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# Transcultural Mentalisation – Why the Body Matters When Meaning No Longer Translates

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## ABSTRACT

A journal titled Body, Mind, and Culture makes a strong claim. It suggests that none of these dimensions can be meaningfully understood in isolation. And yet, in many academic and clinical discourses, the body still appears as an appendix: acknowledged rhetorically, marginalised epistemically. This editorial is written in the conviction that the current global situation – socially, politically, therapeutically – forces us to rethink this hierarchy. We are living in a time in which shared symbolic frameworks are eroding. Words no longer connect as reliably as they once did. Explanations polarise rather than clarify. Moral vocabularies fragment. And increasingly, encounters across cultural, social, and experiential boundaries fail not because people are unwilling to understand – but because understanding itself has become unstable.

**Keywords:** Transcultural, mentalisation, body.

What remains available, however, is the body.

Not as a biological constant. Not as a universal language. But as a situated, culturally shaped, resonant medium through which contact still takes place, often below the threshold of conscious interpretation. The Journal of Body, Mind, and Culture offers a particularly fertile space for exploring this shift. It invites contributions that do not separate bodily experience from meaning-making, nor culture from embodied life. This editorial seeks to contribute to that orientation by proposing transcultural mentalisation as a bridge concept: a way of thinking, sensing, and relating that becomes relevant precisely when familiar interpretative models reach their limits.

## When Understanding No Longer Works

Many therapeutic and academic traditions are built on an implicit promise: if we observe enough, interpret correctly, and communicate clearly, understanding will follow. Misunderstandings are treated as technical problems – gaps to be closed through better translation, more precise concepts, or refined methods. But contemporary encounters increasingly confront us with a different experience: understanding does not fail because we lack information, but because the codes themselves no longer overlap. This is evident in intercultural encounters and in interactions shaped by trauma, power asymmetries, social inequality, generational shifts, or rapidly changing media environments. Behaviour does not "mean" what we expect it to mean. Affective expressions irritate. Silence feels ambiguous rather than containing. Bodily presence unsettles rather than reassures.

In such moments, the classical tools of interpretation lose their grip. And yet something continues to happen. Bodies react. Tensions emerge. Atmospheres shift. The encounter does not dissolve – it thickens.

This editorial starts from the assumption that these moments of irritation are not marginal phenomena. They are central to contemporary relational life. And they demand an expanded understanding of mentalisation – one that takes the body seriously as a site of knowledge.

## Mentalisation and Its Cultural Assumptions

Peter Fonagy's concept of mentalisation has fundamentally shaped modern psychodynamic and attachment-based thinking. At its core lies a simple yet radical idea: human behaviour can be understood in terms of inner states. Mentalisation invites us to pause, to reflect, and to imagine the subjective worlds of ourselves and others. This capacity is deeply relational. It develops within secure attachment relationships and remains vulnerable to stress, trauma, and contextual disruption. Fonagy's model has also been rightly described as an ethical attitude: it resists premature judgement and insists on complexity. Yet mentalisation carries implicit cultural assumptions. It presupposes that inner states are representable, that behaviour refers to mental content in a readable way, and that observer and observed share at least a minimal symbolic framework.

In transcultural contexts – and increasingly beyond them – these assumptions can no longer be taken for granted. What if behaviour does not primarily point to interpretable inner states, but to embodied practices shaped by cultural histories? What if the observer's irritation is not a failure of understanding, but the very medium through which something meaningful emerges? At this point, mentalisation needs to be extended – not abandoned, but complemented.

A European psychotherapist describes a supervision session with an international group of colleagues. During her presentation, one participant remains completely silent. No nodding, no facial feedback, no verbal response. While others intervene, the silent participant looks down, hands folded, posture still.

After a few minutes, the therapist notices increasing tension in her body. Her breathing becomes shallow. Her shoulders tighten. She feels an impulse to speak faster, to explain more clearly, to "reach" the other. Internally, she begins to interpret these as disinterest, resistance, and withdrawal.

Only later does she learn that, in the participant's cultural and professional context, silence and stillness are signs of respect and attentiveness. Speaking prematurely would have been considered intrusive.

What matters here is not the subsequent cognitive correction. What matters is the bodily sequence: irritation, self-activation, interpretative pressure. The therapist's body reacted before meaning was available. The irritation was not an error – it was the point of contact. It revealed both the other's difference and her own embodied expectations of responsiveness.


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## The Body Knows Before Meaning Appears

In clinical practice, research, and everyday interaction, language enjoys a privileged status. We tend to assume that what cannot be verbalised is not yet understood. But this hierarchy overlooks a fundamental fact: the body responds long before meaning is articulated.

A change in breathing.

A tightening of the jaw.

A sudden stillness in the room.

These are not raw data awaiting cognitive processing. They are forms of knowing. When symbolisation is unavailable, restricted, or culturally incongruent, meaning does not vanish. It relocates. It inhabits posture, movement, rhythm, and tone. This is where embodiment becomes epistemologically relevant. Embodiment, in this sense, is not the opposite of reflection. It is a different mode of reflection – one that works through resonance rather than distance. Through proximity rather than representation.

In transcultural encounters, this bodily dimension often becomes the primary site of contact. Symbolic systems diverge. Emotional grammars differ. But bodies still respond to each other. Sometimes all that is shared is a tension, a pause, a mutual alertness.

This does not produce clarity. It produces presence.

## Sensed Knowing as a Transcultural Resource

There are moments when we know something without being able to say what it is. Not as an intuition detached from experience, but as a physically grounded certainty: something is happening here. I refer to this mode as sensed knowing.

Sensed knowing is neither stored knowledge nor implicit memory. It is not historically sedimented, but situationally emergent. It arises in the present moment, within a relational and atmospheric field. It cannot be possessed or controlled. It appears when the body is receptive enough to register subtle shifts. This form of knowing becomes particularly relevant when cultural codes fail, when interpretation produces more confusion than clarity, and when the observer feels involved without understanding why.

Sensed knowing is not vague. It is often astonishingly precise – though not in conceptual terms. It offers orientation without explanation. It allows us to stay connected without premature closure. Importantly, sensed knowing is transcultural not because it is universal, but because it does not rely on shared symbols. It belongs to the encounter, not to the individual alone.

In a therapeutic training setting, two participants are paired for a non-verbal exercise. One comes from a background shaped by physical restraint and emotional containment; the other from a milieu where expressive movement and vocalisation are common.

During a simple mirroring task, the second participant begins to exaggerate movements, adding rhythm and breath sounds. The first freezes almost imperceptibly. Her gaze narrows, her weight shifts backwards. No words are exchanged.

The facilitator notices a change in the room: a brief stillness, a density. Instead of intervening verbally, the exercise is slowed down. Both participants remain present. Gradually, the exaggeration softens; the freeze releases slightly. Something adjusts itself without explanation.

Later, both report having felt “seen” – though neither can clearly articulate why. No interpretation was shared. No meaning was translated. Understanding emerged as a bodily accommodation within the relational field.

## Co-Mentalisation and the Space Between Bodies

If mentalisation traditionally focuses on understanding the other’s inner world, co-mentalisation shifts attention to what emerges between bodies. In co-mentalisation, meaning is not inferred but negotiated, not through words alone, but through shared presence. I am not a detached observer. I am part of the field in which meaning takes shape.

Affective resonance plays a central role here. It is not intentional. It cannot be produced. It happens – or it does not. A room changes because a voice trembles. A pause becomes meaningful. A gesture is mirrored without conscious awareness. This resonance is situational. It belongs neither to subject nor object, but to the relational space itself.

In this sense, transcultural mentalisation aligns with broader sociological and phenomenological perspectives that emphasise resonance, field dynamics, and inter-bodily experience. It suggests that understanding does not always precede involvement – sometimes it follows it.

## Third Space, Fieldwork, and the Body as Method

The concept of the Third Space, as developed by Homi Bhabha, is often understood in cultural theory as a metaphorical site of hybridity – a space in which meanings are negotiated rather than inherited. What is often overlooked, however, is that this space is not primarily cognitive or discursive. It is experiential. It is bodily.

The Third Space does not open through explanation or agreement. It opens through presence. Through staying in situations that are unclear, uncomfortable, or resistant to interpretation. In this sense, the Third Space is less a theoretical construct than a situated bodily condition: a state in which familiar orientations no longer suffice, yet no alternative framework is available.

This understanding resonates deeply with the ethos of ethnological fieldwork. Classical ethnography did not begin as a method of interpretation, but as a practice of exposure. Bronisław Malinowski's insistence on long-term participation, proximity, and endurance was not aimed at faster understanding but at being affected. Fieldwork required the researcher to live within unfamiliar rhythms, bodily routines, and social densities long before meaning could be articulated.

Clifford Geertz later conceptualised this process as "thick description," emphasising that behaviour cannot be separated from its context of meaning. Yet thick description itself presupposes something more basic: the capacity to remain present in situations that do not yet make sense. The anthropologist's body becomes an instrument of perception. Fatigue, irritation, fascination, boredom, and discomfort are not methodological noise; they are part of the data.

Seen from this perspective, transcultural mentalisation can be understood as a field-based attitude. It does not aim at mastering difference, but at staying with it. It requires a bodily tolerance for uncertainty and a willingness to suspend premature interpretation. Understanding is not produced by analytical distance, but by prolonged co-presence.

The Third Space, then, is not a neutral in-between. It is charged, dynamic, and affectively dense. It emerges when individuals allow themselves to be unsettled without immediately restoring familiar categories. In therapeutic, educational, and social contexts, this attitude marks a shift: from intervention to participation, from explanation to resonance.

Ethnological fieldwork reminds us that meaning is not discovered from the outside. It emerges from within the relational field – slowly, unevenly, and often against resistance. Transcultural mentalisation shares this lineage. It treats the body not as an object of observation, but as a method of knowing.