

# Research in psychoanalysis across theory and practice: a systematic literature review

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## ABSTRACT

The present systematic review of the literature aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of the art of research in psychoanalysis. The arguments draw a difference between psychoanalytic research and research in psychoanalysis, meaning that in the past decades, there has been an attempt to bridge the gaps between psychoanalysis and broader research in psychology. Major scientific databases for contemporary psychological research (Ebsco PsycINFO, Ebsco CINAHL, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and PEP-Web) were searched to gather psychoanalytic-oriented research, both theoretical and empirical. The PRIMA method provided a total of 36 results, on which a conceptual/reflexive thematic analysis was conducted. The identified themes or dimensions are: i) the epistemological status of psychoanalysis; ii) the research domains in psychoanalysis; iii) the research methodology in psychoanalysis; iv) the research methods in psychoanalysis; and v) the instruments of research in psychoanalysis. We conclude that, despite long-lasting difficulties in the epistemological cohabitation between psychoanalysis and mainstream psychological research, new hybrid ways for future psychoanalysis can be identified.

**Key words:** psychoanalysis; research; psychoanalysis and psychology research

## Introduction

### From psychoanalytic research to research in and with psychoanalysis

The relationship between theory, formative and applied research, and clinical practice has been fundamental in the emergence and systematization of the psychoanalytic body of knowledge and methods (Fonagy, 2003). Historically, advancements in the theoretical framework and related techniques in psychoanalysis have been transmitted to its community of scholars and practitioners primarily through the medium of books, essays, and lectures, moving away from institutionalized forms of scientific communication (De Vincenzo *et al.*, 2024). This unique characteristic has several motives and roots, as psychoanalysis initiated with an ambiguous epistemological position, proposing an innovative paradigm while attempting to adhere to the epistemological principles of the early twentieth century (Person *et al.*, 2005). As a mark of a fluctuating relationship with institutionalized and mainstream psychological science, research is one of the key themes in contemporary psychoanalysis, with its contribution to societies and individuals (IPA - Research Committee, 2005). On a historical level, Freud developed his theories using the psychoanalytic method within the clinical practice and observations

(Kächele *et al.*, 2011). In the 1930s, Freudian theories became hegemonic, arousing the interest of clinicians and scientists willing to explore their validity and accuracy, and to extend the potential of psychoanalytic knowledge beyond the psychological field toward other disciplines, such as the social sciences (McAloon & Phil, 1992). Hence, the transformation of Freudian hypotheses into verifiable knowledge posed a major challenge, establishing a turning point in psychoanalytic thought (Wallerstein, 1986). Moreover, the compatibility between psychoanalysis and an experimental-based model of scientific research was, and still is, an ongoing and animated debate (Escalona, 1952; Kernberg, 2006). The current relationship between psychoanalysis and the broader, mainstream, and hegemonic scientific research in psychology (De Vincenzo *et al.*, 2024) is reflected in the pressing need to create a bridge connecting clinical practice and theoretical knowledge, without losing psychoanalytic epistemological coherence (Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018; Varvin, 2013) and its unique conceptual framework (Sandell, 2014).

In other words, there is a need to find a coherent interpretative frame between studies that draw on psychoanalytic concepts or methods but are not necessarily grounded in the epistemological premises or clinical traditions of psychoanalysis as a discipline and research conducted within the psychoanalytic tradition as a comprehensive system of theory, method, and practice.

As a “science of knowledge” (Roustang, 1984), epistemology defines the paradigm and foundational assumptions that govern how knowledge is produced (Nobus & Quinn, 2013) and shapes the overarching philosophical orientation of any research tradition – whether hermeneutic, constructivist, or positivist (Dieronitou, 2014). The longstanding debate over what types of research are appropriate for psychoanalysis has often assumed the shape of so-called “double-thinking” – an attempt to resolve methodological tensions by favoring a hermeneutic rather than a positivist paradigm (Wallerstein, 1988). Consequently, research in psychoanalysis may adopt an idiographic approach based on interpretation and case studies, or a nomothetic approach grounded on the methods of the physical and natural sciences, seeking sequences of cause and effect through probabilistic models (Luyten *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, research domains refer to the fields in which research in psychoanalysis is applied – such as clinical, empirical, conceptual, interdisciplinary, or historical domains (Wallerstein, 2009). These domains help define the object and scope of inquiry and clarify the diverse ways in which psychoanalytic thinking intersects with other fields. As Kernberg (2015) notes, clinical and theoretical developments in psychoanalysis have historically advanced faster than systematic research. Indeed, the organic, inseparable unity between theory and practice has been, probably, a hallmark of a “meta-model” (*i.e.*, the epistemological status) of

research in psychoanalysis, reflected also by the preferential vehicle of knowledge sharing and transmission (*e.g.*, books). The proliferation of different psychoanalytic models, although related to common concepts, does not favor an organic research program (Rapaport, 1960). As a result, the field still struggles to establish a common nomenclature of methodologies, methods, and techniques that are broadly accepted within the professional community (Kernberg, 2006).

Bridging gaps

To address this issue and provide a coherent terminological foundation, we propose a conceptual distinction between these levels of research practice, with the aim of clarifying their respective roles and reducing the semantic ambiguities that often characterize psychoanalytic discourse. Specifically, methodology refers to the theory of method and the systematic process through which a knowing subject engages with an object of study, encompassing both the assumptions and the practices underlying research approaches (Bryman, 2008). In this view, methodology provides the logical structure and justification for research design and includes the set of procedures used to describe, explain, and predict phenomena, often shaped by specific theoretical frameworks (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). Conversely, method represents the applied level – namely, the concrete expression of methodology – referring to the structured procedures and research strategies employed in practice, such as case studies, observational approaches, experimental designs, or ethnographic fieldwork (Bryman, 2008). Moreover, technique designates the most specific level, concerning the tools and instruments used to collect and analyse data, such as interviews, questionnaires, coding grids, or psychometric tests (Colton & Covert, 2007). Techniques can sometimes be transferred across methods and methodologies and are not always bound to a specific theoretical framework. This multi-level conceptual framework – from the most abstract to the most concrete – serves to unpack the structural complexity of conducting research *in* and *with* psychoanalysis, aiming at offering a shared nomenclature in support of future investigations and to foster both empirical work and critical reflection on research in psychoanalysis as a distinct epistemological and methodological tradition (Table 1).

Against this backdrop, the present review sets out to explore the current landscape of research in psychoanalysis and to propose a comprehensive methodological framework. The ultimate goal is to provide practitioners, psychoanalysts, and early-career scholars in psychoanalysis, who are willing to dialogue with contemporary psychological research, with an overview of key dimensions around research in psychoanalysis. A preliminary

Table 1. Conceptual framework of research in psychoanalysis: definitions and illustrative examples.

Level	Definition	Examples
Epistemology	The overarching framework that defines how knowledge is conceived, justified, and validated within a discipline	Hermeneutics, constructivism, positivism
Research domains	Fields where psychoanalytic research is applied and developed	Clinical, empirical, conceptual, interdisciplinary, historical
Methodology	The theory of method; a structured system of assumptions and procedures guiding the approach to research	Qualitative methodology, quantitative methodology, mixed-methods research
Method	The concrete application of methodology; the specific strategies and designs used to collect and interpret data	Experimental method, observational method, single-case method
Technique	The tools and instruments used to collect or analyze data, often transferable across different methods or disciplines	Tests, questionnaires, clinical observation, interviews

analysis of the literature revealed a gap, within psychoanalytic knowledge, of a systematic review of the literature that collected the main contributions to scientific research. Thus, this study aims to explore the possible existence of a common ground within research in psychoanalysis and to enhance the growing contributions to integrating scientific methods and disciplines while remaining anchored in the epistemological foundations of psychoanalytic thought.

## Methods

A systematic review was conducted following the PRISMA method. All selected studies were examined, and no selection criteria were laid down with respect to the results and design of the individual studies. No revision protocol was registered. The review included articles published in English up to May 2024 concerning research in psychoanalysis. We included studies that: i) addressed the current state of research in psychoanalysis; ii) focused on the methodology and/or tools of research in psychoanalysis; or iii) utilized protocols or guidelines for conducting research in psychoanalysis. Excluded from analysis were articles without abstracts, editorials, commentaries, book reviews, book chapters, dissertations, and articles in periodicals. We also excluded studies that merely applied psychoanalytic concepts and/or methods and/or tools to investigate external phenomena without engaging directly with research in psychoanalysis. Similarly, studies on psychoanalytic psychotherapy research were excluded, as they represent a distinct line of inquiry with its own assumptions and methodologies.

The eligibility criteria established to differentiate the retrieved material and group it into more specific areas of investigation were shaped by a linguistic and terminological approach. Given the plurality of psychoanalytic schools and models, this review was guided primarily by the use of psychoanalytic language in the studies themselves, rather than by adherence to a specific theoretical framework. We assumed that the use of particular terminology signals belonging to a community that conceptualizes research *in* or *with* psychoanalysis according to identifiable criteria. In this sense, terminology acts as an epistemic marker: those who use the term in specific ways participate in a shared disciplinary discourse. This perspective aligns with reflections such as those proposed by Bachrach (2002), who, discussing Anna Dreher's contribution on conceptual research, argues that meaningful psychoanalytic research requires clarity not only in methodological choices but also in the analytic nature of the concepts under investigation. According to this view, the coherence between theoretical constructs and research methods is deemed essential, yet often inconsistently applied in practice.

## Procedure

The search strategy involved consulting six databases: Ebsco PsycINFO, Ebsco CINAHL, Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and PEP-Web. The search terms included: "research in psychoanalysis", "psychoanalytic research", "quantitative research" AND "psychoanalysis", "qualitative research" AND "psychoanalysis". Each term was searched independently across the databases.

Two researchers independently conducted the bibliographic research for each keyword, as well as the subsequent elimination of duplicates. When checking duplicates between different search engines, citations with slightly different titles and the same ab-

stract, citations with the same title and abstract but different publication years, and citations with the same title and abstract but different titles of the magazine were deleted. Once the final number of citations was obtained, two independent members of the research team evaluated inclusion in a standardized open mode. Disagreements between researchers were resolved by consensus methods. During the screening phase, it was not necessary to examine the full text of all the articles. A fourth senior researcher completed the review process and supervised the entire review process. Figure 1 shows the document identification process according to the PRISMA flow diagram.

A bias risk assessment was performed at the study level. The main risk of bias in the inclusion criteria was related to the decision, implemented before analyzing the content, to include studies in which the specific type of research was not highlighted and studies that evaluated research in psychoanalysis at the overall level, leading to high heterogeneity of results.

## Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to examine how research in psychoanalysis is structured across the selected literature. The process led to the identification of five discrete but interrelated dimensions, which we considered to be representative of the key structural features characterizing research in psychoanalysis. We adopted the term "dimensions" to refer to distinct yet connected features that support and organize research in the field. The identification of these dimensions was performed through a reflective and deductive thematic analysis of the contents of the papers.

Once the data collection was completed, two researchers from the team performed the analysis individually and independently, taking notes and coding the main aspects. At a later stage, the contents of interest, those in line with the research question and aim, were assigned labels (a few words or a short sentence), which were intended to clearly evoke the relevant characteristics of the works, to be able to encode them. Through consensus, the researchers then consolidated these codes into a set of overarching themes. This process culminated in the definition of five key dimensions, which subsequently guided the subsequent research phases.

All studies included in the review were conceptual or narrative in design. It was not possible to perform a systematic bias-risk assessment for each individual paper or across papers due to the nature of the material.

## Results

A total of 36 studies were included in the review. Globally, all the studies were of a narrative and conceptual type, aiming at identifying and providing a comprehensive picture of the different dimensions involved in conducting research within the psychoanalytic field.

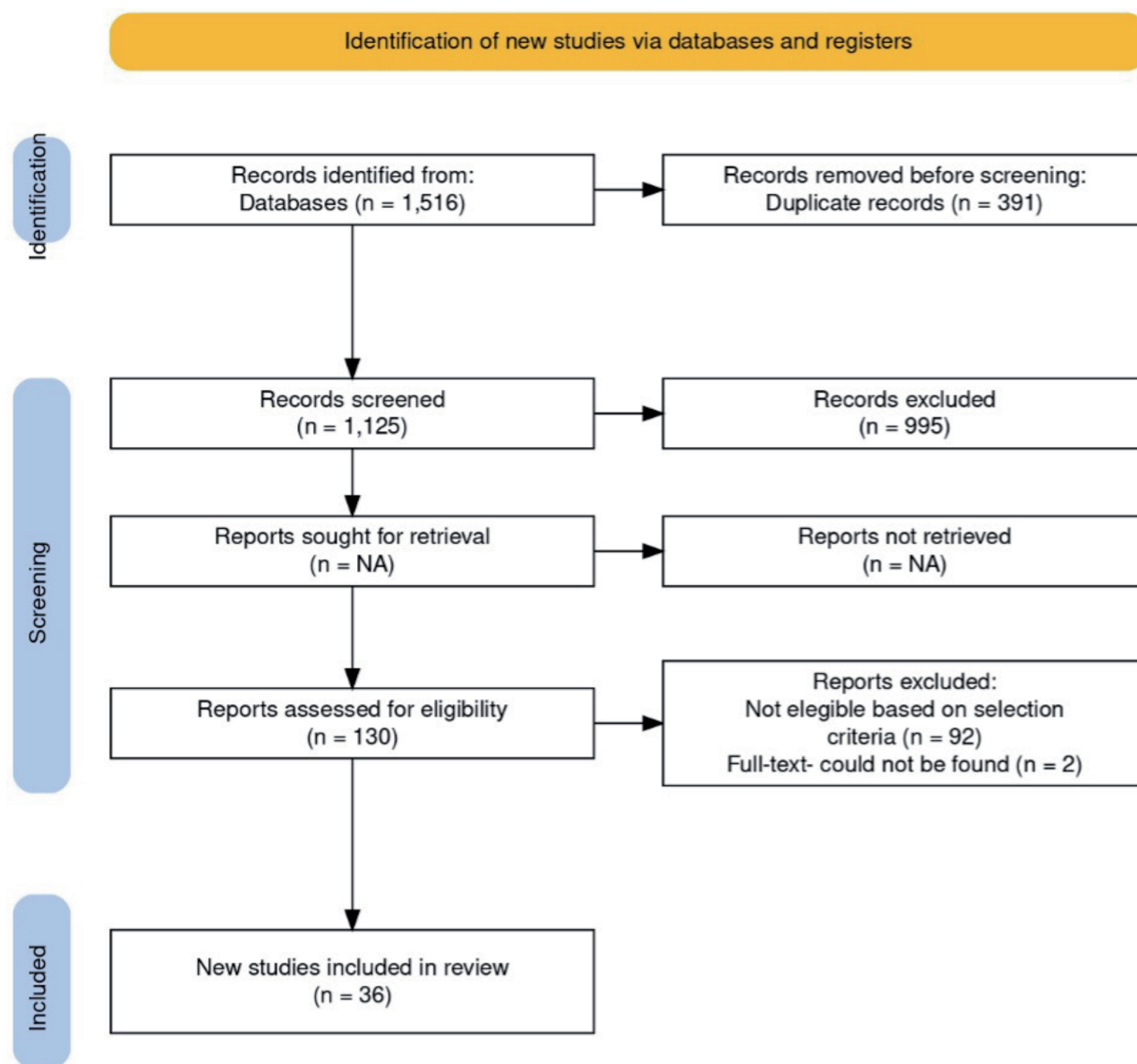
The identified dimensions are: i) the epistemological status of psychoanalysis (n=12); ii) the research domains in psychoanalysis (n=15); iii) the research methodology in psychoanalysis (n=18); iv) the research methods in psychoanalysis (n=18); and v) the instruments of research in psychoanalysis (n=18) (*Supplementary Table 1*). Importantly, some studies were labelled in more than one theme due to partial overlapping between categories.

The first thematic dimension is composed of 12 studies (Bernardi, 2015; Chiesa, 2010; Fonagy, 2013; Gottdiener & Suh, 2012; Hinshelwood, 2010; Kernberg, 2004; Kessler & Lopes,

2023; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018; Sandell, 2014; Stangalino, 2023; Tillman *et al.*, 2011; Wallerstein, 2009). All the articles had a strong focus on the epistemological status of psychoanalysis, facing the relationship between psychoanalytic unique epistemological/theoretical characteristics and the practice of scientific research in psychology. Specifically, these papers contextualize the tension between the positivist and hermeneutic paradigms in the face of the broader frame of contemporary scientific research across psychological and social sciences. Moreover, positivist and hermeneutic paradigms are analyzed in detail, along with their potential and weaknesses.

The second thematic dimension consists of 15 studies. These articles identify and analyze the domains of research in psychoanalysis, that is, traditional or contemporary fields in which psychoanalytic inquiry is conducted. Specifically, there were 10 studies on clinical research (Bernardi, 2015; Fonagy, 2013; Kern-

berg, 2004; Kernberg, 2015; Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006; McAloon & Phil, 1992; Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018; Sandell, 2014; Shulman, 1990; Wallerstein, 2009); 12 studies on empirical research (Bernardi, 2015; Fonagy, 2013; Huprich *et al.*, 2015; Kernberg, 2004; Kernberg, 2015; Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; McAloon & Phil, 1992; Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018; Sandell, 2014; Tillman *et al.*, 2011; Wallerstein, 2009); 6 studies on conceptual research (Bernardi, 2015; Kernberg, 2004; 2015; Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Wallerstein, 2009); 10 studies on interdisciplinary research (Bernardi, 2015; Fonagy, 2013; Kernberg, 2004; 2015; Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018; Stangalino, 2023; Tillman *et al.*, 2011; Wallerstein, 2009); and 5 studies on historical research (Kernberg, 2004; Kernberg, 2015; Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006; Wallerstein, 2009;



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flow diagram for the document identification process.



Zhang & Xie, 2023). For each domain of research, the backgrounds, development, impediments, and strengths emerged, as well as future prospects.

The third thematic dimension is composed of 18 studies. All the papers deal with the methodology of research in psychoanalysis or the reason underlying the method, better defined as “the theory of the method”. Three methodological paradigmatic frameworks were identified: qualitative (Archard & O’Reilly, 2023; Archard *et al.*, 2024; Bernardi, 2015; Campòs, 2021; Huprich *et al.*, 2015; Mastnak, 2021; McAloon & Phil, 1992; Midgley, 2014; Varvin, 2013; Wallerstein, 2009); quantitative (Huprich *et al.*, 2015; Kerneberg, 2015; McAloon & Phil, 1992; Quinn, 1992; Shulman, 1990; Varvin, 2013; Wallerstein, 2009); and mixed (Bernardi, 2015; Eliezer & Peled, 2023; Lingardi *et al.*, 2010; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; McGregor-Hepburn & James, 2021; Tillman *et al.*, 2011). Different methods were used for each methodology.

The fourth thematic dimension consists of articles dealing with the specific methods of research in psychoanalysis. In this area, 18 studies were identified. Specifically, the articles identified the experimental method (8 studies: Bucci 2007; Chiesa, 2010; Hinshelwood, 2010; Huprich *et al.*, 2015; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; McAloon & Phil, 1992; Shulman, 1990; Wallerstein, 2009); the observational correlation method (4 studies: Bucci, 2007; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; McAloon & Phil, 1992; Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018); and the single-case correlation method (16 studies: Bucci, 2007; Chiesa, 2010; Eliezer & Peled, 2023; Fonagy, 2013; Gottdiener & Suh, 2012; Hinshelwood, 2010; Huprich *et al.*, 2015; Kaluzeviciute & Willemsen, 2020; Lingardi *et al.*, 2010; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; McAloon & Phil, 1992; Midgley, 2006; Rabinovich, 2020; Sandell, 2014; Tillman *et al.*, 2011; Wallerstein, 2009).

The last dimension explored instruments, tools, and techniques used in research in psychoanalysis, that is, the technique through which the method is applied. We identified 18 studies that explored the interview (8 studies: Archard, 2020; Archard & O’Reilly, 2023; Archard *et al.*, 2024; Campòs, 2021; Homes, 2016; Kvale, 2001; Midgley, 2014; Tillman *et al.*, 2011); the consultation (6 studies: Archard, 2020; Eliezer & Peled, 2023; Holmes, 2016; Kvale, 2001; Midgley, 2014; Tillman *et al.*, 2011); the observation (9 studies: Bernardi, 2015; Bucci, 2007; Fonagy, 2013; Hinshelwood, 2010; Kvale, 2001; Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006; McAloon & Phil, 1992; Midgley, 2014; Shulman, 1990); the questionnaires (5 studies: Bernardi, 2015; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Sandell, 2014; Shulman, 1990; Tillman *et al.*, 2011); and the tests (3 studies: Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Shulman, 1990; Tillman *et al.*, 2011).

### First thematic dimension: the epistemological status of research in psychoanalysis

In the field of philosophical reflection and of sociology of knowledge, the epistemological status of psychoanalysis has always been debated, attracting scholars from several disciplines. In fact, the assumption of psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline oscillates between two paradigms of reference, positivism and hermeneutics, with the respective epistemological attachment to the natural or “hard” sciences and the spiritual sciences, which means, in the most contemporary language, the social and behavioral sciences.

Specifically, the articles analyzed in this dimension explore: the set of characteristics that investigate the nature of the scientific state of psychoanalysis (Chiesa, 2010; Fonagy, 2013; Kernberg, 2004; Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018; Sandell, 2014; Waller-

stein, 2009); the set of characteristics that define the epistemological placement of psychoanalysis in either hermeneutic or positivist paradigms, validating psychoanalysis within scientific disciplines (Hinshelwood, 2010; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Wallerstein, 2009); the set of characteristics that place the epistemological status of psychoanalysis in the complementarity of the two paradigms (hermeneutics and positivism) (Bernardi, 2015; Hinshelwood, 2010; Kessler & Lopes, 2023; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Sandell, 2014; Stangalino, 2023; Tillman *et al.*, 2011).

### Second thematic dimension: research domains in psychoanalysis

The second dimension maps five domains of research in psychoanalysis: clinical, empirical, conceptual, interdisciplinary, and historical.

Clinical research, the first area of research developed in psychoanalysis, has evolved in opposition to clinical practice (McAloon & Phil, 1992). Starting from Freud, clinical experience stands as the first and most important unit of study, holding a central value for the development of psychoanalytic theory and technique (Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018). Overall, clinical research is conceptualized as cyclical processes of observation in clinical situations and unconscious processes of interpretation and aims at deepening the understanding of clinical phenomena (Sandell, 2014; Shulman, 1990; Wallerstein, 2009), free from confirmation bias (Fonagy, 2013). Kernberg (2004; 2015) and Bernardi (2015) explore issues related to clinical research in psychoanalysis, specifically about the condition for the existence of a common clinical ground, the relationship of such common ground with specific meta-psychological theories, and the application of this in institutional contexts. On this topic, Leuzinger-Bohleber and Fischmann (2006) propose a distinction between clinical and extra-clinical research in psychoanalysis, identifying its specific objectives, quality criteria, possibilities, and limits.

Empirical research arises from the need to substantiate Freud’s theoretical and clinical work into verifiable knowledge (according to definition and operationalization of “verifiable” of mainstream psychology, McAloon & Phil, 1992; Wallerstein, 2009), creating a link between clinical practice and psychoanalytic theory (Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018) aimed at validating psychoanalytic constructs and treatment effectiveness (Tillman *et al.*, 2011). Huprich and Bornstein (2015) argue that this area of research is clinically relevant and has enhanced the scientific status of psychoanalytic theories and the effectiveness and reliability of their treatment approach. Some studies (Bernardi, 2015; Fonagy, 2013; Kernberg, 2004; 2015; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Sandell, 2014) highlight the controversies about the gap between clinical and empirical research in psychoanalysis, bringing out two different cultures within psychoanalysis. One focused on meaning, primarily based on the traditional method of case studies; the other focused on cause-and-effect relationships and was primarily based on methods borrowed from the natural and social sciences. Leuzinger-Bohleber and Fischmann (2006) broaden the definition of “empirical psychoanalytic research” to include several subgroups of studies: naturalistic (mainly experimental), empirical (quasi-experimental), studies integrating qualitative research methodologies, studies applying psychoanalytical and/or non-psychoanalytic research tools, prospective observational studies, outcome and/or process studies, case-by-case statistical studies, and clinical and developmental studies.

Conceptual research deals with the systematic investigation of the meanings and uses of psychoanalytic concepts, including

how they evolve in clinical and extra-clinical contexts (Bernardi, 2015; Wallerstein, 2009) and, together with the other domains of research, can significantly increase research on all aspects of theory, technique, and psychoanalytic applications (Kernberg, 2004, 2015; Luyten *et al.*, 2005). Leuzinger-Bohleber and Fischmann (2006) provide a comprehensive overview of conceptual research in psychoanalysis, explaining how this research domain has made it possible to clarify and formulate psychoanalytic concepts capable of shaping the field dimensions emerging in the clinical context. Leuzinger-Bohleber and Fischmann (2006) further contributed to the integration of existing psychoanalytic thinking and the development of new ways of looking at clinical and extra-clinical data, presenting conceptual bridges to neighboring disciplines particularly interested in psychoanalysis, such as philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, history of art and literature, and cognitive sciences/neuroscience. Finally, they propose seven different subgroups of domains: conceptual clinical research, conceptual research with highly theoretical ambitions, conceptual research focused on historical reflections, empirical conceptual research, interdisciplinary conceptual research, and conceptual research focused on the use of thoughts by analysts.

The domain of interdisciplinary research analyzes the possibilities of developing a culture of integration and synthesis between psychoanalysis and other sciences (Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018) through the exchange of psychoanalytic knowledge with the non-psychoanalytic world (Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006; Wallerstein, 2009), considering the central role of the unconscious in understanding how data from other sciences are organized and constructed, and consequently in the construction of data and the research environment (Kernberg, 2015; Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018). Tillman *et al.* (2011) argue that this domain of research can strengthen the methodological rigor of psychoanalysis, allowing for greater sensitivity to the complexity of human interaction and behavior and encouraging a critical perspective that enhances the argumentative field of discipline (Bernardi, 2015; Fonagy, 2013). Furthermore, the interdisciplinary domain makes it possible to reduce the danger of intellectual and scientific isolation and to facilitate access to methodological pluralism (Kernberg, 2004; Luyten *et al.*, 2005). A recent paper by Stangalino (2023) highlights how the interdisciplinarity of research in psychoanalysis mirrors the transfer relation in the analytic context.

Wallerstein (2009) and Kernberg (2004; 2015) identify historical research as a further domain of research in psychoanalysis. Leuzinger-Bohleber and Fischmann (2006) specify the distinction between non-conceptual historical research and conceptual historical research, the latter being subordinate to the broader domain of concepts. Furthermore, Zhang and Xie (2023) observe a recent shift toward intersubjectivity and a growing emphasis on empirical studies.

### Third thematic dimension: the methodology of research in psychoanalysis

The third thematic dimension addresses research methodology in psychoanalysis, that is, the investigation of the theoretical logic for the psychoanalytic method. Three sub-thematic areas emerged: studies addressing quantitative and qualitative methodologies separately and those exploring their interrelation, highlighting tensions and possibilities for integrations.

With regard to quantitative methodology, Quinn (1992) investigated Robert Langs' communicative approach as an encouraging line of quantitative research and new clinical insights.

Shulman (1990) described five experimental studies and their methodological limitations. Kernberg (2015) highlighted how quantitative logic may oversimplify the complexity of psychoanalytic knowledge.

Qualitative methodology is explored starting from its similarities with the conceptual framework through which Freud began his first research in the clinical field (Midgley, 2014). It includes reflections on methodological challenges in the psychoanalytic field and guidelines for the development of scientific research in psychoanalysis (Campòs, 2021), the proposal of comparative meta-theoretical studies as qualitative equivalents of factor analysis (Mastnak, 2021), and meta-syntheses of psychoanalytic case studies through the category relations technique (RBC), analyzing case studies with existing theoretical concepts and formulating new theoretical proposals (Rabinovich, 2020). Lastly, the role of free association in qualitative inquiry is also explored (Archard & O'Reilly, 2023; Archard *et al.*, 2024).

The third thematic area examines the historical polarity between quantitative and qualitative paradigms (McAloon & Phil, 1992). Wallerstein (2009) and Huprich and Bornstein (2015) outline the logic of the two methodologies and define their main characteristics. Quantitative research, characterized by a nomothetic approach (generalization, abstraction, search for universal truths through the range of instances), is applicable specifically to the natural sciences; and qualitative research, related to an idiographic approach (idiosyncratic, individualizing, looking for a particular truth in the individual case intensively studied), declared applicable specifically to the behavioral and social sciences, always incorporated in history and context. Varvin (2013) discusses the epistemological and methodological tensions between the two.

Several studies advocate methodological pluralism (Bernardi, 2015; Huprich & Bornstein, 2015; Lingardi *et al.*, 2010; Luyten *et al.*, 2005). The qualitative methodology can offer sophisticated insights and evocative scripts of what happens *in* and *between* the minds of therapists and patients, while quantitative methods can verify clinical hypotheses and give empirical support to technical options and psychoanalytic clinical statements (Lingardi *et al.*, 2010). The assumption of methodological pluralism is strongly encouraged to contribute to an enriched understanding of the clinical process and to the development of new research methodologies (Luyten *et al.*, 2005). Within this perspective are included two studies (McGregor-Hepburn & James, 2021; Tillman *et al.*, 2011): the first on the use of mixed-methods research (MMR) as a "third community" of research to develop a pragmatic approach through the integration of qualitative and quantitative procedures, and the second on the combination of qualitative sociological research methodologies and research in psychoanalysis. Lastly, a recent study by Eliezer and Peled (2023) fosters a dialogue between qualitative researchers in social sciences and theorists in psychoanalysis by identifying a method of inter-textual and intersubjective psychoanalytic analysis.

### Fourth thematic dimension: the methods of research in psychoanalysis

In this dimension, the experimental method and the observational and random correlation methods are analyzed.

McAloon and Phil (1992) argue that, from a historical point of view, the experimental method has rarely been used for research in psychoanalysis, since the concepts of statistical probability, randomness, and statistical checks tend to misrepresent and reduce data on human behavior and functioning (McAloon & Phil, 1992). However, Wallerstein (2009) argues for the ap-

plicability in psychoanalysis, especially when integrated with other research domains (e.g., empirical, clinical, conceptual, and interdisciplinary). From this perspective, Chiesa (2010), Hinshelwood (2010), Huprich and Bornstein (2015), Luyten *et al.* (2005), and Shulman (1990) support the use of experimental and quasi-experimental designs to complement hypothesis generation from clinical data. In addition, Bucci (2007) highlights the relevance of experimental methods in linking psychoanalytic concepts with findings in the fields of neuroscience, cognitive sciences, and developmental psychology.

The observational method, emerging to empirically validate Freudian intuitions, is especially suited for populations where other data collection is limited, such as infants, children, or psychotic patients. Bowlby's prospective studies on attachment (McAloon & Phil, 1992) and subsequent contributions by clinical theorists such as Anna Freud, Spitz, Mahler, and Winnicott (Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018) affirmed its value. Currently, the observational method informs understanding of developmental stages and non-verbal interactions in treatment (Luyten *et al.*, 2005). Bucci (2007) also promotes observational methods that include the analyst as both participant and observer in multi-prospective projects, including quality-based analysis.

The single-case method, foundational in psychoanalysis since Freud (McAloon & Phil, 1992), encompasses three formats: the collection of cases with similar clinical profiles, the classical single case, and the examination of different aspects of individuals, such as dreams, symptoms, or behavior. The method consists of the study of a particular case or event (whether it is related to a single individual, an entire community, or society) to achieve a thorough understanding of "the current state of things" (Midgley, 2006). A detailed single-case study is defined as a selective approach when the goal is the discovery and composition of a theory (Tillman *et al.*, 2011). Most of the articles in this area (Bucci, 2007; Chiesa, 2010; Fonagy, 2013; Gottdiener & Suh, 2012; Hinshelwood, 2010; Huprich & Bornstein, 2015; Lingardi *et al.*, 2010; Luyten *et al.*, 2005; Sandell, 2014) investigate the primacy of the single-case method that, for a long time, has dominated research in psychoanalysis, exploring the heated debate between the almost exclusive emphasis on this method and the potential of mixing it with other methods. Specifically, Fonagy (2013) argues that presenting the experimental method and the single-case method as epistemic alternatives serves as a rhetorical device to frame the contrast between "constructivism" and "objectivism", or between the hermeneutic and positivist paradigms. Instead, it is necessary to consider the interaction not only between methods but also between research domains, such as the empirical single-case method proposed in the studies by Lingardi *et al.* (2010) and Sandell (2014). The extension of the single case is also addressed by Gottdiener and Suh (2012), starting from the main criticisms on the method: dependence on retrospective relationships, exclusive use of qualitative data and introspective means, and low internal and external validity. Eliezer and Peled (2023) further support the integration of psychoanalytic and social science approaches to enrich conceptual development.

### Fifth thematic dimension: techniques of research in psychoanalysis

This dimension addresses the main techniques used in research in psychoanalysis – tests, observation, and interviews – highlighting their potential and limitations.

Tests and questionnaires remain underutilized and only partially operationalized in research on psychoanalysis. Tillman *et*

*al.* (2011) note that instruments like the Rorschach test and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) can be used to assess personality or specific variables. Shulman (1990) adds that questionnaires may address dynamics such as repetition and "deception in areas of primary vulnerability", particularly in dyadic interactions. Their use is also supported in the assessment of psychoanalytic constructs (Shulman, 1990) and change levels, as seen in the Three-Level Model (3-TML) for the observation of patient training (Bernardi, 2015). Finally, Luyten *et al.* (2005) and Sandell (2014) suggest that testing may reveal unconscious processes not accessible to either the analyst or the patient.

Observation is one of the most frequently reported techniques in the scientific literature dealing with research in psychoanalysis. Initially formalized with the observational method (McAloon & Phil, 1992), it became a foundational technique, often integrated with interviews (Kvale, 2001). It plays a critical role in hypothesis generation (Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006; Midgley, 2014; Shulman, 1990) and remains central in the single-case method (Fonagy, 2013). Bernardi (2015) discusses its use in the 3-TLM model, linking observation with theoretical inference. Yet, scholars like Hinshelwood (2010) and Bucci (2007) highlight its epistemological challenge: the observer's mind is not neutral, given the shared psychological nature of the observer and the observed.

Interview and clinical consultation are closely related, although the latter is less studied as a research tool. Research interviews, particularly the clinical one, are structured yet open, grounded in psychoanalytic theory, and akin to the clinical process of the patient's free association and the analyst's fluctuating attention (Kvale, 2001). Distinctions emerge between research and clinical contexts: while the former engages broader psychosocial interests, the latter focuses on the individual psyche (Archard, 2020; Midgley, 2014). Holmes (2016) argues that the clinical interview is an exploratory conversation, while the research interview is conceived as an intentional and collaborative context, applicable to broader research designs such as MMR (Tillman *et al.*, 2011). Regarding the research interview, Eliezer and Peled (2023) add that it is necessary to consider that the researcher and the participant are influenced by each other's subjectivity; therefore, single-case research is configured as a dialogical-contextual event, where the data are the product of a mutual effort by two subjects to make sense of a problem or question.

Kvale (2001) explores the interview as an elective technique for qualitative research in psychoanalysis. Specifically, the innovative potential of the interview is described, starting from the analysis of postulates and paradoxes in the production of scientific knowledge to postmodern conceptions of knowledge, with particular attention to relational and constructive aspects. Midgley (2014) introduces the "free association narrative interview" and the "theme-focused interview" based on the "deep structure hermeneutic" method. Two further studies (Archard & O'Reilly, 2023; Archard *et al.*, 2024) expand on the narrative method of free associations, both as an interview technique and in the analysis of the collected material, arguing that researchers must carefully consider the differences between research contexts, clinical psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy to avoid improper integration of clinical concepts. According to these arguments, Archard (2020) addresses the lack of attention and clarity regarding the implications of the use of psychoanalytic techniques in research, particularly research interviews. In addition, this study provides a critical account of Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2013) free association narrative interview method (FANIM) and considers its applications in social and mental health. To complete the concep-



tual framework, Campòs (2021) focuses on the field of research in psychoanalysis, identifying the interview as a unique tool in considering transference phenomena and the subjective position of psychoanalysis in specific domains of research. Holmes (2016) proposes reverie as a research tool, integrating emotional responses, body sensations, and mental imagery to enrich interviews: reverie can inform the research process by generating hypotheses that may be tested through more systematic methods. Lastly, although born within the qualitative methodology of the research, interviews are increasingly adapted to quantitative contexts through data quantification via various scales of evaluation, as seen in MMR designs (Tillman *et al.*, 2011).

## Discussion

The present literature review aimed to synthesize the main reflections on the relationship between psychoanalysis and research, specifically in the context of the broader contemporary scientific research in psychology. It is important to notice that this is the first literature review investigating the state of the art of how research in psychoanalysis is creatively adapting to the broader landscape of contemporary research in psychological sciences. As relevant scholars have noted, the birth of research in psychoanalysis has been both ontologically (*i.e.*, “what research is”) and epistemologically (*i.e.*, “how to do research”) intertwined with the context of psychoanalytic practice (Kernberg, 2004; Rapaport, 1960; Wallerstein, 2006). In particular, research in psychoanalysis has been historically qualified and framed through clinicians’ efforts to link theory and practice (McAloon, 1992). Accordingly, this review sought to move a step further. Specifically, the aim was to identify how, and specifically through which dimensions, research in and with psychoanalysis can be placed within the milieu of global, contemporary psychological research. In other words, we specifically dialogued with a body of knowledge and literature (*i.e.*, papers indexed in major psychological databases) already attempting to create a bridge between psychoanalytic research and research in and with psychoanalysis. The results are interesting and delineate a clear field of engagement for those interested in adopting clear epistemological, methodological, and technical stances without losing psychoanalytic theoretical focus and balance. That is, without letting research in psychoanalysis modify psychoanalytic premises and principles.

The first thematic dimension is the epistemological status that research in psychoanalysis can take on, as it defines the normative frame and structure as well as the set of characteristics that guides knowledge production, transmission, and application (see De Vincenzo *et al.*, 2024). The results show that, in research in psychoanalysis, two paradigms of reference can be identified: hermeneutic and positivist/neo-positivist (Luyten *et al.*, 2006). This opposition highlights a rift within psychoanalytic thought and its method of conducting research. In fact, the epistemological dimension calls into question a Gordian knot: how psychoanalytic research can fuel research in psychoanalysis (*i.e.*, methodology) without losing the ontological and epistemological premises and principles of psychoanalytic theoretical knowledge. The existence of a dialectic of psychoanalytic scholars with, and between, the positivist and hermeneutic paradigms, and most importantly, the encouragement to integrate the two perspectives, indicates the full, adequate belonging of psychoanalytic research to major contemporary approaches (Kernberg, 2006; Wallerstein, 1988).

The second thematic dimension enabled the identification of research domains in psychoanalysis, or areas of focus, summa-

rized as clinical and extra-clinical research (empirical, conceptual, interdisciplinary, and historical), mirroring the epistemological antinomy (theory and practice) of psychoanalysis (Leuzinger-Bohleber & Fischmann, 2006). While papers deepening the field of historical research are lacking, numerous studies have found interdisciplinary research as a “third way” to remedy the paradigmatic contrast with respect to the twofold scientific nature of the discipline (Navridi & Anagnostopoulos, 2018). Thus, also the second thematic dimension projects research in psychoanalysis into the most advanced streams of research, where interdisciplinarity is actively sought as a value.

The third thematic dimension analyzes the research methodology, that is, the theoretical framework guiding the research methods in psychoanalysis. In line with the assumptions described above, the research methodology reflects two positions: the qualitative methodology, closer to hermeneutics, relating to an idiographic approach focused on the construction and search for meaning and interpretation; and the quantitative methodology, stemming from the positivist tradition, connected to the nomothetic perspective and addressed to the knowledge of universal truths in contexts of abstraction and generalization (Midgley, 2014; Shulmann, 1990). In these terms, interdisciplinary research not only aims at the scientific dialogue between psychoanalysis and other sciences but also encourages the mixing of the two research methodologies through the realization of mixed approaches applicable to different domains of research in psychoanalysis (Kernberg, 2006; Zhang & Xie, 2023). In fact, the practical implementation of research methodologies, that is, the methods, highlights the birth in the last decades of “mixed” methods not only in their formal methodological constitution (*e.g.*, Mixed Method Research) but also in their corresponding research domain (*e.g.*, empirical single case).

In these terms, the fourth thematic dimension, namely the specific methods used in research in psychoanalysis, seems of major interest. The review results show that research in psychoanalysis uses two types of methods: experimental and correlative (observational and single case). Within the literature, the terms “experimental method” and “empirical approach” are often used as interchangeable concepts (De Vincenzo *et al.*, 2024). The term “experimental method” refers to a research method characterized by the formulation of hypotheses and knowledge processes based on experimentation, while the term “empirical approach” is intended to contextualize the precise domain of research, which is based on practical experience and not on theorems. In these terms, the two terminologies are operating at different levels within research in psychoanalysis.

In recent decades, research techniques in psychoanalysis have gained increasing theoretical and practical autonomy; observation and clinical consultation have witnessed a strong migration from the purely clinical field, becoming a unit of analysis in different areas of research in psychoanalysis (Elizier *et al.*, 2023; Kvale, 1999). In particular, the development of the interview is promising for different research methodologies, as well as the possibility of integrating the different research methods (Archard *et al.*, 2024).

## Limitations

This systematic literature review has several limitations. First, there was no review protocol (*i.e.*, PICO). Second, heterogeneity among the studies was high in terms of study design, study quality, and objectives, making it rather difficult to create standardized categorizations for all articles. At the same time, thematic overlaps were frequent, with most studies reporting general directions on



all important areas of the topic, sometimes succinctly and sometimes quite explicitly. These limitations were exacerbated by the lack of a common nomenclature of concepts pertaining to the research, sometimes used as synonyms, sometimes as terms belonging to different categories (e.g., “methodology” vs. “method”, “method” vs. “approach/domain”, “technique” vs. “method”). This limitation created difficulties in the interpretation of results. For example, it was not easy to clearly distinguish the “empirical method” from the “empirical approach”. In addition, the scarcity of quantitative studies does not allow the advantages of this methodology over others to be fully explored.

## Conclusions

This systematic review has provided a structured overview of the state of research in psychoanalysis, thus filling a gap within the scientific literature and psychoanalytic research. In particular, it enabled the main scientific contributions on the topic to be collected and structured in a coherent and organized form. The results revealed the need to shed light on what levels of structuring research form the relationship between psychoanalysis and research, between theory and clinical practice in psychoanalysis. Five foundational dimensions emerged, showing specific dependency relationships with one another, in the following order: the epistemological status of psychoanalysis and its paradigms of reference, research domains, methodologies, methods, and techniques. From this perspective, the psychoanalytic method emerges as a cross-cutting element within the field of research in psychoanalysis.

This review also highlights important future perspectives and implications for those who wish to engage in scientific and academic research within the broader epistemological and theoretical family of psychoanalysis. In fact, in an era where scientific research is increasingly driven by methodologies and methods oriented toward the search for evidence, conducting research within the psychoanalytic tradition means shedding light on the specificity and dynamism of the human subject, as opposed to processes that tend to standardize it (De Vincenzo *et al.*, 2024). The aim is to support a theoretical and conceptual movement, such as psychoanalysis, with a methodological reflection capable of counterbalancing currents that risk losing sight of the human subject.

Moreover, this review highlighted the need to establish a shared nomenclature for the concepts pertaining to the field of research in psychoanalysis and to promote the training of new generations of psychoanalysts in research-oriented psychoanalytic thinking. These two actions would foster knowledge exchange, comparability, and the transmission of psychoanalytic knowledge within the psychoanalytic community and support its ongoing development within the broader scientific context.

A final future direction would be to replicate this type of work across the main schools of psychoanalytic thought to assess whether significant differences in research practices actually emerge.

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Online supplementary material:

Supplementary Table 1. Characteristics of studies included in the systematic review.