

## The Relationship Between Reflective Functioning Certainty and Reflective Functioning Uncertainty with Interpersonal Relationship Functioning Among Youth and Young Adults in Pakistan

Ayesha Fazilat  
(Correspondence  
Author)

Department of Psychology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan.  
ORCID #: 0009-0005-5167-9425. Email [ayesha.fazilat18@gmail.com](mailto:ayesha.fazilat18@gmail.com)

Dr. Wajiha Yasir

Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Air University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

**Abstract:** *The current study focused on exploring the correlation between reflective functioning (Certainty about Mental States (RFQ-C) and Uncertainty about Mental States (RFQ-U)) and interpersonal interaction functioning (IRF) in youth and young adults in Pakistan. Reflective functioning, based on Mentalization-Based Theory, is defined as a person's ability to reflect their own and others' behavior in relation to their thoughts, feelings and intentions. The study adopted a cross-sectional, correlational design with a sample of 300 participants (youth age between 17-44 years) of Islamabad and Rawalpindi population sample collected by convenience sampling technique. Reflective functioning was assessed using the Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (RFQ; Fonagy et al., 2016) and interpersonal relationship functioning was assessed using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the bivariate relationships among the study variables. Results indicated small but statistically significant positive correlations between RFQ-C and the interpersonal relationship functioning ( $r = .12, p < .05$ ), and small but statistically significant negative correlations between RFQ-U and interpersonal relationship functioning ( $r = -.16, p < .01$ ). It appears that a better sense of self and others' mental state relates to healthier interpersonal functioning, while a poorer sense of self and others' mental state relates to poorer interpersonal functioning. The results are able to expand mentalization related literature, which was mostly written in Western cultural context, to a community of Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** reflective functioning, mentalization, interpersonal relationship functioning, certainty, uncertainty, Pakistani youth

### 1. Introduction

Good psychologies are among the best predictors of psychological wellbeing, and problems in close relationships are also a significant issue in psychological research – with interpersonal distress and emotional estrangement seemingly growing more common among the younger generation around the world.

Attachments can be used as a helpful starting point for understanding the success of relationships. This view suggests that early interactions with the caregiver's establish a Mental Template or Internal Working Model, a template that influences how people think about their sense of self as a worthy child to be cared for, and the thoughts they have about others as a

reliable caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). These models are not passive memories; they shape the way a person may relate to any situation, whether it's a secure one or one in which they are alert to and wary of their surroundings. At the core of this process is the ability to mentalize, or to see the mind behind one's own and others' behaviors (Fonagy et al., 1991). High reflective functioning is now recognized not as just a developmental process, but as a continuous need for stable, satisfying relationships.

Reflective functioning is a psychological ability that has come to light as a significant capacity, but the exact involvement of this capacity in the development of relationships in adulthood is still poorly understood. The general literature suggests some relationship between reflective functioning and relational outcomes, and the direction and magnitude of this relationship, especially when examining reflective functioning at its two dimensions (certainty and uncertainty about mental states), has received less direct empirical focus.

To date, most reflective functioning research has been conducted in Western (and frequently clinical) samples (Fonagy et al., 2016). In contrast, little is known about the processes in collectivist societies like Pakistan where emotional restraint and other cultural norms and complex family structures could influence both reflective capacity acquisition and expression. In Pakistan, emotional unawareness and relational distress have been found to be associated with challenges faced by young adults in extended families and in the context of cultural norms that dictate restraint, thus highlighting this gap.

The present article seeks to close this gap by examining the bivariate association of the two RF subscales, namely Certainty (RFQ-C) and Uncertainty (RFQ-U) with interpersonal relationship functioning among Pakistani youth and young adults. According to Mentalization-Based Theory it was hypothesized that RFQ-C would be positively related to interpersonal relationship functioning, and RFQ-U would be inversely related to it.

## **Literature Review**

### **Reflective Functioning and Mentalization**

The concept of mentalization, which is the ability to think about the mental states that underlie the behaviors of yourself and others (Fonagy et al., 1991), underpins the idea of Reflective Functioning (RF). RF enables an individual to differentiate their internal representations from the external world, thereby reducing impulsive emotional reactions and misattribution of other people's intentions. The RFQ has been formulated in two ways: Certainty about Mental States is a measure of certainty with respect to an individual's understanding of mental states; uncertainty about Mental States measures a individual's difficulty with understanding their own/others thoughts and feelings (Fonagy et al., 2016).

### **Developmental Origins of Reflective Functioning**

Research that conducts longitudinal research indicated that secure attachments during early childhood predicted later reflective functioning; this has been illustrated in studies following the same participants from childhood to young adulthood, such as that of Carlson et al. (2004), who found that a child's secure attachment to their caregiver at age 4 positively predicted their reflective functioning nearly 20 years later. Studies indicate that adolescents who have a high degree of reflective functioning may be able to mitigate the negative long-term effects of childhood's relational neglect and attachment insecurity, suggesting that high levels of mentalizing capabilities may shield children from future relational challenges and provide a protective buffer against future relational disturbance resulting from early adverse

experiences (Ensink et al., 2016). The majority of longitudinal studies in this area were conducted using structured interview methods and therefore may be limited in terms of their ability to be generalized across cultures.

### **Reflective Functioning and Interpersonal Functioning**

In research conducted with adolescent and young adults, mentalizing abilities, defined by stronger social cognition (assessed either via self-report or behavioral measures), have also been related to positive peer relations and decreased relational conflict between youth (Sharp et al., 2011). Studies that distinguish between the ability to understand one's own mental state (Self-RF) from the ability to understand the mental state of others (Other-RF) suggest that it is more difficult for young people to develop meaningful relationships when they struggle to understand the mental state of another person than when they only have difficulty with their own mental state.

In adult populations, individuals with deficits in reflective functioning are more likely to exhibit hostile attribution bias and higher rates of aggression through interpreting ambiguous social situations as dangerous (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004). On the other hand, individuals with higher levels of reflective functioning at the beginning of treatment have stronger therapeutic alliances and greater improvement in interpersonal difficulties (Levy et al., 2006). Thus, reflective functioning is a mechanism to help repair dysfunctional relationships.

### **The Pakistani Context**

In Pakistan, very little research has been conducted specifically studying reflective functioning, however, there are many studies that report there is a significant issue with emotional unawareness and relationship distress amongst young people aged 12-29 years in Pakistan especially within complex family systems that are hierarchical in nature and place a strong emphasis on controlling one's emotions. The mentioned cultural elements would imply possible differences in how reflective functioning links to interpersonal outcomes as documented in Western literature, and it is also possible that the magnitude of such relationships has been lessened due to the presence of certain cultural characteristics in the family and the relationship context in Pakistan compared to those found in the West.

### **Research Gap**

The literature consistently supports that reflective functioning relates to interpersonal outcomes; however, there are currently limitations to consider: over-reliance on western samples, predominance of cross-sectional designs, and a lack of empirical studies that examine the certainty and uncertainty components of reflective functioning separately in relation to interpersonal functioning within a sample of Pakistani youth and young adults. This study aims to address these limitations directly.

## Method

### Research Design

A correlational design was used to investigate the relationship between reflective functioning (certainty and uncertainty) and quality of interpersonal relationships (social partner) for youth and young adults in Pakistan. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to collect the data for this study.

### Sample

A total of 300 individuals aged 17 to 44 years were recruited as the sample from the general population in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Participants were classified within their age groups based on the definition of Youth (15 years - 24 years) and Young Adult (25 years - 44 years) from the World Health Organization (2025). Both males and females were represented in this sample. Participants were excluded from the study if they had an acute psychiatric illness for which failure to successfully complete the questionnaires would impact their ability to do so, (e.g., active psychosis, acute manic episode, or severe cognitive impairment).

### Measures

Reflective functioning was assessed using the Reflective Functioning Questionnaire (RFQ; Fonagy et al., 2016), a self-report measure rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree). The RFQ yields two subscales: Certainty about Mental States (RFQ-C), reflecting confidence in understanding one's own and others' mental states, and Uncertainty about Mental States (RFQ-U), reflecting confusion or difficulty in this domain. Items on both subscales are reverse-scored, and the measure has demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in prior research.

Interpersonal relationship functioning was assessed using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988), which measures the overall satisfaction, trust, communication quality, and emotional closeness experienced in close interpersonal relationships. Lower scores indicate poorer relationship functioning and satisfaction, while higher scores indicate stronger interpersonal relationship functioning.

### Procedure and Data Analysis

Participants completed a demographic form along with the RFQ and RAS as part of a larger study battery. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to examine the bivariate associations among Reflective Functioning Certainty, Reflective Functioning Uncertainty, and Interpersonal Relationship Functioning.

### Results

Table 1 presents the Pearson product-moment correlations among Reflective Functioning Certainty, Reflective Functioning Uncertainty, and Interpersonal Relationship Functioning (N = 300).

**Table 1**

*Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Among RFQ-C, RFQ-U, and IRF\_T (N = 300)*

| Variables | 1 | 2      | 3     |
|-----------|---|--------|-------|
| 1. RFQ-C  | — | -.58** | .12*  |
| 2. RFQ-U  | — | —      | -.16* |

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*Note.* RFQ-C = Reflective Functioning Certainty; RFQ-U = Reflective Functioning Uncertainty; IRF\_T = Interpersonal Relationship Functioning Total. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

As shown in Table 1, Reflective Functioning Certainty (RFQ-C) had a small but statistically significant positive correlation with Interpersonal Relationship Functioning ( $r = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In contrast, Reflective Functioning Uncertainty (RFQ-U) had a small but statistically significant negative correlation with Interpersonal Relationship Functioning ( $r = -.16$ ,  $p < .01$ ). RFQ-C and RFQ-U were also strongly and negatively correlated with each other ( $r = -.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Both associations between reflective functioning and interpersonal relationship functioning were in the theoretically expected direction.

### Discussion

The findings were consistent with the hypothesis and indicated that there was a positive association between reflective functioning certainty and interpersonal relationship functioning and a negative association between reflective functioning uncertainty and interpersonal relationship functioning amongst Pakistani youth and young adults. Specifically, there was a small positive correlation between RFQ-C and interpersonal relationship functioning, and a significant negative correlation between RFQ-U and interpersonal relationship functioning, suggesting that higher levels of certainty about one's mental state and others' mental state was associated with better relational functioning, whereas higher levels of mental state uncertainty was associated with poorer relational functioning.

The results are consistent with the general mentalization literature which has shown that the ability to understand one's own and others' behaviour in terms of mental states is a key factor in relational security and satisfaction (Fonagy et al, 1991). If a person is able to accurately read the intentions and emotions of their relationship partners then they will be more able to handle the conflict in a constructive manner and keep the emotional connection. The current findings add to this evidence and indicate that reflective functioning is not limited to Western populations or clinical sample groups. This is in line with studies that demonstrate that reflective capacity is related to interpersonal functioning in adulthood and that higher reflective functioning at baseline is correlated with a better therapy alliance and interpersonal problem resolution (Grienenberger et al., 2005; Levy et al., 2006).

The relative smallness of the correlations found in this sample could be due to cultural moderation of mentalization in the Pakistani context. Reflective capacity can be negatively moderated by culture, which prioritizes emotional control and hierarchal family relations, and thus reduce the likelihood that reflective capacity will be directly observed in the form of observable relational behavior, even when mentalizing is present. This aligns with indigenous research indicating emotional detachment and difficulties with mentalization are significant among young adults in Pakistan with complicated family dynamics.

These findings indicate that boosting certainty of mental state, along with minimizing uncertainty or confusion in mental states, may be a useful and culturally relevant intervention for enhancing the interpersonal functioning among youth and young adults in Pakistan.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ayesha Fazilat, Department of Clinical Psychology, Air University. Email: [ayesha.fazilat18@gmail.com](mailto:ayesha.fazilat18@gmail.com)

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### **Statements and Declarations**

**Competing Interests:** The author declares no competing interests.

**Author Contributions:** Ayesha Fazilat contributed to the study conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, manuscript writing, and revision.

**Data Availability:** Data are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations but may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Consent to Publish:** All participants provided informed consent and agreed to the anonymized publication of their data.

**Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate:** This study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. Permission for data collection was granted by the Department of Clinical Psychology, Air University. Only participants aged 18 years and above were included, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.