

The perception of daily reality among children exposed to their father's violence against their mother: An intense bi-polar experience

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The present article explores the phenomenology of the experiences of children exposed to their father's violence toward their mother. The study focused on the children's experience of the violence at each stage of the escalating parental conflict. The study sample included 27 children, of both genders, between the ages of seven and 12 years. They were sampled from families living with intimate violence, according to social workers' reports in centers for the prevention and treatment of violence around Israel. The children underwent in-depth semi-structured interviews. The study findings reveal that the children perceive their daily reality as the merging of two intense experiences: deep emptiness and extreme fullness. These two coexisting experiences are mutually strengthening and create a relationship of tension and acceptance. The sense of emptiness and fullness are an outcome of the daily family interaction and of the children's role in the escalating interparental conflict; a role that is directed by clearly defined parental guidelines. The article discusses the implications of the findings for theory and practice.

Keywords: Children exposed to violence; experience; intimate partner violence

This study was designed to examine the complexity of the experience of children exposed to their father's violence against their mother regarding the stages of escalation of the interparental conflict.

The body of knowledge in the field to date has dealt mainly with the outcomes of children's exposure to interparental violence and has therefore advanced the perception of a population at risk in need of assistance and support. Nevertheless, this body of knowledge has scarcely examined the way in which these risks were expressed in practice, and thus provides limited information about how to cope with the phenomenon.

The literature review on the influence of interparental violence on children shows that living in a violent environment has a negative impact on their physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral development (e.g., Graham-Bermann & Edleson, 2001; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). It was found, for example, that compared to children from normative families, children living with violence suffer from

emotional distress, anxiety, depression, mood swings, posttraumatic reactions, and suicidal thoughts (Evans, Davies & DiLillo, 2008; Silva, Alpert, Monuz, Matzner, & Dummit, 2000). They demonstrate lower academic and social capability (e.g., Jouriles, Norwood, McDonald, & Peters, 2001), and show more frequent use of drugs and alcohol, as well as more frequent displays of aggressiveness and other anti-social behaviors (e.g., Baldry, 2007; Foy, Furrow, & McManus, 2011).

Nevertheless, more recent studies in the field have shown that the impacts are not deterministic (e.g., Hughes, Graham-Bermann, & Gruber, 2001; Edleson et al., 2007). These studies indicate that the equation in which exposure to violence equals developmental impairment applies only in some cases. Some children, despite their familial situation, have the skills and/or are in an environment, which provide them with the strength needed to reduce the negative developmental implications or to achieve normative development (e.g., Allen, Wolf, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003; Davies & Sturge-Apple, 2006; Martinez-Torteya, Bogat, Von Eye, & Levendosky, 2009). This ability is affected by variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, frequency and type of violence, direct abuse and exposure to violence, mother-child relationship, and children's coping skills (e.g., Holt et al., 2008).

A limited number of studies—mainly qualitative and clinical—focused on how children experience the violent incidents. The overall data that emerged from these studies provide a degree of depth of understanding of the complex, multidimensional experience of children who are exposed to violence (Ericksen & Henderson, 1992; Humphreys, 1991; Peled, 1993). Peled (1997) suggested four characteristic types that represent this experience: a) Living with the Secret, in which the child denies the existence of the

violence and acts as if it does not exist; b) Living with Conflicts of Loyalty, in which the child is aware of the violence, but cannot take sides; c) Living in Terror and Fear, in which the child is completely aware of the violence and identifies with the victim, and d) Adopting the Violent Model, in which the child is aware of the violence, but identifies with the aggressor. Based on these types, the cognitive processes that lead to their appearance were examined, providing an understanding of how these processes influence the child's meaning making system (Eisikovits, Winstok, & Enosh, 1998).

The following three processes were identified as influencing the child's assimilation of the violent incident: a) Recalling: the child and the parents negotiate what happened during the violent incident. In this context, the child learns how the collective memory is constructed and how to live with the gap between what was witnessed and what has to be remembered; b) Causality: the child and parents negotiate why the incident happened. At this stage, the child learns how to attribute causes to outcomes, where the explanation for the violent incident might shift from the victim's emotional and mental condition to mystical causes; c) Moralizing: the family members negotiate the meaning of the incident. In this context, the child learns to judge whether or not the violent is legitimate (Eisikovits et al., 1998)

Later, the aforementioned theoretical conceptualization was expanded to a general theoretical model, which includes three components: the child's construction of the reality, parental expectations, and influences from outside the home (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2001). According to this model, the child's construction of the reality will largely be a result of parental expectations, which define the awareness of violence on a continuum ranging from denial to exaggeration. A normative construction of the reality is

likely to be a result of essential influences from outside the home.

To understand the children's overall experience, it is important to examine their perceptions, involvement, and the meaning they attribute to the escalation of the interparental conflicts to all-out violence. For this purpose, the following review will relate to the escalation process. A broad consensus in the literature is that escalation is an emotional process that involves intense feelings such as anxiety, anger, helplessness, humiliation, shame, guilt, envy, hostility, low self-esteem, and the sense of failure (e.g., Gergen, 1994). The presence of such emotions leads to imbalance, which in turn leads to the experience of a loss of control and of the ability to predict, plan, and navigate the course of life. In such conditions, the violence becomes a tool that is perceived by those undergoing this process as a means of acquiring power and control (e.g., Scheff & Retzinger, 1991).

In the literature dealing with escalation in intimate violence systems, several studies have examined the way in which interparental conflicts led to all-out verbal aggressiveness and physical violence. These studies represented the masculine (Winstok, Eisikovits, & Gelles, 2002) and feminine viewpoints (Eisikovits, Winstok, & Gelles, 2002) on the process, as well as an integrative viewpoint (Winstok, 2007).

In this context, it was found that men perceive their actions during the conflicts as reactivity to their partner's behavior. They tend to focus on the partner's actions, which they perceive as undermining the interpersonal balance and threatening their existential reality. Accordingly, they perceive their own actions as directly tuned toward the need to recreate this balance. In contrast, the women see the transition from a non-violent to a violent reality as a process. They evaluate the change as marked by distinct junctures, which each hold the possibility of escalation to violence or of an

escape from it. Control of the situation is a key variable in managing this process, which may or may not lead to violence. This explains why they stay in the relationship despite the violence. The attempt to unify the two viewpoints, while refining the points of similarity and difference between men and women, led to a general view. According to this view, both the man and the woman involved have the inner potential to see themselves both as aggressors and as victims. Therefore, individuals perceive the situation as an ongoing problem, in which they are the victim, and the instigator of the problem is the aggressor (Winstok, 2007). When the focus moves from a specific to a wider problem, which threatens the overall couple relationship, the use of violence might be perceived as an action worth taking, even though, at this point, a new problem is created, resulting in the conflict spiraling out of control (Winstok, 2013).

As can be seen, in all the studies on the topic of interparental conflicts escalating to all-out violence, the children's viewpoint has not received attention. This is despite the fact that these studies were based on the assumption that the children are not only influenced but also have an influence on the way the conflicts arise, develop, and escalate. In other words, and in this context, the child is an active agent. In light of this, the central research questions were as follows:

1. How do the children see their father, their mother, themselves, and their siblings throughout the escalating interparental conflict?
2. How are the children involved in all the stages of the escalation process? (What are they doing? What is their role?)

The question of how the child perceives the transition from a non-violent to a violent reality is beyond the scope of this article.

Method

The aim of a phenomenological research is to understand the meaning of the human experience through descriptive means: What do people experience and how do they interpret the world in which they live (Moustakas, 1994). The present article was based on a study in Israel that explored the phenomenology of children's exposure to violence in families in which the father was violent toward the mother (Carmel, 2010). Since the focus of this research was on the experience of violence regarding the escalation of the interparental conflict, namely, learning about the experience in relation to the process and the development of the theoretical conceptualization in this context, the methodological guiding principles of the present qualitative study were the phenomenological tradition and the grounded theory approach (Creswell, 1998).

Sample

Data collection for the study lasted approximately a year and a half, from August 2006 till December 2007. Location and recruitment of study participants included several stages: receiving approval from the university ethics committee; receiving approval from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services to conduct the research among their clients; establishing a multidisciplinary team within a large center for the prevention of violence in central Israel in order to consolidate ways of approaching violent men, women victims of violence (to obtain their consent to interview their children), and locating the children based on the study criteria. The final sample was based on 27 children, 13 boys and 14 girls between 7 and 12 years old. They were sampled from a population of children growing up in families in which the father was violent toward the mother, according to reports by social workers treating families and children in centers for the treatment and prevention of violence around the country. The children were from secular, traditional,

and religious Jewish families of Iraqi, North African, and Eastern European origin.

Theoretical sampling was chosen for the study (Patton, 2002) and participants were selected based on their ability to contribute to the emerging theory (Patton, 2002). Thus, the children were located according to the following criteria: a) gender: boys and girls; b) received treatment: children who had participated in at least eight (out of 12) group treatment sessions alongside children who had not received treatment in the context of the violence in their families; c) characteristics of the harm: children who were exposed to their father's violence toward their mother alongside children who, in addition to this exposure, had also personally experienced the father's violence. It was decided also that violence would be defined as one or more physical reactions within the 18 months preceding the interview, so that the memory would be fresh in the child's mind. The study population was sampled based on a sampling table, allowing a fitting representation of each criterion, with even distribution of the children's ages, enabling appropriate representation of the various aspects of the phenomenon.

The Research Tool

Data for the broad study were collected via in-depth semi-structured interviews according to an interview guide based on theoretical and empirical literature. The interview guide included five content categories: a) the family's everyday life e.g., "Tell me what it is like at home. What do you do there? What do you talk about?" b) the initiation, development, and conclusion of interparental conflicts that do not escalate into violence, e.g., "Tell me about an argument that got worse but did not reach the hitting stage. What do you think influences the ending of the argument at this stage?" c) the initiation, development, and conclusion of interparental conflicts that escalated to violence, e.g.,

“Tell me about the worst argument that you remember. Did someone get hit?” “How does it happen that an argument turns into a violent quarrel?” d) the children’s experiences of the conflicts (both violent and non-violent), and the way they understood and interpreted what they witnessed, e.g., “What do you feel when the argument gets more serious?” “What do you think about in those situations?” e) children’s involvement in the interparental conflicts (both violent and non-violent) and their perceptions and attributed meanings to this involvement, e.g., “Where are you when the argument between your parents begins?” “What do you do?” “What effect do you think your behavior has on your parents?” The present study was based on analysis of the data pertaining to the children’s everyday lives and to the analysis of the data concerning the children’s involvement in the escalation as well as their experience in relation to this involvement.

Data Collection

Like the process of locating participants for the study, the data collection adhered to the accepted ethical principles for studying sensitive populations (Peled, 2001). The children received explanations about the study and were asked to sign a participant consent form. They were assured of confidentiality, with the clarification that if they disclosed a situation that threatened either them or their family members, confidentiality would be waived and the appropriate authorities would become involved. The recordings of the interviews were marked only with numbers, with no identifying details and the children were told that they were entitled to stop the interview at any stage.

The interviews took place in one to three sessions and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The child set the pace, so that each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the author, who had 15 years’ experience in clinical consultation work with children exposed to violence in

their families. The interview was preceded by a practice stage to reduce tension and create a balancing effect between interviewer and interviewee.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, content analysis was conducted in four stages: the interviews were divided into units of meaning and coded; by comparing interviews, the content categories were phenomenologically reduced; the categories were collected into central themes, which were then conceptually linked (Denzin, 1989; 1993). In addition, the data were examined, conceptualized, and recompiled, while relating to situations, contexts, interactions, action strategies, and outcomes, and were finally linked to a general theoretical wording (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Findings

The analysis of the interviews with the children reveals that their life’s reality is composed of two simultaneously contradictory yet complementary experiences: an experience of extreme nothingness and an experience of extreme fullness, derived from the violent interparental conflicts. Each of these experiences will be examined and the unique dynamics between them will be analyzed.

The Experience of Nothingness

The experience of nothingness is the basis of nihilist ideology; the knowledge that everything is meaningless and worthless. People live in a world of vague wandering, a world of goalless paths. The emptiness that prevails in the world is total. No fullness contradicts the emptiness. Nevertheless, the emotions that are more alive are of desolate emptiness, sickness of mind and body. Any involvement in the world is perceived as half-truth, half-falsehood, and as unimportant, and thus the wish to act and to believe collapses (Nietzsche, 1968).

An analysis of the interviews with the children reveals existence in an empty and worthless world, incorporating a mixture of emotions: boredom, emptiness, helplessness, confusion, lack of control, loneliness, and a lack of intimacy. A compound of these negative emotions is what defines the experience of nothingness of children exposed to their father's violence toward their mother and is at the basis of their everyday existence.

The children's descriptions show that the shaping of this complex, varied, and multidimensional experience in their consciousness is an outcome of the encounter with several elements: communication between family members at home, on all its verbal and behavioral levels; the set of cultural values according to which the children examine their daily reality, and the parents' mode of involvement in daily interactions with them. In the following paragraphs, I will examine each of these components and the way in which they contribute to shaping the experience.

Internal home communication. The children's descriptions of the family's daily life expose minimal interpersonal interaction, devoid of real content (neutral, impersonal) and of reciprocity. It is the encounter with these communicative components that leads them to recognize that the communication is meaningless. The following quotes will illustrate the children's perception of the communication in their homes:

We go to the mall together and we go in the car together and just talk. The truth is that I usually talk to each one separately. But sometimes, I listen to their conversations. (Ayelet)

We didn't use to do anything together. They used to say to me: "Why are you

hitting? Why do you do things that Mom and Dad don't allow?" On Fridays, Dad used to come home with the groceries and I arranged them in the fridge and then I helped Mom again. (Hodaya)

Dad sometimes plants flowers in the garden with me. That's how he spends the time with me until Mom comes home. (Gal)

Conspicuous in all the quotes is the children's use of time and space to express the way in which they perceive the nature of the internal home communication. It is limited to a defined geographical location, takes place at specific times, and is characterized by the interlocutors' location in one space without genuine attunement between them. The definition or presentation of the verbal content as vague intensifies the minimal nature of the communication. Thus, it is through this limited content that the monotonous interaction between the parents and children, which occurs only occasionally and in a specific place, is emptied of meaning.

Internalized cultural values. The second component, in light of which the experience is shaped, is the encounter with a set of cultural values (that the children have internalized as part of the socialization process), according to which the children examine their everyday reality. In the shadow of this comparison, they experience the reality at home as different and distant from existing according to the necessary order. Hence, the value of "family," which the children perceive as representing norms of "togetherness" and of interest in everyday life, dissolves in their consciousness vis-à-vis the discovery that it is nonexistent in their home. The value of "parenting," which the children perceive as representing educational norms, dissolves in their

consciousness vis-à-vis the discovery that it exists only in definitional terms. The following quote illustrates a comparison regarding the cultural value of “family.”

At my house, erm . . . nothing much. Most of the time, Mom cleans and cooks and sometimes we go out to all sorts of places and most of the time they get mad at my two dogs who dirty up the house and that makes me mad because they threaten to give them away. . . (David)

The boy begins by describing the atmosphere at home as nothing special and then elaborates on what has led him to this conclusion. Through use of expressions pertaining to frequency, “most of the time” and “sometimes,” he places their home “togetherness” as marginal to the family reality, and therefore worthless. Following on from this, he elaborates on the essence of the togetherness by emphasizing its absence: the parents are engaged in cleaning or in arguments about the cleaning, and the children are busy among themselves. In this context, the “island of togetherness,” the family outings, are swallowed up and blurred. The boy chooses to describe the reality at home in relation to the perception of the family’s cultural value. In the child’s perception, family represents a source of togetherness, intimacy, and reciprocity between parents and children. The absence of this as well as the “minimal existence” shows what the family togetherness represents for him.

The gap between the current situation (his life’s reality) and the ideal situation (the cultural value that is rooted in his consciousness) is what leads to the shattering of the family value, which cannot provide the necessary meaning to life. The boy is left with a sense of deep emptiness, which he expressed in his description of the atmosphere at home as “nothing

much.” The following quote illustrates shaping the experience of nothingness in light of the encounter with the cultural value that defines “parenting.”

If we argue, my Mom says: “I’m tired. I’m fed up, I can’t control you anymore. I’m too tired to manage you.” And then she helps and starts to be like a real mom.” (Li’el)

The good score that the girl gives her mother for parenting at the intervention stage is based on some external benchmark defined as “real parenting.” The use of the word “real” implies the existence of some external value that is a source of comparison. The same external value, which defines parental involvement as “real parenting,” also defines the lack of intervention and the inability to exert parental authority as deficient parenting. The result of comparing the current situation with the ideal is the sense of weakness and helplessness described by the girl in relation to the home reality with a lack of parental occupancy. The conclusion regarding the parental behavior at home is of half-truth and half-falsehood, which creates the sense of confusion and lack of control.

Parenting styles. The children’s encounter with parents’ types of intervention in daily interactions with them creates an additional dimension of the experience of nothingness: living in chaos in a reality where there is no-one to educate, teach, distinguish between good and bad, between permitted and forbidden, between one type of good (e.g., mediocrity) and another (e.g., excellence). In this context, an overall analysis reveals a common essence in the parenting types described by the children: the absence of parental direction regarding appropriate behavior and the attempt to bring about behavioral change by a means that the child perceives as ineffective. On the mother–child relationship level, the children describe parenting styles that are

characterized by the absence of meaningful parental authority for the child. On the father–child relationship level, the children describe the use of aggressive or violent reaction patterns.

Mother–child relationship.

We talk about everything; everything. About the family, friends, arranging things, like how to do up the house. About responsibility, about caring for my little brother. And once my sister drank from some bottle and I was really scared because I thought she was drinking some kids' medicine. And what if she had died? (Adi)

Mom used to say to me: "Dan, go to your room till I tell you to come out." After I'd been there a few minutes, she'd say: "Dan, come here a minute," and that was the end of the punishment. It wasn't a punishment at all because I just played on my computer. That behavior of hers is funny." (Dan)

Father–child relationship.

Let's say we're arguing . . . about my little brother who did something. And then he says to me: "You can take care of him!" And I tell him that I can't. "Yes you can!" And I say I can't. So I say to him, "Let's say, but Dad, only if we say such and such," I say to him. "Only if" and then he says that it can't happen. (Yael)

Everything used to make him angry and when he started to get angry, I would be quiet. He used to try and hit me. (Yossi)

Escalation

Analysis of the interviews shows that in a situation of meaningless, the way in which children do find meaning is through the escalation of the interparental conflicts to all-out verbal and/or physical violence. The escalation provides the children with a sense of fullness in the following ways: they observe the drama; "something" has now replaced the "nothingness." Suddenly the screen lights up, there are actors, a plot, something is happening; action. Suddenly the darkness is illuminated with a dazzling, shining light, giving great vitality. Boredom is replaced by interest, action, the event, the tension.

To learn about the fullness that the escalation introduces into the children's lives, we will observe the following quotes:

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the last argument that you remember between your parents?

It was about money: "You don't earn a lot of money."

"That's not right. I earn more than you do;" "No you don't, you don't work much! You hardly work!"

"I'll throw you out of the house!" "You have no right to do that!"

"I do!" "OK, throw me out!" That's it. (Uriah)

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the last argument that you remember between your parents?

Where are we eating on Saturday, at my mom's mom's or my dad's mom's? I get

up on Saturday morning. We were invited for the meal, and suddenly Mom sees Dad getting the car ready and she says: “We need to go eat by my mom.” And then he says: “What? No way! We’re eating by my mom.” And then the fight started. (Shir)

Both quotes reveal a conspicuous recurring pattern of how the interparental argument is presented: Immediately after opening the subject of the interparental conflict, the children move on to quoting the parents. This style of presentation as a dialogue between the protagonists, reminiscent of a literary play, gives the reader the sense of being in the drama itself. The subject of the argument presented at the beginning serves as a kind of title or name for the scene that will be acted out. The protagonists in the dramas presented to us here as readers are the parents themselves, and the exchanges between them represent a conflict of interests, which construct the plot being formed.

The description of how the arguments started as parts of a play watched by the children teaches us about the interest, activity, tension, and drama that are introduced into their world through watching the interparental conflicts as they unravel before their eyes. The nothingness is suddenly replaced by “something” of great volume. Just as a play adds interest and enrichment to the audience’s world, so the interparental interactions that are played out before the children add variety and interest to their lives.

Nonetheless, the meaning that the escalation injects into the children’s lives is not only an outcome of the interest and tension, derived from their position as spectators of the drama, but also is an outcome of the children’s role as partners in constructing the reality. An analysis of the findings shows that the children’s “choice” of escalation as a way to fill the vast space, the

vacuum in which they live, dictates to them a very specific action script. Even though the parents create boundaries for them regarding their means of involvement, with the message that “as long as the argument is developing, just watch and stay out of it,” but afterwards, in the dramatic stages, they expect them to become involved, which conveys the message to the children that they are expected to take part in constructing the outcome of the violence. Defining the boundary that the parents have set between watching and participating as penetrable (as mentioned, the children penetrate it when the dramatic activity begins) gives the children meaning, not only by being spectators of the drama, but also by being partners in constructing the reality.

The children identify the different stages of the conflict’s escalation, as follows: initiation of the conflict, the development of the conflict, the stage of verbal aggression, an intense conflict expressed through threats and initial physical contact, and the violence stage expressed through actual physical aggression. An analysis of the children’s movements in the internal home space and/or the space outside the home throughout all these stages of escalation and an analysis of the findings regarding the children’s action patterns in the different stages of the escalation show that the children’s roles throughout the process can be divided into three main functions: 1) allowing the escalation norms to be expressed unhindered; 2) preparation for active involvement in the conflict; 3) taking an active part in helping to end the conflict.

In the next section, I will examine the children’s mode of involvement regarding the developing stages of the conflict.

Allowing expression of the escalation norms and preparing for active involvement.

Initial stage of the conflict.

When the argument starts, I am in the kitchen. Sometimes in my room. In my room, at the computer. If I'm in the kitchen, I go to my room. If I'm in my room, I stay there, playing on the computer. (Jacob)

When an argument starts, I go to my room with my brother. They argue and argue. We hear things all mixed up. I don't get involved and neither does he. (Lilach)

When my parents start arguing, I try to cheer my sisters up. I take them to my room and explain things to them. So that way, I have something to do besides just getting stressed. (Amos)

Listen, I'll tell you briefly. They argue, right? We argue between ourselves. And then when it gets a bit worse, I go to my room. Don't want to hear, don't want to be involved. I am in my room. (Gil)

An analysis of the children's quotes shows that they behave according to a predetermined action pattern. This is apparent from the generalized wording, which refers to fixed actions that do not change (when an argument starts . . . I . . .). They always distance themselves from the scene, specifically, in their rooms. The first quote provides a special emphasis regarding the place where the children are expected to be. The child emphasizes his choice to remain within a spatial arrangement that is away from the scene itself. Being far from the scene as well as the use of distraction tactics, such as playing, and keeping up the spirits of the younger siblings, might shed light on the defined role that is shaped for the children: not to hinder the

development of the interparental conflict. The last quote strengthens this thesis, when the child describes his behavior pattern, according to which the children themselves are those who provide the components for intensifying the argument that began between the parents. When the required conditions for the development of the argument are achieved, the children leave to their rooms, where they behave as if they are not interested in what is happening. The use of the verb "hear" rather than "listen" regarding the developing interparental conflict might also indicate the adoption of a passive role, since, at this stage, the children are clearly expected not to be involved in the argument.

Development stage of the conflict.

When I was in my room and the argument had already turned into a quarrel, I tried to listen to what was happening. I wanted to see who was right: If Dad was lying, I would tell him afterwards that he is a liar. I am like a judge: "I know what you did; I know I can catch you out because I heard what you said, and now you're cheating." (Hodaya)

When the quarrel gets bad and Dad and Mom are yelling, then I say to my brother: "Avi, soon, when the cursing starts, go and stop them!" My brothers and I stay in the room upstairs and he goes down to try and separate them. (Naomi)

The first quote starts with the girl's reference to the familiar scenario. When the argument develops into a fight, the girl is supposed to remain in the spatial arrangement in which she was when the argument

began (in her room), from where she begins to gather information about what is happening. The use of the verbs “to listen” and “to see” emphasize that, at this stage, the girl becomes an active participant in the developing interparental conflict. She is not listening simply to find out what is being said, but is engaged in active, goal-directed listening; to become party to the fight. The continuation of the description reveals the nature of involvement expected of the girl: to be a “juicy” witness, who gathers incriminating information against her father for the purpose of becoming involved in constructing the outcomes of the conflict later on. The girl’s comparison of herself to a “judge” expresses the gap between the way in which she is supposed to perceive her role in the escalation (an external audience to the developing interparental drama) and the role that she plays in practice.

In the second descriptive section, the girl discloses the required coordination and cooperation between her and her siblings so that the older brother will succeed in his attempt to intervene at the verbal aggression stage (when the parents are cursing at each other). The girl describes the role division between the siblings. She and several brothers sit and listen to the developing argument, and at the right moment, when they identify the turning point to the next stage, the eldest brother is called to prepare for active intervention. The role division described here shows that the siblings are positioned on two fronts: at the “rear” and on the “forward line,” when the role of the rear is to identify the most appropriate time for the forward line’s active intervention. This will achieve two goals: first, a division of attention, when each front can focus best on its designated task, and second, cooperation with the pseudo-normative situation, according to which the younger siblings are not involved in the parents’ fight. Only one of them gets involved out of necessity at a specific point. The pathos with which the girl describes

her role of sending her brother to attempt the task of separation indicates her full participation as an actress in the drama (behind the scenes and not on the stage itself, but as a participant nevertheless).

The intense fighting stage.

When the argument gets really, really bad, worse than the usual shouting and cursing, I check to see if the coast is clear, to make sure they can’t see me, and then I cross over to their room. There, behind the door, there’s this rail with clothes hanging on it. So, I hide behind that, and peep through the keyhole. Because after that, I can come out to protect my mom. (Dana)

When the really bad cursing starts, I go and call Hila and then, when the hitting starts, we separate them. (Nitai)

So it’s like that, they get really angry at each other, and then start cursing each other. And most times, my sister answers me and we get ready to separate them. (Michael)

These three quotes emphasize the existence of an additional, more serious stage of escalation than the verbal aggression stage (shouting and cursing). This stage is characterized by even more aggressive communication (“worse than the usual shouting and cursing”) and an intensifying emotional component (“get really angry at each other”). Regarding this stage also, the children describe their behavior according to a fixed, predetermined action script: movement within the home space and toward the spatial arrangement that is close to the scene of the event. In this context, two variations in location are described: a) in a room close

to the scene itself, from where the child can observe what is happening, and b) in the open space close to the scene of the event. Either way, the aim of this mobility is to gather information and cooperation between the siblings to separate the parents physically when necessary (when the fight escalates to a violent outburst). Emphasizing the girl's need to hide behind the clothes rail, despite being inside a closed room, while the other children wait in preparation for the start of the physical violence, accentuates the tension between the parents' expectations. On the one hand, they expect the children to be active participants in the escalating drama, and on the other hand, that they will not interfere in the interparental drama before it has reached its "boiling point."

Analysis of the findings regarding the children's roles in the escalation shows that at the developmental stages of the conflict, namely when the argument is initiated, intensifies, and turns into a serious fight that almost reaches a violent eruption,¹ the children play two major roles: a) enabling the norms of escalation to develop, and b) gathering information in preparation for involvement in the critical stages of escalation. The nature of these roles changes according to the conflict's development. At the initiation stage, the central role is to enable escalation of the argument to an angry quarrel, and gathering information is limited to passive listening ("We hear things all mixed up" – the Initial stage of the conflict, quote no. 2). At the two stages at which the quarrel develops and then intensifies into a serious fight, the emphasis from the children's point of view is on collecting information, despite being physically located in a spatial arrangement outside the

1. The verbal aggression stage is not included in the stages of the developing conflict, because, as will be demonstrated later, it is a critical stage that has the potential of either ending or escalating the conflict.

scene of the event. Nonetheless, the children's location outside the scene of the event at the stages at which they are mentally and emotionally involved in the conflict might indicate the importance of the additional role that is shaped for them in these stages: not to hinder the realization of the escalation norms.

The tension between the spatial arrangements in which the children are positioned during the developmental stages of the conflict and the active action strategies demanded of them might emphasize the importance of the two aforementioned roles: a) to be a fixed audience that gives validity and structure to the play being acted between the parents, hence allowing the escalation norms to be expressed unhindered, and b) to be actors participating in the drama itself, even if not at the front of the stage, and therefore to be involved in how it is shaped. These roles shape additional meanings for the children within the framework of the escalation: turning time into a goal-oriented concept, which is a kind of solution to the boredom described as characterizing their daily routine, and being in a close, intimate relationship with their parents and siblings. These two additional layers create stratification for the children's sense of fullness during the escalation, and therefore constitute a suitable response to the intense and multidimensional emptiness that the children mentioned in their descriptions of their family's everyday life.

Taking an active part in helping to end the conflicts: The children's mode of involvement in the dramatic stages.

The verbal aggression stage.

When the argument gets serious, with curses and shouting, then I separate them . . . when I try to separate them, then my sister helps me. We take charge so that they won't come near each other, one to the living room and one to the bedroom .

. . . at least for half an hour or so, or an hour, sometimes they calm down. (Shlomi)

When they get to the shouting stage, it is tedious and boring but mainly annoying, and after that, my sisters cry and the volume goes down a bit. And then I would enter the picture. I would go out of the room and say: “Stop it now! Stop arguing! You see what you’re doing to them?” . . . And sometimes they stop arguing. (Amos)

When he is shouting really loudly, I go out of the room. I say to him: “Enough, Dad, take a drink of water, let’s go downstairs, come and sit with me” . . . sometimes he listens to me. (Dan)

The violence stage.

When the hitting starts, we separate them. Hila shouts, “Stop! Stop!” and I go in with my body. Sometimes, I push him and then he moves sideways and that’s it. (Natty)

When the fight gets serious, pushing, hitting, we would cry and scream. We don’t separate them because we would also get hit. Sometimes, they stopped because of that. (Anat)

An analysis of the children’s descriptions regarding their behavior and its outcomes in the stages of the verbal aggression and the violence shows the special nature of these stages, as distinct from the other stages of escalation. Both these stages have the potential to either end or escalate the fighting and thus are critical junctures in the conflict. The children’s active participation in these stages of the conflict gives them

meaning, not only by virtue of being actors in the drama but mainly by being partners to constructing the family reality as violent or non-violent.

A comparison of the children’s action patterns regarding each of the stages reveals similar action strategies: physical and verbal attempts to separate the parents; attempts to divert the parents’ attention away from the fight to the children, and attempts to calm the father or both the parents. Nevertheless, an observation of how the tactics themselves are built shows that at the verbal aggression stage, the tactics are divided up into several layers (the child makes use of several action strategies), where each layer reinforces the previous one, and in the verbal aggression stage, the children make intensive use of one tactic. This difference might show that at the verbal aggression stage, the parties still have control over their anger and a de-escalation script remains a real possibility. At the violence stage, however, either one or both of the sides lose control, which requires one intensive act. Either way, the complex activity required of the children on the cognitive, emotional, and physical levels in these stages, might show that they are players who participate in the drama and whose role influences the sequence of events. The tension, action, and interest, which were a product of a conflict of interests between the protagonists (the parents themselves) have now been taken up by the attempts at separation by those currently at the front of the stage—the children.

Through the children’s direct involvement in the escalating interparental conflict, they are in actual contact with them, whether physically separating them, attempting to divert their attention, or by being close to them to calm them down. All these variations enable intimate contact between the parents and children, as is the case with the sibling interaction. The direct involvement in the escalating interparental conflict requires cooperation, coordination, and being together

for prolonged periods, which are fundamental elements for creating reciprocity.

Discussion

An analysis of the children's perceptions of the relationship with their parents and with their siblings and of the interparental relationship, exposes an experience of existing within a void, within a meaningless, directionless reality, combining internal emptiness, boredom, immeasurable loneliness, as well as feelings of uncertainty and lack of control.

The existential experience that emerges from the children's descriptions and exposes acknowledgment of a reality that lacks any kind of essence is, in fact, the experience of nothingness, the experience at the foundations of the nihilist ideology (Nietzsche, 1968). Nietzsche, however, sees the experience of nothingness to be the product of a conscious process that individuals undergo in relation to the cultural values according to which they live and in relation to their own inevitable end within an infinite world (Nietzsche, 1968). The experience of the children in this study, however, is a product of an encounter with specific components: certain characteristics (such as scarce or meaningless communication), the cultural values in which their daily routine is based and parental models to which they are exposed. Thus, whereas the experience of nothingness to which Nietzsche refers is total in the conscious sense, recognizing that the world is absolute non-existence, the experience of nothingness as shaped among children exposed to violence shows its totality in terms of sensation. Still, the experience of nothingness among children exposed to violence is shaped in a conscious context, but because it is structured vis-à-vis specific components and not on the general metaphysical and cultural level, it leads to the recognition of the existence of emptiness that prevails in everything in the individual's close environment. This is what makes the experience mainly an emotional one regarding the sense

of internal emptiness. The intensity of the experience and its totality is derived, in this context, from its being stratified, related to many different aspects.

In the shadow of the crumbling set of cultural values that was assimilated in their awareness (values of parenting and family), the children's enlistment in the escalation process can be seen as the awareness for a need for change, a need to adopt a new set of concepts, which will enable the construction of the reality as coherent and hence as meaningful (Nietzsche, 1968).

The children's involvement in the escalation process shows that they acquire meaning during the process in three ways: a) through the interest that is injected into their lives, an interest that gradually increases with the development of the drama taking place between the parents and reaches a climax with the children's participation in the drama itself; b) through making time goal-oriented: the children are partners in the entire escalation process, both in enabling the unhindered expression of the escalation norms or in helping create them, as well as assisting in bringing the conflicts to a close, and c) through interaction with their parents and siblings, which is made possible through the escalation process. Furthermore, the severity of the tension experienced by the children and the variety of roles they are required to play gives their involvement in the escalation a powerful dimension, which is a type of adequate "response," a genuine "counter-experience" versus the immeasurable void, the vacuum that they experience in their everyday lives.

However, a deep analysis of this meaning that is achieved shows it, apparently, to be a pseudo-meaning, for the following reasons: a) despite the children's potential ability to predict the nature of the process—either escalation or de-escalation—the children describe uncertainty regarding the way in which the conflict will develop at each stage. This situation leads to a sense of the loss of the ability for control in the close

environment in particular and in life in general. b) Even though the children's involvement in the escalation allows them to be in direct or indirect contact with their parents and siblings, because the parents are so immersed in the argument itself and the siblings are goal-oriented, this type of interaction, once the escalation has ended, might leave the children with a sense of deep isolation. Even so, this set of values can serve as a practical means of temporarily breaking the unfathomable nothingness in which the children live.

Thus, the two extreme situations that exist side by side in the children's lives create mutually strengthening relations of tension and fulfillment. The deeper the sense of emptiness, the greater the need to fill the vacuum with the powerful "something," at the end of the escalation process, that powerful "something" (the child's experience of the escalation) is shattered even more powerfully in comparison to the cultural values assimilated in the children's consciousness. This increases the sense of the vacuum and strengthens their motivation to replenish the powerful "something." The sense of total fullness and of total emptiness is an outcome of the comparison to the same benchmark: those cultural values that dictate the desired social order (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; 2010).

An analysis of the findings regarding the children's action patterns at the different stages of escalation shows the existence of two central modes of behavior: indirect participation in the conflict through the use of diversion tactics and active listening for the purpose of gathering information at advanced stages of the conflict, and direct participation in the conflict through active intervention to separate the parents. These modes of behavior are dependent on the specific stage of the conflict. That is to say, in the developmental stages, the children choose the indirect mode of behavior whereas in the dramatic stages, in which they can potentially have an impact either to bring about the end of the

conflict or its escalation, the children choose the direct of mode of behavior. The children's description of a fixed behavioral pattern and their mention of clearly defined stages of the conflict reveal the existence of a predetermined script regarding their involvement in all the different escalation stages.

The findings of the study regarding the children's behavior in the escalation according to a predetermined script provide insight into their acting within a set of familiar social scripts, which delineate the boundaries of the entire process (Gergen, 1999). Therefore, the children's actions are neither random nor personality- or situation-dependent, but adhere to scripts dictated to them by the parents. In this context, both types of expectations were characterized as being used by the parents in most of their parenting actions: the first type was named "framing expectations" and the second type was named "scripting expectations" (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2001). Whereas the first group of expectations discusses the range of possibilities offered to the child for constructing his/her reality, the second group determines the specific ways in which the child will react to the world within the boundaries of the experience (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2001).

The tension between the spatial arrangements and the active tactics adopted by the children in the different stages of the conflict, even if indirect, as well as actually being at the scene of the event itself only at the critical stages (scripting expectation) might indicate the parents' intention to shape a pseudo-normative reality for the children. Within this reality, the children are not party to disputes and their components that are not related to them, and participate "only" by providing assistance to end the conflict. Thus, the violence is limited and minimized as an option in conflict situations, in the way that if it poses a danger to the children, they make sure that they are protected by

changing the predetermined action tactic to end the conflict (framing expectations).

The messages conveyed to the children via the aforementioned types of expectations are directed toward blurred awareness of the violence so that the children do not deny its existence because they are involved in the stage at which the conflict becomes violent, but see the possibility of ending it when the two sides cannot reach an agreement. Therefore, the children are actually guided to relate to violence as part of a normative conflictual reality in which the sides are equally responsible for the initiation, development, and ending of the conflict.

Therefore, unlike the theoretical conceptualization regarding the children's construction of the interparental violence based on parental expectations, which define awareness of violence on a continuum ranging from denial at one end to exaggeration at the other (Eisikovits & Winstok, 2001), this study suggests that the children's construction of the interparental violence is dependent on parental expectations that are directed toward blurring the violence and understanding of the reality, as well as constructing the interparental conflicts as normative. The inconsistency between the theoretical and empirical findings can be explained by the fact that the theoretical conceptualization was constructed according to findings of studies among pre-adolescents (Peled, 1997) and adolescents (Goldblatt, 2001) and not among children. According to these studies, the adolescents are active participants who maneuver the situation in the individual and family contexts alike. They adopt roles either on their own or their parents' initiative and in certain cases, avoid taking on these roles, even when compelled to do so. These findings might suggest that, over the years, the parents' expectations change, and they redefine the range of possibilities offered to the children for constructing their reality; active involvement in the

same violent reality. At the same time, the adolescents are influenced by the peer group whereby they are exposed to other behavioral norms and codes, which are in line with normative reality. This influences them to act in accordance with these codes, even if they differ from their parents' expectations.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This article has several theoretical implications and practical recommendations. The study findings broaden the theory dealing with children's development in a violent family environment, in that they call for an understanding of the children's experience along a time continuum. In other words, the children's age is a central variable regarding how the parents dictate the nature of the construction of the desired reality. The study findings also expand the theory that deals with escalation of interparental conflicts to all-out violence. The parental messages regarding the construction of the conflictual reality as normative direct the children to perceive the interparental conflict in the context of the escalation dynamics set in motion by both sides (Winstok, 2013). This might have immediate implications also for the way in which the children will construct the process of escalation between the parents. This article has implications for the nature of treatment that could be shaped for the population of children exposed to violence. Since the escalation is a powerful experience that can provide the children with a sense of fullness and coherence (even if only temporarily), intervention from the existentialist point of view could be considered as an alternative, or at least, as an additional layer, to psycho-educational intervention. Such intervention is channeled toward creating alternative powerful contexts for the children, within which they can experience values such as partnership, responsibility, empathy, and goal-oriented behavior in their normative context. These contexts could offer different types of creative art activities, which have the

power to create additional spaces of being (Carmel, Sigad, Lev-Wiesel, & Eisikovits, 2014). This positive, powerful experiential place might serve as motivation to connect to the normative world. In the absence of such an alternative, the escalation will continue to be a genuine attraction for the children, a type of life “drug.” The attempt to move the children away from perceiving it as a basis for shaping the reality might leave them in the existential emptiness, namely, despair to the extent of a sense of doom.

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