Children in Family Contexts
PERSPECTIVES ON TREATMENT

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Chapter 2

The Context of Growth: Relational Ethics between Parents and Children

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David was 20 months old when his mother first requested a therapy appointment for advice about him. She was concerned about David's apparent preference for the babysitter, rather than his parents. Bess was an older woman who had been with David 3 days a week since he was 3 months old. Both Mr. and Mrs. Gold were attorneys in their mid-30s, and David was their only child. David, his mother, and his father attended the family session. David was quite at ease, and spent the time playing and going from the mother to the father with toys, finally resting in his mother's lap.

David's father did not agree with his wife that David's attachment to the babysitter was unusual, and he was not worried by it. However, when asked whether he or his wife would be upset if their son had a strong attachment to either grandmother, Mr. Gold replied, seriously, 'We'd kill her.'

Although this may appear to be a simple case of the "worried well," an instance to be managed with reassurance and advice, it is an excellent example of the delicate and continuous process of balancing relational ethics in the family of a young child. For David, there were important implications of his obligation to please and complement his mother on her terms, while still free to develop other relationships. The mother wondered with whom she had ever been "first"—with her parents, her spouse, her child? To whom could she turn for acknowledgment of her efforts and her pain? The father, for his part, had to ask himself how he could satisfy his wife's needs and maintain his own sense of well-being.

Another area of concern was that of the Golds' distant relationships with their own parents. The Golds wanted to "protect" David from having too close a relationship with his grandparents. What about the avoided grandparents? What was their side, and how did their right to get to know their grandson and his right to receive care from them figure in this?

Questions such as these are some of the practical problems of relational ethics—ones that demand an understanding of the Process of development in the context of relationships between parents and children across generations.

This chapter focuses on the give-and-take between parents and children that shapes meaning; this is the contextual approach. This approach, developed by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973) and colleagues (Cotroneo, 1986), incorporates systemic interactions and intrapsychic activity with the dialectic of relational ethics between persons. From this perspective, relational ethics, which is a unique contribution to contextual therapy, shapes the meaning-making activity of development.

The construction of meaning occurs within the individual in making sense of realm "between" persons. Kegan (1982) has suggested that the primary evolutionary task of development is the ongoing task in which both children and parents are simultaneously engaged: the meaning-making activity of growth. Every individual psychology (with the possible exception of strict behaviorism) "directs in some way to this zone of mediation where meaning is made" (Kegan, 1982,p. 2). That zone may be more sharply defined as "within" the person (the intrapsychic) or viewed from the outside (the cognitive activity of meaning making). Kegan (1982) observes, child development has been examined from the Freud-developmental perspective of individually experienced meaning from within, the Piagetian, constructivist perspective of subject-object balance from with-He concludes that despite their different emphases, Freud and Piaget each were interested in the development of meaning making.

Family theory, invested in freeing developmental theory from a static, linear notion growth, has also struggled with the zone of mediation of meaning. Family therapy began with a rejection of its heritage of finding meaning "within," and advocated for finding meaning "between" individuals in the system. This took the form of addressing the experience of present made meaning "between" persons in the multiperson system, rather than "within" the intrapsychic sphere. Systems theory has taught us that both a child and his or her family members will change in response to each other. This is illustrated in the attachment studies of family therapy literature (reviewed by P. Minuchin, 1985), which enlarged the scope from the traditional individual and mother–child dyad to encompass triad of father or siblings and the larger family system.

Yet, like individual psychologies, family therapy has also divided into conquistivist and developmentalist camps. Constructivists in family theory (most notably S. Minuchin, 1974) emphasize the "here-and-now," horizontal experience relationships. Minuchin focuses on the outside activity that generates the form,
asserting that family structure organizes internal experience and behavior. This approach resembles Piaget's emphasis on the mastery of outside experience leading to the making of individual meaning. Like Piaget's, this approach obscures the "within" for each family member. Developmentalists, on the other hand (such as Bowen, 1978), have investigated the origins and processes by which the individual's meaning within the family has come to be. This honors the inner experience of meaning making, yet does not fully offer an integration of the spiral of the within and the between. We are left with polarities of present and past: activity generated from outside the individual, in the social and family system, and activity generated from within the individual. Another organizing principle is needed to incorporate the meaning making of the individual within a dialogic systems model.

This chapter proposes that contextual theory offers such a metatheory, which can serve as a bridge for the stranded family theories. This bridge addresses meaning making within the developmental dialectic between parents and children, and how that dialectic is informed by relational ethics between the generations. This approach takes a resource-oriented stance, which recognizes that some made meanings are more growth-producing or growth-inhibiting than others.

This chapter integrates the dialectical, ethical tasks of growth for the child and the family, as posited by Boszormenyi-Nagy and colleagues. The ethical dimension of contextual theory incorporates fair claims and balances between family members. Here the growth of an individual (whether adult or child) is seen as inseparably related to his or her capacity both to give and to receive care, in a way that leaves no one (whether adult or child) burdened by either chronic over-giving or overtaking. A description of the major concepts of the contextual approach is followed by a discussion of the implications of these observations for therapy in families with young children. From the contextual point of view, growth (or impediments to it) is shaped by the relational context of the individual, which serves as the starting point.

The Context of Growth: Claims and Balances

Relational Context

An infant is born into a unique "relational context." This concept refers to more than the mere family arrangement in which an infant is raised. Children grow up in many types of family constellations. Some are raised by both biological parents to maturity. Others are raised primarily by one parent, or by a grand-parent or relatives; they may have a visiting relationship or no relationship with other family members. Others are adopted or raised for a time in foster care. Yet all children, despite later circumstances are linked both horizontally and vertically by birth to their relational context.

Here the use of "context" differs from its common meaning of social circum-
stances surrounding an action or behavior (Cotroneo, 1986). Rather, the term used in the relational sense refers to the facts and circumstances we inherit by being born male or female, first or last, black or white, and so on, into a particular family, with its inherent resources and limitations. It includes what is unique to each of us and what we have in common with our familial, ethnic, cultural, and religious rootedness. This connection, based on birth, is built up by the balances of give-and-take between family members, and by the consequences of actions or behaviors, whether these acts are trustworthy or exploitative. The child's relational context will be the source, not only of life, but of meaning itself. It is "meaning-making" in the sense that present experience unfolds as the continually expressed result of past and present relational context. As such, context lays the foundation for future relating. Its dimensions are the factual, the psychological, the systemic, and the ethical.

The infant is entitled to his or her biological family relationships simply because the infant has been born into those relationships. This is an ethical axiom.

Family relationships are empowered by the fact that members are connected by birth. They are empowered only secondarily by what family members do for each other... Existence itself speaks to the meaning and significance of the connectedness between parent and child, which constitutes an actual or potential resource for care for a child. (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 8)

Regardless of the arrangement in which a child grows up, the care or lack of care the child receives from his or her biological parents and family will be part of his or her meaning making and is likely to express itself developmentally. This premise, which underscores a child's reality, is not sufficiently acknowledged either in the literature on child development or in the problem-oriented treatment of families with children. Instead, basic resources for a child's growth are viewed as intrapsychically dependent on attachment to a primary caregiver, or as systemically dependent on an adequate parental subsystem. In either instance, the caregiver or the parental subsystem may or may not be part of the child's primary, biological reality. Why is this important?

Theoreticians (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Cotroneo, 1986;) have Proposed a nonconditioned, inherent mechanism, which is expressed early in life and may be growth-producing or inhibiting. This mechanism, which Nagy calls "filial loyalty," refers to the child's early and growing recognition that he or she has received parental care (even if it is limited to the acts of conception, pregnancy, and birth) and to the child's corresponding efforts to discharge loyalty commitments. Research confirms this mechanism, as Kagan (1981) reports that children as young as 2 years of age "invent an obligation" to meet an adult's standard. This self-obligation can be expressed instrumentally or affectively. Loyalty speaks to the connectedness (whether robust or tenuous) to one's relational context, and has implications for growth.
Loyalty

The concept of "loyalty," as first defined by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), refers to expectations shared by the family, the community, and society at large, which are transmitted from generation to generation through the family. Its referent is not the psychological feeling of allegiance to country or group membership, or even to an individual, as Côtoneo (1986) has articulated. Its referent is Ethical Loyalty. Loyalty speaks to a person's obligation to care about those who have made investments in him or her, which have resulted in the person's birth and rearing. Loyalty commitments take the form of expectations shared by family members for reciprocal care and consideration due another family member, based on the balance of care, both given and received. These expectations are passed on from generation to generation, from parent to child. We are born into, develop, and transmit loyalty expectations.

The basis of loyalty commitments is the fact that we are born in need of care (Côtoneo, 1986). Loyalty is the means of repaying our indebtedness for the massive investment of care we need and have received for survival, however imperfect that care may have been. If filial loyalty emanates from the act of our birth and the facts of our care, then parental expectations for filial devotion arise from the one-sided investments made in our care. Parents' expectations of what children owe them are also rooted in the circumstances of what parents were expected to give (and did in fact give) their own parents, and whether those loyalty expectations were fair or unfair.

Loyalty expectations can be growth-enhancing or growth-inhibiting. If parents can appropriately invest in a child's well-being, that child will be free to invest in his or her own continued growth, as well as to offer age-appropriate consideration to his parents. That child will also be free as he or she matures to make loyalty commitments outside the immediate family—to other relatives, to peers, and later to mate and children. This is an expression of positive loyalty. If for some reason parents cannot make appropriate investments in the child's well-being, that child will develop a growth-inhibiting, negative loyalty. Negative loyalty expressions can be seen both in overdevoted, sacrificial giving and in "acting-out" behavior. Loyalty, then, operates positively if a child has received enough care and negatively if a child has not.

A child's loyalty commitments take into account the child's relational context, of biological parents and family, as they constitute part of his or her "shared self." Whether this self is "good" or "bad" is partly based on the meaning a child is able to make regarding whether he or she received sufficient care and offered (age) appropriate care to the people who invested care in him or her. A child's assessment of the care he or she has offered and received is an important part of meaning making, which is subject to developmental cognitive and emotional shifts. This assessment, based on factual events of give-and-take and perceptions of fairness, finally cannot be based solely on any one individual's definition; it requires a dialectical integration of each person's terms for fairness, for parent and child or adult child alike. Next, an understanding of the justice system

THE CONTEXT OF GROWTH: RELATIONAL ETHICS

The Family Justice System

Loyalty is based first on the connection of birth, and second on what family members do for each other. The expression of loyalty (whether positive or negative) is based on the balance of give-and-take between family members. The capacity to make fair claims for oneself while considering the well-being of others is an expression of earned entitlement. Entitlement is earned by the offer of due care in relationships. It gives a family member the right to make claims for himself or herself. Whereas a child's birth entitles him or her to claim caring from the parents, the parents' investment in the child entitles them to loyalty expectations. Whereas a parent earns entitlement by his or her acts of care for the child, that child is obligated by filial loyalty, which takes the form of the Child's caring about the parent. Efforts to discharge filial loyalty commitments from child to parent. The family justice system is this management of the balances of give-and-take between family members.

A premise of growth that Erikson (1968) makes explicit is that the child has "claim" on "the next average expectable environment" in a "sequence of expectable environments" (p. 222). To the extent that parents are responsible for providing that next expectable environment, this premise may be applied to justice issues between parent and child. What is owed between parent and child? Kegan (1982) metaphorically refers to parent and child as "host" and "guest." This less emotionally charged referent allows us to engage in a little imaginative play. What does a host owe a houseguest? A warm welcome? Dinner? Some privacy? A farewell in the morning? Many books of etiquette have been written on the topic. All are in basic agreement that when hosting begins as a unilateral offer of care, it carries responsibilities to attend to the guest. The guest also has some reciprocal, though different, responsibilities to offer consideration to the host. In the family, this etiquette between parent and child is a matter of justice: "The justice system of the family is the configuration of giving and receiving that takes its shape from family relating, either through actions that benefit others or actions that exploit them... In terms of simple justice each of us is required at times to be giver, at times receiver" (Côtoneo, 1986, p. 418).

The focus on the facts of give-and-take, as well as on the relational consequences of benefit or burden, takes justice out of the illusory realm of perceived differences or competing individual needs. Justice between family members is based on the reality that no one can keep giving without receiving in return. Justice also requires that family members cannot indefinitely accept care without reworking this imbalance by offering care in return. The continual give-and-take between family members registers as individual accountings of what one has given and what one has received. The balance of giving and receiving can be positive.
and interpreted as a trust resource for the future, or negative when exploitation has occurred.

Why, if the balances of give-and-take register in both children and adults, do we see people acting in apparently destructive ways? When we have expended ourselves offering care, are we entitled to receive care. If we do not receive care within the context in which it was offered, this registers as an injury: "Care manifests itself in the physical and emotional tasks of caretaking. . . . Someone's concern for us is the magnet of our reciprocal concern. When we do not experience another's concern for us, we tend to withdraw from the attempt of reciprocity in order to 'take care of ourselves' " (Cotroneo, 1986, p. 416).

Depending on the nature of the injustice suffered and its consequences, children, as they grow up, will develop justice-seeking behavior, which reflects and attempts to right prior imbalances of give-and-take. This quest for justice takes place first within the original relational context, then, failing the restoration of justice, outside of it. The intersection of cognitive maturity, prior loyalty expectations, and the nature of justice within our own families shapes our expectations of what we deserve for ourselves. If one has experienced injustice within the family, injustice is likely to continue as a "norm for relating outside the family," as Cotroneo has indicated (1986, p. 418) This norm of injustice may take the form of low entitlement—expecting that one is obliged to give and not to receive. Here the self becomes the object of exploitation. It may also take the form of destructive entitlement—expecting that one can receive with no obligation to give in return. Here others become the objects of exploitation.

To the extent that a person exploits care, that person loses the freedom to ask for himself or herself, as trust is diminished. Often justice-seeking behavior is directed outside the originating family context onto new trust resources, whether mate, children, or peers. It becomes apparent that justice issues in the present (between two generations of parent and child) often have a referent to a third generation.

Thus the balance or imbalance in the family justice system is reflected in how each individual experiences his or her entitlement to give and receive care, both within and outside the family. The imbalance of give-and-take in relationships can turn trust resources into mistrust. In contextual therapy, a primary action component involves the rebuilding of trust resources between family members.

**Trust Resources**

The internalization of basic trust has been considered a fundamental stage in a child's development (Erikson, 1963). However, trust is not a static commodity, gained in infancy and stable for life. It is continually earned, based on the fair exchange between relating partners, which flows between parent and child from one generation to the next. This conceptualization of "trust" as ethically linked to fairness between family members differs from its psychological, individual meaning of whether someone can be believed or relied upon. In the contextual approach, a resource orientation offers options for mobilizing trust. Trust is shaped by acts of care, both given and received. It is also dependent on one person's crediting the other person for actual offers of care, however small that investment may seem. Care or the lack of care creates the dynamics of trust and balances of justice, which can facilitate or inhibit growth. The contextual orientation to growth attends to the resources for trust building. Here the term "contextual resources" refers to those relationships in which trust has been invested for care, or exploited in mistrust. It presumes that resources for care exist in any relational context, even those characterized by mistrust.

This raises the question of where resources come from: self, spouse, grandparent, child? What trust resources do parents have to meet children's claims, as well as their own? To what claims are children entitled, at what age or stage of growth? To what claims are parents entitled? The next section of this chapter examines the implications of contextual theory for the therapy of families with rung children.

**Early Childhood**

Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to describe in detail developmental stages (see Kegan, 1982), it is important to keep in mind that each family member, parent and child alike, is simultaneously in his or her own evolutionary loop, crisis, or truce at any given moment of development. These loops are always intersecting, uniquely shaping how loyalty is expressed and how the balances of fairness are established between individuals in the family, and so adjusting and readjusting the family justice system. The first intersection of child and parent development occurs with the infant's task of differentiating himself or herself while remaining attached to the mother and father.

The first formative experience has been described variously as the establishment of basic trust (Erikson, 1963) and the "incorporative balance" (Kegan, 1982). Broadly outlined, the task is for the infant to simultaneously emerge from this state and be successfully held within it by the parents. This is an excellent example of the consequences of the relational issues of fair exchange. The infant's survival depends on the total care he or she receives. The parents cannot receive back "in kind" in this asymmetrical relationship, but they do earn entitlement by giving, while receiving the benefit of helping their child survive and grow. As the child matures, they will be the recipients of the child's loyalty. Through their earned entitlement, the parents will also pass along loyalty expectations. Relational ethics are already being negotiated in this early exchange between infant and parents.

The balance between infant and parents and the system of justice requires a healthy attachment of the infant, reliable nourishment from the parents, and a parenting culture that does not "overhold" the infant in this helpless, incorporative state. Such overholding would represent the parents' investment in remaining for the child, which would exploit the child's trust. This overholding is
recognized as "parentification," an exploitation of the child's need for nurture in order to meet the parents' needs.

This constitutes the child's first evolutionary truce. But what about the parents? How do their own experiences relate to their child's growth? And how does the child's growth shape their own development? What motivates the parents to offer fair treatment in this asymmetrical relationship? What happens when a parent's own needs are distressed by the infants growth into the next expectable sequence in its development, that of forming new relationships? Here we have at stake the collision of entitlements between parent and child. This was the situation of David Gold and his parents, described at the beginning of this chapter.

David Gold, the 20-month-old youngster whose mother expressed concern and jealousy about his attachment to the babysitter, was embarking on the age-appropriate cognitive and affective task of forming new attachments and differentiating from his mother. David was beginning to expand his attachments, creating a rivalry where none existed before. This evolution was greeted by his mother's alarm, signaling her investment in his demonstrating an exclusive attachment to her.

As readers will recall, Mr. Gold did not agree with his wife about the importance of David's attachment to the sitter. Mrs. Gold became deeply upset when her chance to be "first" with her son did not rise to her expectations. On further questioning, it was learned that she had never been first for anyone—not as a child, not as a spouse, and now not as a parent. She came to therapy hoping for a way in which her son David could be made "right" (i.e., first) for her.

A situation such as this is hardly an unusual circumstance: An individual seeks to reverse an injury sustained in another relationship. This phenomenon, which is often seen between parents and child, has been called "displacement" (intrapsychically) and "parentification between parent and child" (systemically). It is a situation in which "the evolutionary host is drawing upon the guest as if the guest were a culture of embeddedness for the host. The host is deriving a kind of support from the guest [that is] dangerous to the development of the client or guest" (Kegan, 1982, p. 127). Why does a parent parentify his or her child? This age-inappropriate expectation of receiving care from one's offspring is a consequence of the parent's distorted family justice system. Typically the adult is depleted within his or her own relational context, and so turns to the child. Why does a child allow himself or herself to be parentified? The child's overresponsible stance is a negative (growth-inhibiting) loyalty expression. Here the obligation to care about the parents overrules the child's own entitlement to take care of himself or herself.

In such situations, a therapeutic priority is to lessen the child's inappropriate burden of failing to satisfy an unrealistic parental standard (whether that standard is behavioral or emotional). Yet few therapists working with children honor the dialectic—that not only is the child's development in jeopardy (the more so because he is the most vulnerable in this asymmetrical relationship), but the parents' development is also in evolutionary jeopardy. This calls for a recognition of the fact that the burden is being placed upon the child in the context of distorted relational ethics, and that proper corrective intervention involves attending not only to the child, but also to the parents—indeed, to the relational context. In the case of David, the transactions are easy to see. One strategy that would alleviate the symptom would be to side with the father, helping him to reassure the mother that the behavior was not abnormal, and perhaps encouraging him to offer comfort in place of the desired comfort from her son. This would allow David to pursue his current project of differentiation. But this approach, which might shift systemic behavior and free David for the moment, would miss the intersecting meaning of the relational context that triggered the mother's and father's responses and that had to do with the avoided grandparents and other family members. This strategy would address what Piaget (1936/1952) referred to as "learning in the narrow sense." Learning in the narrow sense is akin to training for a specific response. It disregards the inner structure that justifies the "wrong" response. It is aimed at changing behavior, not premises.

If the parents could not be shown a new possibility for themselves, they might be helped to change the offending behavior, but might remain "stuck" with imbalances of fairness that would be growth-inhibiting for parent, child, and grandparent alike. For learning in the broad sense to occur, an intervention would have to address the present and the prior contexts in which imbalances of fairness occurred. Here, relational context and the family justice system could provide a key to the intersecting meaning of the individual's and the family's development. Let us look at this intersection for each family member.

**MRS. GOLD'S SIDE.** Mrs. Gold was the oldest of three daughters of middle-class, Jewish parents. She described her mother as physically and emotionally undemonstrative, and unlike other mothers. Mrs. Gold reported being closer to her father, while her mother tended to her younger sisters. Mrs. Gold tried hard through her academic achievements to win her mother's approval, yet her mother was never enthusiastic. Though she felt loved by her father, she felt betrayed by the times he beat her when her mother yelled at her. In recognizing the parallel in past and present, she reflected, "I didn't have the mommy everyone else had, and I didn't have the kid everyone else had."

Like all children, Mrs. Gold expressed her loyalty in trying to please her parents. When her mother still did not seem pleased, she tried harder. Eventually Mrs. Gold became discouraged and resentful about her mother's lack of demonstrative attention. In adulthood Mrs. Gold handled these injustices, as many adults do, by a retreat, both internally and from the actual parental relationships. This retreat was an expression of negative loyalty between herself and her parents. In order to still comply with old, intuitive parental loyalty standards, Mrs. Gold avoided dialogue with her parents. Although she identified areas of mistrust with her parents (particularly her mother), she only asked for fairness in an internal monologue with "imaginary" parents (the parents in her head), not her actual parents. Unable to come to terms with what she owed her parents and what they owed her, she was unable to make a fair claim for what she was owed. The breakdown of
trust had no place to go but forward. She drew on trust resources in the present, especially David; this represented an exploitation of his care. This growth-inhibiting loyalty affected the interactions with her son, husband, and actual parents in the present, as well as her peer relationships. In terms of the family justice system, Mrs. Gold felt entitled to claim from her son what she did not get from her own parents. Mrs. Gold distanced herself from her family of origin, but still felt as if she were "odd man out." The babysitter was a metaphor for these old injuries.

**MR. GOLD'S SIDE.** Mr. Gold was clearly angry at his wife's distress, which he perceived as unreasonable. He accepted David's displays of independence and other attachments as part of his development. However, Mr. Gold's impatience with his wife's feelings rested on his own relational context and the meaning it had for him. He deeply resented his own mother for pushing him to achieve, and his father for not mitigating his mother's pressure. Like his wife, he distanced himself from his mother and father in the present because of his resentments from childhood. He was invested in protecting his son from a controlling mother, and thus attempting to correct his old injuries. But this stand actually maintained the estrangement with his mother and his son's mother. Like his own father, Mr. Gold now contributed to his own injuries by remaining relatively mute, and in so doing, he passed on his own ledger of injustice to his son.

**DAVID'S SIDE.** David's dilemma was this: Did he have to inhibit his own growth in order to meet his mother's loyalty expectations? Was it fair to him to limit his access to his grandparents because of his parents unresolved family justice issues? He was at a real loss in terms of trust resources for himself, since his mother decided, unilaterally, to fire the babysitter. More important were the present and lifelong implications of the avoided grandparents. Would he begin to suffer the same consequences that his father did, if his mother remained overinvested in him while his father withdrew into an angry silence?

For David, the initial expression of the loyalty dynamic would be emerging in this period. This emergence coincides with the learned acquisition of standards, and the representations of good and bad states. Kagan's (1981) research suggests that children, from the age of about 18 months onward (once they have developed the cognitive structures to form representations, and identify good and bad standards), "invent an obligation to meet an adult's standard" (p. 127). Kagan concludes that this self-imposed obligation is not based on behavioral conditioning. He has also found that children are cognitively appreciative of what parents offer them as early as 3–4 years of age: "The child constructs a 'tote board' of the respective values of various parental gifts, whether embraces, privileges, or presents" (Kagan, 1984, p. 268). In exchange, children intuit and attempt to contribute what they can offer their parents. Because children are limited in what they can instrumentally "do" to give back, loyalty expressions often take the form of attempts to please the parent or to invest in the parent's emotional well-being.

A child's early recognition of having received parental care is expressed by his or her efforts to discharge loyalty commitments. Like empathy, loyalty appears to be a primary psychological phenomenon. It is also an ethical phenomenon, which seeks expression in the dialectical mechanism of offering fair exchange. Kagan (1984) has noted that modern parental standards are primarily affective and later become oriented to competency and academic achievement for the child. The child will attempt to meet intuited parental standards, and become distressed when he or she cannot. These standards are unique within each family, and the child cannot evaluate (until a much later age) whether the emotional or instrumental standards were reasonable to expect. For example, if David's parents kept him from knowing his grandparents, the meaning of this loss would take years for David to register. There are, then, several different situations in which filial loyalty commitments will be discharged. There is a growth-enhancing match between parental standards that are supportive for the child's growth, and the child who meets them. There is also a growth-inhibiting match between a child and demanding standards that the child may not be fortunate enough to meet or may act out over.

These discrete categories seem to call merely for a realignment of reasonable mental standards suited to the particular limits of a child, so that the child can meet self-obligated filial loyalty commitments. However there is a danger here for the child who meets present demanding standards that are inhibiting for future growth. This was David's situation. This situation reflects the loyalty dynamics that maintain parentification.

Kegan (1982) has suggested that a child, will inhibit growth in order to avoid unrecoverable loss. The perception of what that loss will be changes as the child matures. In early childhood, the fear of the real, physical loss of the parent is replaced by the fear of the psychological loss or the loss of love, as the child attempts, although imperfectly, to meet parental standards.

The loyalty dynamic between parent and child is internalized through the overt as well as intuited standards that the child (even into adulthood) experiences, and interprets as either the freedom to grow or the obligation to remain in the old balance that child and family unwittingly construct. As we have seen with David's parents, it is not only the intuited standards, but also the real relationships between the adult child and parents, that may be avoided or rejected. Rejection then serves the pseudoproductive function of maintaining the old self and the old, remembered family. This growth inhibition, whether it takes place at age 2 or 32, is an expression of the negative, binding loyalty of unsuccessful attempts by the child to reintegrate intergenerational mandates within a family of what children and parents owe each other.

It has already been stated that a simple intervention based on the present family transactions does not address the intergenerational issues of relational ethics, and will leave the family members vulnerable to further developmental challenges. The contextual approach to family therapy requires that fair consideration be offered to each family member. Otherwise, in situations like David's, we can expect that the child will continue to be pulled by the polarized balances the parents.
stand for, and will eventually replicate the growth-inhibiting loyalties that are evident in the parents' families of origin.

The thrust of contextual therapy is to balance areas of injury while attempting to move each family member toward a more trustworthy position. In the Golds' case, it would mean helping Mrs. Gold get more of what she deserved, while not inappropriately expecting her son to make up the difference. This not only would relieve the child of too great a demand on his loyalty, but also would free the mother from her own negative loyalty to her parents. It would mean helping Mr. Gold stand up for himself and consider the sides of both his parents and his wife. This would afford him an opportunity to rebalance his relationships and to relate to David in a more directly protective and caring way. David deserved his parents' acknowledgment of his devotion to them, and also deserved to receive care from as many significant people in his context as possible, including his grandparents.

In the five sessions with the Golds, the implications of their unreworked injuries from their own families were spelled out. Mr. Gold chose not to pursue work with his own parents, but Mrs. Gold accepted help in working with her mother. She was encouraged to return to her mother, both to elicit her mother's side (by putting her mother's resources and limits in relational context) and to articulate her own side. Had her mother given her more than she had herself received? Did her mother know how hard Mrs. Gold had always tried to please her? Had she pleased her? If so, why was it so hard to show? The trust resource that enabled Mrs. Gold to return to her mother was her acknowledgment that her mother was very loving to David. By inquiring into her mother's side, and offering her the possibility for dialogue, Mrs. Gold earned entitlement to make a claim to have her mother care about her own pain. When Mrs. Gold returned from this visit, she was surprised and relieved that her mother had been so receptive.

In a subsequent appointment, Mrs. Gold reported that things were much easier with David. She no longer looked to him as the only trustable resource, the only one from whom she could claim care. Mrs. Gold's retested assumptions, brought from the imaginary audience to dialogue with her mother, offered the possibility of her own growth.

The Golds stopped therapy at this point. Untested for Mrs. Gold were the areas of mistrust with her father and with her husband. During the therapy, she had become more aware of and distressed by her husband's "crisp 'and busi' nesslike relationship with her. Mr. Gold had been encouraged to ask others to consider his needs and preferences, rather than withdrawing into resentful silence. He was satisfied that the crisis of the moment had passed. Mrs. Gold correctly perceived that if she invested more in her own growth (and Mr. Gold did not), the marriage would be threatened.

Despite the premature closure, short-term gains and long-term benefits for both parent and child were recognized. Mrs. Gold was offered a bridge to dialogue with her own mother, which allowed her to make claims for fairness for herself. This freed her to lift the inappropriate loyalty expectation that David should inhibit his own growth to meet her needs. This renewed trust resource held the promise of benefit for David, both in terms of his own development and personally. He was freer to expand his own attachments—to positively express his loyalty toward and to receive caring from both his parents and his grandparents. Because Mrs. Gold was able to rework some of her judgments and disappointments with her mother, she was less likely to 'protect' David from his grandparents. Although Mr. Gold chose not to pursue avenues to dialogue with his parents, he was not done the disservice of being made a therapeutic ally against his wife and her problems. This would have reinforced his destructive entitlement toward a "controlling mother."

Here, the mobilization of trust resources was not dependent on stage of development, or even on personality characteristics. The implications for growth did not reside merely in mandating what Mrs. Gold owed David, or what husband and wife owed each other. Instead, the practical problems of relational ethics required a rebalancing of areas of unfairness, as they were informed by the unique national context as well as stage of development. Let us now follow this dialectic of growth over the middle years of childhood.

Middle Childhood

As Kegan (1982) observes, the broad developmental task of middle childhood requires the family to help promote the child's self-sufficiency. This primary task is largely applied to competency in school and to the life of rules, cooperation, and competition with peers. The child needs to be engaged with family, peers, and school in a balanced way. In encouraging the overdifferentiated stance normal to this period, parents need to promote age-appropriate personal responsibility, whether about time, money, personal choices of clothing, activities, or the like. The contradiction that the family and school cultures must provide for the child in helping him or her evolve is a denial of the validity of total self-sufficiency, of only taking one's own perspective into account. In return for their efforts, parents derive pleasure from their child's progress in school and his or her growing capacity to respect limits and be helpful within the family.

A stumbling block in this developmental balance can be found in the case of children who are not able to meet parental or school standards for competence. Another, bind for a child arises when there is a mismatch between or among parental, school, and peer expectations. Here the child is subject to "split loyalties" (competing loyalty standards) on a systemic level. The growth of capability and achievement is also linked to whether the child is free to invest in his or her own well-being or is expending energy over time in the self-invented loyalty obligation to offer care to strengthen a parent. There is a carryover tendency for the child in this period to see himself or herself as responsible if things go well, and also responsible if things go badly. Why is this? The interplay of cognitive development and loyalty may result in a child's overresponsible tendency. This dilemma is highlighted in the following vignette.
Three siblings, aged 11, 9, and 7, had been put in the same foster home 2 years earlier, following incidents of physical abuse by their father. Both parents were substance abusers, and both were court-ordered to receive treatment in order to maintain visiting rights. Their father, Mr. Brown, did not comply. Subsequently, Mrs. Brown separated from her husband and worked in therapy on maintaining her sobriety in order to regain custody of her children. Mitch, the youngest, had recently returned to his mother's care, but the girls had refused to see their mother for 9 months. Soon either her daughters would be returned to her care, or her parental rights would be terminated. A contextual family evaluation was requested at this point, as the three supervising agencies could not agree on a plan for the children's custody and faced a legal fight.

The siblings ways of expressing loyalty were different, reflecting their respective stages of growth, as well as their unique relational contexts. The oldest, Polly, told the child therapist that she wanted a "divorce" from her biological mother, in order to be adopted by her foster parents. Mitch tried to reassure his sisters that "Mom doesn't hit any more" and that "You'll be OK." The middle sister, Jane, let Polly speak for her. What did these differences reflect?

Loyalty expressions change with the maturing cognitive structures of childhood. Elkind (1970) proposes that children and adolescents develop "assumptive realities," or hypotheses that are irrefutably held, despite contradictory evidence. One such assumption of the first decade is that adults are benevolent. This belief is reinforced by children's willingness to assume responsibility for events. Children, in learning parental standards, interpret failure in meeting these standards as their own fault. They believe that they have violated a parental standard if their efforts do not please their parents. The children will then try harder, which from the children's side might be described as loyalty overpayment. This sacrifice by the children is an exploitation of their care and depletes their trust resources. They will expend their energy in offering their parents care, with little left over to make investments in their own well-being or growth.

This paradox was reported by Bowlby (1969) when he asked an abused child whether she wanted a new mommy. The child replied, "No, I want my own mommy." This illustrates filial loyalty despite inadequate care. The loyalty dynamic explains why children assign responsibility to themselves for the loss or deprivation of parenting. Over time, if this injustice is not addressed within the original context of depleted parent–overgiving child, that child will seek justice outside that relational context, which may lead to a similar kind of demand from his or her own children. This is what Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) refer to as a "revolving slate." Clearly, this was the situation in the Brown family. Mrs. Brown had herself been abused as a child, and reported that her mother still hit her on occasion in the present.

As a child matures, the concept of "parental benevolence" is replaced by the assumption of the "imaginary audience," which is an internal forum where the older child (and, later, the adolescent and adult) can rehearse the anticipated thoughts and responses of others. This shift often results in a new assessment of "what's fair." It can lead to a new assumptive reality—that parents were not necessarily fair, and if they were not, they did not care if they did harm. Kagan (1984) has noted that children (into adulthood) universally interpret whether their parents' responses to them were essentially caring. The conclusion that "I was hurt because my parents didn't care" becomes a negative binding loyalty between parent and child (or adult child). The child (from about age 11 or 12) may retest his or her earlier assumptions regarding parental benevolence. Now the child begins to assess the family justice system on his or her terms. In the Brown family, the siblings loyalty expressions reflected these differences.

Mitch, as the youngest, was most firmly lodged in the assumption of parental benevolence, and at this point was expending his energy in supporting his mother (as does the child who overinvests in parental expectations that are inhibiting for his or her future growth). Polly, who earlier had been parentified in the Brown family, was beginning to reassess the notion of parental benevolence. She took a more judgmental stance and refused to see her mother. Her younger sister, Jane, silently supported her. Mitch and Polly were beginning to polarize in the positions of "Mom cared" and "No, she didn't." Siblings often continue this polarization into adulthood, rather than directly addressing parents with their injuries. In addition to this polarization, Polly carried a terrible burden of split loyalties in having to choose one set of parents (foster or biological) and betray her loyalties to the other.

Split loyalty is literally "split self." Split loyalties represent cutoffs from actual or potential trust resources for a child. The child, in a triadic relationship to both parents, feels that in order not to lose one parent, he or she has to choose against the other. In a situation of split loyalties, the child owes some loyalty to each parent, but is faced with two (or more) competing sets of loyalty expectations. When the child chooses one standard, he or she automatically disappoints the other (and cannot discharge the loyalty commitment in that context). It is a "Catch-22" situation that diminishes trust resources by fragmenting options for care. A child who is subject to split loyalties as an infant may suffer consequences that he or she is not yet able to assess. As he or she matures, the child will begin to intuit and make meaning out of these pulls and reassess the fairness of parental actions. Adults, then, need to order relationship priorities so that, if possible, children are not cut off from their full context; this is often a concern in cases of divorce and foster care. Children are more vulnerable to split loyalties when they sense that the adults they care about have anger or contempt for each other, which was the case here.

One hypothesis in the Browns' case is that the girls' exaggerated protests against seeing their mother were an expression of a split loyalty bind between biological and foster parents. This split only intensified as a forced choice became imminent. Both sets of parents were competing for the girls' loyalties, and not wanting to see their mother served a pseudoprotective function for the girls. They did not want to hurt their mother by their wish to remain with their foster parents. In such situations, how do we simultaneously advocate for what is fair to the
children, fair to the foster parents, and fair to the mother? Are the children entitled to "divorce" their mother, as Polly Brown put it to her child therapist? Has their deprivation of care earned them the right to disengage from their mother? What is a fair balance between the children and the biological mother? Some might even question why the mother deserves fair consideration. If relational ethics were not our criteria, we might judge the case on ego strength, family functioning, or even a moral abhorrence for what the children endured. By these criteria, the foster family is the clear winner. But if we look down the road, will there be a hidden cost in ignoring loyalties that the children retain, regardless of estrangement? Here the question for each child is not "Shall I be loyal or disloyal?" for loyalty is the glue for parent—child relationships (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 145). Instead, it is "How can I consider my parents and invest in my own growth?"

In the Browns' case, the children clearly needed a more secure environment, and the foster parents needed assurance that they could retain custody. But the mother also deserved consideration. Despite her limits, she had given more to the children than was ever given to her. She had chosen for them against the wishes of her husband, and her own mother and father, who refused to see the children or her. In the long run, it would not further healing to support the girls' avoidance of their mother; this would only bind their negative loyalties further. It would finally leave the girls with the conclusion that their mother did not care. In fact, they had suffered injustices. However, from Mrs. Brown's side, she had struggled heroically to offer her children more consideration than she ever received. Although the children could not be asked to deny their reality (i.e., that on their terms they received inadequate care), they also could not afford to deny the fact that on their mother's terms, she invested in their care. In the long run, the children's true freedom lay in making rightful claims for their welfare while offering their mother due consideration. The intergenerational spiral of loyalty and intergenerational justice issues required fair consideration to each family member.

These hypotheses were tested in four family evaluation sessions, in which mother, children, and foster parents met together, along with members of the social service agencies. Despite her protest that she did not want to see her mother, Polly's dilemma was clearly expressed in a family meeting where children and mother met for the first time in 9 months. In her mother's presence, Polly was clearly concerned that her wishes to remain in foster care were "heartbreaking" for her mother. The children's evident care for her enabled Mrs. Brown to move from a highly competitive stance with the foster mother to one of overriding concern for the children's well-being. She acknowledged that her daughters loved their foster parents, and accepted their wish to remain in their care. Mrs. Brown's evident investment in her girls moved the foster parents from their previous judgmental attitude toward her and eased their own proprietary pull on the children. Because the adults were helped to take more trustworthy stances, the children were relieved of their split-loyalty dilemma and gained the freedom to express their caring to each parenting adult.

In this case the therapist asked, "What does anyone stand to gain by a forced-choice situation?" Here, a recognition of the children's loyalties worked toward integrating all parenting resources, rather than fragmenting parenting and diminishing the children's trust base. A long-term foster care arrangement, in which Mrs. Brown retained parental rights, was agreed to in this case.

Although this vignette was not designed to address the complexity of foster care situations (see Colon, 1978), it raises questions about the connection between adult and child development and how children and parents renegotiate what they owe each other over the course of life. Renegotiation will again occur as a child moves through adolescence, and questions, as Polly was beginning to, the family justice system on his or her own terms. A renegotiation is also critical in adulthood, as was indicated with the Gold family. Now the adult child has the task of handling past and present injustices in dialogue with primary others within the relational context to which they belong. Many adults opt to contain their experienced injustices (and maintain negative loyalties) with their parents, as Mr. Gold did. Typically, this failure to reintegrate the balances of fairness with our actual parents has consequences for the justice we are able to offer our own children. Justice accountings then necessarily require a three-generational focus, because we embody two generations within ourselves as we act on a third generation. As we have seen, the tasks for parent and child shift as the child matures. Although the main focus of this chapter has been on the family with young children, the implications for this approach span the generations.

Summary

This chapter suggests that reintegrating of issues of fairness at every stage of development is an ethical task of development. It is ethical in the sense that it requires a reintegration of the past relational context, rather than mitigation of the past context (and actual relationships) by interpreting it or acting on it through the present third generation of children. This premise is crucial in an intergenerational model, in which the parents of the child may be blocked in their own quest for justice; if this blockage is not fed back to the original context in which imbalances occurred, it will be inappropriately fed forward to the present relational context. Children always benefit when their parents have faced their own parents in order to rebalance family injustices as they experienced them. How we as clinicians resolve this question of what we owed and owe, and what we deserved and deserve, within our own families has important implications, not only in our own relational context but also for the families we see.

In requiring a reintegration of issues of fairness, the contextual therapist is not invested in facilitating any given "stage" of development, but in offering a bridge for growth to each family member. This differs from therapies that place a value on the health of one member above the health of another; this weighting of values often results in a focus on one person's development isolated from relational context. The contextual therapist functions as a multilateral advocate to the
multiple sides of the dialectic of three generations of family justice, and of positive and negative loyalties. It is my experience that family-of-origin work is a primary tool in the training of the therapist who wants to do this kind of work.

The contextual approach to child and adult development incorporates the dialectic of growth for an individual within a dialogic systems model. The contextual paradigm can be employed with parents and children regardless of their "stage" of development, intelligence, or psychological-mindedness. Relational ethics of growth go beyond these characteristics. These ethics are rooted in the balance of give-and-take between parents and children, and in the universal attempts by children to return care to their parents and to make sense of whether their parents were essentially caring to them.

This approach calls for an assessment of future consequences for posterity, whether the child is or is not the identified patient, and whether an individual or a couple is seen. It attends to the positive and negative loyalty implications of a child's full relational reality, including but going beyond the present household membership. It entails the capacity to assess which situations are most wholesome for growth; it is not merely the detecting of pathology. This approach requires a therapist to help adults order relational priorities, rather than making the child's behavior the only focus of treatment. It calls on the therapist to extend a balance of trust and accountability to all family members, even those who have been exploitative.

The contextual approach provides a metatheoretical bridge for family theories. It honors how meaning is made of the individual and the family, both in the here-and-now and in its prior context, intergenerationally. It places the developmental tasks of parent and child in the organizing framework of relational ethics. It calls for a recognition of the fact that resources for development for parent and child alike are in dialectical relationship to each other, within a given relational context. An individual's growth and made meaning are informed by the balance of fair treatment he or she has received and offered. The context of growth between parent and child operates as an intergenerational meaning maker that is shaped by the balance of give-and-take between primary family members throughout life. It provides, as well, a frame for the ethical tasks of development.

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