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Mentalization and Attachment Style as Underlying Mechanisms of Linking Collective Efficacy with Parental Self-Efficacy

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Abstract: The importance of parental self-efficacy for parental and child well-being is well documented. Many studies demonstrate the significant positive relationship between collective efficacy and self-efficacy. Fewer studies have pointed to the underlying mechanisms of this relationship. The present study aims to fill the knowledge gap by examining two such underlying mechanisms that constitute the essence of the parent–child relationship: pre-mentalization as the parent's cognitive ability to interpret the child's internal world and avoidant attachment as the parent's emotional ability to be in a close relationship with the child. A survey was conducted with 262 married Israeli parents with children under the age of 12. Participants completed self-report questionnaires on collective efficacy, mentalizing ability, avoidant attachment style, and parental self-efficacy. In order to test the mediating role of parental mentalizing ability and avoidant attachment in the association between parental and collective efficacy, a mediation analysis with cross-sectional design was conducted using model 6 PROCESS 3.4 macro for SPSS. Results confirmed the direct relation between collective and parental self-efficacy. Additionally, results indicated a significant indirect effect of this association through low levels of pre-mentalization and avoidant attachment style. The results are discussed in light of the cyclical psychodynamic perspective, with recommendations for interventions that are set to improve parental self-efficacy.

Keywords: avoidant attachment; pre-mentalization; collective efficacy; parents; self-efficacy

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1. Introduction

The present study addresses the underlying mechanisms of the well-established relationship between self-efficacy and collective efficacy in the context of parenting. In particular, this study refers to two core aspects of the parent–child relationship—the parents' ability to understand the child's mental state and their ability to form a secure attachment with the child—as the basis for the link between parental and collective efficacy.

Parental self-efficacy is well-known as an indicator of good parenting and as a necessary condition for positive child outcomes (Albanese et al. 2019). It is defined as the individual's confidence in their ability to successfully fulfill their role as parents and the tasks associated with it (Kestler-Peleg et al. 2023). Parental self-efficacy is a strong facilitating factor across the life course, and it has recently been found to still play an important role in old age, when parenting becomes marginalized, and grandparenting takes its place (Greenblatt-Kimron et al. 2021), further highlighting its great importance to our well-being as adults.

Decades of research have shown that the construct of self-efficacy evolves through self-experience, dealing with life tasks, encountering dilemmas, and overcoming obstacles (van der Bijl and Shortbridge-Baggett 2002). This mechanism develops through the process of self-evaluation in which we examine our own capacity in dealing with life tasks; the more success we experience in achieving our goals, the more we develop faith in our capacity and believe in our ability to accomplish tasks, which in turn increases our willingness to take on challenges. This creates a virtuous circle.

As social beings (Gage and Baars 2019), we also derive our sense of competence from the collective to which we belong (Davidson-Arad et al. 2020; Lavenda et al. 2017). This understanding that we draw inspiration from the shared expectations and beliefs of our community began long ago with the discussion of social capital, a term that developed in the economic sphere and has been applied to the social sphere. It was originally defined as "functional community wealth", which refers to the individual as the main asset of the community. By investing in the relationships between members of the community, trust is formed, as well as norms, and collective actions for the common good (Ansari 2013). Accordingly, collective efficacy is defined as mutual trust and willingness to act for the good of the community (Band et al. 2019; Sampson et al. 1997). For this willingness to occur, it takes people who feel competent and believe they are up to a challenge. Therefore, the relationship between the sense of cohesion and trust among community members and members' personal sense of competence, i.e., their self-efficacy, is easily inferred.

Social disorganization theory (Shaw and McKay 1942) strengthens our understanding of this relationship by considering the negative impact the community may have on individuals under certain conditions. According to this theory, communities characterized by residential instability, low economic status, and ethnic/racial heterogeneity suffer from stress and lack the necessary resources and social norms to prevent local crime and other problematic behaviors, which inflicts on the individual's ability to cope with problems (Lavenda et al. 2017).

There is ample body of research that provides evidence for this association between personal self-efficacy and collective efficacy (see, for example, Gearhart 2023; Kashif et al. 2021; Lev and Koslowsky 2008) and even between self-efficacy of parents, in particular, and collective efficacy (Davidson-Arad et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the underlying mechanisms of this relationship have not been sufficiently explored, especially in the context of family relationships and parenting.

In the present study, we propose two constructs that could serve as underlying mechanisms of this relationship in the context of parenting and the parent–child relationship: The first is a cognitive construct that enables parents to understand their child's inner world–mentalization–and the other is a social-emotional construct that reflects parents' responsiveness to their child's inner world–avoidant attachment style. In the following sections, we review each of these constructs and their interrelationships with parental self-efficacy and collective efficacy.

The term mentalization, coined by Fonagy (Fonagy and Target 1998), refers to the cognitive ability of individuals to understand and interpret their own behavior and the behavior of others in terms of mental states, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, intentions, and volition. It is mentalization that enables our social functioning, as it affects the way we perceive social relationships and how we self-regulate and behave towards others (Slade 2005). Therefore, it is a crucial construct for the parent–child relationship. In fact, several studies have shown that high levels of parental mentalization are associated with lower levels of parental stress, better parent–child relationships, and better self-regulation and well-being of children (Camoirano 2017; Fonagy et al. 1998; Slade 2002, 2008). In addition, parents' deficient ability to mentalize was associated with the child's depression, anxiety, and conduct problems (Ha et al. 2011; Sleed et al. 2020).

The literature on the association between mentalization and self-efficacy in the context of parenting is scarce. Only a handful of studies examined the direct association between these two constructs and confirmed it. For example, Gordo et al. (2020) found a positive association between parents' genuine interest in their child's mental state and high levels of parental self-efficacy. Moreover, they found that pre-mentalization, namely, parents' inability to interpret their child's inner world by attributing prejudices and malicious intentions to the child, was associated with lower levels of parental self-efficacy. The authors explain these relations with the gap that is formed between the child's needs and the parent's ability to meet these needs, which projects on the parent's beliefs of their incompetence to fulfill the parenting role.

In another study conducted by Nijssens et al. (2018), pre-mentalization, as opposed to the positive components of mentalization (i.e., interest and curiosity of the parent in the child's mental state and the parent's confidence in understanding the child's mental state), was found to be associated with parental self-efficacy, namely to low levels of parental self-efficacy. The authors support Gordo et al.'s (Gordo et al. 2020) explanation regarding the parent's inability to understand their child that leads to low confidence in their own ability to fulfill the parenting role.

In that same study, the authors related pre-mentalization to another parental construct that was also found to be related to parental self-efficacy—avoidant attachment style (Nijssens et al. 2018). According to the authors, parents with an avoidant attachment style, which reflects parents' discomfort with closeness and intimacy (Brennan et al. 1998), experience more stressors in this role of parenting that require them to overcome their avoidance of close relationships. The inability to understand their child (i.e., pre-mentalization) increases their stress furthermore and, in turn, affects their sense of competence as parents (Nijssens et al. 2018). Other studies provide further support for the relation of avoidant attachment style with parents' pre-mentalization (Slade 2005) as well as with low parental self-efficacy (Kohlhoff and Barnett 2013).

Rom and Mikulincer (2003) provided evidence for the ideation that individuals develop a social orientation to groups based on their attachment style. They have shown in a series of studies that individuals with an avoidant attachment style forwent the benefits of group interactions and used more self-reliance strategies in group tasks. Moreover, their findings showed that individuals with avoidant attachment styles contributed little to group closeness and group consensus. The authors explain these findings by stating that individuals with avoidant attachment style perceive social interactions as distress-inducing situations due to their negative internal working model. Therefore, they avoid dependent relationships that form the basis of a collective sense of trust and cohesion, namely collective efficacy. We assumed that since pre-mentalization, that reflects the individual's inability to interpret the other's inner world, is associated with avoidant attachment style (Nijssens et al. 2018), they will serve both as the underlying mechanisms of the link between the parents' sense of collective efficacy and their parental self-efficacy.

Therefore, we assumed that: (a) collective efficacy will be positively associated with parental self-efficacy; (b) collective efficacy will be negatively associated with pre-mentalization and with avoidant attachment style; (c) pre-mentalization and avoidant attachment style will be negatively associated with parental self-efficacy; (d) pre-mentalization will be positively associated with avoidant attachment style; and (e) pre-mentalization and avoidant attachment style will mediate the association between collective efficacy and parental self-efficacy. To test these hypotheses, a mediation model with a cross-sectional design was used.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure and Participants

Data were collected using an online structured questionnaire approved by the authors' university ethics committee. Participants were recruited using the snowball method. A link to an online survey was distributed via social media platforms, including Facebook and WhatsApp. Participants received a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study and were asked to sign an informed consent form. Participants who signed the consent form were directed to the questionnaires. The participants' identities remained anonymous at all stages of the study, and no quid pro quo was offered.

A priory power analysis, conducted with G*Power 3.1.9.7. software, to test the sample size of a mediation analysis with 3 predictors revealed a total size of 55 participants to detect a medium size effect with sufficient power (80%) at $\alpha = 0.05$.

The study's sample consisted of 262 parents of children under the age of 12, of which 210 were females, accounting for most of the sample (80.8%). Participants' ages ranged between 24 and 56 years old, with a mean score of 40 years old (SD = 6.709). Most of the

respondents reported being married (90.8%), with an average of 3.34 children per parent (mean age of the youngest child in the family was 5.71 years old). Almost all respondents (92.7%) reported having a high academic education, namely a bachelor's or master's degree; however, many of them (68.2%) reported income equal to or lower than the average income in the population (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics 2022).

2.2. Measures

Participants were asked to fill in self-report questionnaires dealing with demographic backgrounds (i.e., gender, year of birth, number of children and the age of their youngest, educational level and income level compared to the average income of families in Israel in 2022), collective- and self-efficacy, mentalization and attachment styles. All measures used in the present study are well-known and widely used in the national and international arena. In the following paragraphs, we elaborate on each of these measures.

Collective efficacy was assessed with the collective efficacy scale, developed by Sampson and his colleagues (Sampson et al. 1997), to test the theory of collective efficacy in the context of crime. Their measure consists of two sub-scales: The first sub-scale, which measures shared expectations for social control, includes five questions with response options ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). For example: "*If some children were skipping school and were hanging out in your neighborhood, how likely is it that your neighbors would do something about it?*", and "*If some children were spray-painting graffiti on a local building, how likely is it that your neighbors would do something about it?*". The second sub-scale, which measures social cohesion/trust, includes five statements to which participants respond on a scale of 1 (*strongly agree*) to 6 (*strongly disagree*). For example: "*People around here are willing to help their neighbors*", and "*This is a close-knit neighborhood*". In the present study, the full 10 item scale was used to refer to collective efficacy. The internal consistency of the scale in the present study was 0.840.

Parental self-efficacy was assessed with Parental Sense of Competence Questionnaire (PSOC), developed by Johnston and Mash (1989) to test parents' sense of success in fulfilling the parental role. It is a 17 item scale with response options ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). For example, "*The problems of taking care of a child are easy to solve once you know how your actions affect your child, an understanding I have acquired*", and "*A difficult problem in being a parent is not knowing whether you're doing a good job or a bad one*". Internal consistency of the scale in the present study was 0.801.

Mentalization was assessed with The Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (PRFQ), developed by Fonagy and his colleagues (Fonagy et al. 1998; Luyten et al. 2017) to test parents' ability to mentally perceive their own self and the others'. This 18 item scale consists of three subscales: (1) Pre-mentalization reflecting misinterpretation of the child's mental states by imputing prejudices and malicious intentions to the child (e.g., "*My child cries or acts up/is difficult around strangers to embarrass me*"); (2) Certainty about mental states reflecting exaggerated confidence in the ability to understand the child (e.g., "*I always know what my child is feeling*"); and (3) Interest and curiosity about mental states reflecting parents' intention and motivation to understand their child (e.g., "*I like to think about the reasons behind the way my child behaves and feels*"). In the present study, we have used the pre-mentalization subscale alone as it is the only one among the three subscales that refers to the parents' assessment of their actual ability to understand the child's inner world. The response options for this scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of the subscale in the present study was 0.664.

Attachment style was assessed with the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (ECR), developed by Brennan and colleagues (Brennan et al. 1998) to test attachment styles among adults. It is a 36 item scale with response options ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). It consists of two subscales: an avoidant attachment style that refers to a person's avoidance of intimacy and dependency, for example, "*I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back*", and an anxious attachment style that refers to a person's anxiety about rejection, abandonment, and unlovability, for example, "*I need a lot*

of reassurance that I am loved by my partner" (Noftle and Shaver 2006). In the present study, we have used the avoidant attachment subscale alone as it entails a more active response to interpersonal relationships reflecting on the parent's initiation of interaction with their child. The internal consistency of the subscales in the present study was 0.888.

2.3. Data Analysis

The examination of the mediation model was conducted using the IBM SPSS statistic package (SPSS-29). First, correlations were calculated to establish the preliminary associations between the study variables (see Table 1 for means, SDs, and correlation matrix for the study variables). Then, a mediation model with two mediators (see Figure 1) was tested using the model 6 PROCESS 3.4 macro for SPSS (Hayes 2018), with a bias-corrected bootstrap with 5000 resamples.

Table 1. Means, SDs, and correlation coefficients between the study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	Collective Efficacy	Pre-Mentalization	Avoidant Attachment	Parental Self-Efficacy
Collective efficacy	4.56	0.81	1			
Pre-mentalization	2.04	0.67	−0.155 *	1		
Avoidant attachment	3.04	0.85	−0.261 **	0.174 **	1	
Parental self-efficacy	4.22	0.58	−0.140 *	−0.492 **	−0.263 **	1

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

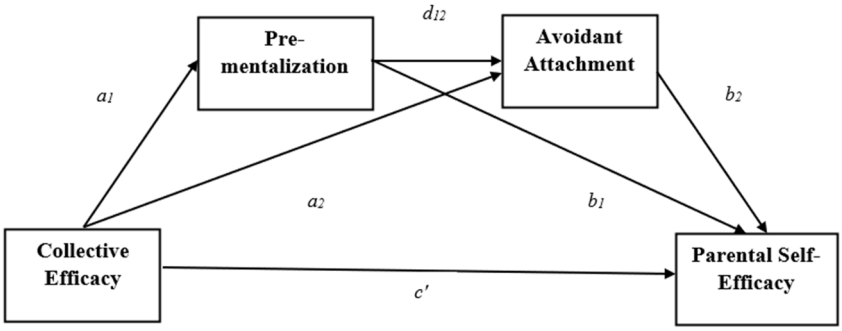


Figure 1. The examined mediation model.

3. Results

As indicated in Table 1, all correlations between the study variables were significant. In addition, all correlations were negative except for the positive association between pre-mentalization and an avoidant attachment style.

The mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects of all three paths (see Figure 1) between perceived collective efficacy and parental self-efficacy. In particular, as indicated in Table 2, a significant indirect effect between collective efficacy and parental self-efficacy was found through pre-mentalization ($a_1b_1 = 0.070$) with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.015 to 0.132. A negative significant path was found between collective efficacy and pre-mentalization ($a_1 = -0.162$, $p = 0.015$) as well as between pre-mentalization and parental self-efficacy ($b_1 = -0.430$, $p < 0.001$). These associations indicate that the higher the perceived collective efficacy, the less pre-mentalization is reported, which in turn is associated with high parental self-efficacy.

A significant indirect effect between collective efficacy and parental self-efficacy was also found through avoidant attachment style ($a_2b_2 = 0.040$), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.006 to 0.078. A negative significant path was found between collective efficacy and avoidant attachment ($a_2 = -0.236$, $p < 0.001$) as well as between avoidant attachment and parental self-efficacy ($b_2 = -0.170$, $p = 0.005$). These associations indicate that the higher the level of collective efficacy, the less avoidant attachment is reported, which in turn is associated with high parental self-efficacy.

Table 2. Path coefficients, indirect effects, and 95% bias-corrected confidence interval predicting parental self-efficacy (N = 262).

Path	Effect	BootLLCI	BootULCI	SE	t	*p*-Value
Total effect (c)	0.143	0.009	0.190	0.046	2.155	0.032
Direct effect (c′)	0.029	−0.063	0.103	0.042	0.472	0.638
a1	−0.162	−0.241	−0.026	0.054	−2.456	0.015
a2	−0.236	−0.380	−0.113	0.068	−3.632	0.003
b1	−0.430	−0.464	−0.264	0.051	−7.189	0.000
b2	−0.170	−0.194	−0.033	0.041	−2.784	0.006
Indirect effects						
Total indirect effect	0.114	0.044	0.183			
a1b1	0.070	0.015	0.132			
a2b2	0.040	0.056	0.078			
a1d12b2	0.004	0.000	0.013			

Abbreviations: BootLLCI, bootstrapping lower limit confidence interval; BootULCI, bootstrapping upper limit confidence interval; SE, standard error.

And finally, a significant indirect effect between collective efficacy and parental self-efficacy was also found through pre-mentalization and avoidant attachment style ($a_1d_{12}b_2$ = 0.004) with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.000 to 0.013. The positive significant path between pre-mentalization and avoidant attachment (d_{12} = 0.154, $p < 0.001$) indicates that the higher the perceived collective efficacy, the less the level of pre-mentalization, which is associated with lower levels of reported avoidant attachment, and in turn with higher parental self-efficacy.

4. Discussion

There is a growing interest in understanding the connections between personal and group-level constructs (see, e.g., example, Marchlewska et al. 2022). This is also true for the relationship between collective efficacy and self-efficacy (Lev and Koslowsky 2008). This relationship is grounded in the social disorganization theory that posits that disadvantaged and disorganized neighborhoods have a negative impact on their individual residents' self-efficacy since they struggle with multiple stressors and low resources of support (Davidson-Arad et al. 2020). Nevertheless, there is a gap in the literature regarding the underlying mechanisms of this relationship, especially regarding constructs that might contribute to it. The present study sought to examine two such constructs in the context of parenting—a cognitive one, i.e., parents' mentalizing ability, and a socio-emotional one, i.e., parental attachment style. Both are the foundations of parent–child relationships.

Consistent with the study's hypotheses, the results of the present study confirm a positive relationship between collective efficacy and parental self-efficacy, mediated by both parental mentalizing ability and parental attachment style. It appears that parents who perceive their community as safe and cohesive, and trust their neighbors, are also parents who experience fewer difficulties in mentalizing the other's internal world, less avoidant attachment style, and therefore more parental self-efficacy.

These results reveal the connection between a low sense of collective efficacy and pre-mentalization. Parents' inability to mentalize means that they misinterpret their child's misbehavior and tend to attribute intentional meanings to it. In other words, these parents find their child's behavior incompatible with their own inner selves, either in an intrusive way that is intentionally directed at them, or unpleasant and confusing (Gordo et al. 2020). Clearly, parents who feel this way towards their children and others around them do not experience the group as a source of comfort, security, or trust. The ability of these parents to feel connected to others and to develop a sense of belonging is poor. It appears that this incompatibility between the parent's inner self and the interpretation of the inner intentions of others leads to a disconnect between the perceived self and the perceived ability to control and influence others. Namely, these parents tend to perceive the behavior of the

child as independent of their own actions, feelings, or intentions, which is reflected in their low sense of competence, that is, their self-efficacy in general and as a parent. Here, the process of self-evaluation in the formation of self-efficacy is obvious, except that in the case of pre-mentalization, it creates a vicious circle rather than the virtuous circle made possible by the experience of success (van der Bijl and Shortbridge-Baggett 2002).

In addition, parents who have difficulty interpreting others' inner selves, especially that of their child, are unable to understand the needs of others, let alone meet those needs. Indeed, the present findings indicate that pre-mentalization is positively associated with the avoidant attachment style, which is known to be characterized by abstinence from close dependent relationships. Such relationships are perceived as negative due to past early childhood experiences (Rom and Mikulincer 2003). We assume, as postulated by Nijssens et al. (2018), that these parents, who avoid close relationships, face increased stress due to the parenting role and the close relationship it entails, and, therefore, have a low sense of efficacy as parents. This explanation is supported by the cyclical psychodynamic perspective (Wachtel 2017) that emphasizes the loop created from the ingrained internal working model to each life circumstance and back to the mental structures. Some feedback reinforces the internal working model, while others modify it. In the present, based on the examples of pre-mentalization, avoidant attachment, collective efficacy, and self-efficacy, it appears that the feedback reinforces the internal constructs. Poor mentalizing ability, manifested through the rejection of close relationships and distrust of others, generates feedback of the inability to successfully perform the role, which strengthens the misinterpretation of others and distrust.

Nevertheless, the results of the present study should be considered with several limitations. It should be noted that the sample used in the present study is not representative. For the most part, they are highly educated women in committed relationships. The model examined in the present study should be further explored with more heterogeneous samples from different cultures and backgrounds. In addition, we used self-report questionnaires to obtain information from participants. This method is known to suffer from social desirability bias (Gittelman et al. 2015). Furthermore, it is important to point out that the study was conducted in Israel, a Westernized Middle Eastern country with unique characteristics of collectivism. Such a specific culture may have produced very specific associations that should be re-examined in different populations. Future studies should use other types of measurements to avoid such potential bias. Finally, in the present study, we used a cross-sectional design, which prevented us from determining causal relationships and excluding intervening variables that may be responsible for the associations found in the results. The model under study should be further explored using longitudinal designs.

Nonetheless, the results discussed here have important theoretical and practical implications. As far as we know, this is one of the few studies to examine the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between community-level efficacy and individual-level efficacy, introducing two mechanisms into the context of the parent–child relationship. Findings provide evidence of the reciprocal relationships between the collective and individual spheres, mediated by cognitive and socio-emotional constructs that constitute the essence of the parent–child relationship. Practitioners and policymakers working for the well-being of families should be aware of these underlying mechanisms that can contribute to improving parents' self-efficacy. Both mentalization and attachment style are constructs that can be reformed and acquired across the lifespan and, therefore, should be considered when developing prevention programs to improve parents and children's well-being.

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