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Introduction to CAN special issue: Attachment & mentalization

Karin Ensink and I met at the Pederson, Moran and Goldberg Attachment Meeting in Quebec City, where major Canadian attachment researchers gather annually to exchange on new trends and ideas in the area. The meeting took place at Laval University, where Karin Ensink teaches as a professor, and from where she founded a clinic specialized in mentalization based treatment (MBT) of complex trauma. In this workshop, I presented data from the European Research Network on borderline personality disorder (BPD).

The findings I presented suggested that attachment representations following maltreatment can either precipitate or prevent the onset of BPD in adolescence. From there, Karin Ensink and I exchanged on disorganized attachment and on its entanglement with failures to mentalize and integrate trauma. Eventually, the idea of editing this special issue on *attachment and mentalization* came up, with the objective of bringing together these two key concepts, in line with Karin Ensink's ongoing work (e.g., [Ensink et al., 2016, 2019](#)).

Examining how attachment representations and the related capacity to mentalize one's own experience can intervene in the development of abused and neglected children was a key objective as, unlike the past which cannot be changed, these mental processes are nonstatic factors professionals can work on to foster resilience. My own work on multiple attachment models ([Miljkovitch et al., 2015, 2018](#)) also raised questions as to the role alternative attachment figures can play in the integration of traumatic experience and the subsequent development of maltreated children.

Mentalization was introduced by the "Ecole Psychosomatique de Paris" and inspired the more recent work of Peter Fonagy and Mary Target. During her PhD., Karin Ensink worked with these leading figures in the study of mentalization at University College in London. According to these authors, the capacity to comprehend others and oneself as thinking beings with their own beliefs, needs, and desires results from early attachment relationships ([Fonagy et al., 1991](#)). In line with the French pioneers' conception, they consider that when affect is intolerable and that a person is not mature enough to mentally deal with it, processes which are necessary for generating and understanding affect are blocked. Consequently, trauma and relatedly childhood abuse and neglect have always been recognized as critical factors for mentalization.

Before that, [Bowlby \(1973\)](#) insisted that attachment relationships enable children to gain protection from adult caregivers, fostering a sense of security and helping them gradually regulate stress on their own. In this context, attachment figures play an important role in helping their child represent others' and his/her own internal states and how they underlie behavior. In so doing, they also help him/her integrate adverse life events ([Bretherton, 1990](#)). But in the case of trauma, cognitive processing of social interactions is compromised, thus putting children at risk of dysregulated affect and subsequently an array of psychological disorders (see [Sharp et al., 2008](#)). Parallel to that, children elaborate internal working models which serve as guides for understanding relationships in light of past experience ([Bowlby, 1980](#)). Hence, family violence is likely to tarnish their conception of relationships and thereby lead to various relational problems. It is therefore crucial to better understand the implications of attachment and mentalization processes in developmental psychopathology, so as to identify ways of improving adaptation after surviving from maltreatment. Considering victims' attachment network in addition to focusing on a generalized trait of the person can also bring new light on potentially protective factors.

A series of papers from this special issue deal with the intergenerational cycle of abuse and ways of breaking it. First, Xiafei Wang presents results from parental reports to an online survey that elucidate the pathway from the experience of adverse life events in childhood to the onset of behavior problems in one's own child in adulthood. Her findings bring further light to the assumption that emotional dysregulation associated with past maltreatment prevents good mentalization (causing parents to misinterpret their children's intentions), thus precipitating the development of behavior problems in their offsprings. Thereby, her work points to parents' emotion regulation and prementalizing mode as two essential components that should warrant professionals' attention to alleviate the

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adverse effects of parent childhood maltreatment.

Likewise, Julia Garon-Bissonnette et al. examine the mediating role of maternal reflective functioning during pregnancy in the link between childhood abuse and neglect and subsequent developmental problems in their children during infancy. Their data on toddlers reveal different processes for boys and girls and emphasize the need to implement mentalization-based interventions during the perinatal period for mothers who have been maltreated during childhood.

Michel Sauvé et al. found maternal attachment states of mind to be a significant factor that differentiates victimized mothers who report behavior problems in their children from those who do not. More specifically, their findings suggest that a hostile/helpless state of mind may carry forward the deleterious intergenerational effects of childhood trauma. Consequently, working through attachment models to improve the integration of past experience into organized representations seems important in preventing transgenerational effects of maltreatment.

We (Miljkovitch et al.) also found disorganized attachment representations to play a critical role in the transmission of sexual abuse from one generation to the next among male survivors. Results suggest that romantic partners are key players in the cycle, by potentially reactivating negative representations of the relationship with the father, but also, in the best-case scenario, by countering the effect of insecurity and disorganization towards a non-protecting mother. Overall, the findings bring a global picture of the way multiple attachment relationships combine to sometimes prevent the repetition of abuse. They point to the relationship with the partner as an important one to work on for the prevention of further abuse.

In the same vein, Camille Danner-Touati et al. examined the protective role foster parents may play in the development of children placed following intrafamilial maltreatment. According to their data, it appears that the effect of past neglect and abuse on suicidal risk in adulthood cannot be completely stamped out. This is especially the case when victims are insecure and disorganized towards their mothers. But their findings also suggest that attachment to a foster parent can significantly buffer the deleterious effects of this potentially toxic relationship.

To complete this special issue, Nicolas Berthelot et al. developed a questionnaire especially focused on failures to mentalize trauma and adverse relationships. They identified seven factors revealing the different ways failures in mentalization can be expressed. Links with other assessments show this self-report can be a useful screening instrument in research or clinical intervention aimed at reducing psychopathology and intimate partner violence.

Overall, the papers from this special issue show that attachment and mentalization can both be significantly and durably impacted by the experience of childhood abuse and neglect and that the limited capacity to represent close relationships in an integrated and coherent way increases the risk of carrying forward the deleterious effects of past trauma into adulthood and with the next generation. But at the same time, findings highlight the fact that attachment representations and the capacity to mentalize constitute intervention targets clinicians can work on to help victims go on with their lives without the burden of past trauma.

More research is needed to document theoretical postulates concerning the development of mentalization and the extent to which early attachment is critical in this respect.

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