

Theory of mentalization and interaction analysis

Integrating language and psychology

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Mentalization refers to the ability to hold mind in mind – it refers to the process by which individuals interpret actions of themselves and others as meaningful on the basis of mental states such as feelings, needs and reasons. Peter Fonagy and his colleagues have developed a theory of mentalization that explains the development of mentalizing abilities and their consequences for interpersonal relationships.

This paper suggests an integration of the theory of mentalization with interaction analysis. It is argued that by framing an analysis of interaction within a theory of mentalization the researcher is able to explore and bring into the analysis interactants' psychological inner states such as feelings and unconscious patterns of actions. Introducing extracts from a General Practitioner's consultation with a depressed patient, it is shown how actions such as preemptive completion and self repair performed by the GP can be interpreted as performances that unconsciously deal with the patients' feelings and needs. It is also suggested that the integration of the two paradigms of language and psychology respectively, brings more light to the ways in which mentalization is enacted in conversations; and that the findings in conversation analysis regarding the order of interactions can inform how mentalization is interactionally achieved.