


Developing a European Psychotherapy Consortium (EPoC):

Scientific Objectives and Logistical Challenges

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Abstract

Complementing the development of evidence-based psychological therapies, practice-based evidence has developed from patient samples collected in routine care, addressing questions relevant to patients and practitioners and thereby expanding our knowledge of psychological therapies and their impact. Implementation of assessments in routine care allows for timely clinical decision support and the collection of multiple practice-based data sets by addressing the needs of patients and clinicians (e.g., routine outcome monitoring) and the needs of researchers (e.g., identifying the impact of therapist variables on outcomes). In this article we describe an initiative developed in Europe, through the Society of Psychotherapy Research, aiming to create a consortium that has the potential for collecting data on tens of thousands of patients per year. A survey identified one of the main problems in the development of a common data set to be the diversity of measures used by members (e.g., 87 different pre-post outcomes). Three strategies for addressing this issue were adopted: (1) the addition of a single item, common to all the clinics; (2) the development of procedures that allow crosswalks of outcome measures; and (3) the creation of a task force that may be consulted when new data sets are collected, aiming for new common measures to be implemented and shared.

Keywords: Psychological therapies, European Psychotherapy Consortium, Practice-based Evidence, Routine Outcome Monitoring


Developing a European Psychotherapy Consortium (EPoC): Scientific Objectives and Logistical Challenges

Over the past two decades, a complementary paradigm to evidence-based practice has developed in the form of practice-based evidence as a means of enhancing the overarching evidence-base of psychological therapies (Barkham & Lambert, 2021; Castonguay et al., 2021; Lutz et al., 2021). While the former concentrates on treatments and techniques using the methodologies of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and meta-analyses, the latter aims to systematically collect patient data in routine clinical settings in connection with specific treatment goals or desired outcomes. Therefore, practice-based evidence focuses not only on how good a treatment can be but also on how well a specific treatment works for a given client in an ongoing therapeutic context (Castonguay et al., 2013).

While RCTs continue to be a major source for informing clinical practice, guidelines, and policy, there is now an expectation in the field that new methodological tools will allow us to advance the science of psychological therapies by studying the effectiveness of psychological therapies in routine care (e.g., Falkenström et al., 2020; Kaiser et al., 2023; Lutz et al., 2022). Indeed, among many relevant topics in psychotherapy research, practice-based studies have been used to compare rates of change in RCTs within naturalistic contexts (e.g., Lutz et al., 2016); to study patterns of client change on a session-to-session basis (e.g., Lin et al., 2023); to clarify how differences between therapists explain an important proportion of outcome variance (Wampold & Owen, 2021); to analyse the impact of process variables (e.g., therapeutic alliance; Falkenström et al., 2019), or the impact of clients' socio-economic background on outcomes (Firth et al., 2023).

The continuous collection of psychometric data before, during, and after psychotherapy sessions may support therapists in their clinical work, creating, at the same time, a rigorous and relevant foundation of data for psychotherapy research. Moreover,

therapists may use measures of each session to implement forms of routine outcome monitoring (ROM; Barkham et al., 2023), thereby assisting therapists in their clinical decision-making. Indeed, it now appears that this is good practice in clinical practice (De Jong et al., 2023), helping clinicians make decisions on treatment implementations, facilitating prematurely the identification of clients at risk of deterioration or dropout (De Jong et al., 2021), and thereby reducing the differences between more and less effective therapists (Delgadillo et al., 2022).

At the research level, this activity requires extensive data collection in order to yield reliable and meaningful research findings (Lutz et al., 2022). Thus, in thinking about each individual patient, conducting a systematic assessment of a client's progress during treatment offers the opportunity to provide "real-time" feedback to therapists, thereby making it easier to adjust their intervention to each patient. And in thinking in terms of all patients, new tools (e.g., Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence) have made it possible to analyse huge datasets, opening up the possibility of identifying "small" effects that could make a real difference to patients' lives when delivered at scale (Barkham, 2023). 

For example, the English NHS Talking Therapies program (previously called Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, IAPT; Clark, 2018) has facilitated the development of studies with large numbers of patients, showing that there are client differences in the way they respond to different models of psychotherapy (Delgadillo & Duhne, 2020), although these differences disappear when we look at whole samples (i.e., on average). In a similar effort, the collection of psychometric data for university outpatient clinics in Germany is being pooled in the project for the coordination of data collection and evaluation at research and training outpatient clinics for psychotherapy (KODAP; Margraf et al., 2021). In fact, the use of these new tools opens the way to personalization or precision psychotherapy (e.g., Lutz et al., 2022), creating a possibility that has proved very difficult to

achieve in past decades, namely improving the efficacy and the effectiveness of psychological treatments. A variety of psychotherapy models and numerous empirically supported treatments or protocols have proliferated in recent decades (Wampold & Imel, 2015), with little evidence that this has improved client outcomes (Cuijpers et al., 2023). In effect, we seem to have reached a plateau in terms of the effectiveness of psychological therapies that is proving difficult to surpass.

A key aspect of the paradigm of practice-based evidence is the continual evaluation of outcomes. Not only does this aid therapists in their clinical decision-making, but at the clinic level, the use of psychometric assessment tools enables the measurement of the average effectiveness of services (e.g., the number of clients who have recovered within a year). Furthermore, it is possible to identify therapists who consistently deliver poorer outcomes (Imel et al., 2015), who may benefit from skill development in areas such as facilitative interpersonal skills (Anderson et al., 2009; Schöttke et al., 2017), to establish achievable benchmarks, or to identify and monitor populations with inadequate access to current treatments (Delgadillo, et al., 2018).

Against this background, it is presumed that in Europe there are a large number of clinics with the potential for collecting data and others who do collect data in their natural practice contexts. However, much of this collected information is lost in terms of generating new knowledge: “We are letting knowledge drip through the holes of a colander” (Kazdin, 2008, p. 155). Furthermore, it is also clear that psychotherapy research has been conducted in a small number of countries, with a large proportion of studies conducted in the US and the UK (Kamenov et al., 2017; Rief et al., 2022). The collection and use of psychotherapy data from other countries would allow for cross-national comparisons that would be of great interest to psychotherapy research.

European Psychotherapy Consortium (EPoC)

All of the above provided the impetus for the current project – the European Psychotherapy Consortium (EPoC) – that grew out of the idea that if we could coordinate a level of standardized data collection across different European countries, we would be able to generate data sets of considerable size, accessible to researchers that could add a new dimension to research findings and thereby extend our current knowledge-base. In particular, such a development would provide young researchers, who usually have considerable difficulty in securing funding, with access to a unique data source for their own research.

The EPoC was launched as an idea at the European Chapter meeting in Rome in September 2022, and during 2023 researchers from different countries began to join what is now a very heterogeneous and open group of researchers and practitioners, collecting data in their own countries. Sharing data is common in psychotherapy-specific research projects (e.g., RCTs), but it is less common in practice-based research, probably because of the difficulties (logistical, and ethical) that it presents.

In other sciences, the wide sharing of data is very important (e.g., physics, medicine, genetics), and we strongly believe that it can also improve clinical psychology research in several different ways. First, it would be relevant to psychotherapy research to have data from different countries, with different cultural, political, and socio-economic realities. Second, one of the aims should be to develop cooperation between European countries, with enough data that can be used to better understand psychotherapy in naturalistic clinical settings. Third, in the long term, if the consortium is successful in collecting enough data, it may have some influence on decision-making processes concerning the implementation of psychotherapy services. Fourth, as mentioned above, the consortium could facilitate the construction of large datasets, with considerable diversity (e.g., clients, diagnoses, cultural backgrounds, therapists), which would enable research on topics relevant to both practitioners and researchers.

With the above ideas in mind, it was decided at the beginning of the project to launch a survey that would capture some of the key features of the way practice has been implemented in different contexts. The survey is still active and if new members want to join in the EpoC, they should start by filling it in (see <https://spr-form.vercel.app/>).

Survey on practice-based evidence

The survey opened on the 1st of February 2023 and comprised 10 basic questions as listed in Table 1. The survey was advertised on the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR) mailing list, at scientific meetings, and on the SPR website. Responses were received from 31 clinics in 15 different countries, most of them European (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and Argentina and Chile) (Figure 1). The estimated total number of clients per year was 25,000, ranging from 12 (couples therapy) to 15,000 per clinic. The most common therapy model was cognitive-behavioural therapy (N=15), followed by psychodynamic (N=14), and then other models (e.g., person-centered, integrative, systemic, transactional analysis).

Interestingly, and what may be a significant challenge in articulating the different datasets, a total of 87 different pre-post measures, 22 measures in each session, and 13 process measures were used. The most common pre-post outcome measure was the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation-Outcome Measure (CORE-OM; Evans et al., 2002), used in 13 clinics, while at each session the most common measure was the Outcome Rating Scale (ORS; Duncan & Reese, 2015), used in 3 clinics. When considering process measures, the most common was the Working Alliance Inventory-Short Revised (WAI-SR; Hatcher & Gillaspy, 2006), used in 3 clinics.

Because of the difficulties posed by the diversity of instruments used to collect data, it would likely be very difficult to change the situation and to do so might become an obstacle

to the development of the Consortium. Hence, we decided on a step-wise strategy comprising three different approaches to developing future collaborations based on making the minimal demand of services and requiring them not to change their current procedures. Our strategy is to take each of these approaches in turn.

1. Introduction of a single item in data collection procedures

As making significant changes to the instruments used in each clinic would be challenging and impractical, a decision was made to propose introducing a single item to be adopted by all participating clinics. This was judged to be the minimal demand to achieve the maximum extent of possible participation by individual clinics. The single item selected was taken from the work of Ken Howard and for which a first version can be found in Orlinsky and Howard (1986) and has been employed successfully in several large-scale studies (e.g., Howard et al., 1996). The item asks clients to evaluate their current emotional and psychological impairment using the question: "At this moment, how well do you feel you are getting along emotionally and psychologically?". Based on the original item, the item is scored on a 5-point scale with anchor points defined as 0 ("Very bad; I can hardly cope") to 4 ("Very good; I have no major complaints"). In addition, the item is used dimensionally in the Consortium with a visual analog scale (0 to 100), which was introduced at the outpatient clinic of the University of Trier (Lutz et al., 2019). Robust correlations with various outcome measures have been demonstrated (Lutz et al., 2021), indicating that it has the potential to establish a common standard across diverse societies.

At present, in addition to the English version, there are versions of the item translated into German and also in Polish; and the Consortium is now involved in translating and adapting the item into French, Finnish, Italian, Portuguese, Slovenian, and Spanish. The members of the EPoC are following the guidelines of the International Test Commission (Hernandez et al., 2020) in the process of translating and adapting the item, and we are

making great efforts to have an equivalent measure across different countries and languages. We have no restrictions on the use of the item, as some clinics may use it in every session, and others at regular intervals. The item will be freely available and under a Creative Commons Licence upon a no-cost registration.

2. Crosswalks between different outcome measures

Another form of collaboration involves developing crosswalks between different measures. Recently, de Beurs et al. (2021) argued for the use of raw measures to develop common metrics, emphasizing that one obstacle to the development of the field is the scattered landscape of measures, which they illustrate at the beginning of the paper with the current existence of 280 different instruments to measure depression. It seems that not only do we have a huge variety of psychotherapy models (Twomey, et al., 2023), but we also have a huge variety of measures that we can use to measure the outcomes of psychotherapy (Margison et al., 2000).

This diversity of measures in the literature parallels clearly the diversity of measures the members of EPoC use. It is unrealistic to aim to reduce the number of measures, as there are often historical or specific reasons for a clinic to adopt a specific outcome measures. And to ask clinics to change be too great a cost for them as they would then not have a bridge for linking the old measure to the new. Indeed, it is known that there is variability across time even within the same measure let alone across differing measures (e.g., Rognstad et al., 2023). As a way of circumventing the problems posed by this diversity of measures, Beurs et al., (2021) proposed the use of T scores as a method of delivering uniformity to the reporting of outcomes from the diversity of measures and illustrated this method by comparing the assessment of depression with three different instruments (CES-D, Radloff, 1977; PHQ-9, Kroenke et al., 2001, and BDI-II, Beck et al., 1996). Other methods have also be used to deliver cross-walk tables, for exemple, between the BDI and CORE-OM (Leach et al., 2006).

Another solution based on Item Response Theory (IRT) would be to develop an algorithm on the basis of existing data with which values on different instruments that record similar constructs can be converted into each other. In this way, a common metric for existing data is to be generated a posteriori. Similar approaches have already been presented by Böhnke et al. (2014) and Cardace et al. (2022).

So, the next step would be to create analytical routines among the EPoC members that would allow comparison of similar constructs (e.g., depression, anxiety) despite using different instruments to measure them. A final course of collaboration involves the creation of new datasets that could be articulated from the onset.

3. Unified data collection in routine care

The EPoC has colleagues with considerable experience of collecting data in routine care, and this offers the opportunity to create a task force that could be employed when new clinics want to start collecting data and have no external constraints on the instruments they need to use. This could be the starting point for the collection of more common measures. In fact, the survey also revealed that 23 clinics would like to start collecting new datasets, which would make it possible to introduce more common instruments that would allow a more direct comparison of measures.

Conclusion

Efforts to improve the effectiveness of psychotherapy require an understanding of the complex interplay between therapeutic interventions and the needs of individual clients in real-world settings. The launch of this project hopefully will mark a pivotal moment in collaborative psychotherapy research and practice in Europe and in SPR. Bringing together committed researchers and practitioners from across Europe (and other countries), the EPoC aims to harness the potential of assessments in routine care to provide a more nuanced understanding of psychotherapy in the setting in which it naturally occurs. Its ambition

extends beyond the present to a future in which collaborative efforts produce large, accessible datasets that can inform service delivery both at a local, national, and international level. The participation of colleagues from Latin America in the EPoC will enhance collaboration with the Latin American Chapter, and is a first step toward data collection collaboration between different SPR Chapters. This scientific endeavor invites therapists to join forces in a collective quest to advance the science of psychotherapy, contribute to a growing body of knowledge, and thrive in a community that shares insights and is committed to unraveling the intricacies of effective psychotherapeutic practice.

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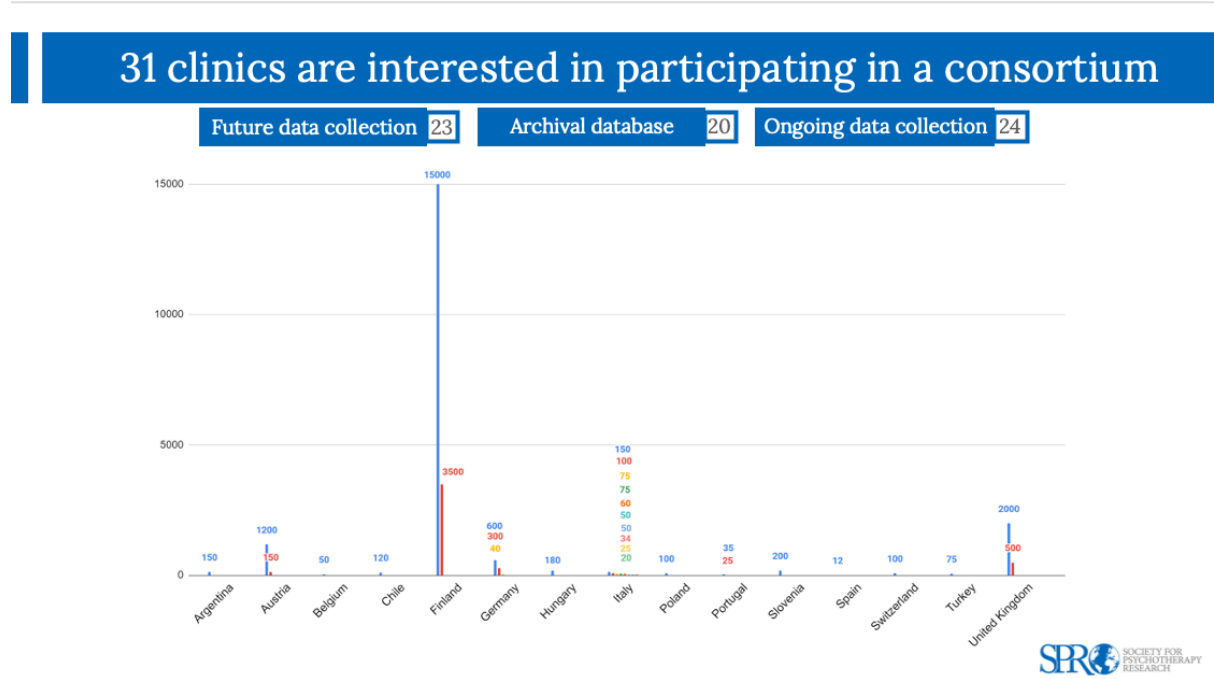
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Table 1: Question topics in EPoC survey

	Question topic
1	Identification data (e.g., country, type of service)
2	Treatment options (e.g., outpatient, inpatient)
3	Therapy models used (e.g., psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioural)
4	Treatment modality (e.g., individual, couples)
5	Patients under treatment (e.g., diagnoses)
6	Estimates of number of patients per year and average number of sessions per patient
7	Pre-post treatment measures used
8	Outcome and process measures used at each session
9	Other process and outcome measures that are used at regular intervals
10	Whether there was routine outcome monitoring in the clinic

Figure 1

Countries and number of clients per year involved in the EPoC



Supplement

EPoC – European Consortium of Psychotherapy – is a group closely associated with the Society of Psychotherapy Research (SPR), constituted by the following members.

Adrian Montesano	España	Open University of Catalonia
Antonello Colli	Italy	University of Urbino
Biljana van Rijn	United Kingdom	Metanoia Institute
Brian Schwartz	Germany	University of Trier
Catherine Irniger	Switzerland	University of Zurich, University of Bern
Christopher Hautmann	Germany	University of Cologne
Clara Paz	Ecuador	Universidad de Las Américas
Dario Paiva	Portugal	University of Minho
Davide Ceridono	Italy	Institute for Research on Intrapsychic and Relational Processes, IRPIR, Rome
Emmanuelle Zech	Belgium	Université catholique de Louvain
Eeva-Eerika Helminen	Finland	Missing
Enrico Benelli	Italy	University of Padua
Fabian Rottstädt	Germany	Friedrich Schiller University Jena
Felix Eichenbaum	Austria	Sigmund Freud University Vienna - Vienna
Giovanna Esposito	Italy	Department of Humanities, University of Naples Federico II
Hubert de Condé	Belgium	Université catholique de Louvain
Jan R. Boehnke	United Kingdom	University of Dundee
Javier Fernández Alvarez	Argentina / Spain	Fundación Aiglé / Universidad de Valencia
João Tiago Oliveira	Portugal	University of Minho
Jochem Willemsen	Belgium	Université catholique de Louvain
Joel Vos	United Kingdom	Metanoia Institute
Juan Martin Gomez Penedo	Argentina	Universidad de Buenos Aires
Julian Rubel	Germany	Osnabrueck University
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Katarina Kompan Erzar	Slovenia	University of Ljubljana
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Laura Inês Ferreira	Portugal	Universidade do Algarve
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Miguel M. Gonçalves	Portugal	University of Minho

Niccolò Fiorentini Polipo	Belgium	Université catholique de Louvain
Omar Gelo	Italy	Department of Human and Social Sciences
Orya Tishby	Israel	Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Paula Errázuriz	Chile	Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile / PsiConecta Mental Health NGO
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Tina In-Albon	Germany	University of Kaiserslautern-Landau
Tomaž Erzar	Slovenia	University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Theology
Vera Bekes	Hungary/USA	Yeshiva University
Wolfgang Lutz	Germany	University of Trier
Zsolt Szabolcs Unoka	Hungary	Semelweis University, Hungarian Cognitive Behavior Therapy Association