

Operational definition of 'Expert Therapist' in empirical research. A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Background: The study of the characteristics of therapists with superior performance could be useful for the understanding of psychotherapy and the development of training methods. However, currently this field faces difficulties in the conceptual and theoretical delimitation of the phenomenon. **Aim:** To analyze the theoretical and operational definition of expert therapist in empirical research published in academic journals. **Method:** Systematic scope review, based on keywords related to psychotherapeutic expertise, according to PRISMA criteria. **Results:** A total of 36 articles were analyzed. Only seven studies were based on a theory of expertise. The role of the expert was delimited to thematic consultant, reagent of an experimental situation or result of a test. The criteria to delimit the variable were institutional affiliation, contribution to the discipline, credentials, work dedication, experience, training, peer nomination, deliberate practice and performance. **Conclusions:** The concept of expert psychotherapist is highly heterogeneous and poorly defined in research. Finally, most articles use unreliable methods to define expertise in this area.

Keywords: expert, psychotherapy, systematic review.

Introduction

It is known that some therapists are better than others, that is, within a sample some professionals have a greater effect on the therapeutic outcome than their colleagues (Owen, et al., 2019). The study of this phenomenon and the characteristics of those who have a superior performance has been called the expert study (Ericsson, 2018a). The interest in this field in psychotherapy research is based on the hypothesis that, if the performance and development of outstanding therapists can be understood, then new training methods can be developed to transfer their skills to therapists in training (Hill, et al., 2017; O'Shaughnessy, et al., 2017; Reese, 2017). However, this field is still underdeveloped, with few publications (Norcross, & Karpiak, 2017) and without a particular theory of *expertise* that explains the phenomenon in psychotherapy (Hill, et al., 2017). Thus, one of the current challenges in this area is the conceptual definition of psychotherapeutic expertise (Hill, et al., 2017; Reese, 2017) and its consequent operationalization.

So far, expertise in psychotherapy *has been defined and operationalized* by comparing subjects according to their performance in a task (e.g. Owen, et al., 2019) or based on meta-criteria, i.e., indirect variables that hypothetically correlate with higher

performance, such as affiliation to certain institutions, academic credentials, teaching, reputation, professional experience (Caspar, 2017). or deliberate practice in the specific task (Miller, et al., 2020). However, only the latter has been shown to correlate with a greater psychotherapeutic effect (Chow, et al., 2015; Shukla, et al., 2021; Westra, et al., 2020). The rest of the indirect variables have been questioned due to their null or insignificant correlation with the therapeutic outcome (Miller, et al., 2018).

The questioning of the criteria for operationalizing psychotherapeutic expertise in empirical studies has led to doubts about the validity of their results (Tracey, et al., 2014) and invites a review of these. Following Teo (2008), it is important to bear in mind that, in scientific research, the results by themselves do not have meaning, but rather take on it based on the interpretation made of them around the conceptual and methodological frameworks in which they are produced.

Based on the above, the objective of this research is to analyze how the variable of expert in psychotherapy has been theoretically and operationally defined in empirical research so far. To achieve this objective, it is intended to characterize the studies related to the subject, their production conditions and methods used. The relevance of this research lies in carrying out a critical review and a state of the art that facilitates the continuation of the study of this thematic area.

Method

A systematic review of the literature was carried out referring to empirical articles that have included expert therapists in their sample with a view to extracting the theoretical and/or operational definition of *expertise* Psychotherapeutic. The review followed the standards of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis, or PRISMA (Page, et al., 2021).

Identification of Publications

The literature search was carried out in the EBSCO, JSTOR, SAGE and WOS databases. Three groups of keywords were used (see Table 1), referring to *expertise*, therapists, or words composed of terms from the first two lists. To confirm the suitability of the keywords, they were evaluated by two external consultants with more than ten years of experience in psychotherapy research.

The search was carried out during the month of July 2023 and under two search *strains* that were repeated for each database. The first was composed of the keywords of the first and second groups, separated internally by the Boolean indicator 'OR' and separated between groups by the indicator 'AND'. The second search group consisted only of the use of compound words. The search field in the databases was the title and abstract of the articles and no temporal or idiomatic criteria were established *a priori*.

Table 1

Search terms

Variable	Keywords
Expertise	best, effective, expert, expertise, high-skilled, high level, master, master's level, outlier, skilled, super, talent, talented, wisdom, wise
Psychotherapist	counselor, practitioner, psychotherapist, therapist
Compound words	Supershrinks

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria were that the documents were academic articles published in journals indexed in the aforementioned databases, that they corresponded to empirical research and that their sample included psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, or *counselors* under the figure of thematic consultant or their performance in psychotherapeutic tasks involving patients directly or indirectly had been studied. Articles referring to expert therapists in the role of clinical supervisor were excluded.

These criteria were applied in two stages. The first consisted of the selection of articles based on their title and abstract. Of those chosen in the first stage, a second selection was made according to the reading of the full-text articles. It was considered as a final inclusion criterion that the researchers independently agreed on the suitability of the articles, discarding those on which consensus was not reached.

Analysis of the Texts

The analysis of the final sample was carried out by reading the following sections: summary, introduction/problemization, theoretical foundations and/or method - according to the characteristics of each article. On the other hand, for the analysis of the conditions of production of the articles, the country of origin and language of the journal, and the country of affiliation of the authors, were reviewed. The categories of analysis used and their operationalization are described in Table 2.

Table 2
Defining Analysis Categories

Variable	Indicator
Year of publication	Year the article was published
Country of affiliation (authors)	Country to which the institution belongs that each author declares as his/her affiliation
Country of affiliation (journal)	Country of affiliation of the journal according to the <i>SCImago Journal portal and Country Rank</i>
Objective	Study objective explicitly stated or inferred by the investigators
Theory of <i>expertise</i>	Reference to external books or articles to define the expertise variable
Method	Use of quantitative or qualitative methodology
Concept of <i>expertise</i>	Primary word used to refer to therapists with superior knowledge or skills
Role	Inference about the role assigned to the expert therapist within the research.
Expertise criteria	Variables according to which the <i>expertise</i> of the sample is delimited. For example, years of training, peer nomination, performance or other that the researchers could identify.
Operationalization of <i>expertise</i>	Explicit statement of the <i>criteria</i> of expertise according to which the results will be analyzed
Sample	Sample declared by the article referring to expert, non-expert and consultants

Information Processing

For the storage and selection of items, the following were used: software *EndNote X9*, *Zotero* and *Rayyan QCRI*, while for The analysis of the information was used *Microsoft Excel*.

Results

The search yielded a total of 1903 articles in database (more 414 duplicates), of which 83 met the inclusion criteria. After full-text review, a total of 47 Articles, 20 because they are theoretical articles, 14 because they are not studying the *expertise*, seven because there was no consensus among the reviewers, 3 because they did not include health professionals or psychotherapists, 2 because they did not have access to the documents and 1 because they referred to *expertise* Non-human (artificial intelligence) (Figure 1). Thus, the final sample was composed of a total of 36 articles (see Table 3), which will be presented in two sections referring to their characterization and the definition of expert psychotherapist.

Figure 1

Flowchart of the data collection procedure according to PRISMA (2021). In original language: Spanish

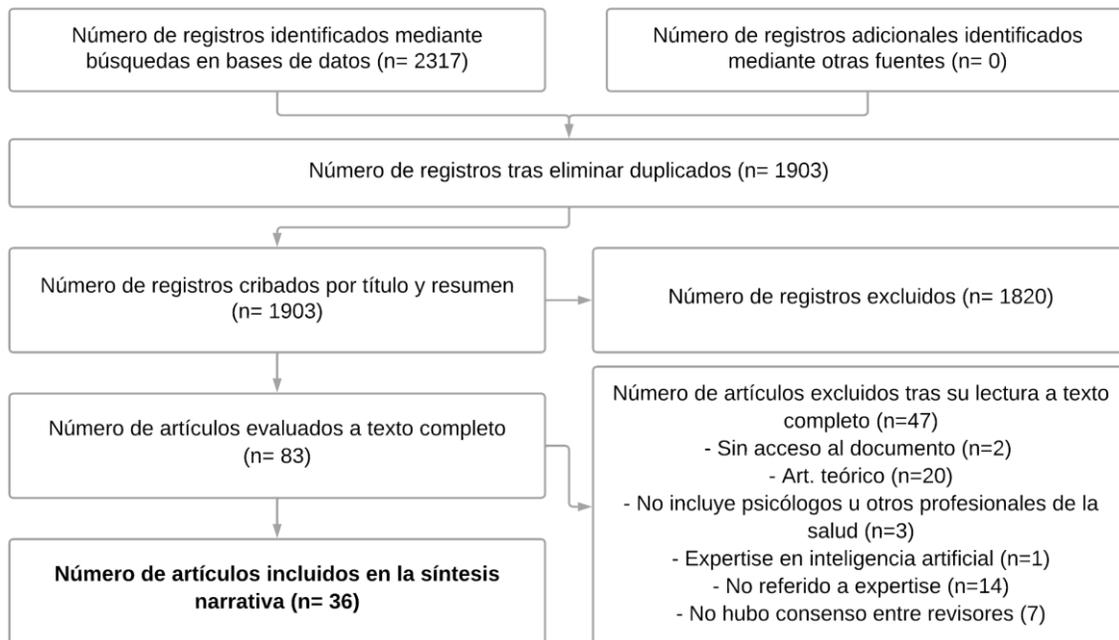


Table 3*List of articles analyzed*

Auth or/s (year)	Title	Magazine
Collingwood and Renz, 1969	The effects of client confrontations upon levels of immediacy offered by high and low functioning counselors	Journal of Clinical Psychology
Lafferty, et al., 1989	Differences between more and less effective psychotherapists: a study of select therapist variables	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology
Hillerbrand and Claiborn, 1990	Examining Reasoning Skill Differences Between Expert and Novice Counselors	Journal of Counseling & Development
Long, et al., 1997	Staff do know best: peer & therapist prediction of outcome following treatment for problem drinking	Addiction Research
Okiishi, et al., 2003	Waiting for supershrink: an empirical analysis of therapist effects	Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy
Brown, et al., 2005	Identifying highly effective psychotherapists in a managed care environment	American Journal of Managed Care
Eells, et al., 2005	The quality of psychotherapy case formulations: A comparison of expert, experienced, and novice cognitive-behavioral and psychodynamic therapists	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology
Jennings, et al., 2005	Nine Ethical Values of Master Therapists	Journal of Mental Health Counseling
Sullivan, et al., 2005	Master Therapists' Construction of the Therapy Relationship	Journal of Mental Health Counseling
Sanderson and Bruce, 2007	Causes and management of treatment-resistant panic disorder and agoraphobia: A survey of expert therapists	Cognitive and Behavioral Practice
Keats, 2008	Buying into the profession: looking at the impact on students of expert videotape demonstrations in counsellor education	British Journal of Guidance & Counselling
Quay, et al., 2009	Competencies for infant mental health therapists: A survey of expert opinion	Infant Mental Health Journal
Minnen, et al., 2010	When do trauma experts choose exposure therapy for PTSD patients? A controlled study of therapist and patient factors	Behaviour Research and Therapy

Brand, et al., 2012	A Survey of Practices and Recommended Treatment Interventions Among Expert Therapists Treating Patients With Dissociative Identity Disorder and Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified	Psychological Trauma-Theory Research Practice and Policy
Witteman, et al., 2012	Assessing Diagnostic Expertise of Counselors Using the Cochran—Weiss—Shanteau (CWS) Index	Journal of Counseling & Development
King, et al., 2014	The development of expertise in children's mental health therapists and teachers: changes in perspective and approach	Educational Research
Lee, 2014	Addiction Education and Training for Counselors: A Qualitative Study of Five Experts	Journal of Addictions & Offender Counseling
Moltu and Binder, 2014	Skilled therapists' experiences of how they contributed to constructive change in difficult therapies: A qualitative study	Counselling & Psychotherapy Research
Chow, et al., 2015	The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Development of Highly Effective Psychotherapists	Computers
Hansen, et al., 2015	Sudden Gains and Sudden Losses in the Clients of a "Supershrink": 10 Case Studies	Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy
Myrick, et al., 2015	Treatment of Complex Dissociative Disorders: A Comparison of Interventions Reported by Community Therapists versus Those Recommended by Experts	Journal of Trauma & Dissociation
Hayes, et al., 2016	Psychotherapists' Outcomes With White and Racial/Ethnic Minority Clients: First, the Good News	Journal of Counseling Psychology
Levitt and Piazza-Bonin, 2016	Wisdom and psychotherapy: Studying expert therapists' clinical wisdom to explicate common processes	Psychotherapy Research
Nissen-Lie, et al., 2016	Are Therapists Uniformly Effective Across Patient Outcome Domains? A Study on Therapist Effectiveness in Two Different Treatment Contexts	Journal of Counseling Psychology
Pereira, et al., 2017	The Role of Practitioner Resilience and Mindfulness in Effective Practice: A Practice-Based Feasibility Study	Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research
Owen, et al., 2019	Are High-Performing Therapists Both Effective and Consistent A Test of Therapist Expertise	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology

Sung and Skovholt, 2019	Master Group Counselors' Case Conceptualizations	Journal for Specialists in Group Work
Zeeck, et al., 2019	Reasons for non-response and recommendations for optimal outpatient treatment of bulimia nervosa: A survey on German expert therapists' views	Zeitschrift Für Psychosomatische Medizin Und Psychotherapie
Genc and Sahin, 2020	Examining Cognitive Flexibility of Counselors According to The Effective Counselor Characteristics, Counselor Self Efficacy and Some Variables	ÇÜ Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi
Locati, et al., 2020	In-session interactive dynamics of the psychotherapy process between therapeutic alliance, therapist expertise, therapist technical intervention, patient metacognition and functioning	Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy
Renger, et al., 2020	Learning and change within person-centered therapy: Views of expert therapists	Counselling & Psychotherapy Research
Deisenhofer, et al., 2022	Are some therapists better at facilitating and consolidating sudden gains than others?	Psychotherapy Research
Genc and Sahin, 2022	The mediating role of cultural intelligence and cognitive flexibility in the relation between effective counsellor characteristics and multicultural counselling competencies of counsellors in Turkey	British Journal of Guidance & Counselling
Hahn, et al., 2022	Developing Into a Group Therapist: An Empirical Investigation of Expert Group Therapists' Training Experiences	American Psychologist
Spagnuolo Lobb et al., 2022	The Therapist's Intuition and Responsiveness: What Makes the Difference between Expert and in Training Gestalt Psychotherapists	European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education
Pardo-Cebrián, et al., 2022	Verbal Behavior Analysis of Expert and Inexperienced Therapists Applying the Socratic Method	The Spanish Journal of Psychology

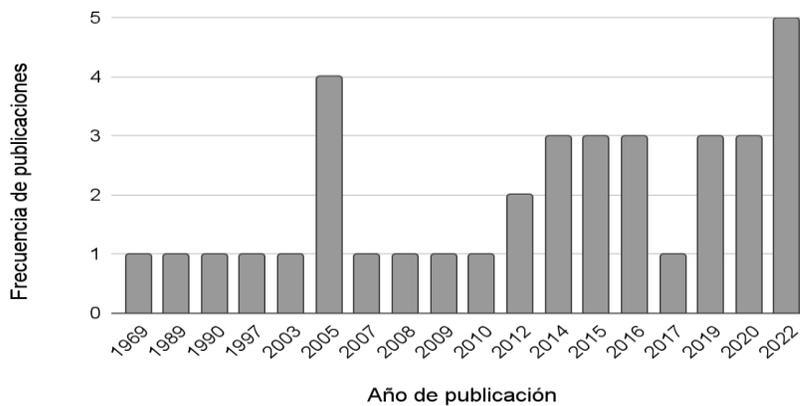
Characterization of the Studies

Temporal Distribution

Regarding their temporal distribution, the first study corresponds to a publication from 1969 and the last to a publication from 2022, the latter being the year with the most publications (n=5). When considering the articles as a whole, it is evident that there is a proportion of publication of less than one article per year (0.68 per year). If only publications are considered of the last decade, the ratio rises to 2,3 articles per year (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Frequencies of publications of empirical studies according to year. In original language: Spanish



Production Conditions

On the other hand, 35 of the collected studies were published in English, only one in Spanish (Pardo-Cebrián, et al, 2022). The 21 journals in which they were published, for the most part, belong to English-speaking regions, with 62% concentrated in the United States, 19.1% in the United Kingdom and 4.7% in Germany, Switzerland, Spain and Turkey, respectively, according to records from the SCImago Journal & Country Rank platform. Something similar happens with the country of affiliation of the authors, who are also mostly English-speaking. Of the total of 126 researchers, 56.35% belong to US institutions, followed by institutions located in Canada (9.52%), the United Kingdom (8.73%), Italy (6.35%), Germany (4.76%), the Netherlands (3.97%), Australia (2.38%), Spain (2.38%), Sweden (1.59%), Norway (1.59%), Turkey (1.59%) and Israel (0.79%).

Research Objectives

As for its objectives, eight studies focused on investigating the characteristics of therapists or consultants, 19 in the therapeutic process and 11 in the results of psychotherapy (see Table 4). Two investigations addressed more than one area at a time: Sanderson & Bruce (2007) & Locati, et al. (2020).

Within the first group, six studies focused on therapist variables and two on consultant variables. This group of studies addressed aspects such as ethnicity/race declared

by the consultant, personal aspects of the patient that contribute negatively to therapy, ethical values of the therapist and professional competence.

Of the 19 articles that focused on the therapeutic process, 15 focused on therapeutic interventions, one on therapeutic bonding, one on the therapist's relationship with himself during therapy, and two They addressed both therapeutic operations and bonding. The variables in question within these studies included the analysis of intervention models, coping strategies for clinical difficulties, diagnostic ability and choice of treatment, the immediacy of the therapist's response, the perception of the therapeutic link, the prediction of the therapeutic outcome, and resilience, metacognition and mindfulness as protective factors of the therapist's health.

Finally, of the 11 articles emphasizing the outcomes of psychotherapy, two focus on the therapist's professional development and nine in the therapeutic outcome. The variables included in these studies are therapist training, wisdom acquisition, efficiency of verbal interactions, variability in therapeutic outcome between therapists, and variability in patient outcome from the same therapist.

Methods Used

Most of the studies analyzed used the quantitative method (n=25) and to a lesser extent the qualitative method (n=11). Within the qualitative studies, the use of various methods stands out, such as the *Consensual Qualitative Research method* (n=1), *Grounded Theory* (n=2), *Cross Group Analysis* (n=1), *Consensual Research* (n=1), *Thematic Analysis* (n=2), *Discovery Oriented Approach* (n=1) and *Phenomenological approach* (n=2). Only one study does not state which method was used for qualitative analysis (n=1).

Sample

Finally, it is possible to group the studies into four groups with respect to their sample: i) studies that include only therapists (n=19); ii) studies comparing expert and non-expert therapists (n=6); iii) studies that compare expert therapists based on their therapeutic outcome with a certain group of patients (n=8), and; iv) studies that combine the above formats including expert and non-expert therapists in relation to therapeutic outcome with patients (n=3). In total, the 36 studies add up to a sample of 3.002 studied expert professionals, 280 non-experts and 60.215 Consultants.

Within their sample, some studies included other trades and professionals not listed in the inclusion criteria (*counselor*, psychologist, psychotherapist and psychiatrist) such as behavior counselors, psychology assistants, nurses, doctors, physiotherapists, researchers, speech pathologists, *policy makers*, teachers, social workers, expressive therapists and occupational therapists. Only one study does not state what type of specific profession or trade the subjects in its sample exercise, but points out that they are linked to mental health care.

Table 4

Analysis of the selected articles according to objective and variables associated with expertise

Topi	Study1	Objective	Variabl	Concept	Role	Criteria2
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Characteristics of the Participants	Jennings, et al., 2005	Identify ethical values of master therapists	Values	Master Therapist	Consultant	N	
	Sanderson and Bruce, 2007	To explore the variables involved in poor therapeutic outcome and coping strategies with patients with resistant panic disorder and agoraphobia	Patient variable	Expert	Consultant	A Co	
	Quay, et al., 2009	To assess the competencies necessary for mental health work with children under 5 years of age	Competence	Expert	Consultant	A Co	
	Hayes, et al., 2016	Identify if therapists differ in their effectiveness with patients belonging to a racial/ethnic minority	Racial/ethnic minority	Expert	Result	R	
	Genç and Sahin, 2020	To explore the relationship between the therapist's effectiveness and self-efficacy in relation to their level of cognitive flexibility	Cognitive flexibility, self-efficacy	Effective counselors	Result	R	
	Locati, et al., 2020	To explore the influence of therapist expertise, therapeutic alliance, interventions, and patient functioning on metacognition processes	Competences	Expert	Comparative variable	C	
	Deisenhofer et al., 2022	To investigate the role of differences between therapists in the generation and consolidation of sudden gains	Variability	Better therapist	Result	R	
	Genç and Sahin, 2022	To examine the mediating role of cultural intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and multicultural counselling competencies in effective educational counselors	Competences	Effective counselor	Result	D R	
Process	Collingwood and Renz, 1985	To compare the level of response of high- and low-functioning therapists to a client's confrontation	Immediacy	High functioning counselor	Result	R	
	Hillebrand and	Compare the diagnostic reasoning skills of expert and	Diagnostic	Expert	Comparative	C N	Ex

Claiborn, 1990	novice therapists	Ability		variable		
Long, et al., 1997	To compare the ability to process and predict a patient's relapse between professionals and non-professionals	Outcome Prediction	Staff	Result	D	
Sullivan, et al., 2005	Investigate the perception of use and establishment of the therapeutic relationship by master therapists	Perceptions and use of the therapeutic bond	Master Therapist	Consultant	N	
Sanderson and Bruce, 2007	To explore the variables involved in poor therapeutic outcome and coping strategies with patients with resistant panic disorder and agoraphobia	Coping Strategies	Expert therapist	Consultant	To	
Minnen, et al., 2010	Explore expert therapists' reasons for suggesting exposure therapy for patients with PTSD	Treatment Choice	Expert	Consultant	C	
Brand, et al., 2012	To investigate expert opinion on the structures and techniques of treating people with dissociative disorders in their different stages	Intervention models	Expert	Consultant	Co Ex N	
Witteman, et al., 2012	To assess the diagnostic expertise of therapists using the Cochrane-Weiss-Shanteau method	Diagnostic Ability	Expert	Result	R	
Lee, 2014	Consult the opinion of addiction experts on best practices in the field	Intervention models	Expert	Consultant	A Co C Ex	
Moltu and Binder, 2014	To study the experience of skilled therapists about their contribution to the therapeutic process	Intervention models	Skilled therapist	Consultant	Co C D Ex	
Hansen et al., 2015	To investigate the nature of sudden gains and losses, and the variables involved in the process of obtaining results of a supershrink	Intervention models	Supershrinks	Result	R	
Myrick, et al., 2015	Describe interventions performed by therapists who are experts in dissociative disorders	Intervention models	Expert	Comparative variable	Co Ex N	
Pereira, et al., 2017	Identify the role of resilience and mindfulness in therapist	Resilience and	Effective	Comparative	R	

		effectiveness and well-being	mindfulness	therapist	variable		
	Sung and Skovholt, 2019	Exploring Conceptualization in Therapy	Case Group	Diagnostic Ability	Master group counselor	Consultant	To
	Zeeck, et al., 2019	To explore expert therapists' perceptions of treatment resistance in bulimia nervosa		Understanding a Clinical Phenomenon	Expert	Consultant	Expert
	Locati, et al., 2020	To explore the influence of therapist expertise, therapeutic alliance, interventions, and patient functioning on metacognition processes		Metacognition	Expert	Comparative variable	Creative
	Renger, et al., 2020	Explore the concepts of change and learning in Client-Centered Therapy		Intervention models	Expert	Consultant	Co-Consultant
	Hahn et al., 2022	Identify expert therapists' perception of the competencies associated with effectiveness as a group therapist, and how these are developed in training		Competencies	Expert	Consultant	Novice
	Spagnuolo Lobb et al., 2022	To compare the presence of resonance, body awareness, and empathy (aesthetic relational knowledge) during therapy performed by beginning and expert students		Competencies	Experienced psychotherapist	Comparative variable	Expert
Result	Lafferty, et al., 1989	To explore the value systems of therapists-in-training and their effects on patients' improvement with therapy		Empathy, directive or supportive attitude of the therapist	Effective Trainee Therapist	Comparative variable	Researcher
	Okiishi, et al., 2003	Compare the therapist's effect among their clients and among other therapists		Inter- and intra-therapist variability	Supershrinks	Result	Researcher

Brown, et al., 2005	Investigate the variability-stability of the therapist's effect and its effects on a given group	Variability and stability	Highly effective psychotherapist	Result	R
Eells, et al., 2005	Compare the quality of therapy between expert, experienced, and novice therapists	Variability Between Therapists	Expert	Comparative variable	Co Ex
Keats, 2008	Evaluate the impact of watching expert videos on therapist training	Training	Expert	Reagent	ND
King, et al., 2014	To compare the perception of factors associated with the development of expertise in child therapists and primary and secondary school teachers	Competences	Expert	Comparative variable	Ex N
Chow, et al., 2015	Analyze the role of deliberate practice in the development of highly effective therapists	Training	Highly effective psychotherapist	Result	P
Levitt and Piazza-Bonin, 2016	Explore the concept of clinical wisdom	Wisdom	Expert	Consultant	N
Nissen-Lie, et al., 2016	Identify whether therapist effectiveness is consistent across domains	Interpatient variability	Effective therapist	Result	R
Owen, et al., 2019	Evaluate the effectiveness and consistency of high-performance therapists	Intratherapeutic variability	High-performing therapist	Comparative variable	R
Pardo-Cebrián, et al., 2022	Compare the type of verbalizations that inexperienced and expert therapists use and which are more efficient in producing change in client response.	Therapist/Patient Verbal Interactions	Expert therapist	Comparative variable	Ex

¹The studies by Sanderson and Bruce (2007) and Locati, et al. (2020), are repeated because they address more than one topic according to the classification exposed. ² The criteria for selecting experts are: **A**: affiliation; **C**: credentials; **Co**: contribution to the discipline; **D**: Labor Publishing; **Ex**: years of experience; **N**: peer nomination; **ND**: does not declare; **P**: deliberate practice; **A**: Performance.

Regarding the theoretical approach in clinical psychology of the mental health professionals included in the studies, 13 declare that the subjects belong to more than one approach, 7 have professionals of only one approach and 16 do not declare the theoretical approach of the investigated subjects. When considering the research as a whole, the approaches most represented in the studies are psychoanalytical-psychodynamic (n=13) and cognitive-behavioral (n=10).

Of the 11 studies that included consultants, the total considered only adult patients. Nine research was based on generic patients and two did so with patients with a psychiatric disorder as an inclusion criterion. Of the studies with generic patients, four correspond to university care centers. On the other hand, of those that included patients with psychiatric disorders, one had as a selection criterion that they met the diagnosis of depression and another included patients with various disorders (addictions, mood disorders, anxiety, behavioral, cognitive, personality and psychosis).

Definition and Operationalization of Psychotherapy Experts

Concept of Expertise

As previously noted, for the search for articles, keywords were included that were synonymous with *expertise* in the sense of implying a therapist who has superior performance or knowledge on a certain subject. Thus, the main concepts for naming expertise in the set of articles were: expert (n=19), effective therapist (n=5), master therapist (n=2), supershrink (n=2), high-functioning counselor (n=1), best therapist (n=1), highly effective therapist (n=1), high-performance therapist (n=1), master group therapist (n=1), experienced therapist (n=1) and skilled therapist (n=1). Finally, one study defined its experts only as *staff* or work team (n=1) (see Table 4).

Theory of Expertise

Based on their theoretical foundation, only seven articles discuss and position themselves from a specific position to talk about *expertise*. Within this group, the articles by Hillebrand and Claiborn (1990) and Eells et al. (2005) they are based on the hypothesis that experts in general would stand out for their reasoning skills in the task at hand, as pointed out by Glasser and Chi (1988) in their book '*The Nature of Expertise*'. While Hayes et al. (2016) were based on the concept of cultural competence, which refers to the knowledge and skills to work with people from different sociocultural groups and/or specific skills to work with a certain group (Lo, & Fung, 2003). The article by Locati et al. (2020) was based on the expertise studies of Weiss and Shanteau (2014) on relational and technical expertise, and that of Witteman et al. (2012) used the performance/stability model of expertise from the same group of authors (Weiss, & Shanteau, 2003).

In addition, one of the investigations was based on the developments of Gillian King's team for the conceptualization of *expertise* in working with children as a phenomenon that includes outstanding knowledge, qualities, and skills for the population in question (King, et al., 2014). The work of King (King et al., 2007, 2008, 2010) and his team is inspired in turn by the writings of *expertise* from a phenomenological perspective of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) and by the model of skill acquisition of Benner (1984). Finally, the research by Chow et al. (2015) was based on the deliberate training hypothesis of Ericsson and Pool (2016), as a variable directly associated with the development of *expertise* in any domain area.

Expert Role

Another point of interest is the role that the expert occupies within the research reviewed (see Table 4). It is possible to speak of defined roles *a priori* and *a posteriori*. In the former, the quality of expert of certain subjects with based on metacriteria. OrThey occupy the role of thematic consultants (n=14) or comparison group with non-experts in a certain task (n=10). It is also possible to observe in research that the expert therapist is not part of the study subjectsbut of the material to be presented to the study subjects through video (n=1). This will be referred to herein as the stimulus or reactive role of the expert therapist

On the other hand, as for the defined expert *a posteriori*, this appears as a result of superior performance around a task and a comparison group (n=11). In other words, in these studies therapists are only considered experts having demonstrated their exceptional ability in the study.

Operationalization of the Concept

Finally, it remains to answer how the concept of *expertise* in the research reviewed. To this end, eight criteria for selecting experts were defined (see Table 5), which are listed below in decreasing order of frequency. The most commonly used criterion was performance around a specific task (n=13), for example, psychotherapeutic outcome, symptomatic decrease or conceptualization of cases. This is followed by the criteria of experience in years of work dedication (n=10); contribution to the discipline through research, publications, teaching or innovation (n=8); peer nomination (n=8); Professional, academic, or specialty credentials (n=7); Institutional affiliation (n=5); work dedication (n=3); Deliberate practice measured in weekly hours of dedication to training or studying clinical skills (n=1); and, finally, years of clinical training (n=1). One of the investigations did not declare its criteria for the definition of experts.

The criteria mentioned above were used individually or in combination, with the first being the most common (n=23). The rest of the research used a combination of two criteria (n=7), three criteria (n=3) or four criteria (n=2).

Overall, 17 psychometric instruments were used to operationalize some of the aforementioned criteria. Most were used as performance criteria (n=16). It should be noted that Only two instruments were used in more than one study: *Effective Counselor Characteristics Assessment Scale* (n=2) and the *Outcome Questionnaire* (n=3).

The other two variables that were defined by instruments were deliberate practice measured through the *Retrospective Analysis of Psychotherapists' Involvement in Deliberate Practice* and peer nomination through the *Peer Nomination Scale*. For this last criterion, three studies used a non-psychometric method based on three questions developed by Jennings and Skovholt (1999), which focus on who is a master therapist for the respondent, which therapist they would recommend to a family member, and with whom they would go to therapy.

Table 5
Methods of operationalization of the 'Expertise' variable

Expertise criteria	Indicator	I am a student
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Affiliation	Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies Board of Directors of Zero To Three American Board of Professional Psychology Be a teacher within an accredited CACREP program	Sanderson and Bruce, 2007 Quay, et al., 2009 Sung and Skovholt, 2019 Lee, 2014
Contribution to the discipline	Teaching Academic Research and Publishing Methodological/practical innovation	Eells, et al., 2005; Lee, 2014; Moltu & Binder, 2014; Renger, et al., 2020 Eells, et al., 2005; Quay, et al., 2009; Brand, et al., 2012 Myrick, et al., 2015 Eells, et al., 2005; Sanderson and Bruce, 2007
Credentials	Professional Title Graduate Specialization	Locati, et al., 2020 Hillerbrand, & Claiborn, 1990; Moltu and Binder, 2014 Minnen, et al., 2010; Lee, 2014; Renger, et al., 2020; Spagnuolo Lobb, et al., 2022
Dedication	Permission to practice Working in a mental health facility	Hillerbrand, & Claiborn, 1990 Long, et al., 1997; Genc and Sahin, 2022.
Dedication Experience	Supervision 5-10 years 10 years or more Over 750 hours of supervised practice	Moltu and Binder, 2014 Hillerbrand & Claiborn, 1990; Brand, et al., 2012; Lee, 2014; Myrick, et al., 2015; Pardo-Cebrián, et al., 2022 Eells, et al., 2005; King, et al., 2014; Moltu & Binder, 2014; Zeeck, et al., 2019 Spagnuolo Lobb, et al., 2022
Peer Nomination	Peer Nomination Scale	Claiborn, 1990; Jennings, et al., 2005; Sullivan, et al., 2005; Brand, et al., 2012; Myrick, et al., 2015; Levitt, & Piazza-Bonin, 2016; Hillerbrand, and Hahn et al., 2022
Peer Nomination	Peer Nomination Scale	King, et al., 2014
Peer Nomination	Reputation and national recognition as a group therapist	Hahn et al., 2022
Deliberate practice	Retrospective Analysis of Psychotherapists' Involvement in Deliberate Practice (RAPIDPrctice)	Chow, et al., 2015
Yield	Brief Symptom Inventory Cochrane-Weiss-Shanteau	Deisenhofer et al., 2022 Witteman, et al., 2012

	index	
	CORE-OM	Nissen-Lie, et al., 2016
	Counseling center assessment of psychological symptoms-62	Hayes, et al., 2016
	Effective Counselor Characteristics Assessment Scale	Genc & Sahin, 2020; Genc and Sahin, 2022
	Index of Multiple deprivation	Pereira, et al., 2017
	Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL-11)	Deisenhofer et al., 2022
	Immediate Relationship Scale	Collingwood, and Renz, 1969
	Life Status Questionnaire	Brown, et al., 2005
Yield	Outcome Questionnaire	Okiishi, et al., 2003; Hansen, et al., 2015; Nissen-Lie, et al., 2016; Deisenhofer et al., 2022
	Patient health questionnaire-9	Pereira, et al., 2017
	Standardized data Set	Hayes, et al., 2016
	Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-r)	Lafferty, et al., 1989
	Youth Life Status Questionnaire	Brown, et al., 2005
	Work and social adjustment scale	Pereira, et al., 2017
No definition	---	Keats, 2008

Discussion

The objective of this systematic review was to elucidate how the expert therapist variable is defined in empirical research. After analyzing 36 articles published between 1969 and 2022, it can be observed that there is a high degree of heterogeneity in the notion of expert used. This applies to its theoretical delimitation, operational definition and the practices or instruments to define it. In particular, it is possible to find studies that do not present a definition of expert and take its meaning for granted, others define the expert as a quantitative result in the face of a task (e.g. therapeutic result) and a third group defines it around meta-criteria such as their years of study, credentials, reputation, among others. Thus, there are studies that assume that the subjects of study are experts (definition *a priori* of expertise), while others define the expert after verifying his superior performance (definition *a posteriori*). It is also of interest to note the role given to the expert psychotherapist within the research, either as a synonym for someone with a lot of knowledge on a topic (expert consultant), someone who performs better on a task compared to the group, a standard of comparison with non-experts, or a stimulus to which non-experts react (e.g., watching videos of experts by students).

A collateral objective was to report the conditions for the production of quantitative studies on expert therapists. On the other hand, it highlights that publications are relatively

scarce, mostly published in English and with Authors affiliated with North American or European institutions.

Interpretation of Results

First, with respect to the conditions of production of the studies, the findings coincide with what has been proposed by other narrative reviews. In other words, as stated by Norcross and Karpiak (2017), it can be pointed out that compared to other fields of study in psychotherapy, publications are scarce. In this regard, Caspar (2017) points out that the low rate of studies in this area could be due to the fact that the phenomenon is seen as elitist or unnecessary, while patients would also benefit from therapists who are 'good enough' and about whom there could be more research interest.

As for the geographical areas in which knowledge is produced, the absence of articles from Africa, Asia (only one in Turkey), Latin America and Oceania is evident. This is relevant when considering the differences in the training curriculum and legal framework of each geographical region to accredit a subject as a therapist.

Second, with respect to the objectives of expert research, these can be interpreted in the light of the Generic Model of Psychotherapy of Orlinsky and Howard (1986). This model aims to organize the areas of research of studies in psychotherapy, dividing the field into three large levels: i) extra-therapeutic determinants; ii) therapeutic process, and; iii) consequences of psychotherapy on the patient, therapist and their environment. From this perspective, it is interesting to note that the studies analyzed cover the three areas of the MGP, that is, they present a wide heterogeneity in terms of their objectives. However, there is no unified agenda of studies on the subject, which coincides with what Norcross and Karpiak (2017) have suggested, when they point out that the studies of experts in psychotherapy are disaggregated from each other.

It is also possible to observe that the 36 studies as a whole correspond to what Stiles (2015) calls *data collection studies* in psychotherapy. These are characterized by collecting specific evidence for a certain variable. The author differentiates them from theoretical studies, which seek to make sense of a series of data, or critical studies, which seek to question existing studies, appealing to their conditions of production, methodology or implications of their results, among other variables.

Thirdly, with respect to the methods, sample and instruments used, the heterogeneity of these stands out again. And although a predominance of quantitative studies is observed, it is noteworthy that a third of the studies use qualitative methods. On the other hand, the absence of certain population groups within the patient samples investigated is striking. For example, the absence of studies of psychotherapeutic expertise with children, adolescents and older adults, or studies with specific populations associated with a psychiatric disorder, cultural, economic, sexual diversity, etc.

Fourthly, with respect to the theoretical definition of the concept of expertise, it is not surprising that most studies do not position themselves from a specific theoretical school, as it has been pointed out that psychotherapy lacks its own theoretical models of expertise (Hill, et al., 2017). In fact, six of the seven studies that define their theoretical position are based on generic expertise models such as those of Ericsson (2018a), Glasser and Chi (1988) or Shanteau and Weiss (2014). However, it should be noted that the study by King, et al. (2014) does seem to define their own model of psychotherapeutic expertise specific to working with children.

Fifth, in relation to the operationalization of the variable and consequent selection of the sample of expert therapists, it is possible to question the validity of research that used selection methods based on institutional affiliation, contribution to the discipline, credentials, work dedication, experience, training, and peer nomination, because the relationship between these variables and a greater effect on therapeutic outcome has not been established (Tracey, et al., 2014; Caspar, 2017). This, together with the lack of theoretical foundation of most of the research reviewed, invites us to question whether the research design is sensitive enough to capture the variable. And, even more questionable is the fact that some of them did not even operationally define what would be understood by expert. The exception being the qualitative studies mentioned above, in which the definition of expert could appear as an emerging category as a result of research. This criticism could be attenuated in those studies that used multiple criteria of *expertise* as a form of triangulation of the variable. This is in line with the theoretical developments of Hill, et al. (2017), for which *expertise* must include multiple criteria. Likewise, in this sense, research that was based on performance criteria or deliberate practice that are considered valid as indicators of the variable cannot be criticized.

Finally, something similar to what was pointed out in the previous paragraph occurs with the role of the expert in the research. That is, for those roles that are defined *a priori* and through meta-criteria, their quality as experts is questionable, but in particular the role of thematic consultant is even more questionable to the extent that various studies have indicated that experts from different disciplinary fields would not be fully aware of their actions or their skills. which has been the basis of criticism of expert study based on the verbalization of the execution of a task or interviews (Ericsson, 2018b). And although other authors endorse that experts can account for their decisions or behaviors (e.g. Gobet, &Charness, 2018), in the case of psychotherapy it has been reported that therapists with varying degrees of *expertise* would have difficulty assessing their competencies and the therapeutic process (Prado-Abril, et al., 2019).

Implications of the Results

The results obtained here provide empirical evidence of the heterogeneity, disaggregation and relative scarcity of publications in this research field. Along with this, the presentation of the objectives or topics addressed proposes an initial map of the information available in this area and, by default, reveals the areas that remain to be explored. It also makes available to the reader a series of designs and instruments already used for future replicability or correction.

On the other hand, in the face of conceptual and methodological heterogeneity, it is evident that the expert subject of a study is not necessarily comparable with those of other research. It is also possible to question what we know about expert therapists by considering that most studies use sample selection methods that have been questioned for their validity.

Taken together, these elements pose a general challenge to this field of study to find a common operational definition that allows unifying efforts to advance in this area. And, along with the above, to be able to develop a methodological standard to be able to indicate that experts are being effectively evaluated.

Limitations of the Study

This review may not have been sensitive enough to other research on expert therapists that might be hosted in databases dedicated to the geographical areas where no results were found, i.e. Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania. It is also a limitation that the search only considered key concepts in English, and other results could have been obtained when extended to other languages.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the word *expertise* and its synonyms have been described as 'elitist' within psychotherapy (Caspar, 2017), which may lead to certain groups of authors using other words or concepts to refer to this phenomenon. In view of this, the search concepts could be expanded to include other studies on the therapist effect and to make intertherapist comparisons.

Main Contributions

The main conclusion of this article is that there is currently no consensus on the operational definition of expert therapist or the empirical methods of its study. This idea, although it had been previously pointed out by authors such as Hill et al. (2017), did not have the empirical support of a systematic review that would account for this.

On the other hand, the text is a methodological contribution by summarizing the objectives, methods and instruments used for the study of expert therapists. For future research, the article can serve as a map regarding the methodological state of affairs of *psychotherapeutic* expertise studies.

Authors' Note

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