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Original research paper

## CAPACITY FOR MENTALIZATION IN ADOLESCENTS: THE CONTRIBUTION OF PARENTING STYLES\*

Žana Živković Rancić\*\*  
Technical School, Pirot, Serbia

Jelisaveta Todorović  
University of Niš – Faculty of Philosophy, Niš, Serbia

### ABSTRACT

An authoritative parenting style and a high capacity for mentalization in adolescents have been recognized in the literature as a strong protective factor in preserving the mental health of adolescents. The aim of this research was to examine the predictive contribution of parenting styles to adolescents' capacity for mentalization. Two hundred high school students participated in the research (54.5% boys; the average age of the respondents was 17 years). The results of multiple regression analysis indicate that, when it comes to the parenting style of the mother, the dimensions of an authoritative style (*regulation* and *connection*) contribute significantly positively to an adolescent's capacity for mentalization, while the dimensions of an authoritarian style (*verbal hostility* and *non-reasoning*) contribute significantly negatively to the development of this reflective function. When the father's parenting style is taken into account, the dimension of an authoritative parenting style that significantly contributes to the development of mentalization is *regulation*, while the *non-reasoning* and *physical coercion* dimensions of an authoritarian style show a negative contribution. The main conclusion of the research is that the dimensions of an authoritative parenting style (*connection* and *regulation*) significantly contribute to the development of mentalization capacities in adolescents, while the dimensions of the authoritarian parenting style (*verbal hostility of the mother, non-reasoning of both parents* and *physical coercion of the father*) negatively contribute to the development of mentalization. The basic pedagogical implications of the paper lead towards

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\*\* E-mail: z.zivkovic.rancic18743@filfak.ni.ac.rs

encouraging positive parenting styles, which would improve the overall development of children, as well as the development of their capacity for mentalization.

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**Key words:**

parenting styles, mentalization, adolescence.

## ■ INTRODUCTION

The role of the family in the development of a child's personality is essential. Children's ability to understand themselves and others depends on whether parents have adequately recognized and interpreted their children's mental states. The capacity to understand one's own behaviour and the behaviour of other people is a significant developmental achievement that takes place within the framework of one's secure affective attachment relationship with the primary parent (Išpanović-Radojković, 2007). Although mentalizing primarily develops within attachment relationships (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008), mentalizing skills continue to develop throughout adolescence (Dumontheil, Apperly, & Blakemore, 2010). Along with the process of brain development (Blakemore, 2008), adolescents experience new emotional and social challenges that are relevant to the improvement of mentalization (Lee, Jolles, & Krabbendam, 2016). Bearing in mind that the capacity for mentalization can be an important skill when dealing with developmental challenges in the period of adolescence, the question arises as to how parenting styles can contribute to the development of this reflective function.

### **Mentalization**

The concept of mentalization was defined by Fonagy and Bateman (2004) as a mental process during which someone implicitly or explicitly interprets their own or other people's actions as meaningful based on intentional mental states such as desires, needs, feelings and intentions. Mentalization is an imaginative activity because it requires that an individual try to imagine what is happening in the mind of another individual (Fonagy, 2008). Mentalization allows us to understand other people's reactions, to predict them better, and to activate from a series of mental representations the one that best suits a certain interpersonal contact (Allen, 2003), which significantly influences affective regulation, impulse control and monitoring of one's own behaviour (Fonagy, 2001). Although the capacity for mentalization is a specifically human characteristic, it is not given at birth, but represents a developmental function that enables the child to respond to the behaviour of others, as well as to his/her own idea of other people's intentions and plans. By attributing

certain mental states to others, the child makes sense of others' reactions, so that their behaviours become meaningful and predictable for him/her (Fonagy & Target, 1998).

### **Factors of Mentalization Development**

According to current knowledge and a literature review, a secure affective attachment is a necessary (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002; Fonagy & Target, 1997), but not a sufficient condition for the development of mentalization (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008). In addition to affective regulation, for the development of mentalization it is necessary to develop a child's ability to correctly recognize and understand mental states (his/her own and others') and to relate them to behaviour. In order to develop this ability, the processes of joint attention, mirroring, and pedagogical intervention are required (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008). The process of mirroring could be a mechanism by which a child commences to perceive and understand emotions, but also to become aware of their impact on others (Fonagy, 2004; Jurist, Slade, & Bergner, 2008). By identifying personal inner contents by the facial expressions and reactions of the parents, the child learns to distinguish between appropriate meanings and to attribute them to different mental states (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). Pedagogical interventions imply the transfer of knowledge and norms of a certain culture about emotions, their expression and control (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008). If the parental pressure on the child to behave in accordance with certain norms is too strong, the resulting fear would prevent the child from considering the feelings of someone else, but would instead focus on the consequences that he/she suffers. If the parent's influence is too weak or inconsistent, the child may ignore it (Hoffman, 2003). Taking into consideration the importance of pedagogical interventions, it makes sense to ask what the role of the family is in the development of the child's capacity for mentalization.

### **The Family as a Factor in the Development of Mentalization**

Mentalization is a transactional and intergenerational process (Fonagy & Target, 1997) because it primarily develops intersubjectively, which means that the quality of a child's mentalization is related to the capacity to mentalize people (primarily significant others) that the child interacts with. A parent who has a developed capacity for mentalization knows the intentions and feelings behind their behaviour and consistently reveals them to the child. In any interaction with the child, the parent recognizes his/her mental states and describes them to the child in a meaningful way, so that the child gradually develops an awareness of the world as a safe, predictable, and secure place (Rosenblum *et al.*, 2008). A deficit in parental mentalization can

be a risk factor, because in that case the parent cannot understand the needs and perspectives of the child, which may result in emotional or physical neglect (Byrne *et al.*, 2019).

Certain authors state that the capacity to mentalize (a reflective function) plays a significant role when dealing with developmental challenges in the period of adolescence. More precisely, a low score on the scale of reflective function is considered to be a developmental deficit, while a high capacity of reflective function can be considered as a protective factor (Benbassat & Priel, 2012; Borelli *et al.*, 2018; Fonagy *et al.*, 2002; Rosso, Viterbori, & Scopesi, 2015; Taubner & Curth, 2013). The results of the study conducted by Benbassat and Priel (2012) indicate that the mentalizing capacity and social competence of adolescents is related to their parents' mentalizing capacity. In this study, the score on the parental reflective functioning scale moderated the relationship between parental behaviour and adolescent adjustment. During adolescence, a deficit in mentalization may be associated with a higher risk of externalizing and conduct disorders (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002; Fonagy & Luyten, 2018; Rosso, Viterbori, & Scopesi, 2015; Sharp & Venta, 2012). Bleiberg (2013) believes that even a turbulent, but not pathological, adolescence can be accompanied by an adaptive breakdown due to disturbances in mentalization. In a sample of adolescents, Borelli *et al.* (2015) found that parental neglect was correlated with an insecure pattern of affective attachment only when the score on the reflective functioning scale was low or moderate, but not in cases of a high score. The presented findings are focused on the role of parents' reflexivity in encouraging adolescent mentalization. In this paper, we ask how parenting styles can contribute to the development of this reflective function during adolescence.

### **Parenting Style as a Factor in the Development of Mentalization**

A parenting style is defined as a relatively consistent way of parents' behaviour that establishes an overall relationship with the child (Matejević, 2007) and implies an emotional climate within which the interaction between parents and children takes place (Nancy & Laurance, 1993). It is formed in early childhood and extends throughout a person's youth (Todorović, 2005). In this paper, we rely on the model of parenting styles of Diana Baumrind (Baumrind, 1966), who identifies three styles of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. An authoritarian parenting style implies highly expressed parental control and a low degree of warmth (Baumrind, 1966). Children are expected to obey (Ross & Hammer, 2002), and in the process of education, parents often use physical punishment to curb children's self-will. Children that grow up in an authoritarian environment are irritable and moody, which makes their socialization difficult (Todorović, 2005), and they often display externalized behavioural problems (Rinaldi & Howe, 2012). The authoritative

parenting style implies high demands adapted to the child's age, but also a high degree of emotional warmth and support (Baumrind, 1968). Although they set clear requirements and rules of conduct, authoritative parents explain to their children the reasons for applying those rules (Ross & Hammer, 2002). When they grow up in a democratic environment, children are spontaneous and express their thoughts and feelings freely (Čudina-Obradović & Obradović, 2006), and they are also research-oriented and more motivated for achievement (Matejević & Todorović, 2012). A permissive parenting style implies a high degree of emotional warmth but a low degree of control. A permissive parent does not set clear boundaries and rules of conduct, but accepts the child's impulses, desires and activities, thus allowing the child to independently regulate his/her activities (Baumrind, 1966). Children of permissive parents have a low degree of social responsibility, often exhibit impulsive behaviour, and have low achievements (Baumrind, 1966).

Parenting styles are recognized as an important determinant of children's cognitive and socioemotional development. Research results confirm that children whose parents have developed an intense emotional closeness with them have the best cognitive development and socio-emotional adjustment (Bornstein & Landsford 2010; Čudina-Obradović & Obradović, 2006; Li & Xie, 2017). According to the literature, when it comes to mentalization, the parents' role is seen mainly through the prism of secure affective attachment, mostly at an early age. A parenting style as a factor in the development of mentalization has been investigated through clinical practice, and studies confirm that abuse, neglect and trauma in childhood are especially harmful to the development of mentalization (Ensink *et.al.*, 2016; Schimmenti, 2016). Early negative experiences in relationships with significant figures can increase the tendency to dissociate, which can interfere with the ability to create and use mental representations of one's own emotional states and the emotional states that underlie other people's behaviour (Garofalo & Velotti, 2017). A research on a sample of children from our community (11–18 years of age) also confirmed the connection between childhood trauma, deficits in mentalization and dissociative defences (Bogdanović, 2022). Moreover, the influence of parenting styles on the development of the child's reflective function was examined through the relationship between parenting and a concept similar to that of mentalization, i.e. theory of mind. Theory of mind can be understood as the ability to understand, explain, infer, and predict the mental states of others that drive behaviours (Baron-Cohen, 1997). Studies on samples of early and preschool children consistently confirm that an authoritative style is associated with children's better performance on theory of mind tasks, such as children's success on false belief tasks (O'Reilly & Peterson, 2014) and second-order theory of mind abilities, such as mentalizing, logical thinking, and understanding irony (Khanipour, Nezafatbakhsh, & Aghababaei, 2021). In this paper, we start from the assumption that an authoritative parenting style, which is characterized by emotional warmth and parental support, explaining, interpreting and encouraging

curiosity in the child, is associated with a higher degree of capacity for mentalization at the adolescent age. On the other hand, we expect that an authoritarian style, characterized by low responsiveness to the child's needs and a high degree of control, will be associated with a lower capacity for adolescent mentalization. Therefore, the aim of this research is to examine whether parenting styles are statistically significant predictors of the capacity for mentalization of children of adolescent age. The study will also examine the contribution of mother's and father's parenting styles to the development of different dimensions of mentalization (mentalization of self, mentalization of others, and motivation for mentalization).

## ■ METHODOLOGY

### Sample and Procedure

A convenient sample consisted of 200 adolescents, students of the Technical School in Pirot, 16-18 years of age. The average age of the respondents was 17 years (SD =.79). Written parental consent was obtained for the participation of underage students in the research. The number of male and female respondents was fairly even – 109 boys (54.5%), and 91 girls (45.5%). The data collection was carried out online through *Google forms* questionnaires during June 2021, and the students filled out the questionnaires in the computer rooms of the Technical School. Before filling out the questionnaires, the students were informed about the purpose of the research, that the survey was anonymous, and that the answers would be used exclusively for scientific purposes.

### Instruments

*The Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire* (PSDQ), authored by Robinson *et al.*, (2001), contains the dimensions of authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive styles, and is based on the model of Diane Baumrind's parenting styles. The questionnaire contains 32 items with a five-point Likert-type response scale. The reliability of the subscales that the authors state (Robinson *et al.*, 2001) is: Authoritative parenting style –  $\alpha=0.86$ , Authoritarian parenting style –  $\alpha=0.82$  and Permissive parenting style –  $\alpha=0.64$ . The authoritative style implies a high degree of emotional warmth and parental control, operationalized through the dimensions of *connection* (e.g. *My mother/my father reacts to my feelings and needs*), *regulation* (*He/She explained to me why the rules have to be obeyed*) and *autonomy* (*He/She was respectful of my opinion by allowing me to express my opinion freely*). The authoritarian

style is characterized by a low degree of emotional warmth and a high degree of parental control. In this questionnaire, the authoritarian style is defined through the dimensions *style – physical coercion* (e.g. *My mother used physical punishment as a method of discipline*), *verbal hostility* (*She yelled at me when I misbehaved*) and *non-reasoning* (*She punished me without taking into account my justification*). The permissive parenting style is characterized by leniency in demands and lack of parental control, and in the questionnaire it is not decomposed into dimensions that operate it closely (e.g. *She threatened me with punishment, but she never punished me*). In this research, the parenting styles of parents were examined from the perspective of adolescents, and an adapted version of the questionnaire was applied. In this regard, the statements in the questionnaire which express parents' behaviour towards the child (e.g., *I respond to the child's feelings and needs*) were modified in such a way as to express the assessment of parents' behaviour by the adolescent (*My mother responds to my needs and feelings*). The alpha reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) is: 0.95 for the mother's authoritative parenting style; 0.97 for the father's authoritative parenting style; 0.94 for the mother's authoritarian parenting style and 0.95 for the father's authoritarian parenting style; 0.60 for the mother's permissive parenting style and 0.68 for the father's permissive parenting style.

*The Questionnaire for Mentalization Assessment – QM* (MentS; Dimitrijević et al., 2017). The questionnaire contains three subscales: mentalizing one's own states (e.g., *I am often confused about what exactly I feel*), mentalizing others' states (*I can recognize other people's feelings*), and motivation for mentalizing (*Feelings are a usual topic of my conversations with close people*), and gives a global score. It consists of 28 statements through which respondents express their agreement on a five-point Likert-type response scale. In previous research, good reliability at the level of the whole scale  $\alpha = 0.866$  was found, as well as satisfactory reliability at the level of the subscales:  $\alpha = 0.836$  for the subscale *mentalization of self*,  $\alpha = 0.84$  for the subscale *mentalization of others* and  $\alpha = 0.734$  for the subscale *motivation for mentalization* was. In this sample, the scale has satisfactory internal consistency reliability of the measurement (*mentalization of self*:  $\alpha = 0.84$ ; *mentalization of others*:  $\alpha = 0.94$ ; *motivation to mentalize*:  $\alpha = 0.89$ ; total reliability of the scale:  $\alpha = 0.95$ ).



## ■ RESULTS

The values of skewness and kurtosis confirm that all variables are normally distributed in the sample of participants in our study, so parametric data analysis techniques were applied. Table 1 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient between maternal parenting styles and adolescents’ capacity for mentalization.

**Table 1:** Relationship between maternal parenting styles and adolescents’ capacity for mentalization

	Mentalization of self	Mentalization of others	Motivation for mentalization
Connection	0.558**	0.593**	0.626**
Regulation	0.555**	0.545**	0.625**
Autonomy	0.527**	0.468**	0.575**
Authoritativeness	0.539**	0.579**	0.660**
Physical Coercion	-0.577**	-0.521**	-0.593**
Verbal Hostility	-0.560**	-0.364**	-0.482**
Non-Reasoning	-0.583**	-0.635**	-0.651**
Authoritarianism	-0.626**	-0.566**	-0.635**
Permissiveness	0.280**	0.328**	0.360**

\*\* p < 0,01

Based on the results, we can conclude that there is a statistically significant, high positive correlation between dimensions of authoritative maternal parenting style and dimensions of capacity for mentalization. On the other hand, authoritarian parenting style shows a high negative correlation with these variables. The permissive parenting style of the mother has a low positive correlation with the dimensions of adolescents’ capacity for mentalization (Table 1).



**Table 2:** Relationship between paternal parenting styles and adolescents' capacity for mentalization

	Mentalization of self	Mentalization of others	Motivation for mentalization
Connection	0.476**	0.577**	0.618**
Regulation	0.449**	0.605**	0.670**
Autonomy	0.434**	0.555**	0.634**
Authoritativeness	0.483**	0.617**	0.683**
Physical Coercion	-0.482**	-0.699**	-0.702**
Verbal Hostility	-0.433**	-0.464**	-0.505**
Non-Reasoning	-0.550**	-0.613**	-0.648**
Authoritarianism	-0.526**	-0.643**	-0.670**
Permissiveness	0.302**	0.350**	0.437**

\*\* p < 0,01

Paternal parenting styles also significantly correlate with the scores on the mentalization assessment questionnaire. The authoritative parenting style shows a highly positive correlation with all dimensions of capacity for mentalization, while the authoritarian parenting style exhibits a high negative correlation with this variable. The permissive parenting style of the father has a low positive correlation with the level of mentalization development (Table 2).

### Parenting Styles as Predictors of Capacity for Mentalization

The predictive contribution of parenting styles in explaining the variance of adolescents' capacity for mentalization was examined using multiple regression analysis, where the predictors were dimensions of parenting styles, and the criterion variables were dimensions of capacity for mentalization (mentalization of self, mentalization of others, and motivation for mentalization).

**Table 3:** Multiple regression analysis – maternal parenting styles as predictors of capacity for mentalization

	Mentalization of self		Mentalization of others		Motivation for mentalization	
	$\beta$	$p$	$\beta$	$p$	$\beta$	$p$
Connection	0.055	0.614	0.294	0.005	0.110	0.286
Regulation	0.297	0.002	0.128	0.172	0.287	0.002
Autonomy	0.020	0.839	0.153	0.106	0.001	0.995
Physical Coercion	-0.186	0.075	-0.110	0.283	-0.187	0.058
Verbal Hostility	-0.238	0.006	-0.200	0.018	0.018	0.823
Non-Reasoning	-0.059	0.597	-0.505	0.000	-0.241	0.024
Permissiveness	0.035	0.549	0.020	0.744	0.001	0.983
	$R^2 = 0.45; F(7, 192) = 22.47; p = 0.00$		$R^2 = 0.47; F(7, 192) = 24.47; p = 0.00$		$R^2 = 0.51; F(7, 192) = 28.31; p = 0.00$	

The model in which maternal parenting styles are predictors of the *mentalization of self* dimension is statistically significant and explains 45% of the variance in this criterion variable ( $R^2 = 0.45; F(7, 192) = 22.47; p = 0.00$ ). Another significant predictor is the *regulation* subscale with a positive regression coefficient ( $\beta = 0.297; p = 0.002$ ), as well as the subscale *verbal hostility*, with a negative regression coefficient ( $\beta = -0.238; p = 0.006$ ). When it comes to the *mentalization of others* dimension, the model consisting of maternal parenting style dimensions is significant and explains 47% of this variable ( $R^2 = 0.47; F(7, 192) = 24.47; p = 0.00$ ). The predictive potential is evident from the subscales: *connection*, with a positive regression coefficient ( $\beta = 0.294; p = 0.005$ ), and *verbal hostility* ( $\beta = -0.200; p = 0.018$ ) and *non-reasoning* with a negative regression coefficient ( $\beta = -0.505; p = 0.000$ ). The results of multiple regression analysis also indicate that the dimensions of maternal parenting styles are significant predictors of adolescents' motivation for mentalization, explaining 51% of the variance in this criterion variable ( $R^2 = 0.51; F(7, 192) = 28.31; p = 0.00$ ). In the model with the selected set of predictor variables, it was shown that the *regulation* dimension with a positive regression coefficient ( $\beta = 0.287; p = 0.002$ ), and *non-reasoning* with a negative regression coefficient ( $\beta = -0.241; p = 0.024$ ) contribute significantly to motivation for mentalization.

**Table 4:** Multiple regression analysis – paternal parenting styles as predictors of capacity for mentalization

	Mentalization of self		Mentalization of others		Motivation for mentalization	
	$\beta$	$p$	$\beta$	$p$	$\beta$	$p$
Connection	0.137	0.332	0.082	0.646	0.087	0.416
Regulation	0.198	0.088	0.335	0.000	0.438	0.000
Autonomy	-0.155	0.245	0.012	0.907	0.136	0.177
Physical Coercion	0.033	0.801	-0.742	0.000	-0.561	0.000
Verbal Hostility	-0.100	0.363	0.054	0.538	-0.057	0.496
Non-Reasoning	-0.389	0.013	0.208	0.092	0.181	0.123
Permissiveness	0.002	0.981	0.130	0.133	0.035	0.550
	$R^2 = 0.33; F(7, 192) = 13.44; p < 0.001$		$R^2 = 0.58; F(7, 192) = 37.45; p < 0.001$		$R^2 = 0.62; F(7, 192) = 44.02; p < 0.001$	

When considering the predictive contribution of paternal parenting styles in relation to the mentalization of self dimension in adolescents as a criterion, we can conclude that the set of predictors explains 33% of the variance of the criterion variable ( $R^2 = 0.33; F(7, 192) = 13.44; p = 0.00$ ). Statistical significance was found in the *non-reasoning* subscale ( $\beta = -0.389; p = 0.13$ ), where the direction of the relationship indicates that higher values on the dimension of *non-reasoning* correspond to lower values on the dimension of the *mentalization of self*. The model in which the dimensions of paternal parenting styles represent predictors of mentalization of others is statistically significant and explains 58% of the variance of this criterion variable ( $R^2 = 0.58; F(7, 192) = 37.45; p = 0.00$ ). The predictive potential is exhibited by the dimensions of *regulation* with a positive ( $\beta = -0.742; p = 0.00$ ), and *physical coercion* with a negative regression coefficient ( $\beta = 0.44; p = 0.00$ ). When we take the dimension of motivation for mentalization as a criterion, the model of paternal parenting styles is also significant ( $R^2 = 0.62; F(7, 192) = 44.02; p = 0.00$ ) and explains 62% of the variance of this variable. In the model with the selected set of predictor variables, it was shown that dimensions of *regulation*, with a positive regression coefficient ( $\beta = 0.438; p = 0.00$ ), and *physical coercion*, with a negative regression coefficient ( $\beta = -0.561; p = 0.00$ ), significantly contribute to motivation for mentalization.

## ■ DISCUSSION

In this paper we examined whether parenting styles represent significant predictors of a capacity for mentalization in adolescents. The research results are consistent with both expectations and hypotheses. The subscales of the authoritative parenting style of both parents – *connection*, *regulation*, and *autonomy* – significantly correlate positively with all dimensions of the capacity for mentalization. In contrast, all subscales of the authoritarian parenting style (in both mother and father) – *physical coercion*, *verbal hostility*, and *non-reasoning* – show significant negative correlation with the dimensions of adolescents' capacity for mentalization. In authoritarian families, children are expected to blindly adhere to adult rules, which is why parents have fewer reasons to discuss different opinions or mental states in explanatory and disciplinary discourse with their children, thus hindering the development of mentalization and affective regulation (O'Reilly & Peterson, 2014).

On the other hand, if the family environment is supportive in terms of parents responding to the child's feelings, showing closeness and emotional warmth, and explaining the reasons for behavioural rules, the child will have a greater capacity for mentalization and greater motivation to reflect on their own and others' intentions and actions. The findings support the idea that competent parenting promotes the development of mentalization (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002) and emotional regulation (Schimmenti & Caretti, 2016), which is consistent with several other studies which have examined similar topics. For example, in a study conducted in Australia involving 30 families with children aged 5 to 12 years, the authoritarian parenting style (tendency to blindly adhere to adult rules) was negatively correlated with understanding theory of mind tasks, while parenting strategies based on Diana Baumrind's concept of authoritative parenting style (encouraging children to express their opinions and think independently) were significant predictors of children's performance on theory of mind tasks (O'Reilly & Peterson, 2014). The relationship between authoritative parenting style and theory of mind skills in preschool children has also been confirmed in other studies (Khanipour, Nezafatbakhsh, & Aghababaei, 2021; Kuntoro, Peterson, & Slaughter, 2017).

The results obtained through multiple regression analysis indicate that dimensions of the authoritative parenting style significantly contribute to the development of capacity for mentalization, especially *connection* (mother) and *regulation* (father and mother). If we carefully examine the items that make up the *connection* subscale, we can conclude that emotional warmth from the mother, responsiveness, and timely response to the child's needs are crucial for the development of the child's mentalization (*My mother responds to my feelings and needs; The time she spent with me was filled with warmth and closeness; She comforted me when I was upset*). This result is in line with the view that the quality of the emotional bond between mother and child is a significant factor in cognitive

(Blumenthal, 1985) and socioemotional development of the child (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004), particularly in the ability to understand oneself and others (Fonagy & Target, 1997). The results of studies examining infants and preschool-aged children confirm that the quality of the emotional bond between mother and child (Ereky-Stevens, 2008), as well as maternal emotional availability (Licata, Kristen, & Sodian, 2016), are significant predictors of theory of mind skills in children. Apart from the *connection* subscale, *regulation*, as a characteristic of the authoritative parenting style, has also shown significance in the development of reflective function, in relation to both the mother's and the father's role. The items that operationalize the *regulation* subscale indicate that the establishment and explanation of behavioural rules play a significant role in the process of developing a capacity for mentalization (*He/She talked to me and helped me understand the consequences of my behaviour; He/She explained to me why rules have to be obeyed*). This result can be accounted for by the fact that the explanation of rules, expectations, and parental perspectives enhance communication and reflexivity in both parents and children, which significantly contributes to the development of capacity for mentalization. Treating the child as a thinking and intentional being encourages the child to reflect on intentions and reasons for behaviour (*motivation for mentalization*), both their own (*mentalization of self*) and that of others (mentalization of others). Parents who engage in frequent discussions about emotional states (Dunn, 1996) and encourage children to consider and discuss the mental and emotional states of others (Ruffman, Perner, & Parkin, 1999) support the development of children's ability to understand others' perspectives. Parental elaborative discourse, such as providing rich and contextual information, asking questions, and giving children opportunities to complete sentences, has a positive impact on the development of theory of mind skills (Pavarini, de Hollanda Souza, & Hawk, 2013). Peterson and Slaughter (2003) found that encouraging frequent detailed conversations about mental states by parents in everyday family discussions is associated with advanced problem-solving abilities in theory of mind tasks.

The dimensions of authoritarian parenting style – *verbal hostility* (mother) and *physical coercion* (father), as well as *non-reasoning* from both parents, have a significant negative impact on the development of mentalization. Parental expressions of anger, open hostility, and frustration are particularly harmful during adolescence and are associated with lower levels of adolescent pro-social behaviour (Padilla-Walker, Nielson, & Day, 2016). Furthermore, the items that operationalize the subscales of authoritarian style indicate that this parenting style is harsh, neglectful, and rejecting. For example, items that further define the *physical coercion* subscale involve physical punishment of the child (*He slapped my face when I misbehaved; My father would hit me when I was disobedient*). Fonagy and colleagues (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002) developed the idea that the inhibition of mentalization represents a child's attempt to adapt to the inadequacy of the relationship with the attachment

figure. Instances of physical punishment and abuse within the family are particularly detrimental to the development of capacity for mentalization (Bogdanović, 2022; Khanipour, Nezafatbakhsh, & Aghababaei, 2021; O'Reilly & Peterson, 2014). The child avoids thinking about what is in the mind of an important person, be it a parent or a caregiver, who harms and humiliates them (Allen, 2013; Fonagy et al., 2002). Parents can impede the development of mentalization in children by not-explaining in an attempt to avoid confronting the suffering they have caused (Allen, Fonagy, & Bateman, 2008; Fonagy, & Luyten, 2009).

When the contributions of mothers' and fathers' parenting styles are compared, it becomes evident that mothers' parenting styles account for a larger percentage of variance in the mentalization of self dimensions, while fathers' parenting styles explain a larger percentage of variance in relation to mentalization of others and motivation for mentalization. One possible explanation for these results lies in the different roles that fathers and mothers play in parenting and socialization. Mothers are the first emotional and social mirror through which children recognize their own needs and emotions. The sensitivity of the caregiver is considered vital for a child's ability to recognize and interpret his/her own mental state (Fonagy & Target, 1997).

During the interaction with the mother, the child primarily learns to understand and regulate their own feelings, which contributes to the development of mentalization and emotional regulation. Closer relationships maintained with the mother are focused on the regulation of adolescents' emotional states (Čudina-Obradović & Obradović, 2006). *Mentalization of others and motivation for mentalization* are to a greater extent determined by the father's parenting styles and behaviours. *Regulation* (positive) by the father, as well as *physical coercion* (negative), contribute to mentalization of others and motivation for mentalization more significantly than these dimensions in the mother's parenting styles. The relationship with the father reflects attitudes toward authority, and through behaviour regulation, the father emphasizes the importance of respecting others people's needs and intentions. The father figure is extremely important for social adaptation and understanding the importance and reactions of others, particularly authority figures encountered within the family, school, and professional environments (Čudina-Obradović & Obradović, 2006). Good affective relationships with fathers during adolescence are associated with pro-social behaviour towards friends (Padilla-Walker, Nielson, & Day, 2016). One important implication of these results is that preventive programs aimed at adolescents should pay attention to educating both parents, bearing in mind the significant role of the father in the process of mentalization development.

## ■ CONCLUSION

To conclude, the authoritative parenting style of both parents makes a significant positive contribution to the capacity for mentalization. However, certain qualitative differences have been identified in the contribution of parental styles of the father and mother in relation to specific dimensions of the capacity for mentalization. Dimensions of the mother's authoritative parenting style contribute more significantly to mentalization of self, while dimensions of the father's authoritative parenting style contribute more significantly to mentalization of others and motivation for mentalization. This result can be interpreted in the context of the different roles that fathers and mothers play in the process of parenting and socialization. Since research results indicate that in addition to mothers, fathers also have an important role in promoting the development of adolescents' reflective function, planning preventive activities when working with parents of adolescents, should focus on the education of both parents. Considering the role of parenting styles in promoting the development of young people's capacity for mentalization, educating parents about the importance of parenting competencies can contribute to creating a stimulating family environment that supports the overall development of adolescents and the development of their reflective function.

Several limitations of the study are recognized. Firstly, the assessment of parenting styles was based solely on the perspective of adolescents. A more comprehensive understanding of family dynamics could be gained if parental self-assessments were also considered. Additionally, the applied Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ, Robinson *et al.*, 2001) lacks satisfactory reliability for the subscale of *permissiveness*, and some items often imply inconsistency in parenting (e.g. *She threatened me with punishment more than she actually applied it*). The dimensions of the authoritarian style, such as *non-reasoning*, *verbal hostility*, and *physical coercion*, encompass elements of abuse and neglect. Therefore, it is advisable to verify the obtained results by using another questionnaire of parenting styles that clearly differentiate authoritarian style from neglect.



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