

THE INFLUENCE OF THE THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE ON ADHERENCE TO PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

A INFLUÊNCIA DO VÍNCULO TERAPÊUTICO NA ADESÃO AO TRATAMENTO PSICOLÓGICO: UMA REVISÃO DA LITERATURA

LA INFLUENCIA DEL VÍNCULO TERAPÉUTICO EN LA ADHESIÓN AL TRATAMIENTO PSICOLÓGICO: UNA REVISIÓN DE LA LITERATURA



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Andréia Oliveira da Mata¹, Hareli Fernanda Garcia Cecchin²

ABSTRACT

Adherence to psychological treatment remains a significant challenge in clinical practice, particularly given the rates of premature dropout observed across different therapeutic contexts. In this scenario, the therapeutic bond has been consistently identified as a key factor associated with patient engagement and continuity in psychotherapy. This study aimed to understand, based on scientific literature, how the therapeutic bond influences adherence to psychological treatment. A narrative literature review was conducted using the Scielo and Google Scholar databases, including articles published between 2015 and 2025. Eligible studies were full-text, freely available articles written in Portuguese or English that addressed the therapeutic bond within the context of psychotherapy. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 14 articles were selected for analysis. The findings indicate convergence regarding the central role of the therapeutic bond in treatment adherence, highlighting elements such as empathy, trust, collaboration, and shared goal-setting as factors associated with patients' permanence in the psychotherapeutic process. The studies also show that a fragile therapeutic alliance is related to treatment dropout, particularly in institutional settings, psychotherapy with children and adolescents, and online modalities. It is concluded that the therapeutic bond is an essential component of psychotherapy effectiveness, functioning as a protective factor against dropout and should be understood as a dynamic relational process, sensitive to clinical contexts and patients' needs.

Keywords: Therapeutic Bond. Adherence to Psychological Treatment. Therapeutic Relationship. Psychotherapy.

RESUMO

A adesão ao tratamento psicológico constitui um desafio relevante na prática clínica, especialmente diante dos índices de abandono observados em diferentes contextos terapêuticos. Nesse cenário, o vínculo terapêutico tem sido apontado como um dos principais fatores associados à permanência e ao engajamento do paciente na psicoterapia.

¹ Graduated in Psychology. Centro Universitário Luterano de Palmas (CEULP/UIbra).

E-mail: oliveiradamataandrea@gmail.com Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/1644707875862492>

² Dr. in Psychology. Centro Universitário Luterano de Palmas (CEULP/UIbra).

E-mail: harelifernanda@gmail.com Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4875-7638>

Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3655813781634730>

O presente estudo teve como objetivo compreender, a partir da literatura científica, como o vínculo terapêutico influencia a adesão ao tratamento psicológico. Trata-se de uma revisão narrativa da literatura, realizada nas bases Scielo e Google Acadêmico, contemplando artigos publicados entre 2015 e 2025. Foram incluídos estudos completos, disponíveis gratuitamente, em português ou inglês, que abordassem o vínculo terapêutico no contexto da psicoterapia. Após a aplicação dos critérios de inclusão e exclusão, 14 artigos compuseram o corpus da revisão. Os resultados indicam convergência quanto ao papel central do vínculo terapêutico na adesão ao tratamento psicológico, destacando elementos como empatia, confiança, colaboração e definição compartilhada de objetivos como fatores associados à permanência do paciente no processo psicoterapêutico. Os estudos também evidenciam que a fragilidade da aliança terapêutica está relacionada ao abandono, especialmente em contextos institucionais, atendimentos com crianças e adolescentes e modalidades online. Conclui-se que o vínculo terapêutico constitui um componente essencial da efetividade da psicoterapia, atuando como fator protetivo frente ao abandono e devendo ser compreendido como uma construção relacional dinâmica, sensível às características do contexto clínico e às necessidades do paciente.

Palavras-chave: Vínculo Terapêutico. Aliança Terapêutica. Adesão ao Tratamento Psicológico. Psicoterapia.

RESUMEN

La adhesión al tratamiento psicológico constituye un desafío relevante en la práctica clínica, especialmente ante los índices de abandono observados en diferentes contextos terapéuticos. En este escenario, el vínculo terapéutico ha sido señalado como uno de los principales factores asociados a la permanencia y al compromiso del paciente en la psicoterapia. El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo comprender, a partir de la literatura científica, cómo el vínculo terapéutico influye en la adhesión al tratamiento psicológico. Se trata de una revisión narrativa de la literatura, realizada en las bases de datos SciELO y Google Académico, incluyendo artículos publicados entre 2015 y 2025. Se incluyeron estudios completos, disponibles gratuitamente, en portugués o inglés, que abordaran el vínculo terapéutico en el contexto de la psicoterapia. Tras la aplicación de los criterios de inclusión y exclusión, 14 artículos conformaron el corpus de la revisión. Los resultados indican convergencia respecto al papel central del vínculo terapéutico en la adhesión al tratamiento psicológico, destacando elementos como empatía, confianza, colaboración y definición compartida de objetivos como factores asociados a la permanencia del paciente en el proceso psicoterapéutico. Los estudios también evidencian que la fragilidad de la alianza terapéutica está relacionada con el abandono, especialmente en contextos institucionales, atención a niños y adolescentes y modalidades en línea. Se concluye que el vínculo terapéutico constituye un componente esencial de la efectividad de la psicoterapia, actuando como un factor protector frente al abandono y debiendo comprenderse como una construcción relacional dinámica, sensible a las características del contexto clínico y a las necesidades del paciente.

Palabras clave: Vínculo Terapéutico. Alianza Terapéutica. Adhesión al Tratamiento Psicológico. Psicoterapia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Adherence to psychological treatment is one of the main challenges of contemporary clinical practice, especially in view of the high dropout rates observed in different care contexts. Studies indicate that a significant portion of patients interrupt psychotherapy early, often before achieving consistent clinical changes, which compromises the effectiveness of mental health care [1, 2]. In view of this scenario, it is essential to understand the factors that favor the patient's permanence in the therapeutic process and sustain engagement throughout the treatment.

Among the elements associated with adherence, the therapeutic bond, often called therapeutic alliance, is consistently pointed out as one of the main predictors of continuity and success of psychotherapy. Since Bordin's classic formulation [3], the therapeutic alliance is understood as a collaboration between therapist and patient, involving the establishment of shared goals, agreement on treatment tasks, and the construction of an affective bond based on trust and cooperation [3]. On the other hand, Gelso & An [4] prefer to name the phenomenon as a therapeutic relation, with the working alliance being one of the three components of this relation, which is also composed of the real relation and the transference-countertransference configuration). However, regardless of the theoretical approach adopted, reviews and meta-analyses reinforce that the quality of the therapeutic relationship is associated with better clinical outcomes and greater adherence to treatment [5, 6].

The literature points out that elements such as empathy, qualified listening, emotional validation, conscious collaboration, and joint goal setting are central components of the therapeutic bond and have a direct impact on patient engagement [7, 8]. In addition, studies indicate that the appropriate management of ruptures in the therapeutic relationship can strengthen the alliance and contribute to the continuity of treatment, instead of necessarily representing a factor of abandonment [9].

The relevance of the therapeutic bond becomes even more evident in specific contexts, such as psychotherapy with children and adolescents, care provided in school services, online modalities, and follow-up of patients with greater emotional vulnerability. In these scenarios, institutional, family, and contextual factors can interfere with adherence, increasing the risk of dropout [10, 11]. Even so, evidence suggests that a well-established therapeutic bond can act as a protective factor, minimizing the impact of these barriers and favoring the patient's permanence in the psychotherapeutic process [1, 2].

Despite the recognition of the centrality of the therapeutic link, it is observed that the scientific production on the subject is heterogeneous, involving different methodological designs, populations, and clinical contexts. In addition, there are still gaps related to the

systematization of the findings, especially with regard to the integrated understanding of how the therapeutic bond influences adherence to psychological treatment in different modalities of psychotherapy [5, 9]. In this sense, narrative reviews play an important role in allowing the critical articulation of evidence, favoring a broader understanding of complex and multifactorial phenomena, such as the therapeutic relationship.

Therefore, the present study aims to understand, based on the scientific literature, how the therapeutic bond influences adherence to psychological treatment. It seeks to review scientific productions published between 2015 and 2025 that address the role of the therapeutic bond in the engagement, permanence, and outcomes of psychotherapy, identifying convergences, theoretical contributions, and gaps in scientific production on the subject.

2 METHOD

The research is a narrative review of the literature, with a qualitative approach and descriptive character, whose objective was to gather, analyze and discuss scientific productions on the influence of the therapeutic bond on adherence to psychological treatment. The narrative review was chosen because it allows a broad and interpretative analysis of the theme, favoring the integration of different theoretical perspectives and clinical contexts [10].

The search for studies was carried out in the SciELO and Google Scholar databases, selected for their relevance to the area of Psychology and for the wide availability of open access articles. The following search strategy was used: ("therapeutic bond" OR "therapeutic alliance" OR "therapist-patient relationship") AND ("adherence to psychological treatment" OR "therapeutic engagement" OR "abandonment of psychotherapy"). Articles published between 2015 and 2025, written in Portuguese or English, were considered.

The inclusion criteria were: complete scientific articles, available free of charge, that directly addressed the therapeutic bond in the context of psychotherapy, regardless of the theoretical approach, modality of care (individual, group, face-to-face or online) or age group of the public studied. The exclusion criteria included: articles published before 2015; texts with restricted access; duplicate studies; productions that dealt with the professional-patient relationship in other areas of health; and studies that addressed adherence to psychological treatment without an explicit relationship with the therapeutic bond.

The selection of studies occurred in two stages: initially by reading the titles and abstracts and, later, by reading the eligible articles in full. At the end of the process, 14 studies met the established criteria and composed the corpus of the review.

The analysis of the articles was carried out in a qualitative and interpretative way, seeking to identify thematic convergences, theoretical contributions, main findings and gaps in scientific production on the therapeutic bond and adherence to psychological treatment. The results were organized in a descriptive way, with the support of a synthesis table for the systematization of the evidence.

3 RESULTS

The initial search resulted in the identification of 54 studies. After the removal of duplicates (n = 8), the exclusion of dissertations, theses, course completion papers, books, and materials without access to the full text (n = 23), as well as the elimination of studies that did not directly address the relationship between the therapeutic bond and adherence to psychological treatment (n = 9), 14 articles that met the established criteria were included.

The selected studies were analyzed in terms of their methodological characteristics, main findings, and relationship with the therapeutic bond and adherence to psychological treatment. The synthesis of this evidence is presented in Table 1, which brings together productions with different designs, including literature reviews, clinical case studies, experience reports and documentary research carried out in Psychology school services.

Table 1

Articles included in the narrative review

Author(s) and year	Type of study	Main results	Relationship with the therapeutic bond and adherence
Adami, Portella & Dias (2020)	Qualitative study of a clinical case with borderline patients; interviews to understand engagement and therapeutic prognosis.	They observe that the breach of trust in psychotherapy is a decisive factor for abandonment; When trust is established, the borderline patient can build a bond, but fears dependence and may give up so as not to be abandoned first.	They highlight that the construction of a secure therapeutic bond is central to keeping borderline patients in therapy, showing that the relationship of trust is a key component of adherence.
Andrade, Fernandes and Silveira (2025)	Experience report, clinical internship in a psychological clinic-school with direct observation of interactions and records in a reflective diary during supervision (Analytical-Behavioral Therapy).	They observe that the therapeutic alliance is built through the direct observation of interactions, supervised reflections and field diaries, which favors the development of therapeutic skills in the intern.	They highlight the importance of the therapeutic alliance in the training process, the bond with the client serves as a basis to improve interpersonal and professional skills, reinforcing the relevance of the therapeutic bond for the effectiveness and maintenance of interventions.
Benetti, Mattos, Silva &	Clinical case study in psychoanalytic psychotherapy;	They observed that the patient's lack of insight and an immature defensive style were	They highlight that individual factors of the patient and the development of the

Bittencourt (2017)	analysis of 20 sessions using the <i>Adolescent Psychotherapy Q-Set (APQ)</i> and therapist's clinical notes.	predictors of psychotherapy abandonment.	therapeutic bond directly influence adherence, evidencing the need for attention to the therapeutic alliance in adolescence.
Brito, Montezuma, Melo and Moreira (2020)	This is a qualitative study, based on interviews with psychologists in training, analyzed through a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach.	The authors identified that the training process crosses insecurities, the need for supervision and emotional challenges, with the therapeutic relationship being the main axis of support for clinical practice. The bond appears as a condition for clinical management and patient engagement.	It contributes by demonstrating that the therapeutic bond is structuring both for the development of the therapist and for the patient's permanence, reinforcing that the quality of the relationship favors adherence and reduces the risk of abandonment.
Château & Leugi (2025)	Qualitative research with 22 Brazilian ACT therapists, through semi-structured interviews.	They observe that Brazilian ACT therapists integrate theories (such as Analytical-Functional Psychotherapy and Analytical-Behavioral Therapy), and adapt interventions in an experiential and idiographic way for their clients.	They highlight that flexibility in therapeutic practice and individual adaptation (idiographic) reinforce the importance of the therapeutic bond and alliance for treatment adherence, especially in acceptance and commitment therapy.
Des Essarts, Brenner, Ffner & Ramires (2022)	Narrative review; The authors selected studies on abandonment of psychoanalytic psychotherapy by adolescents and analyzed sociodemographic, clinical, and behavioral factors.	They observe that factors such as age, gender, antisocial behavior and clinical variables influence the abandonment of psychotherapy by adolescents.	They highlight that the quality of the therapeutic alliance is decisive for the continuity or abandonment of treatment, reinforcing the importance of the therapeutic bond for adherence.
Fraga, Hack, Valentini, Brenner & Ramires, (2022)	Qualitative-exploratory study; Semi-structured interviews with 23 adolescents who were being followed up or who had abandoned psychoanalytic psychotherapy, data analysis by thematic analysis method.	They observe that central themes for those who remain include the "Therapeutic relationship" and "Changes resulting from psychotherapy", and for those who leave, "Therapeutic relationship", "Defenses and resistances of adolescents" and "Therapeutic alliance with those responsible" stand out.	They highlight that the therapeutic bond, both with the therapist and with those responsible for them, emerges as a key factor for adolescents' adherence to treatment, reinforcing the importance of strengthening the therapeutic alliance in psychotherapy contexts with this public.
Machado & Eizirik (2016)	Review of reviews and meta-analyses on therapeutic alliance; analyzed narrative reviews, systematic reviews and meta-analyses involving adults, children/adolescents, treatment dropout, attachment, cultural	Therapeutic alliance (TA) is consistently associated with treatment outcomes, but its effects are small, and other factors also strongly influence outcomes.	It reinforces the central importance of the therapeutic bond for the adherence and success of psychological treatment, in addition to pointing out gaps in the investigation of how the therapeutic alliance affects different types of patients and contexts.

	differences, among others.		
Maffini & Cassel (2020)	Single, systematic case study; adolescent attended at a university psychology school service, with an exploratory character.	They observe that the lack of availability of schedules compatible with the school service, low family adherence and a fragile therapeutic alliance contributed to the premature interruption of treatment.	They highlight that the therapeutic bond and the support of family members are crucial factors for adherence, reinforcing the importance of strategies to strengthen this alliance in psychotherapy with adolescents.
Paez, Nunes & Hirakata (2015)	Quantitative-retrospective study; analysis of 600 medical records of children undergoing psychoanalytic psychotherapy in Porto Alegre.	It found that 24.2% of the children were discharged; Predictors of discharge included prior neurological evaluation and longer duration of treatment.	They highlight that the construction of the therapeutic alliance and the parents' understanding of the need for psychotherapy can influence adherence and continuity of treatment.
Peixoto et al. (2016)	Single case study; brief psychodynamic psychotherapy with analysis of the therapist's verbal interventions and therapeutic alliance measures throughout the sessions.	They point out that the therapeutic alliance increased progressively throughout the process, especially when the therapist's interventions were adjusted according to the phase of psychotherapy, favoring greater patient engagement.	They highlight that the study shows how the modulation of therapeutic interventions strengthens the therapeutic alliance, directly contributing to the maintenance of the bond and favoring adherence to psychological treatment.
Pimentel, Fonte and Martins (2020)	Quantitative-retrospective study; Analysis of 68 adults attended at a psychology teaching clinic, considering sociodemographic, institutional and clinical variables.	They observed that participants who abandoned psychotherapy early were generally younger, had a lower frequency of sessions, shorter intervention time, and more institutional difficulties	It points out the need for special attention to institutional and clinical variables (such as payment modality, frequency, intervention time) that can interfere with the therapeutic bond and, consequently, with treatment adherence, reinforcing that bond and therapeutic relationship are important factors for the patient to remain.
Rocha & Ferraz (2023)	Experience report (cognitive-behavioral approach) in a service-school.	They observed that the patient, even abandoning after a few sessions, reported significant improvement, which suggests that abandonment may indicate therapeutic autonomy and not just a withdrawal.	They highlight that the therapeutic alliance continues to be central, even with interruption, reinforcing that bonding and autonomy are relevant to understanding adherence and outcomes in psychotherapy.
Sei & Colavin (2016)	This is a descriptive documentary study (survey research, analysis of medical records, screening and case closure forms of a psychology school service).	They note that, among those who started psychotherapy in 2013, 24% dropped out during treatment; identify several reasons for abandonment: problems with the therapeutic alliance, institutional difficulties, external issues and unjustified absences.	They highlight that the fragility of the therapeutic alliance, as well as institutional and personal barriers, contributes to patient evasion, reinforcing the importance of the therapeutic bond for treatment adherence.

Source: prepared by the authors based on cited authors.

In addition to the methodological diversity, the studies analyzed contemplated different audiences and clinical contexts, including care with children, adolescents and adults, as well as interventions carried out in school services and in face-to-face and online modalities. Despite these variations, convergence was observed regarding the relational elements associated with adherence to psychological treatment, with emphasis on empathy, trust, collaboration, and clarity regarding therapeutic objectives. These components were recurrent in the studies as factors related to the patient's permanence in the psychotherapeutic process, regardless of the theoretical approach adopted.

In a convergent way, studies indicate that the quality of the therapeutic bond is directly associated with adherence to psychological treatment, with the fragility of the alliance being a recurrent factor in cases of abandonment. On the other hand, the construction of a therapeutic relationship based on trust, empathy and collaboration was associated with the patient's permanence in the psychotherapeutic process, regardless of the theoretical approach or the context of care.

4 DISCUSSION

The findings of this narrative review confirm that the therapeutic bond is a central element for adherence to psychological treatment, sustaining patient engagement and directly influencing the continuity and effectiveness of psychotherapy. The literature analyzed converges by indicating that the quality of the relationship established between therapist and patient plays a more consistent role in adherence than specific technical factors of the approaches, corroborating evidence already pointed out in previous reviews and meta-analyses [5, 6].

The interpretation of the results suggests that relational elements such as empathy, trust, collaboration, and shared goal setting function as mediating mechanisms between the therapeutic process and its outcomes. These components not only favor the patient's permanence in treatment, but also expand their emotional availability to cope with difficult content, strengthening the commitment to the psychotherapeutic process. Thus, the therapeutic bond is not only configured as an initial condition of psychotherapy, but as a dynamic construction, which is updated and strengthened throughout the clinical course [9].

The studies also indicate that the influence of the therapeutic bond becomes even more relevant in contexts marked by greater vulnerability to dropout, such as in care provided in school services, in psychotherapy with children and adolescents and in online modalities. In these situations, institutional, family, and contextual factors tend to interfere with

adherence, increasing the risk of early interruption. However, the analysis of the articles reveals that a consistent therapeutic bond can act as a protective factor, attenuating the impact of these barriers and favoring the patient's permanence in psychological care [1, 11].

With regard to population specificities, the literature reviewed indicates that, in child and adolescent care, the therapeutic bond goes beyond the daily relationship between therapist and patient, also involving those responsible and the family context. The absence of a solid alliance with these actors can weaken the therapeutic process, while their integration favors adherence and continuity of treatment. These findings reinforce the need for interventions that are sensitive to the particularities of development and the demands of the broader relational context [12].

In the context of online psychotherapy, the studies analyzed indicate that the therapeutic bond remains a central element, even if it requires specific adaptations related to the virtual setting. Aspects such as security, clarity in communication and ethical management of the digital space emerge as necessary conditions for maintaining the therapeutic alliance at a distance, showing that the quality of the relationship continues to be decisive for adherence, regardless of the modality of care.

When comparing the findings of this review with the previous literature, it is observed that it is in line with studies that highlight the therapeutic alliance as a robust predictor of psychotherapeutic success. However, the analyzed studies expand this understanding by evidencing the role of institutional, formative and contextual variables, often little explored in classical studies. This broadening points to the need to understand the therapeutic bond as a situated phenomenon, crossed by organizational, cultural and socioeconomic conditions that influence the clinical experience.

Among the limitations identified in the scientific production analyzed, the predominance of theoretical, narrative or qualitative studies stands out, with a lack of empirical investigations that use standardized measures to assess the therapeutic bond and its relationship with treatment adherence. In addition, the methodological and population heterogeneity of the studies makes it difficult to generalize the findings and points to the need for future research that explores, in a more systematic way, the management of ruptures in the therapeutic alliance and specific strategies for different clinical contexts.

In summary, the discussion of the results shows that the therapeutic bond should be understood as a dynamic relational process, central to adherence to psychotherapy and sensitive to the characteristics of the context and the population served. These findings reinforce the importance of clinical practices that prioritize the construction and maintenance of the therapeutic relationship as a fundamental axis of psychological care.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to understand, based on the scientific literature, the influence of the therapeutic bond on adherence to psychological treatment, through a narrative review of articles published between 2015 and 2025. The analysis of the selected productions showed that the therapeutic bond is a central element for the patient's permanence in psychotherapy, regardless of the theoretical approach or the modality of care.

The findings indicate that relational components such as empathy, trust, collaboration, and shared goal setting are key to sustaining patient engagement and favoring the continuity of the therapeutic process. In addition, the literature points out that the appropriate management of ruptures in the therapeutic relationship can strengthen the alliance and contribute to adherence, reinforcing the dynamic and procedural character of the bond.

The review also showed that the impact of the therapeutic bond is particularly relevant in contexts that are more vulnerable to dropout, such as school services, psychotherapy with children and adolescents, and online consultations. In these scenarios, institutional, family, and contextual factors can interfere with adherence, but a consistent therapeutic bond tends to act as a protective factor, minimizing the risk of dropout.

Among the limitations of the present study, the exclusively bibliographic nature of the review stands out, restricted to articles published in certain databases and languages, which may have limited the scope of the evidence analyzed. In addition, the methodological heterogeneity of the included studies makes it difficult to generalize the findings.

As a contribution, this work reinforces the centrality of the therapeutic bond as a structuring axis of adherence to psychological treatment, offering theoretical subsidies for clinical practice and for the training of psychotherapists. It is recommended that future research advances in the empirical investigation of the therapeutic bond, with the use of standardized instruments, analysis of breaks in the alliance, and exploration of specific strategies for different contexts and clinical populations.

In summary, the results of this review confirm that the therapeutic bond not only favors adherence to psychological treatment, but is an essential component of the effectiveness of psychotherapy, and should be understood as a dynamic relational construction, sensitive to the singularities of the clinical context and the needs of the patient.

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