its surrounding community, and how might this process affect the risk for family violence? Finally, how might single-parenthood, a risk factor for child abuse found in studies outside the Jewish community, play out differently *within* the Jewish community—particularly in more traditional settings—either in deepening or reducing a sense of isolation, and thereby altering abuse risk?

As the knowledge base on risk factors is generally well developed beyond the Jewish community, studies that compare risk factor *differences* between clinical samples of Jewish and non-Jewish violent families can yield fruitful information on some of these questions. Such an approach is feasible within or across agency boundaries and can begin to depict important similarities and differences in family violence risk profiles.

Unknown #3: What kinds of programs and clinical interventions are effective in preventing and reducing violence in Jewish families?

Perhaps of most vital concern to practitioners confronting the problem of Jewish family violence, this question seeks to address directly the "how to's" of change and prevention. Those professionals seeking information on effective Jewish family violence programs and interventions have available to them a small but growing body of information on demonstrably effective programs implemented with largely non-Jewish target populations (Olds & Henderson, 1990; Saunders & Azar, 1989). Also available is descriptive information on the array of Jewish family violence programs in North America (Blum, 1992). These descriptions can be used to glean some important clinical and programmatic lessons (Jacobs & Berliner Dimarsky, 1991-1992; Jaffa, 1991-1992; Lithwick, 1991-1992; Stern, 1991-1992). However, the empirical effectiveness of programs within the Jewish community has, as yet, remained entirely undemonstrated. Program descriptions, by themselves, cannot provide unequivocal evidence of the change(s) they may produce. Further, from such descriptions, it becomes difficult to identify and select program components that encapsulate the essential "ingredients" of effective treatment, making the transfer of program knowledge to other settings problematic.

To isolate the impact of an intervention, demonstrations of program effectiveness must compare clients receiving specific services with those who do not (although these clients can be one and the same, as in the case of "single-system" designs—Blythe & Tripodi, 1990; Jayaratne & Levy, 1979). By comparing intervention clients with "control" clients, important changes observed in clinical progress can be linked reliably to the impact of the intervention. Such techniques ground common-sense experience in scientific rigor. With the advance in clinical

research technologies, such as computerized clinical information systems (Benbenishti & Oyserman, 1993), such information is becoming quite easy to collect and in a manner largely unobtrusive to the delivery of services.

Professionals seeking assurances of effectiveness in Jewish family violence programs must, for the time being, rest their confidence on findings outside the Jewish community or on experiential "wisdom." However, the need for more rigorous information on how to combat Jewish family violence effectively will continue to increase as agencies seek to make the optimal use of resources and as family violence becomes increasingly recognized as a specialized treatment problem in itself.

The fact that these three critical unknowns of Jewish family violence yet remain—regarding the extent of the problem, the unique nature of the problem, and effective solutions to the problem—suggests one last key unknown that is worthy of clarification; namely, the communal context in which these unknowns have been allowed to persist.

Unknown #4: What are the communal attitudes and responses that can inhibit or facilitate addressing problems of Jewish family violence?

Paradoxically, one of the few clear conclusions emerging from the existing knowledge base is that we can, as yet, conclude almost nothing about the problem of Jewish family violence or its solutions. The lack of hard data on the problem allows an atmosphere of opinion and myth to persist, which hampers planning, programming, and practice. Although the Jewish community is able to plan and act from its applied knowledge in such areas as Jewish identity, assimilation, and intermarriage, the same is simply not yet true with respect to Jewish family violence.

For a community that builds family life on a traditional ideal of *shalom bayit* (do-

mestic harmony), it is imperative to attend to families at-risk for violence. It is the same communal traditions that inspire Jewish families to attain *shalom bayit* that have also historically given full concern to violence within families (Dratch, 1992; Frishtig, 1988; Schnall, 1992). For example, Schnall (1992) highlights rulings in cases of spousal violence by Rabbi Yosef Ibn Abitur 1000 years ago and by Rabbi Moshe Isserlies 600 years later. Even the earliest texts from the Torah attend openly to the issue of family violence; for example, in the story of Cain and Abel. So what can explain the apparent lack of direct attention given to the problem in today's American Jewish community, to the point where we have become a community that is proverbially "looking under a street lamp" at a problem the keys to which still lay far away in darkness?

Indeed, the question of North American Jewish communal attitudes about family violence itself needs examination. For example, why do Jewish respondents tend not to provide information to questions about violence in the home, even if none exists in their family? Why is there no reliable information on the nature of the problem or its solution within the community when, in the broader stream of American society, extensive information has been and continues to become increasingly available? Why must nearly every Jewish family violence clinical program devote scarce resources away from direct services toward public education? Clearly, the reasons for the hiddenness of Jewish family violence itself are worthy of study in order to enhance community-wide public education efforts. The addition of attitudinal questions in local and national demographic surveys can provide crucial data on these questions for planners and those involved in educating the community on the issue.

I would assert, however, that we may already have important clues to this fourth unknown on the issue, from our own earliest story of family violence:

"And G-d placed on Cain
a sign not to smite him
all who find him."
(Bereshit, 4:15)

Using modern parlance, this first story of fratricide highlights a communal "stigma" associated with the occurrence of family violence. A community often attempts to cast away or to avoid looking directly at a stigma, much like the intoxicated man under the street lamp. This may be a classic sociological response to a stigmatized problem.

However, the traditional story of Cain does *not* argue that a sign (or "stigma") should be placed on the perpetrator to ensure that others will look away from this person or his or her violence. Rather, as the text pronounces, the stigma was placed on Cain by God to ensure that he could be *seen*—and *not* hidden—in order that he *too would not be smitten*. Indeed, our earliest story of communal concern for family violence points to the imperative of seeing the problem directly in order to address it effectively. Clearly, this is what is needed today.

CONCLUSIONS

To address adequately the problem of family violence in the North American Jewish community, we must first detail the problem. Although there have been selected efforts to expose Jewish family violence, the time has come for a systematic, hard look at the problem. Examinations must be made to discern its extent and nature, to begin to discover its effective responses, and to reveal underlying communal stances that contribute to the current state of affairs. Relatively simple research efforts can go a long way to provide sound information on how to best address violence in Jewish families, from adding selected questions in demographic surveys to conducting simple comparison studies with nonrespondents or non-Jews. Such efforts will parsimoniously web together what we already know about family violence with what we do not yet know,

thereby leading us away from the "spot-light" of convenience to the real keys to the problem.

REFERENCES

- Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (1988). Service and financial data memo: Spousal abuse. *Pamphlet*. Kendall Park, NJ: Author.
- Benbenishti, R., & Oyserman, D. (1993). Design and implementation of computerized information systems. Presented at HUISTA-III International Conference, Maastricht, The Netherlands.
- Blum, J. (1992, September). *Domestic violence in the North American Jewish community: Issues and communal programs*. New York: Council of Jewish Federations.
- Blythe, B. J., & Tripodi, T. (1990). *Measurement in direct practice*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Caroll, J. C. (1980). A cultural consistency theory of family violence in Mexican-American and Jewish-ethnic groups. In M. A. Straus & G. T. Hotaling (Eds.), *The social clauses of husband-wife violence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Council of Jewish Federations, (1989, February 14). *Domestic violence in the Jewish community*. Satellite broadcast.
- Dratch, M. (1992). The physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of children. *The R. C. A. Roundtable: Nisan, 5752*.
- Frishtig, M. (1988). Child abuse in Jewish history and Hebrew law. *Chevra v'Revecha (Society and Welfare, Hebrew)*, 9(1), 45-63.
- Goldsmith, E. (1983/84, Winter). Violence in the Jewish family. *Reform Judaism*, 12, 20.
- Gelles, R., & Straus, M. (1985). Physical violence in American families: Original datatape # ICPSR 9211. Ann Arbor: Interuniversity Consortium on Political and Social Research.
- Gelles, R., & Straus, M. (1988). *Intimate violence: The definitive study of the causes and consequences of abuse in the American family*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Greenberg, Y. (1990, April). Rabbis can help by speaking out. *Moment*, 49.
- Guterman, N. B. (1990). The role of social isolation in physical child abuse: A review and revision. Unpublished manuscript.
- Humphries, A. (1986, August). Battered Jewish women: Shedding light on a hidden problem. *JUF News*, pp. 34-36.
- Jacobs, L., & Berliner Dimarsky, S. (1991-92). Jewish domestic abuse: Realities and responses *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 68(2), 94-113.
- Jaffa, S. (1991-92). A model child abuse prevention program. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 68(2), 114-122.
- Jayarathne, S., & Levy, R. L. (1979). *Empirical clinical practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Johnson, J. (1990). *What Lisa knew: The truth and lies of the Steinberg case*. New York: GP Putnam's Sons.
- Jolles, A. (1988, November). Family violence and community silence. *Jewish Monthly*, 103(3), 16-20.
- Kasera, M. (1991, May). Domestic abuse: It's a Jewish problem too. *JUF News*.
- Korbin, J. (1991). Cross-cultural perspectives and research directions for the 21st century. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 15(1), 67-77.
- Kuperstein, E. E. (1989, March 30). Violence in the Jewish family: Breaking silence. *Washington Jewish Week*, pp. 10-12.
- Lithwick, M. (1991-92). A comprehensive approach to elder abuse. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 68(2), 123-132.
- Lowenstein, S. (1990, April). Confronting sexual abuse in Jewish families. *Moment*, pp. 48-53.
- National Council of Jewish Women, Greater Minneapolis Section (1989). Domestic violence survey: Summary of results. Unpublished report.
- New York Times (1992, January 10). Borough Park woman is sentenced in the fatal beating of her son 8. p. A16, B3.
- Oates, R. K. (1982). Risk factors associated with child abuse. In R. K. Oates (Ed.), *Child abuse: A community concern*. London: Butterworth.

- Olds, D., & Henderson, C. (1990). The prevention of child maltreatment. In D. Cicchetti, & V. Carlson (Eds.), *Child maltreatment*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Renzetti, C. M. (1992). Shalom bayit? Domestic violence in the Jewish Community. Unpublished manuscript.
- Roberts, J. (1988). Why are some families more vulnerable to child abuse? In K. Browne, C. Davies, & P. Stratton (Eds.), *Early prediction and prevention of child abuse*. (pp. 43-56). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Rodwell, M. K., & Chambers, D. E. (1992). Primary prevention of child abuse: Is it really possible?, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 19(3), 159-176.
- Saunders, D. G., & Azar, S. T. (1989). Treatment programs for family violence. In L. Ohlin, & M. Tonry (Eds.), *Family violence: Crime & justice, A review of research*, Vol. 11. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Scarf, M. (1988). *Battered Jewish wives*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Schnall, D. J. (1992). Antecedents of social casework in mediating domestic discord: Notes on the pursuit of "shalom bayit" in classical Jewish sources, *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 69(1), 87-91.
- Smith, S. M., Hanson, R., & Nobel, S. (1974). Social aspects of the "battered baby syndrome." *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 125, 568-582.
- Spitzer, J. R. (1988, Fall). The abused child. *Compass*, p. 17.
- Stern, L. (1991-92). Sensitizing the community to the problem of elder abuse: A community education and public awareness approach. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 68(2), 133-139.
- Straus, M., & Gelles, R. (1976). Physical violence in American families: Original Datatape #ICPSR 7733. Ann Arbor: Interuniversity Consortium on Political and Social Research.
- Straus, M. A., Gelles, R. J., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1980). *Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Tolman, R. M., & Bennett, L. W. (1990). A review of research on men who batter. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5(1), 87-118.