

# Relational Ethics as Enrichment of Social Justice: Applying Elements of Contextual Therapy to Social Work

## **Abstract**

This article applies insights of the contextual theory and therapy, developed by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, to the body of knowledge and practice of social work. Social work and contextual therapy share their focus on justice. In social work, it is mainly elaborated as social justice, placed in the discourse of politics and action. Contextual therapy however, elaborates justice as relational ethics; a fundamental element of human relationships, expressed in an innate tendency to care for each other. According to the contextual theory, evoking this reciprocal care enhances human wellbeing. Therefore, next to the focus on social justice on macro level, this article introduces a focus on relational justice on micro level. Relational justice aims at restoring and enhancing relationships within the family, with those who are relevant for the wellbeing of the family, and with the family's context. A focus on relational justice encompasses a promising resource for human wellbeing, and a constructive framework for a contextual social work approach. Subsequently, applicable interventions from the contextual therapy, derived from a previously conducted qualitative research on the practice of contextual therapy, are tailored to the social work practice. Conclusively, this article states that justice within family relationships is an important element for successfully realizing of social justice.

## **Keywords**

Contextual therapy, Relational ethics, Social justice, Relational justice, Social work practice, Family

## **Introduction**

'Social workers are the unheralded pioneers of what later became the field of family therapy' (Broderick & Schrader, 1991, p. 5; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008, p. 108; A. Wood, 1996). Some of the first family therapists were social workers (Broderick & Schrader, 1991; Herman, 2001; Kamphuis, 1977; Verheij & Loon, 1989; K. M. Wood & Geismar, 1989), and social work and family therapy still share the premise that the family and its social context are important elements for relational and psychological health. One of those family therapy modalities is contextual therapy, founded by Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and his associates (henceforth: Nagy). As with social work, justice is the central theme in contextual therapy. It was developed during the emergence of family therapy in the previous century and focuses on relationships with the assumption that justice is the driving force (van Heusden & van den Eerenbeemt, 1983, p. 22). This premise, called 'relational ethics,' forms the core of the

contextual theory and is applied to a methodology and interventions. Social work and contextual therapy share the premise that human well-being is strongly connected with, if not dependent on justice.

Social work focuses on *social* justice. It stands up for those who suffer from presumably unintended but unjust consequences of developments and situations on a macro level. This aligns with the ‘Global Definition of the Social Work Profession’, which speaks of promoting ‘social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people’ (International Federation of Social Workers, 2017). Consequently, social justice is often approached from a political perspective.

Contextual theory approaches justice as a vital element of the fundamental nature of human relationships (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987c, pp. 54, 121; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 417), and has elaborated this into a theory of critical inter-personal elements that contribute to, or undermine, justice within particular family relationships and their contexts. This theory highlights how relational injustice can be passed on and how it becomes a burden for future generations. This is likely an important element of repeating injustice and deprivation through generations, in other words, repeating history: ‘Justice can be regarded as a web of invisible fibres running through the length and width of the history of family relationships’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984, p. 54). Contextual theory is applied to contextual therapy with the main objective of restoring injustice and enhancing responsible care within relationships. Therefore, Nagy describes contextual therapy as ‘inherently preventive’ because care for the family -and in particular the younger generation- is an investment in the future (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987c, p. 211). ‘Our responsible caring feeds into the substrate of posterity’s fate. The fibre of responsibility for consequences connects the health of the present with the preventive interests of the future’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987d, p. 296).

For this reason, the authors suggest enriching social work’s focus on social justice with a focus on *relational* justice. Hereafter, relational justice is elaborated according the contextual theory, presuming that it can enrich the social work body of knowledge and that the application of this theory can be tailored to the practice of social work. Proceeding, a concise overview of the history, and a description of the ethics and values of social work will be followed by a brief explanation of the core of contextual theory and therapy. This article will be completed with some concluding remarks.

## **History of social work**

The roots of contemporary social work can be traced back to the era of industrialization and the resulting changes in society. Until then, there had always been charity, but it was mostly voluntary and somewhat disorganized. However, because of the increasing number of people who appealed to it, better organization and professionalization of care became necessary. This led to the development of social work with two different approaches.

In line with the charity-approach, a part of the social workers kept focussing on individual families and communities and their environments, the so-called micro level. The further professionalization of this approach was inspired by for instance the work of Freud and the

advent of other psychological and psychiatric theories (K. M. Wood & Geismar, 1989). Also the development of social casework, the first method for social work (Roberts & Nee, 1970, p. xiii), described by Mary Richmond in her publication *Social Diagnosis* (Richmond, 1917), contributed greatly to the professionalization of this approach in social work. To this day, social work still takes advantage of insights derived from several other relevant fields (Hare, 2004, p. 414; International Federation of Social Workers, 2017).

Another part of the social workers focused more on solidarity with the poor by participating and initiating a cooperative way of living together in settlements and neighbourhoods (Geertsema, 2004; Hering, 2009; Wood & Geismar, 1989). This approach, aiming at change on a macro level, professionalized in a more political direction, with for instance Jane Adams as one of its representatives (Addams, 1902, 1912). Later, and in line with this, the critical theory (Fraser & Matthews, 2008; Gambrell, 2006) and the anti-oppressive social work (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Dominelli, 2002) developed.

Even though social work has always had to adapt to developments and events in society, social work has maintained an unambiguous general principle and central value: justice for every human being, and especially for those whose rights are threatened. However, it also still struggles with its dual focus: providing assistance to individual families and addressing society's responsibility for human well-being.

### *Ethics and values*

The International Federation of Social Workers (henceforth IFSW) states that 'principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). It confirms that social work is one of the most normative professions in the field of care (Reamer, 2006, p. 4). IFSW's core values have remained the same throughout the years, but their interpretation of those values has changed under influence of the evolving perceptions of morality, humanity, responsibility, care, etc. Social work was initially rather moralizing and paternalizing compared with contemporary perceptions of care, which hold the conviction that the service users need assistance to maximally apply their 'individual human rights' in their lives (International Federation of Social Workers, 2017).

Individual rights, however, cannot exist without individual responsibility. This can be recognised in 'the commentary notes for the global definition of social work'. It states that its anthropology is based on the inter-dependence of the environment, encompassing the interdependence of human beings, which is reflected in stipulated principles as 'collective responsibility' and 'reciprocal relationships' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2017). Social justice, therefore, cannot exist without relational responsibility and human well-being cannot exist without reciprocal care.

So, social work needs a conceptual framework and application, by which social workers can determine and justify how to bring these grounded values of social justice into a practice with a focus on micro level, the relationships within the family as well as its relationship with their social context. However, applying social justice on this level appears to be not so easy. This is where contextual therapy may be of use. The contextual therapy has extensively elaborated

the application of justice into family-contexts. This aligns with van Ewijk's 'contextual social work' approach and its 'person in context' perspective (van Ewijk, 2018, p. 120). In this article, it is elaborated as a normative approach, based on *relational* justice and focused on restoring and enhancing relationships, both within the family as well as with those who are relevant for the well-being of the family. Relational justice is therefore elaborated as an important second focus of social work.

### **The contextual theory: Relational ethics**

Contextual theory is based on the postulate that people not only need each other but also have an innate tendency to care for each other (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 78). Nagy refers in this respect to Martin Buber (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984). In contextual theory this postulate is elaborated as reciprocal care and responsibility. Nagy defined these concepts as ethical principles: if someone needs care, he is ethically entitled to receive care. Conversely, if one is confronted with someone who needs care, one has an ethical responsibility to give care. Both entitlement and responsibility refer to an underlying principle of relational justice, which the contextual theory states is 'the driving force of relationships' (van Heusden & van den Eerenbeemt, 1983, p. 22) with consequences through generations. Both just and unjust actions from one generation influence the next, which means that current generations have also a responsibility to the coming generations. This approach is called 'contextual' because context not only refers to the structure of the environment but also to the consequences of previous, and the responsibility for future generations.

This contextual anthropology of human relationships thus rests on two pillars: the interconnectedness of human beings, and justice as its guiding principle. In 1979, Nagy described this as 'relational ethics' (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987b, p. 243). In the contextual theory, intergenerational interconnectedness and reciprocal care are further elaborated as mutual 'giving and receiving.' Justice is elaborated as 'balance' in contextual theory and is known as 'the balance of give and receive'<sup>1</sup>: 'We are speaking of the ebb and flow of give and take in a relationship over time, whereby each partner may come to feel that however much he or she has invested in the relationship, the other has more or less kept space' (Ulrich, 1983, p. 189). 'Giving' in relationships stems, ethically speaking, from loyalty or responsibility: children are loyal to their parents, and parents are responsible for their children. In turn, both receive constructive entitlement or merit, by which they gain freedom to live, a crucial element of human well-being.

However, 'an impeccably just or fair distribution of advantages and burdens is an idealized goal' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 65) and in every human life things may go wrong. This does not necessarily mean that those relationships will also be seriously disturbed. However, sometimes relationships are disturbed, and contextual theory describes how this impedes the balance of give and receive, leading to serious disruptions. In summary,

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<sup>1</sup> Initially, the contextual theory talked about 'give and take'. Later it changed to 'give and receive' (Bakhuizen, 2000; Dillen, 2004; van Rhijn & Meulink-Korf, 1997).

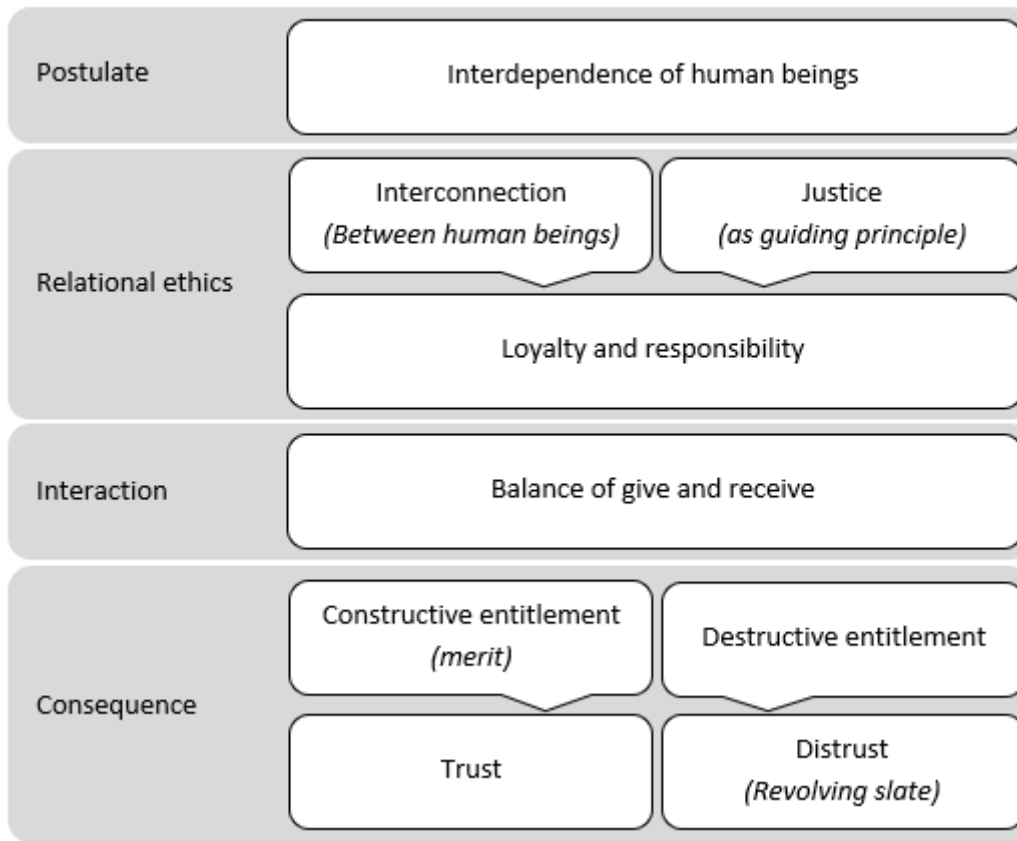
the intergenerational consequences of relational ethical injustice threaten the development and functioning of the person concerned. Consequently, the injustice may turn into destructive entitlement, which can be passed on as a revolving slate: playing out unfaced and unresolved, unbalanced intergenerational unfairness against their marriage partners, their children, and the world at large (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987b, p. 271; Krasner & Joyce, 1995, p. 98).

The ultimate goal of contextual therapy and its methodology is the ‘prevention of dysfunction and the rehabilitation and strengthening of the family's own “immune system”-the resources of care, concern, and connection’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Ulrich, 1981, p. 210). This aligns with the premise that a fair balance of give and receive benefits all family members, as well as their relationships within the family context. Therefore, the contextual therapist uses his or her insight into the realm of relational ethics to expose those injustices and imbalances that hamper relationships and block access to these resources. This process also addresses previous generations in order to uncover revolving slates of injustice.

Ultimately, the contextual therapist aims at evoking a genuine dialogue between those involved in the presented issues. A dialogue opens possibilities for exoneration, the main contextual intervention for restoring trust by eliminating the burden of injustice and debt. The most important working-method is multidirected partiality: being successively partial to all who are involved into the issues at hand, present or absent. The therapist is determined to ‘discover the humanity of every participant -even of the family’s “monster-member.”’ This makes mutual understanding and reciprocal recognition possible, or at least it gives the therapist an opportunity to function as a model in crediting those who are entitled to it (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 418).

Below, the most crucial elements of the contextual theory are shown schematically:

### Schematic overview of the core concepts of the contextual theory



### The relevance of relational ethics for social work

According to Nagy, relational ethics is ‘rooted in the ontology of the fundamental nature of all living creatures’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 420). This insight into the ontological grounded ‘innate tendency to care about other people’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 78) is founded on an alternation of assumptions, theoretical concepts, clinical observations, and beliefs and reflections by Nagy (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987c; Sollee, 1992). However, today this innate tendency to care is given some support in recent life sciences. Various studies point to evidence for possible biological origins of fairness and reciprocal care (de Waal, 2009, 2013; Wohlleben, 2016), indicating that taking care of the weak and vulnerable could be a general element in living beings. This is also presumed by Damasio in his neurobiological research (Damasio, 2012). Human morality, therefore, may be not so much separated from, but part of the human nature. This would support Nagy’s conviction that relational ethics does not come from a moralistic point of view, ‘connected with adjudicating, value preferences, and idealism’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Markham, 1987, p. 243). Recent research indicates that relational ethics is possibly connected with, or even belongs to life as such.

The contextual theory provides insight into the ways in which damaged humanity and injustice can be passed on through generations, accumulating destructive entitlement. This is not limited to individuals or families. Generations of troubled families are collectively

destructive entitled due to an ongoing deprivation and social injustices, causing a continuing revolving slate. It is important for social workers to be aware of the often hidden and unknown intergenerational impacts of injustice. Social workers can do justice to the service-users by addressing and giving recognition for these intergenerational injustices. This is also a way for social workers to gain the trust of the service users.

Being treated unjustly, however, does not relieve people of their relational ethical responsibility to act justly themselves. This, of course, should never trivialize the injustice from others, but capitalizing on the inner sense of responsibility is a far more profound working method towards restoring human well-being. It is well known that people who experience injustice tend to feel victimized. Therefore, social workers have learned to explicitly acknowledge those who suffer from injustice and unfairness, and address those who are responsible. This is an important element in helping people to regain control over their own lives, though it is not the decisive step toward the needed movement for restoring relational justice. Caring for the deprived should never consist of taking over responsibility, because that carries the risk of enhancing victimhood. Good care is, according to the contextual theory, aimed at restoring or improving humanity by helping the service users gain meaning; in terms of relational ethics: to help them to 'give', instead of waiting to 'receive'. Giving leads to reciprocity, which enhances self-validation and the balance of give and receive. Contextual theory and therapy provides knowledge and insight into the blockages and disruptions that impede giving and provides guidelines on how these can be addressed.

### **Contextual interventions in social work**

In an earlier research, the authors analysed the therapeutic practice of Nagy, which led to the formulation of the core interventions of contextual therapy, all of which are ultimately aimed at provoking the innate sense of care and responsibility (van der Meiden, Noordegraaf, & van Ewijk, 2018). The interventions below come from this study. However, since these interventions are derived from a therapeutic practice, only those interventions have been selected that are suitable for, or could be tailored to application in social work.

Each intervention starts with an introduction from the contextual theory, after which the relevance and application for social work with a focus on relational justice is described. Some interventions are illustrated by fragments, coming from the named research on the practice of Nagy.

The following interventions are described in turn: multidirected partiality; focus on the positive; enhancing mutual trust; gaining by giving; eliciting resources; and overlapping interventions.

#### *Multidirected partiality*

Multidirected partiality is the 'chief therapeutic attitude and method' of contextual therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; p. 418). This means that the contextual therapist is not neutral or impartial but is alternately partial to everyone involved, present or not present,

including all who may be affected by the therapy process. The contextual therapist will try to 'empathize with and credit everyone on a basis that actually merits crediting' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 419). By doing this, every family member present is confronted with the side of the other, possibly even for the first time. These 'multidirected trust building efforts' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1980, p. 773) may lead to interest, understanding, and even acknowledgement and will eventually increase the possibilities for a genuine dialogue.

Multidirected partiality can be employed as a structure of talking in turns. This brings to mind the idea of separate speaking and listening by Anderson (1991). Talking in turns results in requiring the non-speaking family members to listen more than talk themselves. Seikkula and Arnkil emphasize that this is meant to foster inner dialogue instead of commenting on one another's utterances (2006). This inner dialogue aligns with Nagy, stating that dialogue combines an individual and a relational goal (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1996). The individual goal aims at helping individual family members articulate their side, their manner of giving, their attempts to be helpful, and their experiences of unfairness. Also Anderson underlines this individual goal: '(...) when one expresses oneself, one is in the process of realizing one's identity' (Andersen, 1992, p. 89). Nagy states that the individual part is dialectically connected to the relational part, showing fair consideration of the other side and consequently leading to its entitlement. According to Bøe et al. 'the dialogue of the present makes it possible to re-relate to past and future, which in turn changes ways of existing in the dialogue of the present' (2015, p. 167). As such, a dialogue creates a relational atmosphere of trustworthiness and enhance the balance of justice between the participants (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987a, p. 153).

Social workers may benefit from multidirected partiality, a working method that contributes to rendering relational justice for all concerned. Multidirected partiality helps the family to give mutual recognition for accumulated damage and disappointments as well as for care that was given in the past. This will strengthen the family, because it enhances togetherness, mutual trust and reciprocal responsibility. In case the family members do not do so spontaneously, the social worker can be model by starting giving recognition.

Multidirected partiality also provides a method that can assist social workers as they navigate between conflicting interests most social workers are confronted with (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). These conflicting interests can be relevant participants, who have a right of attention and partiality. Thus, the social worker helps the family to gain sufficient insight into the relevant interests and persons concerned and can help them to address these issues in a way that renders justice to everyone involved. As a result, the social worker creates a basis from which he or she can 'urge people towards more fair relationships and appropriate behavior' (van Ewijk, 2018, p. 121).

A process in which all participants get the opportunity to express themselves may highlight issues that need change and development. The social worker can show his or her solidarity by acknowledging the injustice and the painful situations it causes. The social worker should also lead the family to a search for remaining possibilities. By doing this, he or she renders justice



towards them by trusting in the positive resources within the family, and by empowering the family instead of completing solidarity with the family, with the risk of becoming a co-victim.

### *Focus on the positive*

Contextual therapy does not emphasize the search for injustice, but aims at identifying and strengthening fairness, the ways family members care for each other, and other positive attributes. It assumes that every human being and every family member recognizes and wishes to answer the appeal of the other, though sometimes in a covered or imperfect way. Tracing and highlighting this positive inner-tendency builds self-confidence of individual family members and enhances mutual trust. Nagy often starts a first session with introducing this view:

*Nagy: I would like to focus on eh, good things. By that I mean not to point the finger looking at faults. Because I see families as helping each other or potentially helping each other and I would like to see the resources in families, how people's relationship can be a resource. So, I am more interested in the positive than in the negative, so that's the way I would like to look at it. (P8:17)*

Also, during the sessions, Nagy regularly acknowledges and appreciates the positive, helpful initiatives by which family members try to be honest, helpful and caring. At the same time, he prevents the pathology, the negative or the destructive tendencies from gaining too much attention. He sometimes even explicitly asks for this positive attitude:

*Nagy: this subject has never been discussed between you and your mother*

*Mother: well, it has been talked about*

*Nagy: Well, do you think there could be a positive way to talk about that here? (P4:53)*

This focus on the positive is distinguished from the well-known focus on identifying pathology and from a linear cause-effect epistemology which search for a solution to the problem or the disease. Social workers, too, are at risk of focusing on the social work-equivalent of pathology: the disadvantaged situation, and a linear search for the cause of these problems on macro level. This may distract them from focusing on strengths, possibilities and positive initiatives within the family, and may risk causing the family members to feel even more victimized by an unjust society. The authors therefore state that social workers can be inspired by the contextual therapy, because it approaches clients not from the perspective of deprivation, but from trust in their possibilities and strength, and with the conviction that clients will benefit from a restored balance within their relationships. By expressing confidence in their possibilities and by identifying and acknowledging their positive contributions, the social worker can strengthen their self-confidence and trust in their own possibilities, which engenders hope. It is also an important step towards restoring reciprocity within relationships. By doing so, the social worker again functions as a model, demonstrating how the service users can acknowledge one another for positive contributions, initiatives and care. In terms of relational ethics, these interactions occur in the balance of mutual care, the balance of give and receive.

### *Enhancing mutual trust*

In contextual therapy, reciprocal care among family members acts as a barometer of reciprocal trust, the degree in which family members can count on each other, i.e., the degree of relational justice. It is 'the dynamic foundation of viable, continuing, close relationships' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 417). That is why Nagy looks for topics and events in which this reciprocal care becomes visible. For instance, in the example below, he speaks with a man and wife about the wife's hysterectomy, and how she felt supported by him:

*Nagy: But did you have any feelings to give some kind of, to be with her in this thing or was she more or less kind of alone with that. . . (P6:122)*

According to Nagy, people show it when they feel unfairly treated by other family members: 'But you open your ears in the first session, you already hear them, the more they suffer, the more so, they talk about fairness and justice in some manner of their own language' (Sollee, 1992, 41:00–41:12). If social workers ignore the signs of unfairness and injustice, their relationship with the service users(s) may be impaired, and, most importantly, they may miss a chance to help the family members restore what has been damaged. Identifying these signs and bringing them into a dialogue among family members may prevent the perceived injustice from eventually degenerating into destructive behaviour, and it will enhance mutual trust. Families with mutual trust are stronger and have more opportunities to cope with external influences and injustices.

### *Gaining by giving*

The concept of the balance of give and receive encompasses another important issue, which closely correlates with the foregoing. As explained above, human beings receive constructive entitlement or merit, trustworthiness and self-validation by 'giving'. This ultimately gives them freedom to live. Although many deprived people have a strong focus on 'receiving', and often the right to receive, they would, ethically speaking, gain more by giving. This does not mean that social workers should stop raising their clients' rights and advocating their interests, especially regarding essential living conditions. In addition, it is true that when justice is done, it enhances the client. However, as far as human well-being is concerned, people gain more satisfaction from their value for others than from material contentment. The focus on 'giving' opens a source of self-confidence and strength, replacing the alleged dependence of 'receiving'. Evoking such a focus on giving within the family can be elaborated by questions about how clients did try to help the other:

*Nagy: But did the two of you work together on that as a team. Does Peter help you with that feeling or are you pretty much alone with that feeling of not being appreciated or recognized by your mother? (P6:471)*

*Nagy: what did you try, how did you try to interrupt- intervene there or or be helpful to them when when all of this was going on between them? (P8:96)*

Nagy invites his clients to explain their intentions for their helping behaviour, how they tried to cooperate or give. This helps the participants understand the giver, and they are invited to express their appreciation for the way the giver has tried to care. Receiving appreciation for the giving enhances the self-confidence of the giver and gives entitlement to those family members who offer acknowledgement. Instead of focusing on receiving, which stresses the dependency of the client, the focus on his or her giving contributes to gaining meaning and self-confidence.

This also provides clients with opportunities for acquiring meaning in society. Social work can, from this principle, develop initiatives where people can be of importance for others. In doing so, considering oneself dependent on receiving care changes into enhancing self-validation and self-esteem.

### *Eliciting resources*

Nagy states that ‘the family is the source of the most fundamental resources and relational options, even if there are seriously shocking inadequacies in the behaviour of some members, and even if the family as a social institution has been the location of flagrant injustices (...)’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Grunebaum, & Ulrich, 1991, p. 209). This is, for example, illustrated by the following fragment:

*What I’m interested in is really the positive resources that we all may overlook in our relationships. And sometimes the resources are right around the corner where seemingly trouble is located (P6:41).*

The most important human resource is the innate tendency to care for the other, though it is sometimes covered or hidden. Contextual therapy focuses on unlocking and exploiting these resources, instead of focusing on pathology. Relational resources provide the ‘fuel by which fairness can be actualized’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 421). For instance, these resources consist of family members or other trusted people who render justice, give opportunities to be valuable, to gain meaning, and give acknowledgement where applicable. This elicits self-confidence and trust, and in turn enhances humanity toward others.

Social workers meet many service-users who feel victimized by the outer world. ‘They are seriously hurt in their trust, they feel indignant, not valuable anymore’ (Michielsen, Steenackers, & Mulligen, 1998, p. 32). They have lost faith in themselves, struggle with their damaged self-confidence, feel unable to be meaningful to others and to keep up with the rest of society. This attitude is understandable but not helpful. Eliciting the relational resources may be a first step in empowering these service-users.

Social workers can use the contextual methods of detecting and unlocking these resources. For instance, they can emphasize the importance of giving to each other (as discussed above), make a genogram (a schematic representation of the family over three generations) to find trustworthy family members, explore the social context to find trustable other people, and encourage the family members to adopt a pro-active attitude.

### *Overlapping interventions*

Despite the differences between social work and contextual therapy, it is neither possible nor desirable to make a watertight distinction between their practices. There is a degree of overlap, and sometimes it is even necessary to cross the borders. The research has shown unequivocally that any form of assistance or therapy in the field of psychosocial and psychological therapeutic service is highly characterized by so-called non-specific factors (Cameron & Keenan, 2010; Sprenkle, Davis, & Lebow, 2009). Since social workers are confronted with families 'with complex, unconventional networks of relationships that had built up as a result of divorces, remarriages, new partners and their families entering the family's networks' (Saltiel, 2013), ready-made solutions will not suffice. Once a social worker is trusted by the family members, they might allow him or her to also bring up the more vulnerable issues that have sometimes long been disguised by externalization, compensation or other distracting behaviour. This may bring the social worker beyond the borders of the profession, leading into a more therapeutic process in the direction of an adult re-assessment, transgenerational manoeuvres or exoneration (van der Meiden et al., 2018). In social work, the relationship with the service-users should be decisive for the methodical choices of the professional, instead of a rigidly following the boundaries of the profession.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article states that human well-being is best served by disclosing, highlighting and enriching the ever-present resources belonging to the realm of relational ethics: an innate tendency to care for the other and to do justice to the other. This is elaborated in social work with a focus on relational justice as an enrichment of social justice, strengthening mutual care within families and their social context, assuming that it contributes to human well-being.

In this article, the authors argue that social workers would do well to focus first on issues at the micro level, empowering the service users, helping them find the already present resources, and encouraging them to take their responsibility for each other and for their environment. In that regard, already promising initiatives can be found (Driessens & van Regenmortel, 2006; Heyndrickx, Barbier, Driesen, Ongevalle, & Vansevenant, 2005; Heyndrickx, Barbier, Ongevalle, & Vansevenant, 2011; van Regenmortel, 2008, 2011; van Regenmortel, Steenssens, & Steens, 2016). However, to some extent, the social worker will also intervene in macro issues. For example, when the service user cannot gain access to relevant regulations or has coordination problems with institutions and organizations. Concerning social justice, some issues occur at a level that transcends individual cases; however, larger social work institutions and umbrella organizations may be better equipped and are better negotiating partners with governments. Social workers are responsible for identifying practices that adversely affect the rights and well-being of the deprived in society and can report such practices to these more appropriate organizations. This allows them to focus all attention on the micro- level of social justice: working on relational justice and on a fair balance of give and receive.

Although social work focuses on the cohabitation of human beings, here the authors would like to point out the importance of the interdependence of human beings and their natural environment, as is also mentioned by IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers, 2017). Especially in this time of climate warming, it becomes painfully clear how human beings have neglected this interdependence. In that regard, social work should ask itself how it is able to contribute on rebalancing care for the non-human world or environment and the sustainability for the next generations (Ife, 2012, p. 309). The expansion of the social work body of knowledge with knowledge about, and insight into the relational-ethical context thus enriches the relevance of social work at micro and macro levels. It also relates to the care for future generations, which is one of the most important human responsibilities.

This article is a recommendation to social workers to integrate the useful elements of the contextual theory and therapy into their practices. Therefore, the authors intertwined the framework and wealth of the contextual theory and therapy with the principles and richness of social work. Furthermore, by differentiating social justice into a more macro political social justice, and a micro relational justice, and by shaping the core principles of contextual therapy towards social work practices, this article adds to both the body of knowledge as well as the toolbox of social work.

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