

# *MEN • TALE • IZATIONS*

Understanding Mentalization in  
Practice Through Narratives

Anique van der Putten

*Edited by Dennis Weyrauch*



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# Introduction

## **Sharing tales to remember**

Sharing tales has been a fundamental part of human culture for thousands of years. We create and tell stories for various reasons. We tell them to entertain others, to express creativity, and to preserve history and cultural identity. Narrative sharing, especially in the form of self-disclosures, serves yet another meaningful purpose—it helps us to see things from the narrator's perspective. In other words, storytelling is essential for our ability to mentalize about one another. Therefore, writing a book that explains mentalization through the narrated experiences of people seemed like a natural choice.

Twenty-four tales have been selected—each of them presenting a unique perspective on mentalization. The concept of mentalization is repeatedly explained throughout the book, which promotes retention of the core teachings—enabling you to absorb, store and consistently ingrain the material from short-term memory into long-term memory, ensuring it remains available for future use.

## **Tested, and found boostable**

The stories in this book have been tested with a wide audience of readers and writers through publication on Medium.com. Of the 24 articles included here, 19 were boosted—a significant recognition, considering that only about 2 in every 100,000 stories (0.002%) receive such

visibility due to limited nominations and strict curation. This success is owed in large part to conscious effort to mentalize about the audience's and the curators' mental states by asking questions such as:

- What do they enjoy reading?
- What do they consider to be a well-crafted article?
- Is the information I share new or valuable to them?
- Will the story capture their interest?

### **A reliable compass**

Time for the big question: What on earth is mentalization? Mentalization is our ability to gather information from different types of human behavior to learn about what people are thinking and feeling. When we attentively observe the verbal and nonverbal behavior of people we are able to extract signals and cues, which provide telltale signs that reveal their inner lives. On the basis of this social information, we can infer, reflect on and understand the mental states of ourselves and others, such as emotions, desires, beliefs and intentions.

We mentalize constantly in daily life, using it to explain and predict behavior. By interpreting and anticipating actions through the lens of mental states, we gain a reliable compass for choosing the most effective ways to deal with others.

### **The root and catalyst**

Mentalizing helps us to recognize the similarities and differences between our own perspectives and those of others. Based on this understanding, we learn how our behavioral responses can shape the perspectives of others, and how we can be shaped by theirs. Mentalization is the root of self-understanding and the understanding of others and catalyzes deeper human connections and psychological growth.

### **Ease into mentalization**

In my first book on mentalization, *Mastering Mentalization*, I provide the reader with a clear and comprehensive description of the theoretical foundation for mentalization. *MEN•TALE•IZATIONS* serves as an introduction to mentalization for those who prefer to ease their way into understanding the value, advantages and broad practical utility of having well-developed mentalizing abilities. This book also functions as a buffet menu, as some tales might be more relatable to you than others. Every tale, however, will gradually enhance your level of understanding of the broad applicability of this awesome ability.

### **Animal kingdom**

Some of the tales in this book carry autobiographical elements focusing on specific events, themes, or periods in my life that are further explained from a mentalization point of view. The story of how I came to specialize in mentalization starts in my childhood. At a very young age, I was not yet



particularly interested in human nature, but I adored the animal kingdom. I played with cats—my hands were always covered with scratches—and I trained dogs, always observing their behavior closely in order to better understand them.

During my teenage years, I learned the skill of bringing young horses under saddle and retraining horses that had developed behavioral problems. Eventually, I developed the acumen to identify the reasons for the behavior of these beautiful creatures, and to understand and explain what was going on in their minds. This insight helped me to stay a step ahead of them by accurately predicting their next move... most of the time, anyway.

### **Human nature**

In my early adult life, my interest in the animal kingdom shifted to exploring human nature. This interest grew into a fascination when I started working jobs that required a high level of interpersonal interaction. At first, I worked as a management assistant. Being a little shy, as many of us are at that age, I didn't want to bother my supervisors with all kinds of questions, but at the same time I wanted to perform at my highest level of ability. Since I had honed my behavior observation skills to near perfection during my childhood and teenage years, I started applying them consciously in my job. This helped me to quickly grasp my supervisor's perspective and understand what was required of me to perform my job effectively, without needing detailed explanations or prompting. A bit like Emilio, the butler in the 2002 film *Mr. Deeds*. Interestingly, working in this

manner made me somewhat invisible in the workplace. Only after I left a job did people notice how much I had contributed to the organization. I came to understand that this way of working wasn't going to serve me well if I wanted to receive a raise or a promotion, something I was too shy to ask for at that tender age.

### **No longer invisible**

With the understanding that I needed to position myself better, I decided to obtain a degree in business administration and take on managerial jobs, not only in the Netherlands, my native country, but also in Kenya and India. This turned out to be an excellent career move, as my ability to gain the perspectives of others became my core competence. I was no longer invisible, as I became the go-to person in the office when people were seeking advice on attracting new customers, hiring the right candidates and enhancing the skills of the management team.

### **A fundamental human ability**

While working and living in Africa and Asia during my long-term assignments abroad, I became increasingly interested in the psychological intricacies of working in culturally diverse environments. I went on to university and obtained a bachelor's and master's degree in organizational psychology.

After completing both degrees, I set out to specialize in intercultural psychology. At the same time, I took on the role of assessing candidates for an organization that

recruited employees from all over the world. Soon it became apparent to me that I did not have time to get up to speed on the cultural peculiarities of every candidate before each assessment. Moreover, these candidates had mixed backgrounds, having been raised in one country, studied in another and worked in yet another. In other words, the candidates carried within them a variety of different cultural influences that were fused together into a highly personalized set of perspectives and accompanying behaviors.

In order to sharpen my assessment skills, I set out to identify a fundamental human ability—one that would help me to quickly grasp the perspectives of candidates and the reasons behind their behavior, without needing to possess an in-depth knowledge of the diverse cultural threads woven into each candidate's personal patchwork.

### **Mentalization and theory of mind**

I remember one rainy evening, sitting at my computer and reading a philosophical essay on mentalization. The essay explored whether mentalization arises from our ability for theoretical reasoning about mental states, or from our ability to simulate the mental states of others in our own minds. As I read along, it struck me that we likely mentalize on both levels. More importantly, I realized in that moment that mentalization was exactly the ability I had been searching for. Driven by that insight, I began studying the literature on mentalization and quickly discovered that the term mentalization is used primarily in the clinical field of

psychology, where it is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of therapy. I also learned that in order to find research beyond the clinical context—such as in game theory, psychopathology and artificial intelligence—I needed to include the search term theory of mind.

### **Mentalization never ceases to amaze**

The more I learned about mentalization and theory of mind, the more I fell in love with these concepts. For over a decade now, I have dedicated myself to researching this fascinating human ability, and it never ceases to amaze me. My efforts have resulted in authoring books, writing articles and developing assessments, training and workshops. Integrating the research has not been easy, as the scientific field is poorly unified across subfields, limiting the development of a cohesive body of knowledge. At the same time, it has been, and remains, an exciting exploration.

### **Organization of the tales**

I invite you to explore the many ways in which mentalization can be applied. The stories in this book are arranged to gradually unfold the breadth and depth of this remarkable human ability. They are tied together with easy-to-follow explanations that walk you through the full scope of mentalization, such as the process itself, its different levels and its key components. First, you will be introduced to the general concept and process of mentalization. Next, you will be invited to explore the different levels of mentalization—basic, affective and strategic—and the components of each.



From there, you will become familiarized with the three focal directions of mentalization: intrapersonal, interpersonal and extrapersonal. In the chapters that follow, the idea of mental time travel will be introduced, before turning to the mentalization challenges presented in the context of cultural differences and psychological disorders. You will then be prompted to look at mentalization as a resource that can be used to enhance mental health and promote self-empowerment. Finally, the concepts of mentalization and theory of mind will be placed into context within the field of artificial intelligence.