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Adolescents' Negotiations of Loyalty and Fairness in Relation to Parents' Separation Process

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ABSTRACT

Research on children's experiences of parental separation highlights equality and fairness between parents as one explanation for why children wish for symmetrical time-sharing between parents. In this paper, we analyse adolescents' narratives and ask how adolescents negotiate closeness and distance with their parents, with a specific emphasis on issues of loyalty when adolescents' views diverge from symmetry and fairness. Narratives from qualitative interviews with 11 Norwegian adolescents aged between 12 and 17 were analysed. Ideas from the theory of invisible loyalties were applied to analyse the interviews, resulting in two topics, namely, 'Bookkeeping of parents' fulfilled and failed obligations' and 'Negotiations of obligations between parents and adolescents'. According to the adolescents in this study, fairness does not necessarily mean equal time-sharing. Fairness is subject to negotiation, and adolescents' loyalty to parents is justified by fulfilled and failed obligations.

1 | Introduction

The dynamic aspect of family life is particularly salient during parental separation. Parental separation refers to the union dissolution between cohabiting and married parents. During such a process, relatively taken-for-granted routines and family practises become subject to negotiation (Morgan 2011). In this article, we examine how adolescents make sense of and negotiate their relationships with their parents following parental separation in a Norwegian context. While we refer to children in general as persons between the ages of 0 and 17, the term adolescents specifies the ages between 12 and 17.

1.1 | Parental Separation in a Norwegian Context

About 44% of the adult population is married, while 20% is cohabiting (Andersen 2023). Based on current trends, the divorce rate is 37.1% (Statistics Norway 2024), and cohabitation is considerably less stable (Golpen 2015). About 77% of children live with both parents in the same household, while about 23% is registered in a one-parent household[1] (Statistics Norway 2023). About 24 000 children experience parental separation each year (The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs; Bufdir 2024).

In the following, we will present some of the key aspects of the Norwegian context for parental separation: children's right to be heard, mandatory family mediation (henceforth mediation) and the practising of joint physical custody (JPC). JPC refers to an agreement in which the child is registered with a physical residence with both parents. *Symmetrical* JPC refers to equal time-sharing, while *asymmetrical* JPC refers to the child spending at least 30–49% of the time at both places (Steinbach and Augustijn 2021).

Norwegian legislation has incorporated the UNCRC, Article 12 (Convention on the rights of the child 1989). According to the Children Act (1981, Section 31), children, from the age of seven

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(or younger if able to form views), should be given information and provided an opportunity to share their views. From the age of 12, their views should be given *considerable* weight. Parents are the primary persons to look after children's right to be heard, and they are informed about this obligation during mediation (Regulation on Family Mediation 2007).

Family counselling offices receive about 11 000 new parental separation cases annually, and the service is free of charge (Nylund 2021). Mediation is one of several forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes (see Birnbaum 2009; Newell, Graham, and Fitzgerald 2009) that may be applied prior to commencing family law proceedings (Taylor et al. 2021). In Norway, it is separate from court-connected mediation and court trials and does not involve lawyers or any appointed child experts (Nylund 2021). It is mandatory for all parents with children under the age of 16 who separate (regardless of the level of conflict) and parents who wish to initiate court proceedings. Its main goal is to promote coparental collaboration and solve conflicts between parents. The family mediator should guide parents to ensure the best interest of the child in parenting arrangements regarding parental responsibility, residence and contact (Regulation on Family Mediation 2007). A mediation certificate that proves parents' attendance is a prerequisite for applying for a divorce, receiving child benefits following parental separation and for court proceedings on custody, residence and relocation (The Children Act 1981; The Marriage Act 1991). Less than 20% of separated parents initiate court proceedings, which in most cases is court-connected mediation (Nylund 2021).

Children's participation in mediation in Norway is not regulated by law, but we have witnessed a political focus on increasing this kind of participation. For instance, in 2022, the aim was to include 30% of children in the parents' mediation process (Bufdir. 2023). Today, around 25% of children (usually aged between 7 and 15) participate in this process (Bufdir. 2023). This is a considerable increase from earlier levels (e.g., 4% in 2010, see Ådnanes et al. 2011). Research from Norway has shown that children, in general, want to be heard, regardless of the level of conflict between parents (Thørnblad and Strandbu 2018; Sunde, Larsen, and Helland 2021). Additionally, children who participate in mediation often have opinions about living arrangements (Grape, Thørnblad, and Handegård 2021).

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 9 (Convention on the rights of the child 1989) and Norwegian legislation (Haugli 2013; The Children Act 1981, Section 42), parents and their children have the right to maintain contact with each other even if they live apart. Shared parenting and JPC have become increasingly common in many Western countries (Steinbach 2019). A tendency towards more involved fathering practises can be placed within a framework of family welfare policies and legislation that emphasise gender equality in Nordic countries (Andreasson and Johansson 2019; Eydal and Rostgaard 2018; Eydal and Rostgaard 2011; Gíslason and Símonardóttir 2018; Kitterød and Lyngstad 2014; Forsberg 2009). Although some scholars suggest that JPC has positive outcomes such as improving the father–child relationship or the child's well-being (see Nielsen 2018; Sandberg 2023; Vrolijk and Keizer 2021), others are more cautious towards such conclusions due to methodological limitations and social selection among parents who practise these arrangements (see Johansen et al. 2022; Ottosen et al. 2018; Steinbach 2019; Wiik 2022).

In 2020, 43% of separated parents in Norway practised symmetrical JPC, one in 10 practised asymmetrical JPC and about half of parents who had separated practised sole physical custody, in which the child lived most of the time with one of the parents, most often the mother (Wiik 2022).

1.2 | Research on Children's Experiences of Parental Separation

Research on children's experiences of JPC has shown that they are often concerned about equality and symmetry and may treat their parents fairly and equally in terms of how they share their time between the two households (see Cashmore and Parkinson 2008; Kitterød and Lidén 2021; Neale and Flowerdew 2007). Several studies find that children wish to have close relationships with both parents after parental separation (Berman and Daneback 2022; Graham, Fitzgerald, and Phelps 2009; Haugen 2007; Kitterød and Lidén 2021; Thørnblad and Strandbu 2018). Closeness to parents is one aspect of the parent–child relationship quality and may function as a protective factor during interparental conflicts (van Dijk et al. 2020).

The ideal of 'intensive parenting' is common in the Euro-American context (Faircloth 2023), including Scandinavian countries (Forsberg 2011; Hennum 2014; Aarseth 2018). It means that parenting is child-centred and attends to the best interests of the child. Children too can rely on a discourse of 'the best interest of the child' when they put forth their own wishes (Kitterød and Lidén 2021), for instance by emphasising the need for flexibility in living arrangements (Birnbaum and Saini 2015). Flexibility can be minor alterations of the parenting scheme or having the opportunity to stop by the other parent's household (Berman 2015; Graham, Fitzgerald, and Phelps 2009; Grape, Thørnblad, and Handegård 2021; Haugen 2010; Marschall 2014). Particularly, adolescents seem to prefer flexible arrangements that are adjusted to their everyday lives (Gollop, Smith, and Taylor 2000; Kitterød and Lidén 2021). The ability to influence living arrangements may depend on children's and adolescents' opportunities to share their views and have a say (Berman 2018; Carson et al. 2018; Gollop, Smith, and Taylor 2000; Haugen, Dyrstad, and Ådnanes 2015; Sunde, Larsen, and Helland 2021).

If a living arrangement preference diverges from symmetrical JPC, children can experience feelings of guilt or loyalty conflicts due to a concurrent wish to have close relationships with both parents (Haugen 2007, 2010; Johnsen, Litland, and Hallström 2018; Marschall 2014). Parent–child relationships are often subject to negotiation after parental separation (see Berman 2015, 2018). Some children may resist or refuse contact with one of the parents due to violence, abuse or behaviour from a parent who influences the child's views (Garber 2007; Geffner

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and Sandoval 2020). Others initiate changes because of practical matters, feelings of closeness to a parent or neighbourhood or other reasons (see, e.g., Carson et al. 2018). Living arrangement preferences that diverge from symmetrical JPC may point to the need for flexible living arrangements.

1.3 | Research Aim

The aim of this article is to provide new perspectives on adolescents' experiences of relationships with parents after parental separation in a Norwegian context. Adolescents are often thought of as standing at the crossroads of new forms of participation in both family and peer relationships (Giordano 2003; Rogoff 2003). Their interactions with parents are sometimes characterised by a move towards more egalitarian relationships and periodically more conflicts (Branje 2018) and are therefore of particular interest. In this paper, we analyse what adolescents emphasise as important when relationships and living arrangements are renegotiated. We ask how adolescents negotiate closeness and distance with their parents and how they justify their loyalty to parents when their views diverge from symmetry and fairness between parents.

1.4 | Theoretical Framework

In a sociocultural perspective, adolescents are understood to be active agents, creating meaning in their interactions with the social and cultural contexts in which they live (Bruner and Haste 1987; Rogoff 2003; Valsiner 1997). Their decisions to behave loyally (or not) must be seen in relation to their context, both the environment and the matrix of motivations, options and (subjective) rights (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 1986). The theory of invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973) views relationships as dialectical. We apply this theoretical framework to understanding the dynamic tensions between adolescents' ontological dependency on interactions with his or her parents and the development of autonomy. Loyalty is defined as 'a preferential attachment to relational partners who are entitled to a priority of "bonding" (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 1986, p. 418).' According to this theory, people behave loyally due to external coercion, conscious interest in membership, consciously recognised feelings of obligation and an unconscious binding obligation to belong (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973). Individuals keep track of past and present obligations among family members that contribute to an (invisible) 'ledger of justice'. This ledger results in a perceived fairness of give-and-take that exists in the relationship (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Krasner 1986; Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973).

Family obligations can be understood as being negotiated through a process of allocating responsibilities (Finch and Mason 1993). Negotiations between parents and their children have become normative in contemporary Western cultures (see Sommer 2019). Failing to comply with obligations can result in guilt, which constitutes a secondary regulatory force by giving input on the homeostasis of obligations or the loyalty system (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973). Viewing adolescents as negotiating with their parents during their parents' separation, we see them as agents interacting in ways that affect relationships and decisions (Mayall 2002). In other words, they are agents within interdependent relationships in which loyalty is continuously negotiated (Abebe 2019; Alanen 1998; Spyrou 2018).

2 | Methods

This study is part of the Hearing Children in Mediation (HBIM) project, which examines aspects of child-inclusive practises at the family counselling offices in Norway. The study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (ref. no. 150314).

2.1 | Sampling Strategy and Participants

Family mediators from five family counselling offices in all four regions of the country, in both rural and urban districts, contributed to the recruitment of adolescents. We used an illustrative (Mason 2002) and purposeful sampling strategy (Flick 2007). Participants were invited based on their past attendance in the mediation process, regardless of the type of mediation (divorce, previously cohabiting parents, precourt mediation and mediation due to relocation), and their age between 12 and 17 years at the time of recruitment.

Our aim was that the narratives would inform different ways for adolescents to participate in decision-making processes during parental separation. We were satisfied with the variation when the narratives had different starting points (e.g., parent–adolescent conflicts or no conflict) that took different paths into continuity or discontinuity (e.g., close relationships and frequent contact and conflicted relationships and little contact). Eleven adolescents (two boys and nine girls) participated in the study. They had different living arrangements with different levels of stability in the arrangements.

2.2 | Procedure, Ethics and Interview Guide

Participants received information about the study from family mediators who recruited families, through the phone and by e-mail, and at the beginning of the interview. Adolescents who were at least 16 years of age gave personal consent. Younger participants gave personal consent, and parents also consented to their participation. The interviewer was sensitive to assessing consent throughout the interview and emphasised that it was possible to withdraw participation at any time. To protect confidentiality, the interviews have been anonymised, participants were given pseudonyms and their ages were presented as intervals of 3 years (12–14 or 15–17).

Interviews were conducted by the first author between September and December 2020. Four interviews were conducted at a venue chosen by the adolescents, and seven interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom Video Conferencing due to Covid-19 restrictions. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

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The interviews were semistructured and drawn on Bamberg (2021) by viewing narratives as configuring the temporal dimension of human experience, such as past, present and future, which has a privileged status for exploring stability, continuity and change. Further, we view adolescents' narratives as ways of creating meaning and coherence (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) from their parents' separation process.

The interview guide was comprised of five sections. (1) Inform and initiate the process (giving informed consent, repeating the content of the information sheet and presenting the interviewer). (2) Talk about the time from when they learned about the parental separation until the time of the research interview. Follow-up questions were asked about the adolescents' thoughts, feelings and understandings of the events, in addition to narrative elements such as time and space. Follow-up questions regarding living arrangements were only asked if the topic had been brought up in the interview by the participant. If a participant had difficulty giving examples, they were asked to elaborate on a highlight, a low point and a turning point. (3) The adolescents' participation in mediation. (4) Their aspirations, hopes and plans for the future. (5) The interviewer summarised the narrative to provide the adolescent with an opportunity to correct and elaborate. Participants were given the opportunity to be contacted to read the manuscript before submission to a scientific journal.[2]

2.3 | Data Analysis

The analysis takes an abductive approach, using both the empirical data and theoretical knowledge to build on each other and carry the analysis forward (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2017; Tavory and Timmermans 2014). The authors discussed what we thought was expected and what surprised us in the narratives. For instance, we expected awareness of children's rights to be heard due to the emphasis on child-centred parenting practises in Norway. We also expected that participants would reflect on their living arrangements. However, what caught our attention was how informants engaged in explaining how family practises had changed and how they evaluated the quality of parenting and parent–adolescent relationships during these changes. Most participants gave rich and detailed accounts. Two of the interviews were characterised by briefer accounts and more talk and questions from the interviewer. Nevertheless, these two interviews were informative by providing inconsistencies between how the adolescents presented both parents' fulfilment of obligations and their emotional closeness to each of the parents.

In the initial analytical process, we picked Anne as an index case (Timmermans and Tavory 2022) to anchor our analysis and used it as 'the point around which variation will be structured (p. 93).' Anne's narrative seemed to capture central features of how adolescents in this study exercised agency in negotiations. Although Anne's narrative caught our attention and curiosity in the beginning, all 11 narratives have been subject to systematic analysis. For example, she was one of eight adolescents who wished for less contact compared to one of the parents. Three adolescents agreed with their parents to spend an equal amount of time with both parents, but this preference was not unconditional.

After picking Anne as our index case, we examined the total data material for excerpts that described aspects of the relationships between an adolescent and a parent. Narrative approaches to analysis tend to focus on the accounts of individual informants rather than general conceptualisations of saturation (Saunders et al. 2018). When emphasising experiences, smaller sample sizes can be acceptable (see, for instance, Sandelowski 1995).

Once we were familiarised with the relational descriptions across interviews, we applied ideas from Magnusson and Marecek (2015) about how to analyse individual excerpts for implicit cultural meanings. The first author looked for textual subjects and actions in each transcript as a tool for organisation. According to Magnusson and Marecek (2015), people (the textual subjects) are the actors in a narrative that say and do things (actions) and thereby channel how implicit cultural meanings (such as old and new norms) may influence or inform what is said in a conversation. The authors discussed contradictions within these textual subjects and actions within cases that helped identify dialectical tensions. Agreements among textual subjects and actions helped identify taken-for-granted understandings and led to further discussions of implicit cultural meanings within and across each interview. See Table 1 for an illustration of this process.

In Table 2, we present how we grouped the implicit cultural meanings together into two overarching topics: 'Bookkeeping of parents' fulfilled and failed obligations' and 'Negotiations of obligations between parents and adolescents'.

We acknowledge that the narratives can be interpreted differently. Instead of loyalty to one of the parents, some might see manipulative behaviour from a parent, abuse and neglect or violence as reasons for possible 'triangulation'. However, we have not engaged ourselves in making any assumptions but rather stayed close to the content of adolescents' narratives.

TABLE 1 | Illustration of data analysis that applies ideas from Magnusson and Maracek (2015).

Disagreements	Agreements	Implicit cultural meanings
Her no. 3: 'The bear-mama' vs. Her no. 4: The mother 'who 'fucked up' with her children' + Her no. 5: The infallible mother	I no. 1: The daughter on her toes + Her no. 1: The moody mother + I no. 4: The daughter who is deprioritised by her mother + Her no. 4: The mother 'who 'fucked up' with her children' + Her no. 5: The infallible mother	Adolescents have the right to evaluate their parents' effort to care for them

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TABLE 2 | Summary of implicit cultural meanings that are grouped together into themes.

Themes	Implicit cultural meanings	Empirical examples (quotes)
Bookkeeping of parents' fulfilled and failed obligations	Adolescents have the right to evaluate their parents' effort to care for them	I have funnier conversations with dad.
	Expectations that parents promote feelings of togetherness	We have started to make meatballs more often [for dinner] (...) we didn't know that we liked it before we started making it.
	Parents' entitlement to emotional closeness and togetherness	I don't want to stay more of the time with one of them. Because then someone might think 'Wow! She loves the other [parent] more than me!'
Negotiations of obligations between parents and adolescents	Adolescents evaluate parents' strategies to be close to their child	He started nagging like 'but can't you stay Tuesdays too?'
	Adolescents regulate closeness and distance to their parents	(...) and I said 'yes, but I'll stay Mondays now until I have talked with the mediator.'

2.4 | The Relevance of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Participants differed in terms of the overlap between the parental separation process and the progress of the Covid-19 pandemic. We acknowledge that, in general, some parents might have experienced increased stress during the lockdown (Helland et al. 2021), and that some children experienced lower well-being and higher levels of anxiety and depression during the early stages of the pandemic (Nøkleby et al. 2023). However, this was not a topic that adolescents emphasised, and our understanding is that negotiations were something that, according to their narratives, were ongoing throughout the separation process regardless of the pandemic.

3 | Bookkeeping of Parents' Fulfilled and Failed Obligations

Adolescents' loyalty to parents seemed to be contingent on parents' fulfilled and failed expectations to care for the adolescent emotionally and in time and space. The former concerned relational feelings of closeness. The latter is related to the feeling of home or feeling distance from a parent's household.

3.1 | Parents' Effort to Care for the Adolescent

Anne (15–17) lived permanently with her father and visited her mother. According to Anne, her parents were unfriendly with each other, and we interpret her narrative as describing two parents who struggled with high conflict. She primarily emphasised how her mother failed Anne's expectations. For example, when Anne was younger, she perceived her mother as a 'bear mama' who fought with authorities to safeguard her best interests. However, this previous protective action by her mother (the merits from the past) had less weight compared to the current demerits. Such demerits were a lack of acknowledgement of Anne's feelings, priorities, wishes or maturity, having told Anne that 'when you get older, you will understand.' Anne seemed to think that she was not getting through to her mother and was unable to initiate negotiations about how to understand the situation. The importance of having the opportunity to share their views and to have their views acknowledged are some of the essential expectations expressed by adolescents across the narratives. Also, adolescents seemed to expect that parents were open and gave necessary and appropriate information about the separation process. Adolescents could disapprove of parents who told lies or tried to deceive them or the other parent through ulterior motives such as wanting to reunite with the other parent due to economic issues or talking about new partners to make the other parent jealous. Parents' communication and adolescents' wish to have a say are in line with scholars arguing that as children grow older, they are more likely to value openness and codetermination in their relationships with parents rather than specific opinions about living arrangements (Sunde, Larsen, and Helland 2021).

Parent–adolescent conflicts might be adaptive for relational development because they can increase competence in negotiating relational changes, especially when parents and adolescents can switch flexibly between a range of positive and negative emotions (Branje 2018). The adolescents in our study valued parents who were emotionally available, who avoided becoming angry or reacting with other negative emotions and who made them feel safe in the relationship. However, as Anne's narrative exemplifies, the relationship can suffer when parents (and possibly the adolescent) are unable to adjust to each other's expectations. Anne described a feeling of not being 'fought for', for instance, because of her mother's reluctance to attend additional mediation sessions. As part of the parents' separation process, Anne and her sibling attended several follow-up meetings with the family mediator, as did her father. From Anne's point of view, her father then became a fallible parent, meaning that he was willing to admit mistakes and do something about them. Her mother, on the other hand, became the infallible mother.

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> I am not able to have any good communication with mum now. Me and (*Anne's sibling*) have asked her to go to the Family Counselling Office to talk. Because we say things to her and try to make her listen to us without her doing so. So it was like 'If you go there, then she [the mediator] can talk to you. Maybe then you will bother listening', but then she refused going. And we have been frustrated. That is why we have been happy that dad have attended—also for his own sake—that he had someone to talk with so that he didn't have to talk with me or (*her sibling*), or especially me—that I should listen to things that my ears shouldn't hear. (...) But also for him to get more advice on how to cope with everything. Which is advice that my mum also could have benefitted from.

Anne viewed her mother's actions as egoistic because she thought her mother avoided being faced with what she called a 'scapegoat', or a mother who had 'fucked up' the parent–adolescent relationships. The fluctuation in the quality and balance of Anne and her mother's relationship is apparent in how she and her mother have not yet acquired a common understanding of Anne's need for care and acknowledgement nor the reciprocity of caregiving between them.

3.2 | Expectations That Parents Promote Feelings of Togetherness

In her narrative, Nora (12–14) described recurrent conflicts between her parents during the whole process of parental separation. She was, however, more concerned about her father's inability to create a feeling of a home that took care of her everyday needs, such as a general sense of stability, help with schoolwork and transport to school. Her mother, in contrast, made Nora feel as if she had the opportunity to be part of decisions that concerned her living arrangements and in matters concerning family life. She was included in financial questions, contributed to maintenance work on the house, gave her opinions on the new kitchen and thereby acquired 'a feeling of being at home'. Nora talked about what had been most important for her to make decisions about:

> That I have been allowed to participate in and in a way starting a new home, because it was as if I lost a home, when we moved away from dad. As soon as all the stuff was taken out from there, as soon as the home disappeared, then it was like, you lost the feeling of home, the one at dad's.

The interviewees seem to appreciate being part of the process of creating new homes through material aspects, such as furnishing their own rooms and new houses or apartments. One aspect is that they get a feeling of having influence but also being part of a new 'we'. Feelings of belonging, alternatively referred to as family cohesion, family connectedness, positive family environment (see King, Boyd, and Thorsen 2015) or perhaps 'family-we' (Dreier 2011, p. 46; Marschall 2014), predict several positive aspects of adolescents' well-being (King, Boyd, and Pragg 2018; Rejaän, van der Valk, and Branje 2022). A sense of belonging can be of particular importance during adolescence (Allen and Kern 2017) when adolescents work to balance independence and autonomy with connectedness to significant others in their context (Rogoff 2003).

Benjamin (12–14), who stayed with his mother following his parents' separation, said that his father was not present nor involved in their lives. Prior to the parental separation, the father already seemed to be peripheral in everyday practises. The father left the house on several occasions throughout the separation process without informing Benjamin and his sibling, and they were not told that the father decided to establish a new family. Benjamin described himself and his sibling as 'guests' when they visited their father and described this as being 'a little bit strange to say [chuckle]' but also 'a little bit nice actually'. As if he pointed out the distance within the relationship to his father and made his father responsible for 'thinking about things alone'. Becoming 'guests' in one of the households can be reasoned by a change in the emotional and physical distance.

In some narratives, explicit statements about how the adolescent acquired a feeling of being at home refer to how the parents adjusted and facilitated such a feeling. Loyalty can perhaps be explained by positive aspects in one of the homes or the lack of them, such as the relationship with the parent who lives there and the feeling of belonging to that home, which is also exemplified in the study of Lidén and Kitterød (2020). Therefore, parents can earn merit by being devoted to the creation of a (new) home. Prior research has shown that the dimensions of 'home', in addition to the physical dwelling, include a place to retreat, a site of psychological and emotional well-being and meaningful relationships, routines and rituals (Campo et al. 2020; Lidén and Kitterød 2020; Natalier and Fehlberg 2015). The children who participated in the study of Campo et al. (2020) emphasised the willingness and capacity of parents to focus on their children and create a new space with them. This contributed to closeness in time and space. We assume that such willingness and capacity contribute to the loyalty of parents.

3.3 | Parents' Entitlement to Emotional Closeness and Togetherness

When both parents fulfilled expectations that made the parent–adolescent relationship quality good enough, the adolescent seemed to stay loyal to both of them, both in terms of emotional closeness and a sense of togetherness while spending time together. The narrative of Sara (15–17) is a contrast to Anne's by exemplifying how her parents cared for her:

> At least I hope that we can do something together all the four of us. Because they [Sara's parents] are good friends and such, so they said that it wouldn't be any problems for them, in a way. And they said, 'we just want you [the children] to do well, and we will do everything to ensure that you are doing well.'

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Sara appreciated that both of her parents cared for her by being friendly towards each other and ensuring that Sara was doing well. As several scholars have shown similar examples (see Kitterød and Lidén 2021; Marschall 2014; Haugen 2007; Grape, Thørnblad, and Handegård 2021), Sara was more concerned about making sure that her parents knew that she loved both equally and therefore wanted to spend equal amounts of time with them: 'It is like, I don't want to spend more time with one of them compared to the other (…), because then I feel that one might think that "Wow! She loves the other parent more than me."' Interpreting this in light of the theory of invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973), Sara expressed a consciously felt interest in belonging to both parents. However, she also referred to the possibility that the amount of time she spent would influence her parents' feelings of being loved by her. Scholars have pointed to time as having emotional significance (Haugen 2010; Merson, Tuffin, and Pond 2023) by being valued as a symbol of love, caring and loyalty (Haugen 2010), or something that children should give equally to their parents (Kitterød and Lidén 2021). The emotional significance of time can therefore function as an indirect clue to love and thereby contribute to an unconsciously binding obligation to belong as part of being loyal to both. Such unconscious obligations are inferred from knowing one's parents well and knowing who is bound together in loyalty through each person's bookkeeping of merits (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973). However, time-sharing might also function as an unconscious obligation as a result of cultural values of equality between parents. If adolescents, such as Sara, did not share their time equally when they thought that their parents cared for them, they said that they risked 'pushing away' one of the parents. Thus, perhaps they perceived asymmetrical time-sharing as unjustified, leaving symmetrical JPC as the only reasonable choice.

The wish for emotional closeness to both parents can also be an expression of reciprocal care. One perspective is that children exercise agency by caring for their parents, for instance, by staying close to both parents and having regular contact (Marschall 2014) or by being aware of time and the economic consequences (Haugen 2005). Such a perspective better acknowledges the reciprocal relationships between children and adults, in which both parties 'invest' into the invisible accounts of obligations (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973). Sara may experience this reciprocal care as empowering, as she described potential protective factors such as emotional support, age-appropriate roles, parental support and validation and her positive appraisal of the love and care for her parents (Masiran et al. 2023). In contrast, Anne did not engage in caretaking for either of her parents. She supported her sibling through the parental separation process and emphasised that her father and her mother had a responsibility to be sensitive to her and her sibling's needs. Thus, her parents were not entitled to her loyalty.

4 | Negotiations of Obligations Between Parents and Adolescents

In the narratives, adolescents described different strategies that adolescents and parents applied to regulate closeness and distance, both emotionally (the bonding between parents and adolescents) or physically (by affecting the time that they spent together). Parents usually try to increase closeness with adolescents, while adolescents try to regulate it in both directions. Adolescents seemed to negotiate to make changes possible in the future.

According to Anne, she did not feel that she could express her true state of mind in case her mother became 'passive aggressive' or 'grumpy' and made Anne feel guilty. Her narrative exemplifies how parents' attempts to negotiate closeness between them can be experienced by adolescents. In some descriptions, parents communicate with emotional expressions that make guilt come into play as a regulatory force. According to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), guilt has the function of regulating the imbalance in how persons within a relationship have fulfilled their obligations. The term 'grumpy' was frequently used by the interviewees, illustrating parents' negative emotional expressions. It seems like a 'grumpy' state of mind is perceived by adolescents as a strategic attempt by parents to change the balance of obligations in the relationships, since 'grumpy' parents can make adolescents feel guilty. Such reactions may be examples of what Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) described as external coercion, one of the mechanisms behind loyalty. However, Anne resisted this kind of coercion and felt supported by the mediator in this regard: 'Something of the most important besides of getting advice and (therapeutic) challenges is the feeling of being right.' She felt entitled to exclude her mother from activities such as her end-of-term celebration. A similar reaction was found in Nora's narrative. It became difficult for Nora to relate to her father's recurrent 'grumpy' expressions and persistent efforts to make her feel as if she was guilty (or had any responsibility) for what happened. She made efforts to 'repel' her father, to create distance from him. She was able to communicate this wish for distance with support from the mediator, but she did not feel as if she really got to influence the contact with her father until she got 'old enough'. Unjustified blame or unreasonable responsibilities from parents seemed to affect the adolescents' bookkeeping of merit. It added to the adolescent's sense of fairness and risked weakening the sense of loyalty to the 'grumpy' parent.

An asymmetrical living arrangement preference, or preferences diverging from a parent's wish, would for some adolescents require that they make an effort for it to be expressed. Such discomfort has also been found in other studies (Cashmore and Parkinson 2008; Goldson 2006; Haugen 2010; Kitterød and Lidén 2021; Neale and Flowerdew 2007; Thørnblad and Strandbu 2018). Haugen (2010), for instance, found that children seem loyal to the idea of symmetrical JPC, even if this solution is contrary to their personal preference. Even though it might have been uncomfortable, for instance, due to parents' strategies, adolescents in our study often seemed determined in their justifications of fairness. Some used the strategy of making siblings, the other parent or the family mediator an ally when sharing their preferences. Others needed to create distance in the relationship. Our study provides examples of how adolescents negotiate with their parents and weigh their own needs against their parents' needs, often in a personally favourable way.

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In our study, adolescents could leave the door ajar for changes in the future. Both parents could be presented with favourable qualities, despite that the adolescent expressed a preference for one of the parents and his or her household or emphasised in the interview that 'I don't mean to favour anyone, but it's just how it is *at the moment*' (Ida, 12–14). Such strategies can be understood as expressions of adolescents' consciously recognised feelings of obligation, both in terms of feeling connected to a parent and in terms of how their parents are presented to others outside of the family. For instance, even though Anne chose to live with her father, she wanted her mother to buy a new house that had enough space for her and her sibling so that they could feel welcome. Importantly, however, is that she puts the responsibility on her mother:

> We [Anne and her sibling] at least got to say that we wanted it to have enough space there in case we changed our mind. (...) Or if we wanted to come for overnight stays and such. Because ... We did not want to shut her out. And if she had bought a house that was too small for us, she would have practically shut us out.

These examples can reflect the dialectical aspect of the sense of connectedness and autonomy in parent–adolescent relationships. Nora described challenges in her relationship with her father, thereby justifying her physical and emotional distance from him. Still, when asked about what the future may look like for her and her father, she expressed hope for the relationship to improve: '[faltering] [...] to have a relationship to him so that I can stay with him every other weekend, but not needing to be very close to him. [...] To slowly build it up again.' Even if strong words like 'repelling' are used in narratives, reconciliation may still be possible.

5 | Concluding Remarks

The aim of this article was to examine loyalty issues in relation to how adolescents negotiate closeness and distance in their relationships with parents and how they justify their views.

Our analysis shows how some adolescents make a bookkeeping of their parents' merits and demerits, on which their justifications are based. Parents are expected to consider adolescents' needs, acknowledge their autonomy and increased maturity and promote a feeling of belonging. Failing them may justify the distance. Adolescents describe strategies applied by themselves and their parents that reflect the ongoing negotiation of closeness to each other. From this analysis, loyalty is not something inherent in the parent–adolescent relationship but rather something one acquires through entitlement. We argue that this entitlement may be expressed through adolescents' wish for closeness or a feeling of belonging. Disloyalty, on the other hand, may be reflected through emotional or physical distance or a feeling of being left out of a parent's engagement and care.

Further, the findings in this paper may contribute to the nuance of three themes in particular: first, research that emphasises children's wish for flexibility in living arrangements, perhaps symmetrical JPC in particular, typically explains flexibility as minor adjustments in living arrangements (see, for instance, Carson et al. 2018; Graham, Fitzgerald, and Phelps 2009; Grape, Thørnblad, and Handegård 2021; Haugen 2010; Kitterød and Lidén 2021; Marschall 2014). This kind of flexibility is often negotiated *within* established schemes of equal time-sharing. Flexibility can also mean negotiating the formalities of the living arrangements, such as changing from a symmetrical JPC arrangement to only weekends at one of the parents' households.

Adolescents negotiate autonomy and interdependence within the context in which they live and with the persons they interact with (Rogoff 2003). The responsibilities and power are reorganised in the parent–adolescent relationship and become more reciprocal (Branje 2018; Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973). In this study, the relationships become subject to change and negotiation, and it is *the adolescents'* agenda that comes to the fore. Still, the bookkeeping of parents' merits is a continuous process. Flexibility can also mean that schemes are undetermined, or at least open for negotiation, which, if time has emotional significance, implies that their emotional closeness and loyalty can change in the future. Parents, social workers and mediators may pay attention to loyalty as a dynamic concept when hearing and giving weight to adolescents' views.

Second, our analysis may contribute to the nuance of previous research about children's experiences of symmetrical JPC as a symbol of equality and fairness between parents. The narratives in this study exemplify how adolescents' negotiations with their parents, to a larger extent, are based on their own needs in a personally favourable way. Fairness is not always perceived as equal time-sharing between parents. Instead, adolescents have their own agenda when justifying the balance in the give-and-take in the parent–adolescent relationship. Aspects such as relationships with stepparents and stepsiblings (Afifi 2003; Kitterød and Lidén 2021), leisure activities, friends and connection to the neighbourhood could further contextualise adolescents' experiences. Additionally, parents who practise symmetrical JPC, in general, have less conflict and higher scores on socioeconomic measures (Steinbach 2019; Wiik 2022). Such aspects can be essential for parents' ability to attend to children's views and needs (Berman 2018; Rejaän 2022). As more parents wish to practise symmetrical JPC, the differences that have been associated with the social selection of symmetrical JPC (e.g., interparental conflict and socioeconomic measures) may be obliterated. Thus, several parents may experience barriers to flexible management of the living arrangement and a reflective stance towards changes in their relationships with their children. We suggest an awareness of how any rigid practise of JPC may hinder adolescents from exercising agency. This is important because support for adolescents' autonomy seems to be important in their bookkeeping of merits. This concern may apply to other international contexts too.

Third, as this study illustrates conflicted dynamics between parents and adolescents, some would point to the possibility that parents have manipulated their children. Research with such

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assumptions tends to view children as untrustworthy (Warming et al. 2019). An early label of untrustworthiness can have severe consequences for children's agency. It may be more profitable for the improvement of parent–adolescent relationships if parents and professionals explore adolescents' meaning-making of fairness and loyalty.

In general, we underline the importance of the mediation system. Mediation may, especially if it is possible to return to the service after some time, provide early and low-threshold support for adolescents and parents. They may acquire new understandings and ways to negotiate loyalty and fairness before any relational problems take root or disputes proceed to court.

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Ethics Statement

The project was accepted by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (ref. no. 150314).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

[1] Based on the National Population Register in which it is only possible to be registered with one residence. Thus, these numbers include children with JPC and children who live with one parent due to other reasons, e.g., the decease of a parent.

[2] Nine adolescents said yes to read the manuscript before submission to a scientific journal. When contacted by the first author more than 2 years after their research interviews, two adolescents replied. One wanted to read the final publications. The other attended a meeting with the mother and the first author and read through the manuscript.

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