

Thesis of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) dissertation

Complex study of adolescent mentalization

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Objectives of the Thesis

In my dissertation, I implemented a preventive approach to exploring the context of mentalization for resilient development. I emphasized the relationship of mentalization with demographic variables in a cross-sectional design (Poznyak et al., 2019). The underlying assumption of the research is that by identifying factors that influence successful mentalization, a mentalization profile can be developed, thus allowing for the interpretation of mentalization in the context of psychological well-being and resilience.

I have defined the first step as testing Hagelquist's (2018) model. My research question was whether the relationship between successful mentalization, physical and relational security, regulatory skills, and resources could be demonstrated among healthy Hungarian adolescents. The second step of the study was to develop a mentalization profile. In my research, I sought to answer the question of how mentalization related to the degree of peer support and relational trust, regulatory processes, and resources. In constructing the mentalization profile, I used a pattern-oriented research approach, which was a new approach in this area. As a third step in the study, I explored the mediating and moderating role of mentalization and sought to identify the dimensions of mentalization that mediated the protective or risk factors of emotion regulation, emotion management, perceived peer support, and epistemic trust in resilient development.

I included the Multidimensional Questionnaire of Mentalization and the Epistemic Confidence, Distrust, and Credulity Questionnaires in the complex study of mentalization. Both questionnaires were newly developed instruments, the Hungarian validations were carried out at the time of writing the dissertation. To understand the correlates of mentalization, I tested the following hypotheses:

Research question 1: The demographic characteristics of adolescent mentalization

H1: Levels of mentalization differ by gender and age

- a) I expect that the level of adolescent mentalization is lower compared to young adults (Choudhury et al., 2006; Fonagy & Luyten, 2009).
- b) I assume that mentalization levels differ between men and women and between boys and girls (Poznyak et al., 2019).

- c) I assume a cross effect between the two variables, I expect that the level of adolescent mentalization will be higher for boys/men, while in young adulthood girls/women will score higher (Bouchard et al., 2008; Fonagy & Luyten, 2009).

Research question 2: The correlations of mentalization with other variables in Hagelquist's (2018) model

H2: Successful mentalization correlates positively with physical and relational security indicators: perceived peer support and epistemic trust. I hypothesize that perceived support from family, friends, and significant others and epistemic trust negatively relate to mentalization impairment (Fonagy et al., 2014; Fonagy & Campbell, 2017).

H3: Successful mentalization is positively related to indicators of regulatory processes and skills. I hypothesize that difficulties with emotion regulation positively relate to impairment of mentalization (Gori et al., 2021; Taubner & Curth, 2013); while successful mentalization positively relates to personal resources. I hypothesize that self-efficacy, self-esteem, and future orientation negatively correlate to mentalization impairment (Gori et al., 2021).

Research question 3: Mentalization profile development

H4: In my exploratory research question, I assume that a profile of mentalization can be developed for adolescents aged 14-18 years, which is useful to identify the characteristics of personality along relational indicators, resources, and regulatory processes

Research question 4: The mediating and moderating effects of mentalization

H5: I hypothesize that mentalization mediates the effect of perceived peer support, epistemic trust and distrust, and emotion regulation difficulties on resilience (Fonagy et al., 2020; Fonagy & Campbell, 2017).

H6: I hypothesized that high levels of mentalization would reduce the negative impact of problem behavior on self-efficacy and self-efficacy (Campbell et al., 2021; Fonagy et al., 2020) (Campbell et al., 2021; Fonagy et al., 2020).

Methods

Sample: In a large cross-sectional survey we recruited individuals of three age groups: young adolescents (11-13 years old; M = 154, 48% of whom are boys), adolescents (14-18 years old;

M = 588, 41% of whom are boys) and young adults (19-30 years old; M = 723, 30% of whom are men). *Measures:* participants filled out self-completion questionnaires: the Multidimensional Questionnaire of Mentalization (Gori et al., 2021; Szél et al., 2023), the Epistemic Trust, Distrust and Credulity Questionnaire (Campbell et al., 2021), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Papp-Zipernovszky et al., 2017; Zimet et al., 1990) (Papp-Zipernovszky et al., 2017; Zimet et al., 1990), Resilience Scale for Adolescence (Askeland et al., 2020; Hjemdal et al., 2006; Kóródi et al., 2022), Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Scale (Szabó et al., 2011), Child Behavior Questionnaire (Achenbach, 1999; Rózsa et al., 1999), Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby, Parker, et al., 1994; Bagby, Taylor, et al., 1994; Cserjési et al., 2007), Rosenberg Self-Efficacy Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; Sallay et al., 2014), the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Kopp et al., 1993), and the short version of Zimbardo Time Perspective Questionnaire (Orosz et al., 2017). *Statistical analysis:* I used JASP and Jamovi programs for statistical analysis. I carried out a confirmatory factor analysis and checked internal consistency indices to test the reliability of the questionnaires in press. Pearson analyses were used in the case of normal distribution of the variables, in other cases Spearman correlation. I compared the mean of the variables using independent sample tests, one-way, two-way, and multivariate ANOVA. Post hoc analyses of ANOVA tests were performed with Tukey's correction or Holm's correction. I used cluster analysis to create groups along the dimensions of mentalization. I examined the relationship of emotion regulation, perceived peer support, and epistemic trust, distrust, and credulity with resilience using a mediation procedure, hypothesizing that the quality of mentalizing capacity mediates the mechanism of action of peer support. I used standardized values of the variables in the mediation and moderation test. When examining indirect and direct effects, I considered significant relationships as significant effects. The demographic characteristics of mentalization were explored by including the full sample, which allowed for a comparative analysis of young adolescents (11-14 years old), adolescents (15-18 years old), and young adults (19-30 years old). The analysis of the relationship between mentalization and the different variables was only conducted with data from adolescents (15-18 years old).

Scientific Results

Demographic features of mentalization

Demographic characteristics were explored using the Hungarian version of the Multidimensional Mentalization Questionnaire. The analysis of mentalization and age indicates

a positive, weak correlation for scales of successful mentalization and a negative, weak correlation for scales of poor mentalization. Among the developmental characteristics of mentalization, the present sample confirms that the ability to mentalize varies in a positive direction with age. From a review of the mean scores, it can also be concluded that the age effect is stronger for the scales measuring successful mentalization for Reflexivity and Relational Attunement, while for the scales measuring poor mentalization, Relational Discomfort shows larger differences. The gender difference hypothesis that the mentalizing capacity of boys/men and girls/women is significantly different at all ages is also confirmed, but the cross-effect of the two variables did not hold in the present sample, with girls/women maintaining their mentalizing advantage at all ages.

The building blocks of mentalization: examining resilient development

Relational security and mentalization: my results indicate the relationship between mentalization and epistemic trust among the scales of successful mentalization: Reflectivity has a significant, positive, medium-strong correlation with Epistemic Trust, and an almost medium positive correlation with Epistemic Distrust and Credulity, while Relational Attunement positively correlates with Epistemic Trust and Credulity. The Epistemic Distrust and Epistemic Credulity subscales show a medium-strong positive correlation with all three dimensions of poor mentalization, while Epistemic Trust shows a negative correlation with Relational Discomfort. In terms of perceived peer support, I found weak or negligible correlations for both successful and poor mentalizing dimensions.

The relationship of emotion regulation with mentalization: to measure the quality of emotion regulation, I used the Child Behaviour Questionnaire's Anxiety and Depression Scale, Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Scale, and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale. Analyzing correlations of at least moderate strength, I can conclude that Reflectivity positively relates to anxiety, depression, difficulty in identifying emotions, and pragmatic thinking. A common feature of emotion regulation difficulties is the overwhelming nature of emotional expressions triggered by thoughts about the future, present or past, which is typically maintained and intensified by continuous self-monitoring. In the case of self-efficacy, I found a negative relationship between anxiety, depression, and identification of emotions while emotion utilization is positively correlated with control scales. The results indicate a moderate positive relationship between relational attunement and identifying others' emotions. For poor mentalization, I found a positive, medium-strength relationship with anxiety, depression, and difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions. The results supported the hypothesis that

higher levels of mentalizing are associated with a reduction in emotional difficulties, and poor mentalizing may indicate difficulty in emotion regulation.

For measuring the level of impulse control, I used the Deviant Behavior and Aggression Scales of the Child Behavior Questionnaire and the Barratt Impulsivity Scale. I found a significant negative correlation between reflexivity and epistemic vigilance. Regarding poor mentalizing, I found a relationship with aggressive behavior, behavioral impulsivity, and anxiety in the case of relational discomfort and emotional discontent. The Attentional Problems subscale of the Child Behavior Questionnaire indicates the maturity of cognitive regulation and ability to focus, with a medium-strength correlation with vigilance, distrust, and emotional discontent. The Child Behavior Questionnaire subscale of somatic complaints may indicate difficulties in elaborating psychological problems, with the presence of teleological mode, as I found a positive medium strength correlation with all three dimensions of poor mentalization.

Personal resources and mentalization: correlations of at least medium strength indicate that self-esteem is positively related to self-efficacy and negatively related to Relational Discomfort, Distrust, and Emotional Discontrol scales. In the case of self-efficacy, only Ego Strength shows a positive relationship. Among the dimensions of time perspective, negative past positively correlated with Reflexivity and all three scales of poor mentalization. A similar correlation is also seen with the hedonic present perspective for the Emotional Discontrol scale.

In terms of resilience, I found a positive correlation between self-efficacy with Social Competence, Assertiveness, and Goal Orientation, and a negative correlation between Peer Support with Relational Discomfort, with similar strengths. The results of the correlational study supported my hypothesis that a higher level of mentalizing skills is associated with higher levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience, and are also determinants of time perspective.

Mentalization profile

To create the profile, I chose the cluster analysis method using the Multidimensional Mentalization Questionnaire subscales. I could create three groups, which I named well-mentalizing, hyper-mentalizing, and poorly-mentalizing groups based on the nature of mentalization. The naming of the groups emphasized the particular way of mentalizing, as the study was conducted on a healthy, non-clinical sample, so the differences between the groups could be considered normal variances in mentalizing.

Mentalization profile and relational security: the well-mentalizing group can be characterized by a higher level of Epistemic Trust, but also by a moderate level of Distrust and Credulity, which is presumably an adaptive characteristic. The scores of the hyper-mentalizing group are higher in the area of Epistemic Distrust, with medium scores on the other two scales. Members of the poorly mentalizing cluster, on the other hand, scored low on all three scales, with the lowest scores in Epistemic Credulity, which may indicate increased mistrust.

Mentalization profile in terms of emotion regulation and self-control: the well-mentalizing group reports average anxiety, and the hyper-mentalizers have a pronounced anxiety value, while the poor mentalizers report negligible anxiety. There are also significant differences in the scales of emotional intelligence. The evaluation and utilization of emotions are highest in the well-mentalizing group, the poorly mentalizing group has the weakest evaluation of others' emotions, while the hyper-mentalizing group has difficulty in managing emotions. An important feature is that emotions are the most manageable for the poorly mentalizers. Approaching the other area of emotion regulation from the perspective of alexithymia, we can see that the hyper-mentalizing group reported the greatest difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions, while the poorly mentalizing group reported the least difficulty. Thus, reduced but still functioning mentalizing ability may be associated with difficulty in expressing emotions, but the perception of difficulty may also develop frustration. The poorly mentalizing group may also have difficulty expressing emotions, but this is not perceived as a difficulty because of reduced reflexivity. In terms of difficulties with self-control, all three groups show difficulties below the cut-offs, but the hyper-mentalizing group shows the highest scores for attention problems and aggression. In terms of impulsivity, the groups score almost equally, with the well-mentalizing group characterized by behavioral impulsivity and the poorly-mentalizing group by cognitive impulsivity.

Mentalization profile and personal resources: examining the characteristics of mentalization groups and resilience, the well-mentalizing group scores higher than the other two groups on all dimensions of resilience, and the hyper-mentalizing group has the lowest scores. The results, therefore, show that hyper-mentalization is associated with a lower level of resilience than poor mentalization. Self-evaluation scores are the highest in the poorly mentalizing group and the lowest in the hyper-mentalizing group. My findings show the highest self-efficacy score in the well-mentalizing group, the poorly mentalizing group comes next, and finally, the hyper-mentalizing group has the lowest scores on this scale. For the time perspective, members of the hyper-mentalizing group score higher for negative past and fatalistic present orientation, the

well-mentalizers score higher for positive past and future orientation, and the two groups have similar scores for hedonistic present time perspective. The poorly mentalizing group scored lower than the other groups along all five dimensions.

The mediating and moderating effects of mentalization on resilience

My findings suggest that successful mentalization has a mediating role in emotion utilization and emotion control. For the poor mentalization scales, the evaluation of one's own emotions is influenced by Relational Discomfort in a negative direction, while the utilization of emotions is influenced in a positive direction. The indirect effect on the evaluation of others' emotions is for the Emotional Discontrol scale. Emotion management is influenced in a positive direction by Distrust and in a negative direction by Emotional Discontrol.

Examining the relationship between resilience and perceived peer support: among the scales of mentalization, only for the self-efficacy scale a significant indirect effect is found, mediating the effect of perceived peer support from family. Looking at the relationship of resilience to Epistemic Trust, Distrust, and Credulity, it can be concluded that, among the scales of successful mentalization, Reflexivity, and Vigilance mediate the effect of Epistemic Trust and Credulity, and Vigilance also significantly influences the effect of epistemic distrust. Among the subscales of poor mentalization, Distrust mediates the effect of Epistemic Distrust and Credulity, while for the latter, the Emotional Discontrol scale also mediates. The results suggest that five of the six subscales of mentalization have mediating effects, mediating the effects of emotion control, perceived peer support, or epistemic trust. Self-efficacy is the scale that is associated with all three factors. The mechanism of emotion regulation is typically mediated by scales measuring poor mentalization, in the case of epistemic trust by scales measuring successful mentalization, while the effect of epistemic mistrust and credulity is mediated by dimensions of successful and poor mentalization.

In my study of the preventive effects of mentalization, I hypothesized that high levels of mentalization would reduce the negative impact of difficulties in emotion and emotion regulation on self-esteem and self-efficacy. In the study, I used impulsivity (BIS) and alexithymia (TAS) scales indicating weakness of regulatory processes as predictor variables, and general self-esteem (RSES) and self-efficacy (GSES) scales as outcome variables. Standardized scale scores were used to measure moderating effects on the dimensions of mentalization. The linear regression conducted showed that difficulty in identifying emotions and self-efficacy explained 30.5 percent of the variance in self-evaluation, but the model

accounting for the interaction of the two variables did not significantly change the explanatory power. The results suggest that difficulty identifying emotions and vigor have a similar but opposite relationship with self-evaluation, i.e., the two variables together explain less of the variance in self-evaluation. My study found that individuals with high arousal have higher self-esteem even when they have greater difficulty in identifying emotions, and consequently, in this group, difficulty in identifying emotions has less of an impact on self-esteem. The compensatory effect of low self-efficacy is less pronounced, while the negative effect of emotion identification difficulties on self-esteem is stronger for those with medium self-efficacy.

In my research on the impact on self-esteem, I studied the moderating effect of poor mentalization scales on the difficulty of recognizing emotions and self-esteem. After conducting linear regression, I found that the combined scales of difficulty in expressing emotions and poor mentalization explained 25% of the variance in self-evaluation. The model accounted for the interaction of the two variables, significantly changing the explanatory power. A similar level of explanatory power was found for the relationship discomfort scale, which, combined with the difficulty of identifying emotions, also explained 25% of the variance in self-evaluation. These results suggest that relationship discomfort amplifies the negative effect of difficulty in emotion regulation on self-evaluation. Young people who report high levels of relational discomfort and frustration in interpersonal relationships are more vulnerable to the effects of difficulty in identifying emotions. On the other hand, a group of young people who experience less misunderstanding and hurt and report low levels of relational discomfort are less impacted by difficulties in emotion regulation.

I also analyzed the moderating effect of poor mentalization scales on the relationship between difficulty in expressing emotions and self-esteem. From the moderation models, I concluded that poor mentalization enhances the negative effect of emotional expression on self-evaluation. The moderating effect of the dimensions of poor mentalization is confirmed in the relationship between the difficulty of emotion expression and self-evaluation.

Regarding self-efficacy, I found that cognitive impulsivity has a negative relationship, while reflexivity and vigor have a positive relationship. The negative effect of cognitive impulsivity is reduced by reflexivity and vigor, and together they explained 46% of the variance in self-efficacy. The results suggest that self-efficacy variability is significantly explained by vigor and cognitive impulsivity, i.e., vigor increases feelings of self-efficacy, in addition to the self-efficacy-reducing effect of thinking indiscipline. The interaction analysis shows that reflexivity

and vigilance together increase self-efficacy and reduce the negative effect of cognitive impulsivity.

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List of Publications



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Szél, E.**, Jámbori, S.: A szándékos önszabályozás, a mentalizáció és az időperspektíva kapcsolata fiatal felnőttek esetében.
In: Új kutatások a neveléstudományokban 2021 : A neveléstudomány válaszai a jövő kihívásaira. Szerk.: Molnár Gyöngyvér, Tóth Edit, Szegedi Tudományegyetem, Neveléstudományi Intézet, Szeged, 101-116, 2022. ISBN: 9789633068960
2. **Szél, E.**: Élet-mese: a mentalizáció és az élményfeldolgozás kapcsolata mesékben.
In: Tabu a gyermekirodalomban / Varga Emőke; Turcsányi Enikő; Pusztai Virág, Budapest: Magyar Gyermekirodalmi Intézet Kft., Budapest, 111-120, 2021. ISBN: 9786158130530

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (5)

3. **Szél, E.**, Szabó, É.: A mentalizáció, a reziliencia és a problémaviselkedés kapcsolati beágyazottsága serdülőkorban: vizsgálatok a Reflektív Funkció Kérdőív (RFQ-H) magyar változatával.
Magy. Pszichol. Szle. 78 (1), 1-22, 2023. ISSN: 0025-0279.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1556/0016.2022.00040>
4. **Szél, E.**, Kóródi, K., Gori, A., Jámbori, S., Szabó, É.: A mentalizáció multidimenziális kérdőívének (MMQ) magyar nyelvű adaptációja serdülők és fiatal felnőttek körében.
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5. Kóródi, K., **Szél, E.**, Szabó, É.: A Serdülő Reziliencia Kérdőív (READ) magyar nyelvű adaptációja.
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6. **Szél, E.**: Mentalizáció a gyászmunkában.
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7. **Szél, E.**, Szabó, É.: A serdülőkori mentalizáció vizsgálata: A reflektív funkció kérdőív magyar változatának (RFQ-H) pszichometriai jellemzői.
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8. Szabó, É., Kóródi, K., **Szél, E.**, Jagodics, B.: Facing the Inevitable: The Effects of Coronavirus Disease Pandemic and Online Teaching on Teachers' Self-Efficacy, Workload and Job Satisfaction.
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