

Mentalization, Epistemic Trust, and the Treatment of Personality Disorder

Peter Fonagy, PhD

Freud Memorial Professor of Psychoanalysis and Head of Research
Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology - University College London.
Chief Executive, The Anna Freud Centre

Peter Fonagy is Freud Memorial Professor of Psychoanalysis and Head of Research at the Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, University College London, UK. He is also Chief Executive, The Anna Freud Centre, UK. Professor Fonagy is an internationally recognized expert in modern psychoanalytic approaches to treatment, particularly those with a grounding in attachment theory. He is perhaps best known for defining the concept of mentalizing and as co-developer (with Bateman) of Mentalization-Based Treatment (MBT) for Borderline Personality Disorder. Professor Fonagy's research has focused largely on prevention and treatment for major societal problems. He has received many millions of pounds in grant funding and has international collaborators across the globe. He has to date over 400 published papers, 17 books, 15 edited books, 200 book chapters. He has given countless talks to professionals. Professor Fonagy has received a great number of awards over his distinguished career, but perhaps most notable of these is the British Psychological Society (BPS) Lifetime Achievement Award (2012), the Order of the British Empire, The Queen's Birthday Honours (2013), and election as Fellow to the Academy of Medical Sciences (2014).

*

This paper will give an overview of recent findings linking reflective function and childhood trauma in the context of attachment relationships. It will examine these constructs in the context of the treatment of personality disorder with special reference to the role of epistemic trust and the establishment of a therapeutic alliance.

A number of effective treatments for personality disorder are currently available. More recently a shift towards an integrative view proposing a limited number of fundamental treatment principles has become popular. The paper will describe a new conceptualization of borderline personality disorder and its treatment based on the role of attachment, mentalizing and epistemic trust in the development of the psychopathology. It will propose that vulnerability to psychopathology in general is related to impairments in epistemic trust and that borderline personality disorder is perhaps best characterized by a pervasive lack of trust and a sense of epistemic hyper vigilance. The paper suggests that this conceptualization makes sense of the rigidity and instability of borderline personality disorder and has far reaching implications for treatment interventions, which will be briefly explored.

Objectives

1. To acquire an understanding of the impact of maltreatment on personality disorder from the point of view of mentalization theory.
2. Gain familiarity with the concept of epistemic trust and epistemic hyper vigilance.

3. Gain preliminary knowledge of techniques used in mentalization based treatment to enhance epistemic trust in patients with persistent psychological disorders.