



EVIDENCE-BASED PSYCHOLOGY: A PATH TO EXCELLENCE IN CLINICAL PRACTICE AND TRAINING IN PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology is a paradigm that emphasizes the integration of rigorous scientific data with clinical practice. It is based on empirically sound studies to guide psychological decisions, assessments and interventions, promoting the effectiveness and quality of the services provided. This practice plays a crucial role in the academic training and professional practice of psychologists, as it allows for an informed, responsible and up-to-date approach. It also encourages the continuous search for knowledge, since psychological science is constantly evolving. Therefore, this study is a literature review with the aim of discussing the importance of Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology in the training of professionals. The results show that some barriers can arise when talking about or implementing this practice. Lack of access to research resources, the complexity of interpreting scientific studies and the time needed to incorporate new knowledge into practice are common challenges. In addition, standardized evidence-based approaches may not be suitable for all clinical contexts, requiring flexibility in application. In conclusion, Evidence-Based Psychology is an essential pillar in the training and practice of psychologists, improving the quality of services and keeping the profession in line with scientific findings. Although there are challenges, the benefits in terms of positive results for patients and the advancement of psychology as a discipline are undeniable, as well as providing an ethical clinical environment between psychologist and patient, acting in accordance with the professional code of ethics that psychology holds dear.

Keywords: Scientificity, Graduation, Evidence-Based Practices, Psychotherapy.



1 INTRODUCTION

Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (EBPP) is a systematic method of intervention that seeks to collect and critically evaluate the results of research relevant to practical and decisive decisions. The effective implementation of PBEP in the work of psychologists requires a continuous dedication to learning and updating their knowledge and techniques. This process involves the integration of three fundamental pillars: the best available scientific evidence, the *clinical expertise* of the professional, and the preferences and values of the patient. Combining these elements ensures that psychological practice is not only based on robust evidence, but also aligned with the specific needs of each individual. PBEP therefore provides a basis for informed and responsible decision-making, allowing interventions to be adapted to the context and particularities of each clinical case (Melchert et al., 2023; Norcross *et al.*, 2016).

In the current context, the implementation of PBEP has become essential in the face of growing challenges in the field of mental health, in which the demand for more effective and personalized practices is becoming increasingly demanding. Advances in scientific research, coupled with the growing availability of technological resources and tools, offer professionals the opportunity to integrate up-to-date knowledge into their daily practice. However, the heterogeneity of the available evidence often makes it difficult to directly apply the results to different clinical realities, requiring psychologists to make an additional effort to interpret and adapt interventions. In addition, the growth of online care during and after the pandemic has further highlighted the relevance of PBEP, bringing new opportunities and challenges for evidence-based practice in the digital environment. However, despite broad theoretical support, the adoption of PBEP faces major obstacles, such as resistance to change among professionals and the lack of adequate training, especially during academic training. These challenges highlight the need for a critical review of the current state of PBEP and its implications for psychologists' everyday practice (Parrow *et al.*, 2019).

Thus, the main objective of this study is to present a narrative review of Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (EBPP), addressing its main contributions to the field of psychology, as well as identifying the gaps and challenges faced both in academic training and in professional practice. As well as discussing the benefits of this approach, such as improving the quality of the services provided and promoting more effective interventions, this paper also aims to highlight the difficulties of

implementation, the barriers that professionals encounter when applying it in everyday clinical life, and possible solutions to overcome these limitations. Thus, it is hoped that this study will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of PBEP, offering theoretical and practical support for its application, while at the same time suggesting areas in which future research is needed to further strengthen this practice.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This narrative review aims to answer the following guiding question: *“How can Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (EBPP) be implemented effectively, taking into account the particularities of patients and different clinical contexts?”* To this end, a critical analysis of the available scientific literature was carried out in order to gather and discuss the main theoretical and practical references on the subject.

The bibliographic material was selected by searching recognized databases such as the Virtual Health Library (VHL), Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS) and Psychology: Science and Profession (PePSIC), as well as other open access academic platforms. Scientific articles, books and book chapters that directly addressed the implementation of PBEP, its theoretical foundations, application strategies and the challenges involved in its adoption in clinical practice were considered eligible.

The inclusion criteria involved relevance to the proposed theme, the theoretical and/or empirical contribution of the works, as well as the methodological relevance of the selected studies. Priority was also given to publications with recognized impact in the field, which favored a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of PBEP.

In addition, this review is based on classic and contemporary authors who have played a central role in the construction and consolidation of the evidence-based practice model in the field of psychology. These include the work of Chambless (1993) and Melchert et al. (2023), considered to be structuring references for their significant contribution to the definition of guidelines, evaluation criteria and the dissemination of the PBEP. These authors were incorporated into the study's theoretical corpus because of their historical relevance and their lasting impact on the improvement of psychological practices based on scientific evidence.

3 RESULTS

The adoption of evidence-based practice in psychology dates back to the establishment of Division 12 of the *American Psychological Association* (APA) in 1993. The conception of this division was accompanied by the creation of a working group made up of psychology professionals representing different theoretical currents, which set about identifying empirically supported treatments (Chambless, 1993; Melchert et al., 2023). This group was established for the specific purpose of evaluating the empirical basis of therapeutic approaches, i.e. the compilation of scientific evidence that corroborates the effectiveness of interventions in particular contexts of application (APA, 2023a).

Traditionally, Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (EBPP) is based on the intersection of three domains: the evaluation of the best available scientific evidence, the application of the professional's clinical expertise and patient preferences (Melchert et al., 2023; APA 2023b; Dozois *et al.*, 2014). This paradigm establishes a synergistic integration between scientific research and clinical application, with the aim of optimizing therapeutic results. The concept of PBEP can be defined as an interactive clinical decision-making process in which the selection of the optimal intervention is guided by the synthesis of the most up-to-date and robust available evidence relevant to the patient in question. Such a decision not only takes into account the professional's theoretical and technical mastery, including their in-depth knowledge of the underlying theory and their ability to carry out specific interventions, but also considers the patient's individual characteristics, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, religious identity and other relevant psychosocial factors (APA, 2023a, 2023b).

In the first domain of PBEP, the focus is on identifying and using the most solid evidence in terms of the effectiveness, efficiency and safety of psychotherapeutic approaches (Melchert et al., 2023; APA, 2023a). Effectiveness refers to the ability of an intervention to generate positive results in real clinical contexts, while efficiency covers the cost-benefit analysis of the practices adopted, ensuring that resources are used optimally. Safety, on the other hand, aims to ensure that psychotherapeutic interventions offer consistent effects and minimize the risks of adverse effects for patients. To fulfill this domain, the psychologist must engage in a continuous process of training in order to develop a critical view of the scientific evidence available for specific clinical issues. This domain involves the review and critical evaluation of

sources, ensuring that the practices adopted are based on solid data and empirically validated results. Thus, the first domain of PBEP seeks to ensure that professional practice is based on rigorous scientific evidence, rather than on traditions or assumptions (Dozois *et al.*, 2014; Spencer, Detrich and Slocum, 2012).

The second domain refers to the skill and experience of the psychologist. As well as drawing on scientific evidence, psychology professionals also use their clinical experience to adapt interventions to each patient's individual needs, such as beliefs, values, tastes and choices. Clinical *expertise* involves the ability to understand and interpret the unique complexities of each case, making informed judgments about how best to apply scientific evidence to the patient's specific situation. This involves adjusting approaches based on the patient's needs, values and circumstances (APA, 2023a, 2023b; Dozois *et al.*, 2014 and Melchert *et al.*, 2023).

The third domain is related to understanding the patient's characteristics, culture and preferences. Each patient is unique, with a life story, experiences, beliefs, values and preferences that must be respected and integrated into the therapeutic process. These preferences can include the choice of certain intervention styles, rates of progress, and even the location where therapy takes place, reflecting what the patient considers most appropriate for their own treatment journey. It is therefore essential that psychologists carry out an in-depth analysis of the patient, taking into account factors such as age, gender, cultural background, social background, personal history and any other relevant characteristics. This analysis allows the psychologist to customize interventions to meet the patient's specific needs and circumstances, making treatment more effective and appropriate (APA, 2023a, 2023b; Melchert *et al.*, 2023; Norcross and Wampold, 2018).



Figure 1 - Visual representation of the PBEP tripod
Source: The authors.

PBEP is a dynamic process, characterized by a continuous research approach, in which the intrinsic uncertainty inherent in decision-making is prominent, and efforts aimed at mitigating it are diligently addressed. This perspective is configured as an intellectually open environment, where the practice of critical evaluation is not only encouraged, but also cultivated, fostering the development of reasoned arguments that are intrinsically connected to the topic under analysis. On the other hand, the formulation of unfounded objections that may divert professionals from a thorough analysis of new ideas and emerging methods, as well as related evidence that holds the potential to enrich patient care capacity, is discouraged (Norcross *et al.*, 2016; APA, 2023b).

It is essential to emphasize that PBEP involves a systematic set of principles aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the practices adopted in a clinical context or with a specific population. The underlying aim is to eliminate the cost of ineffective interventions, increase the effectiveness of treatment and reduce the overall duration of the therapeutic process for the patient. This is achieved by constantly evaluating and adapting interventions, based on the latest evidence, to ensure the most beneficial and appropriate approach for each clinical situation (APA, 2023a, 2023b; Norcross *et al.*, 2016).

PBEP plays a fundamental role in promoting effective psychotherapeutic practice, while making a substantial contribution to the public health landscape, through the rigorous application of empirically-based principles in the field of psychological assessment, case formulation, development of the therapeutic relationship and application of interventions. In addition, it is not a fixed set of unquestionable principles, but rather a process that is enriched through constant review, adaptation and improvement based on the current information available (Norcross *et al.*, 2016; Melchert *et al.*, 2023 and APA 2023b).

By recognizing the inevitability of uncertainty in a complex discipline like psychology, PBEP underscores the importance of engaging in a relentless search for evidence that can inform and support clinical decisions. This practice not only promotes more informed and effective action, but also the continuous evolution of the field, as new scientific discoveries are integrated in a critical and reflective manner (Melchert *et al.*, 2023; Melnik *et al.*, 2014).

The emergence of PBEP is the result of a complex conglomeration of scientific, social, economic and political factors. These factors include the determination of

researchers and professional organizations to subject the unfolding of the services provided by the category to empirical validation. In addition, there is a growing consumer demand for guarantees regarding the quality of the services offered to them. There are also efforts by government agencies to safeguard consumer rights, as well as the interest of health insurance companies in maximizing the cost-benefit ratio of the treatment modalities they offer. These influences, among others, converge to create an environment conducive to the consolidation of evidence-based practice (Chambless, 1993; APA, 2023a, 2023b).

The establishment and operationalization of this task force not only denotes the commitment of the psychological community to the adoption of evidence-based practices, but also underlines the coordinated effort to systematize the evaluation of the empirical support of interventions. This scenario contributes to a more precise and objective understanding of the scientific bases that inform therapeutic practice, promoting a more solid integration between the theoretical and practical aspects of the discipline. Additionally, this search for an evidence-based understanding provides a solid basis for the formulation of clinical guidelines and health policies, promoting a more responsible, efficient and effective practice in the field of psychology (Dozois *et al.*, 2014).

The result of this task force was a set of recommendations outlining guidelines for action. These recommendations included the establishment of a list of treatments with established efficacy, accompanied by periodic updates as new scientific evidence becomes available; the promotion of training programs in at least one empirically-supported therapeutic modality; the implementation of continuing education programs focused on empirically-supported techniques; and the promotion of clinical supervision as an ethical requirement inherent in the adoption of new techniques and approaches, highlighting the importance of shifting the emphasis traditionally placed on short courses as the primary means of obtaining competence in new areas of practice (Chambless, 1993; Dozois *et al.*, 2014).

The consolidation of these recommendations following the work of the task force highlights psychology's commitment to directing its practices in line with the best available scientific evidence. The emphasis on rigorous training, continuing education and clinical supervision reinforces the aspiration to promote a safe, ethical and highly effective clinical environment, where professionals are adequately prepared to apply therapeutic approaches that demonstrate a solid base of empirical support. This

approach not only improves the quality of psychological intervention, but also lays a solid foundation for the constant evolution of the field, ensuring that practices remain in line with emerging scientific findings (Chambless, 1993; Norcross and Wampold, 2018).

The growing demand for the adoption of evidence-based practice is a progressive and transversal trend in the various fields of psychology. It is widely recognized that the discipline of psychology, as an integral component of this scenario, has considerable potential in integrating this approach into its professional practices (Dozois *et al.*, 2014). As an example of this, Psychology's professional Code of Ethics has emerged as a tool to help and guide these professionals towards an efficient practice, and it is the professional's responsibility to continuously improve, contributing to the development of Psychology as a scientific field of knowledge and practice (CFP, 2005). Clinical professionals are able to use these studies as essential tools to improve their knowledge base, researchers are able to use them to identify, justify and formulate more robust research hypotheses, and healthcare managers can use this evidence as a basis for creating guidelines and regulations that are essential in the diagnostic sphere, as well as in treatment and prevention strategies (Dozois *et al.*, 2014).

Accordingly, the advantages inherent in the PBEP approach cover a broad spectrum, ranging from the preliminary stage of designing research focused on high-priority topics, with the aim of minimizing the dissipation of resources in research initiatives, to its application as a tool for guiding decision-making in clinical and public health administration contexts. The integration of the evidence-based approach enhances decision-making by professionals, allowing them to base their actions on reliable and generalizable results (Dozois *et al.*, 2014; APA, 2023b and Melchert *et al.*, 2023).

Nonetheless, professionals who adopt PBEP conceive of research questions that can be substantially answered with regard to the decisions they make in their clinical practice. They adopt the best scientific evidence found, exercise meticulous consideration as to the applicability of the findings to the patient scenario in question and, in collaboration with the patient, choose an option to be implemented, followed by evaluation of the results obtained (Norcross *et al.*, 2016).

Traditionally, the selection of the psychotherapeutic approach to be adopted for different clinical conditions rested mainly on professional expertise and preferences.

However, this paradigm has undergone multiple substantial transformations, stemming from evidence-based practice, which postulates that psychologists' clinical decisions are based on empirical data. The transition from the traditional approach to the perspective of PBEP reflects a paradigmatic shift, in which the selection of therapeutic intervention is distanced from the singularity of the therapist's personal experience and now incorporates a robust framework of scientific knowledge. This implies careful consideration of the empirical evidence supporting the efficacy, safety and applicability of each approach in different clinical contexts (Norcross *et al.*, 2016).

It is important to note that the presence of scientific evidence does not completely cancel out the presence of uncertainties. Psychotherapeutic interventions remain susceptible to multifaceted influences stemming from diverse variables, encompassing therapist attributes (such as length of training, specializations and supervision) and intrinsic patient characteristics (including organic and psychological comorbidities, socioeconomic level and motivation), which are not always contemplated beforehand in studies. In this sense, even in the face of the establishment of evidence-based guidelines for intervention programs and policies aimed at mental health, prudence advocates that these deliberations remain subject to constant scrutiny through systematic monitoring and evaluation processes, with a view to allowing adjustments and improvements in line with the results obtained (Dozois *et al.*, 2014 and Melchert *et al.*, 2023).

Therefore, the nomenclature "Evidence-Based Psychology", as well as "Evidence-Based Psychotherapy" or "Evidence-Based Therapy", transcends the concept of a mere label, and is in fact an intricate construct that encompasses a meticulous understanding of the hierarchy of evidence in psychology. This understanding unfolds in a careful appraisal of the available evidence, the application of the methods underlying the preparation of systematic reviews, meta-analyses, randomized clinical trials and other proficiently conducted experimental designs, thus encompassing a myriad of correlated domains. At the heart of this complexity is the inescapable need for solid training for undergraduates and postgraduates, in order to ensure that the principles underlying this approach are properly assimilated and considered with the aim of catalyzing the progress of scientific knowledge (Melchert *et al.*, 2023; Norcross *et al.*, 2016 and Dozois *et al.*, 2014).

In this way, training psychologists to effectively use knowledge in their professional practice, together with building a solid command of the scientific method,

is an indispensable prerequisite for a fruitful interaction between the scientific and practical spheres. In order to make this connection, it is imperative that students' education is designed in such a way as to foster the acquisition of essential skills to deal with a series of intricate aspects. These skills include, among others, the ability to deal skillfully with issues inherent in sampling, observing, recording and interpreting data. In addition, it is crucial to provide a solid grounding in statistical analysis, in recognizing the different levels of evidence and in the techniques of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. In addition, the ability to conduct a critical evaluation of scientific articles is an indispensable attribute in this training process (Herbert et al., 2022; Norcross and Wampold, 2018).

PBEP aims to build a robust bridge between science and practice in the field of psychology, ensuring that professionals are equipped with the analytical and methodological tools necessary for informed decision-making. By acquiring this set of skills, psychologists not only enrich their own practice, but also contribute to the ongoing evolution of the discipline and the advancement of knowledge in the field. This scenario corroborates the constant evolution of Psychology, propelling it towards a solid level, empirically based and effectively aligned with the complexities and challenges of contemporary clinical and scientific reality (Dozois *et al.*, 2014; Norcross *et al.*, 2016).

Over the last two decades, there has been a persistent and fervent discussion, which has permeated international psychological literature, about PBEP, which has been scarce in the context of Brazilian psychology, revealing a notable gap in Brazilian scientific production. There are few publications in Portuguese that have explored this field in depth. This apparent gap in the discussion of PBEP within Brazilian psychology highlights the urgent need to delve deeper into this topic in order to incorporate an evidence-based approach into clinical procedures and psychological practices on the national scene. The critical analysis and adaptation of empirically-based principles, in addition to providing a solid basis for clinical interventions, can also contribute significantly to the effectiveness of treatments, the refinement of the techniques employed and the optimization of the results achieved in the therapeutic context (Melchert et al., 2023; Norcross and Wampold, 2018; Dozois *et al.*, 2014).

In Brazil, the language barrier is a major obstacle to the effective implementation of PBEP, since most of the essential manuals, articles and guidelines are available in English. This limitation compromises students' and professionals' access to up-to-date

and highly relevant content, restricting the assimilation of scientifically-based concepts and practices. In addition, another critical challenge lies in the curricular structure of undergraduate psychology courses, which often favor a specific epistemological orientation, encouraging students to adopt approaches based on personal and subjective preferences, rather than promoting integrative and evidence-based training (APA 2023a; Norcross and Lambert, 2019).

One strategy to mitigate the spread of misconceptions about PBEP lies in improving the knowledge base of psychology students, which is lacking in their curricula (Herbert *et al.*, 2022). This situation directly contradicts one of the fundamental pillars of evidence-based practice, which is to prioritize the best available evidence to guide the management of the case in question.

The absence of subjects that adopt empirically-supported practices and that enable students to evaluate the evidence available in the literature in undergraduate programs ends up compromising the process of making informed decisions, made worse by the limited understanding of scientific methodology. In this context, the use of psychological interventions without proven efficacy lacks justification (Dozois *et al.*, 2014 and Melchert *et al.*, 2023).

Herbert *et al.* (2022) additionally suggest a reorientation in the emphasis of student teaching. Conventionally, teaching involves the presentation of research protocols. However, the change from the traditional focus on “What?” to “Why?” is imperative. Introducing and promoting logical thinking in relation to research protocols provides a comprehensive conceptual framework in which the content of these protocols can be better contextualized and understood. In addition, the instigation of objections to the approach can be proactively encouraged, addressed and discussed. In this context, reconfiguring teaching to include a critical analysis of the conceptual bases underlying research protocols contributes to a deeper understanding of the theoretical and methodological implications of these protocols. In addition, encouraging active engagement through constructive debates can increase students’ ability to assess the limitations and potential of the methodological strategies employed, thus deepening their perception of the interface between scientific rigor and clinical practice (Herbert *et al.*, 2022).

According to Herbert *et al.* (2022), neglecting to address resistance within the field of psychology towards evidence-based practice can perpetuate the persistence of non-scientific or even pseudo-scientific interventions, thus compromising the

credibility of the subject. The same authors draw a suggestive analogy between resistance to accepting PBEP and resistance to psychotherapy. Psychotherapists operate under the premise that the resistance presented by their patients in relation to treatment should not be disregarded, since such resistance often contains valuable information that can contribute to the therapeutic process and is, in a sense, an ally in the treatment (Herbert *et al.*, 2022).

This cognitive bias implies that the prediction of future events is influenced by the ease with which past experiences come to mind, leading, in this context, to the underestimation of scientific evidence. Similarly, understanding the resistance shown by some individuals to the viability of Evidence-Based Practice can be seen as an ally by advocates of this approach. This can provide a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons for this resistance, allowing the formulation of scientific and logical arguments that can be employed to address this issue with those who show reluctance to consider an alternative perspective (Herbert *et al.*, 2022).

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The discussion on Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology reveals the search for a solid integration between scientific research and clinical practice, with the aim of offering therapeutic approaches based on reliable data and robust methodologies. Throughout this panorama, challenges such as entrenched resistance, traditional beliefs and language barriers emerge, interspersed with promising advances, such as educational initiatives and national publications on the subject. The PBEP is an ethical and effective guideline for psychologists, guiding the choice of interventions based on solid evidence and encouraging constant professional updating. The importance of PBEP in psychology training is vital, as it not only strengthens future professionals' ability to discern between validated and pseudoscientific practices, but also prepares them for active engagement in research and the application of empirically supported methods. By adopting PBEP as a paradigm to be followed, Psychology promotes not only the quality of clinical care, but also the continuous evolution of the discipline, aligning itself with scientific rigor and the relentless pursuit of the well-being of individuals and society, as well as suggesting future studies based on the articles found.

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