

Chapter 2

Living in an *as-if* Reality

Living in an *as-if* reality describes the way members manage family identity along a continuum ranging from normative to deviant. Living in such a reality leads to an unauthentic presentation of self, in which the tactics of hiding the violence become a way of life. The normative descriptions place a heavy veil over the violence by focusing on everyday routine, significant life events, family ceremonies, normative and open social ties, and an overall public identity that presents a seemingly harmonious family image. Over the years, family members develop an entire range of strategies that make possible a collective and individual pseudo-normative presentation of self. These include pretending, face saving, defocusing, masking, and blurring by false presentations; channeling of violence and violence-related information; and minimization and manipulation of the situation and of the memories of violence. All these are associated with extensive use of double standards regarding what is said inside and outside the family.

Between Normative and Deviant

A perception of the family as normative or deviant evolves throughout the life-span, although one cannot present the family as either one or the other. These elements intermingle and are constructed and reconstructed by family members differentially. The process is illustrated in the following excerpts of interviews with the various family members.

The Sharon family. Zeev, 70, and Annette, 65, married for 45 years, and their three adult children: Chanoch, 45, an accountant, Meira, 45, a lawyer, and Yaira, 38, a school teacher. Annette is a delicate woman who talks quietly and slowly. She appears fearful and concerned about the relationship with her husband. Zeev is an accountant by trade who values his personal, professional, and public identity. The unveiling of violence following the hospitalization of his wife is perceived by him as an accident threatening his status.

The husband presents a normative narrative:

I worked in a real sensitive place. We in the family tried to get along as anyone else. I was running amok after work. It was climbing slippery walls. It didn't go fast ... I worked 36 years, I took early retirement and waited to say goodbye ... I used to be busy with childrearing, the children studied at the university, my older son is an accountant, the daughter is a lawyer and the third is a director ... In our house every Sabbath we open the table, we are all together and share meals ... The house is open and people come and go.

When challenged about the violence, he says:

I never had a dark spot anywhere ... except this thing. I never stepped into a police station. It was an accident, nothing more. Accident, nothing more ... I was in shock and did not know what went on with me. They talked about psychiatric treatment. What do they think? Am I crazy? We are just ordinary people.

The wife, who lived most of her married life in violence, also tries to put up a normative façade of regular family life:

I really tried and built a beautiful family. I cooked day in day out. Thursday I would go to sleep late at night to make sure that everything is ready for the Friday holiday dinner. When the kids were small he would help, wash them and dress them in the morning. ... If only he weren't so nervous ... He's got a good head, open hands, he is not stingy. Yet whatever he wanted needed to be done according to his word. Our life would go real well without his blowups and his anger ...

The eldest son, who became aware of the violence only when the "accident" occurred, also attempts to keep up the normative picture of the family:

Normal regular family, average middle class ... We grew up like everyone. My sisters remember all the details. I don't. I was busy with my own stuff. The youth movement, friends, later I left the house and got enlisted in the paratroopers. I would get home from the army and everyone treated me like a prince. My sisters were telling me that the atmosphere was bad. I never thought we lived in a violent reality. I never thought of my family as abnormal.

In contrast to her brother, the daughter describes a complex family reality, including a cover of togetherness based on normative activities aimed at the outside world, with an inner world governed by violence:

When we were children we used to go on field trips together. Every Sabbath morning before we left there was screaming, pressure, and then it would cool down when other people would come. The tension and the nerves were always there. We expected a blowup every time. I remember once coming back from a trip after a week of enjoying myself, the closer I came to home the sense of pressure became harder. What can I say, that I don't want to go into the house, and know where my friends return and where I am returning?

The Sharon family presents a normative façade, but the overall picture is that of a family living an "as-if" reality—polarized, unbalanced, and with the gaps in the perceptions between various family members. The normative image is achieved by emphasizing and giving high visibility to a respectable, middle-class social identity. The pretenses at normalcy amount to strict adherence to normative rituals, life routine and rhythm, gender roles, and division of labor, and are accompanied by the systematic transformation of deviant events into something ambiguous, unclear, and

defocused. The son uses spatial separation to stay normative, and the father resorts to work and professional achievement as hiding places from conflicts, which are acknowledged only by the daughter. In this way, members of the family are able to present a certain coherence between the various perspectives, with the normative façade serving as the figure and the violence as the ground.

The next family presents a fragmented picture of the “as-if” reality, emphasizing the differences in perspectives among the various members.

The Reuveni family, Nachum, 70, and Talia, 65, married for 47 years, parents to two adult daughters and one son. They have six grandchildren. The son and one of the daughters live abroad; their sister Rotem, 50, a housewife, lives in Israel. She is expected to take care of her parents, despite of the fact that as child she experienced inter-parental violence and she herself was abused by her father without the mother’s interference. Talia, outspoken, well groomed, and carefully dressed, worked in childcare, and Nachum worked as a tourist guide. Talia was resolute about leaving her husband who kept cheating on her throughout his work and his subsequent travels. She left home but returned “after three months less a day,” as she said, after having counted the days.

The husband chooses to emphasize the normalcy of the family by describing its character and the functional existence of family members:

The children saw a model of an organized home with organized parents. We had good relationships with everyone; you can’t show that you prefer one child over the other, right? You love all children, they are all ours ... There was a time when the daughter boycotted us. She got offended but recently we succeeded to reunite again.

The wife also tries to hide behind the normative mask of the family, but she allocates considerable space for her husband’s deviant behavior:

I took care of everything at home. He would just do the handiwork. When guests would come he would help ... The entire situation I am facing is unusual. I see how people behave in other families ... I am trying to keep things quiet, but inside I am not. His thoughts are not of an ordinary person; he needs therapeutic sessions to cleanse his thinking. The shrink said he gave up on him. So what can I do?

The wife’s attempts to normalize the picture are associated with her perception of his behavior as abnormal, but the daughter tears down the curtain concealing the truth about the life of the family and describes it in all its deviance:

Our family was never united. There was fear, tension. A real difficult house ... I remember it wasn’t ever good. I always wanted to split and leave home. It is real unpleasant to live in my house, in terms of relationships and behavior. Everything in anger. My dad and my mom were arguing all these years. This affected us all ... I came to my boyfriend’s house and saw a totally different home. I was treated there in a way I was never treated in my home.

The daughter, representative of the next generation, views her family as deviant by comparison to other normative families, revealing the gap between how it should be (prescriptive) and how it is (descriptive).

At the family level, everybody is aware of what normative family life should be like, realizing at the same time that theirs is different. Therefore the parents attempt to either minimize the problems or imply their pathological nature, whereas the

daughter, representative of the next generation, recognizes overtly the deviant character of the family and by so doing brings the problem into the limelight.

Another variation on the inconsistencies in the perceptions of family members can be seen in the divergent views between generations.

The Gilboa family. Yoseph, 76, and Shifra, 75, married for 45 years, parents to three adult children, with eight grandchildren. Shifra, a former supervisor in a public education service, expresses herself with ease and fluency. Their daughter Alma, 52, a social worker, describes herself and her brothers as direct victims and survivors of paternal violence unopposed by their mother.

The daughter says:

Nothing comes from them. They keep struggling with me and try to tell me I am wrong and they are right. That they were wonderful parents ... How can it be that all of us children think the same and you still think you are right?

Alma attempts unsuccessfully to contradict her parent's version of the past and resists the pseudo-normative picture maintained by the parents, as presented by the mother. The wife describes the children's achievements as enabled by the normative family basis created by the parents. The parents' success is measured in terms of their children's titles and occupations and the number of grandchildren. Shifra says:

We produced healthy children ... Children always have complaints about their parents; it is part of their growing up ... They think they will be better parents and better mothers. But then they grow up and they understand it is not that simple.

The husband completes the pseudo-normative picture of the family. When asked about the difficult intimate relationships within the family he reacts:

I don't remember, it is meaningless ... one doesn't remember such things. We remember the more important things, you see, things with a broader base, these are things you can find in our family. All partners have differences ...

This family is characterized by polarized intergenerational relationships, in which members create separate camps representing the conflict between the parents and the children. There is little willingness to hear or understand the position of the other side. It is likely that the parents passed on the conflict between themselves to their children, initiating a cross-generational conflict. It may be that in the old age the interpersonal conflict is too costly and aiming it at the next generation becomes less threatening. The parents adopt the necessary tactics to normalize and trivialize deviance, adopting the scenario that is less detrimental to their survival. They declare violence to be trivial, mundane, and common, focusing instead on broader issues, which they consider to be normal and similar to other normative families. When confronted by the children about the violence, they counterbalance it with descriptions of successful upbringing, which they attribute to the normalcy and functionality of the family. By transforming the conflict from an interpersonal one, within the old generation, into a cross-generational between the old and new generation, they neutralize the violence, because every family is known to have cross-generational "issues."

Hiding as a Way of Life

Behaviors such as keeping secrets, creating screens, pretending, manipulating identity, and focusing on issues other than violence are aimed at hiding violence in order to create an “as-if” normative family reality.

The Soshani family. Menachem, 80, and Malka, 76, divorced after being married for 50 years, parents to three adult children, with eight grandchildren. Two of the children live abroad; son Yoel, 48, supports his father after Malka passed away. Menachem, under restraining order following his violence, never came to terms with the change in the family situation and is actively hostile towards his wife and their son Yoel.

The wife suffered a stroke, which left her incapacitated on one side of her body. She is a victim of years of violence by her husband. He calls her an “old whore” and continually abuses her verbally and physically. Finally she called the police and complained for the first time. She represents families with a dominant pattern of secretive existence over the years. The following quote is revealing:

For years I never said anything to anyone. Just God and myself. Fifteen years ago the neighbor called the police. I told the policeman nothing happened. Husband and wife argue sometimes. I was ashamed to call the police. Never said anything to the children ... they never knew anything. That is why I am burning and the children are burned by this. They cannot understand how come I never said a word all these years.

Despite the fact that the neighbors had awareness of the violence in the family, the wife tried to keep it secret and maintain the normative identity of the family, as described by the son:

We lived in secret. Until he turned 75, there was no hint of anything. All these years she succeeded to persuade us that there is nothing ... we didn't know there was violence until this complaint came ... She tried to conceal it by preparing food and everything seemed OK. We saw no violence, but we did see lots of arguments and lots of conflicts, but we didn't make the connection. There were arguments, so what? There were days they didn't talk, and then back to routine. Everything on course ... She had many blue marks, she said she fell off the bed or got them from the edges of the furniture ... At the same time she prepared food, hosted us, and everything looked good. She succeeded in concealing the unpleasant atmosphere. Today when I think of it, perhaps she didn't react to the beating because she wanted to keep it secret, and this is why she was always nervous. Then suddenly came the complaint at the police station. I don't think she made up these stories, as I remember that there were signs, which we didn't read ... I also remember she once tried to commit suicide. But I was 15 and didn't pay much attention.

For the son, the unveiling of the violence by his mother was a turning point that triggered retrospective reflection and brought about a complete change in the perception of family life.

The husband used violence toward his wife over the years and developed ways of hiding it from everyone around him.

There were times we would argue more seriously ... she would pretend to call the police. But only as if.

So what happened now that she got up her courage to do it? It is because of the son who came from the U.S.

For the husband, violence and his wife's "crying wolf" reaction to it were part of a normative life. So when she finally turned to the police and the violence was unveiled, he experienced it as a heavy blow because from his perspective he was still a regular man who suddenly found himself in a hostile environment.

The entire family lives and acts in secrecy, and its members have diverging interpretations of what goes on. Whereas the mother keeps up a normative façade and conceals the violence from the children and others, the father conducts himself with confidence in the violent space. For him, an authentic life means life in violence, including his wife's parallel pseudo-attempts to expose it. He takes violence for granted. The son is surprised when the violence is revealed. After reflecting, he reinterprets retrospectively various signs and events as related to violence. This reflection appears to change his image of the family.

Over the years all members acquiesce to the "as-if" reality in which the family lives. The inside reality, which is ridden with violence, is superseded by another one which is normative and guided by social desirability. The "as-if" reality is reinforced by social norms, such as not divorcing because it is not done in good families, and not sharing the suffering with outsiders to avoid injury to the image and name of the family. Violence is kept under control although its presence is acknowledged, and living with it requires trivialization strategies. The various signs of violence must be explained away or denied, as do extreme reactions to it, such as suicide attempts. In this way, violence continues over the years, without remedy because it is nonexistent for the outside.

Another Pattern of Hiding the Violence Is Pretense

The Liron family. Moshe, 70, and Ora, 62, married for 50 years, parents to six children (one deceased at an early age), with 15 grandchildren. One of the daughters, Ziva, 45, a beautician, separated from her violent partner and returned to her parents' residence. Ora is an energetic woman, newly religious (*hozeret beshuva*). This change enabled her to find strength to care for her sick husband, despite his violence. Moshe is constantly preoccupied with his health and is dependent upon Ora. He tries to change their relationship, as family integrity is a central value for both of spouses.

The wife describes her experience:

No one heard, no one saw, for fifty years I acted like the strongest woman in the world. I live close to a policewoman and policeman. The woman is telling me "go complain to the police, the man needs treatment." I told her I couldn't do it. Complain about my husband and sleep with him? No, out of the question ... I never let it invade our life ... One day he came out of the bedroom and spit in my face. My son said, Mother, shame on you that you keep living with this man. I told him it is your father and he will always be your father, whatever happens, he'll still be your father.

She describes her attempt to misrepresent her life in violence, pretending to conduct a pseudo-normal family life despite the fact that her son and her environment are aware of the real situation. Her husband presents a different view:

I asked her, I told her. Look, leave this nonsense. We weren't married today ... Fifty years, what will the children say the moment the package falls apart?

The husband attempts to mask the violence by resorting to the longstanding togetherness and to the fact that the family serves as safe haven for the children. He believes that in this way the violence remains outside the family consciousness.

The daughter, herself a battered woman, learned the pretense from her mother and practiced it in her own life:

We would just shut up. She taught me to say nothing. Until you cannot shut up anymore. Years went by in the same way ... to the point where people who were close to us saw what kind of life we live, there and here [her own life]. They didn't understand why I shut up. When I opened up they told me, now you're waking up suddenly? We saw it on the day you were married.

The three members of this family describe two ways of living their lives "as if." Everyone is clear about the discrepancy between what is there in reality and what they want to present to the world. The discrepancy creates the need to conceal. Concealing the violence occurs by accepting it and keeping it a secret, pretending that it does not exist. The mother presents a pseudo-strong identity to compensate for her vulnerability while simultaneously protecting the social identity of her spouse together with what she perceives to be the morals of the family. Her partner maintains continuously a normative identity while denying and concealing the violence. The daughter continues in her mother's path for years, and when she finally exposes the violence she understands that all significant others have been aware of her continuous pretending. Unlike her mother, she decides to divorce.

Mutual accusations associated with pretense are a variation on the theme of concealing the violence.

The Lavie family. Jako, 77, and Rina, 64. In the past, Rina was married against her will to Mordechai, who was much older and from whom she ran away with her young children. She remarried with a man who turned out to be a pedophile. Presently she lives with Jako, a seaman in his past, who has two daughters from his previous marriage. Together the partners have five grandchildren. Rina, a hairdresser by trade, a friendly, well-groomed woman, is the victim of continuous outbreaks of violence and finally turned to legal agencies for help. Her son Doron, 45, divorced and father of two children, was a witness to constant parental violence.

The father describes the hypocritical behavior of his wife:

She treats me like a dog. But when someone calls, even if we were in the middle of the argument, you should hear her how she talks on the phone: "my darling, my life" ... as if someone stowed her away and now there's a different person instead.

The wife describes her husband's hypocrisy using the candle metaphor: "He's like a candle outside and dark inside ... People see us dance and say how nicely you are dancing together. I say, sure ... go tell them that at home he hits me and that we don't sleep together"

The son complements the picture of mutual accusations and pretense:

My mother is pathetic ... She's been eating shit for years with this guy. What counts is that people wouldn't say that she divorced again. My mother makes this ongoing attempt of finding fucking harmony out of nowhere, which is non-existent. As if she takes care of him, he loves her, she loves him. It's sickening ...

The couple lives with violence in a joint dance, with each partner attempting to conceal the violence and projecting an ideal picture in public while accusing each

other of hypocrisy and using extreme metaphors such as “light and darkness” and “doglike treatment” that have come to symbolize the double standard by which they live. This life in two worlds, one for home and the other for the outside, creates a sense of distrust and revulsion in their adult son, who sees his parents as inauthentic and dishonest, and rejects them both. His role in the drama is to reveal their inauthenticity by exposing the dirty laundry to anyone willing to listen.

Summary of Living in an *as-if* Reality

The “as-if” reality is constructed from a narrative based on an inauthentic presentation of the family and expressed along two dimensions: one in which the family is presented as if it were normative rather than deviant and another in which “as-if” nonviolence replaces the violence as a way of life. Movement along the normative-deviant dimension creates a range of “as-if” realities. The first one is of the pseudo-normative type, where all family members perceive the family unit as normative. This perception produces coherence between the versions of the various family members, and the normative descriptions raise a cover before the violence by emphasizing daily routine, life events, family rituals, and social and public identity that are jointly intended to create the appearance of family harmony. The violent father is attached and committed to the normative identity; the battered mother is conscious of the deviance yet she internalizes the deviant events. The grown children usually side with the normative trend or are ambivalent about it.

The narrative of the second type of family consists of contradictory versions that cannot be reconciled, and therefore it is impossible to develop a joint narrative. In opposing versions, the father sticks to the normative end of the continuum and the mother to the deviant one, with the children usually exposing the violence and defining the family as deviant. Another possibility is that of conflicting or divergent versions at the cross-generational level.

The second dimension has to do with the efforts made to present the family as normative. To achieve this, members develop various strategies of concealment, including keeping the violence secret, pretending, and offering a different script for every audience, and resorting to double standards and hypocrisy by holding opposing values concerning violence. Permeability of the value boundaries surrounding families makes possible the normalization of life and the self-perception of family members as normative people. The space created between the normative and the deviant is perceived as a twilight zone that blurs the experience of violence and colors it in pastel tones that enable the family to live a full life in the “as-if” reality despite the violence.

The theme of inauthentic existence appears to be a central motif of families living in IPV (Sartre, 1969). The lack of authenticity arises from the contrast between living in violence and the constant attempt to put on a normative façade. Thus, life in violence prevents family members to be true to themselves and to each other in the sense used by Heidegger: a life focused on defensive action against dread and on

the need to defend the existence of the family as the way of being in the world they know and with which they are familiar (1962, p. 208). The price of such relative security is that IPV becomes taken for granted and part of other life routines (Denzin, 1984). In *as-if* situations family members live a life in violence permeated by loss and suffering, which defines most aspects of their experience. Furthermore, inauthenticity leads inevitably to unconditional conformity and conventionality as a guiding principle of creating reality. By masking violence much ambiguity is created, and reality is blurred to the point that family members become preoccupied with the question of whether their key social belonging unit is deviant or normal (Warnock, 1970). The difficult choice is between being authentic and recognizing the deviant nature of the family vs. being inauthentic, and denying and keeping the violence a secret. Most men we interviewed chose to be inauthentic, which enabled them continue exercising power and control over their partners and avoid outside intervention, support, or help. Some of the women and children chose an ambiguous path, being situationally authentic and at the same time inauthentic, and developing a series of accounting and justifying strategies (Scott & Lyman, 1968) for their situation. The key strategy for preserving the unauthentic family façade had to do with keeping secrets. The secrets around violence create a family space within which all members are busy maintaining it because it provides a unifying frame and line of defense for the integrity of the family vis-à-vis the outside world (Afifi & Steuber, 2010; Avery, 1982; Idisis & Oz, 2011; Mason, 1993; Mitchell, 1993; Vangelisti, 1994). When family members are able to agree on a joint narrative, the secret of the violence acts as a unifying factor; but when the versions and accounts become divergent, family solidarity is broken, conflicts become visible, and they take over parts of the retrospective reflection on the life of the family (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Silverstein, & Wang, 2000; Connidis & McMullin, 2002).

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