

11-25-2014

The Balance of Fairness in Family Relations: A Contextual Family Therapy Case Study

Derek J. Macleod

Agus B. Sadewa

Ruth Ann Arthur

Kelly L. Collins

Tracey L. Hand-Breckenridge

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Macleod, Derek J.; Sadewa, Agus B.; Arthur, Ruth Ann; Collins, Kelly L.; Hand-Breckenridge, Tracey L.; Runstedler, Yvonne; and Van Hooren, Kellie A. (2014) "The Balance of Fairness in Family Relations: A Contextual Family Therapy Case Study," *Consensus*: Vol. 35: Iss. 2, Article 6.

DOI: 10.51644/MTZQ8759

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol35/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

The Balance of Fairness in Family Relations: A Contextual Family Therapy Case Study

Authors

Derek J. Macleod, Agus B. Sadewa, Ruth Ann Arthur, Kelly L. Collins, Tracey L. Hand-Breckenridge, Yvonne Runstedler, and Kellie A. Van Hooren

The Balance of Fairness in Family Relations: A Contextual Family Therapy Case Study

Derek J. Macleod, Agus B. Sadewa, Ruth Ann Arthur, Kelly L. Collins, Tracey L. Hand-Breckenridge, Yvonne Runstedler, Kellie A. Van Hooren

Case Scenario:

Mary is not sure anymore if she has a problem or is the problem. Family life had never been free of the stresses that come with raising two children and managing a household with her husband who is on the road five days of the week but all in all she feels that she is managing, even happy with her life and the home she has created for her family. That was, until the morning that John Jr. tells her he hates her.

For months John Jr. had been surly. Where was the fun loving child who would bolt out the door the second he heard Dad's truck tires crunch on the gravel driveway, madly pulling his arm up and down until his Dad honked that truck horn? Now he locks himself in his room, is absent from family meals and missing school. With her other son Phillip away for his first year of university – the house feels very lonely. When she later found the missing grocery money in the pocket of John Jr.'s jeans, her concern and loneliness deepened. His father, John Sr., had confronted him days before and escalated the entire situation by yelling at him to smarten up or get the heck out of the house. With her school and work duties, she is often busy but she set aside some time to have a heart to heart at the breakfast table with John Jr. hoping he might share what is happening. It did not go as she planned and her anxiety made her questions sound more like an interrogation that ended abruptly with John Jr. yelling at her: "You do not have a clue what was really going on in my life and to get out of my life." She tried to hold him but he pushed her away and stormed out the door. Crying, she picked up the phone and called her friend the pastor for help not sure anymore if it is her husband, child or herself who need help the most.

Introduction to Contextual Family Therapy

The case of John, Mary and their family will be examined in light of Contextual Family Therapy. Family therapy in general is quite different from other forms of therapy as it treats the entire family as a unit or a system, rather than a number of individual parts. It maintains that when one person is showing symptoms of relational stress, it is because the family unit is out of balance. It is a rather hopeful approach in that it does not point fingers but instead of singling out one person as the "problem," it challenges the entire family unit to work together to make change that will move them forward.

Specifically, Contextual Family Therapy, developed by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, says that people do not exist in a vacuum (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Rather, life and relationship struggles happen in a context, impacting many people. The goal of contextual family therapy is to bring together family members in a therapeutic process to promote change within the family system, which in turn relieves individual pain or symptoms. Boszormenyi-Nagy incorporates other therapeutic theories such as Erikson's psychosocial

development theory and Bowen family systems theory as long as they support the process he outlines. He also sees his theory as a multi-generational model of therapy, holding that what is taking place between the members of a family unit can often be the consequences of what happened in the previous generation. Challenges can be carried forward to future generations if they are not properly healed. In fact, awareness of insight of what a person missed in their family of origin relationship is often what initiates change, and the desire of the person to pass along a healthy emotional legacy is a key motivator of Contextual Family Therapy.

Boszormenyi-Nagy believes that all healthy or well-functioning relationships (his focus is on marriage and families) have four dimensions that make up their contexts (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Grunebaum, & Ulrich, 1991). These dimensions are: 1) Facts; 2) Individual Psychology; 3) Transactional Patterns; and 4) Relational Ethics. These are each examined in turn to shed light on how the family functions.

Martin Buber's teaching on I-Thou and I-It relationships can be seen on Contextual Family Therapy (Buber, 1958). The I-Thou relationship is a mutual, supportive relationship in which each person sets aside their personal agendas. We do not experience the other person as we wish they would be, but as they truly are. This relationship is one of dignity and respect, and is the type of relationship in which love can flourish.

On the other hand, the I-It relationship is one in which a person treats another not as a person, but as an object or way of getting his or her own needs met. This might be to get things, information, or emotional needs met and is utilitarian in the way we treat others. Currently Mary's family is experiencing I-It relationships on many levels.

A contextual family therapist works with the family to reset the balance in the relationship toward healthier I-Thou relationships by helping each one better understand the needs and motivations of the others and to learn to accept the other just as they are. Now, the case is analysed using Contextual Family Therapy.

Facts

Dimension 1 is called facts. This includes things such as ethnicity, gender, adoption, religion, level of education, age, employment, etc. They may be "destined" as Boszormenyi-Nagy puts it, such as gender or ethnicity. These are just what is. Then there are facts that may be as the result of choices made, such as marital status or education level. In the case of Mary's family, there are many facts. John Jr. is the identified patient (IP) in this case. He is a fifteen year old Caucasian male in grade 10. John Jr. lives at home with his mother Mary through the week, and his father John Sr. is home on the weekends. Lately, John Jr. has been skipping classes and has stolen the family grocery money. He has become aggressive both verbally and physically; he has been verbally abusive and has also recently 'pushed' Mary.

Mary is a Caucasian female in her mid-forties. Mary is the eldest of 3 siblings; she has one younger sister and two younger brothers. She came from a working class family and was a caretaker for her younger brothers. She has been married to John Sr. for twenty-two years. They are a middle class family with two children, Philip and John Jr. She lives in the family home with her son John Jr. through the week, and John Sr. on the weekends. She works part-time as a secretary for the high school and has recently completed her B.A. in psychology. Mary is preparing to apply for the MSW program at the local University this fall. Additionally, Mary is very involved in her congregation; she teaches Sunday school and

does administration during the week. Mary is close with the pastor and has phoned him for help with John Jr.'s behaviour.

John Sr. is a Caucasian male in his mid-forties. His family of origin was working class and he has one older brother. John Sr. did not get along with his father and was kicked out of the home at fifteen years old. He dropped out of school and worked construction at fifteen but made little money. He changed careers to contract trucking when Mary was pregnant with Philip. He has been married to Mary for 22 years. John Sr. finds it stressful to be away from home and has had difficulty building the relationship he wishes to have with his two sons due to being on the road so much and only home weekends. He rarely attends church with Mary and John Jr. and is not close to the Pastor.

Philip is a Caucasian male who is nineteen years old. Philip graduated high school last spring and has moved two hours away to University this past fall. Philip keeps in contact with his family but is really enjoying his time at University. Each family member has met with the pastor once, on an individual basis. Following is a three-generational diagram or genogram that outlines many of the facts and relationships in John Jr.'s family:

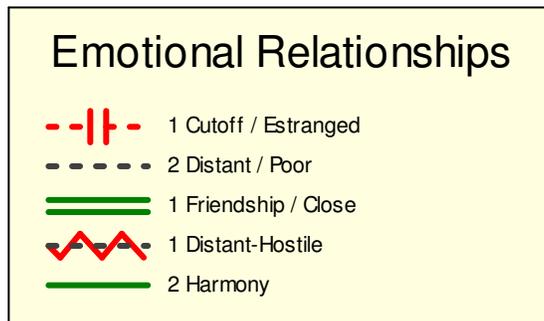
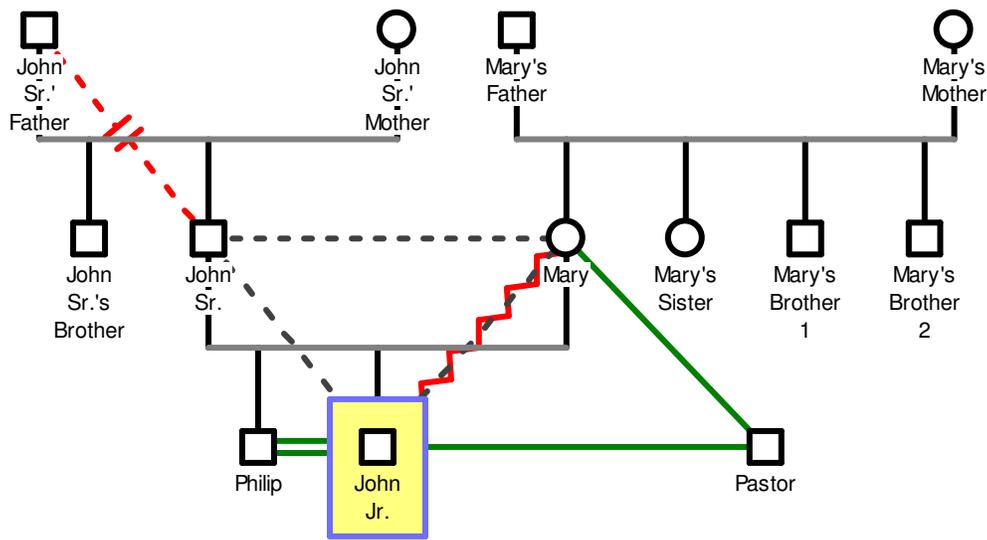


Figure 1. John Jr.'s Family Genogram

Individual Psychology

The second dimension, individual psychology, is more subjective and includes such things as motives, goals, character structure and defense mechanisms. Relationships are complex because each person is unique in these areas. There are competing interests and ways of getting needs met. Often times, this stresses family units. By objectively entering into the system, the therapist can show positive regard to each family member in turn, regardless of their actions, in order to help others understand the motivations, dreams and needs of the other person.

In contextual family therapy, many psychological lenses can be employed to aid in the therapeutic process. In this case, Erikson's Psychological Stages offer insight into the individual motives of each person in this family unit (Erikson, 1985). These stages, including the primary concerns associated with these stages, are listed below. Following this list, the stages most applicable to the individuals in the case will be discussed.

- 1) Infancy where the basic conflict is trust vs. mistrust,
- 2) Early childhood where the basic conflict is autonomy vs. shame,
- 3) Preschool where the basic conflict is initiative vs. guilt,
- 4) School age where the basic conflict is industry vs. inferiority,
- 5) Adolescence where the basic conflict is identity vs. role confusion,
- 6) Young adulthood where the basic conflict is intimacy vs. isolation,
- 7) Middle Adulthood where the basic conflict is generativity vs. confusion,
- 8) Maturity where the basic conflict is ego integrity vs. despair.

In this family, John Jr. is presented as the primary concern. As a result, his psychological readiness to engage in therapy will impact the process. As listed above, those in adolescence experience identity vs. confusion and are likely exploring a sense of self as different from family of origin. In his initial therapy session with the pastor, John's self-awareness seemed somewhat low responding often to questions posed by shrugging his shoulders or saying "I don't know." His motivation for stealing became indicative perhaps of his mental state in that he admitted he did so to raise enough money to visit his brother Philip. This suggests a strong bond between the brothers that perhaps John Jr. fears is now severed due to separate living arrangements. From John Jr.'s perspective, when Philip left "everything changed." This indicates a sense of loss and perhaps the recent violence he exhibits is an outward reaction to the ensuing grief.

Mary is in the generativity vs. stagnation point of her life using the Erikson model. In this stage, the basic virtue is care and she might be asking how she can contribute to the world. Often this is done through parenthood and work. Mary exemplifies generativity in her ability to parent two children and often alone as a result of her husband's work as a truck driver. In addition to this, her ability to work part-time as well as obtain her university degree demonstrates the characteristics of passion and energy. In a preliminary therapy session she indicated that she felt guilt and wondered if her many interests had compromised her ability to raise her son. Erikson might suggest that her industry and ability to anticipate the upcoming changes to her role as each of her children are launched into post-secondary pursuits demonstrates her success in facing such challenges. Additionally, it was through the use of her resources that therapy was initially sought.

John Sr., is also in generativity vs. Stagnation. He shows more stagnation. In his individual therapy session, he felt unappreciated and wondered if his time spent on the road away from his family was worth it. His primary defense mechanism is to control and he becomes authoritarian when confronted with family issues. This is depicted in his recent ultimatum of expulsion if John Jr.'s behaviour does not improve. John Sr. carries a large sense of sacrifice for his continued work driving and struggles to see how this could change. At the same time, his children have become almost strangers to him and he regrets this. He describes himself as "stuck in a role that [he] can't get out of." Initially, he found meaning in the role of provider, but recently this has not brought him much satisfaction.

Philip, though somewhat silent in this case, can also be viewed through Erikson's lens of psychological development. Since he is in his late teens, it can be surmised that he is exiting identity vs. role confusion and entering intimacy vs. isolation. As such his focus may be shifting toward his own possible family and future happiness rather than that of his family of origin. This is not to say that he no longer cares for his family, rather that his attention and energy might now be placed on future self in relationship.

Transactional Patterns

The next dimension, transactional patterns, looks at how people within the family system relate to one another. Patterns such as triangles (a three person relationship-system), cut offs (little or no contact within the family) or competition for power within family unit are identified. If the therapist wants to establish healthy patterns of behaviour, she or he must examine first what patterns are currently at play. All families have a way of keeping themselves together, whether healthy or unhealthy. It is helpful to make these patterns explicit.

The following analysis of the family's transactional patterns is completed using both the lens of Bowen family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), and the lens of Martin Buber's teachings on I-It and I-Thou relationships (Buber, 1970). Bowen family systems theory views a family as an emotional unit. Bowen uses systems thinking to explain and understand the complex relationships between family members. The goal of this theory is improved differentiation, that is, an improved ability to distinguish feelings from thoughts and to think and act for oneself in the face of emotionally-charged situations. Differentiation means that the person can affirm his/her own differentness and uniqueness within the family system while staying connected to family members. Finally, Bowen's family systems theory is concerned with how a family deals with anxiety, whether from a real or perceived threat. Anxiety is a result of change.

John Jr.'s behaviour toward Mary has threatened the balance of the family system, causing Mary to invite the pastor into the system. Though John Jr.'s behaviour seems to indicate emotional cut-off from his family, his first conversation with the pastor reveals that this is not the case. In their initial conversation, John Jr. reveals to the pastor that he misses Philip and was stealing money in order to go and visit his brother. He stated that he did not think his mom would let him visit Philip as she does not think he is mature or responsible enough. John Jr. is clearly experiencing anxiety regarding changes in the family system. However, he is not the only anxious member of the family.

Examination of the triangle formed by John Jr., Mary and John Sr. reveals additional anxiety in the family system (refer to figure 2). John Jr.'s relationship with his father is

distant and conflicted. They see each other only on weekends. When John Sr. addresses John Jr.'s behaviour, there is no attempt to understand each other. Instead, John Sr. issues an ultimatum: "If your behaviour doesn't improve, you'll be out of this house so fast your head will spin!"

Anxiety also exists in John Jr.'s relationship with his mother. With Philip at school and John Sr. on the road, John Jr. and Mary are often the only two family members together at meal time. John Jr. said he does not mind this, but Mary asks questions that feel like an interrogation, not a conversation. John's words and tone indicate that he would like more neutral conversation with his mother. A cut-off between them is not imminent, but there is a great deal of tension and conflict to address.

In the final relationship in this primary triangle (Mary and John Sr.), Mary calls the pastor after John Jr. pushes her instead of carrying out John Sr.'s ultimatum. This action suggests relational distance, conflict and differing parenting strategies.

John Jr., Mary and Philip also form a triangle that interlocks with the primary triangle (John Jr., Mary and John Sr.). Interlocking triangles occur when the high anxiety spills into other triangles (John Jr., Mary and Philip; John Jr., Mary and the pastor).

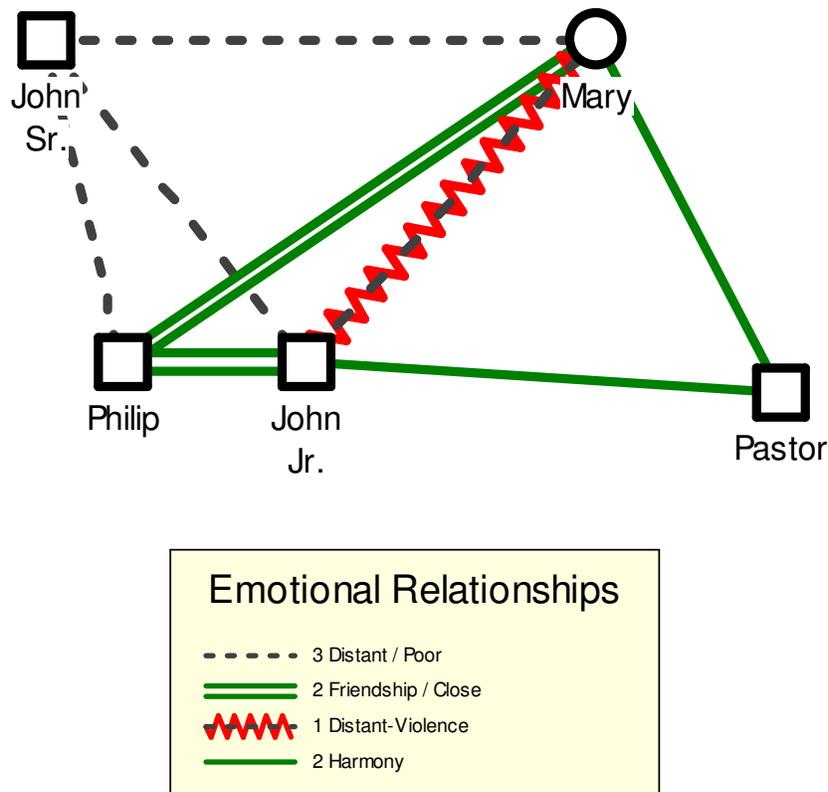


Figure 2. Interlocking Triangles

Philip and Mary have a strong relationship. With John Sr. away, Philip took on many responsibilities. Philip supported Mary and did many chores around the house. As John Jr. stated, "Philip was always helping mom, with yard work, fixing the car and sometimes even drying the dishes. He sort of raised me." John Jr.'s dependence on Philip could indicate

fusion between the brothers, though Philip's ability to move out and attend university indicates a fitting level of differentiation. The brothers have a fairly strong relationship, and John Jr. misses Philip because they could talk about anything. John Jr. said Philip really knew him, suggesting a relationship that was at times an I-Thou relationship. The brothers respect, dignify and look out for each other.

This I-Thou relationship stands out from the many I-It relationships this family is experiencing. When John Jr. steals from his parents or pushes his mother, he is not honouring his parents as people. When John Sr. issues his ultimatum to John Jr. (to straighten up "or else") he is not valuing the dignity or needs of his son above his own. Neither is engaged in conversation to understand the other's perspective. Rather, each makes assumptions about the motives and reactions of others. They seek to get what they want from others in a utilitarian fashion. John Jr. wants money from his parents and so he takes it, without asking and without any explanation. John Sr. wants peace at home and control over his son and issues a top-down directive to John Jr. without attempting to understand the situation or what others in the family might need.

Relational Ethics

The last dimension, relational ethics, is one of the unique aspects of this theory. This speaks to a sense of fairness or justice resulting from give and take in relationship. When equity is enjoyed by those involved, the relationship is enjoyed (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1986). Boszormenyi-Nagy talks about a ledger of merits in which, over the long term, things must eventually balance out or unhappiness and anxiety will begin to be expressed as a symptom. He distinguishes between adult-adult relationships, which should strive for parity, and adult-child relationships, which, when healthy, are more asymmetrical; children are not expected to give to the parent as much as the parent gives to the child. Rather, the parent in the relationship with the child is giving back what he/she received as a child in her or his family of origin. In short, Boszormenyi-Nagy believes that fairness heals and therefore the purpose of therapy is restoration of an equitable balance of fairness among family members. This fourth dimension of contextual family therapy is comprised of a number of important concepts. Some are addressed below.

Parentification refers to the process of role reversal whereby a child is obliged to act as parent to their own parent(s) or to other siblings, is a fairly common occurrence. For practical reasons, elder children are generally chosen, and very often the first-born child. Parentification may involve being responsible for a younger sibling's routine activities. In our case, Philip is most likely parentified.

Philip is silent in the case but he is an important link in understanding the family. He may have been responsible for John Jr. attending and excelling at school. John Jr.'s strong desire to visit him, indicated by the theft, suggests Phillip's parentification as surrogate father. Philip might feel some relief being gone, yet guilt too, knowing that John Jr. must now take self-responsibility.

The concept of **loyalty**, or the bonding between those involved in relationship, is strong in Boszormenyi-Nagy's theory of relational ethics. The presence or absence of loyalty is indicative of the history and reality of one's affiliation with family members and significant others. It exists between all members in our case study.

John Jr.'s loyalty to Philip is evident in his misguided attempt to visit him, and was strengthened by Philip's parentification, which led to the formation of a very close bond between the two. His acting out can be attributed to this loyalty, and the strain of being apart from a much loved sibling. John Jr.'s loyalty to his mother prevents him from revealing his dependence on Philip due to an attempt to protect her from the fact that he feels closer to Philip. His revelation to the pastor that he is willing to engage in conversation with his mother, but dislikes the inevitable questions she asks, rather than sharing this preference with Mary directly, points to loyalty and an attempt to spare her feelings. John Jr. has shown loyalty to his father in years past, but it is now strained as a result of John Sr.'s severe stance with him.

Mary and Philip feel loyalty towards each other *vis-à-vis* the parentification which occurred in his years at home; they could depend on each other. Mary's obvious fidelity to Philip and John Jr. was shown in her choice to work at home when they were young. Despite the situation, she maintains her loyalty and seeks to resolve the problem. She believes it unlikely John Jr. would agree to psychotherapist help, as it would be for most teenagers, so she enlists pastoral support.

John Sr.'s years of hard work on the road have permitted him to financially provide for his family, and reveals a strong allegiance. To Mary, he has indicated his trustworthiness and devotion by occasionally joining her and the boys at church during his brief returns home, and cheering her on as she earned her baccalaureate. In his discipline of John Jr., he emphasizes respect for Mary, her personal safety, his overall honesty, and the significance of a good education, all of which exemplify loyalty.

The inverse of this concept is **loyalty conflict**. When an individual is in relationship with two others, a preference for one over the other may occur in some situations. This is called triangulation and seen in Figure 2. Mary is caught in such a situation between her husband and John Jr.; she wants John Jr. to receive the help he needs, and she is distressed at John Sr.'s response. Triangles often show conflict.

John Jr. is caught in a loyalty conflict between Philip and his parents. His love and respect for Philip are, at the moment, stronger than what he feels for Mary and John Sr., and, although he does love them, his negative actions towards them are influenced by this conflict.

Destructive entitlement is another important concept. According to Boszormeny-Nagy, someone who has been neglected or abused or parentified as a child may be hurt and seek justice and revenge. The child, later as an adult, often unconsciously believes she or he is "entitled" to behave in destructive ways. The person feels they are owed something because of what was missed in childhood. This reinforces his thesis that ethical motives are basic to human nature and cannot be changed. So unfairness begets unfairness, and such legacies of unfairness can create chains of destructive entitlement from generation to generation.

John Sr. appeared particularly angry with John Jr. He interpreted his youngest son's edginess and impulsivity as being ill-mannered, something that he found very displeasing. When the pastor asked John Sr. what his childhood was like, he reported that he had received little in the way of attention or affection and his parents' standards for behaviour had been especially high and rigidly held. No matter how hard he tried to earn good grades, something extremely difficult for him, his father was never satisfied. To gain freedom in life, he rebelled against his father and was expelled from home. As seen in John Sr.'s history

of exploitation, he had been badly hurt as a young child, and that his preoccupation with the unfairness of his early life made it hard for him to see his son who is now 15 in a positive light or to be supportive to him. Also, there is indication that he had been parentified himself. John Sr. had been justifying his harsh verbal discipline towards John Jr. on the grounds that he had been badly hurt himself. In the language of Contextual Family Therapy, John Sr.'s continued reliance on destructive entitlement could be seen in his blindness to his child's developmental and interpersonal needs and in his blindness to the positives about his child.

Self-delineation occurs in an individual when relationships are healthy and allow, in Bowen's terminology, differentiation of one's self from others (Bowen, 1978). As we saw previously, it is having healthy personal boundaries. Being a teenager, John Jr.'s behaviour can be interpreted as his attempt to claim individuality and self-delineation. Stealing demonstrates his wish to act independently to meet his need to visit Philip; however, he shows poor judgment. His non-attendance at school could be his effort to differentiate from Philip's achievements by showing dissimilar achievements and values.

Mary is quite self-delineated as shown by her holding a part-time job, helping at church, completing her undergraduate degree and embarking on an MSW while caring for her family. In Mary's relationship with John Sr., she disagrees with his ultimatum to John Jr. She shows differentiation from John Sr. when she involves the pastor to work through the problem with the family.

John Sr.'s ability to maintain his employment on a long-term basis illustrates a positive aspect of self-delineation, as does his ability to cope with the demands of being on the road without his family. John Sr.'s relationship with his own father and being ejected from the family home at 15 greatly influenced his differentiation. Some of the struggles are now repeating in his interactions and reactions to John Jr.'s behaviour.

Philip is successfully expressing his self-delineation; he has left the family home and is pursuing his career by studying at university. Such action reveals the establishment of skills surrounding independence and self-reliance developed in his years with his family.

Self-validation speaks to one's self worth, or value in relation to others, which is earned by caring actions and not by a "claiming" of power simply by one's position in the family. John Jr. is experiencing mixed validation, again indicative of his age and typical teenage efforts at individuation. He is affirmed by his pastor and his brother, Philip, and therefore feels worthy. However, he may lack self-validation if he perceives Philip's leaving as abandonment, perhaps thinking, "He's left me, so he must not feel that I am very important." This possibility requires further attention in therapy to gain clarity. John Jr.'s behaviour and resulting negative interaction with his father have compromised his self-validation, especially in light of John Sr.'s ultimatum. His mother's support, evident to observers, is annoying to John Jr. and received as criticism, again resulting in a decreased sense of validation.

Philip exemplifies a high degree of self-validation in his decision to attend a university away from home. His positive relationship with Mary, John Sr. and John Jr., along with a history of positive parentification by Mary has prepared him for this milestone, and given him skills and abilities which are transferable from his family of origin to the world at large.

Mary has generally felt a great deal of self-validation by caring for her family and engaging in university studies, but is currently experiencing challenge to this. She has been

essentially a single parent, while her husband, John Sr., was on the road. As her children matured, she worked part-time, adding to her sense of ability and accomplishment. Her psychology degree testifies of both her aptitude to successfully mother and raise her boys, and her growing self-validation. The recent changes in John Jr.'s behaviour have frightened Mary and forced her to question what has gone wrong in their relationship. Present circumstances have diminished her self-validation. The ultimatum issued by John Sr. to John Jr. has also caused her worry and anxiety, and she questions her decision to return to school. Recent events have proven a test to her self-worth, as maintaining the family norm has been compromised.

John Sr. may also be encountering change to his self-worth. His present relationship to John Jr. echoes his relationship with his father, a situation he has difficulty comprehending as he and John Jr. were very close earlier. He looked forward to returning home and being greeted by his excited little boy, who reveled in climbing into the cab of the truck, pretending to drive and pulling the air horn. Lately their connection has become strained almost to the point of cut-off. The authoritarian discipline with which he was raised is being re-enacted through his anger and diminished tolerance for John Jr.'s behaviour, highlighting his own inability to parent in a healthy, constructive way. These things in combination speak to his own lack of validation.

In brief, despite the fact that this family is under great strain, it appears that the members of this family are basically committed to one another's welfare and are beginning to take steps to get help. These are seen as major resources for further therapeutic works.

Theological Reflection

True contextuality means the initiating and nurturing of a dialogue with one's culture, a genuine give-and-take, in which the world is permitted to speak for itself, and in which therefore the Christian community opens itself to the risk of hearing things that it had not anticipated and to which it cannot readily respond. -- Douglas John Hall (1991, p. 79)

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall's summary of his contextual approach to theology aligns strongly with Nagy's contextual approach to therapy. When dealing with a family system the therapist helps give voice to all concerned so that the members of the family have the courage to speak what they feel is true and the courage to hear and receive what others in the family feel is true.

The pastor wants to help the family hear their story with all of its points of view and in understanding the narrative, find the desire to adapt and rewrite it. In other words, can their story be transformed from a tale of struggle to one of reconciliation and grace?

Constructive narrative theology as described by Graham, Walton, & Ward (2005) points out that we are "a story formed society" and that Christians worship "a story telling God." Narrative theology provides an opportunity for the pastor to share a story with the family in order to hear a story from the family. Mary's family members are hurting each other and tensions are high. If the pastor addresses those feelings directly, the risk is that resentment deepens, tempers flare, and the likelihood of withdrawal increases. By telling the family a story from their shared faith tradition (in this case Christian) the pastor introduces a different narrative that might help the family reflect on their own story. If they

can see how God is at work in the biblical story, could they see how God is at work within their own story too?

The pastor shares a parable from Luke 15:11-32 when Jesus tells a story about a family in crisis, a story often referred to as the Prodigal Son. In this parable there is an absent parent (mother) and a younger son acting rashly seeking his father's inheritance (the Greek word used is *bios* – the younger son is essentially attempting to steal his father's life). The father prematurely gives his inheritance (*bios*) to his son only to also lose that son. The youngest son then loses himself by squandering what he 'stole.' The father later discovers that his eldest son feels neglected and deeply resentful, refusing to participate in the life of the family or to honour his sibling who has returned home. To look at this parable through Boszormenyi-Nagy's lens of contextual family therapy this family is struggling with destructive entitlement (there is never enough to satisfy anyone), loyalty (is there a favoured son?) and parentification (has the father treated the older son more like a partner in the absence of a spouse?).

The parable as Jesus tells it does not conclude. The reader is left wondering if the older brother is going to join the family party or remain estranged from his family. Will members of the family let go of grudges and unmet expectations for each other, in order to embrace forgiveness and a new start?

The pastor might ask John Jr. how he would want to conclude this parable. What would he do? What would Mary do? Which character in this story do members of the family identify with the most? Mary's family is not an exact copy of the family in the story, but the power of a parable lies not in the story perfectly reflecting the family but the way in which the story can illuminate and inspire the family.

The pastor sees that this family needs love and support from each other but has not found positive ways to express that desire. John Sr., having a job on the road makes him feel like an absent parent. What identity he has at home is shaken as children leave home and Mary prepares for further studies. Does he feel like the absent parent in the story? Does he feel like the eldest son who works hard for little reward? What if he was asked to identify with the father in the parable who found a way to forgive real offenses in order to redeem and rejoice with who was most precious to him – his children.

John Jr. needed to see his brother for support and affirmation but did not have the resources to purchase a bus ticket. Stealing the family grocery fund was the only option he could see. The pastor might ask John Jr. how the youngest son respond when he realized he had committed a sin. What was his father's response?

The father in the parable proclaims to both of his sons "all that is mine is yours" (v. 31). Both Mary and John Sr. could be invited to say that aloud to each other and to their children knowing that God says the very same thing to them.

Conclusion

Mary called her pastor for help in handling her troubled teen-age son. The sensitive pastor will see that the teen is indeed troubled but not trouble. Whatever is plaguing the family lies not within one person but between each person – they are all feeling that they have been treated unfairly by one another. Focused on the love and attention they all need, this family forgot that love and attention was something also given. Contextual therapy

provides the opportunity for this family to hear each other tell the family story, express their needs, and examine their own motivations in order to find balance together again.

References

- Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Krasner, B. (1986). *Between give and take: A clinical guide to contextual therapy*. New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., Grunebaum, J., & Ulrich, D. (1991). Contextual family therapy. In A. S. Gurman, & D. P. Kniskern (Eds.), *Handbook of family therapy II* (pp. 200-238). New York, NY: Brunner/Mazel.
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I-Thou*. New York, NY: Scribner and Sons.
- Erikson, E. H. (1985). *The life cycle completed*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Friedman, E. (1991). Bowen Theory and Therapy. In A. S. Gurman, & D. P. Kniskern (Eds.). *Handbook of family therapy: Volume II*. (pp. 134-170). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Graham, E., Walton, H., & Ward, F. (2005). *Theological reflection: Methods*. London: SCM Press.
- Hall, D. G. (1991). *Thinking the faith: Christian theology in a North American context*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.