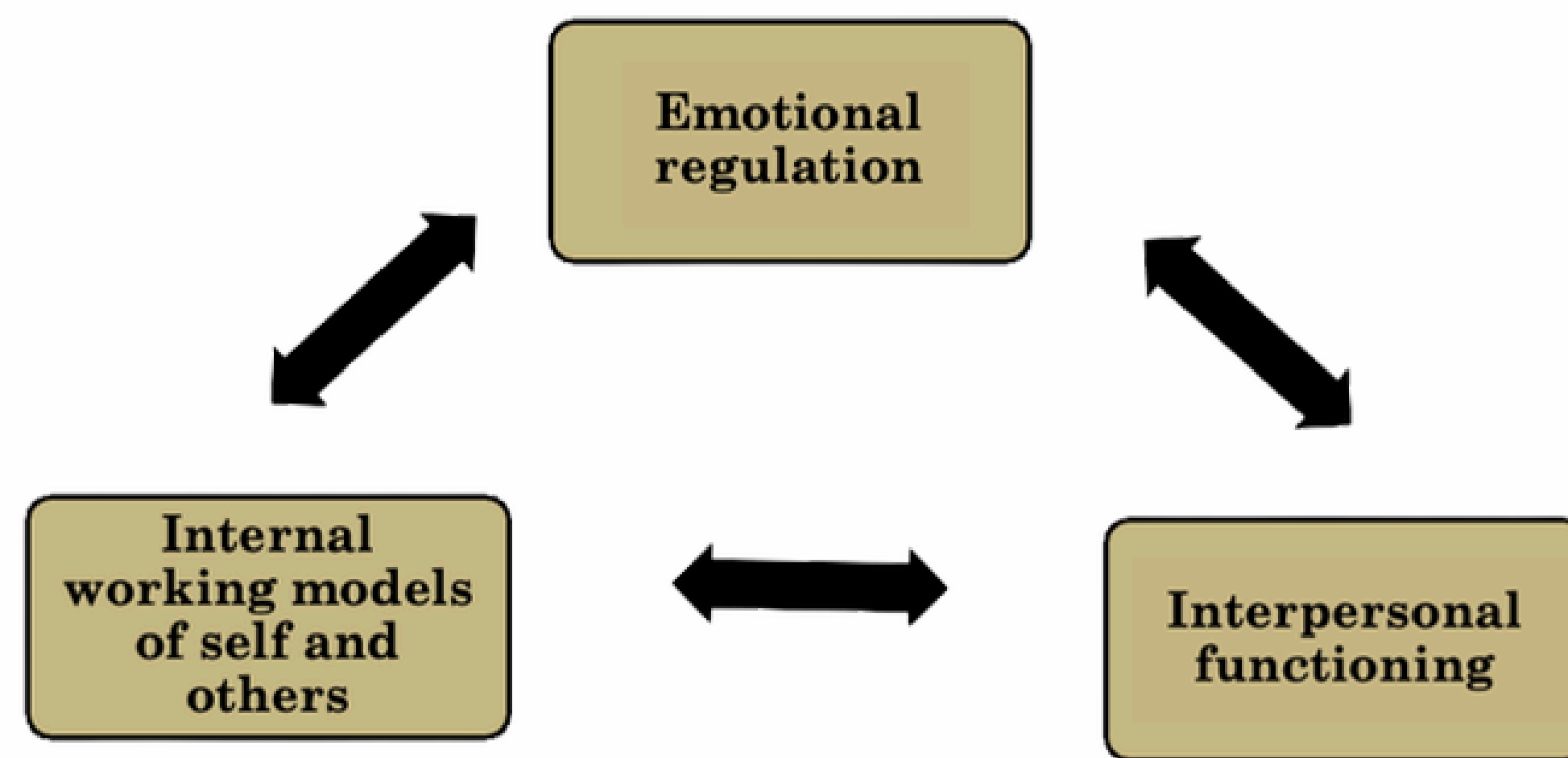


How Does Mentalization Promote Secure Attachment? A Qualitative Exploration of a Chinese Adult's Experience

Authors: Evangelia Gianino, Shayna Slatkin, and Yinan Li

Introduction

Attachment Theory:



Mentalization: the capacity to understand behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, emotions, and intentions

Mentalization-Based Treatment (MBT) Demonstrates:

- Improved emotional regulation
- Improved interpersonal functioning
- Particularly beneficial for individuals with insecure attachment histories

Research Gap:

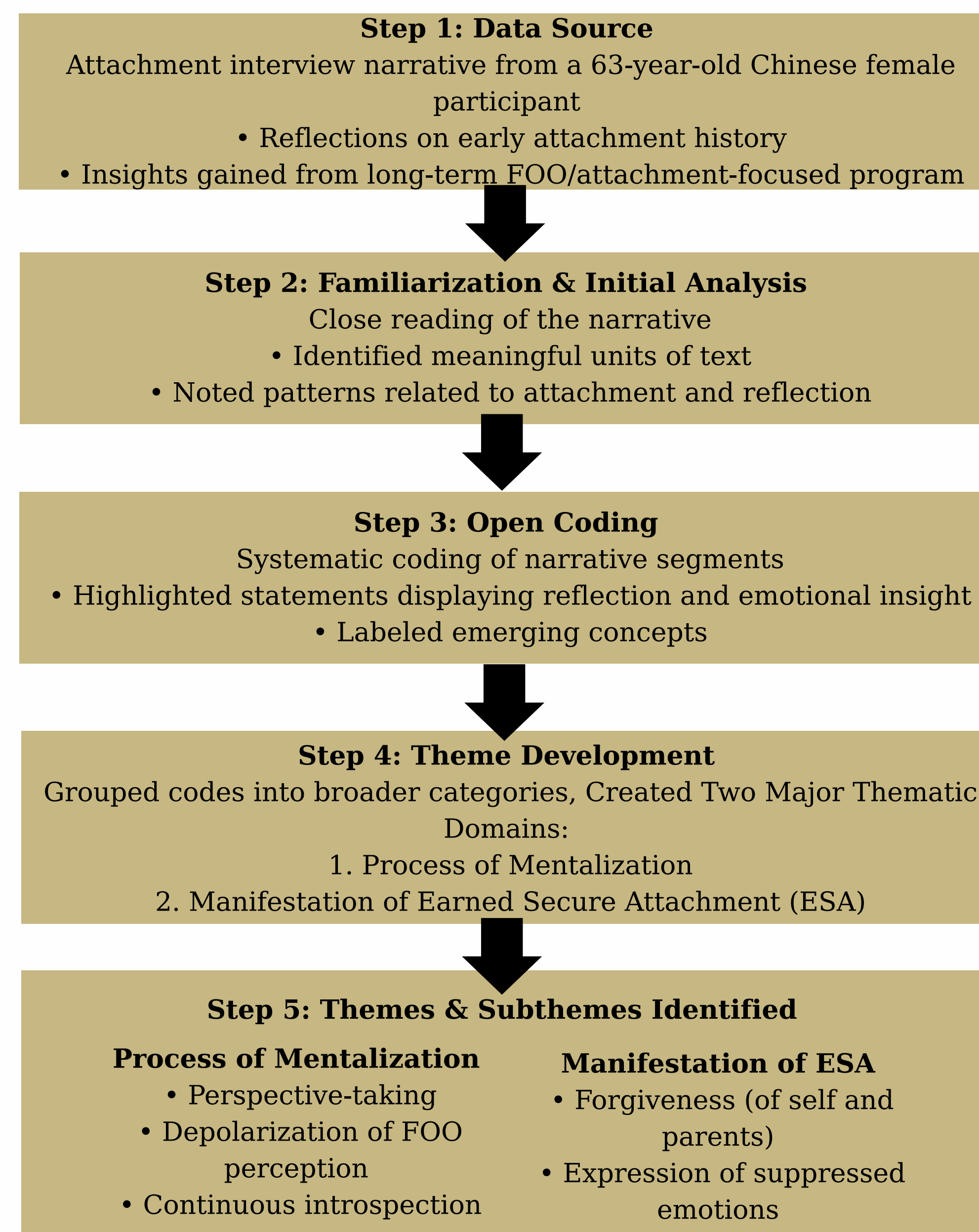
- Most existing research focuses on long-term psychotherapy and Western clinical populations

Limited research on:

- Mentalization in non-clinical contexts
- Mentalization as a pathway to Earned Secure Attachment outside traditional therapy settings

Methods

Thematic Analysis Process



Discussion

Findings support attachment theory while extending the concept of Earned Secure Attachment (ESA) beyond traditional psychotherapy settings. Consistent with prior research, reflective narrative processing was associated with increased emotional insight, flexibility, and coherence in understanding early caregiving experiences. The participant's shift from polarized ("black-and-white") family-of-origin perceptions to a more integrated view reflects a core process of mentalization. Perspective-taking and depolarization appeared to facilitate restructuring of internal working models. Rather than categorizing relationships as entirely "good" or "bad," she demonstrated increased capacity to hold relational complexity—an indicator of attachment security. Importantly, internal cognitive shifts were accompanied by **observable relational changes**:

- Increased forgiveness toward caregivers
- Expression of previously suppressed emotions
- Greater self-acceptance and boundary-setting

These findings suggest that **structured reflection within attachment-informed programming, not only long-term psychotherapy, may promote movement toward ESA**. This helps address the gap in existing literature by demonstrating how mentalization may operate in non-clinical and culturally diverse contexts.

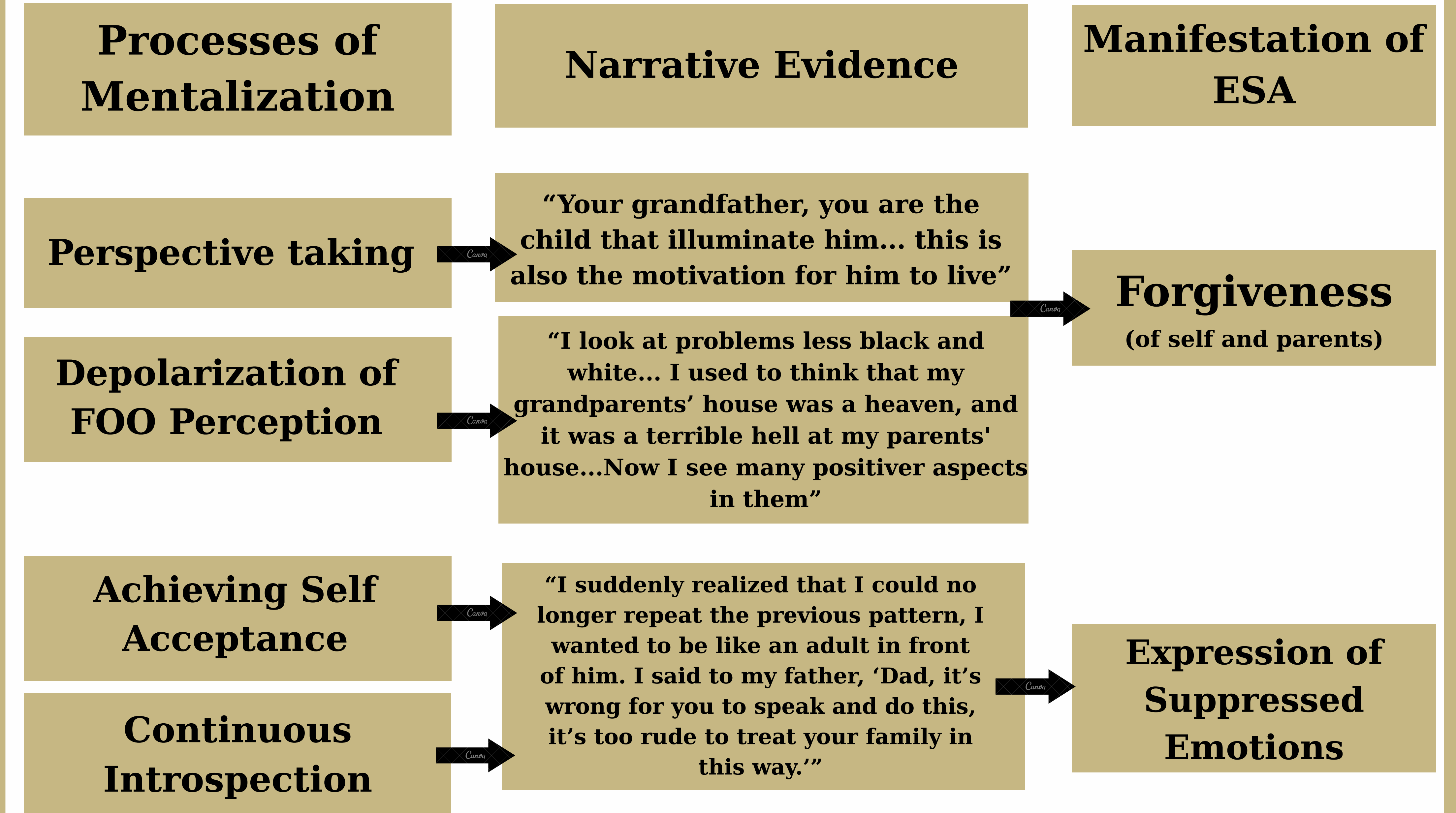
Implications:

- Mentalization may function as a transferable mechanism of attachment change.
- Attachment-informed programs can incorporate reflective dialogue to foster ESA.
- Cultural context should be considered in pathways to attachment reorganization.

Limitations & Future Directions:

- Single case study limits generalizability.
- Future research should include larger, diverse samples and longitudinal designs.

Results



Conclusions

This study illustrates how mentalization may serve as a pathway to Earned Secure Attachment outside traditional psychotherapy. Through reflective narrative processing, the participant demonstrated increased cognitive flexibility, emotional integration, and relational growth. These findings suggest that attachment reorganization may be achievable through structured reflection in non-clinical, culturally diverse contexts, expanding current understanding of how secure attachment can be developed across the lifespan.

References

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- Kim, S., & Woo, S. (2025). Indirect Effects of Self-Differentiation and Mentalization on Family of Origin Health and Marital Satisfaction Among Korean Adults. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 51(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12756>