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The role of epistemic trust in the relationship between attachment and mentalization: a systematic review

Giovanna Esposito ¹, Simona Totaro ¹, Angela Di Maro ¹, Raffaella Passeggia ^{1*}

Abstract

Epistemic trust can be defined as the ability to rely on social and cultural information from others. It allows to integrate the new knowledge in the vision of self and world, promoting the learning from experience. Recently, the issue of epistemic trust is gaining growing interest in literature thanks to the recognition of the significant implications that it may have for treatment effectiveness but not only, as evidenced by the extension of its field of research and application to different contexts and psychopathological conditions. However, this makes it increasingly difficult to identify a unique relational dynamic between epistemic trust, attachment and mentalization. In addition, this issue is still predominantly addressed on the theoretical level, while empirical studies are still scarce, and this allows each researcher to make a different hypothesis. Therefore, this systematic review aims at exploring the role of epistemic trust in the relationship between attachment and mentalization, looking also at factors able to affect this bond. The keywords were the following: “mentalization”, “attachment” and “epistemic trust” and its dimensions and dysfunction. Articles were included if they explicitly focused on the relationship between attachment, mentalization and epistemic trust, and if they were research articles. Studies were excluded if they addressed only one or two of the three constructs, and if they were theoretical articles, opinion articles, commentary, book chapters and interviews. Results predominantly showed a relation of interdependence between these variables, although from studies that empirically investigated this topic an interesting, contrasting datum emerges: there seems to be a relationship of interdependence only between mentalization and epistemic mistrust or credulity, but not between mentalization and epistemic trust. These findings highlight the need to empirically deepen the link between these three variables and suggest therapists to pay attention not only to the creation of a secure therapeutic relationship and the improvement of mentalizing abilities, but also to clients’ epistemic trust, especially to its disrupted forms.

¹ Department of Humanities, University of Naples Federico II, Naples, Italy

E-mail corresponding author: raffaella.passeggia@unina.it



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1. Introduction

Orientating in the world requires the ability to understand a vastity of information and to seek in social knowledge the way to adapt to the reference context (Liu et al., 2013). This latter consists in an individuals' predisposition to teach and learn relevant social information thanks to the comparison with others and the experience of communication tailored to facilitate the transmission of a shared cultural knowledge that allows to move in own social environment. In this scenario, the theory of Epistemic Trust (ET) plays an important role: it can be defined as the ability to rely on information from the social world, which will then be internalized constituting a useful knowledge for survival and adaptation. ET is something more complex than simply to trust in someone: it concerns trusting that information from the other is true and therefore includes the process of structuring a knowledge, since ET produces an epistemic or cognitive state in the one who trusts (McCraw, 2015). The theory of ET can be declined in two trajectories of thinking and application: one focused on cognitive and learning aspects (Csibra & Gergely, 2006) and the other focused on social and individual function of ET (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). In the first model, ET is defined as an essential sociocognitive ability that derives from the development of social cognition, allowing individuals to identify who is reliable source of benevolent and accurate information and to absorb and integrate them in their own vision of self and world (Csibra & Gergely, 2006). In the second model, ET is considered as a prerequisite to learn from others, and it derives from the feeling of being understood and recognized as intentional agent by own social system (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). In this perspective, ET develops when the individual's self-image coincides with the other's image of the individual (Fonagy et al., 2019). This congruence creates an epistemic correspondence that leads to the opening of the channel for efficient social communication, making possible the social learning, the affective regulation, and the adaptive social functioning (Midolo et al., 2020). This way of thinking emphasizes the highly interpersonal nature of the process by which ET is created (Fonagy & Campbell, 2021).

Another important construct in the theory of ET is Epistemic Vigilance (EV; Sperber et al., 2010), defined as a natural state of suspicion that allows individuals to protect themselves from potentially harmful, misleading, or inaccurate information. EV and ET are not opposite, but they coexist: in fact, it is believed that every communicative behavior activates two distinct processes, one aimed at establishing the relevance of what is communicated in the hypothesis that it is reliable, and the other aimed at evaluating its reliability. In this sense, Fonagy et al. (2019) claimed that a certain level of EV is healthy, provided that it can be overcome in certain circumstances, in order to be able to open up to ET. Conversely, a too high or too low level of

EV may lead to the formation of two different disrupted forms of ET (Brauner et al., 2023). Specifically, in case of epistemic hypervigilance, the individual is not able to learn from social experiences due to the excessive interpretation of others' intentions as malicious and disingenuous, and this may generate Epistemic Mistrust (EM; Sharp et al., 2013). On the other hand, in case of epistemic hypovigilance, the individual is characterized by a lack of critical thinking and discrimination capacity of the sources of information, and this may lead to Epistemic Credulity (EC; Campbell et al., 2021), that makes individuals more vulnerable to misinformation and exploitation (Parolin et al., 2023).

Recently, the growing interest in this topic is leading to an extension of the field of research and application of ET. In particular, researchers turned their attention to traumatic experiences (Benzi et al., 2023), foster or adoptive families (Eldridge et al., 2020), immigration (Venta, 2020) and conspiracy mentality (Brauner et al., 2023). The theory of ET has also been applied to the reading of different psychopathological conditions, such as personality disorders (Luyten et al., 2021), depression (Fonagy & Luyten, 2018), adolescent's internalizing symptomatology (Parolin et al., 2023), psychosomatic disorders (Van Houdenhove & Luyten, 2008), anorexia nervosa (Bomba et al., 2014), paranoid distress (Hauschild et al., 2023) and psychosis (Pereira & Debbané, 2018). Finally, ET has been especially explored in the psychotherapeutic context (Fonagy & Allison, 2014), where it has been pointed out that ET plays a crucial role in achieving therapeutic objectives: indeed, it allows clients to rely on what is communicated to them in therapy and to integrate the new information shared by therapist, facilitating their change (Knapen et al., 2020). Thus, ET could be considered as one of the mechanisms of therapeutic change. By contrast, in case of disrupted forms of ET, the capacity for change is limited. Indeed, the clients' rigidity of beliefs, reflecting EM, as well as the extreme naiveté in acquiring new information, typical of EC, cannot go unnoticed within the treatment, since both hinder to learn from the experience and use the new knowledge to improve their vision of self and world. Fortunately, however, ET may be reactivated in the context of therapeutic relationship, through the therapist's resorting to ostensive cues such as empathy and working alliance, and the emergence of a relational modality, named we-mode (Higgins, 2020). The latter refers to a form of shared intentionality in which individuals jointly act towards a common goal and share mental states, increasing the understanding of the other's feelings, thoughts, and behaviours (Gallotti & Frith, 2013). This allows clients to restore their communication channel and to leave the therapeutic room engaging in continuous social learning even in their own world of interpersonal relationships (Fonagy & Campbell, 2017).

Therefore, it is possible to note the close link between ET and mentalization (or reflective functioning), that is the capacity to interpret oneself and others' behaviors in terms of mental states such as emotions, thoughts, intentions (Fonagy et al., 1998), since mentalization allows both the recognition of intentionality and the opening of ET, additionally enabling individuals to reflect on their own interpersonal relationship patterns (Esposito et al., 2023; Esposito et al., 2024). However, this is also closely related to attachment, i.e. the emotional bond between children and their caregivers characterized by behaviors aimed at achieving and maintaining mutual closeness (Bowlby, 1973). In fact, it is believed that the development of ET, as well as the development of mentalization, can occur in the context of a secure attachment (Esposito et al., 2020; Milesi et al., 2023), in which the child may experience positive interactions and the feeling of being recognized as intentional agent. In such case, caregivers may resort to ostensive cues, such as eye contact, turn-taking, infant-direct speech (motherese) and contingent reactivity, which indicate the caregiver's intention to transmit new and relevant information to the child (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). This allows child to suspend EV, generating an epistemic correspondence, i.e. the opening of the communication channel (Fonagy & Campbell, 2021) that promotes ET: the latter then gradually extends to the wider social community, encouraging as adults the ability to change their position in the light of new information and to use interpersonal interactions as learning opportunities (Duschinsky & Foster, 2021). But what if the secure attachment relationship is missing? In a context of insecure attachment, it is more likely that children experience unpredictable or harmful interactions with caregivers and that they are not recognized as intentional agents (Cosenza et al., 2022); as a results, they may lose the opportunity to develop a functional level of EV. This may lead to the formation of the disrupted forms of ET, i.e. EM or EC. Furthermore, both these situations are linked to hypermentalizing, i.e. the tendency to overly attribute mental states to other people (Bo et al., 2017b), as well as both represent a weakening or damaging of ET.

It should be precised that, to date, the interplay between attachment, ET and mentalization has been addressed on a theoretical level (Benzi et al., 2023). However, as stated by Li et al. (2023, p. 40), these “assumptions require empirical investigations before any conclusions can be drawn”. Indeed, without empirical studies, each author can make a different assumption on the relationship between these three constructs. In light of what reported, the current systematic review aims at providing a synthesis of the role of the ET in the relationship between attachment and mentalization, also looking at factors which affect this relationship, in order to fill this gap of the literature.

2. Materials and methods

This systematic review adheres to the guidelines provided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020; Page et al., 2021).

2.1 Sources of information and research strategies

The research for the identification of the studies was conducted between December 2022 and February 2023 using three databases: APA PsycInfo, Scopus and PubMed. The keywords used, searched in the full text, were the following: (“epistemic trust” OR “epistemic mistrust” OR “epistemic credulity” OR “epistemic hypervigilance” OR “epistemic hypovigilance) AND (“mentalizing” OR “mentalization” OR “mentalising” Or “mentalisation”) AND (“attachment”). It was not applied any time limiter due to the youth of the construct of epistemic trust in the empirical field. The only filter adopted concerned the language, selecting exclusively English or Italian articles.

2.2 Selection and data collection procedures

The selection of articles occurred on the basis of the following inclusion criteria: a) study which explicitly focus on the relationship between attachment, mentalization and epistemic trust, b) research articles. In relation to the first criterium, two aspects need to be clarified: firstly, studies were admitted even if they focused on relationship between specific dimensions of these constructs, for example hyper- or hypovigilance, hypermentalizing, unresolved/disorganized attachment; secondly, studies were admitted only if they addressed all the three constructs of interest, i.e. attachment, mentalization and epistemic trust. Regarding the second criterium, it should be specified that studies were not admitted if they were theoretical articles, opinion articles, commentary, book chapters and interviews.

Before proceeding to screening phase, we removed duplicates from the three databases. Subsequently, the selection occurred, at first, basing on title and abstract and, thereafter, by reading the full text. These procedures were conducted by two researchers (the second and fourth authors) through the consensus agreement and a third researcher (the first author) resolved any disagreement as a judge. Several information was extracted from each article: the authors, the year of publication, the origin of the study, the context of investigation, the type of sample, the research design, the variables investigated and the measures used to assess them, the aims, the results, the conclusions, the limitations, the definition of the relationship between epistemic trust, attachment and mentalization, and the factors affecting this relationship. Finally, these data were systematized in a summary table.

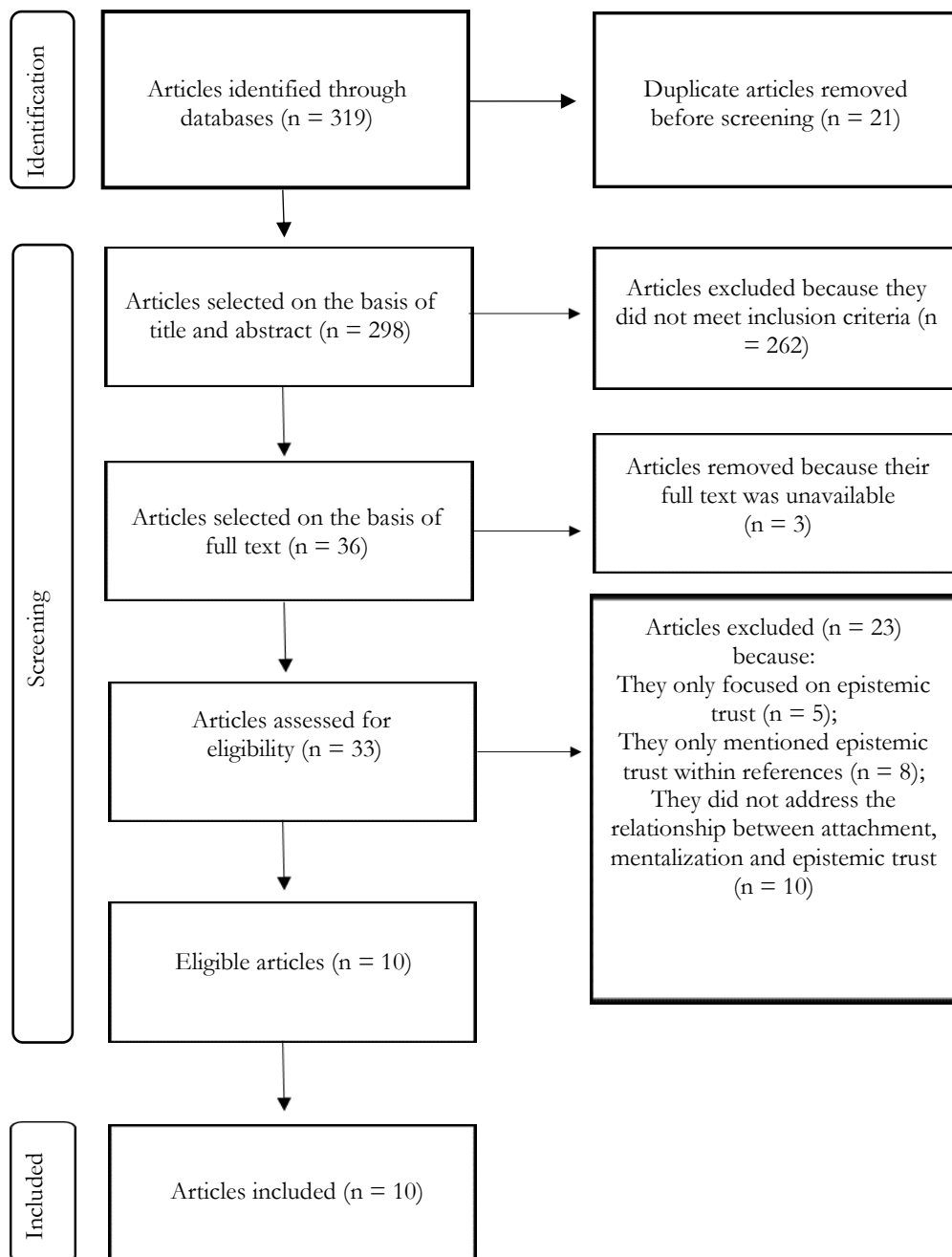
2.3 Quality Assessment

In order to perform the Quality Assessment, the following checklists were used: NHLB Quality Assessment Tool for Case Series Studies (NHLBI, 2013), NHLBI Quality Assessment Tool for Before-After with No Control Group (NHLBI, 2018), JBI Checklist for Analytical Cross-sectional Studies (Moola et al., 2020) and JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research (Lockwood et al., 2015). For each item of the checklists, there is the possibility of answering “Yes”, “No”, “It is not clear”, “Not applicable”. Based on the response, it was assigned a score of 1 for each affirmative response and a score of 0 when the criterium was not present, unclear, or not applicable. The obtained final score was used to categorize each article into one of the three available classes: class A, corresponding to high quality, when the checklist applied has at least 75% of affirmative responses; class B, of good quality, with a positive response score ranging from 51% to 75%; class C, of discrete quality, when 50% of affirmative answers are not exceeded.

3. Results

As shown in Figure 1, the identified studies were 319; 21 of them were removed as duplicates before the screening phase. In the next step, on the basis of title and abstract, 262 articles were excluded for the following reasons: articles in other languages (3 articles); books, commentaries or interviews (18 articles); articles in which the relationship between only two of the constructs was investigated (e.g. relationship between attachment and mentalization without ET; 15 articles) or in which the study of the relationship between the three variables was missing (226 articles). The remaining 36 articles were considered for the next phase based on the full text, either because they were already admissible as they met the inclusion criteria or because it was not clear from the title and abstract whether they met all the criteria. However, 3 articles were excluded because they were unavailable, thus only 33 studies were assessed for eligibility. Of these, 23 articles were excluded because they only focused on ET (5 articles), they only mentioned ET within references (8 articles), or they did not investigate the relationship between all the three variables (10 articles). Finally, 10 articles were defined eligible as they all met the inclusion criteria and, therefore, they constitute the definitive pool of this systematic review.

Figure 1. Flow diagram



3.1 Summary of results

The final sample of studies was explored taking into account some information (see Table 1) in order to pursue the research aims. Firstly, regarding the origin of the sample, it is possible to indicate that 90% of the studies (n = 9) involved a representative sample of the Western population, while the remaining 10% (n = 1) recruited a percentage of Asian subjects. As regards the contexts of investigation of the relationship between attachment, mentalization and ET, 60% of the studies (n = 6) took place in the context of intervention and treatment of psychopathology, in particular borderline personality disorder with Mentalization-Based

Treatment (MBT; Bateman & Fonagy, 2016) and chronic depression with Dynamic Interpersonal Therapy (DIT; Lemma et al., 2011). Other fields consisted in the validation of a measurement instrument (10%; $n = 1$), i.e. the Epistemic Trust, Mistrust and Credulity Questionnaire (ETMCQ; Campbell et al., 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic (20%; $n = 2$), and the adoptive families (10%; $n = 1$). Consistently with the found prevalence of the context of treatment of psychopathology, the type of sample most represented was the clinical one (in 70% of the articles; $n = 7$), with adolescent or adult participants. Regarding the research design, the pool of articles contained series or single case studies (30%; $n = 3$), longitudinal studies (20%; $n = 2$), cross-sectional studies (30%; $n = 3$) and qualitative studies (20%; $n = 2$). Furthermore, despite the specificity of each article, there were some common measures used to detect aspects of the relationship between attachment, mentalization and ET, such as the Reflective Functioning Questionnaire for Youth (RFQY; Sharp et al., 2009) and the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Arnsden & Greenberg, 1987), respectively in 20% ($n = 2$) and 30% of the articles ($n = 3$). Referring to our research question, namely the relationship between attachment, mentalization and ET, 80% of the studies ($n = 8$) theoretically assumed a certain relational dynamic, on the basis of existing literature, while the remaining 20% ($n = 2$) empirically investigated it, constituting one of the research outcomes. Three different relational dynamics emerged and described the relationship between the three constructs: 80% of the articles ($n = 8$) theoretically hypothesized a relationship of interdependence between attachment, mentalization and ET, that is attachment promotes the development of mentalization which in turn facilitates the development of ET; 10% of the included studies ($n = 1$) empirically found a relationship between mentalization and disrupted forms of ET (but not between mentalization and ET), both related to attachment experiences; finally, the last 10% of the studies ($n = 1$) empirically found a relationship of independence between mentalization and ET, while attachment represents a precondition for both these variables. Furthermore, concerning the factors influencing the relationship between attachment, mentalization and ET, the following categories emerged: individual (40%; $n = 4$), interpersonal (30%; $n = 3$) and environmental (30%; $n = 3$) influences. Finally, considering the quality of the included studies, 70% of the articles ($n = 7$) is in class B, 20% of the studies ($n = 2$) in class A and only one article in class C (10%).

Table 1. The characteristics of the included studies

Authors, year and origin of the study	Context of investigation	Type of sample	Research design	Variables	Measures	Aims	Results	Conclusions	Limitations	Relationship between epistemic trust, attachment and mentalization	Factors affecting the relationship between attachment, mentalization and epistemic trust
Bo S., Sharp C., Fonagy P., Kongerslev M. (2017b) – Denmark	MBT treatment for BPD	Clinical n=9	Case Series	Features of therapeutic dialogue Emotional Arousal		To take into account the relationship between Attachment, Hypermentalizing, and Epistemic Mistrust for BPD treatment	Four factors that lead to Epistemic Mistrust: emotional arousal, inability to integrate cognitive and emotional aspects; inability to diversify between their own and others' intentions, incapacity to shift between implicit and	The “we-mode” promotes Mentalization and Epistemic Trust	Clinical work with adolescent sample only Lack of material empirically based	Secure Attachment → Mentalization → Epistemic Trust	Emotional Arousal; Inability to integrate cognition and emotion

							explicit mentalizing				
Bo S., Beck E., Gondan M., Sharp C., Pedersen J., Simonsen E. (2017a) - Denmark	MBT-G treatment for adolescents with BPD	Clinical n=34 (F)	Longitudinal study, Before and After design	Reflective Functioning Attachment Risk Behaviors BPD Depression Level	Borderline Personality Features Scale for Children (BPFS-C); Youth Self-Report (YSR); Beck Depression Inventory for Youth (BDI-Y); Risk-Taking and Self-Harm Inventory for Adolescents (RTSHI-A); Reflective Function Questionnaire for Youth (RFQ-Y); Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment – Revised (IPPA-R)	To evaluate the MBT-G effectiveness for adolescents with BPD	Decrease of scores on BPFS-C scale for BPD Improvement of psychopathology, mentalization and trust in parents	Effectiveness of MBT-G program Epistemic Trust is a protective factor for the psychopathology	Lack of a control group Small sample size All participants were girls No systematic adherence ratings	Secure Attachment → Mentalization → Epistemic Trust	Conflictuality Difficulties in social functioning

					employed to assess parent trust and peer trust						
Folmo E. J., Karterud S. W., Kongerslev M. T., Kvarstein E. H., Stanicke E. (2019) – Norway	MBT treatment for BPD	Clinical n=4 (M=0; F=4)	Qualitative Study	Therapeutic Alliance Strategic Competences Battles of the comfort zone	Transcripts of sessions analysed with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	To analyse therapeutic dialogue to identify influencing factors	Relationship between Therapeutic Alliance, Strategic Competences and Epistemic Trust Protective factors in the therapeutic relationship: Focus on mental and emotional states Logical interventions Pursuing a goal in a clear and empathic way	Therapeutic Alliance and Strategic Competence are useful for the development of Epistemic Trust	Qualitative data only	Secure Attachment → Mentalization → Epistemic Trust	Therapeutic Alliance; Strategic Competence; Battles of the comfort zone
Rao A. S., Lemma A., Fonagy P., Sosnowska M., Constanti	DIT treatment for Depression	Clinical n=40 (M=28; F=12)	Before and After study	Changes in the symptoms during the therapeutic sessions Level of anxiety	Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) Generalized Anxiety	To verify the effectiveness of DITCC model for Chronic Depression treatment	Effectiveness of DIT and improvement of symptoms	The DIT model is effective thanks to the focus on Epistemic Mistrust as symptom of	Small sample size Limited analysis Lack of follow-up data	Secure Attachment → Mentalization → Epistemic Trust	Relationship Interfering Behaviours (RIBs); Interpersonal difficulties

nou M. P., Fijak Koch M., Gelberg G. (2019) – UK					Disorder (GAD-7) CORE-34 Schwartz Outcome Scale-107 (SOS-10)			Complex depression A mentalizing communicatio n created in the therapeutic relationship could replace a dysfunctional one			
Orme W., Bowersox L., Vanwoerd en S., Fonagy P., Sharp C. (2019) –UK, America, Asia, Africa	BDP Treatment	Clinical n=322 (M=105; F=217)	Cross- sectional study	Epistemic Trust BDP symptoms	Inventory of parent and peer attachment (IPPA) used as a measure of epistemic trust; Borderline personality features scale for children, child Report (BPFS-C); Borderline personality features scale for children, parent report (BPFS-P); Child interview for	To study the relationship between Epistemic Trust and BPD, especially the impact of Epistemic Trust on response to treatment	A lack of trust in parents could lead to the development of psychopatho logy Epistemic Trust is useful for the BPD treatment	Epistemic Trust is a key element for the BPD treatment. Deficits in Epistemic Trust are linked to psychopathol ogical development	Measures used in the study are unspecific	Secure Attachment → Mentalizatio n → Epistemic Trust	Capacity of emotion regulation; Changes in brain areas during the adolescent developme nt

					DSM-IV borderline personality disorder (CIBPD); The child behavior checklist (CBCL)						
Jaffrani A., Sunley T., Midgley N. (2020) – UK	Adoptive Family	Non- Clinical	Case Report	Family’s experience of therapy Therapeutic relationship Trust/Mistrust	Semi- structured interview based on an adaptation of the Expectations of Therapy Interview Interview analysed using Interpretative Phenomenolo gical Analysis (IPA)	To identify how MBT could support the development of Epistemic Trust in fostering relationships	Epistemic Trust is important in the pre/post adoptive process Factors contributing to Epistemic Trust: therapeutic room; previous trusted figures/syste ms Factors contributing to Epistemic Mistrust: adverse early experiences; minimal effort by professionals ; rigidity of frameworks	The development of Epistemic Trust is important in an adoptive context	The investigation on how the different factors impact Epistemic Vigilance misses. The case study design hinders generalizing data	Attachment , Mentalizatio n and Epistemic Trust establish a virtuous circle	Adverse early experience s

<p>Campbell C., Tanzer M., Saunders R., Booker T., Allison E., Li E., O'Dowda C., Luyten P., Fonagy P. (2021) – UK</p>	<p>Validation of a self-report measure of Epistemic Trust</p>	<p>Non-Clinical n study1=500 (M=241; F=255) n study2=705 (M=342; F=363)</p>	<p>Cross-sectional study</p>	<p>Trust; Mistrust; Credulity Reflective Functioning Relational experiences</p>	<p>Childhood Traumatic Questionnaire ; Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI); Reflective Function Questionnaire Epistemic Trust, Mistrust and Credulity Questionnaire (ETMCQ)</p>	<p>Validation of ETMCQ</p>	<p>Relationship between developmental experiences, Attachment, Mentalization and Epistemic Trust</p>	<p>A three-factor model: Epistemic Trust, Epistemic Mistrust and Credulity</p>	<p>Lack of interpersonal dimension; Self-report measure Psychopathological investigation with non-clinical sample</p>	<p>Secure Attachment → Mentalization → Epistemic Trust</p>	<p>Self-efficacy; Mental Health Symptoms</p>
<p>Ventura Wurman T. V., Lee T., Bateman A., Fonagy P., Nolte T. (2021) – UK</p>	<p>MBT treatment for BPD during COVID-19 lockdown</p>	<p>Clinical n=5 (M=3; F=2)</p>	<p>Case Series</p>	<p>Challenges of patients and therapist during the lockdown</p>		<p>To study the patients' difficulties during lockdown for the changes in the therapeutic process</p>	<p>Increase of anxiety because of the difficulties to access the care services Increase of rejection feelings Increase of interpersonal difficulties and sensitivity to social context</p>	<p>COVID-19 is linked to the emotional arousal that could lead to mentalizing deficits. In the case of BPD patients, this situation results in the incapacity of social learning .</p>	<p>There's no focus on mentalizing culture in group therapy</p>	<p>Attachment → Mentalization → Epistemic Trust</p>	<p>Emotional arousal Difficulty in regulating emotions</p>

							Increase of mentalizing deficits and difficulty adapting online therapy				
Talia A., Taubner S., Miller-Bottomo M., Muurholm S. D., Winther A., Frandsen F.W., Harpoth T., Onofri A., Kongerslev M. T., Simonsen S., Poulsen S., Dunschinsky R. (2022) – Italy, US, Denmark	Therapy for individual with Unresolved/Disorganized Attachment	Clinical n=181 (M=50; F=131)	Semi-experimental study	Unresolved/Disorganized Attachment Index of communication	Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) Patient Attachment Coding System (PACS)	To collect some evidence-based data in relation to the way Unresolved/Disorganized patients communicate in therapeutic sessions	The features of communication with U/d patients are used in the sessions as in the everyday life The U/d patients show a lack of Epistemic Trust The U/d patients are not treatment-resistant It is possible to distinguish two types of U/d patients: subtype 1 and subtype 2	There are two types of intentions that support the human communication: informative and communicative	The features identified describe more PD patients than U/d ones	Attachment → Mentalization → Epistemic Trust	Adverse experiences
Locati F., Milesi A., Conte F.,	COVID-19 pandemic	Non-clinical	Cross-sectional study	Reflective functioning	Reflective Function Questionnaire	To investigate Epistemic Trust and Mentalization as protective	Adolescents' social functioning is supported	As the stress increases, Mentalization	Small sample size	Secure Attachment →	Stressful circumstances;

<p>Campbell C., Fonagy P., Ensink K., Parolin L. (2022) - Italy</p>		<p>n=131 (M=44; F=87)</p>		<p>Trust in parents and peers Perceived stress Emotion Regulation</p>	<p>for Youth (RFQ-Y) Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) employed as a measure of epistemic trust Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)</p>	<p>factors in relation to emotional distress during the lockdown</p>	<p>by attachment figures that stimulate the development of Mentalization Epistemic Trust and Mentalization are negatively correlated to stress and emotion dysregulation Both Mentalization and Epistemic Trust originate from Attachment, but they are not correlated each other</p>	<p>and Epistemic Trust decrease</p>	<p>Measures used in the study are unspecific</p>	<p>Mentalization Secure Attachment → Epistemic Trust Mentalization and Epistemic Trust are independent</p>	<p>Adverse early experiences</p>
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4. Discussion

This systematic review has synthesized data from studies that have addressed the role of ET in the relationship between attachment and mentalization. Prior to the discussion of the results related to our research question, we will report some considerations on the results concerning the characteristics of the included studies.

Firstly, the year of publication of the studies allows to underline how the research interest for this topic is recent, as all the included articles have been published since 2017. Specifically, the first article was published in April 2017 (Bo et al., 2017b).

Another relevant information to be taken into account is the origin of the sample, considering the significance of ET for the transmission of culture (Fonagy & Allison, 2023). In fact, only one study also includes a small sample of Asian origin, thus the results predominately concern the Western culture. In this regard, it should be noted that Western model of parental interaction is based on a dyadic sensitivity that is able to generate a predisposition to ET, although it is not exclusive strategy by which this social orientation can be gained (Fonagy et al., 2022). There are, indeed, many non-Western communities which have simultaneous multiple caregiving engendering multiple natural attachments and in which caregivers orient children outward by placing them in the same direction in which they are facing (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009). Thus, in such communities the caregivers' priority is not only to teach children about the self, but above all to support them to take the others' perspectives. As consequence, child may learn secondarily about self by identifying the ways their experience is similar to those of others in the community (Fonagy et al., 2022). All this may have an impact on the development of ET. Furthermore, in this perspective it is possible to hypothesize that we-mode can be readily developed around a joint intention to explore others and to see how others feel. Therefore, security and trust may partially be culture-specific aspects (Keller & Chaudhary, 2017).

Referring to the contexts in which the relational dynamic between ET, attachment and mentalization is mostly investigate, it is possible to observe the prevalence of therapy and treatment of psychopathology. In particular, the results confirmed a focus on borderline personality disorder and depression, in line with what observed in other studies, in which the theory of ET has been applied to the reading of these two specific psychopathological conditions (Fonagy & Luyten, 2018; Luyten et al., 2021). Consequently, it is possible to note the predominance of two therapeutic models through which borderline personality disorder and depression are mainly treated, i.e. Mentalization-Based Treatment (MBT) and Dynamic Interpersonal Therapy (DIT), both adapted to integrate the innovative construct of ET.

Specifically, DIT is based on the assumption that rooted and maladaptive relational patterns prevent external inputs from updating or challenging internalized knowledge, leading individuals to no longer be able to respond flexibly to their environment (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). Therefore, this approach aims at identifying these patterns through recognition of the relationship between mental states and behavior. Recently, the DIT approach has been extended to the Dynamic Interpersonal Therapy for Complex Case (DITCC) model, which is characterized by the addition of a further component aimed precisely at addressing the individual's distrust towards the social communications received. On the other hand, by placing mentalization at the center of the approach, MBT can also increase the ability to learn from social situations by structuring ET: in fact, through the therapist's explicit effort to see the world from the patient's point of view, the patient's mind opens to communication with therapist, contributing to the creation of a collaborative therapeutic relationship. In light of the aforementioned, in its relationship with attachment and mentalization, ET could be considered as a key through which looking at psychopathology, as well as a therapeutic factor to be taken into account during treatments.

Other contexts of investigation emerged from the included studies are Covid-19 and lockdown, validation of an ET measurement tool, and adoptive families. Specifically, the Covid-19 pandemic has been investigated from two perspectives: the first one regards the functional or dysfunctional way in which the individual reacted, that in turn depended by available resources, such as mentalization ability and trust in social, peer, and parental information (Locati et al., 2022); the second one concerns the influence of this pandemic on psychopathology and treatments, highlighting the potential protective role of ET (Ventura Wurman et al., 2021). Thus, it is possible to note how ET is becoming an important construct in the reading of wider social phenomena, leaving the therapeutic room to deal with social and cultural problems (Brauner et al., 2023). The validation of an ET measurement tool responds to the need to develop specific instruments for the assessment of this construct, still scarce in literature (Campbell et al., 2021). Recently, another tool has been devised to measure ET, i.e. the Epistemic Trust Rating System (ETRS; Fisher et al., 2024), highlighting how important it is that the development of tools for evaluating ET goes hand in hand with its theoretical conceptualization. Finally, ET has been examined within foster or adoptive relationships, in which a disruption of the communication channel may occur due to the relational and adaptive difficulties that the child may experience. Indeed, ET develops by virtue of experiences of stability and security, conditions that might be missing in such context, leading to EM. In particular, researchers focused – on one hand – on factors able to contribute to EM, such as adverse events and lacking of a secure attachment system; on the other hand, on factors which promote ET, e.g. a psychotherapeutic path that

can hold challenges and build a secure, trusting and mentalizing relationship (Jaffrani et al., 2020). This appears in line with what showed by Eldridge et al. (2020), who highlighted the need to build a safe and supportive care relationship in the context of adoption and fostering.

As stated above, the current systematic review also explored the factors able to impact on the relationship between ET, attachment and mentalization. Specifically, the results show that this relation may be affected by several factors, which we classified into three categories, closely interrelated: individual, interpersonal, and environmental influences. The first group concerns the ability to regulate the emotions in state of high emotional arousal, the self-efficacy, the resilience, and the presence of psychopathology. The second category regards social and therapeutic relationships. The last group includes the adverse familiar experiences and stressful events. In particular, some authors emphasize the influence of emotionally intense events that may increase emotional arousal causing emotional dysregulation, and this in turn may lead to hypermentalizing and, consequently, to disrupted forms of ET (Bo et al., 2017b). Therefore, in this perspective another target goal of treatments could be to promote more adaptive strategies of emotional regulation, in addition to improve mentalizing abilities, provide a secure base and restore ET.

Moving to our research question, namely “what is the relationship between epistemic trust, attachment and mentalization?”, it is possible to observe that the majority of included studies found a bond of interdependence, in the sense that the secure attachment appears as prerequisite and basis of development of mentalizing abilities, that in turn generates ET, in line with what expressed by Milesi et al. (2023). Thus, ET originates within a positive primary relationship characterized by the responsive attitude of caregivers that facilitate the emergence of the reflective functioning. Conversely, an insecure attachment relationship may be marked by an inability to hold and reflect on mental states favoring the development of hypermentalizing, which in turn promotes EM or EC. However, it is important to specify that in the present systematic review this bond of interdependence mainly emerges from those studies which addressed this issue on a theoretical level. By contrast, the only two studies which faced the relationship between attachment, mentalization and ET on an empirical level reported mixed results. Locati et al. (2022) found no significant association between ET and mentalization: in this study, attachment still represents an essential prerequisite for the development both of mentalization and ET, but these latter seem to be independent variables, therefore they follow different trajectories and produce different outcomes. In this perspective, ET could be considered as an ability that once acquired within attachment relationship becomes a default mode regardless from mentalization (Locati et al., 2022). Such result is partially in contrast to what Campbell et al. (2021) observed: although they did not detect an association between

mentalization and ET, they nevertheless identified a relationship between mentalization and disrupted forms of ET. In particular, higher levels of both EM and EC were associated with poorer mentalizing abilities. This result suggests that EM and EC might be considered as vulnerability factors, while ET may not represent a resilience factor. Thus, the only theoretical assumption that appears confirmed by both empirical investigations is the importance of attachment as foundation for the development of these abilities through which navigating as adults in the social world (Campbell et al., 2021; Locati et al., 2022).

Finally, considering the quality assessment, most of the included studies showed a limited rigor about the scientific reporting of methodology, since a medium level of quality was found and only two studies presented a high-quality evaluation. However, as stated by Siddaway et al. (2019), these results allow only to take into account the potential risk of bias of studies, not to decide to exclude a certain study from final pool, nor to evaluate the quality of the systematic review.

5. Conclusions

The present systematic review aimed to explore the role of ET in the relationship between attachment and mentalization. The results of this study confirm first of all that the relationship between these three variables is a topic mainly studied on the theoretical level, since only two of the included studies have investigated empirically this issue. Future research should carry out empirical studies to verify whether the theoretical assumptions are confirmed. Furthermore, the majority of studies show a bond of interdependence between these variables: the attachment experience influences the development of mentalizing abilities, which in turn promote the emergence of ET, in line with what expressed by Fonagy and Allison (2014). This finding implies that mentalization plays a mediating role in the relationship between attachment and ET, suggesting that in order to promote ET one should enhance mentalizing abilities. However, if we look at the studies which empirically addressed this relationship, a different perspective emerges: the association between mentalization and ET appears less significant when considering ET, rather than its disrupted forms, such as EM and EC. In fact, these latter variables seem to have a greatest impact, although negative, on mentalizing abilities and on psychopathological outcomes. Such result, if confirmed, could suggest that one should improve in parallel both mentalization and ET, in order to prevent its disrupted forms. The only aspect appearing constant is the work on the attachment relationship: in this sense, therapy becomes the relational context in which to promote safety, that in turn promotes both mentalization and ET. This discrepancy in the results emphasises the need for tools that in future explore this relationship empirically, since different trajectories of clinical treatment might emerge.

Additionally, it is also possible to note that the relationship between attachment, mentalization and ET has been predominantly studied in the field of treatment of psychopathology (in particular, personality disorders) highlighting the importance of these constructs for psychotherapeutic context, as claimed by Knapen et al. (2020), although it may also be relevant for other areas of research, especially foster and adoptive families. In future it could be interesting to explore this association for several other psychopathological conditions, but also in case of not-clinical sample, and to deepen those data that show a link of independence between mentalization and ET. Anyway, it is possible to confirm the importance of attachment relationship for the recognition of the other both as an intentional agent and as a reliable source of information, and for the development of the ability to learn from experience (Midolo et al., 2020), consistently with what stated by Fonagy and Allison (2014). And if the security of attachment was lacking in the primary relationships, then the link between attachment, mentalization and ET will become central within the therapeutic context, where the psychotherapist's commitment, empathic attitude, listening abilities, competence and responsiveness, and the working alliance will allow to focus on mental states generating a mentalizing dialogue in which the client may restore the ability to trust to learn (Fonagy & Campbell, 2017). However, the predominance of Western sample hinders us from understanding any similarities and differences present in non-Western cultures, especially in collectivist ones. Future research should delve into this subject, in order to expand our knowledge and promote the adaptation of treatments.

6. Implications and future directions

The present systematic review may have some implications for research and clinical practice. First of all, it invites researchers to deepen empirically the relationship between attachment, mentalization and ET in order to clarify the role of each construct, with particular focus on ET. In fact, to date, there is still a gap between theory and research on this topic, due to lack of an empirical validation of what supposed on a theoretical level. Those few studies that analyze the relationship through self-report provide results not perfectly in line with theory. In this regard, recently Fonagy has validated a new tool to qualitatively measure ET in psychotherapy session transcripts (Fisher et al., 2024) and this can be a future direction of research, allowing to bridge the gap between theory, research and practice. In a clinical practice perspective, this review suggests that therapists should pay attention not only to the creation of a secure therapeutic relationship and the improvement of mentalizing abilities, but also to clients' ET, especially to its disrupted forms, which are able to hinder their ability to rely on what is communicated to them in therapy and to integrate the new information shared by therapist, thus compromising their ability to change and consequently treatment effectiveness.

7. Strengths and Limitations

Despite the possible implications, the current study presents some limitations. First of all, the small number of studies decreases the possibility of generalizing the results obtained. In addition, the identification and selection of studies were carried out through manual search, without the use of electronic tools, so it is possible that some articles were unintentionally excluded. However, this systematic review is also characterized by several strengths. Firstly, it made it possible to fill a gap in psychotherapy research, namely the lack of a synthesis of the role of epistemic trust in the relationship between attachment and mentalization. Secondly, three databases were consulted to obtain a wider and more variegated pool of articles.

Authors' Contribution

Giovanna Esposito: Conceptualization, Writing of original draft, Review and editing of final draft, Supervision

Simona Totaro: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing of original draft

Angela Di Maro: Writing of original draft, Review and editing of final draft

Raffaella Passeggia: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Review and editing of final draft

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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