Commonly used research terminology

Evidence-based practice is the corner stone of Clinical Psychology, and means making clinical decisions using the best available research evidence in consultation with the client\(^1\). However, not all psychological research is of an equal standard, and understanding some key terms can help you critically assess the literature to make informed decisions. Commonly used terms include:

**Meta analyses and Systematic reviews:** These studies aim to collate and assess available research to answer a question such as “what treatment for problem gambling is most effective?” These studies use explicit criteria for selecting studies and often only assess high quality research evidence. Outcomes from meta analyses and systematic reviews are often referred to as *Level 1* evidence.

**Randomised controlled trials (RCT):** These research designs are typically used to directly compare the effectiveness of treatments. These trials aim to hold all aspects of the research constant aside from treatment type in order to minimise outcomes being influenced by other factors. This is achieved by randomly allocating each participant into a treatment condition, so every person has the same chance of receiving a particular treatment. In some trials participants and/or researchers are “blinded” to the treatment received to further reduce bias. These studies are often referred to as *Level 2* evidence.

**Validity:** Validity refers to how closely a measure or construct accurately reflects the concept it aims to capture. Validity is very important in psychology as many of the things we work with are unobservable, and we can only infer them by the presence of symptoms. For example, we can observe harm caused by gambling and gambling losses, but we cannot directly observe “problem gambling”. There are numerous ways validity is assessed in psychological research including: face validity, construct validity, convergent & divergent validity, predictive validity and ecological validity.

**Reliability:** Reliability is a way of quantifying whether something or someone is measuring something consistently over numerous applications. Researchers might be interested in whether a person responds in similar ways to a test at different time points (test-retest reliability), whether different people administering the same test.

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\(^1\) Evidence based reference

More information about evidence-based practice, research terminology and tools to critically assess research are available from the University of Oxford’s Centre for Evidence Based Medicine [www.cebm.net](http://www.cebm.net) or the Cochrane Collaboration [www.cochrane.org](http://www.cochrane.org)