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By blood or by choice? On relational autonomy and the familial ties that bind us

Tanya van Wyk
University of Pretoria, South Africa
tanya.vanwyk@up.ac.za
ORCID iD: http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5309-0546

Abstract

This article explores the range of the construct "family" in light of the author's experience of how the death of a congregation-member exposed the strength, persistence and immovability of the construct, "family". Despite different attempts and approaches to deconstruct and broaden the notion of what family refers to that originated in the 1970s, a traditional notion of what kinship (family) entails remains focused on ties that bind people by blood or by marriage. The article provides a brief overview and evaluation of different attempts at a postmodern understanding of family, but ultimately it is illustrated that there has been little change to the construct of family. The notion of "relational autonomy" from a Trinitarian theological perspective is presented as a more thorough foundation for familial ties that are characterised by a creative tension of both distance and belonging. This theological foundation provides a point of departure for a dynamic understanding of the range of choices related to what constitutes, "family", which does not cast someone in the stone of the construct of a "family", even beyond their own death.

Keywords

Family; marriage; relational autonomy; Trinitarian theology; death

1. Introduction: Death, the definition of family and the case of Hanja Kettner

Hanja Reina Kettner, born 3 January 1947, died 15 May 2021, was a Dutch immigrant, arriving in South Africa with her parents at age 6. I got to know her when I started attending Sunday services of the Dutch-speaking congregation of the Netherdutch Reformed Church (NRCA) in

2010. Within the institutional structure of the NRCA, the congregation is sometimes designated with a moniker: "an otherwise congregation" (*andersoortige gemeente*). Within the NRCA, the congregation is regarded as "otherwise" because of the way it maintains its autonomous Dutch immigrant identity amidst the homogenous ecclesial institutional organisation and character of the NRCA (Reinten & Van Wyk 2018:5–7). The "otherwise identity" of the congregation has also been reflected by its theological character and its theological contributions to debates within its own Circuit (a smaller geographical grouping of congregations within the NRCA) and the NRCA at large. The congregation has a history of protest against the theological justification of apartheid, and a history of advocacy toward the church's inclusivity toward people with diverse sexual identities and orientations (cf. NHKA 2004; NHKA 2007a; NHKA 2007b). Mostly, however, this community has a unique ability to make the stranger feel at home. Therefore the moniker, "otherwise" in relation to the congregation is sometimes an authentic compliment, and other times it is an expression of exasperation.

Hanja's lifestyle was the very embodiment of this congregation's unique identity, which is characterised on the one hand by an impatience toward constructs and a respect for autonomy, and on the other hand a welcoming embrace and an innate ability to reconcile diversity[1]. This relates to what Denise Ackermann (2003:12) describes as the paradoxical relationship between "distance" and "belonging" or the way Miroslav Volf (1996) has described embrace as a double act of opening and closing:

> … in which … I also close my arms around the others – not tightly, so as to crush and assimilate them forcefully into myself, for that would not be an embrace, but a concealed power-act of exclusion; but gently – so as to tell them that I do not want to be without them in their otherness. I want them to remain independent and true to their genuine selves, to maintain their identity and as such become part of me so that they can enrich me with what they have, and I do not (Volf 1996:141).

1 To reconcile diversity, certain paradoxes or a creative tension is necessary. For a broader explanation of this, see Van Wyk (2018:3–8).

Within this setting, Hanja's life was one of "mighty freedom": she was not dependent on anyone, she did not marry, did not have children and her parents passed when it was their time. Hanja's relationships were initiated and maintained by choice – and none of them fitted into any type of constructs pertaining to relationships, family, and gender roles. For her congregation, the "otherwise" group of people who were her family, whose embrace is one of distance and belonging, Hanja's life was nothing out of the ordinary. The extent to which her life was considered abnormal however became a harsh reality when she passed away. When it came to dealing with hospital staff, funeral home staff, financial institutions – those who needed information about Hanja's family – it became apparent that it was extremely difficult and apparently near impossible for those people to first of all accept and secondly to grasp, that Hanja actually had family. There was no frame of reference or paradigm from which to interpret the information the congregation was giving to them. The possibility that there is no blood-kin or marriage-kin, or partner-kin was met with incredulity, because surely there must be someone, and the possibility that someone other than blood-kin, marriage-kin or partner-kin could be "kin" in the same way (or more) than one of those categories, was even more impossible. It became clear that a point of reference or grammar that would be required for people to grasp the notion of family, who "is not" family, but "absolutely is" family, simply did not exist.

In this regard it is important to note that I use the word "kin" here in an attempt to describe the difficulty the congregation encountered with definitions of "family". The notion "kin" and "kinship" in an anthropological sense refers to a complex web of social relations, although the history of the anthropological study of kinship did have a focus on relations by marriage or descent. This was challenged in the 1980s by David Schneider. He critiqued the notion that human social bonds and "kinship" was a natural category that was built merely on genealogical ties, in his work titled, *A critique of the study of Kinship*. Schneider (1984:172, 165) made a strict distinction between social relationships as "given" (so-called intrinsic and inalienable – from birth) and social relationships as "doing", namely relationships that are created, constituted, and maintained by a process of interaction. Hanja's life and family were constituted by social relationships as "doing" and social relationships by choice. The problem of the construct,

"family" and the way it intruded upon Hanja's life, and particularly her death, was experienced by other members of the congregation too, with similar lifestyles, when they tried to update their wills after her passing. Unfortunately another theatre of the absurd ensued.[2]

In her research about transitions in perceptions about what constitutes family, domesticity, and intimacy, Stevi Jackson (2015: 169–170; 186) concludes that even though a movement that problematizes the concept of "family" has existed since the 1970s – which took place amidst second-wave feminism (Bagshaw 2019:21–22) – the prevalence of the connection between "heteronormative" and "family" remains high. Social changes in family-related matters, like the occurrences of people marrying when they are older (or not getting married), women having professional careers and having fewer children are not culturally homogenous, that is to say, these changes and their effects are being experienced and embraced in different ways across the world (Jackson 2015:186).

This article explores aspects of the trajectory of change relating to what is considered family, particularly in light of the aforementioned experience that the construct might have a particular solidity (an immovability), which enables it to exact its influence, even in death. By exploring the notion of relational autonomy from a Trinitarian theological perspective and linking it to the notion of a "social Trinity", it is suggested that "family" is constituted by a dynamic, fluid movement of distance and belonging, autonomy and connectedness and in this movement, bonds initiated by

2 In an opinion piece, published in the editorial and comments section on the webpage of the NRCA, one of the congregants remarked about their experience (originally published in Afrikaans): "In the aftermath of Hanja's death, I decided to finally draw up my own will. My broker refers me to someone who has been drawing up wills for two decades (read: lots of experience). The theatre of absurd starts all over again. Every time the specialist uses examples to try and explain aspects of the will, a family-related example is used. I interrupted the person to say that those examples do not apply to me. And you could almost hear the sound of a short circuit taking place over the phone. There is first of all silence and then a lot of questions, trying to get a foothold on the situation again. And after a very short while, the same examples are utilized again, but with a short addition at the start of each statement to indicate it is an example. "Let's say, as an example…" I could not do anything with the information, because it does not apply to my reality. (Available: https://nhka.org/bloed-is-dikker-as-water-dood-en-die-definisie-van-naasbestaande/ [Accessed: 31 October 2021].

choice (which are not limited to marriage-bonds), are as strong, or stronger, than those of blood.

2. Approaching the construct "family"

2.1 The domestic church

One of the lingering frameworks for approaching what "family" means, is related to the notion of a "domestic church" (Thatcher 2015:599–601), as found in Roman Catholic theology. This is linked to the centrality of marriage. Indeed, one of the aspects of the theology of the Roman Catholic Church that exacts influence beyond its own institutional and ecclesial boundaries is that of the sacralisation (sacramentalisation) of marriage. Being part of a Protestant denomination, I have witnessed how "sacramental language" has been used in Protestant marriage formulas for as long as I can remember, which include references to marriage as "being holy" and "being instituted by God" (cf. NHKA 2007c:77;85; NGK 2007:125; UPCSA:68, section 5.1). The philosophical-theological background to this phenomenon can be traced from Augustine's Neoplatonist influence on a theological understanding of human sexuality to Thomas Aquinas' natural theology which utilised Aristotelian categories and applied it to human sexuality. This combination led to the construction of the only two possibilities for humanity to structure their social realities and relationships: marriage (man and woman) or celibacy (cf. Augustine 1999, *On the good of marriage*); Radford-Ruether 2001:45–46; cf. Van Wyk 2022:160–164). Sex for the purpose of procreation was permissible and so a traditional structure of a core family-unit emerged. The family in turn is assigned an almost divine anthropological significance within this theology (Ouellet 2006).

The official Roman Catholic teaching on family was summarised by Pope John Paul II in his "The fellowship of the family" (1981) and in his "Letter to families" (1994) when he referred to the "domestic church". These documents affirmed the theology of the Vatican II, as indicated in *Lumen Gentium* (paragraph 11) and *Gaudium et spes* (paragraphs 23–25), which first utilised the notion of "domestic church". In this theology, Pope Paul VI emphasised that the individual family that is rightly ordered, is the most pivotal aspect of human society. "Family" refers to the family of the

entire human race as well as the family of people that constitute the church. According to Pope Paul VI, the wellbeing of an individual person and the broader human race is linked to the healthy condition of the communion that is produced by marriage and the family. In this sense, "family" denotes a bond that is constituted by the marriage of a man and a woman (and the bearing and rearing of children), and it is the preferred designation of family. Approached this way, the family unit is regarded as a reflection of the Trinitarian unity (the *communio personarum*; cf. Ouellet 2006) and impacts the wider community through the ecclesial or Christian "family of God". This connection and the way the family unit is the foundation of the ecclesial family of God, is what is understood as being the 'domestic church'.

Seemingly emphasising men and women's equal dignity and responsibility within this family unit (marriage), Pope John Paul II emphasises that men and women have different vocations – and that the Church should work hard in order for the work of women in the home to be respected. With John Paul II's designation of family as the "domestic church", and the emphasis of different roles within the family (marriage), the domestic church becomes "the bride of Christ". With this designation, gender hierarchy is masked behind respect for diversity and "marriage" is set as the defining characteristic of what constitutes and defines a family.

In my own, Afrikaans-speaking context and culture, I have witnessed the incarnation of this Catholic theology beyond its borders in Protestant Christian faith communities. The centrality of the construct "family" for the very definition of what it means to be church is emphasised in an attempt to almost de-institutionalise or soften the institutional character of the Christian Church – and to try and deal with the loss of membership due to aspects that is traditionally associated with institutionalism, namely, hierarchy, tradition, colonial missional frameworks, strict observance of church dogma and a focus on sin. I have experienced how many Christian religious communities have attempted to "re-brand" themselves as "friendly family-institutions' and "family-friendly institutions" in which the text of Joshua 24:15 – "me and my family will serve the Lord" have become an almost determining identity marker of the church, almost akin to being on par with the classic *notae ecclesiae*, (marks) of the church. I witnessed the text of Joshua 24:15 go up onto many congregational building's walls on the

inside or on outside signage as a type of identifying slogan. In attempting to re-claim an original sense of the inclusivity of the church and its identity which is unity-in-diversity,[3] the focus on "the family" (with inclusion of the definite article "the") came with a consolidation of a heteronormative, male-dominated pattern of family life, which included a more insidious focus on differentiated normative gender roles. Although the intention was good, it meant a shift from one construct to another. As Jana Bennett (2008:8) has indicated, both the notion of the Catholic "domestic church" and a Protestant family project damages ecclesiology – also because "family" is awarded eschatological significance, in which "marriage and family displace God as the ultimate ground of our hopes: proximate concerns are raised to ultimacy, and marriage and family are overidealized" (Bennett 2008:8). Quite the opposite to its intention, this shift in making "family" the core of the identity of the church, creates an extra layer of exclusion in the church, because now there is yet another prerequisite for being embraced by and feeling welcome in Christian religious communities.

According to Jackson, these types of descriptions and emphasis of "the" family creates the idea that there is an essential, natural unit for humanity that is universally applicable. However, there is hardly a universal blueprint for "family" across cultures. In light of this, Jackson's (2015:171) summary of the three interrelated objections to the concept "family" is noteworthy. Firstly, it conceals inequalities within families. Secondly, it is regarded as essentialist and universalist, as it does not take cultural and historical differences into account; and finally, the concept of family does not do justice (it masks) a diversity of forms of family existing today. Jackson (2015:172) points out that what is regarded as "family" is a complex network of relationships and practices and one "unit" actually comprises multiple family lives. The way in which this complexity is organised, can vary in different cultures. What today is regarded as a "traditional family" only emerged in western societies in the 19th century, after the second world war, and was accompanied by a domestic ideology which separated men's and women's spheres of work. This was limited to a certain context and a certain era – and became a hegemonic type of blueprint across contexts and cultures.

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3 For the notion of the church as a reconciling diversity, see Van Aarde (1987).

Today, postmodern notions of family attempt to deconstruct the construct family as incorporated in Pope John Paul II's notion of a "domestic church" – that is, family as being constituted by a marriage bond between a man and a woman, from which children are born and who all have extended generational (biological) and marital connections with one another. In remainder of this section, I provide a brief overview and evaluation of three separate approaches aimed at deconstructing "family", before turning to a theological exploration of the family ties that bind us.

2.2 The individualisation thesis

Emphasised by feminists, this thesis holds that in the postmodern era, there is an increase in the breakdown of normative prescriptions – a disembedding of the individual. With growing emphasis on choice, this results in more fluid and contingent intimate relationships, and this relates to the notion of "family" too. However, aspects of this thesis have been critiqued (cf. Smart & Shipman 2004) because of the way that no-one is ever a proverbial blank slate, and because an overemphasis on individualisation downplays the way people's choices are shaped by cultural and social contexts, even those whose "domestic arrangements are the vanguard of social change" (Jackson 2015:184). For example: Do parents who have children through donor conception regard this as their unique choice or individualisation? Are stepfamilies' re-formation of families separate from issues of gender, generation and social class and mutual familial obligations? Jackson also mentions the example of couples who are "living apart together" as not being entirely free of familial constraints and constructs in terms of individualisation. The main critique against the thesis of individualisation is of course it's western emphasis, and the fact that it does not take alternative cultural traditions into account, in which marriage is not always regarded as an assault on individual identity, but rather an expression of a larger, embedded, kinship identity.

2.3 Critical familism

A project of analysis of what constitutes or is designated by the term, "family" in Protestant theology was undertaken in the early 2000s under the leadership of Don Browning. The project introduced the term "critical familism", in reference to a stance that appreciates both "family"

and "marriage" but is critical towards a too narrow understanding and application of both – in aid of a postmodern reconstruction of "family" (Browning 2007:vii; 244–262). Critical familism is to be distinguished from a type of familism that emphasises the notion of cohesive families at all costs and critical familism is also to be distinguished from the type of familism that promotes a type of "soft patriarchy" of the so-called traditional family emanating from the industrial era (Browning 2007:255). The main element of critical familism is the notion of "equal regard", which refers to the equality of the husband and wife's access, roles and responsibilities relating to the public sphere of employment and citizenship, and sphere of the household, with its accompanying maintenance and childcare – within a mother-father partnership (Browning 2007:255). Within critical familism, the notion of equal regard seemingly implies a postmodern widening of the construct, "family", while actually sustaining elements of the "traditional family" as Browning refers to it. Even though an equality between partners is emphasised, marriage as the preferable space in which children should be raised – and the "family" as consisting of married heterosexual partners with biological children, is maintained.[4] This is clear from Browning's appreciation for the theory of "kin altruism" (Browning 2007:119–121), which refers to the way people give preferential treatment to those family members to whom they are biologically related. Related to the theory of kin altruism, evolutionary psychology has highlighted the factors of paternal recognition, mothers needing assistance with childrearing and mutual helpfulness between fathers and mothers. Browning (2007:121) incorporates these insights to emphasise the theory of what "family" refers to: "These conditions should be thought of as important premoral goods that should be integrated into any more fully ethical theory of marriage and family" (Browning 2007:121).

Although the project lead by Browning advocated social support for and connection with different types of families consisting of single parents, stepparents, same-sex couples raising children and "adults called to a vocation of singleness" (which almost reads as if singleness is something

4 This is clear from Browning's (2007:259) own reflection on how his stance differs from that of Adrian Thatcher. According to Browning, Adrian Thatcher "goes too far in normalizing cohabitation", while Browning argues for the appreciation of marriage as "a civic good of interest to both church and state" (Browning 2007:258).

out of the ordinary), it is clear that the project of "critical familism" does not differ from the Catholic "domestic church" in major ways. The emphasis of equality was a major step forward in trying to break down patriarchal attributed gender roles in marriage and parenthood – but on the whole, because of the way a specific understanding of marriage and "blood ties" (kin altruism) is emphasised, this project kept the construct "family" intact.

2.4 The de-heterosexualization thesis

This thesis emphasises the increasing instability of the heterosexual and or homosexual binary. It is argued that there is a "queering" of family relationships (Roseneil 2000; Stacey 1996). Although also presented from a western perspective (to be critiqued), the "queering of relationships" can be understood in two different ways. Firstly, proponents of this thesis regard lesbian, gay and queer lifestyles as leading the way to more diverse and unconventional ways of living intimate lives. Secondly, a study conducted by Sasha Roseneil and Shelly Budgeon (2004) found that there is an increase in the amount of people who chose to live outside couple relationships and found that these individuals forge strong networks of care and support, provided by friends with "no biological, legal or socially recognised ties to each other" (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004:125–135). An approach based on this thesis recognises the complexity of familial ties that go beyond or "outside" so-called traditional understandings of what "family" refers to, for example, bonds that are formed amongst families linked by divorce and remarriage and the bonds formed by sexual intimacy – which, according to Stacey (2004:183) can generate bonds of kinship. This thesis seemingly makes the greatest contribution to a deconstruction of the construct "family" in terms of its diverse approach to the types of bonds and the definition of kinship involved with regard to "family".

This brief overview and evaluation reveal that although there are multiple attempts at reframing and extending and redefining the construct "family", few of these attempts really get beyond an understanding of "family" that does not include family linked by blood, family or extended or reformed families by marriage, or family formed by romantic partnerships (albeit across diverse sexual identity). The approach or thesis that comes the closest to provide a reorientation related to what the congregation experienced,

is the de-heterosexualization thesis. I however am searching for a more thorough, open-ended, and theologically grounded foundation for *de-familialisation* and *re-familialisation*.[5] This foundation should provide a framework for "choice" in familial ties that extends beyond (and includes other permutations than) the marital bond – i.e. that does not regard marriage as the only choice for what may constitute familial ties outside those of blood (biology). I am in search of a framework that can embrace the range of choices with regard to familial life which does not cast someone in the stone of the construct of a "family", even beyond their own death.

3. Theologically deconstructing "family"

3.1 Blood and water

I was raised with a mantra-like expression: "Blood is thicker than water". It was a sacred utterance, many times accompanied by the Afrikaans expression: *Bloed kruip waar dit nie kan loop nie* – implying family ties of blood always find a way and these family-ties are always reliant and loyal. It was also an expression of the primacy of blood relations and the primacy of relationships with those to whom you are biologically connected – a type of "kin altruism". The implication of this mantra, growing up, was that your identity is mostly determined by your blood (bonds), and within a religious cultural emphasis on marriage, this type of bond was almost regarded as a type of "blood bond" as well. It is the idea of it, more than the reality of it, that exudes immense influence and contributes to what Bennett (2008:10) describes as the idolisation (and idealisation) of family.

It was one of my undergraduate lecturers who made me aware that the expression I was raised with, is only a partial reproduction and paraphrasing of the original intention of the phrase and context in which it was utilised. There is something proverbially "thicker" than the blood of family, and that is the blood of the covenant. The original expression is, "the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of birth". I have tried to trace the exact origin of the expression and could not determine if it has an exact Biblical origin in that format. In her work, titled, "Water is thicker

5 The terms are borrowed from Stevi Jackson (2015:169–184).

than blood: An Augustinian theology of marriage and singleness, Bennett (2008) argues that your ecclesial ties and understanding of yourself as a member of the body of Christ precedes any emphasis on the importance of relationships by blood.

In Reformed theology, the nature of what constitutes a covenant is emphasised: a willing choice to enter into a sacred relationship. In this context, the partial reconstructed expression, "blood is thicker than water", that is passed around as if it is a sacred and canon-like truth, masks the reality of an identity that supersedes blood ties. In this regard, the Protestant theologian Rodney Clapp (2012:53–54) emphasises Jesus' relativisation of families in the Gospels and asserts that allegiance to one's family is not eliminated, but it is rendered secondary to an identity in Jesus. He references Paul's theology in Galatians 3:28 in which identity-in Christ is the constituting, primary identity (cf. Patterson 2018[6]). This means that in baptism, water is thicker than blood. He argues that the church is "first family", taking precedence over biological family members. In my opinion, this is not the same as making "family life" the core of the church's identity. Clapp bases his arguments on Jesus' desacralisation and decentring of families, which is not the same as trying to order church communities along the constructs of heteronormative family patterns (Jackson 2015:596). The blood (and water) of the covenant is thicker than the blood (and water) of birth. This is the one "leg" of de-familialising (removing the heteronormative and sacred, that is, deconstructing the construct) and re-familialising (creating new grammar and frameworks) for the notion of "family". The other "leg" of this endeavour would be to inquire as to the nature (character) of such *familial* relationships – in which the ties that bind are not constituted by blood, or by marriage.

6 In his work titled, "The forgotten creed: Christianity's original struggle against bigotry slavery and sexism", Patterson (2018) provides a convincing and thorough argument for the theology of this creed, which predates our earliest confessions and baptismal formulas – and in which the original unity and non-hierarchical identity of humanity and Christian believers found expression – which supersedes and predates any attempt at making human aspects like gender, sexuality and nationality defining characteristics of what it means to be human and what it means to be "in Christ".

3.2 Relational autonomy and a Trinitarian perspective

Utilised by feminist scholars to denote the character of women's agency (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Junker-Kenny 2019:183–193), the notion of "relational autonomy" best captures the paradoxical creative tension of distance and belonging embodied by the *familial* relationship between Hanja Kettner and her church-family, the congregation. Relational autonomy is the articulation of recognising personhood, identity, dignity and freedom (Junker-Kenny 2019:183) as an intrinsic part of relationships. The creative tension between autonomy and connection (that is the simultaneous existence and reality of both) is the creative tension between distance and belonging, and this creative tension is necessary for the ability to distinguish between what Denise Ackermann (2003:12–13) has described as a repressing identity and an affirming identity. Against the notion that autonomy is situated only in the possibility and right to make one's decisions, and also against the notion that autonomy is situated in community-generated expectations, "relational autonomy" refers to an "autonomy that is in a position to integrate the rights of others into one's own free choices" (Junker-Kelly 2019:186). This relates to the creative tension I describe above, namely between individuality and connectedness. In fact, the relationship can become the very embodiment of one's autonomy. It includes the possibility a more dynamic understanding of "kin-ship". In Christian theology, relational autonomy finds its foundation and expression in the confession of God as Trinitarian. This connects to Adrian Thatcher's (2015: 604) reframing and understanding of the *commmunio personarum*, in which Thatcher suggests that the centrepiece of theological thought about the family lies in the doctrine of a social Trinity.

Classic Western Christian theology as a Trinitarian theology "from above" does not include much emphasis on the dynamic participation of God in humanity's history – which is a Trinitarian theology "from below". Amongst other things, a Trinitarian theology from above has resulted in a hierarchical understanding of relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, and in the confession of this relationship, patriarchal familial language is utilised. This dogmatic construction, despite all attempts to rehabilitate it, often results in a subordination of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to God, as indicated by Paul Fiddes (2000:240–255) in his chapter titled, "The Triune God and questions of power and authority'. An hierarchical

relationship is contrary to "relational autonomy". However, relational autonomy does find theological expression in a social understanding of God as Trinity, which rests on an Eastern Christian theological notion of "perichoresis" (Durand 2012:177–192). What is described as a "social doctrine of the Trinity" has received much attention (and critique) in recent decades due to the theology of for example the South American liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff (1987) and the German political theologian, Jürgen Moltmann (1981). A social Trinity focuses on the Personhood of each of the Persons of the Trinity and thereby articulates the nature of the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity in a *perichoretic* manner. In this perichoretic relationship, the persons mutually cede space for Each other's existence and being – that is, the Persons are spaces for each other – while existing in a reconciling relationship. This is the core of a theological foundation for relational autonomy and provides a more thorough and dynamic theological foundation from which to deconstruct the construct, "family" and to reframe the familial ties that bind us – in a way that, ultimately, that do not constrain us and that does not persist beyond our own death (a de-familialsing and re-familialising).

4. Conclusion: Choosing independent life, ceding space for independent death

The way that Hanja Kettner's death exposed the strength, persistence and immovability of the construct, "family", is what gave rise to this theological exploration. At its core, this contribution is about questioning the range and reach of the construct, family. An independent death for Hanja did not mean choosing the manner and time of her death – she died of simultaneous heart and liver failure at the age of 74. An independent death for her would have meant that her death would mirror the familial ties she initiated by choice (in her life) and would in essence, "cede space" for her relational autonomy. In a recent publication (Van Wyk 2020:195–213), Trinitarian theology is utilised for the debate about euthanasia, namely that "ceding space" could entail making space for someone's choices about the time and manner of their death. This contribution might be considered as a further development of that theology, albeit focusing on a different dimension and implication of "ceding space".

Critique towards the construct "family" is not about denying the existential importance and reality of relationships. It is about recognising the simultaneous individual identity and relational situatedness of the nature of relationships which are ambiguous, paradoxical: a dynamic, fluid and yet connected, solid nature of relationships and the definition of what constitutes "family" – as illustrated by this extract of a poem, written by William Paul Young (*The Shack*) in the introduction of Richard Rohr's (2016:19) "The Divine Dance":

THREE

Face-to-Face-to-Face

Community

Ambiguity

Mystery

Lover for the Other

And for the Other's Love

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