

Relational Ethics as the unique selling proposition of Contextual Therapy?

Paul Heyndrickx

Master in religion sciences.

1991 Working with homeless young people, I realised myself that there had to be a connection between family relationships and being homeless, hurt and alone in life. So I started to follow training in systemic approach to learn how to work with family ties. I discovered the contextual approach of Ivan Boszormenyi Nagy. In the seven following years I followed one training after another and I also attended the masterclass contextual therapy in Amsterdam, with Else Marie van den Eerenbeemt, Nelly Bakhuizen, Roefke Carmiggelt-Polak and off course Boszormenyi-Nagy.

It was the last masterclass that was organized in Amsterdam and I am very happy I had this opportunity. Since 1998 I work as a trainer in Gent (Belgium)

In this session

Presentation

What is 'relational ethics'?

Relational ethics and evidence based thinking.

Relational ethics and practice based thinking.

Discussion

Is it helpful?

Can it be measured?

Unique selling proposition?

How to sell?

More questions than answers!

What makes therapy work?

- Consciousness? Awareness?
- Changing family structure?
- Re-writing narratives?
- Attachment – scripts? Safety?
- Fairness in relations?

Or is it the 'common factors'?

This is the one billion dollar question in psychotherapy.

And it is really about money.

The government and the insurance companies only want to pay for psychotherapy that works.

What makes therapy work?

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy: “What is helpful in therapy?” What makes people change?

Reciprocity!

A.Gouldner (sociologist), 1959

>>>>>>>>> **Relational ethics**

Nagy finds help in social sciences to describe what happens between people. It is not only a question of love, sexual attraction or attachment. It is also a question of fairness.

The idea of reciprocity in social communities and families was already described long before the eighties. Nagy turned it into ‘relational ethics’.

What is relational ethics?

- Ethics: moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity / concepts of right and wrong (Aristotle, Jesus, Mohammed, Kant, ...)
- Ethics as surviving of the species:
 - Frans De Waal: *'Primates and philosophers (2006): how morality evolved'*
 - Dick Swaab: *'We are our brains'* : the brain decides, not the thinking man

You can find so many definitions of ethics. It is a subject so many philosophers and religions talk and write about. But ethics is also subject in biology and even neurobiology.

Frans De Waal studies the behaviour of primates, our cousins. He discovered that the process of giving and taking is very important to help the species to survive.

Dick Swaab describes how the brain has already taken a decision before the man has the illusion he makes a choice. According to Dick Swaab, man is a bunch of cells that organises itself.

What is relational ethics?

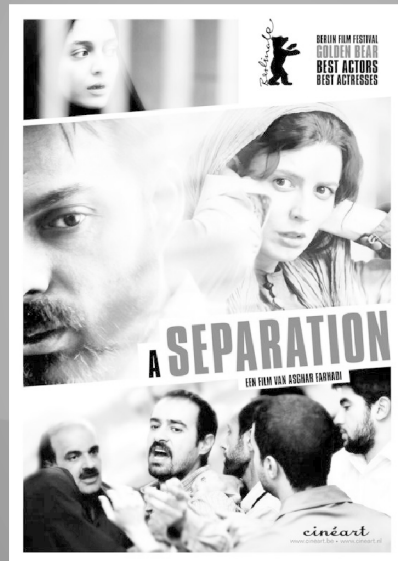
FAIRNESS AND RECIPROCITY

The crucial significance of justice for cohesion of social structures has been recognized by sociologists. Gouldner⁴⁷ analyses the meaning of "reciprocity" of transactions. Reciprocity is defined as mutuality of benefits or gratifications, and Gouldner states: "The *norm* of reciprocity is a concrete and special mechanism involved in the maintenance of any stable social system."^{47, p. 174} Although we agree with the sociological view that a "generalized norm of reciprocity" becomes internalized in the members of social systems, as family therapists we want to focus on a multiperson or systemic ledger of justice which resides in the interpersonal fabric of human order or "realm of the between."²⁶ The ledger comprises all those cumulative disparities of reciprocity which are inherent in the group's past history of interactions. It is the basis for the equivalency of returns. The weight of past, unrequited merit transactions modifies the equivalency of the mutually contingent exchange of benefits in ongoing interpersonal relationships. Nonreceiving parents affect the ledger and therefore the personality development of their children differently than nongiving parents.

To Gouldner people make their choices based upon an internalized social norm. In that way a social structure stays stable. But the norm of ethics is inside the man. It is **internalized**.

To Boszormenyi-Nagy there is the multipersonal systemic ledger that lies **in between** people.

What is relational ethics?



Filmmakers are also human beings. They often show us who we are. Asghar Farhadi (Iran) made the wonderful film 'A Separation' in 2011.

A married couple is faced with a difficult decision - to improve the life of their child by moving to another country or to stay in Iran and look after a parent who has Alzheimer's disease. In the opening sequence you see a man and a woman before the judge. She wants to leave the country, but he wants to stay in Iran to look after his father. Those two people love each other. They are driven by the question of what is good care for their daughter. In this fragment they quarrel about the balances of give and take between themselves or between either of them and their daughter or parent. The scene is in the tribunal, before the judge who gives them the command, the order to solve the problem themselves. I think it is all parallel to the intrinsic relational or transgenerational tribunal in contextual therapy. The film won many prizes and also the Oscar for the best foreign language film in 2012.

What is relational ethics?

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QUANTITATIVE ASPECTS

Gouldner implies that reciprocity has an intrinsic quantitative measure, determined by the extent of equity in exchanges. On one extreme there is the full equity of exchanged benefits and, on the other, the situation in which one party gives nothing in return for benefits received. Between these two limiting cases lie a variety of seeming or real exploitations.

The question of how to define equivalence of mutually exchanged benefits is a key issue in parent-child relationships. The youngest infant requires the most care and concern from the mother, yet, paradoxically, most women experience more gratification in caring for infants than for older children. Then how does the baby give to the adult and how can we measure the degree of equivalence in the mutual give-and-take of their day-to-day relationships? In the language of sociology one can speak of *heteromorphic* "tit for tat" and *homeomorphic* "tai for tai" reciprocity.^{47, p. 172} As Gouldner suggests, homeomorphic reciprocity must have been important in early societies as their talionic measure of punishment and reparation for crimes. Gouldner adds, "We should also expect to find mechanisms which induce people to *remain* socially indebted to each other and which *inhibit* their complete repayment." He quotes a Seneca Indian statement to illustrate this point: "A person who wants to repay a gift too quickly with a gift in return is an unwilling debtor and an ungrateful person."^{47, p. 175} How many forms of parental refusal to accept repayment on the part of the child fit this model?

SYSTEM LEVELS OF BOOKKEEPING

Ultimately, the considerations of justice and reciprocity bring us back to the issue of levels of depth of inquiry. Equivalence of exchanged benefits is easiest to assess when the exchanges are superficial or material. However, the more important layers of motivation are connected with a private, imponderable range of interactions. In order to be able to grow, one must recognize and deal with the invisible bonds originating from one's formative period of growth. Otherwise one is apt to live them out as repetitious patterns in all future relationships. A therapeutic rationale based merely on the observable behavior of families will by necessity collude with an element of escapism and denial. Nonetheless, it is true that behavior can, at least temporarily, be changed without affecting its motivational components. The intrinsic therapeutic "contract" will determine the extent of change in the system. Both the therapist and the family have many options to make the change in superficial rather than essential dimensions of family relations.

SYSTEMIC AND INDIVIDUAL CONSIDERATIONS OF SOCIAL ETHICS

To differentiate between multiperson systemic and individual levels of obligations in families, we assume that justice as a generalized moral norm is a fundamental social mechanism and that as such it transcends both the actions of any particular individual's motivations and internalization processes. Transgression committed by the member of one family against a member of another family apparently is an individual act, but it can produce a systemic response when it leads to a vendetta between the families. Individually, each family member may internalize the reciprocity implications of the vendetta, but the whole is more than the sum total of all internalizations. Justice is composed of the synthesis of the reciprocity balance of all current individual interactions plus the ledger of past and present reciprocity accounts of the entire family.

The concept of balanced justice ledgers epitomizes the difference between individual and relational, e.g., family dynamic, theoretical models. As long as change is aimed at the individual's personality through the analysis of his experiences and character development, the therapist can ignore change in a relational system. Only through a consideration of the hierarchies of obligations in the total system and of motivations of all individuals can we begin to understand and affect the total context of persons in relationship.

Individually based psychodynamic or motivational theories are inadequate to handle the socioethical reality of the consequences of human action. One person's assertiveness, achievement, or sexual prowess, while centrally relevant to the individual's self-seeking goals, do not encompass the vicissitudes of how they will affect the needs of others. While classical Freudian theory appropriately emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility as a valid therapeutic goal, its disregard for the ethics of social reality calls for urgent reconsideration. However valuable its contribution to the understanding of man as a

The problem in the balances of give and take is that it is very difficult to measure what is fair. In human relations it is not necessary to give the same amount of gifts in return.

Nagy quotes Gouldner who describes that it is important to receive and to maintain the relation OUT of balance.

Gouldner quotes a Seneca indian statement: 'A person who wants to repay a gift too quickly with a gift in return is an unwilling debtor and an ungratefull person.'

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is 'the ethics of living together'

Mogobe Ramose (De Morgen, January 24, 2018)

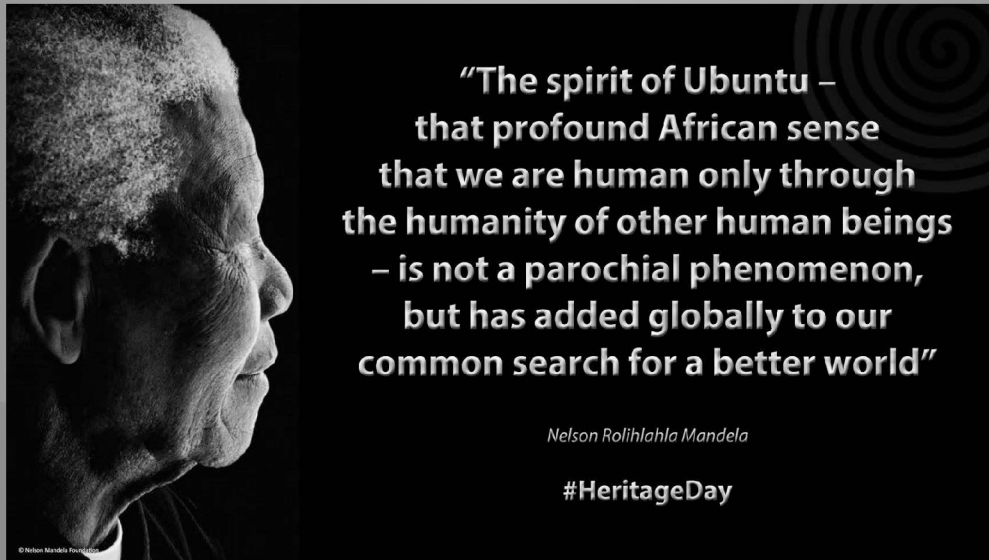
- Reciprocity !
- Generations are connected
- Fairness and justice
- Balance
- Link between justice and mental health



(Ramose, 2017)

By coincidence I found an interview with the South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose in a Flemish newspaper about UBUNTU. It is the philosophy in the southern part of Africa. Ramose wrote a book on UBUNTU which is translated in Dutch. The parallels with the contextual approach are striking.

Ubuntu



Ramose quotes Nelson Mandela.

Relational ethics is a human reality that
has so many power in it!

What is wrong with relational ethics?

“If reciprocity of commitment and earned entitlement are so fundamental to a viable and balanced life context, why has the ethical dimension in family life basically remained unaddressed? Why has psychotherapy so consistently ignored the existence and implications of this dimension? ”

(Between Give and Take, Chapter 10 p 286)

What is wrong with relational ethics ?

- It is too close to religion and ideology
- It is too complex
- It can not be measured
- It refers to guilt and punishment
- It is not sexy

Relational ethics in a world of evidence based thinking

In mental health care there is the tendency towards more 'evidence based working'.

Evidence based psychotherapy seems only to be interested in the individual and not in reciprocity.

Can fairness in between people be counted and measured?

Is there enough 'evidence based practice' that taking action towards relatives has a healing effect?

Relational ethics in a world of evidence based thinking

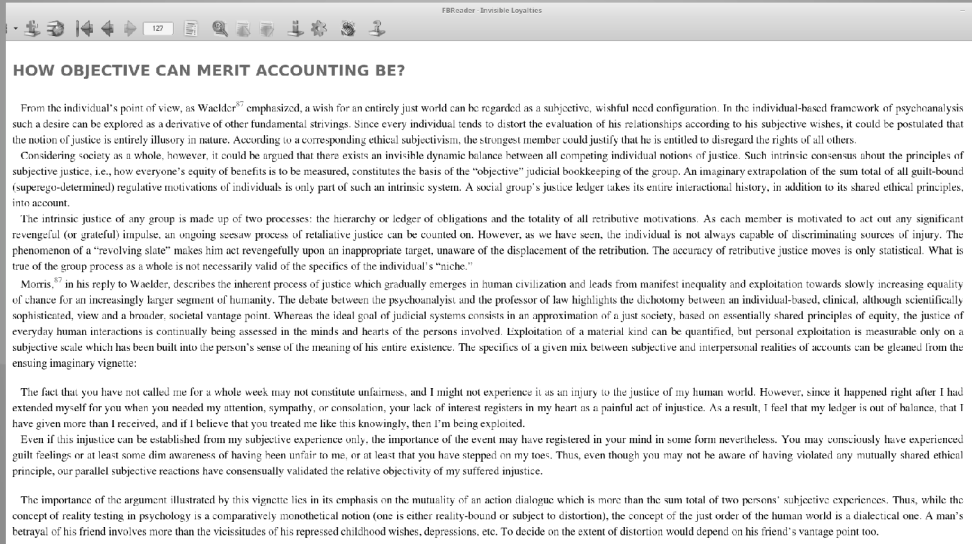


I saw this picture first in the famous TED-talk by Brené Brown on vulnerability.

It is the problem we have to deal with today.

Governments and insurance companies only want to pay for psychotherapy that is based upon empirical evidence.

Relational ethics in a world of evidence based thinking



How can you count relational ethics? How can the balance of give and take be measured? Is my own experience of this balance enough? Much depends on the circumstances and what already has happened between us. It also depends on the ledger between the people with who I am connected. This makes it very complex. Who decides what is fair? Is it the therapist? Is it the client?

Relational ethics in a world of evidence based thinking

Relational Ethics Scale (Hargrave 1991): 'It is necessary, therefore, to consider the individual's stance in the relational dimension as the most logical element to provide information about the interpersonal aspects of relational ethics as well as perceptions concerning the interpersonal dimension of the family.'

Following this logic, the authors decided to use a self-report instrument in the scale development.'

Hargrave and colleagues faced the same problem while developing the Relational Ethics Scale (RES). One can not count merit and debt between people.

You can only ask the different persons how they feel about it. Which brings us to the dimension of the personal psychology.

Relational ethics in a world of evidence based thinking

- Wetzels, J. (2017) Gebruik van de Relatieve Ethiek Schaal binnen de contextuele hulpverlening. (*Use of the RES in contextual help*). The article mentions also other attempts to scientific approach.
- Hermans, W. en Van Loon, J. (2014) 'Op zoek naar de sleutel.' (*Looking for the key*): How does contextual therapy work?
- Gangamma, R. (2008) Relational ethics among couples in therapy.
- ...

There is of course scientific research on contextual therapy. These are some titles and I know that there is much more. Do they all face the same problem? The only way to reach the 'realm of the in between' is the individual stance.

Relational ethics in a world of evidence based thinking

There seems to be little scientific research to prove relational ethics is what makes contextual therapy work. Why? Is it necessary?

Jaap van der Meiden (VCW Vakblad 2018):
Scientific research is what contextual therapy needs for the future.

Relational ethics and practice based thinking

“What is helpful in therapy”.

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy was sure ‘relational ethics’ is what works. Taking the risk to give again should have a healing effect.

What about the ‘common factors’, therapeutic alliance, motivation, placebo, client factors? (De Vries, 2007)

What about you? What do you think what works?

Discussion

1. Is it really helpful to focus on relational ethics, as Boszormenyi-Nagy claims? What makes you think that?
2. Can ethics be measured? Is it helpful measuring 'relational ethics'?
3. Is 'relational ethics' the unique selling proposition of contextual therapy? Do other therapeutic paradigms focus on relational ethics? Which ones?
4. How to 'sell' relational ethics?