



The European Association of Psychotherapy Position Paper on the Proper Nature and Policy Applications of Psychotherapy Research

The European Association of Psychotherapy (EAP) was created to promote the independent profession of psychotherapy following the 1990 Strasbourg Declaration on Psychotherapy.¹ Its members are trained and expected to maintain the highest standards of clinical psychotherapy practice. As a leading European professional organisation and a member of the European Council of the Liberal Professions (CEPLIS), the EAP promotes professional best practices in the training of clinicians and in the practice of psychotherapy. To this end, the EAP encourages its members to participate in relevant psychotherapy research, and advocates the scientifically valid and ethical use of research findings in determining public policy regarding psychotherapy training and practice in Europe.

The EAP firmly supports the movement towards use of research in defining best practices in psychotherapy. However, the EAP maintains that psychotherapy must be recognised as a complex nonlinear psychological and psychosocial process in which many types of variables interact, such as the personal and professional attributes and assets of patients and therapists, the quality of relationships they form with one another, the relevance and impact of interventions used, and the support provided by their social networks and communities.

It is a basic tenet of all science that the research methods used to study a particular phenomenon should be relevant and applicable to the nature of that phenomenon. Whilst research based on natural science methodologies has provided considerable progress for the physical health and wellbeing of global populations, it is essential to recognize the differences in level of complexity between the psychological and psychosocial phenomena treated by psychotherapy and the biological phenomena treated by physical medicine. Success in medicine lies in having the correct treatment, correctly applied in treating the patient's pathology. By contrast, psychotherapists engage with patients as persons in a complex process of which specific treatment interventions ('techniques') form only one part, a part that has been recurrently shown in large-scale, statistically controlled field studies not to be the most effective part of the treatment. Therefore, the EAP has strong concerns about the current tendency to view, as a single "gold standard" for research on psychotherapy, experimental methodologies that inappropriately replicate a pharmaco-medical model oversimplifying the complex process of therapeutic change dynamics and producing information that typically has limited external validity or applicability.

As has recently been observed in some countries, methodologically inappropriate empirical results are often taken up by policy makers who may not completely understand the nature and breadth of relevant research methods, but who nevertheless issue scientifically and ethically questionable guidelines for treatment of psychotherapy patients, as well as the training and qualifications of psychotherapists. The EAP believes that it is the responsibility of professional psychotherapy organisations and researchers to ensure that research findings are properly understood in context, and

to correct potentially inappropriate or unethical training and practice guidelines derived from partially understood research principles. Accordingly, the EAP supports the use of a variety of suitable research methods and research designs that are attuned to the complexity of human experience and behaviour, and thus are broadly attuned to the nature of psychotherapy. We encourage research designs such as real-time monitoring of patient change in routine practice and in real-world ecosystems of clients that provide a reliable data base for understanding and modelling therapeutic change. We welcome practice-relevant methods that enable our members and their patients to participate in generating the kind of practice-based evidence that elucidates the lived experience of psychotherapy. The EAP considers research on best-practices in training and practice to be an essential part of the profession.

The importance of adapting research to meet the needs of its subject of study was clearly emphasized in the 2006 American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force Report on evidence-based practice in psychology, including the practice of psychological therapies. That document also pointed to the need for a methodological diversity that sufficiently considers the unique challenge of studying the complexity of human experience.

“Perhaps the central message of this task force report - and one of the most heartening aspects of the process that led to it – is the consensus achieved among a diverse group of scientists, clinicians, and scientist–clinicians from multiple perspectives that Evidence-based practice and Practice-based evidence requires an appreciation of the value of multiple sources of scientific evidence”.²

In this regard, the EAP encourages professionals who work for and with human beings in psychotherapy to adhere, as a guiding principle, to the idea that evidence-based practice should help patients attain a lasting improvement in overall quality of life, as well as providing short-term relief from distress and symptoms. For economists, this long-term focus on future wellbeing also holds a return on investment that is clearly appreciable.

The EAP’s facilitation of research within its membership seeks to encompass, recognise, and integrate all aspects of research appropriate to psychotherapy. Researchers and clinical practitioners are invited to collaborate to produce research for professional practice and training that is both clinically relevant and externally valid. We further encourage mental health practitioners, researchers, and mental health policymakers to foster and rely on research that accurately reflects the nature of psychotherapy and the aspects of human experience it addresses. Doing so will allow real progress to be made in the provision of psychotherapy to the benefit of the recipients and the general public.

This document was prepared and submitted by the EAP Science and Research Committee working group: Lynne Rigaud, MSc Psych, Catalin Zaharia, MD, Dr. Heward Wilkinson, Prof. Gunter Schiepek, Prof. Mattias Desmeth, Peter Schulthess, MSc, Courtenay Young, Dipl Psyche, and as external expert Prof. David Orlinsky -- Version January 30, 2021

¹ <https://www.europsyche.org/about-eap/documents-activities/strasbourg-declaration-on-psychotherapy/>

² APA Presidential Task Force on Evidence-based Practice, p 280. In: Evidence-based Practice in Psychology pp 271-285. May–June 2006 • American Psychologist. Vol. 61, No. 4, 271–285 DOI: 10.1037/0003-066X.61.4.271