

An exploratory study investigating the experience of a group of Irish social workers undertaking an applied training in mentalization-based thinking and practice.

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored the potential relevance of mentalization-based theory (MBT) and its corollary reflective functioning (RF) within social work practice.

A bespoke MBT-informed psychoeducational programme emphasizing a novel tripartite model, comprising MBT, Attachment Theory and Regulation Theory was delivered in two hourly groups over twelve weeks. In addition to the provision of psychoeducational information, the groups incorporated a Tavistock style Work Discussion Group to support the participants' applied use of MBT to one of their own cases.

The study aimed to explore the participants' own experience of engaging with and acquiring a working knowledge of mentalization, its relevance, both personally and professionally, as well as garnering any learnings from this first attempt to research the provision of introductory MBT training to a group of social worker practitioners.

Nine of the eleven social workers, recruited from a large metropolitan area in Ireland completed the programme.

Utilizing a thematic analysis in conjunction with a psychoanalytic lens, the transcriptions of the groups were analyzed within a critical realist world view, using Braun and Clarke's six-stage model. The case studies were subjected to close scrutiny and reflexive considerations from which three central themes emerged for further analysis.

The study advances our knowledge by indicating a strong consensus amongst the participants that MBT was a relevant and beneficial theoretical and practice gyroscope to support the social work task.

Participants warmly welcomed the new language and 'Thinking Tools' of MBT which supported their ability to conceptualize and articulate a level of complexity of their clients and their own intersubjective process which they had previously struggled to enunciate.

This novel tripartite model offers significant potential as a centralizing theoretical and practice framework; as such, it warrants further development and research. Future social work practice development could be beneficially advanced in light of these findings.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

This is a qualitative study, overtly situated within the paradigm of mentalization-based theory (MBT), which aims to forge a path of exploration regarding the possible utility of MBT as a conceptual gyroscope to guide social work practice and the relational encounters therein. To date, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no published work focusing on the application of mentalization-based thinking directly to social work practice save for a recent publication by this author (2021, p. 891).

Mentalization, “unlike other integrative approaches, [...] has a theoretical frame of reference which includes a developmental model, a theory of psychopathology and a hypothesis about the mechanism of therapeutic action” (Midgley and Vrouva, 2012, p. 28). Such theoretical rigour and practice guidance could beneficially be applied to the often troubling and emotionally taxing relational complexities social workers commonly encounter.

I wish to explore more deeply my sense that mentalization could, when compared to other contemporary theoretical frames guiding social work practice, prove to be a centralizing theoretical frame around which social work practice could be conceptualized.

To this end, a bespoke, MBT informed, continuing professional development (CPD) programme was developed. The provision of this CPD to the social work participants allowed me to investigate their experience of the programme, and their application of this knowledge base to their own cases via a Tavistock style Work Discussion Group (WDG) (Bradley and Rustin 2008) which was included in this study design.

The study consisted of twelve weekly groups of two-hour duration. Groups one to four were wholly psychoeducational. Each subsequent group was divided with the

first hour being devoted to psychoeducational information and the second to a Work Discussion Group (WDG), with each participant being afforded the opportunity to present one of their cases. The study inductively and deductively considered the participants' case studies within a psychodynamic framework.

Critical realism has been chosen as the paradigm within which to locate this study, as it lies in sympathy with the ontological and epistemological tenets of mentalization given that it is a theoretically independent frame that acknowledges the stratification of reality.

### **The Rationale for the Study**

Having worked therapeutically with teenagers and parents for many years, I was introduced to the knowledge base of MBT via some fortuitous mentoring by the author of the Lighthouse Parenting Program (Byrne *et al.*, 2018, pp. 113-118), itself an MBT informed parenting intervention for parents aimed at those who may have abused, maltreated or neglected their children.

My subsequent application of the Lighthouse MBT Programme in a novel way, applying it to foster parents, saw a deepening of my involvement and interest in the application of MBT beyond the typical application within psychiatry (Bateman and Fonagy, 2012). Having conducted a number of Lighthouse MBT informed programmes with foster parents it became evident that this knowledge base was not known, nor available to the social work practitioners supporting foster parents.

The motivation for undertaking this particular enquiry stems from my acute interest in how one perceives reality and the destabilizing effects human beings are subjected to when encountering an alternative conception of reality, such that it challenges one's values, sense of self or identity, personally or professionally, particularly in the context of the highly contested versions of reality inherent in social work practice.



Ferguson's recent writings on the "hostile relationship" within social work practice, "enacted through conflict and resistance" (Ferguson *et al.*, 2021) are arguably the manifestations stemming from such contestations of reality that I wish to address. Central to this study is the investigation of the facilitating and inhibiting factors that all humans experience in apprehending reality<sup>1</sup> and, in particular, within the contested reality of social work practice, as will be detailed within the following case studies. In consequence of the above, this thesis perhaps more than others needs to be scrupulously transparent in articulating its ontological and epistemological position as the subject matter of the thesis itself closely attends to and takes a position on how one apprehends reality and the mechanisms which serve to help or hinder one's apprehending of reality. Thus I feel bound to present a clear and congruent account of the positionality of this study if I am to achieve the level of transparency and rigour I seek.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "apprehending reality" is used throughout this thesis to denote that one's grasp of reality is subjective, acknowledging also that there may well be a reality out there but that we humans are incompletely able to grasp it and only do so based on the ever-shifting matrix of interplay between our ability to perceive, our conscious and unconscious defence mechanisms and arguably our level of reflective functioning and neuroceptive abilities which serve our consciousness. Largely its use relates to our grasp of the contents, motivations and intentions of other mental states or minds.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

In keeping with the epistemological stance of this thesis it is important to state my agreement with Hart who suggests “There is no such thing as a perfect review [...]. Partiality in terms of value judgment, opinions, moralizing and ideologues can often be found to have invaded or formed the starting point of a review” (1998, p. 25). The intention in this review is to acknowledge the inevitability of partiality in attempting to synthesize any body of literature whilst also striving to surface, acknowledge and make evident such possibilities, thus informing the reader in the most transparent manner possible.

I hope to outline the rationale of how I have conducted the literature review, indicating the necessity of developing a pictorial ideograph as a visual guide and explanatory aid in attempting to narrow the focus of the review to only those works which will aid my exploration of the subject matter at hand. Inevitably the privileging of space provided to one concept or intellectual lens over another will manifest some form of partiality; however, I hope to counter this by providing a keen rationale for the inclusion and exclusion of material.

The review will be in the following format.

Initially, I will locate this study in the context of the practice of social work in Ireland, indicating some of the historical and contemporary topics of importance. I will address the importance of developments in the philosophy of mind in underpinning mentalization followed by its linkage to the relationship between mentalization and attachment theory. Given its relevance to the case material, a brief mention will also be provided on Menzies’ (1960a) articulations on systems of social defence against anxiety or perhaps in more MBT terms the impact of the organization in the mind. Following this brief appraisal I shall construct a mechanism to facilitate the

comparison of the theoretical integrity and robustness of selected examples of contemporary social work conceptualizations i.e. Resilience and Reflective Practice and examine the theoretical coherence offered by MBT when compared to these popular conceptualizations. From there, I look to mentalization-based treatments generally, progressively narrowing the focus on mentalization as applied to children, families and foster carers, and the current offerings relating to Trauma-Informed Care in Ireland. I will conclude with a brief outline of Regulation Theory and its possible relevance to our task.

### **Contextualizing Irish Social Work**

From a historical perspective, the development of social work in Ireland can be said to parallel the cultural/societal development of the state's relationship to family and children of the state. A key legislative influence has been the 1908 Children's Act and the Irish Constitution (Bunreacht Na hÉireann, 1937) which "enshrined the protection of the 'family' from undue interference from the state". Skehill presents a number of articles related to the history of social work in Ireland (Skehill, O'Sullivan and Buckley, 1999; Skehill, 2003) including one with McGregor (2016) which charted, similar to other jurisdictions, the tensions that exist and continue to exist between care and control – child protection services and family welfare/ supportive services. It has been suggested that such tensions had perhaps little space to flourish in the context of a profession striving for credibility within a positivistic world view. Noteworthy here is the fact that all social work training in Ireland is university-based with no generic social work training courses in Ireland prior to 1971 (Devaney and McGregor, 2017, pp. 1255-1263). As Rossiter (1996), quoted in Powell, suggests: "historically social work allied itself with positivism in a desperate search

for credibility in relation to the elite knowledge of psychiatry and psychology” (Powell, 1998, p. 323).

The Child Care Act of 1991 which had a protracted gestation was the most significant reform of the child protection and welfare system in Ireland since the beginning of the last century. It coincided with increased concern regarding child protection following a number of child abuse scandals totalling twenty-nine inquiries and reviews between 1993 and 2012. These are related to institutions, dioceses and families (Buckley, 2013) leading to moral panic within the society according to Powell (1998) cited in (Skehill, O'Sullivan and Buckley, 1999). Buckley *et al.* (1997) cited in (Skehill, O'Sullivan and Buckley, 1999, p. 146) claims that “alongside the increased concern about child abuse and neglect has come an increasing preoccupation with the introduction of procedures and guidelines for practitioners in the field and, fundamentally linked to this, a persistently narrowing focus on the protection spectrum of child welfare within an equally limiting discourse of risk assessment, danger and investigation”.

More recently, the Child and Family Act 2012 established The Child and Family Agency referred to as Tusla.

In contemporary Irish literature alternative care provision has garnered some mention, notably from such authors as Gilligan (2000; 2004; 2009; 2012; 2019) in part because Ireland has one of the highest rates of foster placements internationally, currently accounting for 91% (5,338) of all children in the care of the state (Tusla (2021)). Reflecting this, and despite the arguable child protection centric literature, significant numbers of social work staff are deployed within the area of alternative care in Child In Care (CIC) teams and fostering teams.

In addition to my intention to construct a yardstick to examine mentalization-based theory's rigour and theoretical coherence against (see p 14), I also wish to note that whilst Tusla has an established practice model for child protection social work, similar practice guidance for social work practitioners in alternative care has not been developed, although I understand there is an ambition to do so. The absence of such a governing conceptual frame leaves local teams/areas idiosyncratically developing on the basis of local knowledge only.

Browne's 2012 article entitled "Social Work Profession in Ireland" provides an overview of the history of social work in Ireland, in which he lists the "Theoretical Perspectives and Methods used in Social Work". These included Crisis Intervention, Systems Theory, Attachment Theory, Task Centred Practice and Anti-Oppressive Practice/ Emancipatory Practice (Browne, 2012). In light of this list of contemporary theoretical resources utilized by Irish Social Workers, I would invite the reader to compare and contrast the rigour and utility of these theoretical frames when considering the following case studies to the tripartite model of MBT, Attachment Theory and Regulation Theory as detailed below.

Further, psychoanalytical issues of projection (Bunker and Freud, 1936)<sup>2</sup>, containment (Klein, 1946, pp. 99-100) and Menzies' social defences against anxiety (1960b) are all but absent from the social work discourse in Ireland given the limited history of inclusion of psychoanalytical thinking in contemporary social work training curriculums or CPD offerings in Ireland. This represents an important difference compared to the UK experience.

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly Malancharuvil suggests "that projective processes are not merely defensive manoeuvres that interfere with perception, but rather an essential means by which human perception is rendered possible. It is the manner in which human beings test and evaluate reality in terms of their experiential structure, and their needs for survival and nourishment" (J., M. 2004. Projection, Introjection, and Projective Identification: A reformulation. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*.).

The literature is also largely silent on the issue of the emotional labour of social work in Ireland<sup>3</sup>. It is arguably child protection centric with a concerningly limited focus on what I would describe as the inter and intra-psycho-biological mechanisms of co-regulation and meaning-making that are inevitable components of the practice of social work.

It is within these contexts that we must examine the relevant literature relating to the experience of social work practitioners' exposure to the conceptual lens of mentalization and its possible utility within social work practice in Ireland.

### **Mentalization and its Corollary Reflective Functioning**

In this section, I have chosen to address mentalization and reflective functioning together as they are intrinsically linked, with the terms commonly being used interchangeably. Adhering to the protocol I set out in the methodology section, I shall utilize the ideograph of a funnel (see Appendix 4) to aid the synthesis of the literature. I shall briefly articulate mentalization's historical roots and the developments within the philosophy of mind which underpin mentalization. This naturally leads us into consideration of the development of reflective functioning in human infants and its association with attachment theory. Following this, I will detail the development of reflective functioning, its testing, its application to children and families in particular the application of mentalization-based therapy (MBT) and reflective functioning (RF) within the fostering field to the extent that the literature details its application. Finally, I will circle back and address more directly the clinical model of mentalization including its modes of functioning and the axis of

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<sup>3</sup> This contrasts with the UK where authors such as Sandra Dwyer's writings focus on this issue. Her article entitled 'The emotional impact of social work practice' quoted Bunting's claims that "emotional labour had become one of the hardest parts of many jobs" (2005, p61.)

mentalization, broadly detailing its application within the arena of mental health from where it originally developed. I will conclude with a brief examination of the relevance of Allan Schore's psycho neurobiological regulation theory.

## **History of Mentalization**

Google's Ngram attests to the very significant expansion of the use of the word mentalization since approximately 1990 (see Appendix 5). According to Bateman and Fonagy, mentalization has followed "a tradition in philosophy of mind established by Brentano (1973/1974), Dennett (1978) and others as a form of mostly preconscious imaginative mental activity, namely, perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states, (e.g. needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals and reasons)" (Bateman and Fonagy, 2012, p. 12).

The history of this concept can be traced back to the Paris School of Psychosomatics and amongst others the work of Pierre Marty, who according to Aisenstein considered mentalization in terms of "three axes, each representing one of the dimensions of the activity of representations: its density, its fluidity and its permanence" (2020, p. 19). This emphasis on representations informed the mentalizing construct which was subsequently introduced by psychoanalytically orientated attachment researchers, Peter Fonagy, the Steels and Mary Target in 1991 with similar advances seemingly occurring somewhat simultaneously in neuroscience and clinical thinking (Bateman and Fonagy, 2012, p. 3).

Some of the key concepts developed initially out of clinical work undertaken by Fonagy with children, notably Emma, a 17-year-old suffering from Brittle Diabetes who was treated by Fonagy and on whom he subsequently wrote a paper (Fonagy and Moran, 1990). An important aspect of this paper and their work, in general, was their relegation of the importance of the traditional phases of child development in

favour of a focus on the development of a philosophy of mind (Spillius, 1992) to which we will now turn our attention.

## **Philosophy of Mind**

Kuhn suggests “a new theory, however special its range of application, is seldom or never just an increment to what is already known. Its assimilation requires the reconstruction of prior theory and the re-evaluation of prior fact, an intrinsically revolutionary process that is seldom completed by a single man and never overnight” (1996, p. 6). Mentalization like all advances has a history of becoming and rightly we should be attentive to its aetiology to fully understand and situate such advances in our current knowledge. Thus with this in mind let us briefly look at the developments in the philosophy of mind that have informed and underpinned the development in mentalization thinking.

Contrary to the classical Cartesian doctrine which “assumes an innate, prewired organization of our mind that ensures primary introspective access to our internal mental states” (Fonagy, Gergely and Target, 2007, p. 289) Fonagy contended “that optimal development of the capacity to mentalize depends on interaction with more mature and sensitive minds” (Fonagy and Allison, 2012, p. 5). This stance is indebted to Gergely & Watson who in 1996 put forward a new theory, a pedagogical view of natural social biofeedback of early social and emotional development. They argue that infants initially become aware of emotional states through a social biofeedback process provided “by the parents marked reflections of the baby’s emotion displays during affective regulative interactions” (Gergely and Watson, 1996b, p. 1). This occurs according to Gergely and Watson in the context of the discovery of “the very early existence of a (possibly innate) perceptual learning mechanism that analyses [...] the contingent relations between response and



stimulus events i.e. contingency detection and contingency maximising” (Gergely and Watson, 1996b, p. 12). In other words parental affect-mirroring engages a social biofeedback mechanism mediated by the baby's own contingency detection ability whereby “the contingency detection and maximising process involved in interpreting the emotion-reflective displays of parents contributes to the affect-regulative influence of parental interactions with the infant” (Gergely and Watson, 1996b, p. 16).

Gergely's articulation should be understood within the significant developments in our understanding of human infants' development of a Theory of Mind (ToM) stemming from Lewis (1990), Fodor (1987) and importantly Dennett's (1987) proposal regarding the “intentional stance” along with “Premack & Woodruff's (1997) view that it is a ‘theory’ that the child develops, [that] now represents the most widely accepted perspective on the process of the development of a theory of mind” (Astington and Gopnik, 1991 as cited in ((Ensink and Mayes, 2010, p. 304).

Luyten (2017, p. 182) perhaps building on Bion's work, ((1984a) emphasizes mentalization's ability to encompass both the cognitive and emotional aspects of an individual's inference of mental states in both self and others. Mentalization differs from other, often overlapping/interchangeable concepts such as Theory of Mind (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), mind-reading (Baron-Cohen, 1995) and empathy (Preston & de Waal, 2002) in that the latter concepts have a “narrow focus” compared to mentalization according to Kim (2015, p. 356).

From a neuroscientific perspective, Schore's seminal work also aligns with this formulation. He has stated: “the child is using the output of the mother's right cortex [known to be the location of emotional experience] as a template for the imprinting – the hard wiring of circuits in his/her own right cortex” (Schore, 1994, p. 13).

Synthesizing an impressive array of neuroscientific evidence, Schore goes on to build a convincing argument in my view for what he calls psycho-neurobiological regulation which I shall address below.

### **Attachment and Mentalization**

For now, I wish to stay with the developments stemming from the coterminous offerings from the philosophy of mind and neuroscience and look to their integration with attachment theory as this was the territory from which Fonagy, along with Target, undertook the seminal study leading to the conceptualization of mentalization as we know it. The development of Fonagy's thinking was in part based on Sroufe & Hofer (1996) who are credited with extending attachment theory from a developmental theory of social expectancy into a more holistic way of understanding "attachment as an organizer of physiological and brain regulation" (Midgley and Vrouva, 2012, p. 15). Indeed according to Midgley and Vrouva (2012, p. 13), Sroufe (1996) went as far as suggesting "the attachment system is first and foremost a regulator of emotional experience".

Fonagy's seminal study (1991) in which he administered the Adult Attachment Interview to 100 expectant mothers and subsequently tested the children of these pregnancies using the Strange Situation Protocol (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978), at twelve months found that "Maternal representations of attachment (autonomous vs. dismissing or preoccupied) predicted subsequent infant-mother attachment patterns (secure vs. insecure) 75% of the time" (Fonagy, Steele and Steele, 1991, p. 891).

Their results according to Heller & Pollet supported their hypothesis that a child's ability to represent self and others was profoundly rooted in the quality of early object relations (2009) and that a "mother's capacity to understand the child's emotions as analogous to, but not isomorphous, as the element that allows the growth of

mentation” (Fonagy *et al.*, 2003) and ultimately the development of symbolic representation.

Fonagy’s development of the Reflective Self Functioning Scale <sup>4</sup> (1991) to assess the parent’s ability to grasp the intentionality of another led to their assertion that a parent’s ability to comprehend their infant is mediated by the parent’s own level of reflective functioning based on their own experience of attachment (Fonagy *et al.*, 1991). In so doing “they were probably the first to put together key pieces of [the] attachment and theory of mind puzzle” (Ensink and Mayes, 2010, p. 319). Steele in a 2015 article also suggests that “we found evidence that one way of breaking the cycle of abuse was for the individual to demonstrate high reflective functioning, a capacity to monitor the contents of her mind alongside the perusal of the mind of the other. By putting oneself in the so-called shoes of the other she can begin to understand the thoughts, feelings and intention or lack thereof that motivate actions” (Steele, Murphy and Steele, 2015, p. 223).

The import of this shall be made clear; however, it is perhaps appropriate to situate mentalization and reflective functioning alongside alternative conceptualizations that are perhaps more familiar to social work.

## **Mentalization / Reflective Functioning & Popular Social Work Conceptualizations**

Within the world of social work “resilience” and “reflective practice” might reasonably be considered to be popular guiding conceptualizations. Whilst not wishing to be comparative at a granular level as these are indeed disparate conceptualizations manifesting themselves in their own unique way in social work, I do, as stated, wish

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<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with the similar sounding Reflective Functioning Scale later developed by Slade.

to scrutinize the robustness of such conceptualizations as they stand alongside mentalization and reflective functioning by establishing the credentials for these neighbouring conceptualizations which have had considerable influence on social work practice in Ireland.

## **Resilience**

Resilience “was first researched extensively by developmental psychologists based in North America in the 1970s and 80s” (Winkler, 2014, p. 5). It is “an interactive phenomenon that is inferred from findings indicating that some individuals have relatively good outcomes in the face of adversity whereas others have poor outcomes (Danese, 2020, p. 244). Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw’s review notes that positive outcomes for resilience varied from “25% to 84%” (2008, p. 38), a wide variation without any clear rationale for such divergence. Winkler heavily criticized Gilligan, a prominent author on the use of resilience in social work (Gilligan, 2000; Gilligan, 2009; Gilligan, 2004), somewhat unfairly in my view. Winkler claimed that resilience is “characterized by a plethora of definitions of resilience, often operationalising their terms in slightly different ways (See Appendix 6) [arguing that this] leaves unexplained the very process by which [you] may or may not build resilience” (Winkler, 2011, pp. 12-13). Aburn similarly informs us that in an integrative review of over 100 articles they found no universal definition of resilience” (Aburn, Gott and Hoare, 2016, p. 1)

However, contestation of definitional accuracy can be levelled at many concepts including mentalization although perhaps to a less extent. The literature seems populated with instances of associational rather than causative explanations of the development pathway of resilience, noting “Multiple interacting factors including genetics, epigenetics, developmental, environment, psychosocial factors,

neurochemicals and functional neural circuitry, play critical roles in developing and modulating resilience in an integrated way” (Wu *et al.*, 2013, p. 10). This compares unfavourably in my view to the significant delineation of the developmental pathway for mentalization in the literature, and the established empirically validated testing procedures for testing one’s level of reflective functioning.

## **Reflective Practice**

In this brief review of the vast literature on reflective practice, one can quickly establish the shared roots of reflective practice dating back to Dewey’s notion of reflective thought (1933, p. 416) with the subsequent contribution of Schon’s, reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action (1983). Given the limitation of space, I will focus my commentary on high-level epistemological tensions in the application of reflective practice and focus on a call for further development of this conceptualization utilizing psychodynamic conceptualizations.

In 1987 Schon commented that “inherent in the practice of professionals that we recognize as unusually competent, there is a core of artistry” (Schon, 1987, p. 11). I note the dis-ease with which such commentary sits within the positivistic traditions which inform some of the health care professions that have strongly embraced this concept i.e. medicine and nursing, despite the epistemological tensions in so doing.

Notwithstanding such tensions, there is a growing consensus that reflective practice “is key to professional growth and development” (Harris *et al.*, 2010, p. 3).

Lilienfeld & Basterfield’s recent review noted that, within clinical psychology, reflective practice has been proposed as “a foundational competency” and further that they “wholeheartedly embrace the goal of producing more reflective practitioners” whilst somewhat contradictorily stating “no published studies in clinical psychology have examined whether reflective practice activities improve patients’

outcome or the validity of clinicians' assessment-related judgements or predictions" (2020, p. 7) which again is in some tension to the traditional positivistic epistemological positioning of clinical psychology.

More in harmony with my research study's ontological and epistemological positions are the psychodynamically influenced writings on reflective practice. Such texts articulate a different register of phenomenological experience compared to the more readily apprehendable and provable register of the positivistic world view. Writers such as Menzies Lyth (1960a), Obholzer (1994) and Preston-Shoot (1990) as well as more contemporary work by Ruch (2018; 2007) O'Sullivan (2018) and Canham (2012) have all offered significant contributions. However according to Wilkins this "has led some commentators to suggest that there is no generally understood definition of reflective practice (Wilkins, 2017)" (Lees and Cooper, 2021, p. 94) which I feel is fair commentary.

However, Ferguson notes the existence of a "practice anxiety and a new risk consciousness, arising from the need to avoid being responsible for children suffering abuse or dying" (Christopherson, 2002, p. 261). O'Sullivan (2018), an Irish proponent of reflective practice groups draws on a study of Irish social work managers suggesting that their movement away from a practice based on wisdom and collective team knowledge and community knowledge to a practice "flooded with standardized procedure and regulations created an atmosphere of defensive practice, where doing the right thing is far more important than doing the right thing" (Kempe, T. 2008, p.106). Ruch suggests that "the positivistic underpinnings of social work are a response to the uncertainty and risky psycho-social situations" social workers encounter (2007, p. 664). Ferguson argues for a revision of the concept of reflection suggesting that reflection in the social work literature is often related to "the

use of self and or emotional intelligence” which he suggests is “regarded as an apparently limitless resource that the worker taps into” ((2018, p. 416). Ferguson emphasized that on occasion it is better for the practitioner not to reflect, something which seems absent in much of the literature on emotional intelligence, and ultimately arguing “that the current notion of reflection in action is too simplistic to capture the complexity of how social workers think or don’t” (2018, p. 420).

Such thinking seems redolent of my own lack of satisfaction with the rigour of current theoretical concepts informing social work practice. However, Ferguson does not utilize reflective functioning/mentalization informed thinking which I feel would provide a finer grain to the detailing of the relational landscape he suggests requires greater understanding.

Thus, both resilience and reflective practice despite being highly developed conceptualizations that have gained significant face value, remain unsatisfactorily developed. Indeed mentalization could be perceived as the articulation of the fine-grain processes of reflective practice whilst also having the intrinsic advantage of delineating the normative and abnormal developmental pathway of one’s reflective capacities.

Thus having created something of a reasonable yardstick from which to survey mentalization and reflective functioning, let us now turn our attention to these interlocking conceptualizations.

## **Reflective Functioning**

Despite the significance of the findings of Fonagy *et al.* in 1991 no further studies were published relating to the Reflective Self Functioning Scale until the 2005 special edition of the *Journal of Attachment and Human Development* in which Slade (2005) focused on a mother’s ability to represent her child. At base, reflective

functioning “is a construct not unlike insight or the self-observing capacity of the ego, and so has arguably been part of psychoanalytic thinking since its inception” (Steele, Murphy and Steele, 2015, p. 222), linking as it does to “object constancy”.

Accordingly, building on the work of Gergely and Dennett's concept of intentionality, Midgley explains that the “capacity for representing self and other as thinking, believing, wishing or desiring does not simply arrive at age four, as an inevitable consequence of maturation. Rather it is a developmental achievement that is profoundly rooted in the quality of early relationships” (Midgley and Vrouva, 2012, p. 12).

To explain, Slade *et al.* published their findings having employed a different testing procedure compared to the Fonagy and Target 1991 study. Whereas Fonagy tested the participants’ reflective functioning on their Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) transcripts, Slade developed the Parental Development Interview (PDI) which is intended “to assess internal working models of relationships” (PDI Training Institute) and, unlike the AAI, it is intended to enquire into current “live” relationships as opposed to retrospective ones focused on in the AAI. Slade tested her forty participants’ reflective functioning on the transcripts from this instrument (Slade *et al.*, 2005a). This importantly assessed a caregiver’s representation of the child, their self as a carer, and their relationship with the child (Camoirano, 2017; Slade *et al.*, 2005a). It is administered via a predetermined structured interview intended to enquire into “awareness and nature of self, others mental states, recognition of limitations of insight and a capacity to demonstrate alternative perspectives” (PDI Training Institute). It is scored on an 11-point scale from -1 to 9 with three levels of parental reflective functioning: “low, medium and high. The low level indicates that the parent is not aware of the child’s emotions and thoughts and cannot reflect on



the experience of being a parent” (Medrea and Benga, 2021, p. 87). Several similar but separate instruments now exist with the aim of measuring reflective function in children, adolescents and adults (Ha *et al.*, 2013).

Slade found that mothers classified on the AAI (in the third trimester of pregnancy) as secure, had higher levels of reflective functioning scored on the PDI when the child of the pregnancy was ten months old and that these children were then more frequently assessed as secure at fourteen months (Slade *et al.*, 2005a)<sup>5</sup>. Conversely, Camoirano reported that Grienenberger found mothers were more likely to “disrupt affective communication” with their infants if they experienced an impairment in their reflective functioning (Grienenberger, Kelly and Slade, 2005) (2017, p. 14). Reflective functioning is “the operationalized referent to the capacity to mentalize that can be stored in the narrative” (PDI Training Institute) from the data emanating from the PDI test; as a result, the terms mentalization and reflective functioning are often used interchangeably.

Developmental and psychoanalytic theorists have linked the importance of the infant’s experiences within the parent–infant relationship to the ability to regulate affect (Fonagy and Target, 1997). It is thought that “The capacity to reflect evolves from the parent’s capacity to hold the child in mind, and the child’s experience of the parents’ mind as knowable and safe, wherein contemplation of the other’s mind is key to intimacy and connection rather than dread” (Slade, 2005, p. 273). Slade further suggests that “affects that are not held in mind by the mother, or more significantly are misrepresented or distorted, remain diffuse, terrifying, and unrepresentable, leading to a range of borderline phenomena and pathology of the self in later years” (p. 273).

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<sup>5</sup> A revised version was presented in August 2012.

Interestingly, according to Grienenberger “the theory of reflective functioning was developed with special consideration to Bion’s (1962) concept of containment” (2005., p. 307). Fonagy, in turn, suggests that “secure attachment is the direct outcome of successful containment, namely the parent's capacity to reflect the infant’s internal state, as well as represent the state for the infant as a manageable experience” (2005, p. 307).

Ensink argues that "parental reflective functioning (PRF) has been shown to predict the development of emotional understanding and mentalization of children (Steele, Steele Croft, & Fonagy, 1999; Ensink, Normandin, Target, Fonagy, Sabourin, & Berthelot, 2015)” (2017).

In contrast, Luyten suggests that, typically, high levels of parental insecurity are associated with impairments of reflective function particularly in demanding relational attachments i.e. parent-child or our relationship with a partner (2017). In this context pre-mentalizing modes of thinking by parents or foster carers can manifest, resulting in them “showing a genuine lack of interest and curiosity in their infant’s mental states; this is often associated with an inability to enter into the internal subjective world of their child, in particular, the ‘pretend’ or ‘as if’ mode [or alternatively some] parents are overtly certain about the mental states of their children which in the extreme tends to lead to hyper-mentalizing, [or] conversely hypo-mentalizing or they may fall into a pre-mentalizing conceptualization of their child characterized by distorted and often malevolent attributions” (Luyten *et al.*, 2017, p. 176).

Rostad stated that “given its influence on parenting practices, reflective functioning provided a key target for interventions that aim to improve parent-child relationships, such as those programs that are recommended, and often mandated, to parents

involved with the child welfare system (Berlin *et al.*, 2008; Powell *et al.*, 2013; Sadler *et al.*, 2006; Slade 2006; Suchman I., 2008)” (Rostad and Whitaker, 2016).

Prior to detailing the application of reflective functioning (RF) in social work, let me address the development of mentalization-based treatment as knowledge of the simultaneous developments in MBT and RF will aid our depth of understanding of the application of this knowledge base within social work provision and in particular in alternative care.

### **Mentalization-Based Treatment**

Mentalization-based treatment (MBT) originated within the world of adult psychiatry, the first paper being published by Fonagy and Bateman (1999) which detailed the partial hospital setting treatment of borderline personality disorder with the aim of increasing these patients’ reflective functioning capacities (Bateman & Fonagy 2004, 2006). Their comparative study (N = 44) concluded that their model “showed a statistically significant decrease on all measures in contrast to the control group, which showed limited change or deterioration over the same period” (Bateman and Fonagy, 1999, p. 1563), including better outcomes for the cohort receiving MBT regarding depressive symptoms, decrease in suicidal and self-mutilatory acts and reduced inpatient days (Bateman and Fonagy, 1999); thus treatment as usual (TAU) fared poorly.

A follow-up study of a five-year post-treatment comparing MBT to TAU found a “superior level of improvement for [...] suicidality 23% in MBT vs. 74% in TAU group” (Bateman and Fonagy, 2008).

In applying mentalization informed thinking to borderline personality disorder they emphasized that “mentalization is a form of social cognition. It is the imaginative mental activity that enables us to perceive and interpret human behaviour in terms of

intentional mental states (e.g. needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes and reasons” (Bateman and Fonagy, 2012, p. 4). In addition to four central books authored by Fonagy and Bateman<sup>6</sup>, there has been a voluminous number of papers by these authors and others regarding the application of MBT, detailing the evidence supporting their contention that MBT-informed treatment is efficacious regarding borderline personality disorder (Bateman and Fonagy, 2004) and antisocial personality disorder (Bateman and Fonagy, 2008). There is a sound rationale for addressing these disorders given that the evidence suggests 13.7% of people screened positive for personality disorder in “The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Surveys” (APMS) (NHS Digital 2014) with the prevalence rate for personality disorder for those involved in substance abuse thought to be “four times more prevalent among psychiatric and addicted patients than among the general populations” (Bateman and Fonagy, 2012, p. 446).

Anecdotally, there appears to be a high proportion of parents with a child in care in Ireland also suffering substance abuse issues. Thus, stemming from Bateman’s assertion above, there are clear implications regarding the need for the early recognition and management of potential personality issues amongst this population as well as a need for understanding the presentations of children of such parents.

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<sup>6</sup> Four of the central texts from these authors are:

Bateman, A. and Fonagy, P. (2004) *Psychotherapy for borderline personality disorder. Mentalization-based treatment*. Oxford University Press.

Bateman, A. W. and Fonagy, P. (2012) *Handbook of mentalizing in mental health practice*. Arlington, VA, US: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc, Bateman, A. and Fonagy, P. (2016) *Mentalization-based treatment for personality disorders: A practical guide*. New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press.

Fonagy, P., Gyorgy, G., Jurist, E. L. and Target, M. (2003) *Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of the self*. [S.l.], Karnac Books, 2003.

Fonagy, P. (2016) *Mentalization-based treatment for personality disorders: A practical guide*. New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press.

Subsequent iterations of MBT have included MBT for eating disorders (Skårderud, 2007a; Skårderud, 2007b), depression (Fischer-Kern and Tmej, 2019), substance abuse and deliberate self-harm in adolescents (Rossouw and Fonagy, 2012). In the adolescent study, Rossouw found a recovery rate of 44%, compared to 17% for TAU (Rossouw and Fonagy, 2012). Collectively these can be understood as sharing the core deficit of impaired social cognition relating to the person's understanding of oneself and others, manifesting as a pathology of self (Sharp, Fonagy and Goodyer, 2008).

In a helpful systematic review in 2019, it was suggested that “most studies on borderline personality disorder showed positive clinical outcomes, [...] with the treatment of adolescents who self-harm [and] at-risk mothers in substance abuse treatment showing particularly promising results” (Malda-Castillo, Browne and Perez-Algorta, 2018, p. 465). This finding was in part supported by the findings of Ha *et al.* (2013) that reflective functioning can be validly and reliably assessed in adolescent populations with this research being described as “groundbreaking” by Rossouw & Fonagy (2012), as one of the few efficacious treatments for reducing self-harm in adolescents (Ougrin, Tranah, Leigh, Talyor, & Asarnow, 2012) quoted in (Malda-Castillo, Browne and Perez-Algorta, 2018, p. 489).

## **MBT Overview and Relevance**

In essence mentalization attempts to surface the experience and process of how we apprehend the world, particularly how we grasp other people's minds and their intentions and motivations. It draws on Gergely's social biofeedback theory (1996a) to explain the development of this capacity within human beings. It sets out how the interplay of the infant's experience of the quality and quantity of contingent marked mirroring in early life interplays with, and is influenced by, the development of its own

neuroceptive defensive strategies (Geller and Porges, 2014), attachment styles and capacity for reflective functioning and associated self-regulatory ability. Most importantly these experiences are mediated by the carer's own levels of reflective function which in turn mediates the child's.

Remembering that Sroufe & Hofer (1996) extended attachment theory into a process of organization of "physiological and brain regulation" (Midgley and Vrouva, 2012, p15), mentalization alerts us to the malleability of the infant's (and indeed our own) perception of reality. This is based in optimal circumstances on the contingency of the caregiver's own high level of reflective functioning and self-regulatory skills, which has a precedent-setting effect of exposing the infant to the utility of such inter and intra-subjective mechanisms and scaffolds their own growing reflective functioning abilities via co-regulatory experiences.

Taking a pedagogical stance, mentalization emphasizes the importance of the infant's ability to locate epistemic trust in its caregivers. The theory delineates a non-linear development pathway commencing with the infant apprehending reality in a psychic equivalence mode of functioning, through to the teleological mode, pretend mode and the mode of functioning known as the mentalizing mode (although not necessarily sequential nor permanently maintained, once achieved) <sup>7</sup>. This mode is in some texts suggested to be only achievable 30% of the time (Cooper and Redfern, 2016, p. 29); however, no rationale for such an estimate is available in the literature.

Such modes of functioning are themselves based on the balance of the four differing dimensional axes of mentalization i.e. automatic/controlled, self/other, cognitive/affective and internal/external which impact how we apprehend reality. An

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 7 for a representation of the modes of functioning in mentalization

imbalance favouring an extreme in any of the four axes has the effect of distorting how one experiences and perceives reality.

At a different register of experience, perhaps less intensively experienced compared to the level of dysregulation of those afflicted by a personality disorder, social workers themselves are subject to fluctuations in their own mentalizing capacity and how they perceive the world and how they understand their clients.

The ability of the social work practitioner to adequately balance the varying axes of mentalization speaks directly to their ability to achieve a good enough level of self-regulation such that they can deploy their own level of reflective functioning to negotiate the relational territory with their clients and in doing so offer containment and co-regulation.

As with the parent, social workers' own attachment and neuroceptive defensive strategies become part of their engagement in the therapeutic relationship and thus awareness of such processes are arguably key to the discharge of their social work task.

Indeed a lack of awareness of the emotional labour of their daily relational contact with clients (Ingram, 2013), the resulting relational impacts that often emanate from the client's own experiences of trauma and neglect, and the consequential maladaptive defensive strategies clients can exhibit, can combine to mitigate against their ability to hold their child's mind in mind.

The emotional labour involved for social workers to mentalize their own experiences of contact with such distressed, traumatized states and having to negotiate the relational demands of attempting to maintain a therapeutic space arguably requires knowledge of these processes in operation and optionally a high level of reflective functioning in the practitioner.

## **The Organization in the Mind**

It would be wrong in my view to construct our understanding only at the level of the individual. Rather, to further triangulate our understanding I wish to harness what Pierre Turquet termed “the organization in the mind” (Armstrong, French and Obholzer, 2005), which in part concerns itself with the boundary of intersectionality between the individual psychic and the organizational milieu and how the organizational dynamics are introjected into individuals’ mental states. I contend this additional element warrants our attention as it operates in combination with the inherent mentalization capacities of the participants.

Menzies’ (1960b) contribution related to “task anxiety”, labelling such anxieties as depressive following the Kleinian tradition, is relevant here. The traditional application of these ideas would suggest that my participants were impacted by what Hinshelwood explained is “felt as a fear of damaging a loved one” (Hinshelwood and Klein, 1994, p. 79) which we will see arose below as a matter of concern for one participant.

Noting again the individualistic formulation of this anxiety I am drawn to the idea contained in Cooper and Lee’s contribution suggesting that “many forces other than just task anxiety are at work in producing the total picture” (Cooper, 2018, p. 76). They argue that the “externally generated “boundary conditions” have become much more prominent in shaping the context of service delivery and that the anxieties and defences involved typically invade organizational “space” and, beyond this, the mental space that is the self of the social worker” (p. 73). Extending Menzies’ work, Cooper and Lee suggest that the externally generated pressures are experienced as persecutory rather than depressive indicating that the current “managerial anxieties are inherent in the working lives of social workers, as much as exposure to abuse



distress, and hostile clients". In the Irish context, this is perhaps represented by the often referenced dread of a HIQA<sup>8</sup> inspection.

The intersectionality of such boundary conditions according to Krantz is the "intersection of task and sentience [which] creates the medium for human meaning at work" (2006). He suggests "it is the arena where people can bring their developmental dramas as a vehicle for emotional growth and reparative re-integration" (2006., p.2). Social work practitioners are just as subject to the need to make meaning, based on the intermingling of what Williams (1961) referred to as the "structure of feeling" of the organizational milieu, the experiences of their client projections and their own autobiographical histories.

Implicit in the construction of our understanding of the following case studies is the interplay between the practitioner's own level of reflective functioning, the shaping of their experience of the impact of the organization in their minds and how this interacts with their lived experience of relational contact with their clients. Importantly, can the worker locate epistemic trust and find containment within their work environment?

## **Children and Families**

Adhering to the ideography set out above let us now narrow our review of the literature to that which addresses the use of mentalization with children and families.

It is important to note Rostad and Whitaker's (2016) articulation regarding the significance of the association between the quality of the parent-child attachment relationships and the quality of reflective functioning. They address what is known as

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<sup>8</sup> HIQA is an independent authority that exists to improve health and social care services for the people of Ireland, routinely publishing information for providers to assist them to make their care safer and better.

the transmission gap<sup>9</sup> in the attachment literature. Rostad explains that a child's tantrum "is not simply perceived as annoying misbehaviour but is an indicator of underlying emotions and needs expressed through misbehaviour" (2016, p. 2166), where ideally the caregiver will make some meaning of the behaviour rather than responding to "instinctual responses that may be harsh and insensitive to the child's underlying needs" (2016, p. 2166). Quoting Belsky and Fearon (2008) they suggest that the reflective functioning of the caregiver has been "identified as a major contributor to caregiver behaviour" (Rostad and Whitaker, 2016) as it is seen as "underlying sensitive responding by helping parents to mentally put themselves in the place of the infant" (Barlow, Steele and Midgley, 2020, p. 23).

Schechter's (2003) study of severely traumatized women with a history of PTSD, indicated that the degree/extent of their traumatic experiences was not in fact the mediating factors in the negative attributions these mothers made about their children; rather the suggestion made is that reflective function was the mediator that explained why mothers with low reflective functioning experienced negative attributions towards their children based on their own dysregulated and unprocessed states (2003, pp. 115-142).

Importantly Ensink indicates that parents who have a history of abuse or trauma are "widely recognized" (2015, p. 354) as possessing a risk factor for problematic

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<sup>9</sup> Two decades ago Van Ijzendoorn (van Ijzendoorn, M. H. (1995) 'Adult attachment representations, parental responsiveness, and infant attachment: A meta-analysis on the predictive validity of the Adult Attachment Interview', *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), pp. 387-403.) addressed the issue of the relationship between caregivers' attachment representations and child-caregiver attachment classification. However the results showed that caregiver sensitivity, as the mechanism of transmission could not fully explain the relationship, thus there existed a transmission gap as maternal sensitivity "only accounts for about 23%" (Rostad, W. L. and Whitaker, D. J. (2016) 'The association between reflective functioning and parent-child relationship quality', *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(7), pp. 2164-2177.) of the association between adult attachment representations and infant attachment classifications.

parenting. Mounting evidence suggests the crucial factor is “whether trauma is unresolved, or mentally processed rather than trauma per se, as this appears to be the best predictor of frightening and frightened parental behaviour in infant attachment disorganisation (Buch, Cowan, & Coean, 2008; Kind, Fonagy, Allen, & Stratheran, 2014; Main & Hess, 1999; Jacobivitz Leon, & Hazen, 2006) quoted in Enisket al.m, 2015)” (Casey, T. 2018). Selma Fraiberg’s famous paper *Ghost in the Nursery* (1980) and Alicia Lieberman *et al.* (2014) speak to such phenomena from a more psychoanalytic positioning.

Atkins recently asserted that “parents’ mentalizing abilities are consistently associated with better caregiving, parental satisfaction, parental self-efficacy, and healthy communication between family members” (Adkins *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). Thus reflective functioning is seen to underlie what was previously thought to be the mediating factor in the transmission of attachment i.e. parental sensitivity, whereas now, based on Fonagy & Target’s work (2005) there is increasing reason to suggest that reflective functioning is a major factor in the intergenerational transmission of attachment styles.

Flowing from this knowledge base there has been a disparate application of mentalization and reflective functioning to children and families. At the ordinary end of the spectrum, Redfern published a very accessible book entitled *Reflective Parenting* (Cooper and Redfern, 2016) whilst Byrne *et al* (2020) and Barlow *et al* (2020) respectively produced systematic reviews focusing on mentalization-based treatments with children and families and enhancing parental reflective functioning through early dyadic interventions.

Barlow found that “despite the importance of parental reflective functioning in terms of the aetiology of infant regulation and attachment, this review suggests that such

functioning is still not yet being routinely accessed when examining the effectiveness of dyadic interventions for parent and infants and toddlers” (2020, p. 32)

The reviews analyze studies ranging from those focusing on parental conflict (Hertzmann *et al.*, 2017), adolescents, AMBIT (Griffiths *et al.*, 2017), creating a peaceful school learning environment (CAPSULE) and intervention (Twemlow *et al.*, 2001), with most studies addressing parenting, importantly including substance-abusing mothers. Byrne’s systematic review of thirty-four studies found that fourteen specifically focused on ‘improving parents’ sensitivity, attunement and parental reflective functioning [...] with the majority of studies reporting some degree of improvement in reflective functioning” (Byrne, Murphy and Connon, 2020, p. 1042).

Of the thirteen studies, in Byrne’s review, which included a measure of reflective functioning related to parent-infant therapy, eleven showed improvement in reflective functioning as measured on the parental development interview (2020) with one study by Pajulo *et al* (2012) relating to substance-abusing mothers finding that 63% of the mothers were found to have increased reflective functioning on completion of the intervention.

One such encouraging intervention, *Minding the Baby* (Slade *et al.*, 2005b), was utilized with high-risk substance abusing parents as “Substance use often makes a parent absent-minded’ and thus imposes a risk of impaired interactions between caregivers and the extra vulnerable substance-exposed child”. They argue that “without a lifeline to the caregivers’ mind, the development of self-regulation and social competencies is endangered” in the child (Söderström and Skårderud, 2009, p. 48).

Another intervention targeting high-risk parents is *The Lighthouse Parenting Programme* (Byrne *et al.*, 2018) which is an adaption of MBT for personality

disorders (Bateman and Fonagy, 2016) intended to increase the reflective functioning of parents who may have provided or be at risk of providing maltreating parental experiences. It is aimed toward hard to reach, often high-risk parents whose own capacity for mentalization may have been derailed stemming from their own experiences of maltreatment or unresolved difficulties in their own attachment histories. This intervention is a 20-week parenting psychoeducational intervention with an overt focus on mentalizing within the group. Alongside this parents attend a biweekly individual session with a therapist. Byrne's recent publication on this intervention encouragingly suggests it was found to have a "high level of acceptability and confirms that MBT is a potentially powerful approach for improving lives of hard to reach families who critically do not benefit from parenting programmes" (2018) but it did not demonstrate an improvement in participants' reflective functioning. The article notes the possibility of a lack of sensitivity in the measures used and refers to "several recent and larger studies have[ing] similarly not found improvements on this measure [reflective functioning], despite treatment effects being found on other instruments" (Fonagy, Slead, & Baradon, 2016; Ordway *et al.*, 2014).

Whilst Suchman *et al.* conducted a series of studies related to the Mother and Toddler Programme for substance-abusing mothers with the initial study finding "moderate improvements [...] in reflective functioning (Suchman *et al.*, 2008) with representational outcomes showing some increase. However, a subsequent study again by Suchman (2010) of forty seven mothers produced only "moderate" improvements with no improvements found in this study regarding representational qualities i.e. openness and acceptance. Interestingly in a six-week follow-up study, Suchman found sustained improvement in self-focused maternal reflective

functioning. Thus they claimed that the mother and toddler intervention “is effective in helping substance abusing parents to mentalize about their own difficult emotions and the impact of this on their child rather than on their ability to understand and mentalize their children's emotional states impacting on behaviour” (Byrne, Murphy and Connon, 2020, p. 1036). Fourteen of the thirty-four studies in Byrne’s review looked at improving parental reflective functioning in parental/child dyads and reported that there was “some degree of improvement in reflective functioning” (2020, p. 1042). This finding can be placed alongside Barlow's meta-analysis of six studies and her finding that “showed a non-significant moderate improvement in parental reflective functioning in the intervention group [...] and a significant reduction in disorganized attachment”. She concluded that “relational early interventions may have important benefits in improving parental reflective functioning and reducing the prevalence of attachment disorganisation” (Barlow, Steele and Midgley, 2020, p. 21).

In a similar vein, mentalization-based treatment for families (MBT-F) and mentalization-based treatment for children (MBT-C) (Midgley, O’Keefe *et al* 2017) failed to find strong evidence for their effectiveness (Byrne, Murphy and Connon, 2020, p. 1042).

Other interventions, included Midgley’s 2018 study of thirty-six families of adoptees, sought to establish whether or not a mentalization-based therapy for families (MBT-F), a six-session intervention, was efficacious in this population. Results suggest “families found it a containing space that was supportive [...] some adoptive families felt that this short term was not enough to address all the difficulties that had brought the family to seek help” (Midgley *et al.*, 2018, pp. 22-23).

Camoirano's review similarly found "strong support to the determinant influence of parental reflective functioning on the quality of caregiving, on the child's attachment security, on the child's emotion regulation, and on the child's reflective functioning" (Camoirano, 2017, p. 9). Of note they found the emphasis on the maternal ability to "mentalize painful emotional experiences [which] is especially crucial for the child's development" (2017, p. 9). Similarly, beneficial findings have been found in respect of how a "father's RF plays a central role in parenting and in children's emotional regulation" (Buttitta and V., 2019) although the literature is less developed.

Given the cohort of parents that social workers engage with frequently have a high rate of poor parenting experiences themselves and/or histories of deprivation, trauma or maltreatment, this finding seems especially pertinent.

However, taken as a whole it is reasonable to suggest that as yet, despite a growing and very promising literature indicating the importance of reflective functioning, there remains a quantum of work to be undertaken to more fully explain the intricacies of the optimal parenting environment, one in which reflective functioning may develop and, where necessary, how best to support parents whose own experiences may not have equipped them with good enough reflective functioning.

The intriguing finding by Suchman (2010) and highlighted by Camoirano (2017), indicating that the maternal ability to self-mentalize does not necessarily generalize to a similar ability to mentalize the child, seems crucial in furthering our understanding particularly regarding clinically concerning maternal presentations.

Camoirano concluded that "randomized controlled trials showed that mentalization-based interventions were effective in improving caregiving, which is highly relevant especially regarding mothers who have a history of maltreatment and thus who are at high risk of becoming maltreating parents" (Camoirano, 2017, p. 9). Medrea &

Benga's critical review "places three different constructs: mind-mindedness, parental reflective functioning and insightfulness" under the label of parental mentalization. They assert that "each construct brings its own distinct contribution" but conclude that "more conceptual and theoretical work is needed to deeply understand these concepts" (Medrea and Benga, 2021, p. 94).

Regarding the treatment of eating disorders Robinson's study comparing mentalization-based treatment for eating disorders with specialist clinical management. Findings suggest there was a reduction of shape concern and weight concern and a decline in borderline personality symptomology; however, the high dropout rate (22%) has made interpretation difficult (Robinson *et al.*, 2016).

Other studies like "The Hearts and Minds Study" (Midgley *et al.*, 2017) were excluded for space reasons as they related more to the treatment of children as opposed to the social work role in supporting alternative care placements with foster parents.

## **Foster Care in Ireland**

The reader will recall that 92% of all children in care in Ireland reside in foster care (Tusla, 2021) and coincidentally all case studies presented in this study related to fostering.

Despite the high utilization of foster care within the Irish child protection system, the number of foster carers has been steadily declining from 4419 in 2016 to 4035 in 2020 (Tusla Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report Q4 2020, pg 49).

McNicholas' (2011) Irish study of 176 children in care for three years or more were found to have had on average 2.35 placements and although the 2018 Tusla Business Plan set out the objective of developing a practice handbook on permanency planning this has yet to come to fruition.



## Trauma-Informed Care

Lotty, a contemporary Irish researcher in the area, strongly advocated for trauma-informed care in fostering, having developed the “Fostering Connections” intervention (Lotty, Dunn-Galvin and Bantry-White, 2020). According to Lotty, it draws on “a biopsychosocial model integrating research from neurobiology, attachment, trauma and resilience (Bath, 2015; Brendtro, Mitchell, & McCall, 2009)” (2020, p. 2). Noting that the study results “contribute to a small but growing body of evidence to support trauma-informed care” the six-session intervention was found to “likely” support foster parents (2020, p. 11). However, this author notes a particular limitation of the study, besides the small sample size and lack of detail regarding the nature of psychoeducation information provided (save for a description of the six principles of trauma-informed care) (Lotty, 2021, p. 42), which was that “children who experienced placement instability during the study period were not included in the study” (2020, p.11). The author acknowledges this may have “influenced the results” (2020, p. 11). Lotty’s two articles cited above do not refer to reflective functioning or mentalization save for noting that reflective functioning “could have also been explored” (2020, p. 11).

I have included this study in the review as a contemporary intervention that exemplifies the growing emphasis on trauma-informed care within Irish social services which I suggest fails to delineate what the mediating elements of the intervention effects are other than associational findings. Notwithstanding the obvious relevance of trauma-informed interventions, further research is perhaps required to establish what constitutes or defines trauma-informed treatments as well as what the change factor within the application of this knowledge base might be.

## **Fostering and Reflective Functioning**

Turning again to the importance of foster parents' reflective functioning, Gergely notes that carers with high reflective capacities "provide a kind of 'teaching' or 'scaffolding' environment that results in the internalization of the maternal affect regulative function through the establishment of secondary representations of the infant's primary emotion states". Implicitly this is dependent on the carer's own reflective capacity which in turn allows the carer to self-regulate and respond in a thinking fashion.

One of the early interventions targeting the assessment of reflective functioning in fostering was Bunday's study (2015) of twelve foster carers from the south west of England, offering therapeutic care for hard to reach children "who were unable to secure or maintain placement with local authority carers" (2015, p. 147). Her study assessed the carer's reflective functioning about one of their children using the Parental Development Interview (PDI) (Slade, 2005) which, to remind the reader, has an 11-point scale from -1 to 9. Bunday quoting Slade suggests "average or ordinary reflective capacities in a non-clinical sample would score a 5, with 7 being indicative of considerably sophisticated reflected functioning ability whereas a score of 3 is indicative of "a very fundamental level marked by infrequent reference to and connections between states" (2015, p. 151). Of the twelve foster carer participants, four scored below average reflective functioning with two each respectively scoring at 4 and two at 3 which is indicative of a clinically concerning score (2015, p. 150). Noteworthy within the commentary on this study is the author's assertions that the data showed "there were only three occasions where carers recognized that their child's feelings could be unrelated to the external circumstances" (p 151), (perhaps demonstrating an overly teleological mode of functioning) usually focusing instead on

the current intentionality of the child, “nor did they show knowledge of their role as regulators of the child's feelings” (2015, p. 156). Such results are concerning given that this cohort of carers specialized in hard to place children who were unable to secure or maintain a typical local authority placement.

Another early adopter of the importance of reflective function to the fostering population was Bammens’ who’s 2015 study related to a nine-hour intervention “The Family Minds” psychoeducational programme in Texas. Pre and post-training assessments of three dimensions<sup>10</sup> of the carer’s reflective functioning were assessed using the Five-Minute Speech Sample technique (Magaña *et al.*, 1986). The findings suggest parents within the treatment group “were able to increase their mentalization and therefore reflective functioning, about themselves and their child” (Bammens, Adkins and Badger, 2015, p. 47).

More recently Tina Atkins, one of the co-authors of the above study, conducted a larger randomized control trial of eighty-nine foster parents providing the same psychoeducation nine-hour intervention that was delivered in the 2015 study. On this occasion, two measures were used to assess the reflective function of the participants (i.e. The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ; Luten, Mayes, Nijssens, & Fonagy, 2017) and the reflective functioning Five-Minute Speech Sample (Adkins *et al.*, 2018; Bammens *et al.*, 2015) at pre-training, six weeks, and six months. Although interpreting results from the latter proved problematic due to the low response rate, the results showed that “foster parents in the intervention group significantly improved their reflective functioning via a lowering of pre-mentalizing, in contrast to the control group who did not show any such

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<sup>10</sup> The reflective functioning dimensions that were assessed in this study were:- 1. Carers global reflective functioning score. 2. Reflective functioning as a parent and in respect to self. 3. The carers reflective functioning of the child.

improvements” (Adkins *et al.*, 2021, p. 10). The authors take a reassuringly pragmatic approach in acknowledging the study suffered “severe limitations” regarding “insufficient statistical power to test the mediational model that underpins the intervention” (2021, p. 12), including the small sample size, and difficulty in long-term follow-up given the high drop-out rate.

There were two articles in 2018/19 detailing the Reflective Fostering Programme, respectively setting out the rationale for the programme and its key elements (Redfern *et al.*, 2018) and its feasibility and a pilot evaluation (Midgley, (2019). This intervention, based in part on the rationale that the prevalence of mental health disorders for looked after children is “five times” more prevalent compared to the general population (Redfern *et al.*, 2018, p. 235), and emphasizing that “even foster carers previously relatively high in reflective functioning and sensitivity can find their capacity to reflect compromised by caring for a child with a history of trauma” (Midgley *et al.*, 2019, p. 237).

Midgley’s study of twenty-eight foster parents found beneficial effects in terms of “statistically significant improvement in foster carers’ stress and their achievement of self-defined goals, [...] but showed no statistically significant changes in carers’ reflective functioning” (Midgley *et al.*, 2019, p. 1). Nonetheless, it is suggested that there is a “strong conceptual and theoretical rationale for the approach” which is now being tested as a 10-session intervention in two NSPCC sites in the UK. Both foster carers and facilitators “generally found it to be a valuable approach which they felt could play a role in supporting foster carers” (Redfern *et al.*, 2018, p. 17).

At a broader level, there are indications in the literature to suggest that children who have experienced maltreatment are at risk “of developing a defensive inhibition of mentalization in order to protect themselves from an understanding of the intention of

the abuser” (Woodier, 2011, p. 264). Supporting this contention, Schore whose psycho-neuro-biological regulation we shall address shortly suggests children with such histories can sometimes learn to self-modulate their distress by “directing attention away from internal emotional states” (Schore, 2003, p. 135). Foster parents encountering such defensive inhibition, often leading to the sequestering by a child of their own mental state, can be experienced as baffling by foster parents whose standard parenting practices fail to offer anything substantial by way of explanation when such defensive manoeuvres are manifested by the child.

Another perspective that underlines the importance of carers’ reflective functions is related to the fact that in May 2020 26% of children in care in Ireland are placed within relative foster placements (Citizens’ Information, 2021). Thus, it is prudent to suggest some, although not all, of these carers may have been subject to similarly neglecting or maltreating environments that warranted their relative to be received into care. This has particular relevance given Ironside’s statement that “A crucial aspect of maintaining a successful placement is that carers have developed the metacognitive skills for thinking about the foster child’s mind, to mentalize, and resist their own impulses to react ‘unthinkingly’ in the face of sometimes extreme provocation” by the foster child (Ironside, 2012, p. 29).

As Bunday suggests “It is conceivable that without the capacity to find emotional meaning in children’s behaviour, foster carers will be unable to offer a flexible repertoire of responses, provide for the child’s psychological development or even maintain the foster placement” (Bunday *et al.*, 2015, p. 147).

Let me now briefly depart from our trajectory of narrowing the review of the literature to review a fascinating synthesis of the literature by Schore which I feel warrants

inclusion as it will provide a further depth of understanding of the participants' experiences with their clients within the group.

## **Regulation Theory**

Alan Schore's seminal synthesis of the research and subsequent development of his own model of intersubjective "Psycho-neuro-biological Regulation" over the last three decades has attempted to "deeply understand the underlying mechanisms by which the structure and function of the mind and brain are shaped by experiences, especially those embedded in emotional relationships, as well as relational mechanisms by which communicating brains synchronize and align their neural activities with other brains" (2021, p. 5).

The theory draws a parallel between the process at play in infant–mother relationships and clinician–patient relationships suggesting clinicians' access to this knowledge base will facilitate their use of the explicit but "particularly the implicit self in order to treat, at the close intersubjective range a spectrum of early-forming, disorders of the self" (Schore, 1994, p. xix).

In line with Fonagy's suggestion that "the sensitivity of the caregiver prompts the child to organize self-experience according to clusters of responses that will eventually come to be verbally labelled as specific emotions" (Fonagy & Target, p., 684) thereby facilitating the process of meaning-making and self-regulation in the infant, I wish to suggest that this is also directly relevant to the social work practitioners. In this context Schore's cites Bugental's (1987) suggestion that the "primary instrument brought to the support of the client's therapeutic efforts is the therapist's trained, practised, and disciplined sensitivity" (Schore, 2012, p. 43). I wish to further my investigation of the application of mentalization-based thinking in social

work with the additional lens of Regulation Theory, in order to create what Bion referred to as binocular vision (Bion and W., 1970; Mason, 2000).

Space limitations dictate only a brief reportage of the sizeable literature Schore has synthesized. His work argues for and delineates the movement away from focusing on cognitive, left brain development to “embodied functions of the right-lateralized emotions-processing limbic system and stress-regulating HPA axis, [suggesting that this has heralded] a surge of neuropsychiatric investigations on the dysregulation of the limbic and autonomic nervous system in a wide array of psychiatric Axis I and Axis II disorders” (Schore, 2012, p. 5). In line with this assertion Groos & Jazaieri, suggested that between “40% and 75% of disorders involve problems with emotion and emotional regulation” (Jurist, 2018, p. 47).

Schore suggests “therapeutic alliance is a common element of all of the different therapy modalities, that it accounts for more of the variance of treatment outcome than treatment method, that affect dysregulation is a fundamental mechanism of all psychiatric disorders and that all psychotherapies show a similarity in promoting affect regulation” (Schore, 2003, p. xvii).

Fonagy and Target (Fonagy and Target, 1997) similarly concluded that “the whole of child development to be the enhancement of self-regulation” (Schore and Schore, 2008, p. 10).

Schore forensically dissects the process at play in the intersubjective dyadic relations between mother and infant in particular the right-brain synchronizing of the relational milieu where “the child is using the output of the mother’s right cortex as a template for imprinting – the hard wiring of circuits in his/her own right cortex that will come to mediate his/her expanding affective capacities, it has been said that in early

infancy, the mother is the child's "auxiliary cortex" (Diamond, Krech, & Rosenzweig, 1963). (Schore, 2012, p. 13).

Attachment, according to Sroufe (1996), is "the dyadic (interactive) regulation of emotions" (Schore, 2003, p. 39). In part, Schore's thesis is that "attachment is, in essence, the right brain regulation of biological synchronicity between organisms" (Schore, 2003, p. 41).

In harmony with this conceptualization of the dynamic, Fonagy similarly claimed that "the quality of their [infant's] affective states and their emerging self-regulative reactions are strongly influenced by the characteristics of their parent's affective communicative behaviour" (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002, p. 157).

Ogden quoting Sptiz (1965) indicated that the early form of communication between mother and child are "coenesthetic" wherein sensing is visceral and stimuli are 'received' as opposed to being 'perceived'. The mother's affective state is 'received' by the infant and is registered in a form of emotions" (Ogden, 1982, p. 22), thus requiring both self-regulation via reflective functioning and co-regulation also aided by the mother's reflective functioning capacity.

Whilst Schore argues that the dynamic between infant and mother is redolent of the dynamic between client and therapist, I contend that conceiving of the relation between social worker and client is similarly illuminating and beneficially understood within the tripartite conceptual formulation of attachment theory, mentalization and regulation theory.

Schore suggests "the empathic therapist's [or I suggest social worker's] resonate synchronization to the patients activate unconscious internal working model triggers, in the clinician, the procedural processing of his/ her automatic visceral responses to the patient's nonverbal, nonconscious communications" (Schore, 2003, p. 53), thus



allowing the empathic therapist “to act as an interactive affect regulator of the patient’s dysregulated state” (2003, p. 53).

Schore draws on Duma’s classical study (2010) of two adults in spontaneous social interaction utilizing EEG hyperscanning to study the interbrain synchronization during social interaction “characterized by reciprocal nonverbal communication and turn-taking [...] on a millisecond time scale” (Schore, 2021, p. 13). In other words, he claims that this right brain to right brain functions at an unconscious level leading to what Lyons-Ruth (1999) characterized as a “two-person unconscious”.

As Schore (2003, p. 63) states “Therapeutic regulation and not interpretation and insight is the key to the treatment of developmentally disordered patients” such as we commonly encounter in social work.

Central to the social work task is contact with children/adults who have an insecure attachment profile, in part because they have “often [been] unable to induce affect-regulating responses and engage in empathic mutual regulatory processes because the other is not sufficiently attuned to the child’s state and therefore unable to receive the infant’s emotional communications” (Schore, 2003, p. 66). Fotopoulou and Tsakiris claim that “one of the main purposes of early social interactions is the regulation of the infant’s homeostasis” (Fotopoulou and Tsakiris, 2017, p. 5)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> “The term Homeostasis was first used by W. B. Cannon in 1926, and was formally brought into the academic world in 1932 in Cannon’s biological classic, *The Wisdom of the Body* (Hans H. Toch & Albert H. Hastorf (1955) Homeostasis in *Psychology, Psychiatry*, 18:1, 81-91, DOI: 10.1080/00332747.1955.11022996) with subsequent elaborations by Alexander who defined homeostasis teleologically, as “the organism [striving] to preserve those optimal internal conditions under which the process of life is possible”, which is in contrast to Hendrick’s statement also quoted in Hans H. Toch (1955) “that the essence of Cannon’s conclusions about homeostasis coincides remarkably with the significant statements of Freud’s...” *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Their investigations have been in separate realms, yet their final conclusions in regard to the fundamental processes of life are the same: the psychoanalyst, that the psychological processes are initiated by the need to restore an emotional equilibrium which is experienced as pleasure: the psychologist, that all organic processes are initiated by the need to restore a psycho-chemical equilibrium which is

In fact, they go further and suggest that the constitution of the self is itself “dependant upon the social mentalization of the body and particularly its homeostatic needs” (2017, p6).

Again, we see a movement away from the cognitive toward the embodied foundations of the sense of self and its habitual coping and regulatory mechanisms. This redirection of focus from the cognitive to the embodied experience of the world is supported by Solms whose extensive work on the origins of consciousness (Solms, 2017) and indeed Merleau-Ponty’s work on perception, both assert the importance of the embodied perception at an experiential level. As Merleau-Ponty asserts perception “is not a mental event, for we experience our own sensory states not merely as states of mind but as states of our bodies” (1962, p. xiv).

Not wishing to become entangled in the fine grain of the philosophical debates nor debates on the origins of consciousness which are beyond the scope of this thesis, I wish to orientate the reader to the increasingly established position that the origins of selfhood are now conceived of as “interpersonally constructed” via our interoceptive awareness which facilitates the progressive solidification of self-other boundaries (Fotopoulou and Tsakiris, 2017, p. 7) and importantly the maintenance of our psychological and biological state within acceptable homeostatic levels which in part is determined by our emotional regulation ability. Fotopoulou argues, in sympathy

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experienced as health” (Hans H. Toch & Albert H. Hastorf (1955) Homeostasis in Psychology, Psychiatry, 18:1, 81-91, DOI:

For our purposes, not wishing to delve into the minutia of definitional inconsistencies, homeostasis may be thought of as relating to human beings evolutionary mechanism to maintain an operational state both physiologically and psychologically such that it supports the function of the human being within acceptable limits.

with the free energy principle (Rabeyron and Massicotte, 2020), that “embodied mentalization” is the process by which we mentally model the environment and our own mental states (2017).

Jurist (2018) refers to ‘Mentalized Affectivity’, defining it as “ the process of making sense of emotions in light of one's autobiographical memory and history [suggesting] the concept is akin to emotion regulation but is rooted in the context and sense of self” (2018, p. 83). He argues that the typical stimulus-response paradigm adopted in research into emotional regulation “does not acknowledge the extent to which our present experience is mediated by the past” (2018, p. 97). Thus, mentalized affectivity’s aim is to re-evaluate our emotions “by means of re-experiencing them with some perspective” (2018, p. 97) as opposed to just simply regulating or modulating them. Similar to Bion’s notion regarding the capacity to think (Bion, 1984b)<sup>12</sup>, mentalization requires a conducive environment in which the “caregiver’s reverie takes in and alters the infant’s overpowering emotions, rendering them bearable and available to use” (Jurist, 2018, p. 144).

In presenting this view Jurist relies on the notion of homeostatic balance often written of within the attachment literature, that has been extended in the mentalization literature by the use of the concept of allostasis, introduced by Sterling (2012) to encompass a more dynamic version of homeostasis that includes the anticipation of change so that the organism “continually adjust[s] the milieu to promote survival” (Sterling, 2012, p. 5). In other words, it engages mitigations (negentropy) to counteract the disrupting force of such change (entropy). Holmes links the concept of negative entropy or negentropy (Ramstead, Badcock and Friston, 2018) and the free

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<sup>12</sup> See also Caral Mantilla Lagos’ article for an interesting comparison of Fonagy’s and Bion’s mental capacities to think thoughts: Lagos, C. M. (2007) 'The theory of thinking and the capacity to mentalize: A comparison of Fonagy's and Bion's models', *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 10(1), pp. 189-198.

energy principle suggesting that our Bayesian brain “gradually, and with help, learns to infer the causes, affects, motivations, and meanings which shape the child’s interpersonal world – that is to mentalise it.” (Jeremy, 2020, p. 49). Indeed it is argued that “mentalizing enriches Bayesian inference, enabling experience and feeling states to be metabolized and assimilated” (Holmes and Nolte, 2019, p. 1) and ultimately facilitates reduction in prediction error making the world a safer and more predictable place.

This rather complicated conceptualization is for the purposes of the rigour of this thesis whereas the intention in terms of practice was to provide the participants with an experience of a containing space (implicitly offering regulation and co-regulation), offering them a first-person experiential exposure to the relevant mentalization theoretical tenets in action, as it were. Additionally, their experiences in the group and their grasp and formulation of understanding of their clients can be aided not just by the knowledge base of mentalization and reflective functioning but also by their understanding of their role as an agent of, or potential co-regulator and provider of containment. Attention to and awareness of the processes and mechanisms to regain homeostatic balance arguably via the modes of functioning of mentalization that human beings utilize particularly those who are traumatized should, I contend, be available to support social work practitioners’ understanding of clients. Such utilization of mentalization-based thinking to directly support social workers’ understanding of their clients is currently absent from the literature as too is the utilization of mentalization-based thinking in respect of understanding and managing the considerable emotional labour of the social workers’ own states of mind.

As will become evident in the following case studies, utilization of affect regulatory processes by traumatized children in foster care, the resulting deregulatory pressure

on foster parents and the possibility of onward projection of this dynamic into individual or social work teams become more manageable and available to work with when one harnesses the tripartite knowledge base of attachment, mentalization and regulation theory.

## **In Summary**

Initially, I noted relevant developments within social work in Ireland so that the subsequent review of the literature could be contextualized within its practice arena. From there I delineated the history of mentalization, and its relationship to the theoretical constructs of the philosophy of mind and attachment theory, whilst progressively narrowing the focus of the review to the application of mentalization and reflective functioning concerning children and families and fostering in particular. I triangulated my review of the literature on mentalization and reflective functioning by critically evaluating two comparative, popular social work conceptualizations to contrast the theoretical rigour of mentalization and reflective functioning against resilience and reflective practice. Additionally, I offered a critical commentary on contemporary offerings within the Irish literature on fostering.

I highlighted the claim within the literature that MBT offers, or is associated with a coherent theory of human development, a theory of psychopathology as well as offering guidance on intervention strategies which I suggest goes beyond the highly developed, but as yet unsatisfactorily developed, comparative theoretical offerings of resilience or reflective practice. Thus the contention may reasonably be drawn from the current literature that MBT may offer applied social work practice a more comprehensive theoretical foundation perhaps with a higher degree of epistemic rigour compared to current theoretical formulations informing social work practice.

## Chapter 3 Research Design and Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter sets out the methodologic considerations informing the design of the study with particular attention to the ontological and epistemological alignment across the study design and its relationship to the subject matter of mentalization. Considerations regarding recruitment, consent, data collection methods, researcher reflexivity and ethics as well as some limitations of the study are discussed below.

Prior to detailing these considerations let me remind the reader that this study comprised a psychoeducational and WDG component, both of which were audio-recorded (groups 1–4) and video recorded (groups 4–12) and subsequently transcribed and thematically analyzed following Browne and Clarke’s six-stage model (Braun and Clarke, 2009).

Groups 1–4 took place in a large Victorian building in central Dublin, with comfortable couches in a tranquil setting.

Due to the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions my study was paused following Group 4 for a period of four months until renewed ethics applications were obtained to allow the group to move on to the Microsoft Teams platform.

Despite considerable anxiety shared by myself and some of my participants regarding engaging in the group on this platform, fortunately, only one participant withdrew from the study, citing increased child care demands<sup>13</sup>. Data of the study primarily derives from the case study material presented in the WDG.

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<sup>13</sup> One other participant withdrew earlier in the study following promotion which precluded her involvement due to pressure of time; additionally the continued inclusion of this participant would have been in breach of the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

## **Paradigms of Ontology and Epistemology**

“Ontology and epistemology are to research, what footings are to a house: they form the foundations of the whole edifice” (Rehman., 2016 p. 51). They are, according to Filstead, a “set of interrelated assumptions about the social world which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for the organized study of that world” (Gullestad and Wilberg, 2011, p. 127).

As suggested, there is a necessity to align the entirety of the research design within a theoretical framework that is sympathetic to the central tenets of mentalization-based theory. Amongst such parameters is the intent of this study to investigate the individual, subjective experiences of the participants at some depth utilizing a psychoanalytical lens to aid my analysis.

As Grix (2004, p.83) suggests “researchers are inextricably part of the social reality being researched, i.e. they are not ‘detached’ from the subject they are studying.”

In light of the two previous sentences, the reader will already be alerted to a problematic relation this study could have with certain paradigms of knowledge and how such paradigms construct their relationship to knowledge and the nature of reality. Thomas Khun indicated as much when he stated that there can be “immense difficulties, often encountered in developing points of contact between a theory and nature” (1996, p. 30). Thus I need to be vigilant in aligning the differing aspects of the research design in line with the underlying positionality of MBT.

Despite many of the studies relating to MBT being steeped in the positivistic tradition, I wish to contend that MBT and this study’s underlying ontology speak to the stratification of reality.

This is in some contradiction to the positivistic paradigm which privileges and seeks through a process of “confirmation and falsification<sup>14</sup>, and predictive ability of generalizable theories regarding the objective, to readily apprehend reality” (Wynn and Williams Clay, 2012, p. 788) on the basis of its realist ontological positionality (Scotland, 2012, p. 10). This implies that there is but a single universal truth (Bisman 2010, Kennedy 2013) unmediated by human senses (Scotland, 2012, p. 10) according to Coleman (2019).

The realist’s assertion that there is a singular, graspable reality that can be studied in an objective, separate manner without the encumbrance of the researcher impacting on the subject of the study is in some tension with the ontological roots of this study. In contrast to the positivistic positionality associated largely with the quantitative paradigm, the qualitative paradigm can positively value the inclusion of the subjectivity of the researcher and their participants (Hollway, 2009).

This study’s positionality suggests the existence of a stratified reality which we may only be partially able to apprehend. This, according to Wynn and Williams, is “key to understanding the distinctive nature of critical realism” (2012, p. 790). Additionally, this study accepts that the researcher will have an impact on the intersubjective relational reality, all be it one I wish to surface examine and make evident to the reader. Rather than perceiving such didactic impact in the negative, I wish to utilize it as an important “research tool” (Clarke, 2013, p. 36) and data collection method to aid in the triangulation of my findings.

Dilthey (1894/1977), a proponent of constructivism, differentiated *Naturwissenschaft* (natural science) from *Geisteswissenschaft* (human science) claiming that the goal of

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<sup>14</sup> Although I note, however, that theory falsification is more aligned with the postpositivist perspective and theory verification being more associated with the positivistic world view according to Lincoln & Guba (2000, p. 107).



natural science is scientific explanation whereas for human science it is understanding (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). In this study, we are of course concerned with developing an understanding of the inter and intrapsychic, intersubjective relations between clients and social workers as opposed to the quantitative generation of laws from a dualist/objectivist positioning.

There is a necessity within this study to embrace the ambiguity the participants wrestle with rather than the quantitative measurement and testing of hypotheses associated with the positivistic tradition. Considering this and being mindful of Patton's comment that "qualitative inquire is rife with ambiguity" (Patton, 1990, p. 242), may more fully allow me to grasp the subtlety of the participants' experiences. Let us review some of the alternative post-positivist paradigms.

In considering alternative paradigms I wish to address constructivism and interpretivism. The former, according to Varasidas and Williamson *et al.*, delineates a personal and social process of meaning-making (2000, 2003) from the person's own experience (Fosnot, 1996; Varasidas, 2000). According to Guba and Lincoln the underlying assumption here "is the move from ontological realism to ontological relativism" (1994, p. 109), whereas according to Honebein one's construction of the world is based on one's own understanding and experience (1996). Payne (1997), suggests that "social work is, in essence, a socially constructed activity" (Houston, 2005, p. 848).

Whereas interpretivism an anti-positivist paradigm and "assumes that access to reality, either given or socially constructed, is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments [...] through the eyes of the participants rather than the researcher" (Myers, 2008, p. 38). This too

stands in some tension to my hope to apply a psychoanalytic lens to aid the deductive interpretation of the data.

Interestingly Krauss quotes Dobson (2002) who suggests that “the researchers own underlying belief system (ontological assumptions) largely defines the choice of methodology” (Krauss, 2005, p. 759). Rather than asserting that such choices are entirely an academic exercise, I wish to be transparent in suggesting that the choices also have their foundation in my experience of working within a highly positivistic practice setting over two decades. Consequently, it is possible for me to contend both at an academic and at an experiential level that locating my study within a positivistic paradigm would be in conflict with the ontological positioning of MBT but also would not be a good fit to enquire into the lived subjective experience of the participants’ encounters. Or as an interpretivist might suggest it would not allow me to achieve the necessary “*verstehen*” which itself is central to the rejection of the positivistic paradigm.

Thus both the positivistic and interpretive/constructive positionings are problematic with regard to their construction of reality and the means through which they access it, insofar as, in the extreme they do not align with the intention to interrogate the data using a psychoanalytic lens, nor do they align with the stratified conception of reality which seems to most readily reflect the ambiguity the participants experienced in the contested relational territory of their social work practice. Nor finally would either a thoroughly positivistic or an interpretive positionality facilitate the utilization of the methods of data analysis which would be most in keeping with the ontological and epistemological positioning of mentalization-based theory.

## Critical Realism

Consequently, I have chosen critical realism (1978, 1986, 1989) as this seems to offer the greatest potential to facilitate a rigorous interrogation of the data within a world view that is in keeping with the subject matter. In choosing this paradigm I am mindful that “The purpose of a critical realist study is to explain a given set of events by uncovering the hypothesized existence of mechanisms which, if they existed and were enacted could have produced these events (Bhaskar 1975, 1998, cited in (Wynn and Williams Clay, 2012, p. 794).

Sturgiss explains that fundamental to the critical realist’s positionality, and in contrast to constructivism, Bhaskar challenges the assumption that a person’s perception of reality is reality itself, suggesting that they are always only accounts of reality (Sturgiss and Clark, 2020, p. 143), a “transitive dimension” that is constantly subject to revision (Wynn and Williams Clay, 2012, p. 790). Critical realism assumes that our knowledge, produced in the transitive dimension and mediated by social structures is that which comprises our knowledge of an independent reality but only in a partially fallibilistic way (Roberts, 2014).

Bhaskar further proposed the stratification of the ontology of critical realism, delineating the Real (including structures of reality and their inherent causal powers independently existing), the Actual (considered a subset of the Real which includes events that occur in the real world whether or not such are observable) and the Empirical (itself a subset of the actual which are perceivable by humans) (Wynn and Williams Clay, 2012, pp. 789-790).

Central also to Bhaskar’s theory is that “causal mechanisms” operate within “open systems” in consequence of which a “hard determinism” of prediction is not possible; however, Bhaskar posits that such mechanisms induce “tendencies”. In this vein,

Houston suggests “people’s actions will be influenced by innate psychological mechanisms as well as wider social mechanisms” (2001, p. 850). Wynn quoting Sayer (1992) provided an example of structure pointing to “a national market system, a single organization or even smaller non-social structures at the neurological level or below” (Wynn and Williams Clay, 2012, p. 790). The latter I contend has relevance to our exploration of how my participants engaged with the study and its training material.

Bhaskar’s conception of a stratified ontology provides us with perhaps the greatest degree of alignment of ontological and epistemological positioning thus allowing us access to an ontological position that adheres to the central tenets of our subject matter i.e. mentalization-based theory but also data collection and analysis mechanisms that sit comfortably within this theory-free world view.

Understood within this context it is therefore possible to suggest that, to the extent that individual actors within this study are located within a socio-hemostatic environment (an open system), where each actor is imbued with its own structure, understood here as the idiosyncratic characteristics of the operation of their own Markov blankets<sup>15</sup> as important elements that dictates in part the actor's ability to apprehend reality. The resulting apprehending of reality is based on the interaction of a stratified ontology, grasped in a fallibilistic manner and mediated by their reflective functioning capacities and their emergent homeostatic needs, the latter understood as the personal tendencies of the individual. Thus actors (my participants and their clients) must be “considered as being causal powers, manifested through their

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<sup>15</sup> “Markov blankets seem to fall under what psychoanalysts have named psychic envelopes, a notion which appears notably in the work of Anzieu (1974) following Bion’s (1965) writings on the distinction between the container and the contained and the idea of a ‘membrane’ separating conscious and unconscious processes.” Rabeyron, T. and Massicotte, C. (2020) 'Entropy, Free Energy, and Symbolization: Free Association at the Intersection of Psychoanalysis and Neuroscience', *Frontiers in Psychology*, pp. 1-15.

thoughts and beliefs of how given actions are linked to consequences” (Wynn and Williams Clay, 2012, p. 791).

Bhaskar’s formulation goes beyond imbuing a likelihood of causal powers to behave in a certain way; instead, indicating their tendency to act in a particular way. In this regard, we might suggest human beings exposed to high reflective functioning in childhood act as generative mechanisms in that they have a tendency mediated by their own reflective functioning to self-regulate to a higher degree, thus potentially maintaining a more stable homeostatic balance. For these reasons, critical realism was chosen as the paradigm within which to locate this study.

## **Research Questions**

In hindsight, the formulation and articulation of my research questions seem naive at this juncture of the research given my greater appreciation of the multi-layered possibilities of positionings and directions of inquiry one may pursue in this type of research. However, perhaps such reflexive learnings are inevitable in one’s early development as a researcher.

The main research question and subsidiary questions of this study are as follows.

Main research question:

“Utilizing thematic analysis in conjunction with a psychoanalytical lens, what can we learn about the experience(s) of a group of Irish social workers undertaking the proposed mentalization-informed training?”

Additionally, there are four sub-questions:

1	What can we learn about the participants’ process of engaging with and acquiring a working knowledge of the concepts of mentalization and reflective functioning in this training group?
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2	What implications might there be for the participants in acquiring such knowledge professionally or personally?
3	What are the participants' views regarding the relevance of mentalization / reflective functioning to their social work task?
4	What lessons might be learned with regard to the experience of facilitation of such a group?

## Recruitment

The initial engagement was made with the four Dublin Tusla area managers who were to act as gatekeepers, providing access to and permission for their staff to participate in this study. Three of the four area managers agreed to participate and additionally agreed to distribute an advertisement and information sheet of the study to their staff whereby prospective participants could apply to their area manager for approval to engage in the study.

Inclusion criteria stipulated the participants must be currently employed as a social worker with Tusla, receive area manager authorization to participate, commit to attend the group regularly, and adhere to Tusla's research governance guidelines which stated that no participant could be included if they were involved in another major research programme.

Exclusion criteria related to participants not occupying a management position, not currently being engaged in psychological treatment for work-related issues nor experiencing an episode of acute psychological distress disorder or acute psychological vulnerability.

Applications were received from 11 Tusla social workers proportionately divided across the three Tusla areas representing the majority of the Dublin metropolitan area. Despite no criteria being set regarding which type of social work team applicants might be sourced from i.e. duty, child protection, child-in-care (CIC) or fostering social work teams, all participants fell within either CIC teams or fostering social work teams. A possible explanation might be that this researcher would traditionally have had most contact with child-in-care and fostering social work teams. Of the 11 social workers commencing the study, two subsequently withdrew from the study, one due to promotion and one resulting from additional child care demands due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus nine of the original 11 participants participated in the entire research study.

## **Consent**

All participants were provided with an information sheet relating to the study and a detailed consent form setting out the intentions of the research including the audio recording of both the psychoeducational and work discussion elements of the study. They were advised of the intention of developing a transcript of the audio recordings and the intention of subjecting this to thematic analysis, elements of which will be used in an anonymized format within the subsequent thesis documentation and other relevant forums. Within the consent form, they were asked to actively give their consent by ticking a box indicating their approval for the audio recordings and further confirming that they had been given a copy of the information sheet and consent form, that they read and understood the distress protocol and were voluntarily engaging in the research. Importantly, they also affirmed their knowledge that they were free to withdraw from the research at any stage; this stipulation was reiterated to all participants at various stages throughout the research.

## **Insider / Outsider Positioning**

According to Brannick and Coghlan (2007), insider research takes place within the researcher's organizational community or system. Traditionally or perhaps naively the insider–outsider dichotomy is most usually taken to signify the belonging or not belonging within a certain socially constructed group (Innes Robert, 2009), or as Jenkins terms it an “in-group” (2000). Such binary arguments seem incongruent to the multiple social positionings I found I occupied within this research study. For example, I am easily identified as working within a charitable organization whose entire workload originates from Tusla, where my employing organization has been described as having one foot inside Tusla and one foot outside, thereby arguably bestowing it and me with a privileged level of access.

My insider status can be formulated as having multiple commonalities with my participants, some real and some assumed, as well as multiple differences thereby also casting me into an outsider positionality; thus, the binary positionalities of insider and outsider seem deficient.

Further, my participation and membership of internal Tusla governance structures and my provision of clinical consultation to Tusla social work teams inevitably raised the potential of what Ross (2017, p. 326) emphasized as the roles of “power and positionality in defining one's place on an insider–outsider continuum” of research. Ross draws on Tilley's (1998) term “someone familiar” to mitigate the binary distinctions that are commonly made and further suggests that “One's positioning as insider or outsider may not be static: as Song and Parker (1995) [suggest there is] too much emphasis upon difference, rather than on partial and simultaneous commonality and the difference between the researcher and the interviewee” (Ross, 2017, p. 327).



Chavez looks particularly at insider research setting out the advantages and disadvantages (see Appendix 2) suggesting that although they “are advantaged by the closeness afforded by the subject-object positionality, it dually complicates the implementation and completion of the research [...]; many insiders have consistently advocated for vigilant critical reflection on the effects of insiderness” (2008, p. 490). Nonetheless, Jones quoted in Tedlock (2000) suggests that insiders have knowledge that the outsider is just not privy to.

Faber presents an interesting conception of the insider–outsider debate in his article on critical realism and religion that I feel is worthy of inclusion. He presents the view that the “entire insider–outsider debate is clouded by the fact that subjectivity and objectivity are the factors by which insiders define one another” (2006, p. 176) suggesting that some may assert “that the label ‘objective’ itself is posited in an attempt to create an artificial detachment in order to construct illusive objectivity and in turn generate authority” (Faber, 2006 p. 176).

Thus it seems the boundary of separation between insider and outsider is open to contestation. It is perhaps more appropriate, and indeed in line with the stratification of reality inherent in a critical realist world view that I engage with the complexity of this indistinct boundary and attempt to hold my awareness open to the potential influences my shifting positionalities may have on the research. I concur with Chavez and others’ claims that “vigilant critical reflection” is an important mitigation factor in ensuring such issues are surfaced and made evident where relevant (Chavez, 2008).

## **Data Collection**

Draper and Swift’s (2011) assertions that “there is no universal accepted design for data collection, and [...] that the researcher plays a central, key role in the data

collection” is quoted by Fusch, Fusch & Ness (2018) whose views are in sympathy with Denzin’s (1978) view “that researchers bring their personal belief in addition to the social and political environment, which eliminates any possibility of conducting value-free research” (Fusch, Fusch and Ness, 2018, p. 19). I hope that the following multiplicity of data sources (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009) will facilitate a level of data saturation and triangulation which according to Wilson (2017, p 211) “is a widely endorsed strategy for strengthening the internal validity of qualitative studies in social science”.

In respect of the data triangulation in this study, the reader should note my intention to rigorously adhere to (Denzin, 2012) postulation of four types of data triangulation i.e. data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation. Throughout the thesis I have attempted to present differing interpretations, my reflexivity thoughts, differing theoretical views and substantial articulation of the epistemological and ontological theoretical positioning of the study such that the reader will be facilitated to make their own judgement regarding the trustworthiness and rigour of the work presented.

Data was primarily harvested for this study from the transcripts of the WDGs, where efforts were made not just to faithfully represent the spoken word in the transcripts but also the tone and apparent affective expression of the commentary.

Additionally, to move beyond the spoken word a reflexive process of notetaking was completed immediately after each WDG. These notes contributed to my reflexive research diary which was kept to surface my own questions, dilemmas, states of mind and affective experience of conducting this study.

Additionally, I was assisted in the formulation of my thoughts and eventual production of the themes of this research through the support of fellow doctoral

students within a research seminar group. A further forum within which I was assisted in the generation of my thoughts and positionings was the regular doctoral research supervision meetings I had with my supervisor. The sixth and final forum of data collection related to the post group feedback interviews I conducted with a small number of participants who volunteered to undertake this element of the study.

### **A Theory Laden Work Discussion Group (WDG)**

“Research has long shown the adverse effects that caring for others can have on one's own wellbeing and the importance of psychological support in such work” Adams, Boscarino and Figley, 2006; Hawkins and Shohet, 2012 as cited in ((Ellis and Wolfe, 2019, p. 1).

The positionality one assumes, primarily as a human being but also as a social worker occupying a role/identity both personal and professional, is inextricably entangled in our conception of reality/identity and is regularly impinged upon by the very act of professional practice as demonstrated in O’Sullivan and Cooper’s (2021) recent article on the experience of being both mother and social worker which, similar to this study, utilized a work discussion group (WDG) as a practice-near research tool.

Following much consideration, I too have chosen the WDG format as a practice-near research tool to investigate the participants’ experiences of both the learning and application of mentalization-based thinking.

Rustin *et al.* wrote about the work discussion model extensively (Bradley & M.L Rustin, 2008; Ruch, 2007; Warman & Jackson, 2007; M. J. Rustin, 200; Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016). O’ Sullivan and Cooper suggest that “it has been a useful model for meeting the developmental potential of child protection social workers” (O’Sullivan and Cooper, 2021, p. 3).

Work discussion groups have been described as “the epitome of the application of psychoanalytic ideas” (Jonathan and Margeret, 2008, p. xix), and as “the overarching theory of greatest relevance is Bion’s theory of containment” (Rustin, 2008, p. 15) described by Rustin as the ‘stepping stone’ to development. She suggests this model “could be powerfully employed to support workers and hence the children in their care” (Rustin, 2008, p. 15).

Faithful adherence to the traditional model of a WDG in this study would have required the facilitator to take a more facilitative or observational stance than I felt appropriate given that the primary task of this particular group was psychoeducational and specifically theory-laden psychoeducation regarding the possible use of MBT within social work. Thus, although adapted, the intention was to adhere to the traditional framework of the work discussion model as closely as possible.

O’Sullivan & Cooper note however that “there has been little sustained provision of work discussion groups to child protection social workers” (2021, p. 3). Additionally, the incorporation of the MBT lens, creating what Bion may have described as a “binocular view” within the format of a WDG, to this author’s knowledge has not previously been executed or researched. Thus this study hopes to make some small contribution to the exploration of the potential utilization of these dual lenses in supporting workers in caring professions and social workers in particular.

## **Reflexivity**

Dewey formally introduced the notion of reflective practice in 1933 with many subsequent contributions notably including Schon’s (1983) reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action and Kolb’s cycles of reflection (1984).

Reflective practice, reflexivity, and critical reflection are now thought to be “widely accepted as important in contemporary social work practice” (Watts, 2019, p. 8) and Lilienfeld & Basterfield in their 2020 literature review on reflective practice in clinical psychology also acknowledge it as an essential component of many training programmes.

Whilst the finer-grained differences between each concept are beyond the scope of this work it is interesting to note the co-terminus intention of each to harness one's subjective inner experience with the intention of actively and consciously cultivating a deeper register of understanding.

Archer suggests that the “subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action and are thus indispensable to explaining social outcomes” (2007, p. 5). According to Watts this definition is inclusive of both the introspective internal conversation whilst linking this to the “exercise of human agency” (2019, pp. 17-18). However, she goes on to quote Donati & Archer (2015, p. 62) who suggest that this mental ability is “shared by all normal people” (Watts, 2019, p. 16). This contention is in my view problematic in light of the likelihood that reflexivity encompasses some level of reflective function if indeed it (reflective functioning) is not the underlying psychological process that is foundational to reflexivity.

Given that it has been established that we do not all share a similar level of reflective functioning (Slade, 2006; Camoirano, 2017; Grienenberger, Kelly and Slade, 2005) the suggestion by Donati & Archer that all normal people share it, whatever normal means, is evidently open to challenge. However, this view was presented within a critique of these differing concepts regarding which Watts concluded that “Further research is needed to consider instructional pedagogy within social work for

engaging students in the different operations of thought and aims of specific forms of critical reflection” (Watts, 2019, p. 11).

In respect of my study, and not wishing to be speculatively indulgent, I have attempted to be conservative in my hypotheses staying close to the nuance of the presentations, attending to the tone and emotional valence of expression by the participants.

Utilization of this hard to define skill, i.e. reflexivity, lies at the heart of the execution, analysis and production of findings in this study. The commitment to such reflexivity lies not just on my keen prioritization of harnessing my capacities but also on the use of external minds, in the form of my fellow doctoral student peers, and research supervisor as well as engaging in and with the tools that support such reflexivity i.e. the research diary, post group notes and significant investment in the listening and re-listening to the videotapes of the groups and transcript analysis. This was done in the hope that it will offer some level of triangulation of the data and ensure that where interpretations go beyond the data they can at least be seen to have their foundations within the transcriptions.

## **Ethics**

Whilst it may be reasonable to describe my subjects as defended subjects, I was nonetheless keenly concerned that they would not suffer any undue discomfiture or impingement of their personal or professional identities as a result of engaging in this study. In consequence, I remained vigilant that the use of a psychoanalytic hermeneutic lens raises the possibility (however slight) that a participant may reveal more than they wish or intend. Also that my analysis may highlight vulnerabilities or deficiencies which they may not be comfortable in revealing or alternatively that I may, as S. and L. Frosh (Stephen and Lisa, 2008) highlighted, present my subjective

impressions as valid data (the truth) regarding the emotions of my participants as distinct from uncovering a truth from the researcher's perspective. Thus I have been cautious about the presentation of data and have been guided by Holloway and Jefferson's three principles of conducting research: honesty, sympathy and respect (2013).

Prior to engagement in research activities, ethical approval was gained from both the Tavistock and Tusla research ethics committees.

Concerned that participants would be free to engage in as genuine a manner as possible, the research ethical approval included a clause expressly precluding any feedback to Tusla other than access to my final thesis.

All participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study and were expressly informed of the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Additionally, individual information sessions were conducted with all participants to facilitate the surfacing of any concerns or need for clarification.

Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, their data and that of the subjects of the case studies strictly adhered to the tenets set out in the ethics applications. Anonymization of participants and their client data, already anonymized, was further altered to ensure the highest level of data protection possible. Names, ages, genders of participants and case presentations have all been altered with this intention. All data has been stored on an encrypted laptop and processed and presented in this thesis in line with the ethical approvals.

As stated, COVID-19 restrictions necessitated a pause in the research for four months to facilitate renewed ethics applications to the Tavistock and Tusla research ethics committees to move this study onto an online platform.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method of interrogating the data corpus as it is “essentially independent of theory and epistemology” according to Braun and Clarke (2006., p. 78). However, I find myself in agreement with Willig’s suggestion that it is perhaps more correct to suggest that thematic analysis is “characterized by theoretical flexibility” (Willig, 2013, p. 66) as opposed to freedom as it bestows the onus of choice of the theoretical lens onto the researcher. Willig notes that the thematic analysis method is particularly suited to certain forms of enquiry including “questions about people’s conceptualizations or way of thinking about particular social phenomena” (Willig, 2013, p. 66).

Social work’s concern, according to Gould (2006) is relational, as is this study. In consequence, I have chosen a psychoanalytically sympathetic method that aligns with the subject matter of the study, i.e. mentalization, to facilitate an exploration of what might lie “beneath the surface” (Cooper, 2005; Clarke and Hoggett, 2009).

In choosing a psychoanalytic lens to interrogate the data I note that “Psychoanalysis conceptualises discourse as a site where the internal world of psychic reality is expressed and revealed, while at the same time always resisting expression and never being fully known” (Carla and Wendy Stainton, 2017, p. 126) which adheres to the critical realist ontological positioning of the study.

A thematic analysis combined with a psychoanalytic lens I feel supports a theoretical coherence across the research design in our enquiry into the subjective experience of the study’s participants.

Stamenova and Hinshelwood, writing on the application of psychoanalytic ideas to social scientists observed that “what distinguishes the observing social scientist from other members of society is the capacity to maintain a distance from the observed.



The Verstehen observer is only partially immersed in the commonly constructed social world, not wholly assimilated to it” (2018, p. 38). This seems redolent of the positionality one occupies as an MBT practitioner, although I would suggest that rather than limiting oneself to the social world perhaps one needs to include one’s own subjective experience, idiosyncratically processed in the crucible of interactions between our psychic defences and our level of reflective functioning, all with the governing aim of maintaining one’s homeostatic balance.

Psychosocial research is as Hollway suggests concerned with holding “together an understanding of the working of the psyche and the social without reducing one to the other” (2009, p. 461). The notion of “telling it like it is” (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013, p. 52) in a linear way, reducing the meaning to the actual words spoken is rightly described by Hollway when she indicated that in such an approach “words are imprisoned as text in the service of an illusory version of objectivity, shorn of the dimensions of embodied affect and the full range of ways in which people communicate (involving unconscious, as well as conscious, intersubjectivity)” (Hollway, 2009, p. 472).

In contrast to this rather linear and reductive stance, I wish to emulate Geertz’ (1973 p. 312) notion of providing a “thick” account of the data in line with his distinction of an experience near or experience distant inquiry, with the former being my objective. Geertz employed his famous example of the process of discerning or describing a wink or a twitch to illuminate the nature of a “thick” account, which he suggests has a “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures”. Such stratification of meaning should, I contend, particularly in psychosocial research, attend to the reality of the phenomena of both research participants and researcher being defended subjects.

A central tenet of mentalization-based theory and arguably psychosocial research relates to the idiosyncratic way we apprehend reality based on our unconscious defensive processes that are triggered within the gestalt of contactfulness between the researcher and research participants' particular defensive structures.

As Cooper suggests in psychosocial research, the researcher is investigating a world in which there is a "construction of meaning, affects, [and] relationships that can never be fully independent of the researcher" (Cooper, 2009, p. 431).

As suggested above, the meaning is idiosyncratically processed in the crucible of interactions between our psychic defences and our level of reflective functioning, frequently with the governing aim of maintaining one's homeostatic balance. My acknowledgement and engagement with these processes are intended to further my ability to provide an "experience near" and thick account of these experiences.

## **Structuring the Analysis**

Undertaking the transcription and analysis of what seemed like an overwhelming amount of data from the audio and video recordings proved challenging, particularly attempting to find a way of comprehending all of the disparate elements of conversations, impressions, reflexive thoughts and theoretical perspectives that occurred across the seven months it took to complete the twelve groups (given the four-month break due to COVID-19).

The voluminous quantity of text to be reviewed derived from the 24 hours of discourse recorded via audio and video incorporating the automatically generated transcripts from MS-Teams proved very daunting. Eventually, I formulated my own

novel way<sup>16</sup> of processing the data by importing it into Excel with the help of my son's technical assistance.

Preparation of the WDG data occurred in two parts. Firstly, the audio recordings were transcribed. Secondly, the importation of the automatically generated transcripts from MS Teams necessitated their conversion into a format recognized by Microsoft Excel. The utilization of Excel allowed me to numerically code and time-stamp each line of text. Additionally, each speaker's contribution was colour-coded, to ease identification and searching of the data.

Multiple descriptions of how to carry out thematic analysis currently exist (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006; Howitt 2012) and in this study, the Braun & Clark's six-step process of thematic analysis (2006, 2013) was used as a guide.

I devoted significant investment into my familiarization (phase one, relating to Braun and Clarke's guidance) with the texts by repeated reading, re-reading and viewing of the videos until I achieved a saturation of my knowingness of the data. In generating the initial codes (phase two) I was reliant on "active" reading (Braun and Clarke, 2009) and what Bion referred to as reverie in allowing the "latent" meaning of data to emerge in that liminal space of my performed thought. In this way Braun and Clarke ((Braun and Clarke, 2009, p. 63) acknowledge we "generate or construct themes rather than discovering them", and I inductively and deductively tried to "go beyond the explicit content of the data" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p207).

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<sup>16</sup> At this juncture I was unaware that others have previously used Excel in a similar fashion (see Bree & Gallagher 2016, "Using Microsoft Excel to code and thematically analyze qualitative data: a simple, cost-effective approach" *AISHE-J* Vol, No 2) and set about formulating with the help of my son the importation and re-representation of the text into a usable format derived from the automatically generated MS Teams' transcript, importing it into Excel where various macros were written to aid in the process of grouping and searching and coding the data.

In the first pass of the initial coding of the data, I generated rough, initial codes inserting them into the Excel sheet to identify particular elements of meaning. During subsequent reviewing of the texts combining and clarification of the codes were undertaken with a view to the development of themes (phase three) which Braun and Clarke suggest “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question” (2006, p 82). The generation of these themes led eventually to the combination and clustering of codes where this was felt to more accurately provide a descriptor of the theme, thus defining more clearly the differentiation between differing themes. Again this process was recursive as I reflexively worked to condense and clarify meaning elements within the various codes. Appendix 3a is provided to illuminate the process by which I initially coded the raw data. In this appendix, I have highlighted, as an example, the major theme of Defendedness (represented in Appendix 3a as “D”), the movement from the particular elements of the raw data, provision of initial codes, to combining codes and applying final major theme codes which I have highlighted in red to further illuminate the reflexive process of developing the major theme codes. Eventually, a total of ten major codes were identified (See Appendix 3b).

Using the master Excel sheet, which combined the text from the WDGs that was time-stamped and colour-coded to indicate the speaker, I worked through the data and coded segments of text using the ten codes, sometimes labelling a segment of text with multiple codes. By doing so I was able to generate a printout of all the text related to each individual code indicating the line number, who was speaking based on the colour-coding, time-stamp and group from which the text was derived. Synthesizing the voluminous data in this way made it more manageable and facilitated the mapping of the data to my research questions. Phase four related to a

reviewing of the themes, ensuring their coherency and that there was enough meaningful data to support a thick account of the theme with phase five involving checking and where necessary rephrasing the names of the themes to ensure coherency and clarity of meaning.

In phase six I was challenged to make the best use of the data in terms of “producing a compelling story” (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 69) that logically progressed and faithfully told the story of the data in the context of my research questions.

Ultimately three themes were chosen: Case 1 “The culture and functioning of the system” and “Things that don’t compute”; Case 2 “Defendedness” and Case 3 “Enactments”. The rationale regarding my choice of themes was based on my familiarization with the entirety of the corpus of data. The choice of these themes admittedly represents my subjective belief that they offer the greatest possibility of addressing the research questions while also bringing alive the depth and indeed overlap between the practitioner’s own personal values and practice dilemmas.

Draft copies of the case study chapters were provided to the relevant participants where possible<sup>17</sup> for review and comment to further enhance the rigour of this document and its findings and recommendations.

### The architecture of the case studies

The subsequent three case study chapters follow a similar architecture in their construction with the exception of some elements of case study three (Caoimhe – Enactments). In each chapter, initially, a summary of the case presentation is provided although the format of this is slightly altered in the third case study in chapter six. This departure from the format of the two previous chapters was decided upon to closely mirror the way in which that particular case was presented (i.e. in

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<sup>17</sup> Attempts to contact one participant through their employing organization proved unsuccessful as they had left Tusla, as did my attempts to contact her through personal contacts.

three phases) which I felt stayed closer to the authentic experience of the presentation. Following the case presentation in each chapter, there is an untheorized synopsis of the discussion as it unfolded in the work discussion groups. Subsequent to this synopsis I introduce the theme that the particular chapter has been dedicated to illuminating whilst simultaneously utilizing the theory of mentalization to further the analysis of the themes.

In addition to the architecture of the individual case study chapters, each subsequent chapter builds on the previous chapter, incrementally moving from introducing elements of the mentalization-based theory, applying mentalization in more sophisticated ways, and challenging the traditional ways in which mentalization theory is applied: suggesting that it is possible to conceive of the application of the non-mentalization modes of functioning as having a defensive role as opposed to perceiving the non-mentalizing modes within a deficit construction.

Across the three case study chapters, I incrementally recruit alternative theoretical formulations to support the analysis of the data corpus suggesting that a particular combination of theoretical lenses (Attachment, Mentalization and Regulation Theory) when combined perhaps offer a more robust conceptualization, compared to some theories currently informing social work practice. The progressive analysis of the data and themes of the case studies within an incrementally sophisticated theoretical construction furthers my ability to articulate the experience of this group of social workers undertaking this mentalization-informed training pursuant to my research goals.

## **Limitations**

In keeping with the epistemological and ontological positioning, this study can at best only claim a partial capturing of the participants' experiences and, further, as it is a small study it cannot be said to be representative of a wider cohort of social work practitioners' experience. Indeed it should be noted that quite coincidentally the cohort of social workers were all drawn from child-in-care teams and fostering teams thus leaving it open to challenge regarding its relevance to other forms of social work practice. Additionally, as the application for participation went to the area managers acting as gatekeepers, I am unaware of how many potential participants may have applied to participate in the study; thus it is not possible to comment on the wider appetite within the social work fraternity to engage in such in-depth training.

It is also reasonable to suggest, given the time commitment these busy social workers devoted to this study that only the highly motivated requested to participate which limits the study's ability to speak to its possible application to those who may be less motivated. Finally, as stated at the outset, this study is overtly located within the paradigm of mentalization-based interventions; thus its boundary of enquiry is limited in consequence of this.

## **In Summary**

This qualitative research study is overtly located within the paradigm of mentalization theory. It aims to explore the potential application of MBT within social work practice and address the gap that currently exists in the literature as it appears that there are no other published works directly addressing the use of MBT within social work practice.

I outlined the design of the study consisting of twelve weekly groups providing psychoeducation and WDG components for the participants' trial application of

mentalization within their casework as a way of investigating their engagement, application and views of the relevance of MBT as a conceptual lens.

The epistemological and ontological positions were discussed and contrasted with alternative world views in some depth given the importance of achieving a coherent research design, as MBT itself occupies a stratified positionality regarding the apprehension of reality. Critical realism was chosen as the optimal positionality in light of its ability to encompass and enquire into the subjective experience in an inductive and deductive, theory-laden way based on my intention of applying a psychoanalytic lens to examine the data. This lens is chosen as it is in sympathy with MBT and offers, along with critical realism, a level of coherence across the research design that strengthens the rigour of the findings.

Recruitment, consent, insider/outsider issues of relevance were all elaborated as was the import of my utilization of reflexivity including the use of other minds in my attempt to offer a level of triangulation of the six different data sources.

Being guided by Braun and Clarke's six-stage model a number of themes were developed with each chapter being devoted to the articulation of a particular theme.

Ethical approvals were sought and granted on two occasions: the initial approval and the subsequent approval to move the study online.



## **Chapter 4 Case Study One Amanda – “The Culture and Functioning of the System & things that don’t Compute.”**

In this chapter, I will initially provide the reader with a summary of the case based on the written account provided by the presenter, and then provide an untheorized account of the discussion as it unfolded in the Work Discussion Group (WDG) element of the study. Following this, I intend to introduce the combined themes of “Things that don’t compute” and “The culture and functioning of the system” and detail the manifestation of these themes within the case presentation. I will then apply a mentalization lens to the case material and detail the participants’ process of initially applying this lens to the case material. The final section shall begin to look at some of the more overarching clinical conceptualizations which can be brought to bear to help to further interrogate the participants’ process of engagement with the concepts of mentalization.

### **Summary of Case Presentation**

Amanda, the presenter, presented her case relating to Sam who was placed from birth in a “Mother and Baby Home” with his mother. Sam’s mother discharged herself taking Sam to live with her sister Annie when Sam was approximately 2½ months old. After a few weeks, Sam’s mother left Annie’s home leaving Sam behind with Annie without prior agreement.

Subsequently, a fostering assessment of Annie was outsourced to an independent practitioner who, unfortunately, failed to complete it. Eventually, Tusla (The Child and Family Agency) undertook the assessment, by which time Sam was 1½ years old. The assessment did not recommend that Annie should be a foster parent and this was relayed to Annie who subsequently took legal advice and challenged the report.

Sam commenced respite visits to another foster carer who was already caring for Sam's sibling with the intention of Sam moving permanently to this home.

The rationale for the negative fostering assessment report of Annie related to concerns regarding the provision of care to her own children, including experiences of homelessness, poor school attendance and concerns relating to the care and quality of her attachment with Sam. It was noted that Annie *"does not understand the concerns of the social work department and has no insight into the concerns the social worker has about her care of her children or Sam"* (G 4-3 1.12). Amanda stated, *"there is a huge sense of helplessness, avoidance and lack of pro-action in relation to the care of her own children and Sam"* (G 4-3 1.12) despite the support of the social work department.

In compliance with the formal process, the negative fostering assessment of Annie was presented to the Foster Care Committee. Annie submitted an appeal *"at the last minute, prolonging the process"* (G4-3 1.12) which was not heard till July 2019 due to the workload of the committee. Annie was afforded three occasions to attend but failed to do so.

Amanda suggested that Annie's *"legal team appeared to be prolonging the process and simultaneously the GAL [Guardian ad litem] requested Annie to undertake a forensic assessment"* (G4-3 1.13) of her parenting capacity resulting in the appeal being paused whilst awaiting completion of the report. Amanda stated, *"The report outlined similar concerns to the social work department [...] and the report noted that Sam's development was at risk if he continued to remain in the placement"* (G4-3 1.12).

Sam began disclosing physical abuse to his respite carers alleging Annie's son was *"hitting and smacking him"* (G4-3 1.14). Amanda said that Sam *"has role-played*

*different incidents that took place; he referred to Annie as scary and made a number of disclosures about physical abuse and how [Annie's son] hurt him."* Amanda says Sam is *"clearly distressed after access with Annie and is having nightmares"*. She concluded by commenting *"it's not to lash out at an individual social worker carrying out an assessment, but I suppose it's a nationwide problem – the lack of placements for children. Are we just kind of signing off and turning a blind eye to some stuff simply to make it work so we can have a placement for a child?"* (G4-3 1.16)

### **Synopsis of the Work Discussion Group**

Amanda's telling of the case was fast-paced with an intensity and urgency that left the participants and myself scrambling to comprehend not just the details of the case but the emotional valence of its telling. The atmosphere in the room felt like stepping into the churning waters of a cold mountain stream, shocking or numbing the participants.

Maura opened the discussion by commenting

*"I think it must be so frustrating, and I think the child was so lucky that, erm, you know, if there had been a change of social worker it could have nearly gone back to the beginning again [...], so one positive bit out of this case [is] that the child has had the one social worker in yourself; it's very difficult."* (G4-3 19.25) which may be considered as splitting in operation in that positivity has been located within the social worker.

Amanda<sup>18</sup> in a somewhat disconnected way suggested that *"that validates how I was feeling"* (G4-3 19.26) and suggested that *"you have the barristers dragging it all out*

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<sup>18</sup> At this juncture, I must acknowledge that based on my anxiety regarding conducting my first Tavistock Work Discussion Group, I completely forgot to instruct the presenter (Amanda) to remain quiet and observe only until asked to rejoin the group which would be the traditional method adopted in a Tavistock Work Discussion Group (WDG). Although berating myself for such a mistake I have

*in court while you are worried about the child's basic needs" (G 4-3 1.20) Ger wondered about the barrister commenting, "if the evidence is pointing to neglect and the child's development needs are not being met, are they ignoring that and functioning in pretend mode?" (G4-3 1.21) and went on to wonder why Amanda's evidence wasn't given enough weight?*

Amanda responded by questioning how *"invested"* the GAL is if they have seen him only twice in six months.

Kelly, trialing the application of MBT modes of functioning to the case stated *"would you say the GAL is operating in teleological mode – he's not emotionally invested in it – or is he attending to the physical world things – 'Oh! get an assessment done', but he has no skin in the game. It's just going through the process; it's kind of like, kind of like a bit of pretend mode thrown in" (G 4-3 1.22).*

As the conversation moved on Amanda indicated *"it's the false hope she (Annie) had probably been given by her barrister too; you know it's ethically not right ... I found it hard to sit with" (G 4-3 1.23).* She also spoke of her misgivings about the recommendation that a cognitive assessment was to be done on Annie *"despite all our concerns" (G 4-3 1.23)* indicating the apparent futility in this. Amanda said *"I guess the agency kind of let him down [...] he had been there since he was three months old; the assessment should have been done much quicker and he should have been out of there" (G4-3 1.25).*

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come to realize, hopefully not just optimistically so, that what I experienced as the persistent intrusion of Amanda into the dialogue did serve to display perhaps a more authentic reflection of the rawness of her internal process and its manifestation literally spilling out into the group. Doubtlessly this needs to be balanced against the benefits which would also accrue had I complied with the traditional way of running the WDG. Either way, I have chosen to provide a warts and all account, as accurately and faithfully as possible. In this way hopefully the reader may locate some epistemic trust in my intention to adhere to the highest level of rigour I can muster.

*“It drifted”* (G4-3 1.27) suggested Kelly. Amanda agreed and said she had brought it to her Team Leader *“but then another action would happen and it would just revalidate kind of what you saw”* (G4-3 1.27).

At this juncture, I intervened in an attempt to draw attention to the certitude of the presentation and the pattern of movements the participants made moving from the teleological aspects to the affective experience within the discussion. I noted that the initial movement was towards the positive despite the articulation of a distressing experience of this child being in care. Noting or “marking” these movements in the discussion I wondered how else people were impacted by the presentation.

Cathy said she could *“feel it very physically, the anxiety around it, particularly the enormity of it ... it just feels a bit overwhelming at times”* (G 4-3 1. 30) There's a bit about *“maybe being heard and being undermined by the barrister and GAL, you know; you're the one holding the child and people are just wanting to win an argument”* (G 4-3 1.)

Amanda took this up questioning *“how is he (GAL) heard more in court when he has seen him only once since the last court date and I have seen him, and seen the impact on him, watched his distress and I have gone back and I have actually nearly cried in the office to my Team Leader about it”* (G 4-3 1. 30)

After some moments of reflection, Sean<sup>19</sup> said *“I can relate to that; like, it's the psychic equivalence thing in me getting angry at this not working and not going the way I want it to go and feeling like everyone is doing wrong by the child and I'm the one trying to push it in the right direction”* (G 4-3 1. 31)

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<sup>19</sup> To assist those who may be unfamiliar with some of the Irish names a key to their pronunciation is provided in Appendix 8.

*“We would literally still have him in the home today, if he had not disclosed the abuse; like he is three, like so his needs. It's such an important time in his life... and he would still be there because of the whole legal process, only for he disclosed physical abuse”* (G 4-3 1.32) Amanda said.

Ger responded by saying *“I think we own the abuse and it's not actually us that's doing the abusing – that it's like the psychic equillivance. Like you say, you are doing everything within your power to make a change but nothing is happening”* (G 4-3 1.32). Ger's comments seemed to move the register of discussion to a whole deeper level. She went on to say *“It's very hard to sit with that ... it's not you abusing the child but the system isn't helping”* (G 4-3 1.32). Perhaps this can be understood in the context of splitting with the negative being deposited in the system.

Caoimhe seemed to move away from this register by commenting on the age of the child but then returned to the depth of register indicating she was *“struck by how many kids we see who come into care and sometimes by our..., with what our system..., we can end up not making things better for them”* (G4-3 1.33.).

To facilitate staying with this register I enquired what it was like for people to deal with this. Maura responded, *“I don't think it is our system; it's kind of the legal system and justice, the idea that they are entitled to justice more than the child is entitled to justice”* (G 4-3 1.34)<sup>20</sup> .

Cathy, ignoring the above comment said, *“It's very hard to stay with the feeling”* (G4-3 1.38). After a few moments, I encouraged the participants to notice the movements in the discussion as it bounced from the system to the affective experience of just holding this realization that *“maybe we are complicit with a system that hadn't*

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<sup>20</sup> Bunreacht na hÉireann (The Irish Constitution) ratified in 1937 overtly protects the Institution of Family with the Rights of the Child only being ratified by Article 42A in 2015.

*functioned quite well sometimes” (G 4-3 1.00) and asked what that is like for people: “How can you hold that?”*

Ger, in what seemed like a powerfully determined way, said: *“You can’t hold it, you’d crack up if you held it ... it would break you. I think it will break you. You have to distance yourself and if that is us talking about the system then maybe that’s what we have to do to survive it” (G4-3 1.38).*

*“For me,” Cathy said, “that is doing [something], but it hasn’t gone away. It’s still there and I think, over the years, I kind of liken it to something like post-traumatic stress ... particularly the enormity of it ... particularly if it’s ineffective if your input into the system is again and again and again ... there is a sense of helplessness that goes with that, of actually failing the children, or just being ineffective as a social worker and that’s quite debilitating and very deskilling” (G4-3 1.39).*

Moving closer to her feelings Amanda tells the group that she *“thinks it’s very sad. I think I partly feel like I’m letting him down. I feel like I’m letting him down and he deserves more and due to resources and all this sort of crack, we can’t ... it’s not even really somebody’s fault but I feel like very early on he was let down” (G4-4 2.05).*

Méabh talked of being able to identify with that and spoke of a case she is working on where the children have been in placement for four or five years but *“looking back on the file these kids were never going to be long-term, but now because we haven’t anything else we are going for long-term matching. There seems to be an awful lot of that. You couldn’t possibly take those kids out of there so let’s make it... ” (G4-4 2.04).*

*“Make it work” (G4-4 2.06) Amanda interjected.*

Méabh continued saying *“If we had more resources and if the system was working better, I'm not sure ... we wouldn't be leaving a lot of these kids in the placement that we do leave them in. And that's hard, you know, to hold.”* She continued *“Often they (barristers & GALs) want an assessment, like; they want assessment rather than intervention ... let's get that top guy”* (G4-42.8).

Cathy ventured that *“It's more black and white isn't it?”* followed by Sean suggesting that *“It's in their nature ... you know – what do they want? ... want a physical object of the report ... you know, this is the solution, this is the key [...] there is no grey in it. It simplifies it though, doesn't it?”* (G 4-4 2.13).

I commented that it was hard for a human being to manage ambivalence and that in some ways the group was now left with the ambivalence<sup>21</sup>.

Kelly responded by saying *“I think sometimes we ask..., erm people to trust in the process and in this particular case, I don't know if you could trust the process”* (Ger 4-4 2.17).

At this point, the conversation seemed to drift on to different elements of the case. Maura then commented that *“It's difficult if you go through a very stressful case and anxious case, but you, you know that, that ..., OK, that will never happen again! OK it's, it's better than feeling like the system is..., and it could happen again, you know, that case. That's very difficult”* (G4-4 2.18).

Ger spoke of *“struggling”* to know how to mentalize in child protection the court's decision and the barrister wanting to win the case.

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<sup>21</sup> A term coined a little over one hundred years ago by Eugen Bleuler indicating the co-existence of love and hate feelings Troha and Tadej 2017. On Ambivalence. Problemi International Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis.



I suggested that, for some professions, operating in pretend mode is almost a requirement, expected almost, i.e. giving the example of doctors or nurses giving injections.

*“But that’s what I am talking about for us as well,” Ger said “to do our job because we are social workers by profession but we are people first and foremost, so it’s how do you protect yourself within that, within a system that isn’t favouring the safety of children all of the time or just (slight nervous giggle) I just feel kind of dizzy almost thinking about it” (G 4-4 2.20)*

A profound silence enveloped the room. Eventually, the reverie of this moment was punctured when Sean wondered *“if there is a room full of barristers somewhere thinking about mentalization?” (G 4-4 2.21)*

The above account is based on the recording of the WDG and acts as our foundation to explore and conceptualize a deeper more nuanced exploration of the phenomenological experience of the participants’ engagement with this case presentation.

### **“Culture and Functioning of the System” & “Things that don’t Compute”**

Subjecting this data, to a deep, recursive analysis, adhering to Brawn and Clark’s (Braun and Clarke, 2009; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) precepts, the following two themes have surfaced, and are still surfacing and forming as I write this.

The titles for these combined themes were chosen to reflect the very real human dilemmas at the heart of the participants’ relationship to the culture and level of functioning that permeates their professional workspace, as well as their struggles with things that simply did not compute or make sense for the participants. I hope in

the readers' minds there is already an emerging recognition of elements of the data that fit with these titles.

I have chosen this particular work discussion group (WDG) to be the vehicle that does the heavy lifting of the manifestation of these themes; however, I will argue that these themes have relevance across the whole corpus of data.

In my research diary, I note how the participants seemed to take a shockingly "*quick and deep dive*" into very disturbing issues. I hope by choosing to start with these themes I will go some way to offer the reader something of this experience. In considering how best to represent the theme of "The culture and functioning of the system" I felt stuck and unable to proceed questioning how to structure, organize and impart the data in a straightforward and coherent way and yet still honour the complexity and multi-layered nature of it.

I was deeply aware of the profoundly disturbing impact on the participants and me which seemed to call forth a depth of uncertainty and anxiousness that seemed overwhelming. Perhaps I had taken on something of the experience of the participants, in that I too now needed to make sense of these experiences. In Bion's terms, I needed to keep on thinking.

It was confounding to me then, and now, that the participants seemed to hold a contradictory position of being both defended subjects but also displaying a propensity to take a "deep dive" into a level of contact and exposure of their inner turmoil that seemed incongruent with their defended sense of self.

Based on these realizations and the reframing of my "stuckness", perhaps it is not the struggle of articulation but rather the task of making meaning and containment that my participants faced (and that I now faced), that allowed me to perceive a way forward.

My research diary notes my recognition of something of a “dam bursting”, in that the group seemed to manifest a need to articulate these deeper more personal inner conflicts that were viscerally alive within the group but seemed not to have been satiated elsewhere. Interestingly, having presented a short piece of WDG 4 to my research seminar group for analysis they too commented on the apparent appetite of the participants to address their seemingly disturbing inner conflicts. We might speculate that such an appetite may be more acutely manifested if the organizational milieu does not privilege or facilitate workers to process the relationally traumatizing relational contact that constitutes some social work practice.

As Zora Neale Hurston said “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside” (1942 as cited in Kantz 2006).

We might also consider Eric Miller’s notion of “failed dependency” (Miller, 1993; Krantz, 2006) in respect of some participants’ apparent failure to locate epistemic trust, as well as their own dependence needs within their employing organization.

### **The Two-Stepped Process of the Overall Gestalt of the WDG**

In attempting to make meaning and articulate the phenomenological experiences of the group members it is perhaps helpful to consider the overall gestalt as having operated as a two-step process. The first consists of the elements of the discussion focused on the case presentation identifying failures of the system. This leads to the second step or what may be considered the “central dilemma” of the participants, i.e. a conflict or dissonance becoming alive in the minds of the participants regarding being complicit with a system “*that isn’t favouring the safety of children all of the time*” (G4-4.1. 04).

The speaking of this dilemma ventilated something which many within the group seemed to recognize and acknowledge. It was subjectively experienced by this

author as admitting something with significant gravity and seemingly generated a profound disturbance within the group. This is represented by the second theme of the chapter as this experience speaks to the profound sense of “Things that do not compute” for the participants.

The foundations on which this central dilemma are built relate to the varying registers within the case presentation of things the participants adjudged as wrong.

Adopting this rationale allowed us to focus on the incremental nature of the presentation of the different elements which led to the central dilemma becoming alive within the minds of the participants.

### **The Delayed Assessment**

The first step in the gestalt of the WDG representing the theme of “The culture and functioning of the system” relates to Méabh’s comparison of her own experience of a case as an exemplar which is confirmatory of Amanda’s struggles in the case she presented. Méabh spoke of one of her own cases suggesting that the kid’s placements *“were never going to be long term for the foster carers, but now because we haven’t anything else to offer we are going for long term matching; there seems to be an awful lot of that”* (G4-4 2.04). Méabh went on to mimic some unknown other, saying in a somewhat dramatic voice *“you couldn’t possibly take those kids out of there so let’s make it ...”* (G4-4 2.04). with Amanda finishing the sentence for her by saying *“Make it work!”* (G4-4 2.04).

To paraphrase Méabh, it’s probably the right thing to do in the circumstances but *“if we had more resources, and if the system was working better, I’m not sure we would be leaving these kids in the placements that we do leave them, and that’s hard, you know, to hold”* (G 4-4 2.07).

Louise Emanuel speaks of “conflicts [that] can become intolerable for practitioners and interfere with their capacity to ‘see’ what is in front of their eyes, with serious consequences for the safety of children in their care” (Cooper, 2012, p. 254).

Here there is a real ethical dilemma bounded by the also very real practical realities of available resources.

The articulation of these apparent shortcomings at a systems level is not for the purpose of occupation of a critical stance for the sake of it, but rather to look to how best to understand the practitioner’s phenomenological experience of the inherent tensions within the social work task as they experienced it and spoke of it within the learning environment of this study.

What might the “holding” of this dilemma entail for individual social workers? How might they attend to the internal dissonance, the ill at ease-ness that this potentially induces within the human subject? What resources might they deploy to maintain their own self-regulatory mechanisms in the face of what could potentially be a psychologically dysregulatory experience?

Most importantly, are practitioners supported in ventilating these tensions within their work culture, or is there a fear that such ventilation may be taboo, an act of disloyalty within a system that purports to be “responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children” (Tusla 2021).

I am reminded of my sense of a “dam bursting” in this group and wonder if there is an implicit need within the practitioners to ventilate, make meaning of and process such psychological dysregulatory issues to say nothing of the psychic energy such “holding” potentially consumes for the human subject.

Briggs emphasized the need for robust emotional supports for practitioners, referring to the “tendency to avert one’s eyes as a defence against the pain of seeing

becomes understandable, though lamentable” with Cooper suggesting that such defences “may be needed to a certain extent” (2012, p. 274).

The meaning-making process seems to be engaged with implicitly, in an attempt to relieve the dysregulatory experience of holding dissonant feelings.

It is interesting to note that the initial delay in assessing Annie as a prospective foster parent for Sam garners little traction in the group’s narrative when compared to the traction the barrister’s alleged advocacy of delaying tactics for Annie generated within the text.

One possible understanding of this is located in the intangible identity of “the system” as it fails to conduct the fostering assessment in a timely fashion, whereas the barrister is a known subject with perhaps some elements of a shared identity that may more readily trigger our evolutionary need to make sense of another human being’s actions. The need to interpret human behaviour is arguably more advanced within the species compared to our need to make sense of institutions/corporate actions.

This need seems particularly evident if the other’s identity and one’s own identity is in some way shared, even if only tangentially. The need to make meaning of the others actions, positions etc. in the context of their departing from one’s own norms and yet holding some aspects of a shared identity seems to particularly trigger a desire to resolve and come to an understanding as to how a person with a shared identity could behave in a different manner. This is perhaps a foundational dilemma for all social work practitioners with a recent example being “mother” social workers’ duality of identities which was the subject of an illuminating publication (O’Sullivan and Cooper, 2021). In this case, how could a person, a barrister working in family law, advise the use of delaying tactics (acknowledging that this is Amanda’s

assumption) given the likely impact on Sam remaining in a home in which, it is said, he is not safe.

To address this issue and build our method of addressing some of the more noteworthy elements of this case study later in this chapter, let me draw on Thomas Nagel's view that "there is something irreducible perspectival and subjective about the human experience both conscious and unconscious such that it cannot be wholly explained in terms of being reduced to neurophysiological processes in the brain" (Volume: 64 issue: 2, page(s): 389-403 DOI: 10.1177/0003065116647053)

The relevance to our task is both that Nagel's positionality speaks to the underlying construction of the epistemological and ontological positioning of this thesis and can be seen to adhere to one of the central tenets of the thesis: the use of mentalization-based thinking. Mentalization-based thinking holds dear the idea that one's conception of reality is perspectival; hence the emphasis on being curious about the perspective of the other or, in my shorthand, the importance of "perspective jumping".

To explain, when viewed from one position the barrister's actions may seem cold-hearted and unempathetic to Sam's situation. Indeed it is evident that Amanda's view is located somewhere close to the tenor of this description. However, if one jumps perspectives, which necessitates the abandonment of Sam as the primary concern, we can see the reasonableness of a legal representative focusing on the vindication of his client's (Annie's) rights to a fair and just assessment.

I shall argue that the ability to flexibly manipulate our perspective and apprehend the other's perspective, which in MBT terms can also be referred to as our reflective function ability, is central to the task of social work practice, and indeed to good parenting practices (Cooper and Redfern, 2015).

We know from the work of Bateman and Fonagy that such perspectival capacity is best achieved when one is operating in a low threshold of emotional stimulation. Heightened emotional activation, particularly in the context of an attachment relationship, is known to degrade one's ability to hold in mind the perspective of the other. Arguably, this is because the phenomenological experience has pushed us into a non-mentalizing mode of functioning in an attempt to manage and regulate the affective experience such that this form of perspectival flexibility is lost to us.

Interestingly, it is reasonable to assume that Amanda does possess the knowledge that the barrister's role is to represent her client but there is an apparent failure to incorporate this into her thinking. It is almost as if Amanda's perspective – how she had formulated her understanding ascribing negativity to the barrister – has a stickiness, a perspectival stickiness, set in the context of the high level of her emotional arousal which serves to hinder her ability to perspective jump and thus she does not incorporate this knowledge into her thinking. In consequence of this she struggles to make meaning of the barrister's actions and reverts to ascribing negativity.

Such defaulting to ascribing negativity is quite common when the human subject fails to be able to grasp an understanding of someone else's positionality. This often operates as a recursive or self-confirming cycle related to the failure to be able to be curious about the perspective of the other and jump to the quality or the as-if-ness of inhabiting their perspective or, as one of the participants described it, to be able "*to walk in their shoes*".

Other elements which can be seen to lead to the central dilemma becoming alive within Amanda's mind related to her statement that "*it's the false hope she had*



*probably been given by her barrister too; you know it's ethically not right, it's ...I found it hard to sit with"* (G 4-3 1.23).

On the assumption that her view is correct, Amanda is presented with the ethical dilemmas of how she should position herself in the context of the alleged false hope instilled in Annie by the barrister. Should one disabuse Annie of this false hope? Even occupying a neutral stance might require Amanda to contain her possible concern for Annie on the assumption that she will be disappointed. Navigating how to be with this dilemma requires Amanda to contain, at an emotional or psychic level, strongly contradictory feelings, particularly if one's self-identity is associated with practising as an ethical practitioner.

Similarly, the GAL's request for a cognitive assessment, which Amanda expressed with a certitude regarding its futility given the depth of concerns about Annie's parenting, demonstrates a perspectival stickiness that arguably hindered her ability to be curious about what the actual intention of the GAL might be in seeking such an assessment.

Indeed Amanda's questioning as to *"how is the [GAL] heard more in court when he had seen him only once since the last court date and I have seen him, and seen the impact on him, watched his distress"* (4-3 31.26) confounds not just Amanda but also Ger who questions *"it's difficult to understand why your evidence wasn't given enough weight to make changes for the child"*. In this example of "Things that don't compute" we can see the experience of social workers being unable to reconcile themselves with an understanding of why the system operated in the way that it did by not ascribing sufficient weight to the social worker's testimony in court compared to the GAL's. Irrespective of the right or wrongs of the particular situation, about which I offer no opinion, my interest here is the apparent experience of cognitive or

mental state dissonance as the practitioners encounter something that they cannot make meaning of, possibly in light of holding the child in mind.

I will argue throughout this thesis that the imperative to make meaning of such events, which lies at the heart of mentalization, is motivated by the overarching need to regain or maintain one's homeostatic balance which is achieved through the process of meaning-making, thus reducing the mental state dissonance. Such dilemmas have particular relevance as we move on to the second aspect of the gestalt of the Work Discussion Group (WDG) where we will address more fully what I initially labelled "Things that don't compute".

In a striking statement, Ger indicated that "*I think we own the abuse*" and went on to explain its psychic equivalence "*when you are doing everything in your power to make a change but nothing is happening*" apparently indicating that the experience of not making things change for the better induces a state or feeling of responsibility for the abuse in that the practitioner has been unable to change the experience of the child and therefore "owns" the abuse. Here it is important to differentiate this from the different versions of the same reality. In this instance, Ger readily acknowledged a difference between being objectively responsible compared to the feeling of owning the abuse.

Feeling, in the mode of functioning known as "psychic equivalence" is perhaps appropriately identified as potentially playing a role in her own experience in that her experience of feeling responsible in her current mental state has a "too real" feeling to it. In the literature there is no as-if-ness in the experience of psychic equivalence; feelings are taken to be real and true in a concrete fashion with little or no balancing from an alternative perspective on the reality of the situation.

In this instance indicative of mentalizing, Ger can hold both the “too real” feeling of being responsible and the physical world reality of not being responsible. Although lacking in precision, using the term physical world can be an effective shorthand in differentiating from that which is objectively true in the objective “physical world” from that which is felt to be true within one’s mental state – the emotional valency.

Ger continues by stating *“it’s very hard to sit with that but sometimes you have to try to separate yourself like it’s not you abusing the child; but the system isn’t helping”* (G4-3 1.32).

Caoimhe commented, *“I’m struck by how many kids we see [...] We can end up not making things better for them,”* and Sean said, *“It’s really sad isn’t it? Like, I think, just sad”* (G4-3 1.33).

Maura, in an apparent move away from the gravity of these comments indicative of splitting challenged the prevailing views of the group suggesting *“I don’t know if it is our system; it’s kind of the legal system and justice, the idea that they are entitled to justice more than the child is entitled to justice”* (G 4-4 2.02).<sup>22</sup>

The apparent movement away from the intensity of the feelings by Maura was seemingly caught by Cathy who quietly stated *“it’s very hard to stay with the feeling”*.

I moved to support staying with the feelings as opposed to focusing on the system, asking what is it like for people, how can you hold that?

Ger spoke with a quick-paced intensity and stated *“you can’t hold it; you’d crack up if you held it [...] It would break you; I think it will break you. You have to distance yourself, and if that’s us talking about the system then maybe that’s what we have to do to survive it”* (G4-4 2.0:38).

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<sup>22</sup> The reader should note that it is possible to offer an alternative explanation based on the fact that the Irish constitution bestows significant rights to the family which some see as detrimental to the vindications of children rights. Exploration of such issues are beyond the scope of my research question and consequently shall not be dealt with here.

The fraught intensity of this comment registered with me as an expression of frustration and perhaps an unconscious rejection of the idea of being with the emotional valence of the situation which I had been advocating throughout the group.

Cathy said, *“for me that is a doing; that is a doing, but it hasn’t gone away. It’s still there and I think over the years, I kind of liken it to something like post-traumatic stress [...] I think that catches up with you a lot of the time”* (G4-4 2.03:38).

The above passages incorporating Maura’s wish to split off the toxic elements of one’s association with a system that is perceived as failing children and Ger’s advocacy of emotionally distancing herself through a focus on the system (physical world) is challenged by Cathy who advises that processing the toxic elements of this realization, rather than splitting off from them may be more appropriate.

The powerful feelings exhibited in this segment, speak to the differing styles of dealing with the central theme of “Things that don’t compute” in the face of the dilemma of working within a system that doesn’t always look after the children as we might wish. Facing this realization that despite their overtly altruistic intentions sometimes they are complicit with a system that fails children, is deeply disturbing and all participants seem to struggle with this possibility.

Cathy’s commentary can be observed to be on the foot of a greater level of working through of her feelings such that she displays the capacity to stay with and regulate the disturbing feelings, mentalize her experience of them and reflect on the dangers of a premature movement away from, or splitting off from, such disturbing feelings.

The possibility of understanding the barrister’s functioning in pretend mode also was highlighted and the analogy of medical professionals defensively cutting off from empathic feelings when performing painful interventions on their patients and its

normalization as a way of functioning was discussed, to which Ger responded *“but that’s what I’m talking about for us as well – to do our job because we are social workers by profession but we are people first and foremost, so it’s how do you protect yourself within that, within a system that isn’t favouring the safety of children all of the time. Or just (slight nervous giggle) I just feel a little kind of dizzy almost thinking about it”* (G4-4 21.O1).

Implicitly the heart of the dilemmas that surfaced within the group related to the participants’ defensive processes which sought relief from the toxicity of the phenomenological experiences that this case brought alive in their minds.

Whilst such mental state movements may have the immediate effect of helping to relieve oneself from the mental dissonance and ultimately be regulatory at the level of homeostatic balance of the human subject, at least in the short term we would be wise to remember Munro’s commentary regarding the need to support social workers to be alive to the most distressing material within themselves as so often this is the reflection of the worlds the children we care for inhabit. As Munro stated, “If the work environment does not help support workers and debrief them after particularly traumatic experiences, then it increases the risk of burnout which, in the human services, has been defined in terms of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (or cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment” (Munro E., 2011).

## **In Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a synopsis of the case and then moved to examine the different layers of interpretation the participants applied to the case material.

The trial use of MBT modes of functioning assisted the participants to articulate two important themes of their phenomenological experience. Firstly, the articulation of

their view of the “Culture and functioning of the system” which they found wanting. The second theme of “Things that do not compute”, linked inextricably to the first, goes some way to surface the level of dissonance they experienced in associating within their own mind their identity as part of such organizational culture and functioning.

The WDG can be seen to move from the external towards the internal or personal dilemmas the participants face in reconciling their association with an organizational entity that they do not feel is always protecting children in the way it should. As these very troubling realizations surface within the group we witness the differing psychological defensive movements the participants make to lower their level of mental state dissonance and regain an inner homeostatic balance. Despite their articulation of pretend mode possibly being resorted to by the barrister, there seems little overt acknowledgement that participants too may be resorting to such strategies. Until that is the modality of defence seems to clash with contradictory movements to embrace the toxicity of this realization with simultaneously defended movements to mitigate, deny and distance oneself from such unpalatable truths. The contention of this study, and perhaps MBT in general, is that awareness of such powerful intersubjective processes, even if one is forced to rely on such splitting mechanisms as pretend mode is best done with some level of awareness, if possible. The alternative is for social workers to unconsciously defend themselves. Munro’s interim review of child protection noted “that previous reforms have concentrated too much on the explicit, logical aspects of reasoning and this has contributed to a skewed management framework that undervalues intuitive reasoning and emotions and thus fails to give appropriate support to those aspects” (2011., p35).

## Chapter 5 Case Study Two Sorcha – “Defendedness”

### Summary of Case Presentation

In group six Sorcha presented the Maher family to the work discussion group (WDG) which I will use as a vehicle to discuss the theme of defendedness<sup>23</sup>.

She explained that Mr and Mrs Maher had been fostering for many years and were regarded as an “extremely solid couple [...] with great insight and openness” (Case Briefing Doc Group 6). That was before their sudden separation! Theirs was a large family of adult biological children and four younger foster children. They were said to have “*impressed the social work department [with] how well they cared for the four children*” consequently the social work department was “*really shocked*” (Case Briefing Doc Group 6) to hear of their separation.

Initially, the foster mother remained within the household on a part-time basis staying over several nights a week. During this time, the foster mother did not disclose her whereabouts when not in the family home. The adult birth children had a “*very poor view of the foster mother and [did] not communicate with her*” (Case Briefing Doc Group 6) whilst some of the foster children are reported to have felt torn between the foster parents, with one foster child feeling “*she had to protect the foster father and not annoy him*” (Case Briefing Doc Group 6).

The foster mother felt blocked out by the adult birth children and foster father and is reported to have resorted to direct communication with the foster children. Sorcha

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<sup>23</sup> The term Defendedness is used throughout the text to denote the processes of psychological defences in their generality. In doing so I subscribe to Cramer’s statement that “A defence is adaptive if its function is to contribute to maturation, growth, and mastery of the drives. However, if the primary function is to ward off anxiety, strong instinctual demands, and unconscious conflict, the defence may be considered pathological.” Cramer, P. (2015) 'Understanding Defense Mechanisms', *Psychodynamic Psychiatry*, 43(4), pp. 523-552.

reported that the foster father *“is running the household extremely well and had demonstrated a huge commitment to the children”* (Case Briefing Doc Group 6).

Sorcha identified two dilemmas: firstly, the poor communication between the foster parents and secondly the *“quite large focus on negatives in the case, perhaps because of the number of professionals involved”* suggesting that *“small problems are highlighted to the point that they are made bigger than needed”* (Case Briefing Doc Group 6).

Sorcha spoke of her feeling that the foster mother needed space and presumably time, subsequent to her comments that the phone contact which the social workers were facilitating between the couple was *“damaging to her mental health”* (Case Briefing Doc Group 6). Sorcha detailed how this view was not supported by her colleagues who advised her of their view that *“the couple have had plenty of time (to make progress/agree to our plans). They need a push (to agree to our plans). “It’s been over a year since the split happened; they should be workable.”*

Sorcha related how she *“felt deep down this kind of approach probably wouldn’t help”* but wondered if the view of the other social workers was that she was *“not being hard enough”* (Case Briefing Doc Group 6) on the foster mother.

## **Synopsis of the Work Discussion Group**

Caoimhe said the first thing that struck her *“was, um, the focus on moving things along, on management, like it’s only been [...] it’s a year; they are still suffering this huge loss. There’s grief, there’s loss [...] obviously emotions are going to still be really, really raw and really high”* (G6. 1-14.05). Maura then commented on the appropriateness of experiencing such difficulties saying *“they should have difficulties”* (G6. 1-32.09), noting that the commentary regarding the foster father was



really positive: *“that the dad is doing a great job”* (G6. 1-32.45). This view of the foster dad *“doing a great job”* (Case Briefing Doc. Group 6) was challenged within the briefing document which commented on the big focus on some of the foster father’s responses to the children’s emotional needs, although the only information presented to support this was that he reportedly advised one of the children to *“forget about it and move on”* (Case Briefing Doc. Group 6) regarding a falling out with a friend. One is left to assume that this may be idiomatic of his approach to addressing such difficulties. Indeed it is noted that he *“just wants to get on with things”* (Case Briefing Doc. Group 6) indicating that his preference was that his wife *“was not in their lives at all”* (Case Briefing Doc. Group 6).

The absence of any known history of relationship difficulties is notable in the briefing document and later surfaces as a confounding factor for both Sorcha’s and the groups’ understanding of the separation. Maura suggested, *“It would be easy not to go into pretend mode but to deal with the concrete world”* (G6 1-32.53) in respect of the presentation of the foster parents. Maura also questioned *“[where] is the time to deal with the emotions?”* (G6. 1-33.17).

In spite of running the household “extremely well”, such issues seemed to be at the heart of concerns regarding the foster father’s ability to support the processing of the children’s feelings.

Changing the focus to the foster mother Sean suggested: *“she might be in pretend mode if maybe she is minimizing the impact [...] Maybe her part in the relationship, she can’t look at that, maybe because it’s too painful for her”* (G6. 1-36.45).

Mention was also made of the public nature of the foster mother potentially breaching what might be described as a social taboo regarding a mother leaving her

children, with the social work department involved in the intimacy of the failure of this long-standing relationship.

Sorcha articulated wondering if the other social workers felt she *“was not being hard enough on the foster mother”* (Case Briefing Doc Group 6). Evidently, Sorcha has held in mind the foster mother’s comments indicating that the situation was *“damaging to her mental health”* (Case Briefing Doc Group 6). However, Sorcha reported the strongly conflicting position of the other social workers in the case as they had suggested that they felt the *“foster mother needs to grow up / be an adult etc.”* (Case Briefing Doc Group 6)<sup>24</sup>.

*“There had to be something going on for some time for that to end like that”* (G 6 1.39.31) Cathy said. Amanda noticed the different ways the foster parents were described and talked of the fact that *“when they are described as foster parents it’s all really, really good but it’s all very, very physical; there is nothing about, you know, clearly there is some emotional stuff but [...] they are described as foster parents who meet the children’s needs, who have done really well, but that’s all very ‘physical world’”* (G6 1.40.26).

I should make the reader aware that within the group the term “physical world” developed as a shorthand to refer to the mode of function more correctly entitled teleological mode. The literature is perhaps less developed regarding the definition of teleological mode<sup>25</sup> compared to the other non-mentalizing modes; however, it does suggest that people operating in this mode are “imbalanced toward the external pole of the internal-external mentalizing dimension – they are heavily biased toward

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<sup>24</sup> One might wonder about the participants’ unconscious associations to gender, motherhood and separation amongst other issues which have recently been articulated by O’Sullivan, N. and Cooper, A. (2021) “Working in complex contexts; mother social workers and the mothers they meet”.

<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 7 for a brief description of the modes of functioning in mentalization.

understanding how people behave and what their intentions may be in terms of what they physically do” (Bateman and Fonagy, 2006, p. 17). An example quoted by Hagelquist and Janne is “you did not give me a hug so you must not like me” (Hagelquist and Janne, 2017, p. 57).

Notably, much of the literature frames the non-mentalizing modes of functioning as being something less than – a deficit of some order. However, in this instance, I wish to explore the possibility of being in a non-mentalizing mode (in this case teleological mode) as potentially having a beneficial effect, at least in the context of one’s wish to defend oneself against an emotional reality perceived to be overwhelming or toxic. In this case, functioning at the level of teleological could be said to be self-regulatory of one’s internal world, aiding the maintenance of a homeostatic balance. We shall return to this possibility later in the chapter.

For now, let us continue with our summary of the discourse as it unfolded in the WDG.

In response to Cathy’s comments regarding the complementary view of the foster parents being set alongside their seeming privilege of the physical manifestations of care, as opposed to a focus on and attunement to the children’s emotional worlds Sean commented: *“I wonder how much of it is the foster carers mirroring us, the social work department, because we’re so teleological; we’re all about tasks and having things done”* (G6 1.40:50.3).

Maura said, *“I think everybody operates like that, so, in a way, it’s easier to operate like that”* (G6 1.41:08.4).

*“I just wonder, are the other team maybe focusing on the teleological world of the children? [...] You know, Mum and Dad are living separately now so let’s just plan, you know, for access [...] and not understanding the emotional impact the separation*

*has had on them. [...] We often work in a [certain] way; we get set up, we are focusing on the logistics perhaps” (G6 1.27:48.8). Ger went on to suggest that this was based on “the rights of the child, the rights of the mother to have a plan in place and it’s easier to operate in that way” (G6 1.27:59) rather than to attune to the children “experiencing that sense of loss; they may feel that Mum has cheated on them” (G6 1.38:19) or is not just leaving the foster father but them too.*

Cathy spoke of her sense that Sorcha was trying to hold this family through a very difficult time in their lives but perhaps *“some of the other workers were trying to skip that process or skip through that [...], defending themselves against the actual pain that everybody is feeling in all of this and wanting to get to a point where things have settled back down again and are people trying to skip through the actual emotional working through of this very big disruption in this family, where there are children who have already had their own experiences of separation and disruption before” (G6 1.24:56).*

Cathy went on to echo some of Sean’s previous comments regarding Sorcha apparently trying to “hold” not just this family but the other professionals.

In response to a query about what that might be like for Sorcha, Sean said *“Um, you kind of have to take it into yourself, don’t you, that worry, that anxiety, that stress, or whatever, that fear maybe, and regulate it yourself and then mirror back something more calming [...] it’s stressful, yeah stressful” (G6 1.17:01).*

Amanda, taking up the theme of containment and what Bion referred to as “digestion” then verbalized her curiosity about *“the containment of the other professionals, like, it seems like there is an awful lot of anxieties about the placement [...] I feel like you’re (Sorcha) nearly containing the family and the other professionals [...] it must be very draining if you’re constantly containing the family and you’re also*

*trying to contain the other professionals who should be working alongside you” (G6 1.18:03). She went on to wonder about the role of team leaders in the provision of containment. We might also speculate about what might be being mirrored by Sorcha of the foster mother’s experience being potentially the one who might hold in mind difficult emotional material if her husband’s emotional management style is not conducive to doing so.*

In an effort to maintain the focus of the group on Sorcha’s phenomenological experience of holding in mind the foster parents, her social work colleagues and importantly her concern that their perception was that she was not being hard enough on the foster parents, I made the following comment to the group, *“It is almost as if Sorcha is the odd one out here trying to co-regulate other people who potentially have taken quite a concrete, erm, kind of stance to their understanding of the psychological process after a separation” (G6 1.18:58). I wondered aloud if people in the group had any similar experiences of being in that position. “Yes, I certainly have,” Amanda quickly said, with Cathy adding, “My experience of being that ‘lone voice’ in situations like that, it’s very... I’ve felt frustrated and distressed at times because my sense was the bigger picture was being lost [...] and maybe some distress at not being able to bring the people along to my own sense of what might work” (G6 1.26:42).*

### **Defendedness as Manifested in the Work Discussion Group**

As the group progressed, I became more accustomed to identifying the various forms of defendedness of the subjects of the case studies and witnessing the participants similarly engaging in various forms of defendedness. The necessity to surface the intra and intersubjective manifestations of this frequent dynamic which

are so profoundly at the heart of the relational dilemmas in the social work task became increasingly obvious.

Defendedness is arguably inherent, not only to the good performance of the social work task but can also contribute to its downfall if engaged in with a wholly automatic and unconscious manner (Munro E., 2011). Arguably, there is a contradiction relating to the paucity of Irish literature on the subject of psychological defendedness in social work literature and the deep and immediate sense of recognition by the participants when the issue of defendedness surfaces in the group.

This particular presentation to the WDG articulates well the competing tensions experienced by the players to defend against the overwhelming or “hard to be with” realities of the relational contact they experienced within the case and the need to attune so that containment may be offered.

We look now at how this theme, viewed primarily through an MBT lens, can illuminate our understanding of the foster father, foster mother, the other social work team respectively, as well as briefly mentioning the organizational context in which these defences operate.

Emphasis will be drawn to Sorcha’s attempts to hold all the players in mind, her experience of being the “lone voice” and the emotional labour of attempting to hold in mind these disparate aspects of her experience. To attempt to achieve this I shall draw on the conceptual lenses of “psychic retreat” (Steiner, 1993), containment (Bion) and the importance of “co-regulation” (Schorer, 2003) in maintaining a homeostatic balance to advance our understanding of Sorcha’s experience.

It is evident, despite this being only group six of twelve that the participants readily took self-agency in applying the knowledge base of MBT to their experiences of the case material as evidenced by their hypotheses regarding which modes of

functioning various players may be operating in. Indeed there is evidence of an established ability within the group to engage in curiosity about how one apprehends reality which I shall address below. For now, it is sufficient to note the ability of the participants to differentiate and perhaps privilege, not just the apprehending of the occurrences in the physical world (teleological) but rather their speculative attunement to and curiosity about the people's mental states.

### **Defendedness and the Foster Father**

The case briefing document draws our attention to the conflicting views regarding the foster father: the potential idealizing of him for "*doing a great job*" (G6 1.32:45) running the house and the less favourable commentary on his disinclination to attend to the emotional world of the foster children's experience of their separation.

Within the data, there is a clear impression of the foster father as overly attending to the "physical world" at the expense of being with the emotional turmoil of the children and likely his own turmoil. This is only obliquely scaffolded by the example of him being perhaps dismissive of his daughter's distress regarding a fracture in a peer friendship suggesting she just move on. Similarly, perhaps the articulation of his preference that his wife would no longer be in their lives may speak to the naive belief that physically not having her present will serve to quell the emotional disturbance of their separation within himself.

Attunement to the physical world, that is, restricting one's attunement to the teleological can be understood as a form of psychological self-defence, with the aim of downregulating psychological disturbance<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Schore suggests that "A body of clinical and experimental evidence indicates that all forms of psychopathology have concomitant symptoms of emotional dysregulation and that defence mechanisms are, in essence, forms of emotional regulation strategies for avoiding, minimizing, or

As Amanda suggests it's "*all really, really physical*"; consequently, we might speculate that the foster father may be operating in the teleological mode of functioning. This is typified by a person's reliance on the physical manifestations within the world as a way of gaining insight into one's own actions and the actions of others. It represents a narrowing of the experiential data that one attends to, which in this case can be seen to have the impact of facilitating the foster father to sequester the distressing elements of his experience of his separation, one assumes with little or no conscious direction of this mechanism. However, one implication of this form of psychological defence is likely to be a degrading of the foster father's ability to attune to others' distress regarding his separation as attuning to the other (mentalizing the other) is dependent on his ability to be with and regulate (mentalize) his own experience of his distress regarding his separation.

In a broad and perhaps more developmental sense, Aron spoke to this dynamic when he suggested that "The progressive movement from reflexive psychological functioning to reflective conscious control is marked by a shift from concrete to abstract mental functioning and an expansion of the mind" (Aron, 1993, pp. 289-313).

In a similar vein, Sugeran (2006, p., 972) claims that "Psychopathology can be understood as failing to develop or losing the symbolic level of organization". Arguably the foster father's retreat to a level of concrete or teleological mode of functioning significantly decays his ability to symbolically integrate and process his inner turmoil. This mitigates against his potential to act as an empathically attuned

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converting affects that are too difficult to tolerate." Schore, A. N. (1994) *Affect regulation and the origin of the self. The neurobiology of emotional development*. Lawrence Erlbaum.



co-regulator of the foster children's experience of the separation and also as a competent container of their feelings.

Apprehending reality at the level of the teleological is regarded negatively in respect of the foster father doing so but as we shall come to see a very similar positionality is regarded differently when the participants apply it to their own colleagues

### **Defendedness and the Foster Mother**

For now let us look to the foster mother who, similarly, may be said to be psychologically defending herself, but in her case Sean identified the mode of functioning saying *"I think she might be in pretend mode if she is minimizing the impact of the separation and then at the same time trying to repair her relationship and then finding that an issue because the kids are obviously negatively affected by it; but she doesn't seem to get it, maybe because, maybe she is minimizing it, maybe she has to because if she did [...] her part in the relationship, maybe she can't look at that, maybe because it's too painful for her"* (G6 1.36:46).

When we consider Caoimhe's commentary regarding the foster mother saying *"she is demonized, she's been labelled as a cheat"* (G6 1.14:29.7) it is perhaps not surprising that the foster mother might consciously, or more likely unconsciously move to apprehend reality in a pretend mode of functioning.

The foster mother's retreat to the non-mentalizing model of pretend mode inherently acts as a restriction of her attunement to the full spectrum of emotional experience including the impact of her actions on her children. This is broadly redolent of Steiners, writing on the human need for "psychic retreat". He suggests "A psychic retreat provides the patient with an area of relative peace and protection from strain when meaningful contact [...] is experienced as threatening" (Steiner, 1993, p. 1).

The foster parents' combined reliance on differing non-mentalizing modes of functioning arguably served their interests in limiting meaningful contact with their own emotional turmoil, acting as it does as both a defensive and regulatory mechanism. In consequence, one must wonder about the quality of meaningful contact, co-regulation and containment the foster parents are then able to marshal.

### **Defendedness as Manifested by the Social Workers**

The above attempts to make meaning of the foster parents' presentation stands in some relief to the other social work team whose implicit formulation resulted according to Sorcha in their suggestion that she (the foster mother) "*needs to grow up*" (Case Briefing Doc. Group 6). This comment was situated within the context of the other social workers' view that "*the couple have had plenty of time (to make progress/ agree to our plans); they need a push (to agree to our plans). It's been over a year since the split happened; they should be workable. The foster mother needs to grow up/be an adult*" (Case Presentation Doc. Group 6).

These strikingly unempathetic comments are perhaps emblematic of a case formation demonstrating a poverty of reflective functioning, particularly the ability to perspective jump. My hope, and indeed my experience, is that this is not representative of the normal level of service provided; consequently, what might explain such a stance?

The other social work team referred to here relates to the child in care (CIC) social workers involved, with Sorcha being the fostering link social worker. With this in mind, it is perhaps easy to imagine how the CIC might slip into an imbalance in the self/other axis of mentalizing (Bateman and Fonagy, 2012, p. 63) as their feelings are perhaps dominated by their exposure to the children's experience. They are

required in some respects to hold their children's minds in mind more so than the foster parents' minds.

In this context, we might hypothesize they may enter a psychic equivalence (Bateman and Fonagy, 2016) mode of functioning overly privileging their experience and feelings without adequately balancing their feelings against, in this case, the foster parents. As Sean said *"I just wonder if, uh, the other social workers are in some sort of psychic equivalence with the children"* ( G6 1.15:23.8).

Cathy approached the theme of defendedness from a slightly different, although connected perspective when she suggested that *"My sense was that some of the other workers may be trying to skip that process, skip through that, working it through. My sense [is] they're protecting themselves against the actual pain that everybody's feeling in all of that, and wanting to get to a point where things have settled back down"* (G6 1.24:41). Caoimhe's initial comments noting *"the focus on moving things along"* (G6 1.13.17.1) seems in line with this possibility.

In this passage, we see quite clearly the conflict between the teleological wish to move things along in some tension with Sorcha's attempts to attend to a differing register of experience. It is interesting to observe the quite different perceptions of the unacceptability of the foster father's use of the teleological mode compared to the quite different acceptability of the CIC social workers' wish to move things along which seem to co-exist.

Assuming the above hypothesis is correct, the CIC social workers were operating in part in a teleological mode in respect of moving things along, in addition to their possible occupation of psychic equivalence mode with the children's feelings about the separation. In the latter scenario, psychic equivalence, feelings do truly become real to the individual and often unbearably so. Consequently, defensive management

is required to inhibit the dysregulatory effect on the person. This stands in some relief to Cathy's apparent ability to be with what we assume to be the disturbing feelings of the children and yet to contain and process said feelings thus providing a wider, perhaps more mentalized perspective than was achievable by some of the social workers involved.

Understood in this light, it is possible to understand what I described earlier as the "not service as usual" response which I labelled unempathic as a possible retreat to the level of the teleological, combined with the use of projection by the other social workers vomiting out their own unwanted and indigestible feelings with the aim of acquiring a higher level of self-regulation of their own disturbed mental state.

Ger spoke of the difficulty of engaging colleagues in discussion at this register citing as an example the apparent wish to move things along, suggesting "*we have a difference of opinion, but we don't maybe sit down and analyse what the difference is*" (G6 1.13.18), which perhaps also mirrors the foster parents' inability to mentalize their difficulties. The participants seemed in agreement when I speculated that perhaps the language might not exist within the department to carry such conversations.

The suggestion was also made in the group that perhaps the family had operated in pretend/teleological mode of functioning for a very long time. Were this to be the case, the implication might be that the social work department had accepted the pretend/teleological version as a true and accurate representation of their functioning and parenting skills.

This may have been particularly likely if, for instance, the mode of functioning of the social workers adhered to a similar mode of functioning i.e. if the social workers involved were themselves tempted to find psychic retreat by operating in

pretend/teleological mode. This might explain the assertions about them being an *“extremely solid couple [...] with great insight, openness”* (Case Briefing Doc Group 6) and go some way to explain the social workers’ shock and surprise on learning of the separation. It also follows that when the relationship failed completely that they reverted to a known method of mental state management as a way of regulating themselves.

### **Non-mentalizing Modes of Functioning as Regulatory Mechanisms**

Again perhaps mirroring the family’s manifestation of contradiction, Sorcha described the level of co-operation across the case as *“extremely good”* but later emphasized her feelings of disapproval with the apparent wish to move things along, and the less than empathic stance which was taken by some of the social work team toward the foster mother, suggesting that she should just *“grow up”*.

Sean commented, *“It’s almost as if Sorcha is trying to manage and regulate the other social workers involved in the case”* (G6 1.15.33.9). *“You can imagine that that is very draining if you’re constantly containing, you’re trying to contain a family and then you’re also trying to contain the professionals who should be working alongside you”* (G6 1.17:56.9).

Cathy, speaking of her own experience, suggested that *“being that lone voice or that different perspective in situations like that is very, uh, I feel frustrated and also quite distressed at times because my sense was that the bigger picture was being lost [...] there’s quite a lot of responsibility in that as well, I think, and I would have felt frustration, but also maybe some distress at not being able to bring people along to my own sense of what might work”* (G6 1.23;42.1).

In discussing the defendedness of other social work colleagues Cathy articulates the difficulty of being the practitioner who has maintained a higher level of reflective functioning and the considerable emotional labour required to sustain this position when perhaps other colleagues have not. Internally Supportive/Unsupportive Reflective Functioning Organizational Dynamics

Cathy went on to suggest *“I think it is not just within us as individuals. I think it’s in our system and I think it’s a big issue in our work. We are either working with other people who are in pretend mode a lot of the time, or in and out of it ourselves; it can become very comfortable”* (G6 1.57:06.7).

There are echoes here of Menzies’ (Menzies, 1960a) seminal work on the emotional management mechanisms within a neonatal ward. Whilst Menzies’ focus was on how the staff organized the work tasks to provide a level of psychic insulation from the toxicity of existential distress the nurses were exposed to, in this case perhaps it is less about organizing the work tasks and more about how the individual unconsciously adjusts their ability to apprehend reality to similarly provide a level of psychological insulation from the inherent distress in the social work task.

Of importance also is to what extent the institution of Tusla might have taken on or privileged a teleological way of operating as an important institutional defence against the unpalatable aspects of social work. Ferguson’s work importantly suggests that social workers’ “state[s] of mind and the quality of attention they can give to children is directly related to the quality of support, care and attention they themselves receive from supervision, managers and peers” (Ferguson, 2011) as cited in Munro (2011., p105). Irrespective of one’s own base level of reflective functioning, the emotional milieu, work practices or operational culture of Tusla may inadvertently mitigate for or against the use of such psychological defences. The emotional labour of attending to the fine-grain of the relational dynamics within a social work team, or across teams, whose work tasks bring them into intimate

contact with abuse, neglect and trauma are, I suggest, complicated by not having the language to process these very nuanced phenomenological experiences. Relevant too is the institutional awareness, or lack thereof, of such relational dynamics and the willingness of the institution to engage with these issues.

The tendency to shy away from such difficult conversations, particularly those relating to one's own functioning or other colleagues level of functioning, was evident within the individuals within the group which I felt was reflective of a more general experience of practitioners being more comfortable focusing on the functioning of their clients rather than themselves.

It is debatable whether it is justified to negatively critique a person for seeking a psychic retreat. Ferguson *et al.* (Ferguson *et al.*, 2021, p. 32) recently commented in a fascinating article on hostile relationships in social work that “the emotional impact of hostile relationships paralysed workers and organisations, restricting their minds and actions, confining them in highly constricted spaces where they and parents effectively enacted pathological relationships, taunting and punishing one another”. Employees are called upon to manage and regulate themselves while with a client despite being human and subject to the same evolutionary instincts to minimise distress.

Steiner (1993) suggests there is a human need for a psychic retreat when meaningful contact becomes too challenging. However, this needs to be set against the very significant wrongs that can occur when professionals or parents fail to recognize the actual impact of behaviours despite the difficulty we may have in holding in mind such distressing material. This was in part the subject matter of the Munroe reports and Margaret Rustin's painfully evocative paper on Victoria Climbié

(2004), although the language of reflective functioning and mentalization was not used.

Throughout this chapter, I have used the lens of mentalization to offer some depth to my experience of the inter and intra-subjective experiences and how the theme of defendedness was manifested by the foster parents, and social workers in the case<sup>27</sup>. Having detailed some of the instances of defendedness and having attempted to grasp them through the lens of mentalization, I now wish to insert mentalization and particularly the non-mentalizing modes of functioning within a further layer of conceptualization to aid our grasp of the participants' use and engagement with the concept of mentalization.

## **Regulation Theory**

Schore in his seminal contributions suggests that “the ability to modulate emotions is at the heart of the human experience” and “the use of emotional self-regulatory processes constitute the core of several modern psychotherapeutic approaches” (Schore, 2003, p. xviii) including I suggest mentalization.

In the existent literature on mentalization, the notion that the non-mentalizing modes of operation have a regulatory effect is implicit but is not in my view articulated to any great extent in the literature when compared to Schore's Regulation Theory.

I reference this as a way of building a case to move beyond the traditional way of conceiving of the non-mentalizing modes – that is, within a deficit construction – and instead look to their regulatory qualities and their potential role in striving to maintain a higher level of homeostatic balance.

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<sup>27</sup> I have chosen not to detail the individual instances of what I considered to be higher or lower levels of reflective functioning of the participants in part out of an ethical responsibility to the participants but also as I feel that the thrust of the explication of the import of the lens of reflective functioning and regulation can be achieved without risking individual identification of various instances of good or bad reflective functioning.



This is not to suggest that one's mentalization ability is solely a self-regulatory mechanism; rather it potentially has many motivations including, as Fonagy and Bateman (2012) suggest, acting as a social guidance system to navigate our social world; it also aids our attempt to make meaning of our internal world and other people's intentions.

However, in addition to the more traditional functions of the mechanism of non-mentalizing modes of functioning articulated in the literature, I wish to contend that the non-mentalizing modes of functioning are also associated with a reduction in the spectrum of awareness whereby we attune to or narrow our register of experience or privilege one register to the exclusion of a more balanced attunement to all the registers of psychological reality. I contend that such experiences bear a certain similarity to what both Munro's and Rustin's papers (2004) caution us about doing within social work practice and indeed to Ferguson's above-quoted paper addressing the impact on the capacity of social workers to think in hostile environments.

Such reductions in psychological attunement have the effect of offering the experiencing self (in this case the social worker, foster father or mother) the potentially less troubling or ambivalent version of reality, possibly lowering the emotional register by use of pretend mode (by the social worker or foster mother) or attuning to only the functional running of the household (teleological mode) by the foster father, both of which can reasonably be said to have a self-regulatory effect. This mental state management, conducted most usually below the level of consciousness, can have the effect of moving the person's mental state towards a higher degree of homeostatic balance which is our evolutionary aim. Thus I contend that the non-mentalizing modes of functioning can be viewed through the lens of self-regulation and not just as a deficit but also as having a beneficial effect on

regulation, although occupation of this mode of functioning would clearly be deleterious if conducting assessments for fostering or risk in a general sense if one's ability to apprehend reality is restricted by this unconscious self-regulatory process.

This is not to suggest that this conceptualization of the non-mentalizing modes of functioning should be taken as always operating concretely in this manner as there can be many contradictions to this.

One such contradiction is the fact that in the mode of psychic equivalence the intensity of feelings can be overwhelming. In this case, it would be hard to suggest that the non-mentalizing modes of functioning are operating in a self-regulatory fashion given the often overt intensification of feelings associated with this mode of functioning.

When looking at this contradiction – the notion that the non-mentalizing modes can have a self-regulatory function – if we extend our hypothesis to include individuals with Borderline or Antisocial Personality Disorders, and their known extensive utilization of the non-mentalizing modes of functioning, we can perceive that such individuals can both suffer from the utilization of such modes of functioning as well as reverting to them to reduce the tension of their mental state to aid their attempts at self-regulation. At this level of pathology, the literature notably articulates the attempts to garner a coherence of sense of self both by relating in concrete (teleological) ways and use of projection with the aim of self-regulation. Arguably, similar but less dramatic mechanisms of regulatory management may be at play in the general population, including social workers and foster parents and, importantly, in the relational dynamics between different social work teams.

## **In Summary**

I set out to articulate the theme of defendedness as it unfolded within the WDG. We looked at the manifestations of this theme examining the foster mother, foster father and the hypothesized experience of the CIC social worker based on comments attributed to him/her as reported by Sorcha. I endeavoured to be conservative in my hypothesis and indicated potential ways of making meaning of the various players by drawing on the work of Steiner in respect of the psychological need for a psychic retreat.

I also presented the non-mentalizing modes of functioning as potentially having a regulatory function beyond the traditional way that has been implied in most of the literature, suggesting that the lens of mentalization is not just relevant to those with mental health or personality issues but can be used to make meaning of the named players featured in this chapter, both clients and, importantly, the social workers involved.

In detailing the possibility of using the lens of mentalization and being curious about the use of the non-mentalizing modes of functioning, I attempted to situate my thinking on mentalization within a further conceptual lens of Alan Schore's thinking on regulation. In the coming chapters, I hope to further the discussion on the relevance of encompassing the notion of mentalization in a layered way with Schore's Regulation Theory and also in respect of the central importance of containment within the social work task.

## Chapter 6 Case Study Three Caoimhe – “Enactments”

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will introduce the case that Caoimhe (Social Worker) presented to the Work Discussion Group (WDG). I shall follow the now established format of summarizing the case presentation followed by a synopsis of the WDG with a more detailed analysis of the participants and my own contribution to the group in a reflexive way.

I will explore the theme of “Enactments” utilizing the conceptual lens of projective identification (Ogden, 1982) and further locate the theme within the lens of “mentalized affectivity” (Jurist, 2018). I will attempt to detail how the initial discussions of the WDG may be perceived as teleological in nature and explore the idea that the idiom of such narratives may serve a self-regulatory function within both the individual and organizational milieu. To achieve this I will use Schore’s Regulation Theory (Schore, 1994; 2003; 2012; 2021; 2011) as an overarching framework in which to situate this hypothesis as it offers a useful heuristic of human inter and intra-subjective relations.

### Summary of Case Presentation

Caoimhe presented a calm, reflexive chronological account (when compared to Amanda’s (Chapter 5) fast-paced presentation that was hard to comprehend) of the three phases of her work with Mary, a relative foster parent, who has been caring for Brian since he was a few months old. Caoimhe informed us that Brian is now a young teen who she pointed out has *“been claimed by Mary”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8) suggesting he is now an integral part of Mary’s family.

I have chosen to depart slightly from the framework I have used in previous chapters as Caoimhe herself has set out her presentation in three phases. As I wish to provide as true an account as possible I shall adhere to her framework.

## **Phase 1**

Caoimhe described being allocated to Mary to complete a foster care review as the original review report “*was deemed not fit for purpose by the foster care committee as key questions were not answered*” (Case Briefing Document Group 8).

She described Mary as “*hostile*” to her visits and provided examples of Mary opening her hall door without saying hello, asking “*why are you always here?*”, and making comments like “*hurry up I have things to do*” (Case Briefing Doc Group 8). On one visit Caoimhe reported that shortly after her arrival Mary became distressed and said she wished social workers would “*fuck off*”.

The case briefing document articulated Caoimhe’s curiosity regarding Mary’s style of contact and her growing speculation based “*on things she told me, snippets I heard and piecing information [together] from the assessment*” (Case Briefing Document Group 8) regarding how her own history may be having an impact on their contact. She referenced Mary’s laughter when speaking of Brian’s father’s death, indicating the laughter as a manifestation of a defensive mechanism. Caoimhe felt the experience of the visits themselves were a trigger for Mary “*based on her own experience of childhood neglect and emotional and physical abuse*” (Case Briefing Doc Group 8).

Caoimhe postulated that Mary’s childhood trauma “*impacts on her ability to respond to Brian’s trauma*” (Case Briefing Document Group 8) and his feelings of loss and rejection from his mother who is homeless and actively misusing drugs. She pointed to the example of Mary’s normalization of Brian’s skin picking quoting Mary saying,

*“every child picks their skin”* (Group 8, 1.20:09) noting she did the same as a child, rationalizing her disinclination to bring him to a GP for treatment as she had been requested to do.

Caoimhe informed us that she completed the review report noting that it had been a difficult process for her and Mary but that the final sharing of the report with Mary had enabled Mary *“to make some movement toward mentalization on the day”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8).

## **Phase 2**

Caoimhe advised the group that the foster care committee decided to withhold approval of Mary’s ongoing status as a foster parent. Unfortunately, informing Mary of this coincided with an investigation into an allegation (later deemed to be unfounded) against Mary. Caoimhe advised the group that when she phoned to invite Mary to a meeting to discuss the outcome of the committee’s decision she said *“I was completely taken aback by the ferocity of her communication”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8). She explained that Mary’s relationship with the social work department had always been precarious and that these two events cemented her perception that the social work department was *“judgemental, critical, unfair, and unnecessary”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8).

Caoimhe explained that Mary thought she had known of the allegation and had not informed her: *“When I told her this was not true, it didn’t abate her anger. I felt unable to defend myself. My response was mostly to say nothing. I couldn’t think of what to say! I was unthinking. I imagined the traumatized child was speaking to me; however I was not able to contain her”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8).

A further phone call was reported to be *“characterized by Mary’s anger at my perceived wrong, [...] verging on abusive. It probably was abusive; I felt it was way off anyway”* (Group 8, 1.23:03).

Caoimhe spoke of attempts to build a relationship with Mary telling us that she told Mary that she wanted to keep working with her and asked her if she would like to work with another social worker. Mary did not respond. Caoimhe suggested that reflecting on this call now *“I think I went into management mode. I was looking for solutions rather than co-regulation, empathy”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8). Following this Mary did not accept Caoimhe’s attempts to communicate with her.

### **Phase 3**

Caoimhe advised the group that after several weeks she called Mary again, conscious that her own stress levels were high. *“I think I might have been in pretend mode”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8) she said. *“I was ignoring that she did not want to work with me [and] attempted to keep things neutral, avoiding any potential conflict areas”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8).

Caoimhe said she told Mary about some training; however, *“her response was really derisory and dismissive [...]. I think it probably was not a very meaningful conversation; however, my instinct told me to take it very slowly, that it was progressing. I felt relieved that she answered the phone but also that I needed to ‘get through it’”* (Case Briefing Document Group 8).

Caoimhe concluded by telling us that the child in care team (CIC) *“doesn’t seem to be signalling the same red flags that I am [...] I think the CIC team are operating in teleological mode; they are happy to be hands-off because nobody is jumping up and down about it”* (Group 8, 1.27:08).

## Synopsis of the Work Discussion Group

Sorcha opened the discussion by complimenting Caoimhe for a really interesting case presentation saying *“I really got a sense of what Caoimhe was feeling herself”* (Group 8, 1.27:45). She said *“from working in fostering myself, I supposed those physical pieces around the foster care review report having to be redone, the foster care committee withholding an approval and then the allegation thrown in, just literally made me cringe”* (Group 8, 1.29:09). She also identified with the experience of taking over a case with a lot going on *“and it totally blocks your ability to form a relationship with someone, [...] yeah the overall feeling for me was one of cringe and just pure discomfort”* (Group 8, 1.28:19). Amanda said she wondered if the CIC team were acting in pretend mode *“because it’s not a case that is screaming and shouting, so it’s kinda like, it’s grand like”* (Group 8, 1.29:56).

Sorcha also raised the whole question of relative foster carers and whether or not they may need specialized training, referring to some relative foster carers who she says *“don’t see it as foster care”* (Group 8, 1.30:40) indicating that some struggle to adhere to the formality of the fostering role and the processes and procedures associated with this role. Maura suggested *“that sometimes the standard is different because you want to maintain the family connections and because they [the children] are there. There can be a fear that if you move them they will lose their contact with the family”* (Group 8, 1.32:20). She also said *“I was quite worried reading it, actually. You know, I think it’s difficult for the fostering social worker if they have worries and they are not shared”* (Group 8, 1.31:40). Maura went on to acknowledge that it was understandable that the foster parent was not happy having to redo the report and *“unhappy to have more intrusion going on and somebody questioning trauma and*



*picking skin [...] it sets you up on the back foot, going in to try to establish a relationship I think*" (Group 8, 1.32:28).

Amanda also spoke of the tension between the bureaucratic need to adhere to the timeline to produce a report and it possibly not being a good time to try to do it.

As the facilitator, I recall noting the tenor of the discussion, sensing that whilst empathic to both parties the discussion seemed to be largely indicative of a relationship with the "other" at some remove. On reflection, it appears reflective of what Roiser and Sahakian (2013, p. 1) referred to as "cold cognitions" distinguishing them from hot cognitions – "hot emotions" – with the former generating a level of insight with a low level of emotional valance. The concern here is that whilst cold cognition is appropriate to comprehending issues within the physical world, comprehending the motivations of another's behaviour based only on such cold cognitions will prove to be deficient, as so much of human behaviour is not motivated by logic (befitting of the physical world) but by our own idiosyncratic emotional defence mechanisms deployed with the aim of maintaining our homeostatic balance. According to Koole, ever since Freud introduced "the notion of defence mechanisms, researchers have been intrigued by the idea that people may distort their perception of reality to ward off anxiety and other types of negative emotions" (2009, p. 19). Reliance on cold cognitions to attempt to comprehend such illogical/irrational emotionally motivated mental states will, in my view, fall short of providing an explanation commensurate with the complexity of the register of experience with which we are dealing.

In a shift in the discussion I took to be more attuned to the mental states of the people involved or a hotter cognition, Cathy spoke of *"imagining Mary's sense of being unable to defend herself, because it seems there is a lot of scrutiny on her at*

*the moment [...] I had just a very strong sense of how defended and unable to do anything she must feel and how, I suppose, the word that comes to mind [is] primal; erm, the feelings that were evoked for her, in relation to scrutiny about this little boy who she had cared for since he was a little baby [how this] has been deemed to be, maybe, not good enough for him, and that's extremely frightening"* (Group 8, 1.34:40).

Cathy went on to say *"I just wonder if Caoimhe's sense of not being able to defend herself was linked to that in some way. Was it transference, or counter-transference in the sense that nothing seemed possible [for her] to feel safe?"* (Group 8, 1.35:25).

Immediately following these comments Sorcha suggested, *"I kinda wondered like, Caoimhe, you know, not defending herself, kind of because she, like, she didn't have any reason to defend herself because she hasn't really done anything wrong, as such"* (Group 8, 1.35:41). Sorcha went on to wonder aloud *"If we don't defend ourselves, is that a form of defence?"* (Group 8, 1.35:57).

### **Projective Identification Hypothesis**

Anxious that the potential debate regarding whether or not Caoimhe did anything wrong might lead to further contemplation of the teleologic world and wishing to maintain the focus on the hotter cognitions of the mental states of the participants involved I invited them to wonder about the idea of projective identification (Ogden, 1982).

Projective identification processes occur when a person cannot bear or tolerate certain aspects of him/herself and projects these deeply unwholesome and unsettling emotional states that cannot be borne into another person. These projections are often so powerful that they compel the object of the projections to mobilize unconscious feelings into actions or behaviours and may impact on

their ability to reflect, think, and act appropriately (Armstrong and Rustin, 2014, pp. 306-307).

In the group, I said, *“There are a number of ways that perhaps we could attempt to understand that experience of Caoimhe’s and technically one may be called projective identification. There is the straightforward projection of feelings from one person into another person and then there’s what’s called projective identification which speaks to not just the projection of feelings but the idea that that person takes into themselves and begins enacting in some way the feeling that has been projected. I was struck by Caoimhe’s experience which seems to mirror that lady being kind of unable to defend herself, ... erm being unable to think her way through it, and being unable to speak”* (Group 8, 1.38:28).

Perhaps she’s enacting something of Mary’s internal experience. I explained that such a transference *“where Caoimhe potentially has an experience of what that lady (Mary) is not able to articulate, not being able to form her thoughts into thinking, such that she’s able to articulate it. But, actually, Caoimhe has been able to survive it and is now thinking about it [...] Perhaps that in itself, and the registering of the wallop of that experience, is the therapeutic process. It’s the acknowledgement, the non-reactivity, the curiosity about it, and then engaging in the process of thinking about it when you can survive it”* (Group 8, 1.38:34).

There followed a long pause in the group where I wondered about my own eagerness to make sense of this presentation and questioned if I had presented something too complicated. I interrupted the silence by saying, *“I wonder where my comments have landed?”* (Group 8, 1.39:08).

This was met initially by Maura saying *“Sorry, I was still trying to figure out what projective identification is, sorry”* (Group 8, 1.39:32) to which I offered my apologies

adhering to the mentalization stance of humility saying *“Sorry, that’s my fault for perhaps not making it very clear”* (Group 8, 1.39.58) and offered a further explanation by providing examples of this mechanism to help the participants grasp this concept. I concluded by saying *“It seemed to me that Caomihe’s experience of not being able to think, not being able to talk, not being able to defend herself mirrored perhaps the experience of Mary, but she (Caoimhe) perhaps wasn’t able to think or talk about it”* (Group 8, 1.41:20). I am mindful here of Schore’s comments suggesting that at the “moment of an enactment there is a state shift, a revival of the trauma which had been frozen” (2012 p., 163) which seems redolent of Caoimhe phenomenological experience, shifting as it did to her inhabiting an unthinking, unspeaking state.

The appropriateness of intervening in this way has been the subject of some reflexivity on my part, which I shall address briefly below. I also wish to offer a closer examination of the initial comments in the WDG to develop a further depth of understanding regarding the participants’ fluctuating capacity, ability or willingness to come into closer relational contact with the troubling experiences Caoimhe encountered.

For now, let us continue with the summation of the WDG and their response to my presentation of the possibility of understanding Caoimhe’s experience through the lens of projective identification.

### **Reflections on Caoimhe’s and Mary’s Mental States**

Sean commented, *“Yeah, it’s very interesting or illuminating in terms of the next phase of what Caoimhe went through,”* going on to say *“when she goes into phase three there is a discussion, at some level, about how to continue the case [...] and*

*the decision is to remain allocated*" (Group 8, 1. 42:10). Sean indicated that he would like to know more about this section and went on to reference when Caoimhe "goes to re-engage and repair the rupture. It's really reflective; it's the way she quotes it 'just get through it'. You can almost feel like they are both just trying to 'get through' this interaction" (Group 8, 1.42:22).

Mattinson's advice here seems relevant; she suggested "it is important to remember that the more disturbed the client, the less he is in his own skin, and the more he psychologically bombards the worker" (1975, p. 32).

Sean went on to say "*Maybe it's like what you're saying, Tom; maybe, erm, there is more mentalization to do on the social worker's part, on Caoimhe's part, to really figure out how to process it*" (Group 8, 1.42:43). "*They're dancing around what just happened and how probably they're both feeling, and how they both experienced working together. Potentially they are both in pretend mode trying to avoid that experience*" (Group 8, 1.43:01).

Cathy said "*I think this woman is very ... [pause] so threatened; nothing is safe, and it seems in some ways as if the only possible way of her beginning to feel safe in any way, if she is going to continue to do the job of foster care, is to build a relationship with Caoimhe and I think that is going to be very slow, if she let's that happen*" (G 8 1.45:36). Cathy also spoke of her empathy with Caoimhe "*as you seem to be holding all of the concerns and that's really difficult not to have a broader view on that. I think that's really hard*" (G8 1.45:55). I understood this to be a reference to the fact that the CIC social workers seemed not to be articulating similar concerns.

Sean suggested that what came up for him was that "*Caoimhe herself had noticed that. I was thinking that, erm, erm, I was thinking of the foster carer's experience of social workers in the past, and I think for me if I was in Caoimhe's position I would*

*feel a lot of responsibility [...] you know, oh, how did I let this happen, let it spiral out of control, I'm just mindful of, of, what is it that social work represents for the foster parent, from her own experience of childhood and her own relationships and her own attachments in childhood?"* (Group 8, 1.47:45).

Méabh, another participant, spoke of her own identification with the difficulty in inheriting a case where there have been historical issues. *"You have got a committee and you've got a CIC social worker that might be thinking differently and kind of holding all of that and you're even questioning yourself [...] It seems Caoimhe is a bit on her own with all of this in some ways"* (Group 8, 1.49:00).

### **Caoimhe's Response to the WDG Comments**

When Caoimhe rejoined the group she said *"I was really taken by what Cathy said and you took up about the transference, the projective identification. I hadn't thought about that but that actually resonates with me. I feel a bit responsible for her and I feel that I need not do more harm; that she is a woman who I think is very traumatized. I'm a little bit wary – wary of where we are going with this and not wanting to be another adult in her life who has, um, erm* (at this point the internet signal decayed) *[...] I feel she had misjudged me and maybe that has added to the defensiveness"* (G8 1.53:05). In part, this commentary can be understood as articulating concerns emanating from the depressive position.

Caoimhe went on to say *"my gut is telling me to take it very slowly"*. Caoimhe also alluded to her sense that in relative foster care sometimes *"there is a risk of that trauma being passed on [...] and I think that is..., I think that is what's happened here"* (Group 8, 1.54:40).

## **Analysis of the Discussion within the WDG**

Thus far, I have provided a summary of the case as presented by Caoimhe, some of the pertinent details of the discussion that evolved in the WDG and Caoimhe's reflections on the discussion of the group.

In this section, I wish to move beyond the reporting of the events of the WDG and offer some deeper analysis of the data. I have chosen this particular WDG as I feel something important occurred within the group, i.e. the articulation of Caoimhe's taking on something of Mary's experience and the subsequent setting of this within a projective identification frame manifesting in the enactment by Caoimhe of Mary's hypothesized inner state.

I have reflected on the tension that continues to exist within myself regarding the appropriateness of my offering of this to the group and indeed the appropriateness of its inclusion in this thesis which I shall address below.

However, initially, I want to address the apparent proclivity of the participants to engage in teleological discussions which again can be understood under the theme of defendedness. This is a familiar tendency within social work practice in my experience.

Additionally, I will examine the potential of viewing the hypothesized projective identification in part as an enactment by Caoimhe of Mary's inner experience and situate this within a context of co-regulation, noting Caoimhe's ability to mentalize her own experience is foundational to her attempts to offer co-regulation to Mary's phenomenological experiences. To this end, I shall look to the notion of "mentalized affectivity" (Jurist, 2018) emphasising its link to one's autobiographical history as a further layer of insight into the participants' engagement with and utilization of the knowledge base of mentalization.

## The Initial Focus of the Discussion

Let me draw your attention to a number of topics addressed by the WDG which were, in my opinion, limited in the extent to which they really addressed the phenomenological experience of the relational encounter between Mary and Caoimhe which I have referred to in the context of Sahakian's (2013, p. 1) work as cold/hot cognitions. Whilst it is true to suggest there was some identification at a deeper register of experience, on a closer reading of the transcript something else surfaced that, although I now consider a familiar phenomenon, I had nonetheless not been able to consciously identify within the WDG at the time – an apparent tendency or preference by the participants to address issues that were less emotionally alive. The following elements of the discussions might be considered in this context:

- the foster care review report having to be redone
- the delayed approval by the Foster Care Committee
- whether or not relative foster carers need specialized training
- the assertion that the standard is different in relative foster care
- the understandability of the foster parent not wishing to redo the report
- the bureaucratic need to get the report done in a timely fashion.

Even though all of these issues are quite appropriate and reasonable topics of discussion, I wish to consider their emotional vividness, their aliveness as I submit that, at best, they might be considered to be relatively “cold” topics emotionally. They are references on the whole to physical world events (teleological) and occurrences with individual emotionality only tangentially associated. They are not located on the same register as comments like – *“I feel very scared”*, or *“Mary must be so scared”*.



In some sense, they were “othering” discussions lacking a close association to an “I”. As stated, I was not consciously aware of this epiphenomenon at the time and it is only in the context of a close reading of the script and a deeper level of reflection that has led my own subtle affective recollections of this event to surface.

### **Reflections on my Mental State**

Rightly or wrongly, encountering a narrative that I instinctually know to be somewhat superficial produces a vigilance within me which I have come to understand to be related to my implicit awareness of a seemingly less congruent form of relational contact manifested through the use of the teleological register.

My reflexive attunement combined with this sensitivity, derived from my own internal working models (Bowlby, 1988) of contact can be a beneficial aid in the surfacing of what are in essence quite subtle mental state shifts in others; in this case, the participants’ movement from one mode of functioning to another. The conceptual frame of the teleological mode of functioning in this respect provides a useful frame in which to attempt to grasp and make meaning of such relational experiences.

### **Teleological Mode as a Defence Mechanism**

I would like to propose the possibility that the initial narrative of the WDG was not just made up of the normal introductory remarks that one might find in most social work case discussions; rather I contend that these different elements of the initial discussion were reflective of the dominance of a teleological mode of functioning.

The dominance of this mode may reflect the in the moment functional capacity of the participants or might, in my view, perhaps more likely, reflect the unconscious employment of this mode of operation as a way of managing the day-to-day stressors of the social work task.

We can see the focus of the discussion initially relates to relatively distant, physical world topics of discussion at some remove from the intensity of the relational encounter that Caoimhe has just described. My wondering here is if entering the teleological mode of functioning has in effect a self-regulatory function for the individual.

Throughout the groups, I have been aware of the tendency for the narrative and level of relational contact to be strongly influenced by the teleological mode of functioning unless challenged in some way to move beyond this register of experience. Indeed the ethical conundrum of when or at what level a group facilitator should challenge the occupation of the teleological if such is being used in a defensive way thus arises as one assumes there may be a reduction in their ability to use such modes in part due to higher levels of awareness of this mechanism stemming from the psychoeducation material provided in the study.

I have also come to wonder if the use of the teleological mode of functioning might be reflective of the possibility that this particular work culture has unconsciously normalized the adoption of this mode of operation as opposed to it being a matter of individual capacity. It is interesting to consider whether this represents an unconscious organizational defensive mechanism employed within the institution to manage the very significant depth of anxieties associated with the task of social work. I am mindful of Morgan's comments suggesting that the "Constant exposure to the patients' very concrete modes of thinking inevitably erodes the staff's own capacity to reflect, often leading to 'mindless', institutionalized responses that may recreate the patient's very early deprived relationships" (Morgan, 2011, p. 69).

Menzies seminal work (Menzies, 1960a) on the unconscious process employed by nursing staff to manage their anxiety associated with the nursing task has perhaps

significant relevance. Anecdotally, many but not all of the social work case discussions I am exposed to have a tendency to default to a teleological level if allowed to do so.

Judicious caution should be exercised here as the use of teleological modes of functioning potentially being normative within a social work process must be held to be speculative only as there is no data regarding the use of this mode of functioning within the general population to compare it with.<sup>28</sup>

Further, there is a danger in challenging the individual's use of this potential self-regulatory mechanism if there is an unconscious institutional reliance via the privileging of teleological actions of writing reports, following guidelines and emphasizing administrative work rather than supporting reflection at this register.

However, at the level of the individual, we may note the importance of one's capacity to mentalize and the role it plays in self-regulation and co-regulation as well as one's role in offering containment to one's clients.

### **The Ebb and Flow of Modes of Mentalization**

It is possible to track the lower level of mentalization that spanned the initial number of topics referenced at the beginning of the WDG and the movement triggered by Cathy who moved the discussion toward a higher level of reflective functioning. She demonstrated this by shifting the conversation to her curiosity and attunement about Mary's mental state using "perspective jumping" to attempt to gain a deeper understanding of Mary's phenomenological experience. Interestingly, Cathy's comments were apprehended by the next speaker, again at a teleological level of

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<sup>28</sup> There is reference in the literature to suggest that at best we only occupy the mentalizing mode of functioning 30% of the time (Cooper, A. and Redfern, S. (2015) *Reflective parenting. a guide to understanding what's going on in your child's mind*. London, Routledge, 2015.). The reference seems to have been used in a number of places but all fail to provide any substantiation as to how this figure was arrived at; thus, this too perhaps should be regarded as speculative only.

whether or not Caoimhe had done anything wrong such that she should be defensive. This can be understood to be a further movement away from the intense emotional reality Cathy was trying to access. Despite its subtlety, these sometimes extraordinarily finessed mental state movements, cumulatively dictate the quality of relational contact and in turn our ability to make meaning of our own and our clients' presentations. Here mentalization comes into its own in providing a developmentally attuned conceptualization capable of accessing these micro-moments.

At this juncture, I think it is important to acknowledge that the privileging of space provided to the in-depth illumination of the three selected themes in the thesis inevitably mitigates against further development of the wider process of how the participants moved from a state of unknowingness regarding the application of MBT to social work to their above demonstrated command of applying the central tenants of MBT to their first-hand practice dilemmas. Indeed much could be beneficially said about the wider framework in which the participants surfaced their practice dilemmas; however, I have chosen to orientate the thesis by attempting to illuminate at some depth the selected themes in the belief that bringing the personal practice dilemmas of these social workers alive in the mind of the reader may offer something perhaps more substantial where we can witness the participants' own struggle of engagement and trial application of MBT.

Returning now to Cathy's potentially higher level of mentalization regarding Mary's experience (compared to the previous teleological nature of the discourse), she spoke of her imagining how Mary must have felt a strong sense of defendedness and powerlessness. Cathy suggested that the feelings that came to her mind felt "primal" in the context of Mary being under such scrutiny. Here, Cathy utilizes "perspective jumping" to mentalize Mary's affective state aiding her meaning-making efforts

regarding Mary's hostile and dismissive idiom of relational contact. To offer some level of triangulation of this experience, Casement (Casement, 2018, p. 145) I think was approaching something similar which he called "trial identification". Similarly, I noted the repeated use of the phraseology of "*walking in the client's shoes*" by the participants to achieve a higher level of attunement.

Mary's experience was of being the subject of a high level of scrutiny, overtly being found to be wanting regarding her provision of parenting, being threatened with Brian's removal whom "she had claimed" and being hostile in her presentation to Caoimhe, (wanting all social workers to just fuck off). As Cathy suggested, Caoimhe's experience mirrors Mary's i.e. being the subject of negative scrutiny by Mary, being found to be wanting in her professional role (from Mary's point of view), being rejected implicitly by Mary, given Mary's lack of response to whether or not she wanted to work with Caoimhe and her possibly understandable feelings of just wanting Mary to go away. Understood in this way it seems reasonable to suggest that Caoimhe has been provided with an experience of what Mary's unconscious world might be experiencing.

It is this psychic experience that provided the identification of primal feelings that Cathy hypothesized as Mary's experience. If such primal states, often associated with terror, manifested within Mary, it is not a far leap to suggest that Mary may have attempted to regulate her own internal world by evacuating out these painful mental states via projective identification. This in turn may have induced the unthinking state, here understood as an enactment, within Caoimhe given her experience of being unable to defend or speak for herself in the face of Mary's hostility. Roughton quotes Jacobs, who stated that an enactment is "the transformation of a wish or an idea into a performance" (1993). In this case, perhaps it is more correct to

assert that Caoimhe's performance of being unable to speak/think was an enactment of Mary's unthinking state, which in turn can also be understood as perhaps representing the Alpha elements (Bion, 1984a) of Mary's unthinkingness.

Sean's emphasis on Cathy's assertion of needing to "get through" her phone conversation with Mary also has suggestions of just trying to psychically survive the encounter.

Interestingly, despite Caoimhe's experience of being unthinking, it should be noted that her next sentence belies the possible unacknowledged truth that although she may have been relatively unthinking at one register, she did retain her reflective functioning capacity enough to indicate that she "*imagined the traumatized child was speaking to me*" (Case Briefing Doc Group 8) from Mary. This, one can reasonably argue, demonstrates an ongoing capacity to mentalize.

Implicit within the above hypothesis of Caoimhe's experience is the fact that despite the invitation to act in a retaliatory fashion, Caoimhe declined to adopt this position, instead privileging her own self-regulation thereby aiding her to be curious and insightful regarding the possibility of Mary's traumatized child speaking to her.

### **Reflexively Considering Projective Identification as a Heuristic**

I indicated earlier that I wished to address the appropriateness of offering projective identification as a possible way of understanding the relational dynamic and perhaps here is an opportune moment to do so.

At heart is my own reflexive tension regarding whether or not it is appropriate to have addressed the group in this fashion and similarly if it is appropriate to provide the space to pursue the enunciation of projective identification within a text whose focus is the participants' engagement with the knowledge base of mentalization. This is/was a complicated dilemma; however, surfacing the implicit boundaries between

mentalization and wider psychoanalytic theory and my own internal acknowledgement that mentalization theory alone is not sufficient has perhaps allowed me to achieve a more mentalized positioning in exploring the tripartite formulation of MBT, attachment theory and regulation theory as set out below.

I was also torn between my knowledge that the tradition of a WDG may suggest little or no intervention by the facilitator and my anxiety at breaching this tradition. I am also mindful of Judith Edwards' words in relating the process of teaching theory to students as "digestion" where she cautioned that "giving too rich a meal at one sitting – one has to be careful not to force-feed" (Edwards, 2015, p. 4). In hindsight I realize that in my anxiety to perform well I may have overfed the participants. However, whilst this may be true, it is also important to contextualize the group as a psycho-educational venture rather than solely process orientated; in which case my interventions seem more reasonable.

With regard to the appropriateness of detailing Caoimhe's enactment as a feature of projective identification within a thesis on mentalization, as stated, at the time I felt something important had spontaneously occurred within the group and I wished to harness it as a potentially significant heuristic with which to impart something that I have come to believe occurs all too often within the social work task but which is often poorly understood: that is, the frequency with which practitioners engage in enactments of their clients' unconscious emotional material. This is a difficult concept, particularly for those without a psychoanalytic background and perhaps more so if steeped in a rational technical model of social work practice. I did feel compelled to address this issue given the availability of live case material which I felt demonstrated it so nicely. In the moment it felt like the right thing to do.

## Enactments

Cathy spoke of Caoimhe's experience as mirroring. However, I think framing it as an enactment allows us greater access to the subtle depth of defensive psychic forces at play in this inter-subjective process. Wallin rather nicely described enactment as "The unique interactive matrix' (Greenberg 1995) made up of their [in this case foster parents and social workers] intermingling subjectivities as the context within which the therapist's interventions with the patient acquire their meanings" (2007, p. 283).

As Ogden similarly suggests, the concept of the analytic third is "the idea that our subjective experiences in the clinical hour arise [...] out of the unconscious psychic intermingling of both partners, and thus may reflect aspects of the patient's experience, as well as the therapist's" (Wallin, 2007, p. 267).

Here the conceptual lens of mentalization can facilitate our meaning-making of not just the client's mental states but crucially our own mental states as importantly being in response to our contact with the sometimes unprocessed, disturbing contents of the client's traumatized mental states.

Mapping the intermingling of mental states, what Ogden referred to as the "profound blurring of boundaries between self and object representations" (1982, pp. 14-15), and the potential enactment of a client's projective contents, is aided by one of mentalization's important axes when assessing mentalization, i.e. the self/other axes. According to Bateman and Fonagy, this relates to the "self/other diffusion with regard to mental states" (2012, p. 63). This is an important axis of our phenomenological experience regarding our ability to maintain an appropriate psychic boundary between self and other. Awareness of such intermingling of mental



states which go beyond any teleological manifestation is the foundational territory on which our meaning-making efforts occur.

The contention that Caoimhe was engaged within an enactment manifested by her inability to defend herself, her inability to speak and her stated inability to think, speaks directly to the idea that some intermingling of mental states may have occurred.

As Casement suggests “Unconscious re-enactment by the analyst, if it is attended to, can sometimes have an important diagnostic function, as when the analyst’s failure represents a key feature in the patient past” (Casement, 1990, p. 135).

Caoimhe’s quite understandable struggle to retain the capacity to think can also be understood in Bion’s terms as the struggle of Alpha elements to be transformed into Beta elements or in mentalization terms as Caoimhe’s struggle to keep on-line her reflective functioning in the face of the relationally challenging dynamic emanating from Mary. Assuming Caoimhe demonstrates the ongoing capacity to think or mentalize, this may offer Mary the possibility of being in a containing relationship that has managed to survive the unspoken, implicit contents of her internal world which may offer her considerable assistance in processing this material.

### **Locating Mentalization within Regulation Theory**

In the last chapter, I introduced the possibility of placing mentalization within the context of Alan Schore’s conceptualization of regulation theory (2021; Schore, 1994; Schore, 2002; Schore, 2003; Schore and Schore, 2008; Schore, 2009; Schore, 2017; Schore, 2021), simultaneously suggesting that non-mentalizing may operate in a less dramatic fashion within the normative population including within the cohort of participants of this study. I further conjectured that the non-mentalizing modes of mentalizing can be construed not just in respect of the deficit model normally

articulated in the literature as a failure of mentalizing, but rather that the non-mentalizing modes of operation can potentially be beneficial given their self-regulatory function as a defence against the realization of material which if held consciously would trigger a dysregulatory experience.

Linking Mary and Caoimhe's phenomenological experience of each other and the inter-subjective attempts by Mary to self-regulate via projective identification, and acknowledging Caoimhe's understandable struggle to self-regulate, we can use the concept of mentalized affectivity (Jurist, 2018) to link their present-day experience with what we know of Mary's autobiographical history including her history of abuse and neglect.

Koole suggests that "Ever since Freud (1915/1961) introduced the notion of psychological defence mechanisms, generations of researchers have been intrigued by the idea that people may distort their perceptions of reality to ward off anxiety and other types of negative emotion" (2009, p. 18).

In this context, we might suggest that Mary's projection of negative feelings into Caoimhe may have defensively allowed her to distance herself from possible feelings of guilt or failure which she perhaps unconsciously harbours towards herself resulting from the negative finding of the foster care committee regarding her provision of care to Brian. This defensive manoeuvre perhaps serves to assist the coherence of her sense of self in the face of the very dysregulating view of the Foster Care Committee of her.

The utilization of this form of self-regulation can be understood within the complexity of Mary's early life experiences and involvement with social services. As noted in the case discussion her history includes "*experience of childhood neglect and emotional and physical abuse*" (Case Briefing Document Group 8). Schore quoting Toth &

Cicchetti, (1998) suggests that “the most significant consequence of early relational trauma is the lack of capacity for emotional self-regulation” (2012, p. 263).

Elliot Jurist, the proponent of “mentalized affectivity” suggests it “overlaps with emotional regulation in so far as it involves modulating and crafting emotions [and] is based on the recognition that emotion regulation is affected by personality style, values, and most importantly, autobiographical memory” (Jurist, 2018, p. 97).

Jurist emphasizes the importance of one’s autobiographical history in determining the manifestation of one’s present-day emotional management abilities in line with the core tenets of mentalization and reflective functioning i.e. that one’s level of reflective functioning is primarily bestowed through your primary caregiver. He suggests that this conceptualization offers more compared to “a stimulus-response paradigm which is typically assumed in research on emotional regulation, [which] does not acknowledge the extent to which our present experience is mediated by the past” (Jurist, 2018, p. 97) which seems relevant to Mary’s presentation.

According to Sroufe & Waters, (1977), they advise that “in attachment theory, the main purpose of defence is ‘affect regulation’ and the primary mechanism for achieving this is ‘distance regulation’” (as cited in (Renn, 2012, p. 61). Treating a person (Caoimhe) in such a hostile way as Mary did clearly holds the potential of creating a relational if not geographical distance.

Additionally, having created an emotional distance by locating the unconscious material that Cathy called “primal” emotions in Caoimhe, Mary is now in a position to relate to the said emotions in a less direct way. Indeed she may also benefit from the working through of the said emotions (Ogden, 1982) by Caoimhe’s higher level of reflective functioning.

Being the recipient of such hostile projective identification arguably invites Caoimhe to respond in a talionic manner which she admirably managed to avoid. However, this understandably challenges her reflective functioning ability as she descends into a state of unthinking.

It is to Caoimhe's credit that she allows herself to feel that which is being projected, as Schore suggests that the "most important source of resistance in the treatment process is the therapist's resistance to what the patient feels" (McFadden, 2012, p. 183). Had Caoimhe not allowed herself to feel Mary's distress she would have effectively emotionally abandoned Mary by offering her little in the way of containment.

Caoimhe's ability to maintain her reflective functioning, at least in part, allowed her not to respond in a talionic fashion. Indeed she has arguably maintained the central stance of mentalization i.e. curiosity, by choosing to present this particular case to the WDG to aid her attempts to make meaning of these experiences. Additionally, the very act of maintaining one's ability to mentalize, through an enactment and to remain curious denoted a level of self-regulation that is a basic requirement of the related ability to be able to offer to the client a co-regulatory experience which may ultimately provide some containment.

Schore suggests that for those with a history of developmental disorders of self-regulation "psychotherapy functions as an attachment relationship" (Schore, 2003, p. 46). In light of this, we might wonder if Caoimhe's relational contact with Mary may benefit more from this register of meaning-making rather than the teleological responses that may be more prevalent within traditional discourses in social work as was evidenced at the beginning of this WDG.

These types of presentations are not unfamiliar in social work caseloads; consequently, I find myself in agreement with Schore's assertion that "Therapeutic regulation and not interpretation and insight is the key to the treatment of developmentally disordered patients who are not psychologically minded" (Schore, 2003, p. 63).

### **The Need for Receptivity to Enactments**

Schore notes that "enactments are more common in severe psychopathologies, specifically those that contain histories of attachment trauma" (Schore, 2009, p. 158). Although Caoimhe's and Mary's relationship does not constitute a primary attachment relationship, we can be sure that both Mary and Caoimhe's own internal working models (Bowlby, 1969) must surely have been at play to some extent. Contemporary research has established that one's reflective functioning ability is known to degrade within the context of attachment relationships (Bateman and Fonagy, 2016).

In this context, we must also acknowledge the probability that some element of Mary's projections toward Caoimhe may have found a receptive home in that it may have overlapped or offered some psychic familiarity<sup>29</sup> to Caoimhe which she too still needs to process. It is this element that perhaps Sean was referring to (see above pg. 125).

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<sup>29</sup> Roberts speaks of a similar phenomenon in respect of groups in a work place. She suggests "To the extent that people are drawn to work in a particular setting because it offers opportunities to work through their own unresolved issues, these settings may well attract staff with similar internal needs and a similar propensity to fit with certain kinds of defences. Bion (1961) refers to this phenomenon as valency, [...] This gives rise to collective defences against the anxieties stirred up by the work which can seriously impede the task performance. (Obholzer, Anton, Roberts and Zagier, V. 2019. *The Unconscious at Work: A Tavistock Approach to Making Sense of Organizational Life.*: Routledge. p 129-130).

Here we must emphasize the normality of this occurrence in that we all come with imperfectly processed pasts in consequence of which we are all subject to participation in enactments.

According to Gabbard (2002) quoted by Schore countertransference “is determined by the fit between what the patient projects into the therapist and what pre-existing structures are present in the therapist’s intrapsychic world” (2003, p. 83). Similarly, Park & Park’s articulation regarding the process of projective identification notes that “the receptive potential must already be present in the second person that has been perceived (outside of awareness) by the initiator” (Park & Park, 1997 p144 as cited in Wallin, 2007, p. 77). The potential for these projections to be accepted and to find a home within Caoimhe may have been unconsciously perceived by Mary as the initiatory of the projective identificatory process.

In line with the literature which suggests one’s ability to mentalize decays within environments of relational stress, particularly attachment relationships, we might suggest that understandably Caoimhe’s ability to maintain her online reflective functioning decayed in the circumstances of Mary’s hostility toward her. It is to her credit and her reflective functioning ability that she did not react in a completely unthinking manner by responding to the strong relational invitation to enter conflict with Mary. Mary’s implicit communication of her internal state to Caoimhe is perhaps the medium by which many traumatized social work clients make known their distress. Caoimhe’s availability to participate in the subsequent enactment, itself a necessary therapeutic stance, facilitated (perhaps) Mary’s observation of Caoimhe’s struggle to process the projections, but ultimately enabled her to witness Caoimhe’s ability to apply her reflective functioning abilities to self-regulate and make meaning of the disturbing relational phenomena. Despite the potential of such experiences to

put us to the pin of our collar, they are perhaps the ones that offer the clients that which they are most in need of.

## **In Summary**

This chapter detailed the manifestation of the theme of enactments and addressed my own reflexive uncertainty regarding the appropriateness of introducing this thinking within the group. Surfacing an awareness of the domination of a teleological mode of functioning within the group facilitated a deepening of the analysis of the transcript which in turn supported close scrutiny of the theme of enactments. In so doing I drew upon supporting theoretical constructs such as Bion's notion of unthinking, Shore's regulation theory and, importantly, Jurist's work on mentalized affectivity which linked Mary's autobiographical history and Caoimhe's hypothesized autobiographical history to the manifestations and experiences within the transcript. Importantly, questions regarding the reliance on a teleological mode of operation at both the individual and organizational level were raised with the attendant ethical question of the appropriateness or not of challenging individuals' reliance on this mode of thinking within the context of the potential organizational reliance on this mode of functioning operating perhaps as an organizational defence.

Implicit within this chapter is the realization that mentalization theory alone might not be sufficient to explain the various presentations and that other theoretical orientations can be beneficially employed particularly those stemming from the same psychoanalytical paradigm.

Finally, the litmus test of relevancy and fit has also been passed in respect of understanding Caoimhe's phenomenological experience as an enactment given her comment that it "*resonated with my experience*" (Case Presentation Doc).

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

This original study aimed to contribute to the existing literature by forging a path of exploration regarding the possible utility of MBT as a conceptual gyroscope to guide social work practice.

To aid the transparency of my findings I outlined the study design, the ethical issues and detailed the methodology and in particular the ontological and epistemological positioning of the study, ensuring that its design adhered to mentalization's own position on the stratified existence of reality. Detailed too was the prima facie case for the relevance of mentalization and reflective functioning to the task of social work. Within the literature review I increasingly narrowed our lenses of attention from initially contextualizing the study within an Irish social work context, the history of mentalization and the literature on the philosophy of mind from which it originated, to eventually incrementally narrow my review of the published works of the application of mentalization within children, families and fostering. Outlined also was the importance of the additional lens of Schore's regulation theory.

Following close scrutiny of the transcripts, three categories of themes emerged: firstly the culture and functioning of the system and things that don't compute, secondly defendedness and thirdly enactments, with each theme being illuminated via a case presentation.

In case presentation 1 we saw the participants' mental state move from the external environment to the internal dilemmas the participants face in reconciling their identification with an organizational entity that in their view did not always protect children as well as it might. Despite the participants' ability to speculate on the use of pretend mode by the barrister involved, identifying their own refuge in non-



mentalizing modes of functioning based on the surfacing of these painful realizations proved harder to grasp. I speculated that their use of such non-mentalizing modes was motivated by their own need to maintain a homeostatic balance. The dangers, particularly social workers' unconscious reliance on such modes, were also articulated and linked to relevant literature.

In case presentation 2 I outlined Sorcha's case presentation identifying the theme of defendedness and its hypothesized use by the various players involved in the case. I outlined the use of the non-mentalizing modes (psychic equivalence, pretend mode) and attempted to develop our understanding beyond the typical deficit model associated with these modes of functioning within the literature and put forward the case that they also serve as a form of psychic defendedness in that they reduce one's ability to apprehend the full spectrum of reality (which supports one's efforts to maintain homeostatic balance), linking this with Schore's regulation theory. Viewed in this way non-mentalizing modes of functioning become more applicable within the general population as opposed to the traditional application to those with a personality disorder. In particular, this is a beneficial and arguably more robust way of understanding the dynamics within social work practice when compared to other contemporary conceptualizations informing social work practice.

Case presentation 3 detailed Caoimhe's account of her attempts to remain in contact with Mary despite the relational dynamic triggered by the Foster Care Committee's refusal to sanction her as a foster parent. I examined the domination of the teleological mode of operation initially within the group and my contribution regarding the use of projective identificatory processes that Caoimhe was subjected to. Mentalized affectivity was utilized as a way of linking both Mary's and Caoimhe's hypothesized sensitivity to the reception of the projective identificatory processes.

Speculation regarding the potential organizational reliance on a teleological mode of operation was also discussed.

Throughout chapters 4, 5 and particularly chapter 6 I presented the case based on the realization that mentalization alone was insufficient, arguing instead for the tripartite use of mentalization, attachment theory and regulation theory, the combination of which arguably provides a more robust conceptualization when compared to the contemporary theoretical formulations as were discussed within the literature review.

## **Findings**

Arising from the extensive analysis of the existent literature and close scrutiny of the 24 hours of transcripts from this study the following findings emerged:

- The participants quickly and strongly engaged with the psychoeducational material appearing to locate epistemic trust in it as well as locating a sense of containment within the group. This facilitated the social workers to willingly take up the opportunity to reflect and move beyond perhaps the traditional positioning of their defences within the containing environment of the group.
- The participants demonstrated an apparent unconscious yearning to enter a forum to ventilate aspects of practice that troubled them and strongly embraced the group experience and psychoeducational material as a mechanism to address their practice dilemmas. This was particularly evident where there was an experience of conflict between their values and the conduct of the institution or system in which they worked.

- Raising the participants' awareness of the non-mentalizing modes of functioning heralded the introduction of a more complex multi-layered way of thinking about the case presentations that moved beyond the previous reliance on dualistic conceptualizations of right/wrong or attending to the happenings in the teleological world. Arguably a more mentalized grasp of their cases was achieved.
  
- The emphasis on attunement, perhaps to the greater degree that is inherent in MBT, generated an apparent sense of personal psychological instability viscerally vocalised by Ger's commentary "you can't hold it; you'd crack up if you held it... it would break you" (G4-3 1.38) which beneficially provoked a discourse on the understandable need to defend oneself from the toxicity of relational trauma.
  
- The combination of the learning environment of the work discussion group as a method of imparting the particular psychoeducational material arguably allowed the participants to move beyond the cognitive grasping of theoretical constructs instead seemingly providing an immediacy of learning at considerable depth, beyond the register of the cognitive. Such experiential learning environments, where one's sense of self and curiosity about one's ability to grasp and be with the toxicity inherent in some practice encounters, facilitated the surfacing of the very real dilemmas of how one should or should not psychologically defend oneself and allowed the participants to begin to engage with the different positionalities unconsciously adopted by various participants. Practice resilience derived

from this register of depth of learning will, I contend, resource practitioners in a more fundamental way compared to the mere learning of theoretical constructs.

- Participants also warmly welcomed and embraced the new language and thinking tools derived from their understanding of MBT and associated psychoanalytic concepts. The said thinking tools aided the participants' ability to disentangle and give voice to the varying accounts of reality which they are often asked to adjudge as well as processing their own, often troubling phenomenological experiences.
- The role of the participants as providers of containment and co-regulation to their clients emphasized practitioner contact with clients as a primary treatment modality in and of itself and is a movement away from the notion of social workers as case managers, alternatively enlivening the possibility of social work as a form of primary intervention.
- The study also emphasized the importance of comprehending the non-mentalizing modes of functioning not only in the traditional deficit model but rather as potentially beneficially aiding one's attempts to self-regulate and maintain one's homeostatic balance. The caveat of the importance of the need to do so in a thinking mentalized way to avoid an unthinking practice response was highlighted.

- The study emphasized the critical importance of the culture and functioning and operational idiom of Tusla in facilitating a mentalizing operational milieu to facilitate good social work practice and to mitigate against the possibility of retreat to a teleological mode of functioning, either at the level of the individual or organizationally.
  
- The combination of mentalization integrated within the wider therapeutic knowledge base of attachment theory and regulation theory offers perhaps an epistemically more robust articulation of the fine-grained phenomenological experiences of the participants' practice experience. It also demonstrates how harmoniously these differing clinical conceptualizations can enhance our understanding of the complexity of phenomenological experience inherent in social work practice.
  
- On the basis of this study, it is reasonable to suggest that mentalization and reflective functioning may beneficially inform social work practice and potentially act as a centralizing conceptualization, offering, compared to other contemporary theoretical constructs, a more rigorous overarching theory incorporating a substantial theory of development and psychopathology that can beneficially inform social work practice.
  
- Conducting this group underlined to me the need for the facilitator to have a good command of the underlying theoretical conceptualizations, such that the participants may locate epistemic trust in the material provided.

## Recommendations

This study represents an original piece of research regarding the application of mentalization directly to social work practice. The following recommendations are presented in the hope that they may offer some small contribution to the literature.

- I contend that there is ample evidence to support the relevance and utility of MBT and its corollary reflective functioning to social work practice.
- Further research and practice implementation strategies should be supported to fully realize the potential application of MBT and particularly reflective functioning. The latter offers utility beyond the alternative care arena, with parental capacity assessments and reunification plans being particularly relevant.
- The case studies demonstrate the cogent need for Tusla to support social work practitioners' processing of relationally demanding events beyond the teleological supervisory register currently available.
- Provision of these MBT "Thinking Tools" via the dissemination of the above knowledge base provides a "new language" and theoretical framework to make meaning of, process and contain the relationally toxic aspects of practice that have hitherto struggled to be enunciated apparently hindering their metabolization by frontline social work staff.

- Staff retention strategies within Tusla should incorporate and develop similar forums to support social work staff to process the emotional labour inherent in the work as a matter of priority.
  
- Development of this new and innovative tripartite model of social work practice comprising attachment theory, mentalization and regulation theory should be subjected to further development and research as it offers significant potential to act as a centralizing practice gyroscope capable of informing practice in a more holistic manner when compared to some other contemporary social work theoretical perspectives.
  
- There is a need to develop practice guidelines for social work practice in the arena of alternative care in Tusla. I contend that the tripartite configuration of attachment theory, mentalization and regulation theory can inform and theoretically underpin the development of such practice guidance in a more informed and evidence-based manner compared to some contemporary social work conceptualizations.
  
- Future practice and policy developments within the alternative care and child protection arenas should be benchmarked against the wealth of evidential clinical material stemming from the significant evidential base associated with mentalization-based thinking.

- Social work training institutions should actively consider the incorporation or alignment of their curricula in light of the above tripartite knowledge base of attachment theory, mentalization theory and regulation theory.

To conclude, the words of the French Jesuit priest and idealist philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1959) seem apt:

“The being who is the object of his own reflection, in consequence of that very doubling back upon himself, becomes in a flash, able to raise himself into a new sphere. In reality, another world is born”



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## Appendix 1 A Brief Explanation of Mentalization

A common explanation of mentalization relates to our ability to think about thinking, and the everyday psychological process that supports a person's understanding of their own and others' mental states including their thoughts, behaviours, desires and intentions.

It is helpful to think about mentalization in terms of how we apprehend reality, our purchase or grasp on our experience of reality, if you will, encompassing the various phenomenological registers of experience that we both occupy and encounter in everyday life.

To simplify the complexity of the theoretical construction of mentalization and its supporting psychoanalytical and philosophical underpinnings, it may be of assistance to indicate that essentially there are ten elements to hold in mind.

These include the four dimensions of mentalization (self/other, cognitive/affective, automatic/controlled and internal /external) and how one balances these dimensions to effectively grasp reality.

Then there are four modes of functioning: the three non-mentalizing modes of functioning (psychic equivalence, teleological and pretend mode) and the mode of mentalizing.

The balance of the dimensions of mentalization facilitates one's occupation of a mentalizing or non-mentalizing mode of functioning.

The final two elements to hold in mind are related to the process of how human beings develop their ability to mentalize. The literature emphasizes the process of contingent marked attunement as being central to the attendant process of facilitating a child's ability to locate epistemic trust in their primary caregiver. The locating of epistemic trust facilitates the delivery of culturally important information to the developing child and underpins the emergence of the child's evolving metacognitive abilities and mentalization capacity.



## Appendix 2 Insider / Outsider

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*The Qualitative Report* September 2008

Table 1.

### *Methodological Advantages and Complications of Insider Positionality*

<b>Advantages to Insider Status</b>	<b>Complications to Insider Status</b>
<p><i>Positionality</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•a nuanced perspective for observation, interpretation and representation</li> <li>•an equalized relationship between researcher and participants</li> <li>•expediency of rapport building</li> <li>•immediate legitimacy in the field</li> <li>•economy to acclimating to the field</li> </ul> <p><i>Access</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•expediency of access</li> <li>•access to more in-group activities</li> </ul> <p><i>Data Collection/Interpretation/Representation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•insight into the linguistic, cognitive, emotional, sensory and psychological principles of participants</li> <li>•knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field</li> <li>•stimulation of natural interaction and behavior</li> <li>•detection of participants' hidden behaviors and perceptions</li> <li>•detection of nonverbal gestures of embarrassment and discomfort</li> <li>•detection of informants' actual behavior versus their performed selves</li> <li>•identification of unusual and unfamiliar occurrences</li> </ul>	<p><i>Positionality</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Insider status unchecked can complicate or overwhelm researcher role.</li> <li>•over-identification or over-reliance on status obscures researcher role or goal of research</li> <li>•social roles in group or community constrain researcher role and objectives</li> <li>•expectation to participate in community events or affairs</li> <li>•overload with exchange or reciprocity requests from participants</li> <li>•requests to take sides in community political and moral issues</li> <li>•the rise of value conflicts as a result of research and community member role</li> <li>•compromised professional ethics and/or research results</li> <li>•participants' perceptions and expectations co-opt researcher or constrain role</li> </ul> <p><i>Access</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•bias in entering field and establishing rapport</li> <li>•limited access based on political climate</li> </ul> <p><i>Data Collection/Interpretation/Representation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•observer and/or participant role may be culturally inappropriate</li> <li>•large amounts of impression management to maintain rapport and/or identity</li> <li>•selective reporting</li> <li>•difficulty with recognizing patterns due to familiarity with community</li> <li>•bias in selecting participants</li> <li>•breaking or maintaining relationships with participants when leaving the field</li> <li>•community interaction style compromises interview process or observation</li> <li>•insiderness obscures representation or implementation due to turbulent or changing political and historical climate of the field</li> </ul>

Note. This table does not represent the experience of every insider scholar surveyed here. In some cases, an advantage to one scholar was not an advantage to another, or not experienced altogether. Complications seem to outnumber advantages. This should not be taken as indicative of the phenomenon. In fact, many insiders tend to report more on the failures than the successes, perhaps because as Parameswaran (2001) suggests by citing Visweswaran (1994), they provide lessons about methodology, epistemology, and phenomenology.

## Appendix 3a. Example of my code generation

This example is provided to illuminate the process of generating the initial codes and the eventual combining and synthesis of meaning elements from the initial codes through to the eventual generation of the major codes.

Reading from left to right the below example identifies the group from which the data has been drawn, ie Group 4, the pseudonym of the speaker, in this case Ger, followed by the time stamp of Ger's contribution to the discussion in Group 4. The next field contains the raw narrative data with selected elements of the text highlighted to draw attention to the meaning elements of the text which I rely upon in the generation of the initial and major theme codes.

The example illuminates a discussion relating to S., a now three-year-old girl in relative foster care (see chapter four) and Amanda's concern for the girl who had to remain within what she felt strongly was an unacceptable foster placement. Using this example I will articulate the process of generating the initial and major themes codes in respect of one of the final major themes (Defended-ness). I acknowledge that this is but one of potentially a number of major codes that this segment of the data could be coded with.

The discussion in question was triggered by the comment that maybe "we are complicit in a system that hasn't functioned quite well sometimes" (G4-4 00.45). This was based on commentary from Caoimhe who indicated that "our system has contributed to her trauma in those really early critical early years" (G4-3. 34.01) referring to S. Ger responded (as indicated by the highlighted text below) by suggesting that "You can't hold it, you'd crack up if you held it" which I have interpreted as indicating something of her need to not hold the responsibility of this young girls endurance of a foster placement that is considered by Amanda not to meet the basic needs of S.

Ger's assertion of "you can't hold it, you'd crack up if you held it" indicates perhaps a need on Ger's part to distance herself and ultimately perhaps to not hold this responsibility, which is implied by her identification and membership of the Tusla system, which Caoimhe had indicated contributed to this little girls trauma. Evident too is her prediction that, were one to hold this responsibility "you'd crack up" which I inserted as a rough initial code to highlight this element of potential meaning.

Ger then reminisces indicating that having worked in a really stressful environment you would be upset to the point of crying but that "you would go home and have to let go of that" 'upset'. Which I also inserted as a rough initial code.

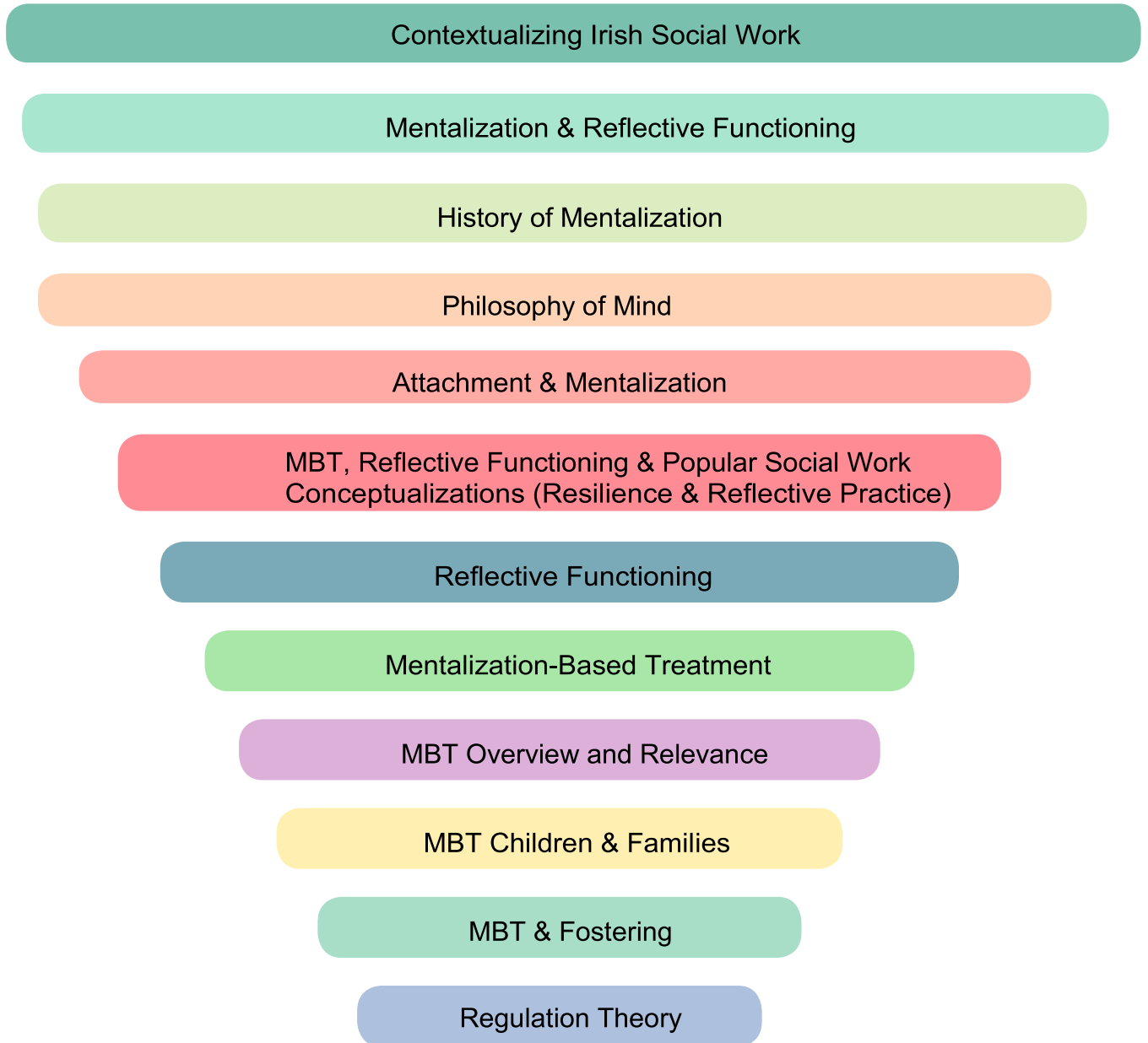
In the final element of this brief selection of data, Ger appears to present a somewhat less coherent narrative apparently switching from past to present tense and then future tense indicating "you can't, you would. It would break you, I think it will break you" as she apparently contemplated the possibility of holding the responsibility of S remaining in a placement that is thought to be deficient. This element of the narrative clearly indicates a concern that holding on to this responsibility could break you. This passage is concluded with Ger's assertion that

“you have to distance yourself” which I coded as a letting go of the responsibility but clearly also implies the notion of defending oneself against the deleterious effect (it will break you) of holding on to the responsibility. The three initial codes, Cracking up, Upset, and Letting go when combined speak to Ger’s apparent stance which indicates some defence against the experience of holding the responsibility for S is warranted or needed to stave off the possibility of ‘it breaking you’. When combined with the plethora of other examples across the three case studies I felt the term Defended-ness encapsulated something of the intention and stance of the participants which I felt went beyond the neutrality of a ‘letting go’. Defended-ness I felt implied an intention to defend against the distress of particular elements of practice in the face of the implied responsibility they may have as identified members of the system which is said to perhaps have contributed to the trauma of those it seeks to protect. Ger speaks in evocative terms of the need to defend against holding a sense of responsibility for S’s experience of being in foster care. Combining, synthesising and attempting to authentically and congruently represent what I came to understand from the actual spoken words, the text, the phonological experience of being exposed to this discussion, as well as the regularity of references within the data corpus regarding notions of defence, has led me to generate the major code of defended-ness as an important theme which I wanted to further illuminate.

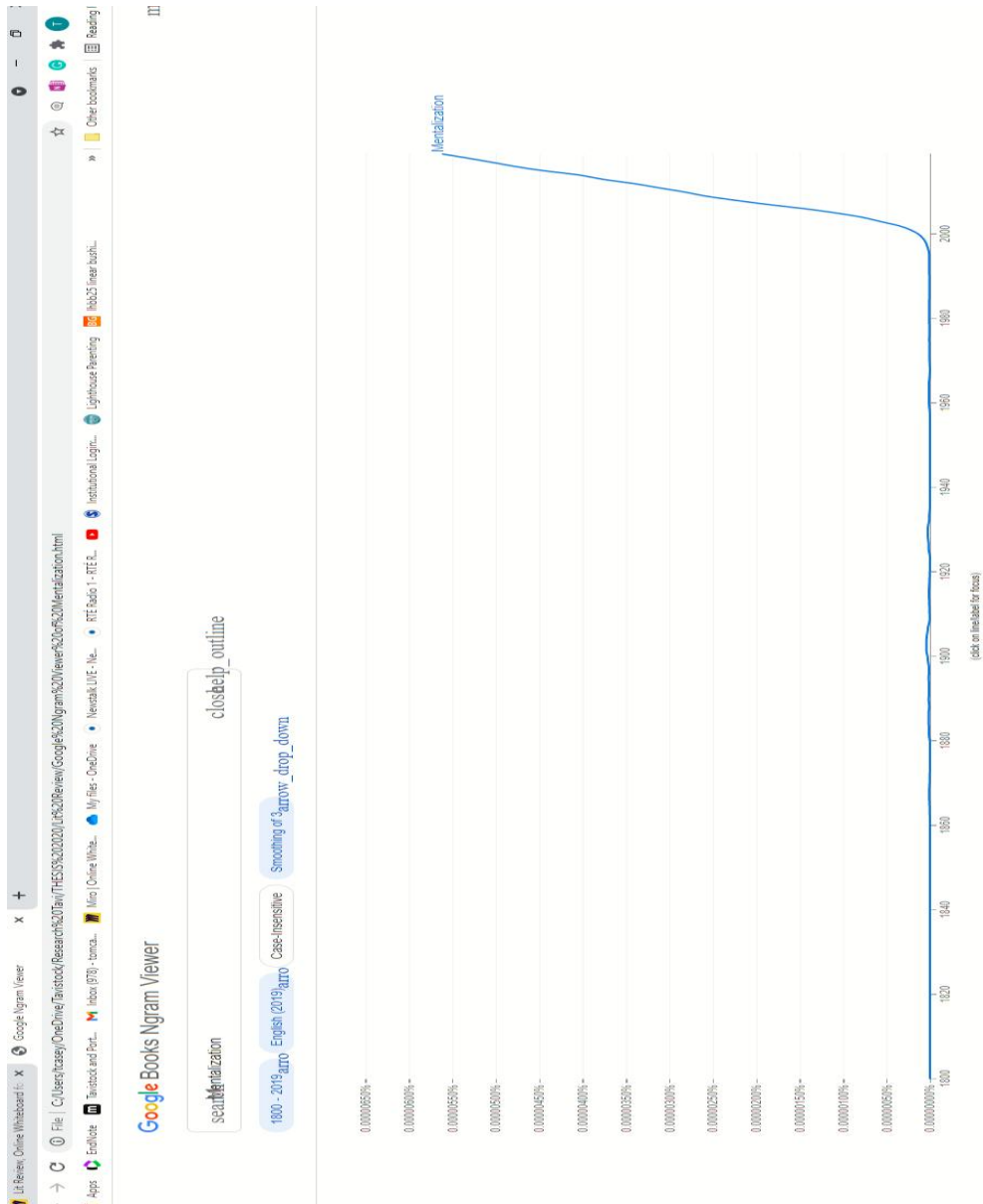
## Appendix 3b Major Theme Codes

Major Theme Codes	
Use of self	US
Things that don't compute	TDC
Culture and functioning of department	CFD
Enactment of case dynamics	ECD
Defendedness	D
Confusion / Frustration	CF
Modes of functioning	MOF
Drive to understand	DTU
Coping with responsibility	CWR

## Appendix 4 Ideograph Demonstrating the Incremental Narrowing of the Literature



# Appendix 5 Google Ngram Mentalization



(Accessed 14.9.21)

## Appendix 6 The Differing Definitions of Resilience

**Developmental psychology:** Resilience “implies exposure to adversity and the manifestation of positive adjustment outcomes” (Luthar & Cicchetti 2000, p.858).

**Psychiatry:** Resilience “means that there has been a relatively good outcome for someone despite their experience of situations that have been shown to carry a major risk for the development of psychopathology” (Rutter 1999, pp.119-120).

**Social work:** Resilience comprises “... qualities which cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity in whatever form it takes and which may help a child ... to cope, survive and even thrive in the face of great hurt and disadvantage” (Gilligan 1997, p.12). “It is widely accepted within the [general] literature that the term resilience refers not to singular phenomena but rather to behaviours and outcomes in empirically distinct circumstances” (McMurray *et al.* 2008, p.301).

**Social Care Institute of Excellence:** “Resilience refers to the qualities that cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity” (Bostock 2004, p.6).

**British government:** “Resilience refers to an individual’s capacity to adapt successfully to change and to stressful events in healthy and constructive ways. It involves an interaction between both risk and protective processes that act to modify the effects of an adverse life event” (DCSF 2007, pp.18-19).

(Astrid Winkler Thesis ‘How can social workers promote resilience in looked-after children?’ pp. 8-9 <http://repository.tavistockandportman.ac.uk/958/1/M%20A%20%20dissertation%20on%20resilience%20-%20ASTRID%20WINKLER.pdf> Accessed 16.5.21 @10.39)

## Appendix 7 Modes of Mentalization

Nonmentalizing mode	Features
<b>Psychic equivalence mode</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equation of inner reality with outer reality: “What I think is real”</li> <li>• Overly concrete/literal understanding</li> </ul>
<b>Teleological mode</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on directly observable goals or actions</li> <li>• Only observable changes or actions can be true indicators of the intentions of others</li> </ul>
<b>Pretend mode</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thoughts and feelings are decoupled from external reality</li> <li>• May lead to “dissociation” of thought (hypermentalizing or pseudomentalizing)</li> </ul>

Table 2. Automatic nonmentalizing modes that emerge with the loss of controlled mentalizing

Published in 2018

**The Neurobiology of Attachment and Mentalizing: A Neurodevelopmental Perspective**

P. Luyten, P. Fonagy



(<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Neurobiology-of-Attachment-and-Mentalizing%3A-A-Luyten-Fonagy/6102eb15ef67f1c27fbe2a0af62ad2466c8a937f/figure/1>)



## Appendix 8 Key to the Pronunciation of Irish Names

- Caoimhe is pronounced KEE-va or KWEE-va.\*
- Méabh is pronounced MAYV.
- Sorcha is pronounced SOR-kə
- Seán is pronounced SHAWN.

\*Remember, all Cs are hard in Irish.

[\(http://www.nancy.cc/2008/03/17/how-to-pronounce-popular-irish-names-aoife-cian-niamh-oisin/](http://www.nancy.cc/2008/03/17/how-to-pronounce-popular-irish-names-aoife-cian-niamh-oisin/)

Accessed 1.9.21)

