Social Systems: Mentalizing Beyond the Microcosm of the Individual and Family

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If one views the mind as being essentially a social and interpersonal organ, then the aim of enhancing mentalizing could be defined as

opening the mind to improved social communication and interaction,
both within the family as well as in other social contexts
Social Systems and Mentalizing

Socialization involves the individual making encounters with several extra-familial social systems:

toddler groups, play school, kindergarten, school, further education, work, faith-based institutions, clubs, special interest groups etc…

Functioning within the broader social environment is more difficult when individuals are not able to hold other minds in mind and find it difficult to engage in perspective-taking

On the other hand, *Mentalizing Social Systems*, can stimulate imaginative thinking in relation to self and others

In an effectively mentalizing social system, individuals are attuned to whom they can reliably relate to and whom they can - and cannot - trust

Mentalizing develops and is sustained (also) by the social systems in which people live or to which they relate
Social trust is required to support social cohesion and to overcome the natural vigilance that people feel toward ideas that are not their own.

A person is much more likely to be able to take in and consider the novel / different ideas of others if he/she feels that his/her own personal narratives are regarded seriously and his/her agency is respected.

In order to experience a sense of meaningful connection to the broader social community, individuals need to feel that they are recognized as having agency and that they are being mentalized by the relevant social context and those operating in it.

The relevant social context can be educational or work settings, health and social care institutions, the justice system, and the various cultures and subcultures people are part of.
1. Mentalizing in and with Schools
Family Class, Family School, CAPSULE
Family or School Issue? Or both?
Mentalization-Based Work with Pupils at Risk of Exclusion
Parental Presence in Schools

Family Class(room) or Family Groups
School-based multi-family group work
Weekly, 2–3 hours, during ordinary school hours
In mainstream primary or secondary schools
6-8 ‘problem pupils’ are selected from different classes by teachers / head teacher
One parent’s attendance mandatory
Mixture of learning and therapy
3 months (term)
Jointly conducted by a therapist and teacher
Multi-Family Therapy (MFT)

What is it?

Work with 6 – 8 (10) families at the same time and together
Families have similar problems in common
In different settings - Health, Social Services, Schools, Community Centres
‘Dosis’: daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly - with sessions lasting between 2 - 9 hours
Usually not ‘stand-alone’ approach, but combined with other interventions
2 Therapists
Why MFT?

The families attending MFT...

- share difficulties
- compare experiences and learn from each other
- take and receive many different perspectives
- see themselves and their difficulties mirrored in others
- can engage in surrogate parenting (cross-fostering)
- move from ‘helpless’ to ‘helpful’
- establish new social networks
MFT as a Setting for practicing Mentalizing

Observing other families and their interactions and speculating about the mental states of other group members

Seeing oneself / one’s family ‘mirrored’ in others who have similar problems – forms a bridge to self-reflexivity

Being exposed to multiple descriptions of one’s own mental states by others and checking these with own perceptions

Observing and experiencing attachment issues (e.g. seeking of proximity) in other families from a ‘safe’ distance and without increased arousal

Experimenting with new ‘attachment behaviours’ via ‘cross-fostering’

Addressing difficult issues in pretend mode via playful activities and exercises

Re-viewing problematic interactions and behaviours via video-feedback when arousal is lowered
Video example – Pupil Interviews
Seeing yourself through the eyes of different people
Mainstream School

Family Class

Special Family School

Family Class and Family School

Less complex
Medium complex
Highly complex
Parental Presence in Schools

Family School
(Pears Family School @ Anna Freud Centre)

34 children (age 5 – 14)
5 days a week
Parent(s) present in school for minimum of 1 - 2 days per week
Learning and therapy
Parallel track with mainstream school
1 year on average
Parental Presence in Schools
- Creating Multiple Perspectives

Parents see their child in interactions with teachers and other pupils
Parents are encouraged to mentalize their children and themselves
Teachers see pupils (and their behaviours) in the family context
Teachers are encouraged to mentalize their pupils, the parent(s) and themselves
Pupils see their parents and teachers in interaction and are encouraged to mentalize them and themselves
What makes a good teacher / school?
What makes a teacher / school the most effective?

– It is the teacher / school seeing learning through the eyes of students / pupils

The key ingredients are:
– Awareness of the learning intentions
– Knowing when a student is successful
– Having sufficient understanding of the student’s understanding
– Know enough about the content to provide meaningful and challenging experiences
– Passion that reflects the thrills as well as awareness of the frustrations of learning

after Meta-analytic Studies of Teacher Effectiveness, Hattie 2014
How can schools/teachers recognizing individual agency?
1. The pupil’s imagined self narrative

2. The teacher’s image of the pupil’s self narrative

3. The pupil’s image of the teacher’s image of the pupil’s self narrative

4. The Epistemic Match

5. Opening of the Epistemic Channel for knowledge transfer

Need for mentalizing (RF)
Opening of epistemic channel for knowledge transfer

Student perceives teacher’s recognition of subdominant personal narrative

EPISTEMIC MATCH
Teacher recognizes subdominant personal narrative(s)

Subdominant personal narrative(s)

Dominant personal narrative(s)
CAPSLE
Creating A Peaceful School Learning Environment
(Twemlow et al 2005, 2017)
... is a whole-school prevention approach to school violence and coercive power dynamics in primary schools

... based on the assumption that all members of the school community play a role in bullying and that anyone can assume the roles of bully, victim, and bystander

... promotes awareness of interpersonal dynamics and capacity for perspective taking, to encourage empathy and decrease pre-aggression attitudes

... enlists all members of the school community to take an active stance against bullying, especially when they witness bullying as bystanders, by supporting victims (i.e., helpful bystanding) and refraining from the encouragement of bully behavior (i.e. aggressive bystanding)
The By-stander

The witness to a power struggle - the bystander - can experience sadistic feelings of pleasure in seeing another person’s suffering.

But this is only the case when the witness feels distanced from the internal world of the victim: i.e. the victim’s pain is not fully represented as a mental state in the bystander’s own consciousness: it is recognized but not felt by the bystander.
Elements of CAPSLE Intervention

1. **“Positive climate” campaign**: reflective classroom discussions of immediate past experiences to create a shift in the language and thinking of students and staff

2. **Classroom management plan**: focusing on understanding and correcting the problem at the root, rather than punishing and criticizing behaviour. A behaviour problem in a single pupil is conceptualized as a problem for all the pupils in the class who, often unwittingly, participate in bully, victim and bystander roles. This reduces scapegoating and replaces it by speculating about the states of mind of all

3. **Physical education programme** focusing on skills to deal with victimization and bystanding behaviour – role-playing, relaxation, self-defence techniques, identifying alternatives to back-fighting

4. **Peer and adult mentorships**
The Positive Climate Campaign

promotes effective mentalizing (i.e., being empathic and reflective on one’s own feelings and those of others) through the use of a variety of “campaigns”:

- posters, magnets, buttons, class projects, the school peace flag, lectures, school assemblies, and integration of the program philosophy into the curriculum at teachers’ discretion

The overarching goal is to make awareness of power struggles, reflection, and modulation of feelings a regular part of the students’ day so that it eventually becomes part of their language

Another goal is to shift the tone of the school such that social rewards come from helpfulness and consideration of others rather than from the power gained and retained with aggression
Classroom management plan

“Reflection time” each day for class discussion of students’ behaviours regarding their goals and rules.

Students decide whether they should signify that they had a peaceful day by hanging their “peace banner” outside the classroom.

Teachers are asked to help students generalize self-control strategies (e.g., “relaxation response”) learned in Gentle Warriors

Disruptive behaviour is addressed via comments to the class as a whole (rather than singling out individual students), praising behaviour that contributes to a positive classroom climate

Students are involved in setting classroom goals and evaluating progress toward those goals, and pointing out how others are affected by behaviors to increase interpersonal awareness
Pro-social tokens
(given to students by teachers, parents and other students)
Gentle Warrior Programme
(martial arts)

Activities include physical exercises such as stretching, relaxing, self-defense, and role-playing activities as well as the reading of stories that emphasize ethical conduct including
self-respect
respect for others
self-control
kindness and generosity

The programme fulfills the school requirement for physical education, is easily implemented, requires no previous martial arts experience, and is well accepted by physical education teachers.
Mentoring Programmes

Schools can choose two types of mentoring programs.

1) **Peer Mentors** are often high school students assigned to specific primary school children identified by the school as likely to benefit from a mentoring relationship. Peer Mentors spend time weekly with their assigned child at his or her elementary school and are closely supervised.

2) **Adult Mentors** help children manage unstructured school time such as breaks and lunch hours. Adults functioning in this way often use creative ways to help children resolve problems such as setting rules for basketball games, sharing play equipment, and so on.
Bully/Bullied /Bystander Role Play

Scenario
• A typical bullying scene is role played by 4 people: 1 bully, 1 bullied, 2 bystanders.
• The rest of the group has to speculate about what goes on in each person’s mind

Instruction
• Imagine a typical scene at break-time in school: one young person (YP) gets teased, it escalates – the bully escalates, other YPs get drawn in and watch what happens

Focus
• What might be going on in a bully? What might the bullied YP think and feel?
• What might be the thoughts and feelings of each of the bystanders? What
• Could they do and/or why don't they do what they feel they should do?
Results of CAPSLE Anti-bullying Intervention

1,345 children across nine elementary schools in a city in the USA (Fonagy et al. 2009).

Results:
Substantial reduction of aggression
Improvement of classroom behavior
Reduction in children’s experience of aggression and victimization
Decrease of number of children nominated by their peers as being aggressive, victimized, or engaging in aggressive bystanding
Reduction of disruptive and off-task classroom behaviour in schools
Empathic mentalizing increased in schools using the CAPSLE program
2. Mentalizing in and with the Justice System

Criminal Courts use a binary model: “guilty” or “not guilty” “beyond reasonable doubt”
Prosecuting and defending lawyers, each sell their particular version of “reality”
Conviction leads to Punishment (Retributive Justice)

Is effective mentalizing possible in the criminal justice system?
Restorative Justice – a mentalization-based approach?

This approach encourages the offenders to create an image of the persons they have harmed by confronting the offender with the victim:

- Face-to-face conferences
- Victim-offender mediation
- Restitution
  (gains-based recovery, different from compensation)
- Reparation payment

Results: Reoffending rates 11% compared with 37% in control group of subjects who had served prison sentence
Civil Courts
*(incl. Family Courts)*

Not certainty, judgments are made on the balance of probability.

Judges generally try to mentalize the parents and expert witnesses.

*(but they often do not mentalize children and themselves)*

‘Expert witnesses’ have to focus primarily on the welfare of the child.

*(but they often so not mentalize lawyers, judges, other professionals and themselves)*
Mentalizing the Justice system and being Mentalized by the Justice System

Via joint medico-legal training events with an emphasis on:

- Generating a mutual understanding of “legalese” and “psychobabble”
- Provision of psychiatric reports that have multiple minds in mind
- Provision of Judgements which have multiple minds in mind – in a child-friendly language
Contact and Residence Disputes
High-Conflict Parenting Post-Separation
‘Parental Alienation’
‘Parental Alienation’

Child…
- makes unfounded allegations against the resident parent, often of a very banal nature
- idealizes the resident parent and repeats that parent’s narrative often in identical words
- refuses to have any form of contact / communication with ‘demonized’ parent
The Child’s Voice?

“HIS MASTER’S VOICE”

This trademark and the trademarked word “Victrola” identify all our products. Look under the lid! Look on the label!

VICTOR TALKING MACHINE CO., Camden, N. J.
or the voice of the favoured parent?
‘*FamilyTies*’

**A Model of Working with Post-Separation High Conflict Entrenched Family Relationships**

1. Work with child(ren)
2. Parallel work with each parent
3. Parental couple work (*if possible*)
4. Preparation of rejected parent for having contact- the video message
5. Preparation of child (and the favoured parent) for having contact
6. Managing first contact(s)
7. Family work
8. Multi-Family Work
High Court Judgement in the form of a Letter to Ben, age 13

THE HON. MR JUSTICE PETER JACKSON
Family Division Liaison Judge for the Northern Circuit

13 July 2017

Dear Ben,

It was a pleasure to meet you on Monday and I hope your camp this week went well.

This case is about you and your future, so I writing this letter as a way of giving my decision to you and to your parents.
So I have a view on the question of whether the idea of these proceedings comes from you or from your dad. My view is that you brought the proceedings mainly as a way of showing your dad how much you love him. It was mainly to meet his needs, and not yours. I have seen the self-centred way that he behaves, even in the courtroom, and how he makes sure everybody knows how little respect he has for anybody who disagrees with him. Even as a judge, I found it hard work stopping him from insulting the other witnesses.

Your mother certainly finds his behaviour difficult, so difficult that she avoids contact with him whenever possible. I don’t think you yet realise the influence that your father has over you. It leads you to side with him and praise him whenever you can. You don’t do the same for your mother. Why is that? Is it because you sense that he needs it and she doesn’t? Also, I may be wrong, but when you gave your evidence I didn’t get the feeling that you actually see your future in Norway at all.
Ben, I realise that this order is not the one that you said you wanted me to make, but I am confident that it is the right order for you in the long run. Whatever each of your parents might think about it, I hope they have the dignity not to impose their views on you, so that you can work things out for yourself. I know that as you get older, you will do this increasingly and I hope that you will come to see why I have made these decisions. I wish you every success with your future and if you want to reply to this letter, I know that Martine will make sure that your reply reaches me.

Lastly, I wanted to tell you that your dad and I enjoyed finding out that we both love the film My Cousin Vinny, even if it might be for different reasons. He mentioned it as an example of a miscarriage of justice, while I remember it for the best courtroom scenes in any film, and the fact that justice was done in the end.

Kind regards
Mr Justice Peter Jackson
Concluding remarks

Where and what next? Political systems?

Mentalization-based interventions to combat the growing populism?

May a Trumposcope assist?
Trumpo-scope
How can Social Systems support Mentalizing and generate Epistemic Trust?

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Socialization involves the individual making encounters with several extra-familial social systems:

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- faith-based institutions, clubs, special interest groups etc...

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Being mentalized by a social system *(and its representatives)* fosters and restores Effective Mentalizing
THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST