After all, they are still my parents. About exoneration and forgiveness[1]

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Introduction

Good morning.

I would like to talk with you about exoneration and forgiveness. For me, exoneration is one of the elements that made me delve into contextual thinking. I was attracted by the fact that this approach in family therapy introduced an element bordering forgiveness. As far as I know, Nagy was the first in that regard. And contextual therapy is still one of the few modalities which explicitly focuses on such a process as exoneration. But unfortunately, I do not know of any specific research on exoneration. So, what would be more appropriate as to start such research?

But I did not. Instead, I researched forgiveness. Together with Alvin Lander from Israel and Valentina Simon from Romania we started international research on adult children who have forgiven their parents. And in 2022 I started even another study on forgiveness among Dutch respondents only.

I can imagine you're wondering: why forgiveness, if you want to learn more about exoneration? Well, first of all, exoneration is not really a well known concept. At least not in the Netherlands. So, a call for participation of adult children who have exonerated their parents is likely to receive limited response.

But even more: There is an ongoing discussion about differences and similarities between exoneration and forgiveness. So, research into forgiveness could be helpful in that discussion, and shed some light on how they are related. After all, my goal is to ultimately develop tools and guidelines for therapists and other caregivers. Guidelines by which they can assist or coach especially adult children in exonerating or forgiving their parents. Because I think this process definitely deserves more attention in therapy. So, therefor, the focus of this keynote is: How are exoneration and forgiveness related, and what can we learn from it. As such, I will try to find the elements of exoneration, and compare them with the experiences of our respondents.

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Exoneration

Before diving into exoneration, I want to start with a short story:

> *A young man stands before his father. His father sits behind a glass window and wears a gray coat. He is clearly in prison and looks sullenly ahead. The young man is nervous. In his hand he holds a small pile of cards and looks his father straight in the eye. Then he picks up a card and shows it. The card reads, 'You have neglected me'. His father does not respond. After a while, the young man shows another card, which reads, 'You have rejected me' . Again no response. Another card follows: 'And you despised me'. The father remains grim and dismissive, also after the card: 'You used my love'. Still no response. After the next card: 'You took away my ability to trust', the young man begins to cry. But continues with another card: 'You killed mom', and again, followed by the card: 'You took everything from me'. At that moment, the father also begins to cry. Both cry passionately. As if this were the moment, the boy grabs a pen and starts writing a new card. Then he shows it his father. The card says: 'Father I forgive you'. Then, the father breaks.* (Royston, 2010)

What is this story about? For me, first of all it is about the emotion of the young man and the way he addressed his father. Simple cards that reflect his pain and loss. A confronting example of what we call 'direct address' (Krasner & Joyce, 1995). But more than that, I was touched by the father, initially grim and dismissive, but eventually bursting into tears especially when his son shows him the card 'Father, I forgive you'. We know nothing about the context. What made this boy go to his father and forgive him?
We don't know if, or what process preceded that. Nor do we know how father and son fared further. Is this what we call forgiveness, or exoneration, or perhaps both? We do know that forgiveness leads to extraordinary results. And contextual theory also promises such results of exoneration.

But what exactly is exoneration? It comes from the Latin word onus, which means burden.
So, ex-oneration means un-burdening. Webster's dictionary translates it as follows: "To relieve of a responsibility, obligation, or hardship, or to clear from accusation or blame" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

In the Netherlands, exoneration belongs to a specific legal context. As it is -to my belief- here in the US also. In everyday life we might encounter exoneration for example on a sign at a parking lot that reads 'No liability accepted for any loss of damage'. Thus, the owner of the parking lot is relieved of liability or accusation of blame.

In fact, I presume that the explanation from Webster's dictionary initially more or less applied to exoneration in contextual therapy. Nagy and Spark introduced exoneration in 1973 in their book Invisible Loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). And they seem to assume that the term exoneration is quite familiar. To Nagy it probably was, because it is a legal term, and, as you might know, he grew up in the context of judges and magistrates. In Invisible Loyalties, they used it 14 times without defining it anywhere. So, that is why I think they indeed used it in its regular, legal sense, as given by Webster's.

It was not until 1986, in the book Between Give and Take, where they use the word sixty times, that Nagy and Krasner gave their own definition: 'a process of lifting the load of culpability off the shoulders of a given person whom heretofore we may have blamed' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 416). And elsewhere Nagy summarizes it literally as 'unburdening from blame' (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1991).

But in contextual theory, exoneration is not about parking lots, but about serious violations between people. Think of the offences against the young man in the story above. He speaks of neglect, despise, reject, et cetera. And here, the parent is fully responsible for the harm the child suffered. But nevertheless, contextual theory says this parent can be exonerated, that is, relieved from the burden of guilt. In this regard, we can say that what the young man does in the video fits the definition of exoneration. But what reasons can we think of that are sufficient to exonerate a father who has done such terrible things as this young man has had to endure? Even more, what can motivate this young man. And what can motivate adult children at all to exonerate their parents. According to contextual theory: their loyalty and obligation to their parents.

Contextual theory

Let me briefly explain these concepts as defined in contextual theory. Therefor, I start with the premise of contextual theory, our interdependency. Contextual theory assumes that we need each other to exist. I need you, and you need me. And from this interdependence, contextual theory derives our connectedness (van der Meiden, 2019). The fact that we cannot exist without each other connects us. But being dependent also makes us vulnerable. Vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, neglect. That is why our interdependency also involves justice, as a regulative principle. To secure vulnerability, and help us to live together in a good way. And this particularly applies to the relationship with our parents, where we can recognize this intertwining of connectedness and justice as our loyalty and our obligation to them. And in contextual theory, these are ethical concepts.

What do we mean by that? Well, loyalty is commonly known as a psychological concept; we feel loyal. And justice we know as a set of rules and regulations from the law book. But in contextual theory, loyalty and justice are ethical concepts coming from an innate sense, ‘our innately generous, loyal, caring, and giving inclinations’ (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 307). In other words: loyalty and obligation come from an ethical appeal from within. This is best recognized in the naturalness of caring for a newborn. An innate sense of justice, of care, an intrinsic longing to fair reciprocity especially in our parent-child relationships.

So, contextual theory continues: We children owe loyalty to our parents, and as such, we are inclined to exonerate them. Not coming from a law or commandment, but from our innate sense of loyalty, from our innate sense of care. An appeal from within. And as such, adult children also have an obligation to exonerate their parents for the sake of the future. Because, by doing so, we avoid passing on the injustice suffered. And, as such, we can stop a revolving slate of injustice to the next generation, to our children.

And finally, following this innate sense, exonerating my parents strengthens my wellbeing, my self-esteem, my relationships, etc. So, exoneration benefits at least three generations: my parents, my children and myself.

Elements of Exoneration

So far, a short relational ethical underpinning of exoneration. Let us now find out what contextual theory says about the elements of exoneration.

- To begin with, it seems that exoneration of parents can occur in several ways. As far as I understood it can be an intrapersonal process (without parental involvement),
  it can be an interpersonal process (with the parents involved), and even a so-called posthumous process,)when the parents have already died).

- Further, as previously said and explained, the motivation to exonerate parents comes from the innate sense of loyalty and obligation.

Then we come to the two most important, even indispensable elements.

- First, the acknowledgement of the injustice suffered. As the young man in the video does through the cards he shows. And this includes the anger, resentment, and pain about the injustice. This is an important element, because children, even in adulthood, may tend to move too quickly to exonerate. Out of compassion and out of loyalty to the parent. Or to avoid the pain and anger that comes with acknowledging the injustice they have suffered. But to truly release their parents from the burden of blame, the adult child must first honestly face the injustice suffered. Only then he or she can move toward exoneration. In that order.
- The second indispensable element is the most crucial. It concerns the process of removing the sting of the injustice suffered, dismissing the accusation, and lifting the load of culpability. Here contextual theory introduces the core of exoneration, the ‘adult reassessment’ of history (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 416). Adult reassessment means that the adult child reconsiders his or her long-held interpretation of the injustice suffered. To this end, he or she examines the history of the parents. Under what circumstances did they grow up themselves, what did they experience, what injustices did they suffer. How were they to be father and mother, raising their children (van der Meiden et al., 2020, p. 354). This insight in the parents' context can change the old interpretation of feeling rejected into acknowledging the parents' own hurt and inability. And as such, it will lift the load of culpability of the parents’ shoulders. So, as Catherine Ducommun-Nagy says in her newest book: ‘exoneration should not be understood as a full exculpation of the parents but as a reappraisal of the degree of their culpability’ (Ducommun-Nagy et al., 2023, p. 106).
- And finally, according to Nagy, no single occurrence in a family's life holds greater promise of improvement than when an adult child exonerates his or her parents. (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 306). And what is that promise of improvement? Summarized: self delineation and validation, leading to the freedom to give and receive, to care and to be responsible, to be a parent.

So here we have, as far as I know, the elements of exoneration: An intrapersonal, interpersonal, or posthumous process, motivated by loyalty and obligation which, after acknowledgement of injustice suffered and through a process of adult reassessment, leads to self-delineation and self-validation, resulting in freedom to give and receive.

Forgiveness

I now want to shift to forgiveness, and especially to our research on forgiveness. Remember the focus of this keynote: How are exoneration and forgiveness related, and what can we learn from it.

The concept of forgiveness is very old and was long associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Meanwhile, forgiveness has evolved and expanded in many ways, which makes it quite difficult to define what it is. There appear to be many definitions, but in short: Forgiveness is a process in which a person's unforgiveness and anger changes to letting go of reproach and revenge in favor of understanding and compassion, and possibly repair of the relationship (Worthington, 2005).

As said, in 1973 Nagy introduced exoneration, a concept that borders forgiveness. But it was not until the end of the last century that an interest in forgiveness emerged in psychology and therapy. That interest resulted in many publications and many different views on forgiveness. An important discussion is about whether forgiveness comes from a decision or a process. Let me give you a short example of a decision-based forgiveness.

> *Gary Ridgway pleaded guilty for killing 48 women, making him the biggest serial killer in the US history. He admitted the murders to superior court on November 5th in 2003. During the trial, he sat there stone faced as victim relatives damned him and mocked him, saying: 'He's an animal', and 'I wish for him to have a long, suffering, cruel death', and 'He's going to go to hell and that's where he belongs.' But then, the emotionless façade finally cracked when a father of one of his victims appeared to surprise him with a dose of human kindness. This father addressed him: 'Mr. Ridgway, there are people here that hate you. I'm not one of them. You've made it difficult to live up to what I believe. And that is what God says to do. And that's to forgive. You are forgiven sir'. And Gary Ridgway broke.* (Shady Habashy, 2003)

This father speaks of his decision to forgive the perpetrator. And in fact, this reflects the Judeo-Christian tradition that views forgiveness as a commandment to be obeyed. And I will come back to that later.

So, while there are different views on forgiveness, on what it is and how it comes about, everyone agrees on one thing: the results of forgiveness are impressive. That's why I don't understand why forgiveness gets little attention in psychotherapy and family therapy. And despite all publications and research on forgiveness, very little research has been done on the real experiences of those who have actually forgiven another.

So, therefor we thought it would be helpful to do such research, focusing on: what can adult children tell about their experiences forgiving their parents. And I was especially interested in how these stories relate to exoneration.

Comparing Exoneration and Forgiveness

Before comparing our findings with exoneration, let us first listen to what Nagy says about the difference between exoneration and forgiveness. The following fragment comes from a recording of the 49th AAMFT annual conference for marriage and family therapy:

> *'Exoneration is really unburdening from blame. And the difference between forgiveness, ordinarily, and exoneration is that forgiveness is really dismissing the accusation, I don't pursue I don't accuse anymore, but the person is a wrongdoer. In exoneration the blaming is removed also. Sop, there is no more, neither active pursuing of blaming but culpability itself is removed. So, that the person is being viewed in a kind of average human range rather than a wrongdoer. The person and his actions are not seen as outrageous and so on.'* (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1991)

The essence of what Nagy says in this excerpt is echoed in several of his publications. For instance in Between Give and Take: 'The act of forgiveness usually retains the assumption of guilt and extends the forgiver's generosity to the person who has injured her or him. In contrast, exoneration typically results from an adult reassessment of the failing parent's own past childhood victimization'. (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 416). So, forgiveness is, according to Nagy, based on the generosity of the forgiver, where exoneration is based on an adult reassessment. In their newest publication, Catherine Ducommun Nagy and colleagues formulate this quite clear: 'the main

difference between forgiveness and exoneration lies in the fact that forgiveness does not require a reappraisal of the degree of culpability of the wrongdoer, while exoneration does' (Ducommun-Nagy et al., 2023, p. 106).

So far, the differences according to contextual theory. Let us now turn to our findings which may possibly give some insight into why people forgive, what is behind the decision to forgive or what kind of process leads to that forgiveness compared with exoneration.

As said, I will draw from two, both qualitative studies with a similar design. We interviewed adult children who responded on a call for participation in a study on forgiveness. The main criterion for participation was: having forgiven one or both parents because of relational injuries. We have not defined what we mean by forgiveness, because we were curious as to how the respondents themselves interpreted it. So, I was able to use data from a total of 63 respondents from Israel, Romania and the Netherlands. For now, I will present only those findings relevant to the comparison with the elements of exoneration.

- **Intra, interpersonal, and posthumous process**
  Regarding the persons involved in the process, our studies showed that most of the forgiveness processes had proceeded without parental involvement. The reason for not involving their parents in the process complies with what I said earlier about the loyalty of the children. Furthermore, there were a few posthumous processes. Fascinating is the fact that in half of the 20 processes of Israeli respondents, the parents were involved. And at least as interesting is the fact that in those cases the parents took the initiative to ask for forgiveness, and they apologized. This has to do with Jewish tradition and regulations, and I will come back to this briefly at the end.
- **Motivated by loyalty and obligation**
  This brings us to the motivation to forgive parents. Contextual theory lists loyalty and obligation as the main motives. Well, in the stories of the respondents these exact terms were not used so much, but we recognized them in the stories. For example, in:
  - the willingness to delve into the parents' history,
  - to search for a new interpretation of what had happened,
  - in creating space for growing empathy for the parent.
  - in wanting to stop the negative feelings about the parent,
  - wanting to stop blaming them
  - the reluctance to involve the parents in the process.

  And also, in phrases such as, 'They wouldn't be able to handle it' or 'I would cause them enormous grief.' Furthermore, the obligation to the future was evident in their concern about their own parenting, and their fear to pass on the suffering.
- **Acknowledging injustices suffered**
  An important prerequisite for exoneration is that the adult child acknowledges the injustice suffered. In our research, this acknowledgement often preceded the decision to want to forgive the parents. This decision seems to refer to decision-based forgiveness, as we saw with the man forgiving Gary Ridgway. However, in the respondents' stories, we discovered that this decision was not forgiveness itself, but initiated the beginning of the forgiveness process. Sometimes for a long time, respondents had repressed their anger and grief over abuse and neglect, or had projected it onto others. Until they could no longer avoid it, and wanted to face the reality of their history. There, the acknowledgement of the injustice suffered brought them to question

why their parents had acted as they had. And with that, a desire to forgive their parents emerged.

- **Through a process of adult reassessment**
  This brings us to the most essential element in the process of exoneration, the element that differentiates it from forgiveness: adult reassessment. This adult reassessment also seems to be the most important element in our studies. As a matter of facts, the main helping factor found in our analysis of the 63 forgiveness processes appears to be a better understanding of the parents' own victimization. That helped respondents trade guilt and anger for understanding their parents. So, respondents in fact describe the process of adult reassessment. In that process, they were greatly helped by support from siblings, friends, therapists, pastors, and others, and by reading books, watching movies, attending conferences, praying to God, et cetera. Further, the respondents showed a growing, humble realization of a shared humanity between themselves and their parents.
- **Resulting in a promise of improvement**
  Now we come to the results of a forgiveness process. According to contextual theory, exoneration results in self-delineation and validation. In our research, almost all respondents indicate that the most important outcome is 'freedom'. They say that they feel lighter, have more space, can let go of anger, are relieved of a burden, experience peace, can see the good things from the past again, and that they can think back with appreciation to their parents and their shared history. They also report a better self-esteem, more self-awareness, and more awareness of personal responsibility. In summary, the forgiveness process has a positive influence on the personal development of the respondent which encompasses self-delineation and -validation. For most respondents it also worked out in improving or restoring the relationship with the parent. For example, they say that they can talk freely with the parent, no longer feel the need to blame the parent, entrust them with taking care of their grandchildren, wanting to take care of the parent or even love the parent again. The forgiveness process has also had an effect on other relationships such as relationships with their own children and with their siblings. One respondent even noticed an improvement in the relationship between the parents.

Conclusion

Well than, what can we conclude about differences and similarities between exoneration and forgiveness?

Contextual theory identifies the lack of adult reassessment in forgiveness processes as the main difference. But honestly, in our studies we found no clear confirmation of this. On the contrary. All five elements of exoneration to some extend also emerged in the findings of our studies on forgiveness. And in particular, nearly all 63 respondents in three countries say that especially this adult reassessment helped them to understand their parents, to forgive their parents. Furthermore, this led them to the realization that their parents are just as human beings as they are. So, not so much generosity, but the realization of shared humanity helped them see the parent no longer as wrongdoer, but again as a human being.

So, the analysis of these experiences leads to the preliminary conclusion that exoneration and forgiveness are more related than contextual theory assumes. Therefore, I asked myself: Can we

understand why Nagy believed that forgiveness was only coming from generosity? And that an adult reassessment was not part of a forgiveness process?

Well, let me share my thoughts on that. As mentioned, forgiveness has long been associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this tradition, forgiveness is a commandment. According to the Bible and also the Koran, people are bound to forgive. And the church has long prioritized obedience to the commandment over supporting the process of forgiveness. As we saw with the man who forgave Gary Ridgway. And certainly at that time, in 1973, when Nagy introduced exoneration, forgiveness was still much associated with that obedience to the commandment. Perhaps that is why Nagy explicitly pointed out the importance of a process, a process of adult reassessment. But now, fifty years later in our survey, there too were Christian respondents. And their motivation also came from wanting to be obedient to God. But in our research, that motivation mostly led to a process.

So, our study raises the question of whether the connotation of forgiveness is changing. That forgiveness today, also for Christians, is seen more as a process rather than an act of obedience, out of generosity or whatsoever. And as such, forgiveness and exoneration are coming more together.

But nevertheless, there is still one significant difference. Although forgiveness and exoneration seem to describe a similar process, there is still a different perspective. In the past decades, forgiveness has been studied, examined, and analyzed from a psychological-systemic perspective. Exoneration is a concept elaborated from a relational-ethical perspective. And we all know that fourth dimension of relational ethics is indispensable. Without it, I wouldn't know how to be a therapist anymore. It reveals our innate sense of wanting to be connected and to do just, highly important in relational processes such as exoneration and forgiveness. But we also know the relevance of other perspectives and dimensions insofar as they are helpful in a relational ethical process. If forgiveness and exoneration are then more similar than we thought, perhaps we can also learn from the models and insights developed for forgiveness. To better learn how to help adult children restore their relationship with their parents by taking the blame off the parents' shoulders. Whether that's called exoneration or forgiveness.

Before I come to my final words, there is one other thing I'd like to share with you. Contextual theory speaks of the obligation of children to exonerate their parents. Not in the least to prevent a revolving slate in favor of the next generation. But what about the parents? Nowhere have I read anything about a similar obligation of parents, to actively open up to their children for exoneration or forgiveness. As is likely in Jewish tradition, as evidenced by the fact that in our study, half of the Israeli parents did. I might have overlooked it, but if not, I wonder if this would not be a valuable addition to the theory of exoneration and to our therapeutic practice. Specially because the findings from our research suggest that parental-initiated processes more often led to reconciliation as well.

5: Finally

With this I come to my final words for this keynote. The stories of the 63 respondents made a big impression on me. And I want to thank them for what they gave us with that. They were stories of great injustice, severe abuse and neglect. But despite this, they showed an inner conviction that they had an obligation to these parents, a conviction that gave them the courage to enter into the process of forgiveness. To do so, they had to delve into that father or mother who had so neglected or damaged them. But they realized, they too have a history. I was impressed by the perseverance they

showed that they could persevere even after repeated parental denial and rejection. That perseverance and conviction is encapsulated in the title of this keynote: After all, they are still my parents.

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