



## Review

# Child-focused maternal mentalization: A systematic review of measurement tools from birth to three



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## ABSTRACT

Although the relevance of the concept of maternal mentalization is widely accepted in the field of attachment and theory of mind research and practice, to date no systematic review of measurement tools capturing the concept exists. The present review addresses this lack by systematically searching and summarizing available instruments and providing a detailed content description. Instruments were identified by searching electronic databases as well as employing additional search strategies. The number of identified instruments was  $n = 15$ . In summary the instruments can be classified in interview and observational tools. To date no questionnaire exists capturing the concept. Tools vary greatly in theoretical foundation, psychometric evaluation, availability, and specific content domains.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of maternal mentalization is widely accepted in its significance for attachment as well as theory of mind research. Many different operationalizations of the construct exist, yet to date, no systematic review of measurement tools capturing the concept has been compiled. One non-systematic, narrative expert review lists four possible assessment options (2008). Moreover Choi-Kain and Gunderson [11] present a very detailed review of one possible operationalization of the construct (see Reflective Functioning Scale below). However, the whole stock of currently available tools to assess maternal mentalizing capacity has not been systematically searched, classified and compared according to dimensions relevant for the transfer into daily practice.

After defining maternal mentalization and providing a brief review of major research results regarding the construct, it is the goal of this systematic review to provide the reader with a detailed description of currently available assessment instruments to measure maternal child-focused mentalization capacity.

### 1.1. Definition

Several definitions of the broader term mentalization exist. Taking a psychoanalytical perspective and referring to Mary Main's elaborations on metacognitive monitoring Main [34] Sharp and Fonagy [54] describe mentalization as "both a cognitive process akin to psychological insight or perspective taking, and an emotional process, that is, the capacity to hold, regulate, and fully experience one's own and others' emotions in a non-defensive way without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down" (p. 740). The term reflective functioning in particular is used when this process is referred to in the context of attachment relationships.

Meins et al. [38] argues from a cognitive developmental point of view, connecting maternal mentalizing to children's theory of mind development as well as the evolution of secure attachment relationships. The author defines mentalization as the parental understanding that the child is capable of having own representations of the world and different stances that may be taken toward reality. She specifically coined the term mind–mindedness to describe "a mother's proclivity to treat her infant as an

individual with a mind rather than merely as a creature with needs that must be satisfied" (p. 638).

Based on these definitions the authors define maternal child-focussed mentalizing capacity for the purpose of this review as: the maternal ability to be sensitive to and aware of the infants' mental states, namely its thoughts, feelings, intentions, desires, or wishes. Instruments measuring this particular maternal ability will be the focus of this review.

### 1.2. Relevance

Since the pioneering work of Mary Main and her colleagues prompted the field of attachment researchers to 'move to the level of representation' [35] an increasing interest in the representational or mental world of parents regarding attachment relevant themes can be noted. This resulted in an impressive body of research regarding individual differences in the way parents mentalize and the effects on their children. Today, the capacity for mentalization is regarded as one of the main psychosocial variables mediating the significant influence of parents' representations of their past attachment experiences upon their child's current attachment status [67,22]. A phenomenon which is still awaiting its full resolution by contemporary attachment research, namely the question how attachment is transmitted from generation to generation ('transmission gap', Ijzendoorn van [29]). Exemplary to that effect Fonagy et al. [21] were amongst the first to be able to link a mother's overall prenatal reflective functioning (RF), one possible operationalization of mentalizing capacity, to secure attachment at 1 year or 18 months respectively. Similarly Slade et al. [57] present data on the more specific parental reflective functioning. Here, higher maternal RF predicted secure attachment of the infant at 14 months. Employing yet another operationalization of maternal mentalization (appropriate mind related comments) Meins and colleagues showed that this maternal capacity at 6 months was a strong predictor of attachment security at 12 months [38] and 45 or 48 months respectively [41]. Additional evidence for the proposed link between maternal child-focussed mentalization capacity and child's attachment security comes from Bretherton et al. [1], Solomon and George [60], Oppenheim et al. [46] as well as Koren-Karie et al. [30] (see below). Furthermore higher maternal mentalization

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