



MentEd

Mentalisierungsbasierte Pädagogik

Erasmus+ Mentalization training for pedagogical  
professionals

# **Module 2: Epistemic trust, ineffective mentalizing, attachment and stress**



## Module 2

# Structure

### Learning objectives

1. Communication, epistemic trust and social learning
2. Effective and non-effective mentalizing
3. Failure in mentalization, activation of the attachment system and stress  
(when is social learning no longer possible)
4. Recognising non-mentalizing mode in oneself and others



# Learning objectives I

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## Theoretical foundations

- Under what conditions can learning be better and what is necessary for this?
- When is social learning no longer possible?
- What are the different facets of mentalizing?
- What happens when the mentalizing breaks down?

## Practical aspects

- Diagnostics: How do you recognise, in yourself and in others, when mentalizing is not taking place?
- What types of non-mentalizing can be distinguished?

# Epistemic trust and knowledge transfer

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**Epistemic Trust** is the basic trust in a caregiver as a safe source of information.

This is a requirement for social learning.

# „A natural history of human thinking“

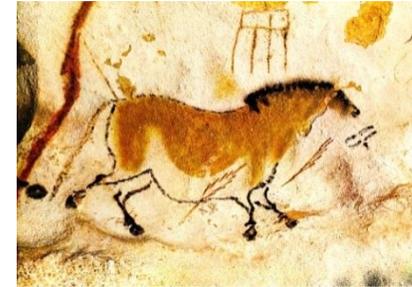
"At a certain point [...] early humans were forced into cooperative ways of living and therefore their thinking became more focused on devising ways of cooperating with others to achieve common goals. This changed everything" (Tomasello 2014, p. 18).



Michael Tomasello  
From 1998 to 2018 Co-Director at  
the Max Planck Institute for  
Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig

# Communication and social learning

- Ca. 75.000-50.000 B.C.
- First symbols and tools
  
- Imagination creates a world behind the physical world
  - ***Beginning of art and culture***
- Tools for the manufacturing of tools
- Living together in larger groups
  - ***Increasing importance of communication***



# But how do we know who to learn from?

How is trust related to attachment?



# Epistemic vigilance + communication

Learning about culture/ Protection against deception  
social learning

*epistemic  
vigilance*

- ✓ - belonging to a group
- ✓ - attachment
- ✓ - ostensive stimuli
- ✓ - mentalization

**Disruptions**

- Inhibition of social learning/ closure

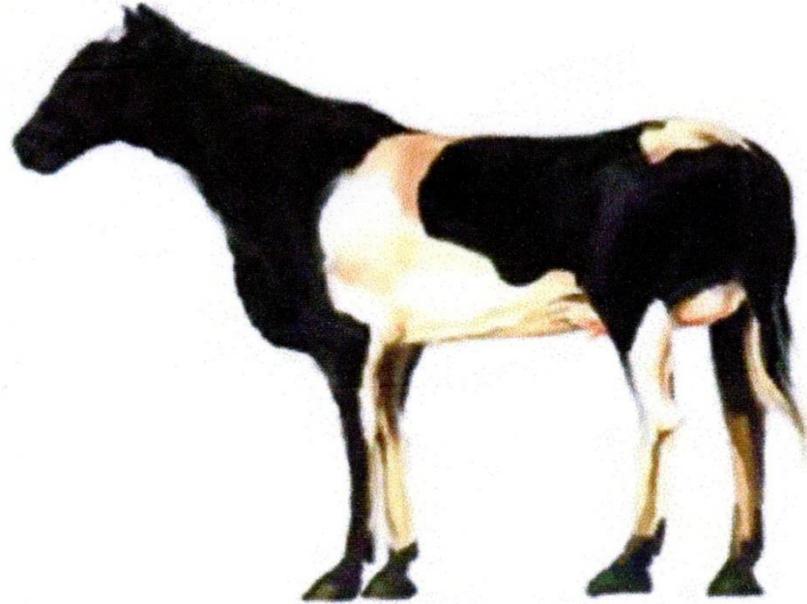
vs.

- Gullibility
- Isolation
- Hypervigilant

# Epistemic vigilance

- From an early age, children develop a sense of who they can believe and who they are more suspicious of

# Cow or Horse? (Corriveau et al. 2009)

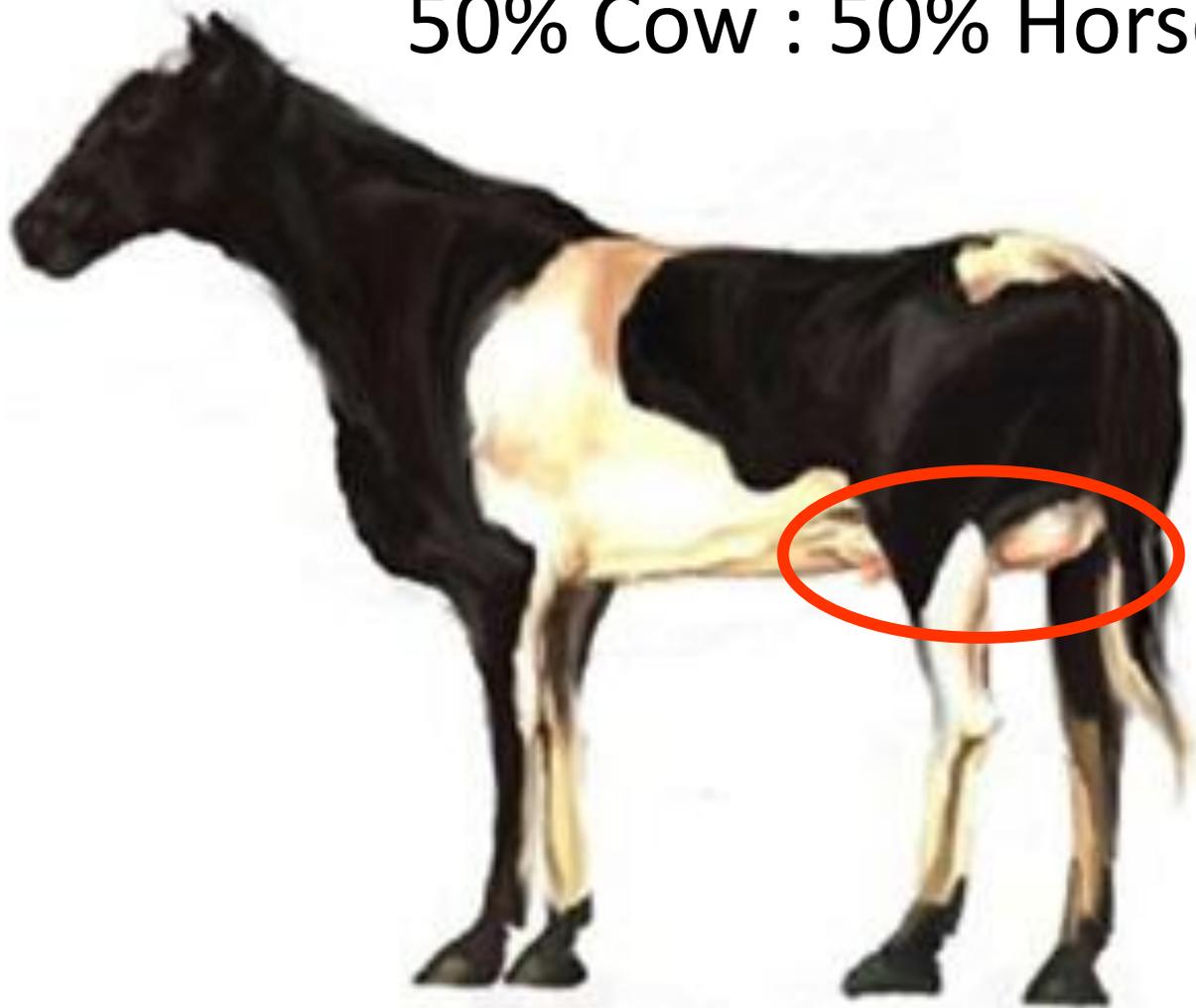


Children aged about 5-6 years are asked to decide whether a fantasy animal (e.g. 75% horse and 25% cow) is now a horse or a cow.

The mother and a stranger name the object differently. For example, the mother calls it a cow, the stranger a horse.

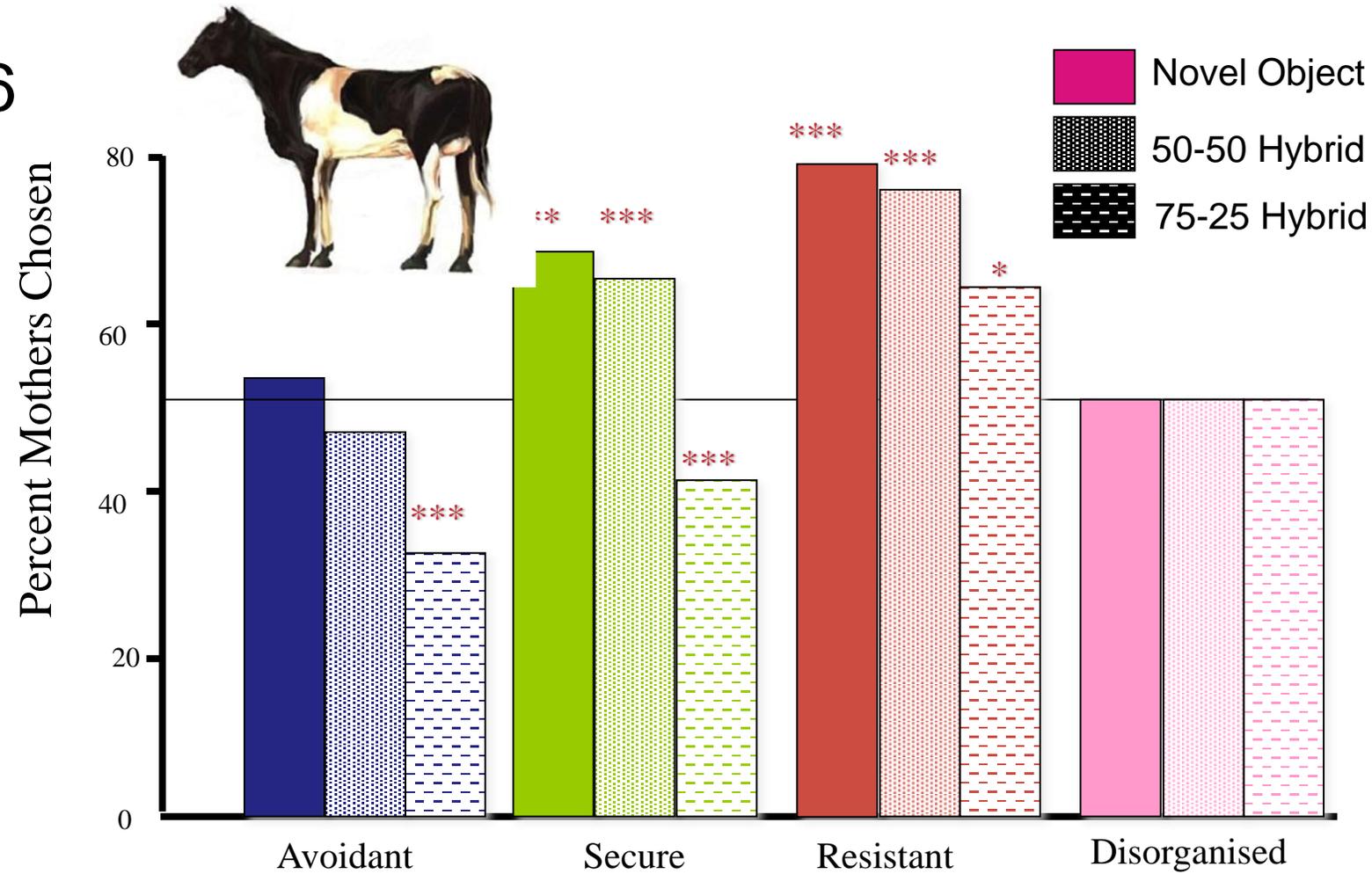
Example: a 50:50 animal from Corriveau et al.

50% Cow : 50% Horse



# Proportion of Trials on Which Children Chose Their Mother for Information by Attachment Group and by task

N=146



Corriveau, Harris, Meins et al.,  
*Child Dev.*, 80, 750-761.

Attachment Classification at 18 months

# Epistemic trust and attachment

- Securely attached children respond flexibly. They prefer the mother's statement, but trust their own perception if the mother's statement differs from the objective picture.
- Insecurely avoiding children trust the judgement of the stranger rather than that of the mother.
- Insecurely ambivalently attached children are more likely to trust their mother's judgement than that of the stranger, even if this is obviously wrong. Insecurely attached children as a whole do not trust their own perception very much.
- **Especially disorganised attached children get into stress (epistemic hypervigilance) and isolation because they cannot trust themselves or others.**

Modul3 2: 1. Epistemic trust (ET) and social learning

## **Communication, epistemic trust and social learning**

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ET describes the process of information and knowledge transfer as being characterised by sufficient trust in the authenticity and well-meaning intention of the source (understood here as the primary attachment figures).

This goes hand in hand with recognising the personal relevance of knowledge that is passed on from one person to the next.

”

As long as people succeed in interpreting their environment and themselves in a metalizing way, they feel neither at the mercy of their environment nor of themselves.

### **Group assignment:**

- Discuss among yourselves for 15 minutes which (relationship) aspects seem important to you in order to create a successful learning atmosphere!



# The pedagogical stance is enabled by ostensive communication signals

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Children are characterised by a species-specific sensitivity to certain non-verbal ostensive communication signals, i.e. those that make an intention visible. (Csibra & Gergely, 2009, 2011).

These include, for example, eye contact, purposeful pointing movements or the individual singsong of the mother's voice (motherese) or, on a verbal level, addressing the child directly by name.

Module 2: 3. Epistemic trust and social learning

## ET and knowledge transfer

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Infants and toddlers are preferentially sensitised to these previously described signals within the framework of a communicative act (i.e. Egyed, Király & Gergely, 2013).

This increases their attention and the likelihood of absorbing the information subsequently conveyed (Csibra & Gergely, 2009) - this opens up a kind of "epistemic highway" (Fonagy, 2015). Here, ostensive means an explicit display of the communication intention in the sense of: "What I have to tell you now is important and especially meant for you".

Epistemic trust often develops when, through these channels of communication (ostensive cues), the child experiences that the caregiver is trying to see the world through the child's eyes (mentalizing).



# Evolutionary perspectives on metalizing

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The overlap between the neural systems of the mentalizing of self and other establishes a possible connection to the intersubjective origin of the self.

evolution has "pre-programmed" our brain for psychosocial interventions (experienced in relationships)

There is an inherent desire/disposition to learn about opaque mental states in our social environment (in therapy or school and beyond)

The easiest way to learn about mental states is under the condition of epistemic trust -> **generalisability is made possible.**

# Shared, joint attention

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## Joint Attention (cf. Tomasello)

It's not just about looking at the same thing.

It is about a shared experience in seeing something third

It is about a **sequence, about intentional communication**, which is demonstrably about

- We look at the same thing and it has meaning
- Neither the object nor the other are interchangeable or arbitrary
- Willingness to pay attention is checked beforehand - are you ready to look with me?

# Secure attachment and learning

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These aspects seem largely obsolete in the secure attachment relationship between mother and child: ET arises because here the "sender has shown himself to be repeatedly trustworthy, guided by good intentions, a source of resilient knowledge that can be generalised beyond the current context, *and* at the same time has demonstrated adequate sensitivity to questionable other sources of knowledge" (Nolte & Fonagy, 2017).

Cognitive advantage of securely attached children!



Repetition

Module 1: Theoretical foundations of the mentalization approach

# Developmental psychology foundations

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**"Mirroring" as social feedback in the context of affect regulation**

**Double signaling:** Affects are not mirrored 1:1, but in a modified form.

→ "Marking thesis": exaggerated/pronounced ("marked") mirroring leads to referential decoupling (the infant can experience the marked affect in the "as-if" module and referentially anchor it in its self in the form thus changed).

→ Marking contributes to self-regulatory capacity and the formation of secondary representations

(Fonagy et al., 2018; Dornes, 2019)

Module 2: 3. Epistemic trust and social learning

## ET and mentalizing

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When a child experiences being mentalized, their understanding of the intentions of others improves (a reflective self can emerge).

Twin studies show that this is not a genetic process but requires the child to develop strategies so that it can cope in the developmental niche into which it was born.

The feeling of being contiguously responded to (i.e. mentalized) by the other is the quintessential ostensive signal that it is safe to learn (from the other) - a primary biological signal.

# Excursus Experimental Research: Ostensive cues: or how do I gain attention

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Slidess: P. Fonagy, Sept. 2017, London, Gergely, Egyed et al. (2013)

18 month old infants

2 unknown objects

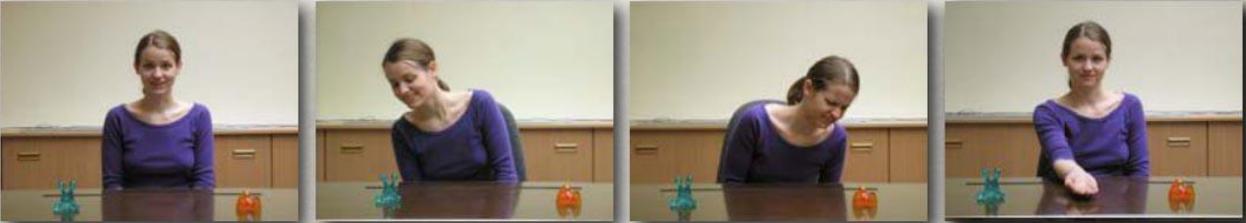


# Ostensive cues:

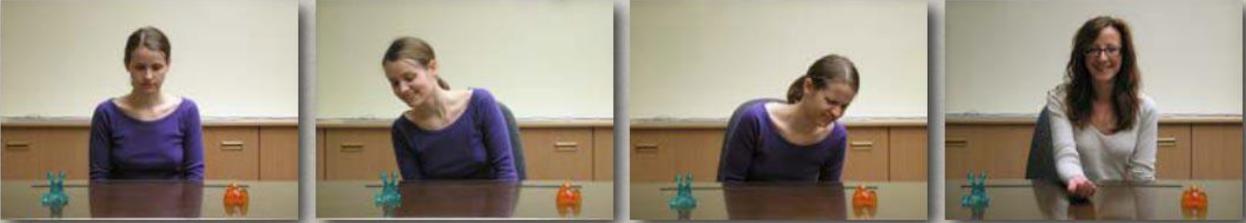
## LEARNING FROM ATTITUDE EXPRESSIONS

18-month-olds

Ostensive Expression - Generalization



Non-Ostensive Expression - No Generalization



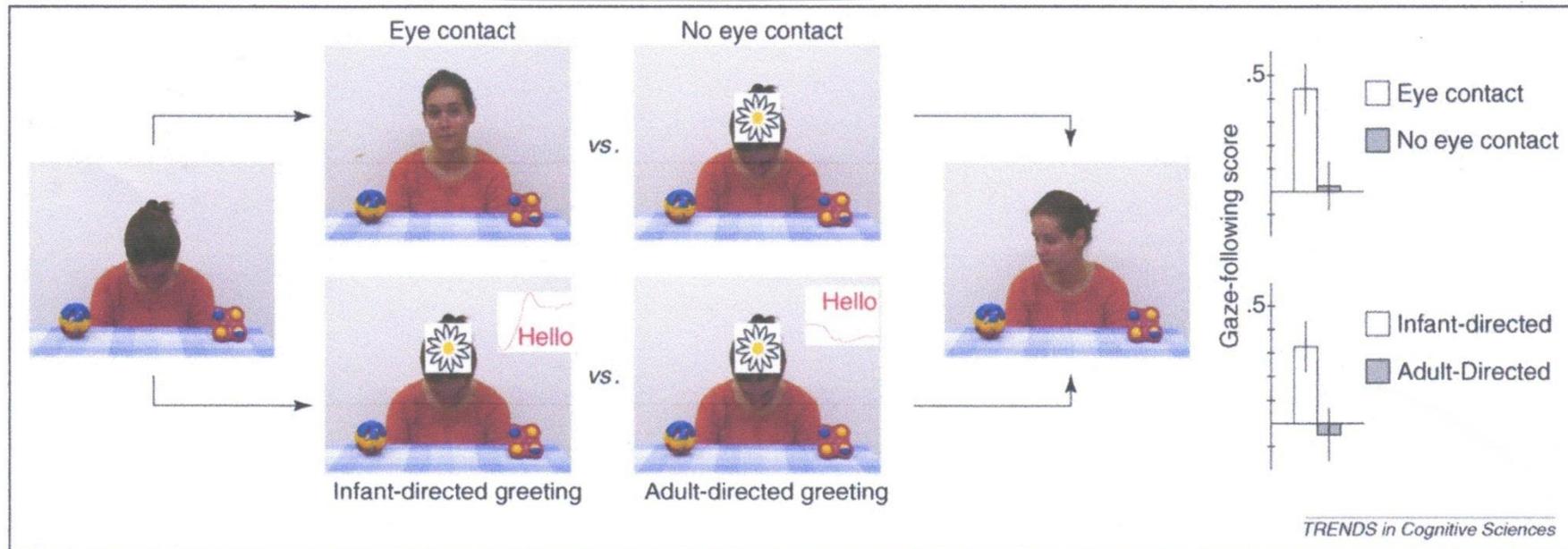
Object



71

40

# Promoting epistemic trust



Basic research by Csibra & Gergely (2009, 2011) shows how **eye contact, divided attention and "motherese"** appear to open communication channels that direct attention and improve the child's confidence in the meaning of the caregiver's statements.

Module 2: 3. Epistemic trust and social learning

## How is ET created?

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We all have a **personal narrative**

The **being understood** of this narrative **by another person** generates the **potential for epistemic trust**

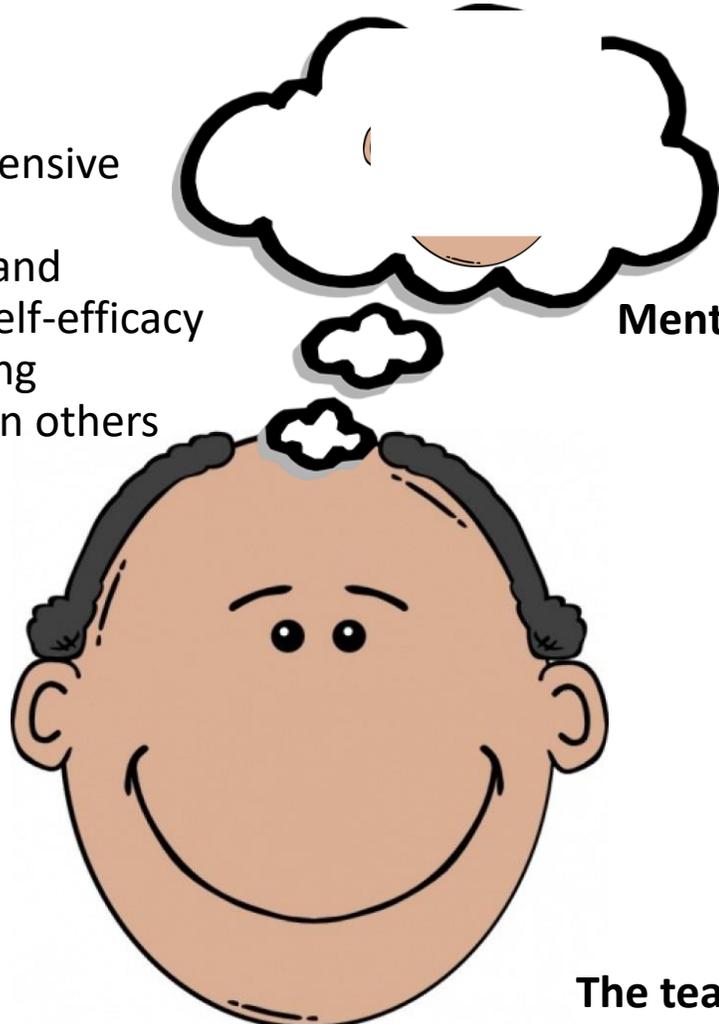
The **perception of this understanding of one's own narrative by the other** generates ET

2. The facilitator's image of the learner's narrative

3. The learner's image of what the facilitator has made of his or her self-narrative

4. The epistemic match

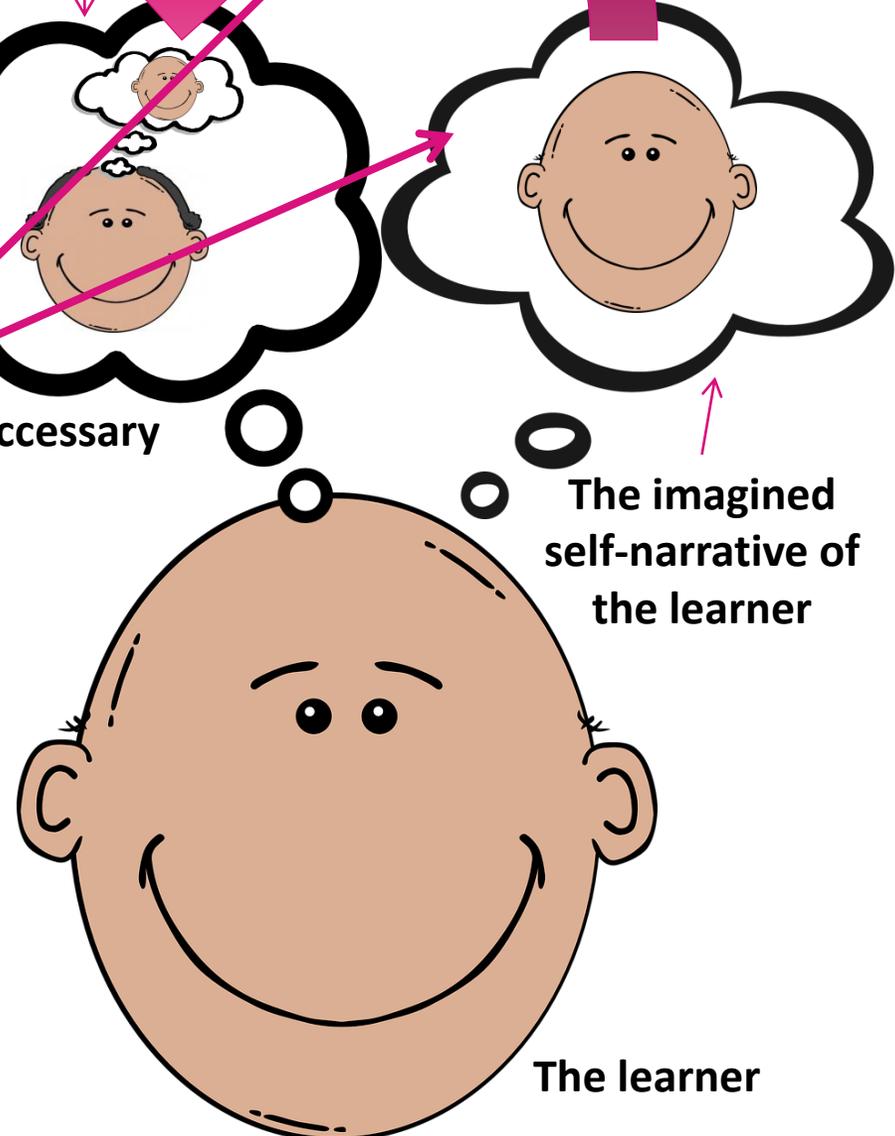
Effective ostensive Signals:  
Generating and perceiving self-efficacy and becoming mentalised in others



Mentalization (RF) necessary

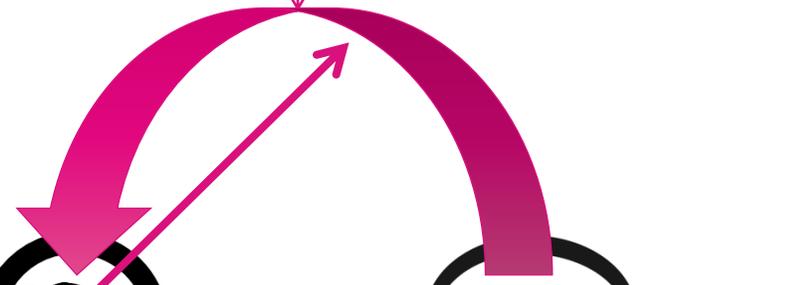
Opening epistemic channels for knowledge transfer

The teacher



The imagined self-narrative of the learner

The learner





**Openness to the (social) environment is usually adaptive...**



**Openness to the (social) environment is usually adaptive...**



**Openness to the (social) environment is usually adaptive...**



**...but so is hypervigilance under certain circumstances**

# Restoration of social learning

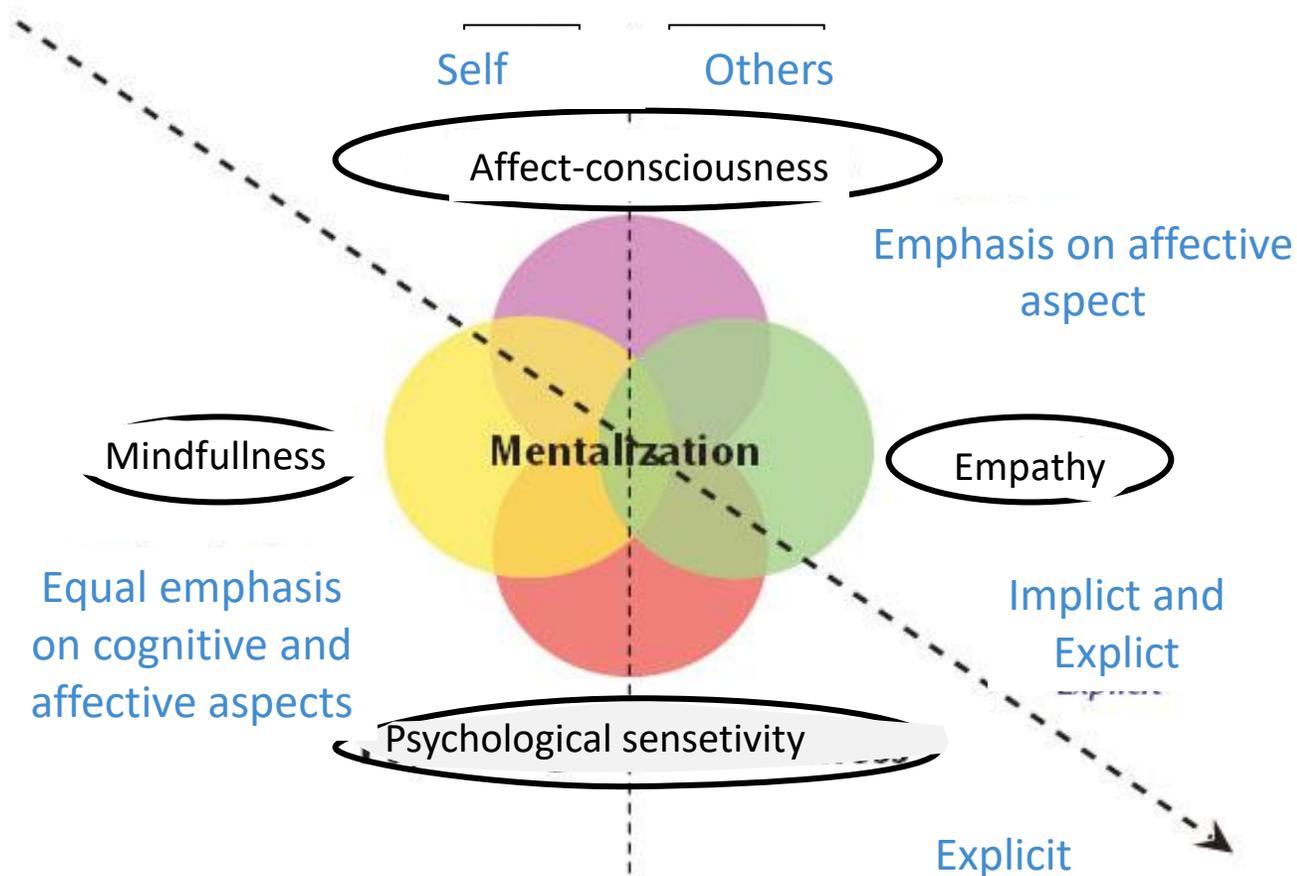
- The restoration of the ability to mentalize (or the experience of being mentalized) brings a person out of their epistemic isolation.
- We need to have new relational and learning experiences to change (behaviour, knowledge absorption, understanding of ourselves and others).
- We must be able to engage with these experiences or learn to do so again or anew.

Module 2:

## 2. Effective and non-effective mentalizing

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## Recursion: Mentalization and overlapping constructs



# Dimensions:Summary

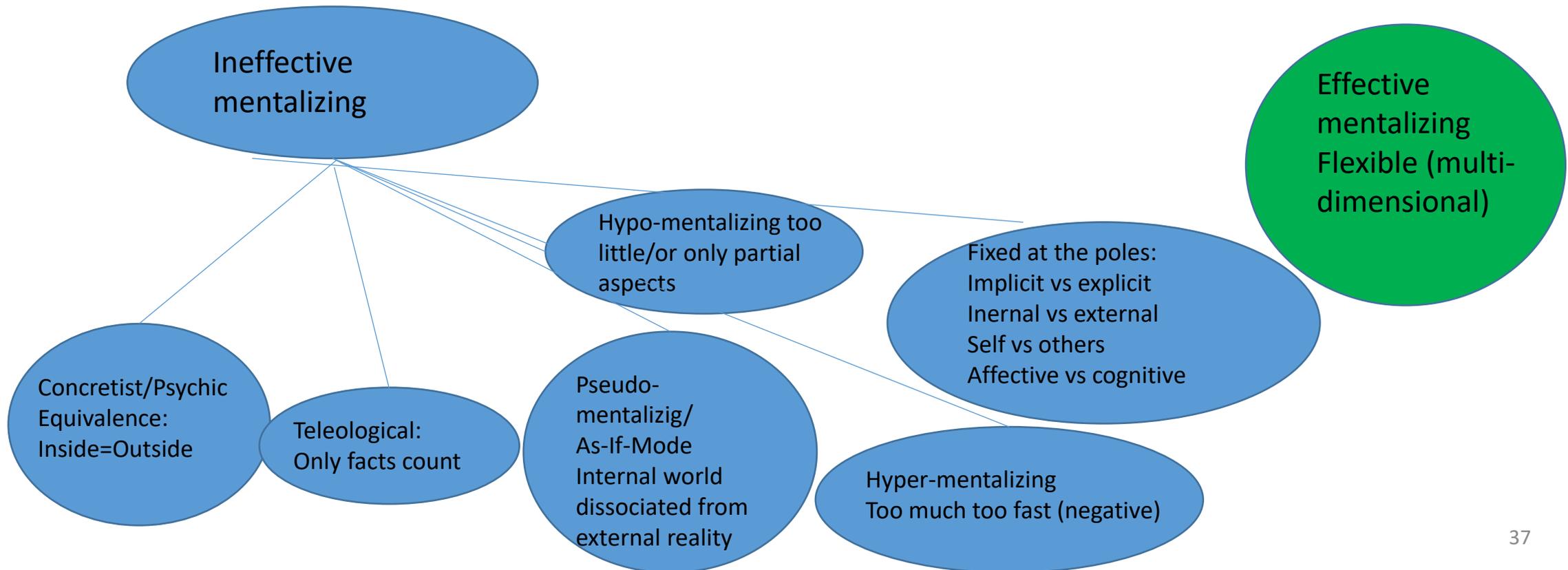
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*Explicit mentalizing* is a relatively conscious, intentional and reflexive process. *Implicit mentalizing* occurs mainly automatically and non-reflectively in interpersonal interactions. Explicit mentalizing is to implicit mentalising as *declarative* memory is to *procedural* memory.

*Inwardly* focused processes involve attention to the *inner* psychic worlds of self and others, while *outwardly* focused processes involve attention to *external*, physical and mostly visual features of other individuals, self or shared interaction.

Allen, J., Fonagy, P., Bateman, A.: Mentalisieren in der psychotherapeutischen Praxis. Stuttgart 2011

# Characteristics



# **Effective mentalizing**

- **All poles/dimensions are used**
- **Situation- and relationship-specific balance between the poles**
- **Diverse perspectives**

Module 2:

## 3. Failure in mentalizing

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# Failure in mentalizing

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1. Ineffective mentalizing as fixation on pole(s)
2. Breakdown of mentalizing and recourse to pre-mentalizing modes, hypo- and hyper-mentalizing
3. Mentalization and stress

## Concrete understanding

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- Everything is concrete
- Only facts or evaluations are presented. Influence of situational or physical factors are overemphasised.
- Contents of thinking and feeling arouse fear, thoughts are not just thoughts.
- Meanings, symbols, emotions are not perceived.
- There is only one truth, different perspectives cannot be taken.
- Lack of attention to the thoughts, feelings and wishes of others.
- Tendency to generalise and prejudice

# Teleological action/ instrumentalisation of mentalizing

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## General information:

Mentalizing is used to control the behaviour of another and often in a way that is harmful/detrimental to the 'mentalized'.

A seemingly almost excessive/exaggerated ability to mentalize at the expense of the ability to represent one's own mental state.

Knowledge of another's emotional state without the ability to resonate with it.

Module 2: Failure of mentalization

# Pseudo-mentalizing

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Knowledge about thoughts and feelings is extended beyond the specific context

The knowledge of thoughts and feelings is presented in a form and complexity that lacks the frame of reference

Idealisation of insight for its own sake

Thoughts about others are experienced by them as opaque and confusing

Basis: no *reliable* psychological model available

# Hypo-mentalizing

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Level above concretist and teleological "a little" mentalizing, not yet effective, not yet appropriate to the situation.

# Hyper-mentalizing

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Goes hand in hand with hypervigilance, unquestioned assumptions and uncontrolled, excessive reasoning.

Bateman & Fonagy, 2015

## Can be observed frequently:

1. when a person is in a state of high arousal
2. when a differentiation of self and other fails in relation to the attribution of a mental state.
3. when the ability to integrate cognitions and affects is impaired.
4. when the switch between automatic and explicit mentalizing fails.

Module 2:

# Mentalizing and stress

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# What situations reduce the ability to mentalize?

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1. **Stress**
2. Intensive relationships (activation of the attachment system)
3. Feeling misunderstood
4. Trauma-associated moments

Module 2: Mentalizing and stress

# Stress and self-regulation

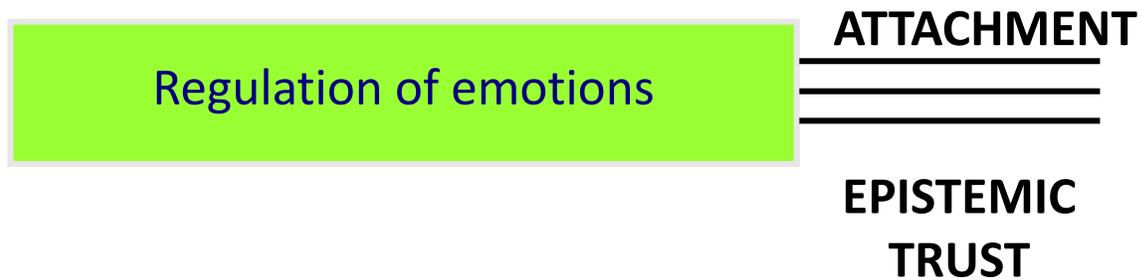
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## Mentalizing

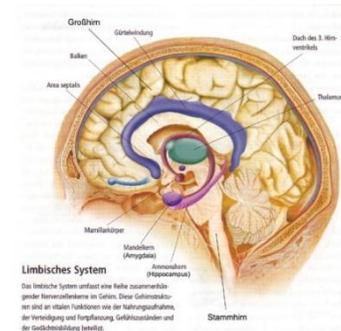
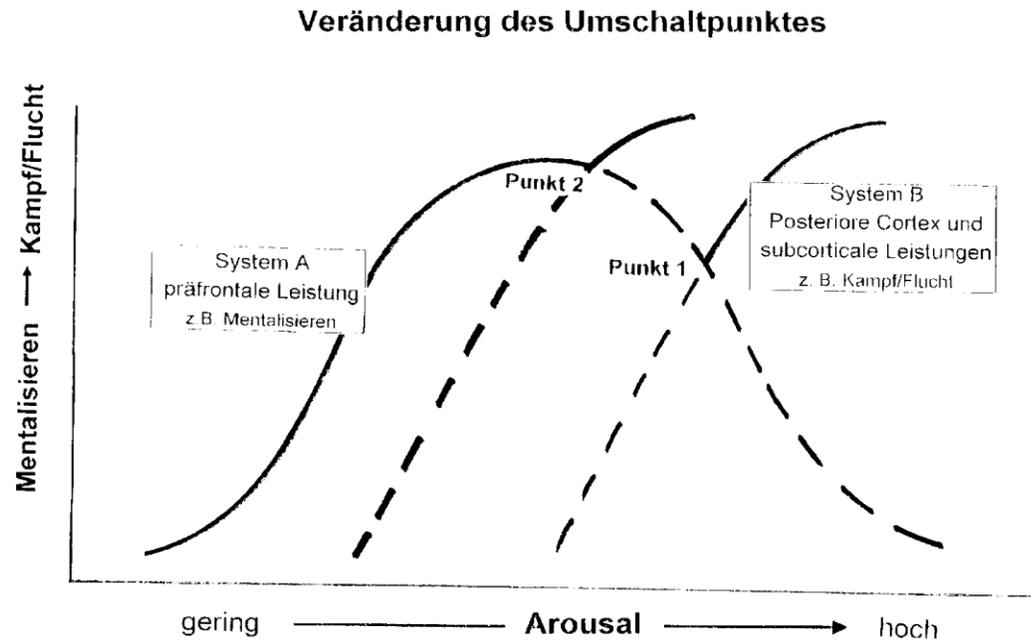
Is most difficult,  
when we need it the most



# How attachment relates to affect regulation

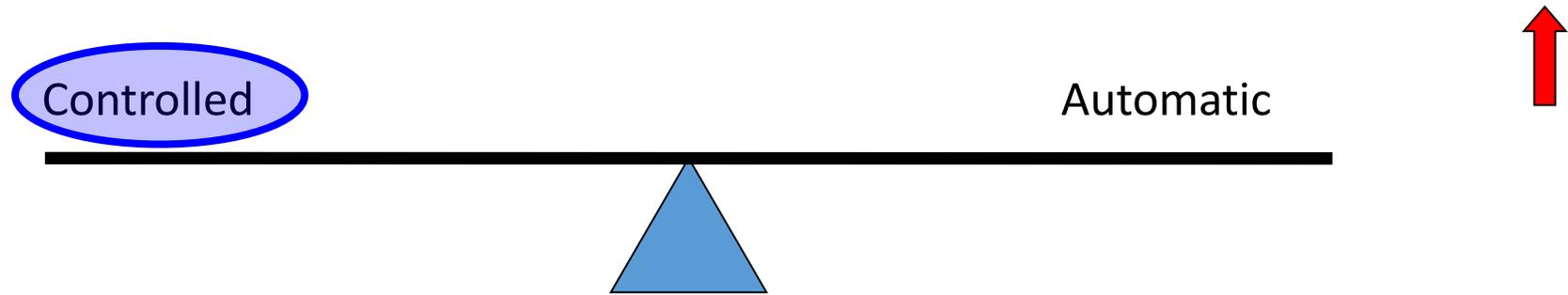


# Stress-dependent information processing Biobehavioural switch model (Luyten et al. 2015)



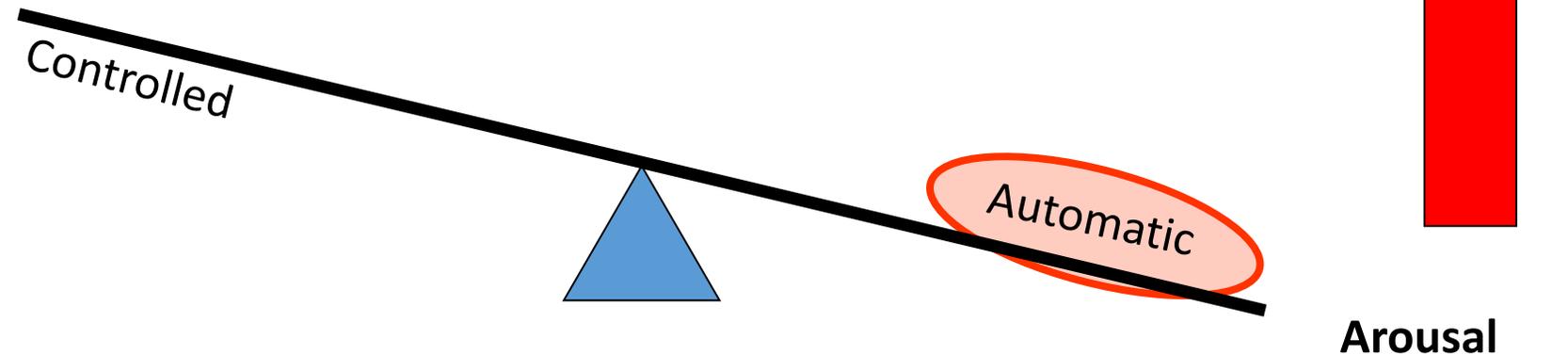
# Dimensions of mentalizing: implicit/automatic vs. explicit/controlled

Under high arousal, psychological understanding decreases and rapidly leads to confusion about mental states.



# Dimensions of mentalizing: Implicit/automatic vs. explicit/controlled

The **demand to explore** subjects that evoke intense emotional responses involving conscious reflection and explicit mentalizing is difficult to reconcile with the person's ability to do so under stress.



Module 2: Mentalizing and stress

# **Failure of the mentalization capacity --- Consequences for other dimensions?**

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Module 2: Mentalizing and stress

# **Social "contagion" model**

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1. **Mentalizing leads to mentalizing**
2. **Non-mentalizing generates non-mentalizing**

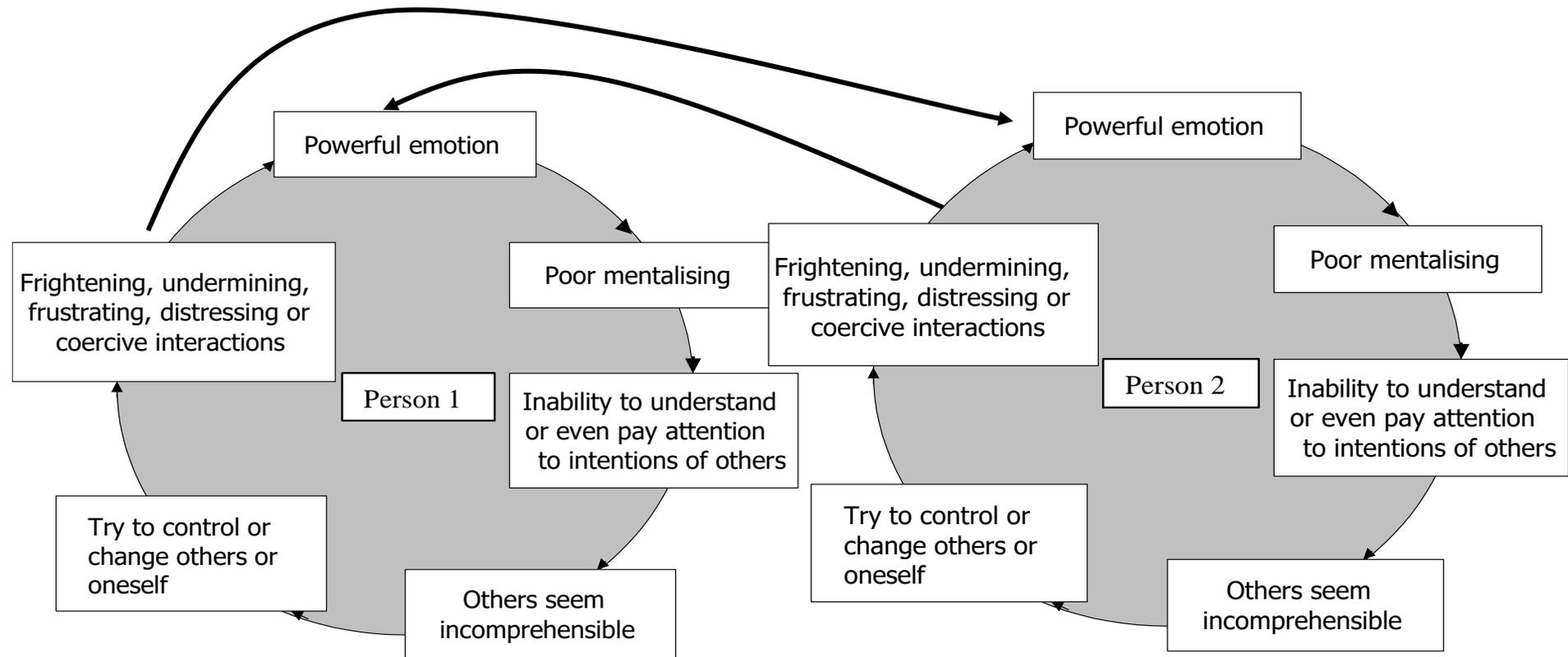
# Failure of the mentalization capacity -- consequences on other dimensions?

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- Non-mentalizing triggers intense, difficult feelings that are hard to manage in the other person. Often such non-mentalizing interactions are repetitive and predictable.
- Non-mentalizing leads to trying to control behaviour instead of understanding it. Controlling behaviour triggers strong emotions in others, so he cannot mentalize either.
- Conclusion: Create stress-free or stress-reducing space....



# Inhibition cycle of mentalization in a dyad or group



Module 2: Mentalization and stress

## **Stress and self-regulation**

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Change of perspective: The behaviour not the starting point but the result of a process ("assumption of a good reason")

Failure in metalization and (temporary) loss of control capacity

Re-staging and externalisation of a foreign self

Module 2: Mentalization and stress

## Effects of coercion or control

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*„[...]“Violent systems or contexts of coercion (e.g. criminal justice, custody) often inhibit mentalization (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco 2005, Straub & Stavrou 2014). **Through coercion, strong control or threats, fear, anger and humiliation are generated and non-mentalizing cycles are maintained.** This means there is often a chronic failure of mentalizing in these environments.“ (Kirsch & Zapp in Druck)*

# Three types of conflicts and their consequences

(Gingelmaier & Kirsch 2020)

## 1. (Deliberate) provocations, boundary violations



(e.g. anger, irritation, curiosity, competition, affection, group dynamics, contact, (sexual) attraction, boredom, projections, insecurity, developmental conflicts, fear, testing out...)

### What is the conflict for?

Situational, developmental-psychological, biographical in the pedagogical institution.

### Handling:

Playfully and humorously de-escalating or showing boundaries (professionally mentalizing = not counter-aggressive, no revenge).

## 2. Hot conflicts (impulsive affect breakthroughs)

### What is the trigger?

What prevents emotion regulation in the hot situation?

### Handling:

Consider harm to self and others

- How can emotion regulation be built up and supported, especially for heated phases?

## 3. Cold conflicts (empathy disorder)

### Why is there a lack of empathy?

- Consider dynamics of power and powerlessness (biographically).
- Topic: Fear (avoidance, processing)

### Handling

- Reliability of the pedagogical professionals and the institution
- Working at the limits (manipulation, smallest progress, regression and frustration omnipresent)
- Enduring relationship work on Epistemic Trust
- Support any form of showing feelings (fear, aggr.)
- Protection of victims

Wird mit Mißbrauch assoziiertes soziales Verständnis inhibiert, kann das weiteren Mißbrauch begünstigen

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Adversive emotionale  
Erfahrungen mit Wurzeln  
in Beziehungen

Module 2:

## **4. Reconising non-mentalizing modes in oneself and others**

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Module 2: Perceive non-mentalizing modes in oneself and others

## Being misunderstood

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Although the ability to recognise and understand mental states in others is important, it remains essential to be aware of one's own limitations of this ability.

Firstly, interventions based on false assumptions lead to (at least) confusion

Secondly, being misunderstood is a highly aversive experience.

It triggers strong emotions, which can result in compulsions, regression, hostility, protection and rejection.

## Module 2: Perceive non-mentalizing modes in oneself and others

# Recovery

Binding	Switch Point	Extend of reaction	Restoration of M.
Secure	High	Mittel	Fast
Hyperactivating (insecure- ambivalent)	low (hyperresponsive binding system)	Stark	Slow
Deactivating, (unsafe-avoiding)	Rather high (emotional distance, cognitive, only emotional at high stress level)	Weak (but strong as stress increases)	Relatively fast
Desorganisiert (Deactivating and Hyperactivating Strategies)	Incoherent	Stong	Slow

Module 2: Perceive non-mentalizing modes in oneself and others

# Ineffective mentalizing – Definition and consequences

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Ineffective mentalizing = consequence of mentalization failures attempts due to limited components of mentalizing.

**Inability** to take into account the complexity of mental states in the self and others.

Constructive and progressive **interpersonal and social involvement is reduced**

**Inability to calibrate self-states through the psyche of others**

Difficulty in identifying and modulating own emotions

Limited acceptance of **alternative perspectives**

Difficulty in finding common points of view

Module 2: Perceive non-mentalizing modes in oneself and others

# Indicators of ineffective mentalizing

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Focus on external factors such as school, neighbours, youth welfare office

Focus on physical or structural labels (tired, lazy, clever, self-destructive, depressive)

.

Putting labels on others, stereotyping ("He's just trying to attract attention again!")

Non-questioning, no curiosity, categorical ("She hates maths")

Absence of content (e.g. in depression) auf

Module 2: Perceiving non-mentalising modes in oneself and others

# Indicators of ineffective mentalizing

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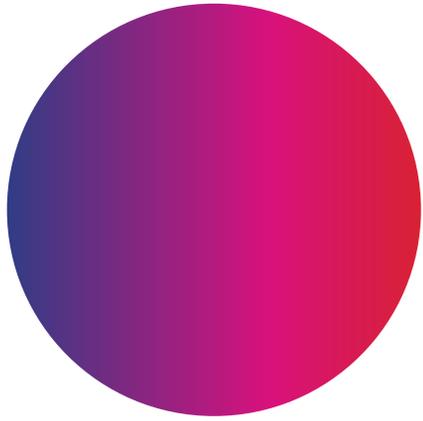
Constant reference to **rules**, responsibilities, 'shoulds' and 'should nots'.

**Denial of responsibility** or awareness of problems

**Blaming, looking for the fault in others**

**Absence of openness to other perspectives, rigidity**

**Insinuations instead of understanding**



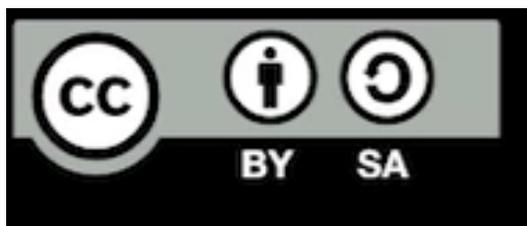
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Mentalisierungsbasierte Pädagogik

Nolte, Tobias (Responsible for the module) in cooperation of Gengelmaier, S.; Turner, A.; Kirsch, H.

Citation recommendation:

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# Epistemic trust, recognition of mentalisation disorders, attachment activation and stress

## Literature

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Allen, J., Fonagy, P., Bateman, A. 2011  
Brockmann Kirsch (2020) Seminar Mentalisieren in der Psychotherapie  
Bateman & Fonagy, 2015  
Choi-Kain & Gunderson, Am J Psychiat 2008)  
Corriveau et al. 2009  
Corriveau, Harris, Meins et al.,  
Csibra & Gergely, 2009, 2011  
Gingelmaier 2017

# Epistemic trust, recognition of mentalisation disorders, attachment activation and stress

## Literature

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Egyed, Király u. Gergely, 2013

Fonagy 2015

Fonagy & Alison 2014

Mayes 2000

Sperber et al., 2010

Tomasello 2014

Zemke- Brockmann-Kirsch (2020)