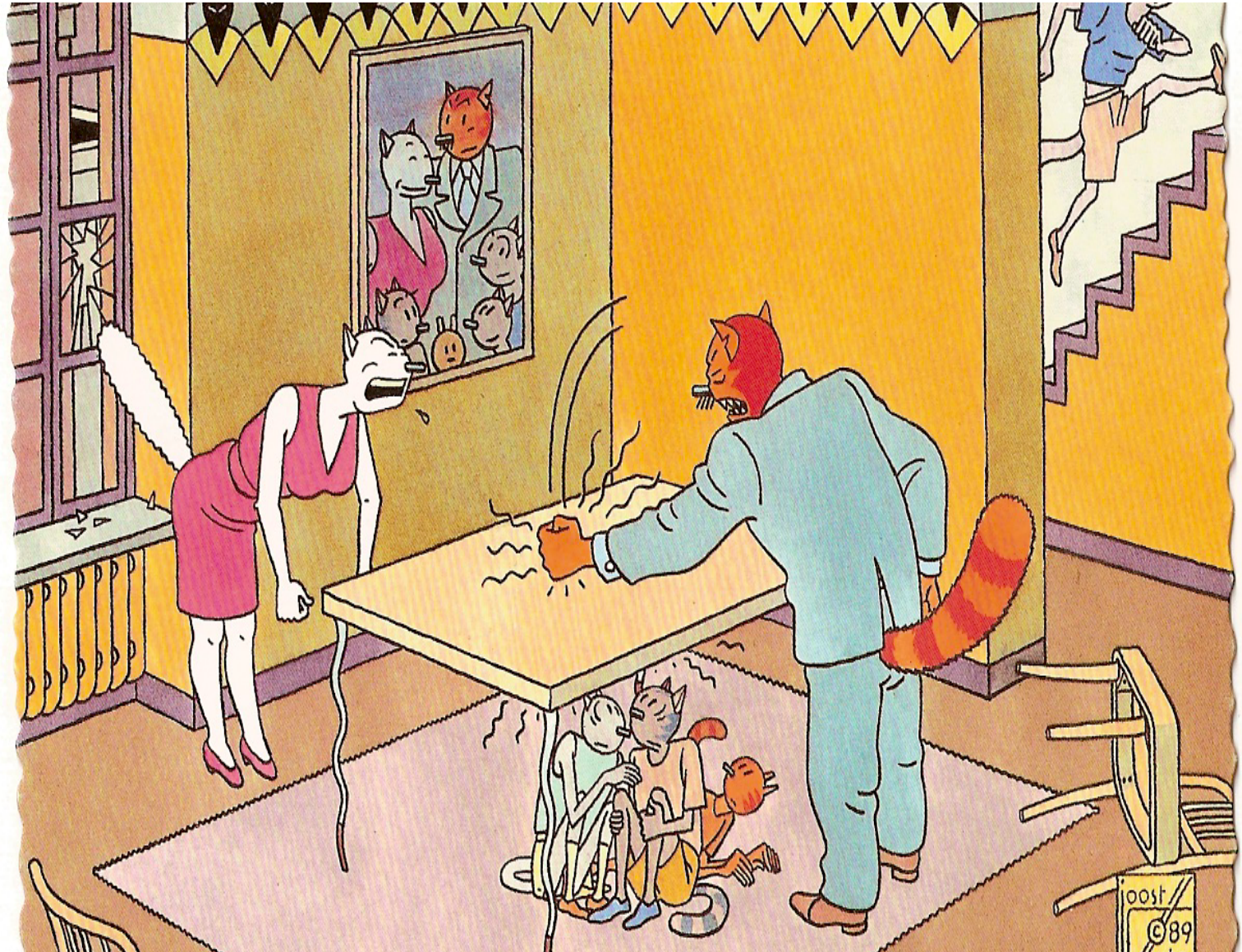


Mentalising Family Violence

Eia Asen Anna Freud Centre



Geneva
8.2.2016

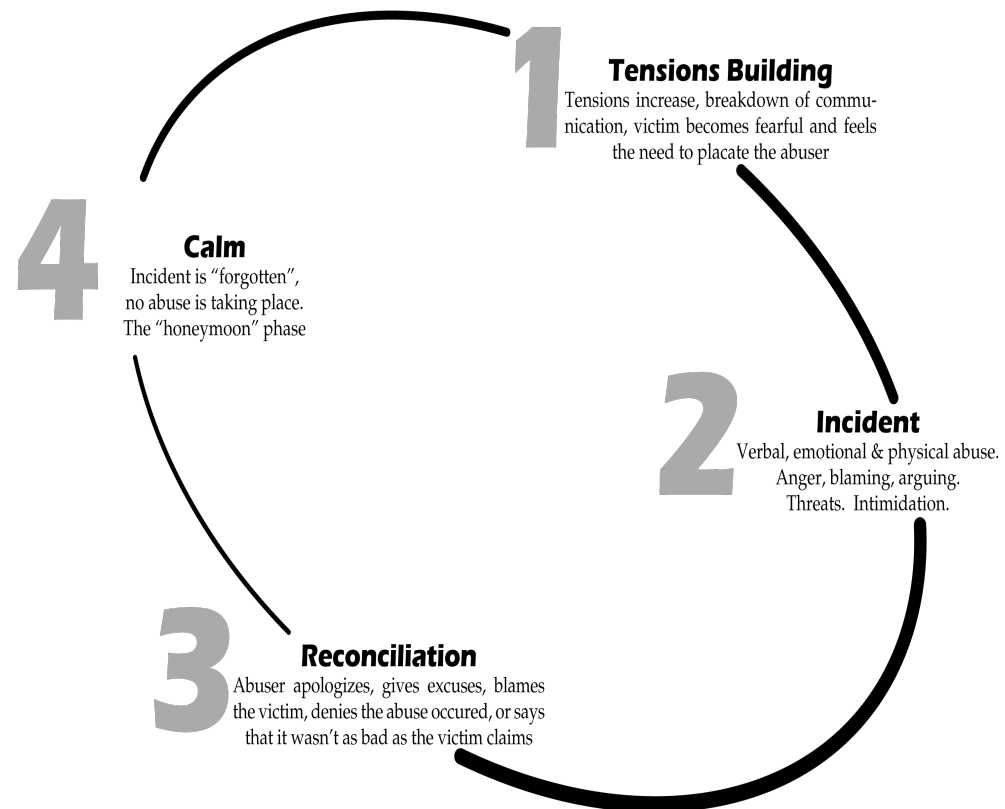
with thanks to Peter Fonagy,
friend and collaborator (*second from right*)



Intra-Family Violence

- **Love** and **Violence** are common bedfellows - more people get hurt in family disputes than anywhere else (apart from war zones)
- In 2013 an estimated 1,500 children died from abuse and neglect in the USA (US Department of Health and Human Services 2013) and more than 3 million children received preventative services from child protection agencies in 47 states (National Children's Alliance 2013)
- In the U.K. each year more than 50,000 children are placed on the child protection register because of abuse (Department of Education 2014)
- The family is (also) a **danger zone** or '**minefield**' rather than (only) a 'safe haven'

Intra-Familial Cycle of Abuse



Family Violence and Non-Mentalizing Interactions

During emotionally charged interchanges in families 'flight-fight' modes are triggered. Intense emotion leads to a temporary loss of the capacity to think about the thoughts and feelings of others

High levels of arousal 'turn off' the 'mentalizing system' temporarily – this reduces the individual family members' ability to check and reflect on their own mental states, let alone align these with those of others

The parent's mind becomes temporarily closed to seeing the child from any perspective other than their own. Not feeling meaningfully responded to intensifies the child's behaviour in order to feel his experience is being recognized and that it 'gets through' to the adult

The parent's temporary emotional unavailability generates further powerful distress in the child. This increases the parent's arousal who may re-experience their own childhood helplessness, now visibly displayed in their child

The escalating non-mentalizing interchanges can include violence as the 'solution' to terminating a deeply distressing experience. Unable to inhibit distress, the child's response is likely to be physical.

The Effects of Family Violence on Children

- several aspects of their social-cognitive competencies are adversely affected ([Cicchetti, Rogosch, Maughan, Toth, & Bruce, 2003](#); [Ensink, Normandin, et al., 2015](#); [Pears & Fisher, 2005](#); [Smith & Walden, 1999](#))
- they are likely to have poor affect regulation, which contributes to later psychopathology and peer rejection ([Kay & Green, 2015](#); [Kim & Cicchetti, 2010](#); [Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002](#); [Robinson et al., 2009](#)).
- they make fewer references to their internal states ([Shipman & Zeman, 1999](#));
- they struggle to understand emotional expressions, particularly facial expressions ([During & McMahon, 1991](#), [Koizumi & Takagishi, 2014](#)), even when verbal IQ is controlled for ([Camras et al., 1990](#); [Shenk, Putnam, & Noll, 2013](#)).

The Intergenerational Transmission of Family Violence

- repetition of family scripts is most likely to occur in families where reflection on family beliefs and patterns and associated subjective experiences are absent ([Berthelot et al., 2015](#); [Ensink et al 2014](#))
- Family violence itself will undermine reflectiveness or mentalizing ([Ensink, Normandin, Leroux, Biberdzic, & Fonagy, in press](#)).
- These combine to make it highly likely that family scripts can be somewhat mindlessly enacted when set against a background of Domestic Violence
- Volatile attachment relationships exist in families prone to violence (Goldner 1990). When feelings are not valued, unheard or ignored, anxiety and arousal increase - the attachment system kicks in
- **‘Violence begets violence’**: in families in which fear and hyperactivated attachments are produced, mentalizing capacity is reduced or destroyed and family members return to pre-mentalistic modes of thinking and acting.

Mentalizing capacity and violence

- Mentalizing others makes it hard to hurt people because we feel them 'from the inside'. Physically violent acts are perhaps only possible if mentalizing is temporarily inhibited or decoupled – or if there is a permanent lack or loss of mentalizing capacity.
- The 'violence inhibition mechanism' (Blair 2005): hurting others intentionally causes mental pain in the observer – especially when the observer is the cause of the pain. Carrying out violent actions seems to be related to not experiencing the victim as a feeling and thinking person anymore ([Levinson & Fonagy, 2004](#)).

Common features in violent families

- a) **hyper-alertness** in one or more family members, with children or partners continuously ‘scanning’ the violent family member for signs of emotional dysregulation and impending danger;
- b) fairly sudden and dramatic **increased levels of arousal** in one or more family members in the face of real or imagined abandonment or as the result of un-contextualised emotion becoming overwhelming;
- c) a seeming ‘**addiction**’ to engaging in emotionally or physically abusive interactions, with each party feeling that they are ‘the real victim’;
- d) an overwhelming **feeling** expressed by one or more family members that they are **not being heard or understood**, or are feeling alone in the middle of those who profess to love him /her;
- e) **cutting off** and becoming selectively ‘mute’ or ‘deaf’ and unwilling to respond with words, detaching and isolating oneself further – until it becomes unbearable and proximity with the attachment figure needs to be sought, even at the risk of another episode of violence occurring.

How to treat Family Violence?

A Mentalizing Approach

MBT-training: The Therapist Stance



The ancient Roman Technique of 'Forced Mentalizing'
is ***not*** indicated in cases of Family Violence



But **Family and Multi-Family** Mentalizing Interventions can help...



Some Intervention Techniques...

‘Mind Mirroring’

‘Mind Facing

‘Mind Masking’

‘Mind Mapping’

‘Mind Sculpting’

‘Mind Scoping’

‘Minding the Child Narratives’

Multi-Family Group Work as a Setting to Increase Mentalizing

Observing other families and their interactions and speculating about their mental states

Seeing oneself / one's family mirrored in others who have similar problems / issues

Observing and experiencing attachment phenomena in other families from a 'safe' distance and without increased arousal

Experimenting with pretend mode via playful activities

Using video clips of problematic interactions for later video-feedback session when arousal is lowered which permits

'Diachronic Prompting':

past, 'here and now', hypothetical future

**„Multi-Family Group Work is an Optimal Setting
to Increase Mentalizing“ (*P.Fonagy*)**



Mind Facing

‘Mental State Snapshots’

The use of Selfies and I-Pads (tablets)

Family violence can occur when the mental state of a person is being misread or misinterpreted

Training in facial recognition of affect (‘The Mind in The Eyes’ *and* Face) is less helpful than reading the mental states *behind* the face: the aim is to rebalance the excessive emphasis on the external so often found in violent families

Feeling Snapshots during Sessions

Ta(I)king Selfies



- 1) Individual is asked to take 10 'selfies' before the next session
- 2) Therapist and patient examine the shots and speculate about the states mind *behind* the face
- 3) Other family members are invited in and look at the selfies one by one and speculate about mental states (mental state thought bubbles: *thinks... feels*)
- 4) They are asked to tell a story, in the 'I'-form, pretending to be the individual
- 5) Family selects 7 historic photos that "*tell the story of your family*"

What's the point?

The polarity of self and other is brittle in violent families

The depleted understanding of the self undermines both motivation and capacity to see the other clearly

There is a lack of flexible movement between considering the self and other: it is either all about **'them'** or it is all about **'me'**

Violent families can benefit from experimenting with moving between different perspectives, finding a balance between the extremes of excessive speculation and the false 'certainty' of presumption

What might it feel like being 'looked at' by others?
What might they be thinking and feeling?



as the patient here you'd need a **mirror** to
'look at yourself from the outside'



Mind Masking

The Therapeutic Use of Masks



'Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth' (Oscar Wilde)

Functions of Masks

- *Disguise and Concealment*
- *Entertainment*
- *Experimentation*

Mask allows us to

- expose parts of ourselves that we are not usually willing to embrace in everyday life
- cover up who we are at the moment, it acts as a protective shield from our true feelings, above all shame
- try on a different 'persona' and let our imagination run wild
- invite story telling
- create mental states in others



Masks and Mentalizing

When family members wear masks, they are less inhibited in their thoughts by the reactions of the other person because:

- we no longer have to fear overt signs of disapproval
- to the extent that we all ‘invent’ ourselves from the reactions that others have to us (Hegel), wearing a mask frees us up from again and again having to find ourselves in others and, momentarily, makes us not depend on other people’s reactions to feel validated
- with a mask we may be able to find an identity that is beyond what we are – without the fear of frightening others with our own shame, embarrassment, aggression or disgust
- We no longer harbour fears of having one’s identity distorted by seeing oneself non-contingently (i.e. *incorrectly*) reflected in the other

Experimentation



creating mental states in others



'Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth' (Oscar Wilde)

Functions of Masks

- *Disguise and Concealment*
- *Entertainment*
- *Experimentation*
- *Protection (of self and others!)*

Protection (of self and others!)



Making Masks

They show how you think others see you on the outside and how you may feel inside..

Mask Making by Traumatized US War Veterans

"I have destroyed my life and myself so that others may live"
(US army doctor)



'emotional hostage'



© Nicoe

'split self'



© Nicoe

Mind Mapping

Mind scanning

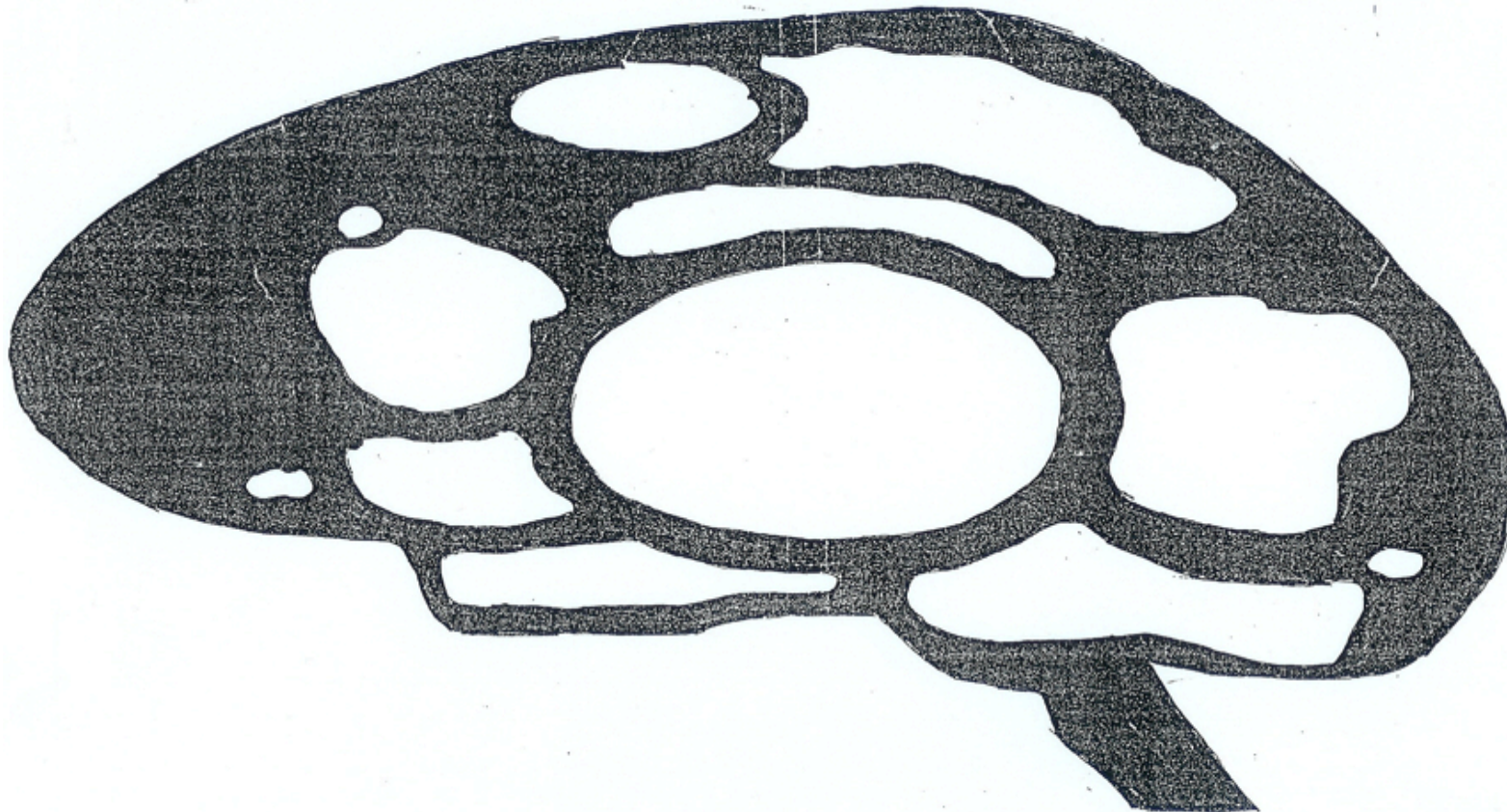
Body maps

Incident maps

Escalation Clock

Vulcano Eruption

Mind Scanning



This is how I feel when I'm
mad.



Mind Sculpting

Frozen conflicts

clay sculptures

Family Sculptures





Mind Sculpting

Frozen conflicts

Live sculptures



Putting the Family under the Microscope...

- What would the situation look like through your Mummy's (Daddy's / Child's) eyes?
- Could you make a Mummy-scope (or Daddy-scope) and then see the family through it

Daddy-Scope (Asperger model)



‘Mind in the Eyes’ Intervention

(couple work)



Deflator



Darkness-Vision Glasses to make **The Unconscious** visible

Anna-Freud prototype



CG Jung Prototype



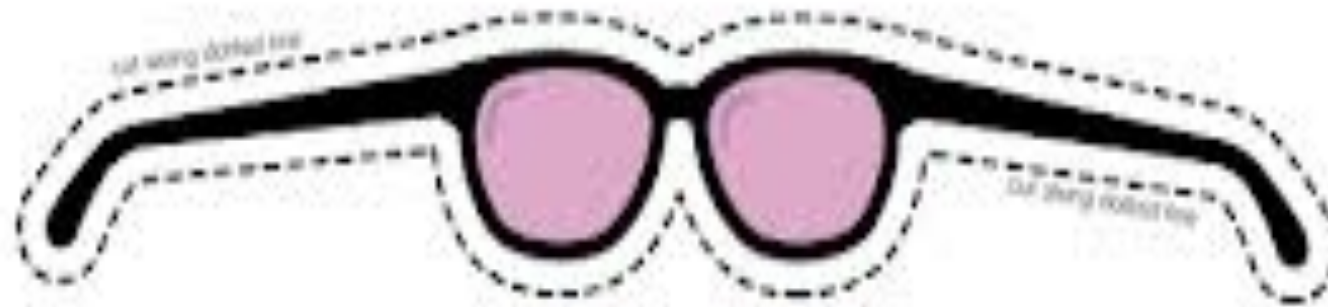
Darkness-Vision Glasses

to make **The Unconscious** visible

CG Jung Prototype



EMERGENCY ROSE-TINTED GLASSES



IF YOU NEED THESE



GET IN TOUCH WITH US



In Conclusion: Mentalizing Family Violence

- Intra-family violence is likely to be connected with the disorganization of the attachment system
- There is a close association between attachment, the use of physical aggression and the collapse of mentalizing
- Aggression and violent acts are tools to ensure the survival of the individual – the term ‘aggression’ is derived from the Latin word ‘adgrederere’ (meaning ‘to approach’, ‘to seek out’), indicating a link with proximity seeking
- When the family context gives insufficient resources to devote attention to the child, physical ‘*seeking-out*’ and, if met with persistent misunderstanding or non-responsiveness, *aggression* on the child’s part can be seen as an adaptive response
- In families with hyperactivated attachments, family members return to pre-mentalistic modes of thinking and acting.
- Specific mentalizing techniques can assist to reduce family violence