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Marte Meo as a basis for increased capacity for mentalization

»I discovered something new about myself«



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1. Introduction

Over its 25-year history, the Marte Meo method has been an approach that has crossed cultural and national boundaries (Vik & Rohde, 2014). Its focus on the quality and strength of relationships transcend cultural difference, age and language. The method became an important part of competence development among employees at Western Balkan orphanages through the project »Competence building – in the best interest of children, a network-based project between Western Balkan orphanages and the University of Agder (UiA)«. Researchers from the UiA, therapists from the Department of Child and Adolescent Mental Health (ABUP) at Sørlandet Sykehus Health Enterprise and the Kristiansand Municipality developed a training and counselling programme in Marte Meo as a sub-project of the competence development project. The project has three main objectives:

- 1 to support and contribute to the development of a network between Western Balkan orphanages,
- 2 to support and contribute to competence building and education in child care for leaders and staff,
- 3 to contribute to reflection and discussion on qualities in child care and children's living conditions at orphanages.

These objectives can easily be closely linked to the Marte Meo method's fundamental ideas of development, support and reflection, and mentalization capacity (Aarts, 2005). The concept of mentalization appeared in psychotherapeutic literature in the early 1960s, and has, during recent years, been an important theoretical starting point in psychiatry, drug rehabilitation, child welfare, etc. (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). Mentalization-based therapy and the Marte Meo methodology have several common features. In this context, we would like to highlight a common basis with respect to development theory and address how to bring about change, in specific behaviour as well as in individual people's reflections on how they function in interaction. Thus, this article aims to address how the method of Marte Meo can increase the capacity for mentalization of employees at Western Balkan orphanages.

2. Capacity for mentalization

Relating to others is about trying to understand each other, taking each other's perspective to adjust to our own and the others' needs. However, it is also about understanding feelings, our own thoughts, interpretations and actions. Taking the perspective of others while taking a self-reflective perspective forms the basis for a sound or reduced capacity for mentalization (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). This can be illustrated as follows:

The concept of mentalization appeared in psychotherapeutic literature in the early 1960s, but was not empirically tested until 1983 by researchers Zimmer and Perner (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Some of the pioneering figures for this tradition today are Bateman and Fonagy at the Psychoanalysis Unit at Anna Freud Centre in London, and they define mentalization as follows:

Mentalization is making sense of the actions of oneself and others on the basis of intentional mental states, such as desires, feelings, and beliefs. It involves the recognition that what is in the mind is in the mind and reflects the knowledge of one's own and others' mental states as mental states. (Fonagy, 2004, p. 24).

In other words, people's capacity for mentalization refers to the meta-cognitive abilities of individual persons to reflect on their own and others' thoughts, feelings and actions. Our interpretations of mental states help determine what we do, whether we are aware of it or not. In relating to children, it is always the adult who is responsible for the quality of the relation. This also means that the adult's ability to interpret the child's signals in a manner that is consistent with the child's intentions becomes decisive for the quality of the contact. At the same time, the adult must be aware of how he or she interprets, experi-

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ences and acts based on the responses given by the child. In this interaction, the child develops his/her capacity for mentalization. Through experiences with adults' abilities to see, understand, confirm and act, experiences are established that become part of the child's experience and action repertoire (Lund, 2012).

Mentalization is about understanding our own and other people's minds – so simple, yet so hard. Our interpreting each other's behaviour and feelings will always be a risky project with a great chance of failure. And this is where misunderstandings occur, which, in turn, can trigger strong feelings both for the person that is interpreting and for the person that feels misunderstood. This can lead to conflicts and rejection.

Conversely, nothing is more pleasant than being understood, interpreted correctly and met constructively by someone. In such circumstances we can sense closeness and contact, and the world is a less dangerous place to be.

We will never understand ourselves or the others fully. Therefore, open reflection, wonder and positive curiosity are useful tools in gaining a better understanding of each other. This means that we have to set our overconfidence aside for a while, »turn off« ingrained truths that many of us have established over years, and open up to the others' subjective experience. As a result, there is no fighting over »who is right«, but an exciting exploration of each person's perspectives of the world.

Film recordings portray the world as it is at the time of the recording, for better or worse. They are tools that can help adults take the children's perspective from the outside, while at the same time seeing their own. Through the reflections afterwards, wonder and positive curiosity can help the adult take an inside perspective as well, in relation to the child and themselves. In other words, Marte Meo counselling could provide good growing conditions for capacity for mentalization.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 16 staff members at various orphanages in the Western Balkans participating in the Marte Meo training – 15 women and 1 man. The staff members were divided into three counselling groups together with three Norwegian Marte Meo

counsellors and an interpreter in each group. The interviews were implemented during autumn 2011 and autumn 2012, with one focus group interview for each group. All of the participants had analyzed their own films from the orphanage and received Marte Meo counselling before the interviews.

3.2. Focus group interviews

A focus group is a form of structured group discussion suitable for collecting qualitative data in research (Morgan, 1998). Focus groups are particularly suitable for gaining an insight into common practice and understanding, and identifying attitudes and opinions. In addition to allowing information to be gathered from several representatives simultaneously, focus groups act as a venue for discussion and debate. Thus, not only do focus groups constitute a source of information; they can also be a goal in themselves (Miller, 1999).

Some of the group-dynamic interaction process is lost when an interpreter is used due to interruptions associated with the interpretation process. At the same time, our experience was that this form of interviews created a certain measure of security in a situation, which was foreign to many of the participants.

The focus group interviews were moderated by a researcher whom all the participants knew. Film was used as recording medium, to enable the researchers to return to the data during the process of analysis and, where necessary, reinterpret the verbal and the non-verbal communication afterwards. We brought an interpreter whom the informants knew from the project. The interviewer asked questions that were translated, and the informants answered in their own language. The informants' answers were translated into Norwegian. The interviews lasted about one hour, were moderated by a researcher in the project group and transcribed immediately by the same researcher.

3.3. Using an interpreter; validity and reliability challenges in the study

The language situation during the focus group interviews was challenging, and collecting data via an interpreter is a relevant problem in various types of studies where the informants belong to another language group than the researcher. Kapborg and Bergtrö (Kapborg & Berterö, 2002) describe the risk associated with the validity of qualitative data emerging during interviews where an interpreter is used. They conclude: »Very little is published on the problem of conducting qualitative interviews in an-

other language with the assistance of an interpreter». Furthermore, they emphasize the difficulties associated with the fact that the researcher is often unable to check inaccuracies in the material if the interpreter

- a is not well trained,
- b does not have a full understanding of the research project, and
- c has other (biased) ideas.

In our case, the interpreter was well trained and she had followed the collaboration project for years as an interpreter. Furthermore, the interpreter was given the questions before the interviews and given the opportunity to ask if anything was unclear. This could contribute to preventing misunderstandings and unnecessary linguistic challenges when questions are asked, thus strengthening the validity and reliability of data.

Another challenge could be the fact that the group dynamics, reflection and spontaneity are hindered by frequent interruptions due to interpretation (Edwards, 1998). This is a variable that may affect data that emerge and data that are lost.

3.4. Analysis

The method chosen in the analytical work is inspired by science philosopher *Amedeo Giorgi's* (1997) phenomenological analysis method, also referred to as systematic text condensation (Berg, 2007). The systematic text condensation was performed in four steps:

- 1 First read-through of the transcribed interviews to become acquainted with the material, with an emphasis on gaining a general impression. Central topics are identified in this step.
- 2 In this step, the topics are categorized, and the categories are used as guides for further reviews of the transcribed text.
- 3 In this step, the various parts of the transcribed material are associated with meaning, and the interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication is key.
- 4 In the fourth and last step, the topics are summarized and validated against the whole.

3.5. Ethical reflection

The central elements in research ethics with respect to research related to other cultures are dialogue and co-determination, and these were followed in this

research project. In this context, it means that all informants, through a dialogue during the counselling before the interview, were thoroughly informed of the form and content of the interview and, based on this, made their decision regarding participation. All of them wished to take part in the focus group interviews, although there were variations with respect to active participation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Marte Meo at the orphanage

- Watching film helps you grasp things you do not see in normal life.
- Watching film helps me to see the child's reaction, which I often do not see in the moment.

It is powerful to re-experience yourself in pictures and sound. Movements, smiles and words become more noticeable and appear as a repeated reality. A retrospective distance allows for a new perspective on elements that cannot be explained away. The recognition can create joy, pride, unease, sadness or stir up other feelings that arose in the situation. The film portrays what happened there and then, providing a unique opportunity to better understand oneself and the others, in addition to the interaction. In hectic everyday life at the orphanage, things happen fast, with many children needing to be comforted, fed, cared for and stimulated in different ways. Many of the children have disabilities and therefore need extra attention, with respect to physical, social, medical and emotional needs. It is no wonder then that the staff feel like they grasp things about »normal life« by stopping interaction sequences in this manner. Film-based Marte Meo feedback allows the participants to dwell on small incidents. The remote control pause key is the technical aid that enables us to micro-analyze interaction. Rewinding, replaying and stopping at various incidents stimulate talks about what the child's intention might be, about small initiatives and about the child's reactions in the situation displayed on the screen. Waiting, studying step-by-step and analyzing how the staff member interprets the incidents result in renewed understanding of the child and oneself.

Marte Meo counselling emphasizes elements that promote positive interaction. Through (micro-)analyses and reflection, the individual staff members can

see how their own and the child's interaction competence develop through relation. The film is not meant as a fault finder, but as an opportunity finder – like one staff member put it:

I will not focus on the mistakes that I make. Instead, we can change the way we do things to improve them even more.

This search for »own strength« takes place by identifying and showing situations where the developmental support is the clearest. By focusing on interaction and dialogue, emphasis is placed on how the adult seeks information about the child's focus of attention. During the film analysis, situations are identified where the child receives recognition for his or her initiative, as well as situations where the staff member awaits the child's reaction to his or her action. Film sequences where it is explained to the child what is happening, what will happen, what is being experienced and what may be experienced at the emotional level are also emphasized. An active search for moments where the child receives affirmative recognition is also included in the analysis. Furthermore, the film material provides a basis for identifying situations where a connection is being established to phenomena, objects or persons outside the »I – Thou unit«. The last dialogue element is whether the orphanage staff member is being a positive leader and takes responsibility for sending adapted, mutual start and stop signals.

4.2. The importance of interpretation

Individual interpretations of the incidents in the film could cause participants to notice very different things when they see the film, and in this, there lies great potential for learning and development. However, for such learning and development to take place, the participants need to be willing to see how their own interpretation of the incidents can contribute to new perspectives and understanding of the interaction between the adult and the child. There is not just one truth about the incidents; there are several. And by reflecting on minor everyday moments at the orphanage using film recording, each individual participant is able to see how their own interpretation and understanding of children's behaviour can contribute to promoting or restraining further development. Also, individual participants' observations of things that could have been done differently could lead to new practices at the orphanage.

When watching the film, we also see that some of the choices we make are wrong in dealing with children. If we had not seen this on film, we would not have known it.

Awareness is raised and interaction with the child the following day involves new opportunities because the participants have been made aware of something they had not reflected on before. Then, group-based Marte Meo counselling can also result in more participants contributing input, recognizing the situation and extending their understanding of the child and the behaviour and interaction of the person being counselled. At the outset, some may be self-critical; others may be wearing »glasses of criticism«, tainting everything that happens in interaction in the film. Then, it is useful when others see something completely different in exactly the same footage. A smile, a pleasant voice, a stroke on the cheek or physical touch that goes unnoticed through the »glasses of criticism« can be spotted by the counsellor or the other participants. This is not a matter of correct or incorrect interpretation of incidents, but how we can learn from each other's different perspectives on the same incident.

4.3. About understanding our own and others' misunderstandings

This is completely new to me, and it is a challenge getting down to the children's level to understand their emotions. This is completely new to me.

Understanding other people can be a challenge in itself, and understanding many of the children at the orphanage is perhaps an even greater challenge since many of them have backgrounds characterized by insecure attachment. Most of the children are at the orphanage because their parents are unable to care for them. Drug abuse, physical and mental health problems (psychiatry) and various types of neglect are reasons why the children are living at the orphanages. There are few adults to care for each child. For example, three adults were defined as caregivers of 12 children between the age of 1 and 3 without any form of professional competence. This means that the seconds and minutes the adults have available for contact are extra important. It means that time spent changing nappies at the infant and toddler ward is highly valuable. It means that a smile or stroke across the tummy is more important than

anything else at that point in time, as is the adult's awareness that every little moment of contact matters, even though the adult, at the outset, may think that in a hectic work day the most important thing is to ensure that the child is clean and has a dry diaper. It means that a child's initiative for contact, which was met with a smile, all of a sudden turns into a beautiful story about something important in the child's life and development. These were some of the elements that seemed to take many of the participants by surprise: children who show initiative, children who seek, children who do not give up despite many negative interactional experiences, children who react to the adult's initiative, children who enter into a dialogue through turn-taking and who accept the adults' lead. These were children who seemed to have given up, spending most of their day rocking back and forth. In this context as well, film footage showed how even the small initiatives from the child that were met with an adult touch, look or voice could result in a new initiative which, in turn, developed into small dialogues, not only between adults and children but also in interaction between the children.

Seeing the child as a competent participant of interaction, regardless of age and disability, could result in a new understanding of children, behaviour and disabilities. In this case, the adults' understanding of individual children and ailments does not go far. It must be expanded and sometimes even replaced by a relational perspective where the adults' relational and interactional competence is decisive for the child's development. Then, »difficult« behaviour may be redefined as a need for contact and support. We can see completely new aspects of the child that we have not seen before, like one staff member put it:

One of my colleagues, who was filming, was surprised to see how well the child was able to concentrate. We did not expect this from this child, but we saw it on film and were surprised.

The adult's role becomes decisive for how the child's behaviour develops, meaning that I, the adult, am important there and then. In the context of mentalization, this means that the adult must consider the child's behaviour and try to identify and understand the child's emotions, while at the same time considering own actions and emotions. In this regard, film footage is an important aid, as it helps the adult

see him- or herself as well as the child from the outside. It also helps reinterpret the child's emotions by recreating the moment and emotions that arose in the adult. The adult's strengths and challenges become clearer, which, in turn, provides optimum opportunities for growth and development of the adult's capacity for mentalization.

I discovered something new about myself; I have always had a tendency to take a leading role, and a tendency to always believe that I am doing things the best possible way and that I am always right. I am not patient enough, and no good listener. I do not analyse enough. Now, I am realizing this and becoming more aware. So, now I try to listen more and be more patient.

This kind of discovery about own behaviour and attitudes carries all kinds of opportunities. In it, there is the opportunity for further reflections and development in terms of one's own role in relations with colleagues as well as children at the orphanage, and there is also the opportunity for altered practice in relations with each individual child. The transfer value to other arenas is also emphasized by several of the staff members:

First of all I have noticed changes in myself, and I have used these both at home and at work.

5. Concluding reflection

Staff members at orphanages saw themselves in interaction with children at their workplace. They saw change and positive development when important incidents in their everyday life were showed on film. Several of them discovered that the children they were with turned out to be more competent than they thought. They also become more aware of the fact that their own functioning in interaction was decisive for how they perceived the child and themselves. They became concerned with the fact that the relationship between themselves and the child was affected by their ability and opportunity to see themselves from the outside, on film and in their daily work. Their assumptions about the child, themselves and the significance of interaction were challenged on several levels. The Marte Meo counselling contributed to change at meaning level, as it produced new thoughts and perceptions of the child. Hence, we can assume that the orphanage staff members in-

creased their capacity for mentalization. Furthermore, from the beginning of the counselling programme to the end, we saw that the participants specifically changed their approach to the children; a change has been taking place at behaviour level. This gives hope that several children will be better off and, in actual fact, be met in a more development-supportive, positive manner. The facilitated, active search for »own strength« in the staff members contributes to the discovery of something new in themselves.

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