

Constructing time in uncertainty:

Temporal regimes among missing persons' families

Abstract

This article examines how concepts of time undergo transformation in cases of extreme uncertainty by examining the experiences of missing persons' families in Israel. Living with uncertainty, the relatives of those who go missing fluctuate among imaginations of past, present and future and among ontological assumptions about the missing persons' fate. Taking a relational view of time, we claim that—in contrast to the passivity usually attributed to them—families of the missing dynamically construct different temporal regimes in a process that both reflects and shapes the missing's ontological status. Drawing on in-depth interviews with families of long-term missing persons in Israel, we identify three such temporal regimes: Parallel Time, Presumed Dead Time and Perpetual Time. Our analysis draws attention to time's role in negotiations over ambiguous categories in late modernity, particularly over those categories that blur the life-death dichotomy.

Keywords

Temporal regimes, time, uncertainty, missing persons, Israel.

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*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the
heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die. (Ecclesiastes 3: 1-2)*

The role of time has always been central in providing order and giving meaning to human lives. Ecclesiastes addresses humanity's sense of meaninglessness by acknowledging that all human actions have their own time, first among them life and death. Uncertainty about life and death thus not only erodes the binary distinction between these two moments, but also erodes our very notion of time. In this article, we explore relations between extreme uncertainty (i.e., about such basic human conditions as life and death) and conceptions of time by examining the experiences of missing persons' families in Israel. Following the assumption that in late modernity the aspiration to overcome uncertainty becomes superfluous (Beck, 1992), we ask how contemporary temporalities are constructed in situations of extreme uncertainty, and how this entanglement shapes and becomes shaped by ambiguous categories in between life and death. More specifically, we aim to explore how those left behind negotiate and conceptualize the temporalities of the missing, and whether this process reveals an agentive quality within 'waiting'.

Uncertainty and time intertwine with missingness from the moment a person goes missing, affecting interpretations of the past, scenarios of the present and imagined futures. The most certain facts of humanity—life and death—are challenged and a new ontological category of 'missingness' is often constructed. Several scholars have tried to conceptualize missingness, describing this phenomenon as 'suspended death' (Kaplan, 2008), 'living in limbo' (Holmes, 2008) and probably the most influential, 'ambiguous loss' (Boss, 1999). However, little research has explored construction of temporalities among families of the missing. This paper introduces new concepts to the literature on missing persons, analyzing it as a case study to expand our understanding of the relation between uncertainty and time.

Taking a relational view of time and drawing on in-depth interviews, we argue that families continually, actively and dynamically construct temporalities of their missing relatives and that these temporal regimes also intertwine with the ontological categories of alive, dead and neither. We begin our discussion with a brief introduction to scholarly analysis of relations between time and uncertainty, followed by a focus on missing persons' families and various assumptions about the 'waiting' space. Following a section on method, we describe three temporal regimes of 'missingness': Parallel Time, Presumed Dead Time and Perpetual Time. We conclude by relating these regimes to states of uncertainty and ontological assumptions about the missing.

Temporal regimes and uncertainties

We frame our analysis using a dynamic and relational lens of time, in terms of 'temporal regimes', which incorporates not only an inner, subjective sense of time (Firth and Robinson, 2013), but also a relational, cultural and social negotiation of temporalities.

Kaufman-Scarborough (2006: 63) explains how temporal regimes 'represent the time-related structures, practices, and rules of using time in a particular context.' They are constructed, reconfirmed and changed in different cultural spheres, such as 'work' and 'home' (Tietze and Musson, 2002). We employ this definition in exploring the time structures, practices and rules that families construct in missingness circumstances.

Adam (2004) distinguishes between two ideal-types of time perceptions: first, the 'clock-time' perspective, relating to the modern view of time as objective, externalized and linear, and second, a relative understanding of time, which disassembles time and objectivity and highlights time's various functions and non-linear character. Time in Ecclesiastes is linear time, which Greenhouse seems to accordingly define as 'time with a purpose' (1989: 1636).

Greenhouse identify linear time as deriving from the single one-sided geometric connection between the Creation and the Day of Judgment, and in a human's life terms, between birth and death. But since 'real life is not so neatly arranged' (Greenhouse, 1989: 1636), and this connection is made of multiple engagements, other temporal regimes need to be constructed. Thus, different cultures suggest different systems of temporal idioms to variously capture human temporalities. For example, Robins (2009) identifies two different temporalities of Victorian farmers' waiting for rain: cyclic time, which sets events along a known and expected calendar (thereby making them controllable), and biding time, which comes whenever there occurs an unpredictable drought and signals a loss of control.

Since the future cannot be known, uncertainty is invariably an important component in our construction of temporal regimes. The aspiration for certainty sometimes leads people to use temporal regimes to construct 'temporal maps' (Zerubavel, 1985) of individuals, which reflect prevailing temporal and age-related expectations and provide guidance across the calendar year and years (Thomas and Bailey, 2009). This aspiration is also prominent in life-course discourse, which helps people think, interpret and make sense of their lives (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). As long as life-course events occur as expected, a sense of control persists. However, when life-course expectations are violated, the need arises to rethink time and temporalities.

The notion of 'risk' may then be utilized to control and manage the future, through calculating likelihoods. The influence of 'risk' has increased throughout the development of modernity, such that the future has 'opened up to the influence of human agency' (Reith, 2004: 389). However today, uncertainty describes the indeterminate world, rather than particular cases of miscalculation. While the modern notion of the future as calculable and controllable aims to defeat uncertainty by calculating risks, late modernity nevertheless includes the perception that uncertainty is here to stay (Beck, 1992). Beck (2006: 338)

maintains, 'the actors of first modernity...responsible for calculating and controlling manufactured uncertainties are undermined by growing awareness that they are inefficient, their actions even counter-productive.' Thus, 'rather than aiming for certainty, around the mid-twentieth century the calculation of risk began to reflect the uncertainties of an indeterminate world instead' (Reith, 2004: 393).

According to this perspective on time and uncertainty in modernity, missing persons is not just an exceptional case, but one reflecting late modernity's essence, taking it to the most extreme edge, since here uncertainty relates to the foundation of our being: life and death. Lived experience of temporal complexity and multiple temporalities has been recently discussed in a variety of cases, including sickness (Broom et al., 2018), late singlehood (Lahad, 2017), seafarers (Thomas and Bailey, 2009), youth (Leccardi, 2014) and migration (Ibañez-Tirado, 2018; Sheller, 2018). Our study aims to go a step further to examine temporality in cases of extreme uncertainty, in which a new category (missingness) blurs a universal and stable dichotomy (life and death), and to identify the particular temporal regimes constructed.

The temporal experience of missing persons' families

Although people go missing all over the world, there is no universal definition for a person who goes missing (Kiepal et al., 2012; Shalev Greene et al., 2019). Missingness is not a status determined in a single moment. Moreover, it is experienced by the people left behind, rather than the ones perceived to be missing (Edkins, 2011). Missingness is thereby negotiated and constructed through relations and interactions, making a relational component necessary to any definition. Not everyone who goes missing is reported; they are 'the missing missing' or 'the unmissed' (Edkins, 2011). For our purposes we follow Laura

Kiepal et al.'s (2012: 139) definition. They do not define missing persons as such, but rather a relational acceptance of missingness that occurs only when others 'have noticed that a person is missing, perceived this disappearance as a problem, and filed a missing person report that is accepted by the police service as legitimate.'

Hogben's (2006) work relates to temporalities of missingness by analyzing the experience of missing persons' families through the concept of waiting. Within this space, families are 'thrown into a phase of suspended animation, in literal and figurative stasis, unable to satisfactorily complete normative life events and "move on"' (Hogben, 2006: 338). They are left behind, not only in space, but also in time (Hogben, 2006: 335).

This sense might be a result of the extreme uncertainty families of the missing experience. The profound uncertainty of the indeterministic late modern world, as Reith (2004: 393) claims,

erodes the basis for decision making, freezes action, and ultimately blocks the possibility of forward movement into the future. Indeed, the future no longer exists as something that is open to 'colonization' by confident, rational action, but rather as a site of anxiety, full of unknowns, that is not amenable to human intervention.

It is no wonder, then, that families of the missing are often described as living in frozen grief (Gair and Moloney, 2013) and as if their 'life's on hold' (Hogben, 2006). However, Reith (2004: 393) describes how this sense 'creates a quandary, for although the future may be radically contingent and unknowable, the individual must still engage with it. The problem that now faces them is—how to act'.

The description of families of the missing as passive actors raises the question as to whether they have agency within waiting. Crapanzano (1985) connects 'waiting' with powerlessness and vulnerability, claiming that within waiting there is no meaning of 'now': 'Only meaning lies in the future—in the arrival or the non-arrival of the object of waiting' (Crapanzano, 1985: 44). For Barry Schwartz (1975), the most extreme form of waiting occurs whenever there is no information regarding its length—as in the case of missing persons—catapulting the past into the future and certainty into uncertainty.

Waiting is thus necessarily connected to uncertainty and to expectations (Hage, 2009). But is it necessarily a space of passivity and lack of agency? According to Hage (2009: 2), 'there are many cases where agency oozes out of waiting'. Gasparini (1995) claims that 'waiting' carries a wide range of meanings, from hope to frustration. Within this range, people who wait bear an 'agentive capacity' to make decisions about 'what to do while waiting' (Bissell, 2007: 285). For example, Moran and Disney (2017) observe how prisoners' absence from their families' lives might be both relative and agentive, as opposed to absolute and passive. In this sense, waiting is not merely a static state, rather families of prisoners are 'doing the wait' (Foster, 2019). Similarly, Ibañez-Tirado (2018) shows how the families of absent migrants in Tajikistan actively produce different roles within their villages that bestow on the migrants' full vitality despite uncertainty about their return.

Dwyer (2009) distinguishes between 'existential' and 'situational' waiting. The former is an embodied disposition with 'no aim in mind', whereas the latter is a relational and engaged 'of the world' kind of waiting (Dwyer 2009: 18). Dwyer explains how situational waiting suggests kinds of choices to actors, who therefore have agency in the world, and how existential waiting lacks such choices:

Existential waiting may be elicited in contexts where an actor is encompassed by an uncertain future—where, in effect, an actor experiences powerful yet incomprehensible forces that derive from places where he or she does not reside—then, to that actor, it may seem that there has been a loss of agency; that he or she lacks the capacity to act. And that condition, though real to the afflicted actor, is likely to be judged by outsiders as pathological. That condition, therefore, may be appreciated as a symptom of the late modern. (2009: 23)

We espouse the notion of 'waiting' for families of the missing as a space in which temporal regimes are constructed relationally, and hence as agentic spaces. We claim that while waiting for a missing person to come back, whether alive or dead, is a type of situational waiting, construction of the 'missingness' category establishes an existential waiting that nonetheless retains some degree of agency.

Being active while waiting plays an important role in coping with uncertainties and features prominently in rituals that change due to uncertainty. For example, birthdays and holidays become moments of crisis symbolizing personal frozen time (Lahad, 2017: 89). On the other hand, agency may also lead to inventing new rituals involving activity and creativity (Hogben, 2006). With our inclusion of agency, we join the scholarly approach to viewing time relationally, as a product of cultural and relational negotiations.

Wayland et al. (2016) offer evidence of this dynamic in illustrating how families waver between states of hopelessness and hope that the missing person will return, describing this movement between poles as an ongoing and flexible inner process of individuals. In contrast, we consider the relational processes within families and specifically attend to their active relational construction of temporal regimes.

Nik Brown (2005) foregrounds the role of hope in the face of uncertain truth. In analyzing the relationship between 'present though contested truths and future-oriented hopes and visions' in different bioscience sites, Brown (2005: 350) highlights how this relationship occurs within social networks, leading to the relational construction of 'regimes of truth' and 'regimes of hope.' We claim that hope among families of the missing is intertwined both with 'truth' about the missing's ontological status and with his or her assumed temporal regime. A convincing narrative of the ontological status of the missing must reasonably relate to a given temporal regime.

Method

In Israel, on average, over 4,000 persons a year are reported as missing to the Israeli police, with some 99% returning or found within a year's time. This rate is similar to that in other countries, such as the UK (NCA, 2017). Overall, at the time of this article's writing there remain approximately 550 missing Israelis whose whereabouts have remained unknown for at least one year.

Different actors are involved in the relational construction of 'missingness' and its temporal regimes, including police and other officials. The findings presented here focus on families of the missing and are drawn from 20 in-depth interviews with family members of 19 long-term (for over one year) missing persons, conducted between 2015 and 2018. A recruitment strategy was employed to achieve as varied a selection of interviewees as possible, according to the following criteria: duration of missingness (from one to over 40 years), type of family relation, and cultural background and gender (of both the missing person and the interviewee). Participants included immigrants and natives, as well as non-orthodox and orthodox Jews. However, only one Arab and one ultra-orthodox (Haredi) woman

participated in the study. The ethnic makeup of study participants does not necessarily reflect that of all families of missing persons in Israel, nor the population as a whole.

Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to three hours in a place chosen by the interviewees, most frequently their homes (15 cases, with three interviews conducted at the interviewees' places of work and two in cafes). The first author conducted all interviews as the participants' relatives remained missing.

Recruitment of study participants benefitted from the help of media reports and the 'Bil'adeihem' association of families of the missing. Bil'adeihem ('Without Them' in Hebrew) is a voluntary association established in 2015 by Shuky and Varda Minivitzky, a few months after the disappearance of their son, Daniel. The first author has taken part in the activities of the association since its establishment onwards, participating in meetings, public events and the continuing efforts to regularize by law the status of missing persons in Israel. He was presented to the families of the missing both in one of the meetings and in the families' Whatsapp group, asking whether they would like to be interviewed.

The study gained ethical approval from Ben-Gurion University, acknowledging the sensitive nature of this project. Reflexive practice ensured that the interviewer remained effective and impartial and consciously acknowledged his assumptions and preconceptions, and was sensitive to the psychological processes families of missing persons can experience (Boss, 1999; Wayland et al., 2016). To ensure that no interviewee would misconstrue the study as helping to trace a missing loved one, the interviewer took pains to clearly communicate its aims. Informed consent was gained from all participants and pseudonyms ensure confidentiality and privacy.

Due to the study's focus on relations, it takes a narrative approach. Narrative inquiry emphasizes the ways people provide meaning to their world and express it through stories

(Riessman, 2008). People construct narratives through relations and different actors may take part in the process. In cases of uncertainty, narratives can play an important coping role, since they are capable of providing order and constructing a coherent identity in a chaotic world (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Our premise is that the ambiguity of missing persons' stories leads the people who have been left behind to deconstruct and reconstruct their personal, familial and social narratives.

In line with narrative approach principles, interviewees were first asked to tell the story of their missing loved one, followed only then by a semi-structured interview. The analysis process combined holistic and thematic readings of the interviews. We first listened to and read the interviews holistically, attending to both their content and form (Chase, 2007). Then, we read them thematically, first seeking and coding categories within each story, then reviewing all stories as a whole to locate similarities and differences. Finally, following identification of sets of assumptions about linear time, the ontological status of missing persons, and imagined good and bad scenarios of the future, we delineated three temporal regimes: Parallel Time, Presumed Dead Time and Perpetual Time. These three categories entangle and overlap, and each left-behind's experience does not necessarily fall within a single model; indeed, movement among these possibilities demonstrates the fluidity and temporality of missingness.

In what follows, we describe and analyze these three temporal regimes, their main assumptions and their relational construction process. While the first two temporal regimes illustrate the assumed and aspired linearity of time, the final one establishes 'missingness' as a stable, enduring category.

Parallel Time

From the moment a person is defined as missing, with his/her timeline unknown, those left behind negotiate a new temporal regime. This regime relates to the missing person's time as parallel yet divided from their own. The linearity of the missing persons' temporality is still assumed and the world's clock and calendar still govern their time. Thus, even though their temporality is not known, it is assumed that it is still 'normal' and that they are still alive.

If no information comes forth regarding the missing person's fate or whereabouts, this temporal regime is filled with speculation and searches for evidence. Yaniv, whose daughter has been missing for more than twenty years, illustrates this process: 'On the first days [of her disappearance] I would even sit at the bus station. I calculated that she would show up there. And on the night of the Passover Seder, I said, "Now she should come back."' Yaniv thus manages the schedule of his missing daughter, deciding when and where she could appear. He uses the word 'calculate', in line with a common practice of risk calculation attempting to maintain some measure of control and manage uncertainty. Seeking to unite his daughter's temporal regime with his own, the occasion of the Passover Seder provokes the calendar's assistance with this effort.

Families of the missing must move not only back and forth, from past remembrances to imaginings of the future, but also from side to side along parallel timelines, meaning that they simultaneously develop different imagined scenarios as to their loved one's fate. This relation to time is prominent in Amir's story about his mother Yaffa, who disappeared 20 years ago. Amir fills this 20-year gap by speculating that his mother might have been influenced by an ultra-orthodox group:

The ultra-orthodox viewpoint is 'don't wash your dirty laundry in public'. For that reason, they hide those who join them to search for God so the secular people won't try to rekidnap them. It's a possibility. I don't dismiss this

possibility at all. In no way can I dismiss it. This, along with other possibilities of missionary cults.

Amir constructs his mother's time with different parallel scenarios, placing her timeline in perpetual movement. She may live with the ultra-orthodox, in a missionary cult, and so on. These various options are all based on the assumption that the missing is alive. And if the missing is alive, the only implication for her temporality is that it is concealed and unknown. Thus, linearity still governs.

As linear time is so powerful, assumed and aspired, it does not necessarily shatter even after a radical disruption, although it becomes essential to rethink its rules. In order to create encounters between a missing relative and the calendar, families enact rituals and ceremonies, as Naomi, whose grandfather has been missing for five years, illustrates:

Every year we celebrate Grandpa's birthday. We gather with the whole family and with a cake, as it's a birthday party, and he's gone. And now he would be 80 years old, so we talk about him, but we don't really know how to talk, I mean, as if he still exists or not.

Naomi's family holds annual birthday parties for her grandfather because 'the clock still ticks' for him. These ceremonies are created relationally to reflect the hoped-for temporal map of her missing grandfather. They illustrate the active practices taken by those left behind to construct a temporal regime of the missing, whose timeline is unknown. The uncertainty Naomi describes reveals how the linearity of her grandfather's parallel time is only aspirational since 'we don't really know...if he still exists or not'.

And yet, in missing persons' parallel time, they do not necessarily remain frozen as on the day of their disappearance, meaning their imagined body can change. A demonstration of

this expectation appears in images (figure 1) the Ya'acobi family published years after Adi's disappearance (Edelson, 2008). The left-hand photograph was taken the year of her disappearance, whereas the next two images are illustrations generated in order to show possible ways she might have appeared at the time of publication. Taking advantage of forensic techniques for estimating age progression, similar announcements reflect the agentic waiting of those left behind. They not only reveal the ambition to locate the missing person, but also to visualise her or him as a living person, thus converging parallel time with linear time.

[Insert Figure 1: Adi's age progression illustration]

Parallel time must therefore exist only temporarily, whether its end comes as a result of the good outcome (finding the missing person alive) or the bad outcome (finding the missing's dead body). Since time also does not stop in parallel time, and the missing becomes older as time progresses, the expectation of death as an inevitable ending would invariably come one day and remerge the temporality of the missing with known linear time. Amir says about his mother, missing for over 20 years, 'We're a bit late because she's now 70, so her age becomes a factor concerning the question [as to] whether she's alive or dead.' Since time passes for the missing as well, once death is expected in their life-course, the ontological assumption of 'the missing is alive' starts to unravel.

Thus, movement from the ontological category of alive to that of dead is the point of encounter between parallel and linear time. While linear time's timeline is straight and universal, the timeline of the missing is ever in flux—dynamic and relational—and so is their ontological status.

Presumed Dead Time

Families' relational discussions of missing persons' parallel time may become resolved with the ontological decision that the missing is dead. Such a decision should reunite parallel time with the universal calendar that marks each person's ending in death. However, the presumption of death does not irreversibly fix the missing's time to linear time for it can never carry the weight of confirmed death. Responding to the question of whether he still holds on to the hope of finding his daughter alive, 15 years after her disappearance, Yuval recounts his internal cogitations regarding her ontological status:

No. Every day you wake up, you stand in front of the mirror shaving, you realize you are alive, and you're saying, 'She said she would run away and that I would not be able to find her.' But then, after 15 minutes you tell yourself, 'Don't be a fool; it's been so many years.' It's a punch in the face.

As Yuval demonstrates, assumed death lacks the certainty of confirmed death. Yuval tries to make sense of his daughter's disappearance with a memory from the past. But after such a long time, his efforts surrender to the death assumption, which feels like 'a punch in the face'.

Presumed dead time follows from a decision or an assumption, yet the lack of a body makes it ambivalent. Even if some indications insinuate that the missing is dead, usually it takes time for families to admit this likelihood, as demonstrated in Vered's thoughts about her father, missing for four years:

I can't believe he is alive. Not after so much time. It is very hard to believe that a person would disappear for so long without any kind of

connection...unless someone is holding him.... Today I can say it loudly, I don't believe he is alive. At the beginning I couldn't say it.

Vered reveals the process she went through in coming to the assumption of dead, wherein it takes time to 'kill' the missing's parallel time by 'killing' the hope that the missing person would be found alive. In contrast to death's certainty, Vered expresses this temporal regime's uncertainty ('unless'), demonstrating how her father's status is a matter of belief ('I don't believe') rather than of concrete knowledge.

While Vered feels that it took her some time to come to this recognition, for Ruth it took much longer: 'As a young child, my mother thought that he ran away. That's it, he decided to take himself and run away. And up until I was already married with children I thought that my father had run away.' Ruth recounts how almost 30 years after her father's disappearance, she decided to request to see his police file. It reported that a skull was found not far from the place where her father had last been seen. She relays, 'Then according to the things I read in this file, basically that [the skull] is my father.... I came to a conclusion that my father died on the same day that he was announced missing.'

For Ruth, reaching presumed dead time was momentous. After years of life in the shadow of a father who had abandoned her, this conclusion inverted her previous narrative, shattering events that had 'occurred' in the imagined parallel time of her missing father. While Vered and Ruth give completely different narratives on assuming their fathers' deaths, both construct a temporal regime in which the missing's linear time comes to an end.

However, a personal conclusion like Vered's and Ruth's is not necessarily sufficient for constructing a convincing ontological status of death. Thus, this temporal regime contains not only an assumption, but also a yearning for a body and a grave, a yearning emphasized through relations with other family members, as well as friends, police officials and so on.

Amir recounts: 'I find myself going to funerals, of uncles, cousins. I stand on the side, jealous. They can come here and cry. I don't even have this privilege [to properly mourn my mother].' It appears that presumption of death does not provide sufficient closure to the narrative nor end uncertainty. Even if parallel time ceases to exist, the distance between presumed dead time's good scenario (the missing's corpse is found) and bad scenario (the missing is never found) remains too great to quiet the heart of the left-behind.

While many families assume their beloved missing is dead, only in a few cases have such families in Israel attempted to receive official recognition of death. The majority wait, hoping that remains will someday be located. Human remains, funerals and graves all symbolize the ultimate ending of life, symbols absent in presumed dead time. Such symbols' absence can leave a space for hope, however slight. But such hope is only a source of continual pain in this temporal regime. Michal has considered her father dead for nearly 20 years:

I know it. I realize it. I grasp it. But I still have this dream. I still have this fantasy. Those dreams that recur since the date of his disappearance, the nightmares. I want a grave.... I deserve a grave, deserve quiet, deserve to stop being a missing person's daughter. My father deserves to die peacefully. I want it to stop. All I want are bones.... I deserve to have his teeth, something. He deserves to have his name written.... I want something real. I want a clear-cut answer that says, 'Here he is, here are your father's bones. There you go, he is dead, it's over.'... That's all I want. I know my father won't come back.

The absence of 'something real' (bones, teeth, a name on a tombstone), and the recurring dreams, fantasies and nightmares, reveal presumed dead time's multiple temporalities.

'Knowing' that a missing person must be dead is not enough to achieve peace, not for the families, nor for the missing, who also cannot die 'peacefully'. Thus, so long as there are no remains, death is not fully achieved and waiting does not come to an end.

This waiting, even if only for traces of the missing's dead body, is permanently present, as Dennis, whose grandfather has been missing for five years, recounts in a newspaper interview: 'We wait for news anytime.... It is likely to be bad news, but we have already prepared ourselves for this kind of news' (Vardi, 2017). Despite their death assumption, waiting dominates Dennis's family's temporal regime. His grandfather's missingness darkens their life and hinders their ability to move forward. On the one hand, they appear to experience 'frozen grief' (Boss, 1999), yet Dennis illustrates how they also engage in agentive waiting (Foster, 2019), involving mental construction of likely events and preparation for different outcomes.

Presumed dead time assumes an imagined past and an imagined future, wherein the best possible event is the identification of a dead body. A conclusion to the in-between state of the missing body concludes the missing's temporal regime. But for Rita, whose brother has been missing for over 30 years, life and death as dichotomous categories have ceased, to remain forever gone even in the event of a conclusion: 'If I find him, wow! My dream. I know he is dead. For me, [even] to come to his grave would be as if he is still alive.' Rita is not referring to life after death in the case of her brother, but rather to life alongside death, a relational life that remains despite the presence of a grave and the cessation of presumed dead time.

Perpetual Time

In his interview, Aharon, whose father disappeared six years ago, describes his experience using the past tense, highlighting how it is all behind him, even though his father remains missing. He sums up: 'It has been a period of time for us, but that's it.' He identifies 'a period of time', characterized by uncertainty and intensive searching, which has come to an end, even though his father has not been found. 'That's it', he says, sealing his narrative and thereby dismissing any possibility of the story's reversal. His father's missingness has become and will remain perpetual and unchangeable, marking the temporality of perpetual time.

Perpetual time constructs missingness as a constant space outside linear time, such that the missing no longer carries the status of alive, but is also not presumed dead. A third status, missingness, is thus constructed out of resignation that the missing will never be located and his or her fate never known. Yuval recounts how he first acknowledged the possibility that his daughter would never be found:

The Minister of Public Security at the time...told me, 'Listen, it was Friday. A guy had a few beers with friends in a pub. Then he drove off, saw a lonely young lady who can't find herself, pulled her into his car and that's it. You will never know what happened.' That's what he said. [It felt] just like a punch in the face.

Like Aharon, Yuval says 'that's it', quoting the Minister of Public Security who rhetorically sealing off the possibility of locating Yuval's daughter in the future. He repeats his phrase, 'a punch in the face', this time to describe how he first resigned to the possibility that his daughter would never be found. The Minister of Public Security's speculation helps to thereby construct missingness as a perpetual ontological status. However, just as presumed dead time is not identical to the ending of time for the dead, missingness is not a static

category. Rather, missingness is a continuing relational process, and therefore perpetual rather than permanent. It is constructed processually, as with Aharon, or arrives in a specific relational moment, as for Yuval.

Vered, whose father has been missing for four years, experienced such a moment after meeting David, an activist in Bil'adeihem:

We [Vered's family] had a meeting with the police station commander, and we asked: 'Is it possible for a person to enter the sea and never come out?' [He replied,] 'No, no way.' But apparently yes, it can happen.... We wanted to hear from a professional: Is it possible that a person disappears and is never found? No one would answer this question, and it's hard. David gave us an answer.... He told us, 'Yes, yes!' You start to realize that you may die without closure to the story.... This punch that David gave us was like putting a mirror in front of us and telling us, 'Okay, this is your life today. Good luck and keep living.'

Perhaps paradoxically, David's answer of the possibility of an uncertain outcome helped to ameliorate the uncertainty of Vered's new life. To acknowledge that her father may never be found, that his fate may never be resolved, is itself an answer. Prior to receiving it, Vered existed in other temporal regimes, first in parallel time, hoping for her father's return and then in presumed dead time, hoping to locate his body. Shifting temporal regimes occurred relationally; while the police took the position of maintaining hope, at least for locating a body, David enabled Vered's construction of perpetual time, where the good outcome is the left-behind's ability to 'keep living'.

To construct missingness as an ontological category requires disrupting the binary distinction between life and death. Hence, it can only arrive when this dichotomy's rationale breaks down. Orit describes this process, which began a year after her brother disappeared:

We remain optimistic...but we are also realistic. I don't know what to think, nothing seems reasonable to me. Even if something happened to him, we were told they would find a body, a garment, a bag. They didn't find any of these [things], so it all seems unreasonable.

Once the alive assumption collapses ('we are realistic') and the death assumption is yet not constructed (no trace is found), the missing falls outside of time and space. The life-death distinction no longer offers answers, so 'nothing seems reasonable' and missingness can arrive as a category of its own.

Perpetual time runs counter to the common ontological perspective and to linear time's assumptions, making it difficult to explain this temporality to others. Shira, whose father has been missing for seven years, illustrates this quandary:

I had to explain to [my daughter] a four-year-old girl how her grandfather disappeared. How can you explain it? The initial perspective is: 'Okay, it's a story that will be over in a week or two.' So when she asked where I'm going and why I'm crying, I told her, 'Grandpa doesn't feel well. He's in the hospital. It's okay, I'm taking care of it.' But then a month passes, and two months, and three months and six months. How long can you keep lying to this girl? After a year, I broke down.... I told her the truth. A five-year-old girl is sitting in front of me and telling me, 'Mom, you're a liar.'... I lied to her. I lied for a year. I have a whole box of drawings from her that he will never get. I have dozens of letters that he will never receive.

Shira's lies illustrate her turmoil concerning her father's state. For as long as she lied to her daughter his missingness remained temporary. His parallel time contained a future wherein he would return (the good scenario), or wherein a grave would be a concrete place to deliver drawings and letters (the bad scenario). In perpetual time, which Shira eventually constructed, her father's ontological status as a missing person became perpetual.

Perpetual time generally bears another implication: if it is decided that the missing cannot be found, then searching no longer makes sense. At that point, primary attention shifts from ontological questions—where is the missing person, what happened to him or her?—to epistemological questions: what we are searching for, how should we search, and should we stop searching and how? The decision to stop searching derives from the perpetual ontological status. It highlights the families' active role in constructing the missingness category. Yet, justifications are necessary to actively decide to stop, as Naomi explains:

We were thinking when we can stop, how we can stop.... So we wanted to consult with another family who also had been through this. We called the family of Eliyahu Levi, who had then been missing for six months.... We asked, 'What are you doing now, after six months?' And they said, "Nothing. We're doing nothing.' We told them what we had done so far and they were amazed. They said, 'Wow.... We've been sitting at home and crying.' So it made me feel relaxed. I felt that we could stop.

As time goes by, the ontological category of missingness stabilizes. Outcomes framed as 'good' in parallel time no longer have a place in this temporality, and even their consideration may seem like a violation. For many, an imagined knock at the door by their loved one no longer embodies hope. 'I'm sure it would freeze me', says Amir, 'I would

become petrified, I wouldn't know what to do.... It's awful to say, [but] I don't need her in my life right now.'

For the families, perpetual time is a temporality that allows them to keep living their lives. Its disruption would send them back to other temporal regimes, where life for them might seem impossible. This sense appears prominently in correspondence between the police and Tzipi's family, thirty years after her disappearance. Following a rumor they heard about Tzipi living as Palestinian in the West Bank, they wrote to the police asking for clear answers. In response to the family's inquiry, the police checked Tzipi's file, wherein it was recorded that she 'had been traced [alive] and the investigation file was destroyed'. Tzipi's daughter wrote to the police commissioner:

Since we received your letter, my father and my brother have been in a state of tension and frustration.... We have lived with the knowledge that my mother is missing, and throughout the years we accepted this and realized our mother will probably never be found.... Your letter re-aroused deep pain in us.

While we might expect such news to be good news for a missing's family, for a family living in perpetual time, it feels like bad news, causing 'deep pain'. As both parallel time and presumed dead time had long been abandoned, the family had 'accepted' Tzipi's missingness and moved on in life. This news represents the bad scenario of perpetual time: reverting to previous temporal regimes. It ultimately turned out that the police had made a mistake. Tzipi was again listed as a missing person, enabling her family to return to perpetual time.

Conclusion

People who go missing are neither fully alive nor dead, creating an in-between space in which uncertainty reigns. In analyzing the experiences of missing persons' families in Israel, we explore the active role and construction of time within this space of extreme uncertainty and waiting and its relation to ontological categories. Three essential claims drive our argument that families of the missing relationally construct and move among different temporal regimes.

First, uncertainty threatens assumptions of linear time. Parallel time preserves an assumed linearity of the missing's temporality; presumed dead time assumes the missing is dead, thus declaring the end of linear time; and perpetual time follows the establishment of missingness as a stable, enduring category, wherein linear time ceases to exist for the missing, and thus enables the people left behind to go on with their linearity. Uncertainty about life and death distinguishes universal linear time from parallel time and the sealed time of the dead from presumed dead time. Perpetual time arises in relation to an entirely new ontological category: missingness.

The need to construct new temporal regimes may have arisen more generally in late modernity in which linear time is perceived as unattainable. In Zygmunt Bauman's words: 'What is novel is not uncertainty; what is novel is a realization that uncertainty is here to stay.... We are challenged with a task...to develop an art of living permanently with uncertainty' (in Dziadosz, 2013). This 'art' is the mission of long-term missing persons' families, who face 'permanent temporariness' (Sheller, 2018), in which the families construct and move among different temporal regimes.

Second, temporal regimes and ontological categories are interwoven and construct each other. Families of the missing maintain aspirations of linearity so long as a distinction remains between two clear ontological categories. The first two temporal regimes rely on

acceptance of the life-death dichotomy. In these temporal regimes, missingness is a temporary in-between state. Only perpetual time is truly subversive in the sense that a new ontological category is created, and previously-accepted linear time is not only disrupted but also ceases as an aspiration. Temporal regimes and ontological categories are inter-related; while the 'clock-time' perspective (Adam, 2004), on some level maintained in parallel time and presumed dead time, supports the modern process of categorization with clear distinctions, a relative perspective—illustrated by perpetual time—makes ontological categories such as life and death fluid. And the reverse can also occur: amorphous categories such as missingness shatter linear time to construct their own temporalities. This entanglement exemplifies how temporal regimes, as well as 'regimes of hope', are related to 'truth regimes' (Brown 2005).

Third, the families are not merely passive survivors, but actively construct temporalities. Their agentic capacity within the space of waiting, while not always experienced as such, is implemented dynamically and relationally. Time does not simply freeze for families of the missing, in contrast to a common scholarly view. To borrow Bauman's (2000) metaphor of liquid modernity, while frozen grief conveys an image of solid subjects frozen in time, the active agency of people left behind generates liquid time. Rather than viewing families as passive, as if in a constant state of 'waiting', we observe them 'doing the wait' (Foster, 2019).

Following Dwyer (2009), while the first two temporal regimes are types of situational waiting, Perpetual Time comes with existential waiting, when missingness emerges as a stable category. However, just as with other states of existential waiting, Perpetual Time is not irreversible, thus maintaining a narrow possibility whereby agency may reappear.

This agentic waiting occurs within relational settings that shape a constant movement between temporal regimes that may occur chronologically for some families, whereas for

others, they may overlap or shift from one to the other and back. We can even witness different temporal regimes arising within the same narrative.

In attending to the temporalities of missing persons' families, our analysis ultimately aims to contribute to understandings of relations among time, ontological categories and uncertainty. Intervening in scholarship addressing the role of time in late modernity, it also adds to discussions on distinctions between life and death. Such understandings can also contribute to practitioners' (e.g., police, NGO's) awareness of the missing persons' temporality as a facet of their families' experience.

Further research into this experience could additionally enrich our understanding of alternate temporalities. For example, it could prove useful to investigate how time gets reorganized when missing persons are found (dead or alive) or when new information is discovered. Examining how different temporal regimes are constructed in other cases of uncertainty among people left behind, such as with families of prisoners before verdicts or of patients in psychiatric hospitals, could also yield rich cases for comparison.

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Figure 1: Age progression illustration

