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**Abstract** This paper examines the process of the emergence of new social representation among abusive men vis-à-vis their own behavior. The discussion focuses on a group of 65 men who were sent to a closed hostel (Beit Noam) for intensive therapy for habitual violence. The paper argues that there was no possibility of the existence of such a representation at the beginning of therapy because there was no relevant group to create the discourse necessary for the structuring of social representations. The creation of the group and the ensuing discourse helped the men construct a social representation of their own violence. Such a representation enabled them to complete therapy successfully.

**Key Words** abusive men treatment, discourse, social representation, structuring process of social representation, violence

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## The Structuring Process of the Social Representation of Violence in Abusive Men

### Introduction

We usually examine social representations that already exist, and we try to detect changes in them and influences on them. In this paper we demonstrate the creation of a social representation. The process of the emergence of social representation is a phenomenon that has rarely been investigated, yet understanding the mechanism of new social representation formation is important to the whole of theory and research in this area and can help us to better understand the maintenance, changes or developments in a given themata or social representation.

### The Theory of Social Representation

The theory of social representation that underlies the success of this therapeutic approach is based on two principal assumptions. First, we are dealing with a world constructed through the eyes and interactions

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of its members, the group's eyes (Wagner, 1998). Second, representations can be explained only in the context of a social situation. They are evinced in politics, religion and economics (Moscovici, 1993), and thus bound to social structure, social organization and social institutions.

Social representations comprise a group's common knowledge of language, images, ideas, values, attitudes, actions, orientations, norms and behaviors (Wagner, 1993, 1995, 1998), and in this sense they have two components: a cognitive component, where a person or a group has an active role in the creation and restructuring of reality, and a social component, where social representations are collectively produced and generated by social interaction (Abric, 1996). The creation of social representations is a human trait stemming from the human need to clarify the unclear. We continually build these representations all our lives through social interactions and discourses (Moscovici, 1961, 1984, 1988). They are at the same time both internal and external; they are part of culture as well as of cognition (Farr, 1998).

In these definitions of social representations, the importance of the representations is shown in the human ability to negotiate knowledge, opinions, attitudes, ideas, behaviors, symbols and ceremonies. They are deep, complex socio-cognitive patterns that enable us to communicate. As claimed by Moscovici (Moscovici & Marková, 1998), in order for us to be able to relate to something, we first need a social representation of that thing. Taking this idea further means that without a significant group and without significant discourse about something within this group, we have no negotiable object. Consequently, even if a significant group exists, in the absence of social representations, our ability to negotiate is impaired (Levin-Rozalis, 2000b). We deal with an ongoing process in which we have several actors: the group; the group's discourse, activities and behavior; an object that is the subject of group discourse; and a context.

Two mechanisms are involved in the process of acquiring and changing social representations. The first is *anchoring* (Billig, 1988; Doise, 1993; Doise, Clemence, & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1993; Moscovici, 1984, 1988; Wagner, 1998), which is the mechanism that connects the familiar with the unfamiliar; familiar contents serve as an anchor for new and unfamiliar contents. The second mechanism involved in the creation of new social representations is *objectification*, which turns the unfamiliar, the alien and the distant into a part of reality everyday language and the individual's world. These two mechanisms are complementary: anchoring starts the process and objectification completes it.

To prove the absence of a social representation is not an easy task. It is always difficult to show the absence of something as elusive as social representations, and social representations are especially elusive because there is no set connection between behavior and the verbal expression of social representation. Social representation does not directly explain behavior (Wagner, 1993, 1995, 1998), and, as demonstrated by Jodelet (1991, 1996), behavior can sometimes be unconscious and unrelated to the verbal expression of the social representation.

Any claim regarding the absence of social representation is complex and might be dangerous and speculative, as demonstrated in a paper by Gervais, Morant, and Penn (1999): there may not be a genuine absence. Rather, the absence might only be a misperception, for example, from the researcher's theoretical emphasis, inadequate research tools or other methodological problems, or an incorrect interpretation of the data.

In this paper we look at this problem of absence and the creation of social representation. We attempt to show that abusive men have no social representation of their own violence because they are not part of a significant group in which violence is a subject of discourse. Further, we illustrate the creation of a significant group, in Beit Noam treatment hostel, and the creation of a common social representation in this group through the course of a therapeutic process. We suggest that the significant change found in the behavior of the men in this group is due to the creation of a social representation of their own violence as a controlled behavior, along with the means to control it.

### **Beit Noam Treatment Center**

The subject of domestic violence in general and of a man's violence towards his partner in particular began to penetrate public awareness in the early 1970s (Walker, 1984). This development was demonstrated in Israel with the opening of the first shelter for abused women in Haifa in November 1977.

Men's abuse of their partners is defined in various ways. Anne Ganley, one of the first therapists to establish intervention programs for batterers, defines battering in terms of (a) the relationship between the parties involved in the abuse, (b) the perpetrator of the behavior, and (c) the functions served by these behaviors. According to Ganley, aggressive behavior includes physical abuse, frightening by looks, gestures, and so on, threats, isolation, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, using children to dominate the victim, economic domination and traditional male codes (such as that the woman's place is in the home:

she must prepare food for her husband, etc.) (Ganley, cited in Healey, Smith, & O'Sullivan, 1980, pp. 3–5).

This paper examines the process of structuring a social representation of violence among a group of 65 abusive men who had been sent to a closed hostel, Beit Noam,<sup>1</sup> to undergo intensive therapy for their violent behavior. These men had been sent to the hostel, either by the court or by social workers, because of their habitual violence, which posed a threat to their families. In many cases they were sent to Beit Noam instead of jail.

At the end of their four months of treatment, a significant change was evident in the behavior of these men. Reports from parole boards, in-depth interviews with the men's partners, reports from community social workers, and reports from the men themselves all indicated that the physical violence they had shown before treatment had disappeared almost completely after the therapy at Beit Noam. It was also reported that following therapy, the men were calmer, communication with them had improved, and there was evidence that the decrease in violence was transmitted to other spheres, such as driving and behavior in the workplace. All the women except one noted that, following their stay at Beit Noam, the men no longer used physical violence against them. In only one instance did the woman state that the man had had a violent outburst and that she still lived with a sense of fear of and threat from him. Some of the women reported verbal outbursts on the part of the men and noted that, in contrast to the past, the men managed to identify their anger and control it ('In his first outburst, close to Passover Eve, he really succeeded in controlling himself'). Professional care-givers in the community estimate that there is a great likelihood of the majority of these men remaining non-violent if they observe the conditions of suitable care in the community.

In this paper, we claim that this change in behavior arises from the therapy's success in structuring a social representation of the men's own violence, thus making it a subject for negotiation and therapy.

Beit Noam is an attempt to create an integrative therapeutic group framework that provides a solution for relatively hard-core violent men. It is a framework in which the men live at Beit Noam hostel for a period of four months. In the mornings they go to work and in the afternoons, evenings and at night they remain in the hostel, where they have to cooperate in managing their lives (preparing meals and cleaning). In addition to managing the hostel, they undergo intensive therapy comprising group therapy (five different groups per week for each man, covering such areas as duality and sexuality, art therapy, anger management and control, psychodynamic group processes, and

even judo or shiatsu), individual therapy, and assistance with the caregivers in the community.

In this paper, we argue that at the start of this therapy, no social representation of the abusive men's own violence exists, but that a social representation of this behavior is structured during the course of their stay at Beit Noam. The objective of this paper is to present our evidence for this claim and to examine the process of structuring this social representation, along with its contribution to the success of the therapy.

## Methodology

### Research Method

The research approach is abductive, meaning that the data are examined with no prior assumptions (Levin-Rozalis, 2000a). The abductive logic of research has been outlined by C.S. Peirce (Peirce, 1960) and has been used in cases where there have been surprising data—facts that, based on the theory and concepts used in the research, were not expected or could not be expected because there was no advanced theory. The explanations we give to these facts are 'assumptions on probation' in the sense that they have to be checked rigorously against the findings.

In Beit Noam assumptions were raised during the evaluation period on the basis of various findings. Following the abductive approach, these assumptions were examined and were refuted or refined during an ongoing process of assumption and examination, until the formulation of the conclusions presented here was complete.

Because we don't know in advance what we are looking for with this research method, most tools are open-ended—the observations and interviews, in particular.

### Target Population

The population studied was comprised of 65 men who, over the last three years, had each spent four months undergoing intensive therapy at Beit Noam. The majority of these men had been barred from their homes by a court restraining order. Some were sent to Beit Noam by the court, some on the recommendation of community social workers, and a few came voluntarily. While Beit Noam accepts the hard core of violent men, they must be men whose main problem is physical violence towards their partners, they must not be criminals or psychiatric patients, and they must be integrated into a work environment.

They come from all sectors of Israeli society: Jews (both secular and religious) and Arabs.

#### *Consent*

All the men in this study knew that the research was taking place. They all agreed to participate and they all cooperated with the researchers. They were willing to express themselves and spoke very frankly during the interviews.

### **Data-Gathering Tools**

#### *Interviews*

Fifteen in-depth, open-ended personal interviews were conducted with members of the program's professional staff. In addition, several more focused interviews were conducted in which various concrete questions were discussed, along with many 'conversations in passing'.

A total of 31 in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with men who were in therapy: 19 interviews were carried out during different periods in the course of the men's stay at Beit Noam, and 12 interviews were conducted some months after their return to life in the community. The interviewees were asked two questions: 'Tell me about yourself' and 'Tell me about Beit Noam'.

Twenty-nine interviews were conducted with the partners of men who had completed therapy at Beit Noam (sometimes these were the same men who were interviewed for the study and sometimes different ones). The interviews were conducted during different periods following the conclusion of therapy (between one month and two years), and most took place between three months and one year after the conclusion of therapy.

There were eight in-depth interviews with professionals in the community, violence therapists, and agencies connected with the subject of violence in the community in which the men live. More general interviews were also conducted with additional professionals, among whom were heads of welfare bureaus and centers for the prevention of violence who facilitated the transition of men from Beit Noam into the community, therapists directly involved in the prevention of violence, the men's parole officers and a judge.

#### *Questionnaires*

The men were administered 79 pre- and post-treatment questionnaires, which included questions on general information, on attitudes and

feelings towards Beit Noam, and on the subject of violence, therapy and the family.

## Results and Analysis

### Findings from the First Stages of Therapy

A total of seven men took part in an open-ended, in-depth interview at the beginning of the therapeutic process at Beit Noam. The interviews were examined in two ways: (1) on the basis of the *topics* that arose in the interviews (i.e. the topics to which the men referred during the interview, their order, and their connection to other topics) and (2) on the basis of the *content* that arose in these topics (what had the men to say about the topics they raised). It is interesting to note that the similarity among these interviews was very great.

### The Topics

For the purpose of examining the topics brought up in the interviews, the seven interviews were divided into groups of continuous sentences dealing with a specific topic. There was a total of 116 of these short segments, covering six main topics that were raised in the interviews:

1. *Beit Noam*: Forty-five segments dealt with Beit Noam, of which 26 were a description of the hostel and its activities, eight were about what Beit Noam does ('We learn about mistakes we've made in life'), six were about the reasons the man was at Beit Noam ('I was looking for somewhere to get some space', 'Instead of detention'), and the remainder were various criticisms of the hostel.
2. *Home and family*: Twenty-five segments dealt with a description of the man's home and family. The majority were about problematic and stressful situations ('She sees things differently', 'There's a lot of tension at home with the wife'). Only two mentioned positive aspects ('The economic situation at home is very good', 'The relationship with the children is good; they visit at weekends').
3. *Description of self*: Sixteen segments dealt with the man's description of himself. Three contained a denial of violence ('I'm basically not a violent person', 'I'm not a criminal and I haven't committed any crimes'). In four there was a sense of helplessness ('I felt I had to carry a mountain', 'I felt helpless, that I was getting lost', 'I had no one to turn to; I was completely alone'). In all the others, the man expressed a sense that the world did not have a correct view of him ('It's important to me that in the review, Beit Noam writes about me as who I really am, and not like today when I appear to be a



- potential murderer', 'It was important for me that someone objective sees me', 'I felt that the judge, too, was influenced by the media and the preoccupation with violence', 'I've got a charge sheet; I've got the name of a violent man; 50 percent of what's written there is wrong').
4. *The situation before the man came to Beit Noam*: This was mentioned in 11 segments. The main theme was about the various agencies that intervened in the family situation ('I went to the police, the welfare officer, the center for the prevention of violence, the family doctor, the [Islamic] Shariah court').
  5. *Hope for the future*: in another seven segments, the man spoke of hope for the future. Five of these segments dealt with the family and the man's relationship to his partner as a couple ('I hope to start a new family and a successful married life'). Two segments dealt with the man himself ('That I should be myself').
  6. *Violence*: Only four segments of the 116 dealt with references to the man's own violence. In two of them, the reference was direct, albeit blaming the woman ('I raised my hand because my wife annoyed me', 'I hit her because she bought an old computer, not a new one'). In the other two segments, the reference was indirect ('My wife ran off to the shelter for abused women', 'There was an excellent relationship with the family up until the violence').

Of all the segments in the interviews, there was a reference to violence in only 3.4% of them, and a direct reference in only 1.7%. This was despite the fact that the men spoke candidly on various topics and about their feelings.

Again, these interviews took place at the beginning of the therapy. The men were in a crisis situation and Beit Noam was now their home. But even though they were asked directly to talk about Beit Noam, the number of responses relating to the hostel was relatively low (39%), and the references were shallow with almost no connection to the real reason they were there. At this stage, Beit Noam was not something they could relate to.

The men preferred to talk about themselves and their strong feelings of almost being persecuted by a situation over which they had no control, the life situation they found themselves in, their difficulties coping, and their hopes.

### **The Content**

An in-depth analysis of the content in the initial interviews shows a uniform picture of chaotic and inchoate feelings. The dominant feelings were anger and a lack of control, divided into a sense of feeling

incapable ('I felt I was becoming lost; I didn't know how to cope', 'I don't have the tools to cope with it', 'Things got worse, out of control') and of unfocused anger ('I'm angry with my environment', 'I'm attacked by the whole world').

Part of the chaotic feelings was also related to the feeling that life, and especially the family, was falling apart ('I'm scared of losing the family and the world', 'I'm frightened by detachment from the family', 'I'm destroying a way of life'). The sense of breakup and loss of control was reinforced by the proliferation of factors that had suddenly come into the man's family and life: the welfare officer, the court, restraining orders ('All of a sudden there was a welfare officer, criminal charges; I was arrested, the police, a judge, a social worker, a parole officer').

Within this emotional and experiential chaos, violence played only a very small role for these men, despite the clear context of the Beit Noam interview and the fact that it was known to both interviewee and interviewer that the man had reached the point of being barred from his home as a result of severe problems with violence. These violent men did not identify violence as something that belonged to them. In three out of seven interviews, violence was not mentioned at all. When it was mentioned, it was played down ('There were a few small things'), and in every case, it was said to be caused by the woman ('My wife is the problem', 'I raised my hand because my wife annoyed me'). The men did not describe themselves as violent ('Basically I'm not violent', 'I'm presented as a violent person; they don't see me the way I really am').

Throughout the interviews, the men conveyed the feeling that they were not able to explain themselves to the world, or that the world did not see them correctly. At the same time, they expressed a tremendous need for recognition and love ('I want to be loved', 'I want people to see who I really am', 'I'm looking for warmth; I'm afraid of detachment, separation', 'A caress is worth more than money').

The men's great hope for the future was defined in terms of their relationship to their family or to their partner as a couple ('To fix up what needs fixing up in a relationship and turn over a new leaf with my wife or another partner', 'I want to learn how to behave with the family', 'The little girl is very important; I want to have a family, a successful relationship', 'I want to contribute to the family, not dismantle the package').

This finding about the men's failure to address their own violence, or its force, was strongly reinforced by the interviews conducted with

the hostel's therapy team. The men's perception was that they were at Beit Noam either by mistake or because of a plot against them.

One would expect that a social representation of their violence would be central in the lives of these abusive men. They had been barred from their homes because their violence was severe, continual and proven. They were in Beit Noam—a place whose aim is to treat violence. The interviews were conducted because they had come to Beit Noam. These interviews showed a picture of the different factors that had intervened in their families as a consequence of their violence. But despite that, and despite the men's great openness during the interviews, their violence was not expressed verbally. It had no name, and within the men's emotional chaos, it did not exist—there was only emptiness.

But there is more. The men's condition at the beginning of their stay at Beit Noam was one of crisis. Not only had they been barred from their homes and brought to a new place to live, they had also been given the public label of violent men. Quite naturally, one would expect crisis conditions to expose latent representations, and yet no violence was expressed: it surfaced in neither its public aspect nor—according to the Beit Noam therapists—its personal aspect (in the admission interviews and in individual therapy sessions).

### **Findings at the End of Therapy**

In contrast to its almost total absence at the start of the therapeutic process, violence gains a significant place in interviews conducted later, either at the end of the man's stay at Beit Noam or after he had returned home, as well as in later group therapy, individual therapy and in conversations among the men during their stay at Beit Noam.

Twenty-four interviews were conducted with men at the conclusion of therapy. These interviews were richer and more comprehensive than those done at the beginning. Very prominent was the men's broad, well-organized retrospective perspective, addressing topics that were totally non-existent at the start of the process. This in itself is an interesting change, which is also a testament to other changes.

The sense of chaotic distress that was evident before therapy was also mentioned in the later interviews ('There was an emotional distress that I didn't know how to resolve', 'I didn't know how to cope with the problems', 'People couldn't understand how distressed I was', 'There was overwhelming anger; I'd accumulate tensions', 'I couldn't function in pressure situations', 'I couldn't find myself', 'I was a volcano', 'I felt angry at the world', 'There was heavy emotional baggage').

The involvement of numerous factors in the family as a cause of further distress and pressure was also mentioned ('Too many agencies were involved in the family', 'The whole system, the social worker, welfare', 'The parole officer came, the restraining orders, charge sheets, the difficult economic situation').

The men again mentioned their feelings of loneliness and desire to be accepted ('I've always felt rejection, that I'm targeted', 'I had no answers', 'Everybody turned their back on me', 'The outer shell is hard but [I'm] very soft inside').

All these topics were mentioned in the early interviews, but there was a tremendous change in the place occupied by violence. In contrast to earlier interviews, violence gained a significant place. Denial of violence disappeared completely and violence was mentioned in all its nakedness in every interview ('Nerves, hitting the children, cursing, fighting with the wife, breaking [things]', 'There was even violence in how I overtook somebody on the road, looking at him with hostility', 'The violence at home got dangerous', 'There was violence towards the wife and kids at home', 'I didn't know how to talk, to control [my] anger'). The men also acknowledged blaming their partners and not themselves ('No more "I hit her because she made me"').

Violence was the center of these later interviews, and the significant place it occupies here underscores its absence in the earlier ones. The connection between the men and violence changed. They acknowledged their connection to it, their responsibility for it, or at least their ability to control it when it appeared ('Beit Noam gave me more of my thing with my wife, about life in general; it also influenced my driving; I no longer get mad at everything'). Another man compared his feelings to a man driving on the road ('I feel like a driver who puts his foot on the brake before an accident happens. It's happened twice at home that voices were raised because of something or other, and suddenly everything calmed down. I don't know exactly what I did but things didn't get heated; they calmed down. I didn't even have to take a timeout').

In addition to violence occupying a central place in the interview, other topics were mentioned or gained far greater distinction than they had in the opening interviews. It should come as no surprise that the ability to talk things through was highlighted and was demonstrated in the ability to converse and communicate ('Explain to the children rather than hit them; there's success with the wife; I talk to her, talk nicely; we didn't talk that way before', 'Today I'll talk instead of keeping it in; today [I] express [my] feelings', 'A serious talk with the wife—never [did that] in the past', 'I can express feelings'). A distinct

conversational skill that developed was the ability to take the other's place ('I've learned to look at my daughter from her point of view—how she sees me, what she feels—and with the wife too', 'Listen to the other side, think about their feelings'). This emphasis in the interviews on the conversational skills acquired by the men reinforces the assumption that at the start of the process a spontaneous group discussion was out of the question. Social representations are developed through social discourse, of which conversation is one of the main tools and its main courses. Without conversation skills there is a very low chance for a discourse that enables the creation of social representation.

The evidence provided by the women and the professionals also reinforces these findings. For example, in an interview with an arraignment judge, the judge described the case of a man she recommended be sent to Beit Noam for therapy. On his return at the conclusion of therapy, she said, 'He had a different insight on domestic violence.' She noted that this was a severe case of domestic violence and that the change undergone by the man was immense and fundamental.

As mentioned above, the women, too, noted a change in communication and division of labor ('Today he's more composed', 'Today he has fewer outbursts than in the past', 'He's more attentive today; he can see it's hard for me', 'He helps a lot at home, washes the dishes and helps with the cleaning and cooking'). The majority of the women (19 out of 29) said that the men knew how to listen better, hold a conversation with them and the children, speak quietly and make them part of things ('He knows how to talk about his problems without getting angry', 'He accepts, talks more; he doesn't raise his voice').

It would appear that the therapy teaches the men to identify their anger, control it, and ascribe it more to themselves and less to extraneous factors. This is linked with assuming responsibility for controlling violence. The most notable element the men felt they had managed to change as a result of their stay at the hostel was their awareness of behavior.

#### *Changes Identified by the Men*

In a questionnaire given to 87 men at the end of their stay at Beit Noam, the men were asked (in an open question) what, in their opinion, were the things that had changed at the conclusion of therapy. The majority of their spontaneous responses (44% or 38 responses) were related to changes involving the development of an awareness of themselves and their behavior, including developing the ability of self-control and self-awareness, and the improvement and change in their personal feelings and manner of speech. Almost 20% of the responses (16 responses out

of 87) were related to the man avoiding violent behavior in the future; 11% of these responses (10 out of 87) included the use of terms learned at Beit Noam, connected to ways of coping with violence (e.g. speaking in the language of 'I', taking a timeout, self-interviewing, positive thinking, not suppressing), and in five other responses, the men noted the cessation of violence ('Not to be violent', 'Not to raise my hand').

Fourteen percent reported a change in self-esteem and self-confidence. Thirteen percent talked about better communication with others and a greater ability to express themselves.

Some of the men noted that they had learned different ways of communicating with their children: 10% of all responses at the end of the stay mentioned learning different modes of behavior with their children, such as, 'Hearing and listening to the children' and 'Caring for the children', 'I've learned to look at my daughter from her point of view . . .'; as compared with only 2% of all responses at the beginning of the stay. Six men divorced during or after treatment. They all said that in spite of the divorce their relationships with their children were much better: 'I let her [his wife] go and gained relations with my children', 'I am much better with the children now'.

A question that was asked at both the beginning and the end of the men's stay at the hostel was, 'In your opinion, what are Beit Noam's main targets?' This was an open-ended question and the answers were spontaneous. There were several interesting changes in the responses to this question between the beginning and the end (Table 1).

These findings show not only a different perception of Beit Noam, but, more importantly, different expectations for the men themselves. At the beginning, the men's locus of control was more external, and their expectations were for someone (Beit Noam) to 'give' them a 'toolkit' to solve their problems. At the end of their treatment, the locus

Table 1. Changes in perception of Beit Noam: percentages (raw frequencies targets)

The perceived target	Beginning of term	End of term
Toolkit to deal with violence and to control feelings, anger and stress	43 (20)	30 (14)
To get out of the cycle of violence	13 (6)	20 (9)
Self-rehabilitation, self-improvement, self-awareness	22 (10)	35 (16)
To provide place to live	2 (1)	0 (0)
Other	(9)	15 (7)
Sum	100 (46)	100 (46)

of control was more internal, and the men's expectations were that they were themselves changed and were more aware and more responsible.

## Discussion

### The Absence of Violence

The reliability of the men's initial interviews is reinforced by the interviews and discussions at the conclusion of therapy and the men's connection with feelings they expressed at the beginning. This strengthens our claim that the absence of violence in the early interviews was genuine and not an attempt at concealment or denial. Our contention is that this absence of violence was due to the absence of a social representation of violence and that the therapists would not be able to deal with or change the men's violent behavior without the existence of such a social representation, nor would the men be able to deal with their own violence. As Moscovici (1963) states, 'a social representation is understood as the collective elaboration "of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating"' (p. 251).

Only after the creation of a social representation of violence was it possible to bring about a communicative discourse on violent behavior and to learn to behave differently. In this case, behavior is very strongly shown to be an inseparable part of social representation. Behavior itself is not accessible without social representation (as shown by the interviews done at the beginning of the process). Social representations create a complex of connections between behaviors, the feelings that accompany these behaviors, the evaluative aspect of behavior (e.g. that something is not an acceptable behavior), its traits (that it can be controlled) and the context (such as family relations, on the one hand, and broader social values, on the other).

One could ask whether it is possible that at the time of the men's arrival at Beit Noam and in the stages that preceded it, they would not yet have a social representation of their own violence, despite its being their own behavior. It would seem that this was indeed the situation. The essential role of social representations is making the invisible perceptible, and at this stage, the representations were invisible—the men were incapable of verbally formulating and communicating their violent behavior.

If social representations are 'the ensemble of thoughts and feelings being expressed in the verbal and overt behavior of actors which constitutes an object for a social group' (Wagner et al., 1999, p. 96), we cannot speak of a social representation of violence for these men at this initial stage. They did not express their violence in words and it did



not constitute an object for the group of which the men were a part. It also cannot be said that the object—violence—was an extension of the violent men's behavior, as claimed by Moscovici (1973, p. xi), because the men did not recognize the violence as their own and their self-image was not one of a violent person. As Wagner (1992) claims, there is no logic in calling emotional arguments 'social representations':

Does it really make sense to call a purely evaluative and affective 'statement' a social representation, even if it seems to exhibit the same content, as interpreted by the researcher? A tendency to evaluate without being able to elaborate verbally on the justificatory superstructure of this evaluation. . . . The purely evaluative and affective statement is not yet a social representation, but rather the ontological genesis of a social representation from more basic habitual reaction tendencies. Only when the habitual tendency to evaluate is accompanied by a more or less elaborated quasi-theoretical framework—usually with justificatory moral elements—can we reasonably speak of a representation. (p. 112)

The men's violence, as demonstrated at the start of the process, was far from being a social representation. The lack of even minimal verbal processing, not to mention moral and theoretical perspectives, was notable.

At the start of the therapeutic process, we see that the social representations of domestic violence in abusive men are unfocused. Violence is absent. At the core of social representation are feelings of emptiness, absence and lack. There is a great longing for attention and love, which are not there, an unfulfilled desire to communicate (they are not 'perceived correctly'), and the feeling that life is falling apart and the family is slipping through their fingers.

On the periphery of the field of representations, there is a great deal going on: the family plays a number of roles—something that has been taken away and is being lost, a hope for the future, and a trigger for violent behavior that is not experienced by the men as theirs. There are numerous interventional factors that have entered the men's lives and are linked to the family and the woman. And there is violent behavior that is experienced only partially as such and by only some of the violent men.

In the midst of all this, there is also unclear anger, unidentified pressure and a great deal of helplessness floating on the periphery of the representation, all of which are not actually linked to the violence of the interviewees. Rather, it is all part of the general existential situation and plays only a small part in the involuntary behavioral reaction that does not arise from the man himself, and which is sometimes not even seen by him.



In contrast to the marginality of the place occupied by violence in these men, there is a marked disparity with regard to how it is seen by the man's partner and children and the care-giving agencies involved. It is almost the complete opposite. In the context of Beit Noam, the man is almost exclusively perceived through his violence by his partner and the care-giving agencies—it is his dominant characteristic. But the man perceives it as almost non-existent and certainly not as something belonging to him, which could be the source of the feelings of 'They don't see me as I really am'.

A partial explanation of the absence of a social representation of the men's violence might be that it could create a stigma that might harm their self-perception. Another possible explanation is linked to their social position during their stay at Beit Noam, a position of weakness accompanied by denial (Joffe, 1995, 1996), thus the part played by feeling they were there 'by mistake' or as the result of 'a plot'. These are both good reasons for the absence of any mention of violence.

However, it appears that this is not the entire explanation because it assumes the existence of a social representation that is either concealed, denied or projected. Our claim is that no social representation of the personal violence of abusive men has been created at all. This explanation is based on the fact that the mechanisms needed to create such a social representation are absent. The first of these mechanisms is the group, as Wagner et al. (1999) explain:

Social groups are distinct in terms of their understanding of social phenomena which in turn constitute their social identity. The shared understanding of their world and of the objects composing it provides the ground for communication and other forms of co-action. (p. 97)

As part of modern society, abusive men belong to different groups. But not one of these groups is one in which they can structure their common knowledge, their identification with their own violence, or their understanding of it. The likelihood that a group of abusive men would spontaneously form a group that would deal with its violence does not in fact exist. (While there are groups of men at centers for preventing violence, these are not spontaneous groups. They are certainly interesting, but they were not included in the research reported here.)

The man, his partner and the care-giving agencies *are not a group* for the purpose of creating a joint social representation of violence. The family is something that has slipped through the man's fingers and is falling apart. His partner is, to a certain extent, the enemy. The care-giving agencies are perceived as undesirable meddlers that are outside the man's control and, moreover, act on his partner's behalf to form

pacts against the man. No discourse around violence can be formed with them. For, as Moscovici (1985) says, 'all "cognition", all "motivation" and all "behavior" only exist and have repercussions insofar as they signify something, and signifying implies, by definition, at least two people sharing a common language, common values and common memories' (p. 11).

The possibility of creating a *common understanding of a social object* (in this case, the man's violence) is non-existent. The man's partner, together with the care-giving agencies, is unable to constitute a group, and no discourse is created with them. There are also no other groups within which discourse can be structured. Therefore *the structuring of a common identity* around the man's violence is improbable, just as a common understanding of the subject under discussion is impossible. As we have shown, the man's perception of his own violence is a mirror image of his partner's and that of the care-giving agencies; it is not a common picture that enables joint communication and cooperation. In everything pertaining to his violence, the man has no common language with the environment, no common values, and even his memories or interpretations of events are skewed. The abusive man is alone in a violent situation with no group in which he can communicate his act, understand it, structure it, and in this way build a common identity.

Discourse is the second condition for creating a social representation, but the absence of a significant group in which to discuss the subject means that no discourse can occur that will structure the representation. The absence of a social representation means that neither discourse nor communication can be enabled because it is social representations that provide people with 'a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history' (Moscovici, 1973, p. xii).

Here it is important to create a distinction between verbalization or conceptualization, both of which certainly exist, if only in the media, and the creation of a social representation embodying far more than mere concepts. This distinction must acknowledge a cognitive representation of behavior and feelings, the feelings themselves, naming and comprehending behavior at different levels of understanding (cognitive and emotional), as well as values and morals. And, most important, it must be part of a discourse; in other words, it is imperative that the representation can be addressed cognitively with a common understanding of its meaning.

The violent man, the family and the care-giving agencies cannot develop a social discourse around the man's violence and are,

consequently, unsuccessful in creating a common social representation of it. There are several reasons for this, which reinforce one another, the first being the man's difficulty in creating any kind of discourse, as demonstrated in the initial interviews.

A second reason is the apparent denial of violence by the man, which makes the subject of violence almost totally inaccessible for social discourse. In addition, the fact that the violence is something that the man perceives as extraneous and beyond his control (at least at the experiential level) does not enable the creation of a discourse around violence, not even non-verbal discourse (such as, for example, a ritual or series of events with a known set of rules).

### **The Process of Creating Social Representations**

How does the Beit Noam therapeutic process contribute to the structuring of a social representation of the men's violence?

Beit Noam has succeeded in both building a group and structuring a discourse. This success, in an almost impossible situation, is nurtured by two factors: (1) a group is formed, albeit artificially at first, and (2) the entire Beit Noam system functions around this group. The men are treated in groups of 12 and live as a group, having to function as a group in their everyday life at the hostel, organizing cleaning duties, meals, and so on. All the therapeutic activity at Beit Noam is group activity (with the exception of once-weekly individual support sessions).

Two things happen in the course of this group activity. First, a group is formed—a group of equals, relevant to the subject of violence—that exerts pressure and ways of communicating of a previously unknown kind. An opportunity is created for what Moscovici terms 'the unceasing babble' of human interaction. Second, together with the group-building process, a process of objectifying the men's violence is created (Billig, 1988; Potter & Billig, 1992). This objectification process is carried out through discourse bombardment, from which it is difficult to escape even if you want to. If one kind of dialogue does not work, there is another; if one topic doesn't express it, there is another. There is a great deal of repetition, and the concepts recur in all the workshops, where they are processed—linked to other concepts, emotions and behaviors. The moment the men start learning to communicate the chaos, the objectification process works.

For the objectification process to be created, there is a need for anchoring, which is accomplished through the feeling of anger. This part of the men's experience is common to all and is defined and encouraged. At Beit Noam, the process begins with the identification and control of anger. The identification of anger is carried out on

several levels: cognitive, where the cycle of violence is identified; instrumental, where tools are provided for identifying the anger early and coping with it; and emotional, which involves working with art. All of this is done in the group all the time. The anger, its origins, ways of dealing with it, and, most important, its result—violence—are processed over and over again in the group workshops, from different points of view and in different ways. Anger is identified, classified, catalogued and, no less important, is spoken of in the language of 'I', which constantly forces the men to link the anger and violence to themselves.

Additional factors that catalyze the process of creating a social representation of violence are the authority factor and cognitive conflict.

Earlier authoritative interventional factors in the men's lives did not create a dialogue; they simply imposed themselves ('no one listened or understood—they simply intervened'). At Beit Noam, authority creates a discourse, one in which the men are a part despite the fact that 'ownership' of the discourse is in the hands of the authority. Moreover, the authority is an authority in the sense of being both a status authority and an epistemic one (Leman, 1998). Although the authority represents the accepted social representation of violence, a social representation that Moscovici terms 'hegemonic or uniform and coercive', it helps the men create their own representation as an exclusive subgroup connected with an experience that is theirs alone, according to Moscovici's (1988) 'emancipated representations, which derive from the circulation of knowledge and ideas belonging to sub-groups' (pp. 221–222).

Conflict is created because the persons in authority and the majority of therapy figures at Beit Noam are women. They hold the authority and possess the knowledge. This creates a multi-layered dissonance that causes the cognitive and emotional process to develop (Doise & Mugny, 1984; Leman, 1998).

All these factors together (the formation of the group, the possibility of anchoring, the creation of a discourse, the pressure for objectification and the presence of a challenging authority) contribute to the men's success in building a social representation of their own violence, a social representation that enables them to communicate their experiences and emotions and to cope with them, ultimately reaching a point of dramatic change in what was thought to be a lost cause—control of violence. Once the social representation has been created, it is possible, using the same methods (group discourse, authority and cognitive dissonance), to change it in a way that enables the men to control their behavior.

The enforced group at Beit Noam reflects the men themselves and compels them to create a social representation, thus connecting them with their own difficult and negative aspects. There is no escape from the group, so it is able to become a lever for change—for creating a social representation of violence as something that can be controlled and directed, that can be coped with. This change in the representation of violence from something unidentified that controls you to something that can be dealt with and controlled is important. It enables the men to create and preserve a more positive self-image. Thus, the process of dealing with and controlling violence becomes an inherent part of its social representation: the violence is mine; it is understood and communicated; it can be controlled and it is I who control it.

The moment that a social representation is created, it requires a 'significant majority' to maintain it (Wagner et al., 1999). 'Graduate' groups (men who have returned to the community after their stay at the hostel) are constantly maintained at Beit Noam. These groups enable the social representation to be preserved and enriched through the further experiences of subsequent groups of men, experiences that continue to include the difficult but possible aspect of coping with violence.

The process at Beit Noam has provided an almost laboratory-like situation in which we can observe the process of creating a social representation, from a point at which even verbalization was non-existent to one where a social representation could be created and through which compulsive behavior could be changed.

### Note

1. Beit Noam is an experimental program approved as a demonstration project by the Israeli National Insurance Institute with the joint backing of the National Insurance Institute and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, on the initiative of the Noam Non-profit Organization for the Prevention of Domestic Violence. The research was financed by Israeli National Insurance, the Department of Demonstrating Projects.

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