THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES

Over the last decade the concept of mentalization has steadily gained in popularity. While some regard this as a matter of “old wine in new bottles” others have embraced the concept as a “breakthrough” in psychology. Even those skeptical of mentalization are likely to agree that people tend to make sense of one another’s actions by constructing narratives—stories we tell ourselves—based on an assessment of others’ beliefs and desires that are then used to venture guesses about what others intend their actions to accomplish in the interpersonal field. The ability to surmise another’s motives is an essential interpersonal tool and those who lack this strategic ability are handicapped when it comes to forming and maintaining intimate relationships.

J. Mark Thompson and Richard Tuch, two Training and Supervising Analysts from The New Center for Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles, have written a book that has just been released which applies the mentalization concept to the understanding and treatment of problematic one-on-one relationships. *The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Mentalizing Tales of Dating and Marriage* approaches the subject of intimate relationships from a multi-dimensional perspective—psychoanalysis proper as well as the related fields of attachment theory, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, complementary role theory and theories of love. The book is filled with clinical examples and some cases are presented repeatedly in successive chapters in order to view the material from the vantage point of different theoretical perspectives. The book is aimed not only at clinicians interested in learning more about the intricacies of intimate relationships it is also written for those who treat couples. The middle section of the book provides a manual that spells out the sorts of modifications in technique used in a mentalization-based approach to
conjoint therapy that can help facilitate partners’ abilities to better mentalize the mind of their mate. Surprisingly, no book to date has addressed this subject in quite the same fashion.

An initial chapter--"A few things worth knowing about marriage"--draws heavily from Henry Dicks' *Marital Tensions*--a reference Kernberg considers his "go-to" text on the subject of marital discord. Dicks, who was associated with the Tavistock Clinic, pioneered the practice of considering interpersonal dynamics to comprise a system worth addressing clinically. In particular, Dicks describes the ways in which the projection of lost (repressed) aspects of the self can lead to polarizations that result in each member of the couple adopting rigid roles that anchors each to specific ways of being ("he's the one who . . . ; she's the one who . . ."). These rigid roles often prove stifling, precluding each from recognizing and acknowledging aspects of the self that defy the roles that have been assigned and assumed. The topic of fixed roles is separately addressed in a latter chapter on "complementarity"--a topic introduced by Racker in reference to particular kinds of countertransference reactions, which was subsequently generalized and elaborated by Jessica Benjamin in her description of individuals who adopt reciprocal roles of "doer" and "the one done to" that play against one another.

The chapter on attachment theory examines how particular attachment styles of individuals who go on to pair up help determine the nature and course of the resulting relationship. How much latitude is permitted each and how gratifying or frustrating the relationship turns out to be for each can more or less be predicted if one knows the attachment styles of each partner. The authors believe the goal of treatment is not to try and alter attachment styles but, rather, to help the couple maximize the possibilities given the limitations imposed by these styles.
The topic of "sexual (mate) selection"--the lesser known of Darwin's two theories of selection--helps illuminate phenomena typically seen in the dating world whereby individuals size up potential mates by assessing a prospective candidates "mate value" and matching it with what one believes to be one's own mate value. A consideration of the principles of evolutionary psychology also helps illuminate particular aspects of marital functioning by highlighting the process of "reciprocal altruism"--the continuous measuring of whether one is getting as much out of the relationship as one is putting in. In this chapter the authors propose a view of the mind that parallels the drive-based model used by psychoanalysts. This model emphasizes the information-processing features of the brain that facilitate the rapid reflex-like recognition and response to environmental conditions that spell potential opportunity or represent impending danger that require immediate unthinking response before one even has a chance to give the matter a second thought. Such non-conscious processing contrasts with the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious.

*The Stories We Tell Ourselves* focuses considerable attention on the ways in which expectation shapes perception contributing mightily to the sorts of misperceptions and misunderstandings that commonly arise in the course of relating to others. In this regard, the neuroscientific process of pattern recognition is seen as either facilitating or interfering with the rapid assessment of other's actions, sometimes leading to the faulty mentalization of other's motives. Getting couples to reconsider conclusions they'd reached about their mate often proves a formidable task since accepting that one had erred often proves shameful and deconstructing one's beliefs can be disorienting. Helping couple's navigate these waters is a task for which a mentalization-based approach to treatment seems particularly well suited.
In the final chapter, the authors describe how people differ in terms of what they regard as "loving gestures." The authors challenge the prevailing notion that "loving gestures" are universally recognizable as being of a specific sort by illustrating the breadth of behaviors different people regard as "loving." "Theories of love" catalogues a number of different sorts of behaviors individuals implicitly employ to measure whether they feel demonstrably loved. Making each partner’s particular theory of love explicit can help cure what ails many marriages.

Lawrence Josephs, Professor of Psychology at Adelphi University, contributes a chapter entitled “Mentalizing Sexual Betrayal” that operationalizes and validates much of what Thompson and Tuch posit in the other chapters. Using anthropologic data, Josephs calls into question the analytic assumption that witnessing the primal scene is necessarily traumatic and pathogenic. He then goes on to illustrate one particular deleterious effect poor reflective functioning (inadequate mentalization) can have on a marriage—setting the stage for infidelity that, in turn, causes a further deterioration in the couple's already low reflective capacity. If one hopes to help a couple get past the traumatic effects of infidelity, argues Josephs, requires a therapist have the tools needed to help facilitate a substantial enhancement of the couple’s ability to read the mind of their mate.