

In Press : Bulletin Menninger Clinic, 2005

A Developmental Approach to Mentalizing Communities: II: The Peaceful Schools Experiment

Stuart W. Twemlow, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry, Menninger Dept Psychiatry, Baylor College
Medicine, Houston, Texas

Peter Fonagy PhD, Freud Memorial Professor of Psychoanalysis, University College London

Frank C Sacco PhD, President Community Services Institute, Agawam & Boston, MA

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank Megan and Brad Culver, who provided the case vignette and discussed
with us their rewarding but stressful experiences teaching in US Public Schools.

Research supported by Foundation grants to Child & Family Program, Menninger Dept.
Psychiatry, Baylor College Medicine, Houston, TX.

Corresponding author:

Stuart W Twemlow MD,

The Menninger Clinic,

2801 Gessner Drive,

PO Box 809045,

Houston, TX 77280-9045

713-275-5436, stwemlow@aol.com

Introduction

Applying attachment theory and mentalization concepts to complex social systems is an innovative use of these ideas. This first paper contrasts a social systems approach to school bullying and violence with a mentalization approach (Footnote at the end of the paper) to the same problem and then attempts a synthesis of the two. We then summarize the findings of a test of these ideas in a randomized controlled trial involving several schools and over three thousand children. In the second paper we extrapolate these ideas and findings in a proposal for a series of projects that test out these applications in the larger community.

Our goal in this paper is to see if the serious contemporary problem of bullying and interpersonal violence in schools could be approached using a focus on the relationships between the members of the social system as a whole, rather than the more traditional strategy seen in prevention studies, i.e. that of identifying disturbed and at risk children and separating them from the social system for special attention.

A Problem Child as a Symptom of a Pathological Social System

Let us begin with a vignette composed of details culled from several stories of everyday teaching disruptions by two middle school teachers, who have been teaching for many years in a Midwestern school, in a low income area, in a mid-sized city. The school has close to 2,000 students and security guards guard its entryways. Violence is not uncommon in this school, including serious violence resulting in injury. The teachers in the school are divided into teams, each with a team leader, including one of the authors of this vignette. Each team is tasked with coordinating efforts to maintain a peaceful and productive classroom learning environment and curriculum.

The climate in this school is tense; teachers report often feeling frightened for their safety and desperate for support from the administration due to ongoing harassment from parents and children. They often do not feel they have the necessary social skills and psychological knowledge to cope with children, many of whom they saw as seriously disturbed, and frequently request that the children be separated from their peer group into special classrooms or referred for treatment.

The student at the center of our vignette, whom we shall call Billy, a slightly overweight round-faced 11-year-old, enters the classroom on a Monday morning, rushes to his desk, sits down with a loud commotion and yells out, "I hate Mondays. School is such a waste of time." The teacher, whom we shall call 'Ms. Jones,' is allowing students to make up missing assignments during that particular class period. Billy has quite a few late Language Arts assignments to do. Billy makes it quite clear to Ms. Jones that Language Arts is the subject he hates the most and that he knows very well that he will not complete these assignments before the end of the period. Based on similar experiences, Ms. Jones knows that he plans to misbehave to cause conflict and avoid doing any work.

Initially, Ms. Jones tries to ignore Billy's initial comments and behavior. She thinks to herself, "Here we go again," thus confirming her frustrations not only with Billy but with his mother, whom she felt was encouraging Billy's disruptive behavior and constantly finding ways to criticize the school. Ms. Jones has become very frustrated with the situation, one that seemed to be escalating. She dreads the period that she has him because she knows that the help she requires is not available.

Billy's outburst is the culmination of many days of avoiding his work in numerous classes. When Ms. Jones mentions that she will call his mother, Billy becomes rude and

indignant, adding that he couldn't care less because his mother thinks the school is "stupid" anyway. Billy's comments only add to the mounting frustration that Ms. Jones feels about this particular school year, which in her view has seen a marked increase in complaints by displeased parents. She feels that the students realize they have the upper hand and can passively/aggressively manipulate their teachers because of their parents' and/or guardians' lack of faith in the public school system.

It seems to Ms. Jones that Billy has realized that he can get away with these daily disruptions because his mother, who is a single parent, allows it and is constantly threatening the school. When Ms. Jones has previously attempted to contact Billy's mother she has been treated with such disrespect that she now refuses to speak to the mother. All communication must go through the principal.

Every time Ms. Jones intervenes in an attempt to deter Billy's outbursts, his behavior worsens. She asks him to sit down and keep quiet so that the other students may do their work without distraction, to stop making a nuisance of himself. With increasing emphasis she tells him to "Stop making that noise!" to no avail. Finally, raising her voice she exclaims, "Billy, JUST SIT DOWN! NOW! AND I MEAN IT!" The escalation in behavior that results from these failed interventions causes constant disruption to the class, leaving the remainder of the students unattended during various parts of the class period.

Unfortunately, when Ms. Jones finally refers Billy to the principal he is basically "babysat" for the remainder of that period and is then sent to his next class. Ms. Jones feels that the principal refrains from more severe punishment in fear of reprisals to the school board by Billy's mother.

Ms. Jones notes that Billy has had a history of difficulty with his peers since elementary school. He did not play collaboratively in elementary school and had trouble sharing playground equipment at recess. He seems always to have wanted to control and to dominate the mode of play. In pickup basketball, he would pout if he was not elected captain of the team, and would make constant appeals, especially to male teachers to take his side.

By middle school it seems that his bullying behavior made him feared and unpopular. He made an effort to associate with the popular peer group, but lacked the necessary social skills to carry off his role as a “cool, popular kid”. His attempts at affiliation with the popular group did not give him the attention he seemed to need. He then tried to ally himself with the leader of the popular clique, as a sort of bodyguard, a role which was not always appreciated or appropriate. His classroom and peer relationship problems dominated his life, and of course led to a significant drop in his school grades.

Commentary from a mentalization perspective

From Ms. Jones’ standpoint, Billy appears to be a boy capable of bullying teachers, who through cunning manipulation of his mother and even the principal, achieves mafia-like protection from the system and an almost unlimited license to disrupt and maltreat teachers and students alike. While she is cognizant of his social failings, Ms. Jones has no genuine understanding of the reasons for his misbehavior. Her model of Billy’s actions is based on the assumption that Billy, like she herself, is an average mentalizer. Ms Jones assumes that Billy depicts with reasonable accuracy the beliefs and desires of those around him and has a developmentally adequate sense of his own psychic experiences. Thus it seems clear to her that his behavior must be purposeful, aimed, for example, at avoiding work that he does not enjoy.

Ms. Jones does not blame Billy. She feels that the fault lies with Billy's mother, who communicates her attitude that the appropriate response to feeling bad in relation to the school is to attack it. The problem is a transgenerational one in Ms. Jones' eyes. The parents' lack of respect for the school becomes manifest in the child's behavior by a process of identification, although perhaps she does not think of it as such. In any case disrespect is what she experiences from Billy's mother, who is feared even by the Principal. Ms. Jones feels helpless as her attempts to calm Billy or rebuke him generate the apparently paradoxical consequence of escalating the violence of his outburst. In her attempt to find an explanation for Billy's behavior, to contextualize his acts, Ms. Jones gropes towards exploring Billy's experiences of having been rejected by his peers. She sees his bullying as a solution he has found to achieve esteem, notwithstanding his brutishness and poor social skills. She sees a positively accelerating curve of bad behavior feeding into poor performance in class, and further violence to protect Billy's basically flawed self-esteem.

Now let us take a second look at this scene, without some of the assumptions entailed by Ms. Jones' view of Billy as a basically rational person whose behavior could be understood in terms of putative beliefs and desires. Ms. Jones, like all of us, tries to make sense of the actions of others as well as her own actions by reference to mental states. She does this spontaneously, intuitively and by and large not even consciously. Her mental attitude to Billy is qualitatively different from the way she might think about the physical world. The latter is understandable according to the laws of physics but at the core of her understanding of Billy is the unique assumption that Billy is a rational agent. Ms. Jones feels confident that she can 'divine' the beliefs that rational agent Billy ought to have given his actions, his apparent goals and the context in which these occur. She even ventures to identify the desires underlying Billy's

behavior, his wish to avoid work. Basically as Daniel Dennett, (Dennett,1987) identified, she predicts that rational agent Billy will act to further his goals (to avoid any work) in the light of his belief that there are no substantial negative consequences to force alternative choices of action. Her model of Billy's behavior seems to us reasonably accurate. It certainly appears to predict quite effectively what Billy goes on to do (that is, create further mayhem).

While we may take this for granted, Ms. Jones' mentalization of Billy was underpinned by quite a complex set of computations. She analyzed the circumstances Billy found himself in, linked these to his past patterns of behavior and considered these in the light of experiences that Billy had been exposed to. An example is his mother's disrespect for his school. But the mentalizing stance is far more uncertain than the physical stance. For example, a person can act according to wrong belief. Billy may be wrong in his belief that his behavior will yet again attract no consequences. Beliefs are also unstable; they may change. Thinking through his position may lead Billy to modify his belief that his misbehavior does him no significant harm in any way he can detect, or the environment (the school principal's reaction) could change and so too his belief about consequences. Beyond illustrating how we naturally and automatically form complex models of the behavior of others in terms of their mental states, the vignette also illustrates the way mentalization interfaces with emotional life. Emotions relate to one's goals and desires. Ms. Jones's sense of frustration and hopelessness is rooted in her desire to modify Billy's behavior and her belief that this is not a practically attainable goal.

Beliefs are representations of reality. There are no absolutes about beliefs in relation to particular experiences. Mentalization is by definition inexact. The mind is opaque. We have to share internal experiences with others to make them meaningful. Ms. Jones does not know that Billy is disrupting the class with the sole purpose of avoiding work, supported by the belief that

he can get away with it. Recognizing the inherent uncertainty of mental states, offers us remarkable freedom to speculate about the nature of actions, to consider alternative perspectives and find an infinite variety of meanings behind behavior. Sadly, emotional arousal, the kind of arousal which Billy's behavior creates in Ms. Jones restricts our capacity to mentalize, to find this richness and variety and it forces us instead to be as economical as possible with our models of behavior and wherever possible to revert to stereotypical fixed patterns of conceptualization. Feeling the weight of the responsibility for the entire class, Ms. Jones does not give Billy the benefit of the doubt. She really does not know that Billy's exclamation 'I hate Mondays' is really borne of his desire to create turmoil motivated by his wish to avoid unpleasurable work. Thus, Ms. Jones does not know that Billy's mother screamed at him before he left home, to get out of the house, to go to school, to leave her alone, adding for good measure, that she wished Billy "had never been born". Billy's provocative (aggressive) behavior driven by his emotional arousal and the anxiety this gave rise to in Ms. Jones in relation to her responsibilities to the other students in the class, prevented her from exploring possible alternative wishes behind Billy's behavior. It never occurred to her to ask him what the matter was. Her reaction was to inhibit mentalization, to simplify matters and assume immediately that the past was repeating in the present. 'Here we go again', she said to herself without thinking of the specific instance. Billy gives only the faintest of indications of the nature of the turmoil he feels. When threatened with his mother's involvement, he expresses little apparent concern. He knows that for his mother the school is a convenient place to park Billy and that her overriding concern is not that he should have an education but that he should not be at home 'under her feet'.

But Ms. Jones' anxieties, which undermine her capacity to envision mental states, go beyond the interaction with Billy. Her failure to consider alternative accounts for Billy's

behavior may be linked to the threat that she experiences in relation to Billy's mother and all the other mothers and fathers who aggressively manipulates teachers makes thinking about beliefs and desires, thoughts and feelings well nigh impossible. In such situations of acrimony thinking about the intentions of someone who harbors true malevolent intent towards one would be unbearable to Ms Jones who protects herself by refusing to have contact with Billy's mother but at the same time she deprives herself of the opportunity to think about her and about what it could be like for an 11 year old, far less well protected than she, to be the butt of this person's raging temper. Unlike Ms. Jones, Billy does not have the opportunity to route all communications with his Mom 'via the principal'. Perhaps at the beginning of the class when he made the commotion he was still feeling the impact of his mother's vitriolic onslaught and was not fully aware of the impact his behavior was having on others but was simply trying to make himself feel better – not as Ms. Jones assumed to create an upheaval to conceal his inadequacy. Contrary to Ms. Jones' belief, far from being able to manipulate the behavior of his peers through creating distraction, Billy with a limited capacity to mentalise, is actually not able to see their minds clearly nor anticipate their behavior on the bases of their mental states, but instead on the bases of concrete behaviors.

Little wonder then that Ms. Jones' interaction was unsuccessful. That kind of self-regulation is quite simply beyond Billy's capability at this point. He experiences the rebuke as an assault from yet another hostile mind which simply confirms his need to shut off, to make a noise, to disrupt, to protect himself from what is unbearably painful. Unable to tolerate hostile cognitions about him, he shuts out the entire person whose mind generates ideas that he experiences as malevolent. Ms. Jones, in feeling unlistened to, naturally increases her wish to control and becomes increasingly physical or teleological in her manner of wanting to control

Billy's behavior. She finds herself caring less and less about what Billy thinks or how he feels and just wishes his body to cease to be an obstacle to her over-arching goal of education and communication. Were she able to reflect at this stage, she would recognize that her attitude simply pushes Billy further along in a non-mentalizing direction. And thus the classroom drama continues along its predictable path of emphasizing physical control as opposed to influence through modifying feelings and ideas. Each party feels deprived of the capacity to think and reacting by depriving the other of the ability to do so, until little remains beyond the physicalistic controlling power relationship that is usually called bullying.

Looking at Billy as an agent whose rationality is limited by his impoverished ability to mentalize, particularly at times when he feels upset or anxious, helps us have a somewhat different appreciation of not only his current behavior but also his history. Billy's father is absent, not there to protect him from his mother, but also not there to help Billy see his situation from an alternative standpoint. The presence of the third adult, or even a more mature individual (such as an older sibling) can help a child to think about his relationship with a parent if he finds this relationship overwhelming. Billy has neither older siblings nor a father present to perform this task. In fact none of the adult figures around him assist him with the terror he sometimes feels around the mother that he also critically depends upon. Even the school principal appears to be frightened of his mother and so does Ms. Jones, although neither of these well-intentioned people recognizes that their reaction of acquiescence to Billy's mother further exaggerates Billy's fear of her. They don't think of it—not because they are unthinking people—but because they apparently have specific difficulty in thinking about thoughts and feelings in relation to Billy.

. Billy so clearly appears to lack the capacity to be attuned with his peers, reacting to them in ways that they find disturbing, as if at times when he was overanxious to please. He would then repeatedly do the wrong thing; making him an object of ridicule. He inadequately defends against this state which all of us would find almost unbearable by creating a position for himself through coercion and sometimes cruelty. No one notices that these instances of cruelty are almost invariably linked to moments where he feels profoundly humiliated by those around him. No one notices because the kind of teleological physicalistic strategies that he uses to control the minds of those around him are precisely what exclude the possibility of mentalization. Billy has created a system around him, which increasingly responds solely to physical threats rather than reason.

Billy is a bodyguard and as such commands respect rather than ridicule. Most of his peers see him as overconfident. If asked, they would say that Billy thinks he is great, a cool kid. Few noticed how his determination to stay on top is driven by desperation. Unlike most other boys Billy was not able to set aside social criticism as something, which was just one person's perspective. He felt it as if it was directly destroying him. Humiliation, shame could destroy him totally because he experienced such thoughts directly almost as if they could have a physical impact. Not being elected captain of the team, finding his school grades slipping and above all feeling that other students did not like him, felt to Billy tantamount to total destruction, the end of existence. Of course, neither his peers, Ms. Jones, nor the principal can truly appreciate what this feels like. Although Ms. Jones links her own difficulties with Billy with his earlier experiences of shame and humiliation, she does not really know just how devastating humiliation is for this 11 year old.

So, how can we help Billy? Or Ms. Jones in her struggle with him? It would be impractical to try to explain the intricate communication patterns we have outlined above. If we had asked Ms. Jones to consider even a tiny proportion of these elaborations. She is far too busy having to cope with an entire class. Would Billy benefit from individual therapy? Experience shows that boys like Billy respond poorly to such efforts, however skilled, if not occurring in the context of concurrent family & social interventions. We feel that disrupting the vicious cycle that Billy finds himself in should also be undertaken in Billy's school and class. Further, it may be best, given Billy's sensitivity to humiliation, if the intervention does not directly concern Billy at all but rather the whole class.

It may seem like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut to modify the behavior of the class rather than imposing consequences on Billy. Yet if we take a broader view we can see that it is not just Billy but all those interacting with him who have difficulty in considering thoughts and feelings. The problems may originate in Billy but Ms. Jones, normally a sensitive and caring person, finds herself reacting to Billy by shouting and bullying. Her reactions in turn paralyze the other children to a point where there is little expectation on anyone's part that thinking about what is going on could achieve more than imposing physical consequences. The procedure in the context of our program would have been for Ms. Jones to stop the class immediately after Billy started creating a commotion and mark some space for reflection on what was happening. Later in this paper more specific details about the process are given in the section on Classroom Management.

Commentary from a Social System - Power Dynamics Perspective

The Social Systems perspective makes certain assumptions about the way social systems operate. Of particular importance in this application is the way in which Billy immediately forces everybody's attention to his problems, by coercive misery, provocation and contempt; school is a waste of time and you won't do anything till you deal with my problems! Unwittingly Ms. Jones has been dragged into the role of victim as Billy adopts the victimizer role. Billy has likely learned this pattern by observing aggressiveness in the home. Power has achieved primitive control objectives for him, modeled by his parents and other family members. Ms. Jones is at the end of her rope with Billy and his mother, and demonstrates the incapacitating power of the victim's role by her impoverished and uncreative thoughts to her self; the "here we go again" feeling, which creates a feeling of being "defeated", so to speak, from the outset. Arousal of the sympathetic system is signaled through the activation of the fight-flight hormones creating a victim mindset that is highly focused, narrow, uncreative and preservative. Thus Ms. Jones has perhaps, unwittingly fallen into the power dynamic of victim, which renders her even less able to respond in a constructive way to Billy's problems. Billy, although he may be crying out for help, has also unwittingly adopted a position of power that is facilitated and even enhanced by the submissiveness of the surrounding bystander system that cannot cope with him.

Research has shown that in serious aggression, submission encourages a controlling grandiose response by projective identification of disavowed self-representations into the victimizer (Twemlow 1995 a+b), . Thus, the victimizer becomes locked in a hateful "dance", which decreases the capacity to think and increases the tendency to stereotype the other, all in an ambience that is not conducive to creative and constructive compromises. This school has literally run out of ideas about Billy!

From this perspective, Billy's fundamental problem is a systemic one. He is a pawn in a much larger social game, a game that involves his ever-changing role as bully and victim in the interchange with his social group, both of his teachers and of his peers. The victimized response of the authority system, especially the teachers who have to deal with him directly, and the audience of bystanders who occupy a variety of different roles, unwittingly aggravate the victimization. This enhances Billy's ability to control the system by his help rejecting complaining (victim role), and his carping aggressiveness (bully role), thus reducing the probability that learning can occur for anybody in the school. If Billy's problems are to be contained and he is to become part of a creative and peaceful school-learning environment, the assumption is that these pathological roles have equal culpability and responsibility.

The energy or power of the system that positions Billy in the dominating role arise from the failure to deal with the power dynamic that keeps it going. This perspective depicts the bystander in a less obvious role, which nonetheless is a key, we feel, to normalizing the system. Bystanders, all of whom feel disempowered by the combined force of Billy and his mother, include all school personnel—administration, parents, teachers, volunteers, support staff and security personnel, as well as of course the students. Billy has heard that his mother feels that the school is stupid, so the mother has created here a *folie à deux*; she has become, like Billy, engaged in a power struggle with the school, attempting to control it to do her will. In the position of the victim Ms. Jones is overwhelmed and discouraged and is now going to the principal for help, since she has realized most likely that her rage and helplessness is a reactive concrete repetition of Billy's role as victim. Thus the talion principle reigns in this middle school, with an accompanying mindset that tends to stereotype and oversimplify human relationships. Billy becomes an intolerable monster. People have become dehumanized part

objects rather than whole individuals and the problem escalates. In spite of a detailed assessment of Billy and the knowledge that his family has problems, this information does not seem to help because the staff stereotypes Billy through a narrow, perseverative and uncreative mindset aggravated by stress hormones.

The power struggle in the pathological social system has become even worse because the principal has also been disempowered, becoming an exaggerated babysitter for Billy, most likely conveying to Billy that he is in control of the principal, the teacher and the whole school. This constitutes an overwhelming burden for a child of 11 who is developmentally trying to contain aggression; he may be both exhilarated in a triumphant sense and terrified by such developmentally inappropriate power. The failure of the parental authorities to contain and hold his aggressiveness further escalates the problem, which he most likely acts out at home with more aggressiveness. Higher authorities then become the focus of attention when mother threatens to report the school to the school board. Billy's attempts to appeal to a higher authority, such as the principal, his mother and others can be viewed from one perspective as restitutive or adaptive maneuvers. That is, the regressed quality of the thinking of those trapped in this spiraling aggression, becomes oversimplified into a search for a helpful dominant hierarchy in which the more powerful can subdue and control the weak. In most human social systems there is no ultimate authority that can completely control a system, so with the philosophy in Billy's middle school the system has no option but to continue to flounder without direction.

Billy's history suggests opportunities for successful interventions. Billy has always had problems in his relationships with his peers. The natural tendency of children at this age is to form peer groups, often with tightly structured codes of conduct requiring reflection and subtlety

to negotiate, a very difficult task for Billy. Frequently he uses his large size to achieve what he could not with more sophisticated social techniques. Satisfying social relationships become submerged under the more power centered, non-reflective ones. Healthy self-criticism takes the form of victimized depression and suicidal thoughts. Active playfulness becomes coercive triumph, with the power dynamics enacted in struggles between Billy and his peers into an “us vs. them” philosophy.

The “individual within the group” medical approach to this problem will not solve it. Traditionally Billy would be assessed and placed in a Behavior Disorder classroom and referred for psychiatric care. Instead we propose that the bystanding community, the crucible within which this violent mindset develops, has to be addressed for any lasting solution to emerge.

In summary, all personnel in Billy’s life have at different times adopted the roles of bully, victim and bystander even from one classroom period to another. The social systems-power dynamics perspective sees this as a dissociating process; the bully on behalf of the bystanding community dissociates the victim from the school community as “not us”. In this instance Billy is the bully in terms of overt behavior, but he is also the victim of a group process: The community bystander role can be described as an abdicating one. The abdicating bystander projects blame for problem children onto others, often those in the school system, such as teachers, administrators and school security personnel. From this vantage point any intervention in the school setting must focus on the transformation of the bystander into a committed community member.

A successful intervention should promote recognition within the large school group of the dissociated elements represented by the victim Billy, as a scapegoat for a larger group problem to which each member of the group contributes as a bystander. This dissociating process is a largely

unconscious effort to deal with the anxiety felt by all in response to a dysfunctional, coercive and disconnected social system. Any remedy for this state of affairs requires a clear conceptualization of the group's task from a perspective that does not permit scapegoating, empowers bystanders into a helpful altruistic role and does not overemphasize the importance of therapeutic efforts with the victim or victimizer. The symptom, bullying, is not merely a problem to solve, but a dysfunctional solution or adaptation, which obscures a larger and more painful and meaningful problem, the dysfunctional social context. The helpful bystander role is a critical catalyst in converting Billy's school into a peaceful, mentalizing school-learning environment, as our research reported later in this article illustrates. In this sense bystanding can be defined as an active role with a variety of manifestations, in which an individual and/or group indirectly and repeatedly participates passively in a victimization process as a member of the social system. This perspective also means that the victim-victimizer-bystander roles are not useful when considered as separate entities, but are cocreated and that bystanding can either facilitate or ameliorate the victimization through dialectical interaction with the victim and victimizer. Bullying thus defined is a triadic rather than dyadic process. (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, 2004)

Mentalizing School Communities with Balanced Power Dynamics: a Modern Synthesis

Our assumption is that from a psychobiological perspective, mentalization and its loosely coupled counterpart attachment creates a social environment, which is incompatible with interpersonally aggressive violent behavior (Fonagy, 2003). In general, social systems, which are incompatible with violence, are mentalizing social systems, because an individual is, from an evolutionary point of view, incapable of exercising interpersonal aggression in a context in

which they successfully mentalize their victim. When a social system becomes coercive as in Billy's school, the players in the social game share a common characteristic. They have all lost their individuality in favor of a social role, which they will be forced to adopt by group pressure. That social role fosters social stereotypes, and perseverative robotic group behavior that fails to recognize and mentalize the individual-in-the-group, for example, the fighting behavior of the military or in cultist religious groups. The unique individual presence of the other is negated by the requirements of a stereotyped social role. Theoretically, a social system may need to engage in violence to protect itself and to provide food. Such a system still retains a mentalizing component, because the killing necessary is in the service of the dyad and the social system as a whole, and not merely a reflection of the idiosyncratic interpersonal problems of the individual predator bent on forcing others to comply with his/her non-mentalizing mindset.

Billy and Ms. Jones have been sucked into the roles of victimizer and victim, respectively. Neither can be considered solely responsible for their position nor can their responsibility simply be assigned to a faceless social organization. To do so would lead us down a nonproductive path of blaming the system itself without regard to the individuals within it. It is however the people within the organization who paradoxically adopt a position where they prefer to see stereotypes rather than the full complexity of people. Klein (1940), considered the natural development of psychic maturity evolved from the "depressive position", which arises in depressive anxieties associated with having to see an individual not as a part object but as a whole person, complete with defects and strengths. The difference between a violent and a non-violent community must then be the degree to which the implicit social conventions are structured to encourage all participants to be aware of the mental states of others of that group

and to take these into account when forming rules and regulations and procedures for the system. The rules have to embody the perspective of mentalization.

The complexities of mentalizing and the sense of self that emerges from this process are reflected in several conceptual difficulties in understanding how an individual is both part of a social system and at the same time an individual in that system, with their own will and sense of separateness. As interpersonalist and current relational theories hold, the person feels defined by the social system, and their sense of reality is rooted in that reality being shared by others. We know that the world outside is real ultimately because others respond to us in ways that are consistent with our reactions.

The extraordinary impact of social responses on the developing individual is illustrated by experiments with six month old infants using the still-face paradigm (Weinberg & Tronick, 1996). In such research, a six-month-old infant is interacting with his mother but by instruction she 'freezes' her face for a minute or so during their interaction. After a few seconds of the mother not reacting, infants tend to go into a state of despair. The infant recovers after normal interaction is resumed. The catastrophic effect on the infant is not just due to the loss of the caregiving object. Subsequent research with children of the same age has demonstrated that even if the person who 'freezes' their interaction with the infant is a total stranger, the effect is so traumatic that a year later, at age 18 months, the child avoids the picture of that stranger. The still-face paradigm is not a response unique to the mother-child relationship, but instead a response to the failure of the other to validate the infant's experience of the world outside. The mirroring, understanding and attuned social world is essential to us in early development not just to ensure that we acquire a sense of who we are as Kohut (1984) and others have suggested, but also so that the child can develop an accurate appreciation of a shared external world. From this

mentalizing perspective, the personal consensus between two people may be seen as creating an external (social) reality. On a larger scale, when power dynamics influence that social reality, either through individual psychopathology especially of leaders, or overuse of coercion and punishment in legal institutions or codes of conduct, then victim, victimizer and bystander mindsets are created in members of that system, who then function in the robotic roles created by this non-mentalizing social system. That is, there is a chronic failure of mentalization in violent environments. Such a failure of mentalization creates for the witness to the power struggle (the bystander) an avenue to the pleasure of sadism illustrated by the child who gains vicarious pleasure by watching the bullying process, since in order for the child to be able to enjoy being witness to the suffering of an other, he must be able to distance himself from the internal world of the other at the same time as benefiting from using the other as a vehicle for unwanted (usually frightened and disavowed) parts of the self projected into the victim. Bystanders do not lack empathy, because it is precisely through projective identification with the victim (and or the bully) that the child is able to experience himself as more coherent and complete. Retaining the libidinal aspect of projected aggression, and projecting the sadistic- aggressive aspects makes this possible. Thus, affect inconsistent with a coherent sense of self is then seen as belonging to the victim of the vicious power dynamic. The child's mentalizing is however limited by the environment in that the suffering and pain of the victim need never be represented as mental states in their consciousness. The fault is not in the child. Mentalizing is a fragile developmental function that is not acquired fully until early adulthood (if then). In most social contexts, it needs environmental support and requires a social system to scaffold it and ensure that reflection on the mental states of self and other is relatively comprehensive and covers painful as well as neutral mental states.

A mentalizing interaction between individuals in the system, we feel allows for the individual to be both an individual and a member of the social system. From this synthesized perspective the self in a mentalizing social system can be defined as an everchanging and ongoing experience of otherness in the present, where the power dynamics are balanced and conducive to a full intellectual and emotional experience of self and other.

Is it possible to create a mentalizing social system with balanced power dynamics? Twelve years ago, we began an experiment in schools, designed to test that hypothesis.. The first seven years of the study involved piloting and refining interventions and the results of these efforts are reported in detail elsewhere (Twemlow et al 2001, Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 2002, Twemlow, 2000). The inciting incident was the attempted rape of a second grade girl by several second grade boys, in a school with the highest out of school suspension rate in the school district and the poorest academic performance on standardized achievement tests. After this phase, in which the school did very well, a randomized control trial was conducted involving nine elementary (K-5) schools and over 3,600 students.

The Peaceful Schools Project: A Mentalizing Social System

The basis of the approach encouraged the creation of a philosophy rather than a program. In doing so the reflective component of mentalizing is encouraged since everyone involved participates in the process and do not merely follow a dehumanized research protocol. Understanding how the system works from the mentalizing power dynamics perspective allows the individual teachers and students to create innovative ways for creating that social climate in the school. Although the process we have spelled out seems very complex, and at first blush might seem impractical in busy schools, the Peaceful schools project demonstrated that the basic ideas of power dynamics (cocreated power struggles), and mentalization (a focus on

relationships rather than information), are easily grasped by students & staff, who then develop ways to implement the concepts in both the formal curriculum and during recess and lunch time.. This approach we have found is preferable to elaborate and overwhelming manualisation and specification of procedures, which we feel often leads to poor fidelity & followthrough when the research phase of the work is over.

The components of the program philosophy included the following:

1. Positive Climate Campaigns

These campaigns use counselor led discussions, posters, magnets, bookmarks and other devices to encourage a shift in language and thinking of all students and personnel in the school. These language tools help identify and resolve problems that develop when coercive power dynamics dominate the school environment. For example, children help each other resolve issues without adult participation. Such effects are observed as they share playground equipment peacefully and do not push and jostle in the lunch line. Positive climate campaigns repeatedly underscore for both students and teachers the dynamic that takes place between bully, victim and bystander. This creates a context in which no participant can experience the situation without awareness of the mental state of the other and indeed without self awareness, instead, the focus is on the relationship between bully, victim and bystander, which implicitly creates a demand on both the child, the teacher and other staff to consider this interpersonal situation from a mentalizing perspective. It would be counterproductive to force students and teachers to explicitly describe the mental states of the participants. This might induce pseudo-mentalization, where mentalizing terms are used but the connection to the reality of the experience has been lost.

2. Classroom Management (discipline plan)

This approach assists teachers' efforts at discipline by focusing on correcting root problems, instead of punishing and criticizing behaviors. A behavior problem in a single child is conceptualized as a problem for the whole class who participate in bully, victim or bystander roles. Scapegoating is reduced and insight into the meaning of the behavior becomes paramount. From this new perspective, a child's disruptive behavior is seen as an attempt to locate a valid social role within the group. At the point of disruption, the teacher would stop teaching and assign bully, victim and bystander roles during class discussion. The bully being the child, the victim being the teacher and the bystanders would be the rest of the classroom, who may have laughed at the teacher's response to the disruptive student. If such a child repeatedly offends, the class would collectively fill out a power struggle referral alert. That is every student would participate in determining and defining the bullying, victim and bystander behavior according to a standardized form. At a later point the children involved and sometimes even the parents of the child would be seen by the school counselor or social worker for a further understanding of the event. This process and other aspects of the Peaceful Schools approach are presented to parents in regular workshops entitled "Six People, One Bathroom", where the opportunity is also taken to help teach the approach to parents to use in resolving their power issues in the home situation. Interpolating the counselor/social worker in this process rather than the principal implies the need for understanding rather than punishment. Punishment would not be invoked except as a very last resort when the disciplinary infractions were serious enough to require intervention by the school principal. Parental involvement occurs when the parents are known to be sensitive to their child's punishment or when there are repeated and increasingly serious infractions that seem to be leading to the Principal's office, and suspension.

The child with a propensity to act violently is encouraged by this approach to develop a mental life representation of his experiences and adapt to it in a non-persecutory way. The essential component of this approach is that children do not experience themselves as having been punished, which would inhibit, rather than facilitate mentalization. So the environment becomes conducive to thinking within the context of a counseling relationship that encourages mentalization. When a child is sent to the principal the anxiety created by the system begins to inhibit any capacity to mentalize. This is so especially because principals are often quite defensive owing to school board and parental harassment, and their capacity to mentalize is often inhibited. Thus an encounter between a child and a principal in such a setting paradoxically cannot involve any reflecting from a mentalizing perspective. The pattern is to encourage the child to think about the perspective of others including his or her parents as well as teachers and principals. Experience suggests that teachers who invoke punishment less frequently in response to classroom behaviors show classrooms with better academic performance and fewer disciplinary referrals.

3. Peer and Adult Mentorship

Mentorship approaches are attempts to mirror outside the classroom what the classroom management plan does in the classroom. That is to get everybody in the school system to understand the violent interaction, and to see if there is a way to resolve the problem collaboratively and without blame. Male mentors seem particularly helpful on the playground where much childhood aggression comes out. The most effective male mentors are rather relaxed older men of any race, often retired, non-competitive and who have children and grandchildren of their own. One particularly skilled mentor cleverly used magic tricks to distract

children. He would make himself a buffer; for example, “Why don’t you go first on the jungle gym and I will try and catch each of you”. Thus the fight becomes a game with him as the referee.

Looking at mentoring from a mentalizing perspective requires the point of view of the “third” Ogden, (1994), melded with the more widely known idea of therapeutic alliance. Both are concepts not actualities, that come from interactions between the therapist and patient. Ogden considers that this cocreated “third”, the melded intersubjectivities, allows the analyst to attend & think clearly about the patient. Similarly the therapeutic alliance, is a feeling of safety and hope created by the contributions of both : therapist : skill, ability to mentalize, patient: trust in skill, feeling understood and valued. The mentor is a temporary concrete representation of this alliance which allows each party within the conflict to see through eye of this real “third”. For example, the mentalizing action of the mentor and his game creates a transitional space by this distraction in which the participants, the bully, the victim and the bystander, start thinking in this space, thus allowing disruptive affect to settle, with a spontaneity essential for mentalizing, and with the hope that this modeling eventually will be internalised by the children, so that the model relationship in the mind of the children, creates the helpful “third” in the abstract..

Billy’s abortive attempts to identify with his peer group by becoming a bodyguard to the leader, would, in a mentalizing peer group, allow the group to see him as a real person and to identify with his loneliness and social isolation. They would also be able to perceive his bodyguard role not simply as a wish to appear powerful, but instead as showing his desire to make social contact. Billy would feel increasingly recognized and able to relinquish his dependence on the enforcer role. Instead, his self-esteem would be maintained by mentalizing.

4. The Gentle Warrior Physical Education Program

This approach satisfies the physical education requirements in most school systems, using a combination of role-playing, relaxation and defensive martial arts techniques. The approach helps children protect themselves and others with non-aggressive physical and cognitive strategies. For example occupying bully, victim and bystander roles provides students with alternatives to fighting. Learning ways to physically defend oneself, when being grabbed, pushed or shoved, combined with classroom discussion, teaches personal self control as well as respect and helpfulness towards others. These confidence-building skills support an essential component of the capacity to mentalize that is to allow children to feel confident enough and safe enough to be able to think. If a child is too frightened, the capacity to think is paralyzed, and the victim mindset is adopted. A child experiencing an emergency mode of thinking is presented with simple-minded choices, running away or submitting. At the brain level there is an inhibition of the frontal cortex in favor of the posterior parts of the brain, and the subcortex, that enables the fight-flight reaction to occur. Such reaction is incompatible with mentalization. A safe environment from a mentalizing prospective has to be one in which a child experiences a situation that they can cope with. (Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco, 1992).

5. Reflection Time

Adler, 1958, pointed out that a natural social group has no right to exclude any member or conversely, that every member of the group has a right to belong. From his point of view, narcissistic injury represented by bully, victim and some bystander reactions are attempts by the child to regain entry into a social group and to be accepted by that social group. Although teachers may see the Peaceful Schools Program as training the child, the real aim is that the teachers actively become involved in mentalizing the child via the process of training. The serious problem of teachers who bully and are bullied by students and parents (Twemlow et al,

2004, Twemlow & Fonagy, 2005) is one example of how important the mentalizing teacher becomes to this process. So the system through its members becomes more psychologically aware and eventually the rules, regulations and the policy of the system will embody mentalizing principles. Reflection time is one such method to encourage mentalizing in teachers and students. This period of 10 minutes or so at the end of each day is called reflection time when the classroom engages in a discussion of the day's activities from the point of view of bully, victim and bystander behavior, and after discussing this behavior make a decision about whether to display a banner outside the classroom indicating that the class has had a good day. Teachers note that the children are rather critical of themselves and do not put the banner up as much as the teachers might. Thus mentalizing children are capable of being self-critical without a drop in self-esteem. The reflection time is a way of consolidating the day's activities and allowing the child and teacher to take a whole systems view of what is going on. In many ways the subject of the reflection matters less than that the reflection is taking place. If a system cannot be thought about in this way then no mental representation of it can be created. Mentalization for its own sake is of no great value. The important thing is that it makes the system more peaceful.

Results Of The Peaceful School Projects

The complex structured methodology and analytic strategy for this project is described in detail elsewhere. (Fonagy et al 2005a+b) In summary, a traditional school psychiatric consultation was compared to an intervention based on a mentalizing and power dynamics systems approach as described in the body of this paper, and a treatment as usual condition in which schools had been promised which ever was the more successful of the other two interventions in return for collecting data. The study was a cluster level randomized controlled

trial with stratified restricted allocation. Efficacy was assessed after two years of active intervention and effectiveness after one year of minimal input maintenance intervention.

Nine elementary schools with 1,345 third to fifth graders provided data for the trial, which was conducted in a medium size Midwestern city. Approximately 3,600 children (K-5), were exposed to the interventions. The outcome of the interventions were measured with peer and self-reports of bullying and victimization, peer reports of aggressive and helpful bystanding, self reports of empathy towards victims of bullying, self reports of belief that aggression is legitimate and classroom behavioral observation of disruptive and off task behavior.

Compared to the other two conditions, results suggested that the experimental intervention showed a decrease in peer reported victimization ($P < .01$), aggression ($P < .05$) and aggressive bystanding ($P < .05$) compared to control schools. The intervention showed less of a decline in empathy compared to psychiatric consultation ($P < .01$) and control conditions ($P < .01$).

Peaceful Schools also produced a significant decrease in off task behavior ($P < .001$) and disruptive classroom behavior ($P < .001$) while behavioral change was not observed in the psychiatric consultation and control schools. The findings of reduced victimization ($P < .05$), aggression ($P < .01$) and aggressive bystanding ($P < .01$) were maintained in the follow-up year.

The major conclusion was that this program philosophy was effective in reducing children's experiences of aggressiveness and victimization. The strength of the study lay in its extraordinarily careful and detailed evaluation. The program showed that children did become more involved on helping to reduce aggressiveness as suggested by the increasing engagement of Peaceful Schools children in non-aggressive and helpful bystanding behaviors. Such children help each other resist individual victimization by bullies in part by mentalizing a victim. This

awareness allows children, teachers and other staff to take action to normalize power dynamics in the social system as a whole.

This intervention seems to reduce the natural tendency for children to harden their attitude to victimization over time as other studies have shown (ref: including the Springfield study). In other work Gamm et. al. 2004, found that greater teacher adherence to the Peaceful Schools philosophy was related to greater student empathy, defined as a student's awareness of a negative effect of victimization on other students over time ($P < .01$ for year 1 – 2 change, $P < .01$ for year 2 - 3 change). Students whose teachers reported greater fidelity were viewed by peers to show less aggressive bystanding (that is encouraging bullying without active physical participation), than students whose teachers reported less fidelity ($P < .01$ for year 1-2 change, $P < .01$ for year 2-3 change). Over the second and third years of the program helpful bystanding, (that is children who would assist children being bullied to cope with the bullying and to resolve the problems) was significantly related to the adherence of teachers to the main elements of the program and awareness of its usefulness, with children in high-adherence classrooms showing more helpful bystanding over time than other students. Followup of children into middle school suggests maintained academic performance of children exposed to the Peaceful schools philosophy.

Concluding Comments

In this paper we have attempted to synthesize a theoretical/philosophical perspective on mentalizing and power dynamics as a type of attachment pattern between individuals that is essential to how social systems operate. We have sketched the beginnings of a theory of how this may occur in schools and outlined a set of steps that might be necessary to create mentalizing schools that have a sophisticated developmental focus on the individual needs of the

members as reflected in the conduct of the system as a whole. The role of the psychoanalytically informed practitioner in helping these processes happen is illustrated in numerous case examples in Sklarew, Twemlow & Wilkinson, 2004. Although this idea needs a great deal more experimental and empirical verification, the paper reports an attempt to test these hypotheses in a randomized controlled trial in a series of elementary schools. In a nutshell the intervention showed that such a program could work and produce a significant lasting result.

The larger question of whether a community can reflect the mentalizing power-dynamics perspective in the way it organizes itself remains unanswered. Our feeling is that for communities to reflect the high quality of life demanded by citizens in an open democracy, such changes in how the system as a whole operates must occur. Our second paper outlines a researchable model for such a community approach.

Footnote for Bull Menninger Clinic paper.

Mentalizing is a complex and evolving concept. In essence it embodies the capacity to make sense of the actions of oneself and other people on the basis of desires feelings and beliefs, and a valuing of that knowledge that gives it high priority in conducting relationships and judging interpersonal priorities. It embraces and extends concepts like empathy to include self as well as other, and to value relationships over content & information. Thus in social systems it has enormous implications for policy as well as administrative process.

References

Adler, A. (1958). *What Life Should Mean to You*. New York: Putnam Capricorn Books.

Dennett, D. (1987). *The intentional Stance*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

- Fonagy, P. (2003). Towards a developmental understanding of violence. *Br J Psychiatry*, 183, 190-192
- Fonagy, P., Twemlow, S., Vernberg, E., Sacco, F., Little, T. (2005a). Creating a peaceful school learning environment: The impact of an anti-bullying program on educational attainment in elementary schools. *Accepted for publication Medical Science Monitor*
- Fonagy, P., Twemlow, S., Vernberg, E, Mize, J., Dill, E., Little, T., Sargent, A.J. (2005b). A randomized controlled trial of a child- focused psychiatric consultation and a school systems- focused intervention to reduce aggression. *Submitted for publication.*
- Gamm, B.K., Vernberg, E., Twemlow, S.W., Dill, E.J., Fonagy, P. (2004). Teacher adherence and child outcome in a school violence prevention program. *Submitted for publication*
- Klein, M. (1940). Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states. *In Love Guilt & Reparation And Other Works 1921-1945*, Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1975 344-369
- Kohut, H. (1984). *How Does Analysis Cure?* Ed Goldberg A, Chicago Ill., Chicago University
- Ogden, T. (1994). *Subjects of Analysis*. New Jersey, Jason Aronson.
- Sklarew, B, Twemlow, SW, Wilkinson, S (eds). *Analysts in the Trenches : Streets, Schools, War Zones*. New Jersey: The Analytic Press, 2004.
- Twemlow, S.W. (1995a). The psychoanalytical foundations of a dialectical approach to the victim/victimizer relationship. *Journal American Academy of Psychoanalysis*.

- 23(4), 543-558.
- Twemlow, S.W. (1995b). Traumatic object relations configurations seen in victim/victimizer relationships. *Journal American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 23(4), 559-575
- Twemlow, S.W. (2000). The roots of violence: Converging psychoanalytic explanatory models for power struggles and violence in school. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, LXIX, 4, 741-785
- Twemlow, S.W., Fonagy, P., Sacco, F.C., Gies, M., Evans, R., Ewbank, R. (2001). Creating a peaceful school learning environment: A controlled study of an elementary school intervention to reduce violence. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 158(5), 808-810
- Twemlow, S.W., Fonagy, P., & Sacco, F.C. (2001). An innovative psychodynamically influenced intervention to reduce school violence. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40(3), 377-379.
- Twemlow, S.W., Fonagy, P., Sacco, F. (2002). Feeling safe in school. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 72(2), 303-326.
- Twemlow, S., Fonagy, P., & Sacco, F. (2004). The role of the bystander in the social architecture of bullying and violence in schools and communities. *Annals of New York Academy of Sciences*, 1036, 215-232.
- Twemlow, S., Fonagy, P., Sacco, F., Brethour, J. (2004). Teachers who bully students: a hidden trauma. *Accepted for publication, International Journal of Social Psychiatry*

Twemlow, S.W., & Fonagy, P. (2005). A note on teachers' who bully students in schools with differing levels of behavioral problems. *Accepted for publication, American Journal of Psychiatry*

Weinberg, K.M., & Tronick, E.Z. (1996). Infant affective reactions to the resumption of maternal interaction after the Still-Face. *Child Development* 67, 905-914.