

# **The Unevaluated Framework of APA's Policy on Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (EBPP)**

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Responding to the recent debate concerning evidence-based practice (Norcross, Beutler, & Levant, 2005, pp. 3-9), APA president Ronald F. Levant commissioned a Presidential Task Force with the mandate to establish a consensus that "acknowledge[s] the valid points from all sides of the debate" ("A presidential," 2005, p. 59). As a result, the Task Force (APA, 2006) produced a statement concerning evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP) that was approved as APA policy by APA's Council of Representatives in 2005. The policy defines EBPP as the "integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of patient characteristics, culture, and preferences" (p. 280). In a more extensive report explaining the process and rationale for the policy (APA, 2006), the Task Force explains that

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"best available research" includes, but is not limited to, randomized clinical (or controlled) trial (RCT) methodology and empirically supported treatments (ESTs) for specific DSM disorders (p. 273).

In comparison to narrower systems of evidence-based practice (e.g., an EST monopoly; see Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005), EBPP's inclusion of a diversity of methods and practices better reflects the complexity of psychological treatment. As the Task Force has emphasized, real-world practice is too complex to be informed by the robotic institutionalization of a single type of research, such as the RCT (APA, 2006). Instead, it requires "a decision-making process for integrating multiple streams of research evidence-including but not limited to RCTs-into the intervention process" (p. 273). This process "requires that psychologists recognize the strengths and limitations of evidence obtained from different types of research" (p. 275).

I agree wholeheartedly with the need to handle "multiple streams" of evidence, but I wish to take a more critical look at the "decision-making process" the Task Force has in mind. Such an ambitious endeavor would require, it seems, an underlying framework to inform how a diversity of evidence-based methods and practices might be used and evaluated. In this article I demonstrate that the APA policy and report imply such a framework but, curiously, it is neither explicated nor evaluated. This unevaluated framework is committed to a narrow epistemology, and this commitment, I argue, is inconsistent with EBPP's values of justification and inclusiveness.

### **The Policy's Implicit and Unjustified Commitment to Empiricism**

As I have mentioned, the APA policy is connected exclusively to a single framework, but it fails to articulate or examine this con-

nection. This framework is built upon a narrow brand of *empiricism* that asserts that "we can only know, or know best, those aspects of our experience that are sensory" (Slife, 2006; Slife, Wiggins, & Graham, 2005, p. 84). This conception of empiricism is a fairly traditional one, and is the way the term is typically used in psychology. More liberal usages of empiricism differ markedly, such as William James' radical empiricism, which encompasses "the whole of experience," including non-sensory-"unobservable"-experiences such as thoughts, emotions, and spiritual experiences (Slife, 2006). In mainstream psychology, however, the term empiricism is commonly used to refer to sensory experience only-thus, throughout this paper, I use "empiricism" to refer to sensory experience and "non-empiricism" to refer to non-sensory, unobservable, experience.

The trouble with an empiricist framework in mainstream psychology is that it incorrectly views empiricism as meaning objective or impartial, "in the sense of exposing what is actual or real" (Slife et al., 2005, p. 84), as opposed to being merely one epistemology or philosophy among many, each with inherent strengths, limitations, and biases. A common symptom of the narrow empiricist view is an inability or refusal to think critically on an epistemological level, including the failure to consider or take seriously a rich and sophisticated literature that exposes the limitations of empiricism (e.g., Kuhn, 1970; Feyerabend, 1975; Bernstein, 1983; Polkinghorne, 1990; Slife & Williams, 1995; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999). As a result, empiricism is seen, by default, as *the* way, not *a* way, and anyone who questions otherwise should study art, literature, or philosophy-the mind of "science" is already made up!

In this respect, the Task Force appears to be no different-the language of its report suggests that it does not see empiricism as a philosophy at all, but rather as a transparent window to objective reality. This presumption frees the Task Force from needing to

provide a rationale for its repeated, implicit equation of "evidence" with "empirically supported." The Task Force claims, for example, "The purpose of EBPP is to promote effective psychological practice and enhance public health by applying *empirically supported principles* of psychological assessment, case formulation, therapeutic relationship, and intervention" (APA, p. 273, emphasis added). Here, as in several other places, the Task Force asserts *that* it endorses the application of empirically supported principles, but it fails to explain *why*. In fact, nowhere in its policy statement or report does the Task Force provide a rationale for its commitment to empirical research and nowhere is a consideration given for even the possibility of the contribution of non-empirical research to EBPP. If the Task Force does in fact view empiricism as a particular epistemology, nowhere does it justify, or even explicate, its exclusive commitment to it.

This is a curious omission. If EBPP is exclusively committed to a single philosophy, why not come right out and say it? Indeed, why not call the movement *empirically-based practice* in psychology? Perhaps the Task Force wants to have its cake and eat it too—to cater wholeheartedly and uncritically to one philosophy-empiricism-but talk about it in a way that implies it does not see it as a philosophy at all. Indeed, the Task Force appears to have no qualms with assuming that empiricism is the sole lifeblood of EBPP, and that empiricism itself lies outside the realm of critical inquiry or justification.

The fact that neither the APA policy nor the mainstream discipline evaluates its commitment to empiricism is all the more reason to be concerned. We ought to consider the possibility, at least, that EBPP's unjustified commitment to empiricism is a violation of the very principles in which the evidence-based movement is grounded—if researchers and practitioners must be accountable for their practices, then so should the discipline give an accounting for its underlying philosophies and frameworks.

This lack of accountability has real consequences, including the preinvestigatory disenfranchisement or marginalization of non-empirical philosophies and the methods they imply. The remainder of this article will focus on the marginalization of a particular non-empirical method, qualitative research.

### **Marginalization of Qualitative Research**

By limiting itself to an empiricist framework, the APA policy has no choice but to marginalize qualitative research. This is because qualitative research is based on an alternative philosophy of science that neither requires nor prefers the study of sensory experience (Slife et al., 2005, p. 85). Although the mainstream discipline has long been interested with the content of unobservable meanings (e.g., love, sadness, happiness, motivation), it has nonetheless insisted that such content be operationalized (Slife et al., p. 88; Slife & Wendt, 2005; Slife, 2006). An *operationalization* is an observable, quantitative set of criteria intended to represent an unobservable meaning. For example, one might operationalize depression as a score on a questionnaire, or intelligence as a score on an intelligence test.

Operationalization is widely considered to be essential for the reliability and progress of a scientific discipline. The Task Force's report perpetuates this assumption, asserting that "good practice and science call for the timely testing of psychological practices in a way that adequately operationalizes them using appropriate scientific methodology" (APA, p. 274). This insistence for operationalization, however, is not consistent with the nature of qualitative research. Early qualitative researchers were interested in unobservable meanings themselves, not the operationalizations of these meanings (Slife et al., 2005, p. 85). Therefore, they developed alternative, qualitative methods and practices that are better suited than empirical methods to understand and investigate these meanings (Slife & Wendt, 2005).

Existential therapy, for example, is inherently concerned with understanding unobservable meanings (Irvin Yalom, as cited in Slife et al., p. 92).

In spite of its insistence on operationalization, the Task Force includes qualitative methods on its list of acceptable methods, suggesting that it does not understand the epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research (Wendt, 2006). How does the Task Force envision qualitative methods could be used to inform evidence-based practice? Its report is hardly informative on the matter, stating merely that "qualitative research can be used to describe the subjective, lived experiences of people, including participants in psychotherapy" (APA, p. 274). How do descriptions of "subjective, lived experiences" inform evidence-based practice? From the APA policy and report, the answer is unclear—perhaps one could surmise that qualitative research is useful primarily as a hypothesis generator that could lead to the development of new or improved operationalizations that can then be isolated, investigated, and implemented for evidence-based practice.

Another way the Task Force misunderstands qualitative research is in its use of the word "subjective." A relegation of qualitative research as "subjective" makes sense only from an empiricist framework. From a non-empiricist perspective, empiricist conceptions of "objective" and "subjective" are irrelevant because they merely equate objective as empirical and subjective as non-empirical (Slife, 2006). Thus, from a non-empiricist perspective, the subject matter of qualitative research is hardly subjective. Qualitative researchers are not interested, for example, in investigating a subjective interpretation of "love"; they are interested in studying the actual meaning of love itself—which is, fundamentally, an unobservable meaning.

There is reason to believe that the Task Force included qualitative research on its list of approved methods due to pressure from

respected qualitative researchers, and that it failed to understand the implications of doing so. In earlier drafts of the policy report, qualitative research was not even included on the list of endorsed types of evidence. This changed, it appears, after Arthur Bohart (2005), a leading expert in the evidence-based movement, recommended its inclusion. The report did not, however, follow Bohart's related suggestion to mention examples of qualitative methods, such as "grounded theory, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and others." This omission is not surprising because an understanding of how these methods inform practice is not possible within a strictly empiricist framework. Without understanding how these qualitative methods show promise for the investigation of unobservable meanings, the APA report does not provide an adequate position concerning the role of qualitative research for evidence-based practice.

That the APA policy misunderstands and misrepresents qualitative research calls into question whether it truly "acknowledge[s] the valid points from all sides of the debate" ("A presidential," 2005, p. 59). Instead, the policy is committed in advance to an empiricist epistemology that causes it to have a preinvestigatory bias against non-empiricist epistemologies and the methods and practices they imply. This bias can lead to the misinterpretation and marginalization of a method in question—as is the case for qualitative methods—or it can exclude the method altogether, before investigation even begins (Slife et al., 2005, p. 92).

Therefore, "all sides of the debate" are set up in advance to include only the methods and practices of a single epistemology. This is a crucial point, considering the extent to which the Task Force lauds the diversity and open-mindedness of its report, claiming, for example, that

. . . perhaps the central message of [the] report, and one of the most heartening aspects of the process that led to

it, is the consensus achieved among a diverse group . . . from multiple perspectives that EBPP requires an appreciation of the value of multiple sources of scientific evidence. (APA, p. 280)

When one considers, however, the Task Force's exclusive commitment to a single epistemological framework, this statement must be qualified. Indeed, one could claim that the Task Force's consensus is not heartening at all, if in fact the Task Force and its policy are restricted to a narrow view of scientific evidence in the first place.

The narrow perspective of the Task Force is also revealed in its report's concluding remarks, in which it claims that the APA policy reflects a "reassertion of what psychologists have known for a century: that the scientific method . . . is the best tool we have for learning about what works for whom" (p. 280). Given the report's empiricist framework, discussed above, one can safely interpret "the scientific method" as an empiricist methodology. In using the words "best tool," the Task Force, I suppose, implies the existence of other types of investigation, but it fails to provide a rationale about *why* the scientific method of empiricism is the best tool. Did it compare it with other tools, such as qualitative methods? If so, what underlies the method for this comparison-empiricism, the very subject in dispute?

This lack of rationale is compounded when one considers another unheeded suggestion from Bohart (2005), who pointed out that the Task Force's above passage "perpetuates the myth that there is one 'scientific method,' [and] should be rephrased as, 'that scientific METHODS are the best tools.'" The failure to follow this suggestion, representing the position of many in APA's Division of Humanistic Psychology (Division 32; Bohart, 2005), marks a crucial distinction when evaluating the APA policy's inclusiveness: Although the Task Force appreciates "multiple sources of



research evidence," it does so only within the larger umbrella of a single epistemology. This so-called diversity is problematic when we consider that there are indeed other scientific methods, such as qualitative research, based upon non-empirical epistemologies, which show promise for evidence-based practice.

### Conclusion

EBPP's implicit endorsement of an empiricist framework betrays its own values of accountability and inclusiveness. Although the Task Force was "charged with defining and explicating principles of evidence-based practice in psychology" (APA, p. 273), it has failed to define and explicate the very framework upon which these principles supposedly rely. Moreover, although a core value for the project is diversity, it favors certain methods and practices and disenfranchises others without rationale. If we are to do the evidence-based project correctly, we need to articulate a more critical framework that recognizes empiricism as *a*, not *the*, philosophy of science (Slife, 2006).

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