

Psychodynamic approach to religiosity/spirituality: characterization of productions, and their methodological and epistemological aspects

Abordagem psicodinâmica da religiosidade/espiritualidade: caracterização das produções, seus aspectos metodológicos e epistemológicos

Enfoque psicodinámico de la religiosidad/espiritualidad: caracterización de las producciones y sus aspectos metodológicos y epistemológicos

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to characterize the scientific productions on religiosity/spirituality within the psychodynamic approach, analyzing their

methodological, epistemological aspects and contributions to psychology education. The research was motivated by the observation that, although the psychodynamic perspective—focused on the existence of the unconscious as a source of human motivations—provides significant contributions to the study of religiosity/spirituality, it has been increasingly overlooked in favor of cognitive theories. An Integrative Literature Review was conducted in January 2023, using the PsycInfo database and the descriptors "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy," "Religion," "Spirituality," "Psychology and Religion," and "Psychodynamics" in English, Portuguese, and Spanish, combined with the Boolean operators AND and OR. Out of 173 records retrieved, 25 studies were selected, all in English, published between 1998 and 2022, predominantly in the United States. More than half were case studies (n=14), followed by theoretical reflections (n=7), opinion articles (n=2), and quantitative/descriptive field research (n=2). Some studies used exclusively one psychodynamic theory (n=11), others multiple psychodynamic theories (n=4), and some adopted diverse theoretical approaches (n=10). It is concluded that, despite the relevant production, the predominance of low-evidence-level methods such as case studies hinders scientific recognition of the approach, suggesting the adoption of mixed methods and greater methodological rigor. Finally, it highlights the importance of preserving hermeneutic sciences in psychology education.

Keywords: Psychodynamic Approach. Religiosity. Spirituality. Psychotherapy. Teaching in Psychology.

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa teve como objetivo caracterizar as produções científicas sobre religiosidade/espiritualidade sob a abordagem psicodinâmica, analisando seus aspectos metodológicos, epistemológicos e contribuições para a formação em psicologia. A motivação decorre da constatação de que, embora a perspectiva psicodinâmica — centrada na existência do inconsciente como fonte de motivações humanas — ofereça relevantes contribuições ao estudo da religiosidade/espiritualidade, tem sido preterida frente à expansão das teorias cognitivas. Realizou-se uma Revisão Integrativa da Literatura em janeiro de 2023, na base PsycInfo, com os descritores "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy", "Religion", "Spirituality", "Psychology and Religion" e "Psychodynamics" em inglês, português e espanhol, combinados pelos operadores booleanos AND e OR. Dos 173 registros encontrados, 25 estudos foram selecionados, todos em inglês, publicados entre 1998 e 2022, majoritariamente nos Estados Unidos. Mais da metade eram estudos de caso (n=14), seguidos de reflexões teóricas (n=7), artigos de opinião (n=2) e pesquisas quantitativas/descriptivas (n=2). Alguns estudos utilizaram exclusivamente uma teoria psicodinâmica (n=11), outros múltiplas teorias psicodinâmicas (n=4), e textos com abordagens teóricas diversas (n=10). Conclui-se que, apesar da produção relevante, o predomínio de métodos de baixo nível de evidência, como o estudo de caso, dificulta a consolidação científica da abordagem, sugerindo a necessidade de métodos mistos e maior rigor metodológico. Ressalta-se a importância da valorização das ciências hermenêuticas na formação em psicologia.

Palavras-chave: Abordagem Psicodinâmica. Religiosidade. Espiritualidade. Psicoterapia. Ensino em Psicologia.

RESUMEN

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo caracterizar las producciones científicas sobre religiosidad/espiritualidad desde el enfoque psicodinámico, analizando sus aspectos metodológicos, epistemológicos y sus contribuciones a la formación en psicología. La investigación se motivó por la constatación de que, aunque la perspectiva psicodinámica —centrada en la existencia del inconsciente como fuente de motivaciones humanas— ofrece importantes aportes al estudio de la religiosidad/espiritualidad, ha sido desplazada en favor de las teorías cognitivas. Se realizó una Revisión Integrativa de la Literatura en enero de 2023, en la base de datos PsycInfo, utilizando los descriptores "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy", "Religion", "Spirituality", "Psychology and Religion" y "Psychodynamics" en inglés, portugués y español, combinados con los operadores booleanos AND y OR. De los 173 registros encontrados, se seleccionaron 25 estudios, todos en inglés, publicados entre 1998 y 2022, en su mayoría en Estados Unidos. Más de la mitad fueron estudios de caso (n=14), seguidos de reflexiones teóricas (n=7), artículos de opinión (n=2) e investigaciones cuantitativas/descriptivas (n=2). Algunos estudios utilizaron exclusivamente una teoría psicodinámica (n=11), otros múltiples teorías psicodinámicas (n=4) y otros abordajes teóricos diversos (n=10). Se concluye que, a pesar de la producción relevante, el predominio de métodos de bajo nivel de evidencia, como los estudios de caso, dificulta el reconocimiento científico del enfoque, sugiriendo el uso de métodos mixtos y un mayor rigor metodológico. Finalmente, se resalta la importancia de valorar las ciencias hermenéuticas en la formación en psicología.

Palabras clave: Enfoque Psicodinámico. Religiosidad. Espiritualidad. Psicoterapia. Enseñanza de la Psicología.

1 INTRODUCTION

The psychodynamic approach, at times referred to as “Depth Psychology,” is an umbrella term encompassing various theories that share the concept of an unconscious psychic dimension—not solely Freudian psychoanalysis, as is commonly assumed. This tradition has had a significant impact on the development of the Psychology of Religion, providing a vast body of literature up to the present day and polarizing the field between its staunch defenders and critics (Ávila, 2007).

Freudian psychoanalytic theory, however, influenced research in this field for a considerable period, proposing both a theory of normal and pathological

functioning and a method of investigation and treatment simultaneously. Through the clinical method of unconscious scrutiny (free association), treatment was conducted alongside the investigation of psychic processes and the theoretical formulation based on the data obtained (Àvila, 2007; Corveleyn, Luyten, & Dezutter, 2013; Marinotti, 2016).

From Freud's initial formulations, other psychodynamic schools emerged—such as Drive Psychology, Ego Psychology, Object Relations Theory, and Self Psychology—all of which continue to offer valuable contributions to the understanding of religiosity/spirituality (Corveleyn *et al.*, 2013).

Although psychodynamic literature on religion is abundant, it is noteworthy that within the contemporary landscape of the Psychology of Religion, little attention has been given to the exploration of these contributions. Such works are often limited to historical analyses of psychoanalytic thought concerning religion (Hood Jr., Hill, & Spilka, 2018).

In this context, the present integrative literature review aims to characterize the scientific productions on religiosity/spirituality from the psychodynamic approach, highlighting their methodological and epistemological aspects and discussing their contributions to psychology education.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a master's dissertation and adopts the Integrative Literature Review as its methodological approach, aiming to synthesize the scientific production regarding the contributions of the psychodynamic approach to the teaching of religiosity/spirituality in psychology programs.

The Integrative Review was chosen due to its capacity to gather and critically analyze studies with different designs, while ensuring the rigorous application of methodological steps that enhance both clinical practice and education (Souza, Silva, & Carvalho, 2010).

The research was developed following the six stages recommended for integrative reviews (Dantas *et al.*, 2021). Initially, the topic was identified and the research question formulated, using the PICo strategy (Population, Interest,

Context) (Stern, Jordan, & McArthur, 2014), resulting in the guiding question: "How does the psychodynamic approach understand and address the religious/spiritual experience from a clinical perspective?"

Study search and selection were conducted using the PsycInfo database, maintained by the American Psychological Association (APA), which is widely recognized in the field of psychology. Inclusion criteria were: (a) studies available in full-text format; (b) texts published in Portuguese, English, or Spanish; (c) studies that used the psychodynamic approach as a theoretical framework for analyzing religiosity/spirituality. Exclusion criteria included incomplete, unavailable, duplicate texts, abstracts, reviews, preprints, and studies that did not address religiosity/spirituality from a psychodynamic perspective.

The search strategy involved combining standardized descriptors (DeCS, MeSH, and PsycINFO Term Finder) with the Boolean operators AND and OR, resulting in six search algorithms: ("Psicoterapia Psicodinâmica" OR "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy" OR "Psicoterapia Psicodinámica") AND (Religion OR Religión OR Religião) AND (Spirituality OR Espiritualidad OR Espiritualidade); ("Psicoterapia Psicodinâmica" OR "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy" OR "Psicoterapia Psicodinámica") AND (Religion OR Religión OR Religião); ("Psicoterapia Psicodinâmica" OR "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy" OR "Psicoterapia Psicodinámica") AND (Spirituality OR Espiritualidad OR Espiritualidade); ("Psicoterapia Psicodinâmica" OR "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy" OR "Psicoterapia Psicodinámica") AND ("Religion and Psychology" OR "Religión y Psicología" OR "Religião e Psicologia") AND (Spirituality OR Espiritualidad OR Espiritualidade); ("Psicoterapia Psicodinâmica" OR "Psychodynamic Psychotherapy" OR "Psicoterapia Psicodinámica") AND ("Religion and Psychology" OR "Religión y Psicología" OR "Religião e Psicologia"); (Psychodynamics OR psicodinâmica OR psicodinámica) AND (Spirituality OR Espiritualidad OR Espiritualidade) AND (Religion OR Religión OR Religião).

The initial search was conducted in January 2023 and updated in August of the same year. No time restriction was defined, as the objective also included an analysis of the historical development of the theory.

For data extraction and categorization, information was collected regarding the authors, journal, year of publication, methods used, and theoretical frameworks. These were organized into synoptic tables to facilitate comparison and critical analysis.

The critical analysis of the selected studies involved evaluating the level of evidence of each research piece, considering its methodological design and scientific rigor. Subsequently, the data were interpreted in light of the proposed objectives, highlighting the main contributions and gaps identified in the analyzed literature.

Finally, the synthesis and presentation of results were conducted in an integrative and critical manner, aiming to provide relevant insights for clinical practice and for the teaching of psychology on topics related to religiosity and spirituality.

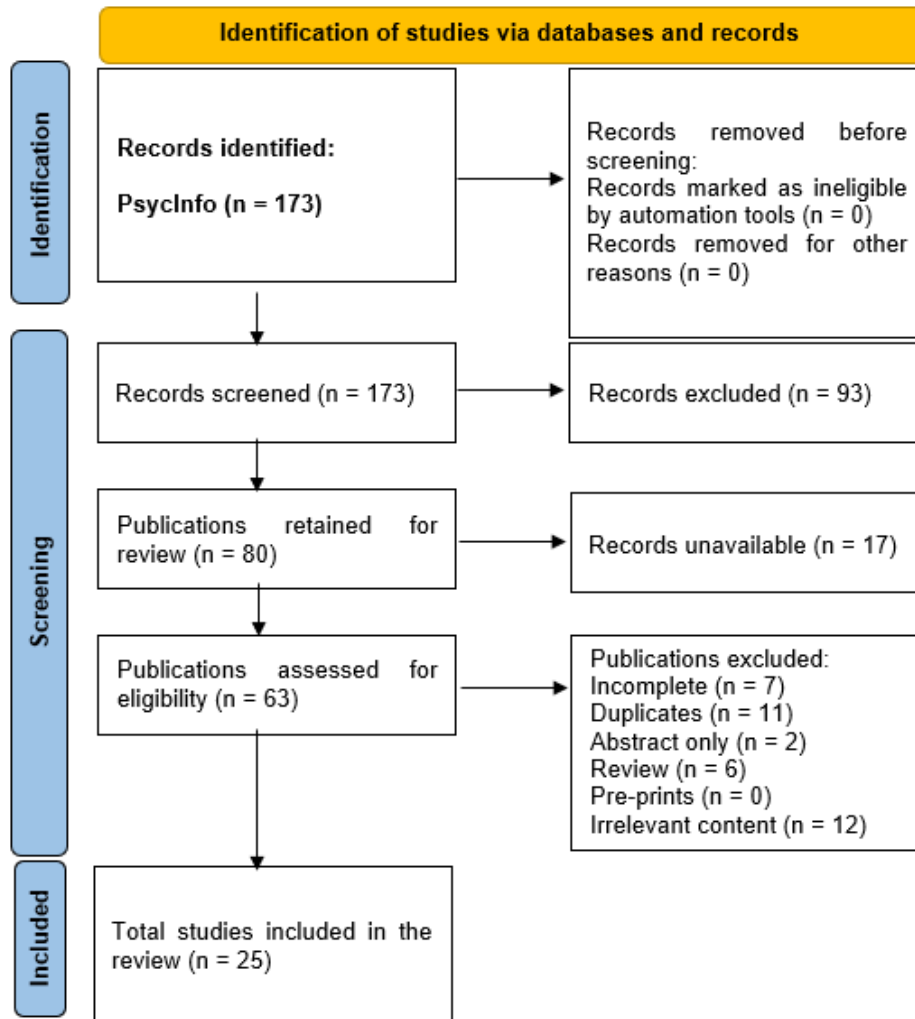
It is important to note that, as a literature review without the involvement of human participants or primary data collection, the study did not require submission to a Research Ethics Committee.

The limitations of this study include the restriction to a single database (PsycInfo) and the exclusion of studies not available in full text, which may have limited the scope of the analyzed publications.

3 RESULTS

The application of the search strategies described above in the PsycInfo database yielded 173 studies, distributed as follows: 21 from the first search, 48 from the second, 34 from the third, one from the fourth, four from the fifth, and 65 from the sixth. These records were subjected to a preliminary screening based on titles and abstracts, which resulted in 80 studies. In the subsequent stage, the full texts were read thoroughly, and based on the previously defined inclusion criteria, 25 texts—all in English—were selected, as shown in the PRISMA 2020 flowchart below.

Figure 1. Flowchart of Articles Retrieved



Source: Prepared by the authors, 2023.

Considering the objective of the present article, which aims to analyze the general overview of the state of the art in the field by classifying the selected studies based on general data—such as authorship, year of publication, country of origin, type of text, theoretical frameworks, methodologies employed, and types of evidence presented—as well as discussing the main critiques and advantages of their methods and future perspectives, the table below presents a synthesis of the selected material, analyzed according to the following categories: title, authors and year, country, type of text, psychodynamic theory used, and method.

Table 1. Summary of Articles on Spirituality and Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

No.	Title	Authors/Year	Country	Type of Text	Theory	Method
1	Addressing patients' relationships with God in psychotherapy: Exploring psychodynamic therapy, depressive symptoms, and attachment to God.	Halstensen <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Norway	Article	Object Relations Theory and Attachment Theory	Experimental
2	Hindu spirituality and psychoanalytic psychotherapy.	Tummala-Narra (2022)	USA	Chapter	Relational Psychoanalysis, Object Relations Psychology, Self Psychology; Intersubjective Theories	Theoretical Reflection / Case Study
3	Spirituality and therapeutic action.	Cohen (2019)	USA	Article	Object Relations Psychology, Existentialism, Humanism and Cognitive-Behavioral	Theoretical Reflection
4	Perspectives on 'sacred moments' in psychotherapy.	Lomax <i>et al.</i> (2011)	USA	Article	Object Relations Psychology	Empirical / Case Study
5	Psychotherapeutic change and spiritual transformation: The interaction effect.	Jones (2010)	Canada	Article	Self Psychology, Cognitive Neuroscience, Attachment Theory, Developmental Psychology	Empirical / Case Study
6	The role of religion and spirituality in Olav's treatment and recovery: Commentary on an exemplary case report.	Richards (2010)	USA	Article	Object Relations Psychology	Empirical / Case Study
7	Spiritually oriented psychodynamic psychotherapy.	Shafranske (2009)	USA	Article	Psychodynamic Theories	Theoretical Reflection / Case Study
8	Psychotherapy as sacrament: The therapist as prayerful reader, the client as sacred text.	O'Rourke (2008)	USA	Article	Psychodynamic Theories and Object Relations Psychology	Theoretical Reflection
9	A psychodynamic case study	Shafranske (2004)	USA	Chapter	Ego Psychology, Object Relations Psychology and Self Psychology	Empirical / Case Study
10	Constructing a place for religion and spirituality in psychodynamic practice.	Northcut (2000)	USA	Article	Psychodynamic Theories; Constructivism and Narrative Theory	Theoretical Reflection
11	Sexuality, religion, and atheism in psychodynamic treatment.	Malark (2017)	USA	Article	Relational Psychoanalysis	Empirical / Case Study
12	Psychodynamic psychotherapy, religious beliefs, and self-disclosure.	Tillman (1998)	USA	Article	Object Relations Psychology	Theoretical Reflection

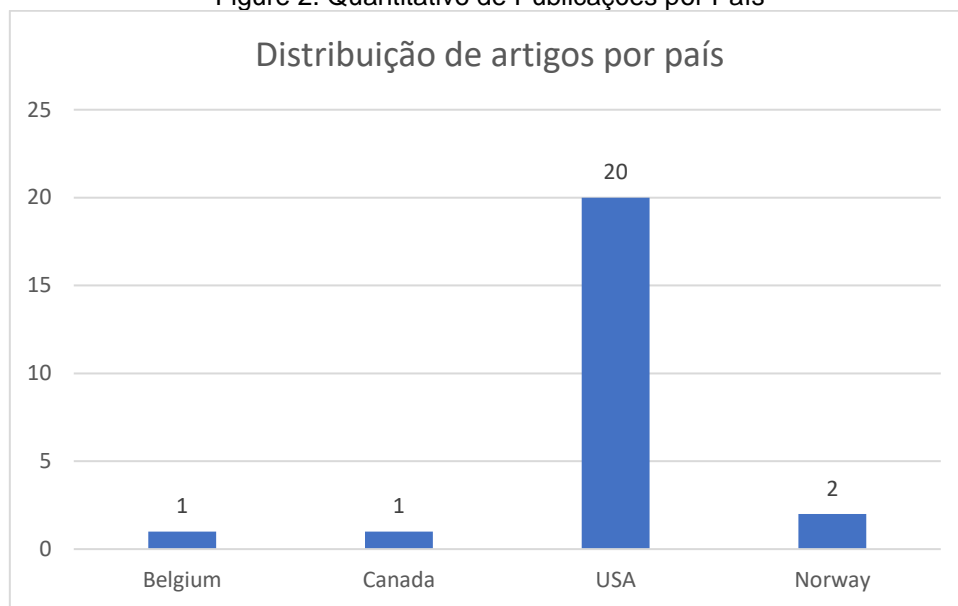
13	Reflections on Olav's therapy: The roles of religious experience, self-psychology, and mentalization.	Stålsett <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Norway	Article	Object Relations Psychology; Self Psychology and Attachment Theory	Empirical / Case Study
14	A strong woman: A psychodynamic perspective on religion and culture in a grieving mother.	Doghor & Marshall (2018)	USA	Article	Object Relations Psychology; Dialectical Behavioral Theory; Cognitive Theory	Empirical / Case Study
15	Reflections on a case of spirituality in clinical practice.	Arkema (2018)	USA	Article	Self Psychology	Theoretical Reflection / Case Study
16	The culture of narcissism revisited: Transformations of narcissism in contemporary psychospirituality.	Gleig (2010)	USA	Article	Self Psychology	Theoretical Reflection
17	Therapeutic enterprise: A psychological exploration of healing elements in a local African-American spiritualist church.	Guillory (2010)	USA	Article	Self Psychology	Theoretical Reflection / Case Study
18	Self-cohesion and the search for a spiritual container.	Ventimiglia (2009)	USA	Article	Self Psychology	Theoretical Reflection
19	Why bother with God?	Holliman (2009)	USA	Article	Object Relations Psychology	Empirical / Case Study
20	Prayer as therapeutic process toward aliveness within a spiritual direction relationship.	Kuchan (2008)	USA	Article	Object Relations Psychology; Affective Neuropsychology	Theoretical Reflection / Case Study
21	Object-relations and spirituality: Revisiting a clinical dialogue.	Gurney & Rogers (2007)	USA	Article	Object Relations Psychology, Attachment Theory and Developmental Theory	Theoretical Reflection
22	The role of spiritual and psychological development in the cross-cultural adjustment of missionaries.	Hall, M. E. L., Edwards, K. J., & Hall, T. W. (2006)	USA	Article	Ego Psychology	Experimental
23	Psychodynamic psychology and religion.	Corveleyn, J., Luyten, P., & Dezutter, J. (2013)	Belgium	Book Chapter	Drive Psychology; Ego Psychology; Object Relations Psychology; Self Psychology	Theoretical Reflection
24	Addressing religion and spirituality in treatment from a psychodynamic perspective.	Rizzuto, A.-M., &	USA	Book Chapter	Drive Psychology; Object Relations Psychology	Theoretical Reflection / Case Study

		Shafranske, E. P. (2013)				
25	Relocating, reanalyzing, and redefining miracles: A psychodynamic exploration of the miraculous.	Gaztambide, D. J. (2008)	USA	Book Chapter	Object Relations Psychology; Attachment Theory	Theoretical Reflection

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2023.

Based on the characterization of the sample, considering the country of origin, year, type of text, and method employed, it was observed that the majority of the analyzed publications (n=21) originated from the United States of America. This predominance was evident both by the place of publication and the country of correspondence of the first author. Additionally, publications from Belgium (n=1), Canada (n=1), and Norway (n=2) were identified, as shown in Figure 2.

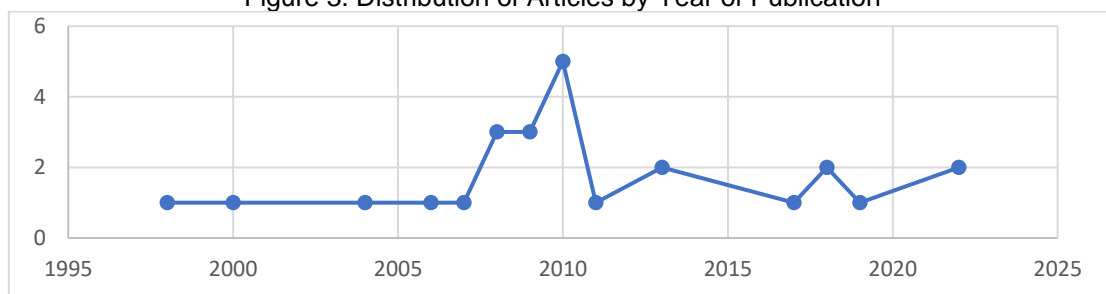
Figure 2. Quantitativo de Publicações por País



Source: Data collected from the PsycInfo database in 2023.

In Figure 3, shown below, it is noted that the most significant period of publication was between 2008 and 2010, totaling 11 studies in three years. Following that, nine additional records were identified between 2011 and 2022, that is, over the subsequent 11 years. Meanwhile, the period between 1998 and 2007 accounted for only five publications.

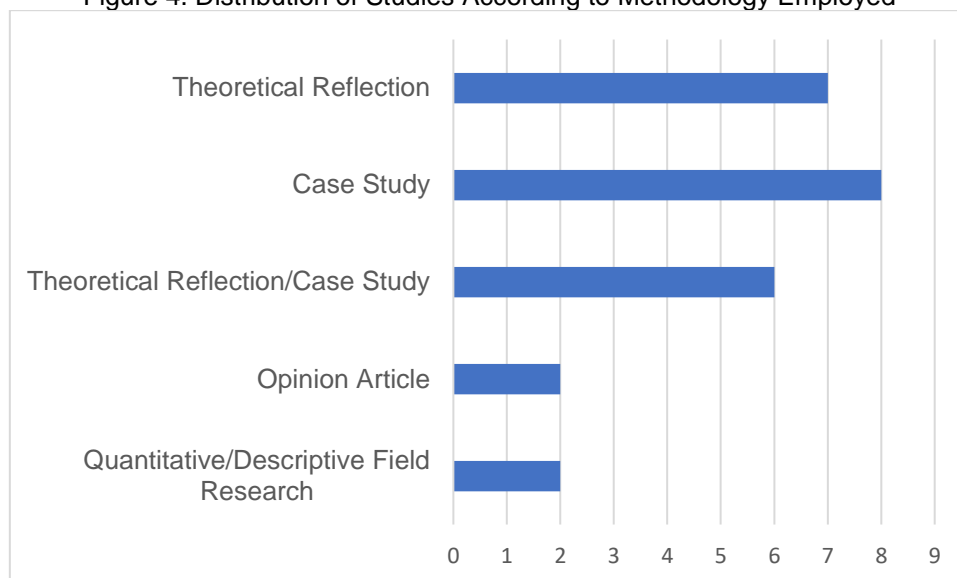
Figure 3. Distribution of Articles by Year of Publication



Source: Data collected from the PsycInfo database in 2023.

The collected material was also classified according to its format of publication. Of the 25 texts, 17 were journal articles and five were book chapters. Regarding the methodologies employed, it is worth noting that only two articles were quantitative/descriptive field studies, two were opinion pieces, and seven were theoretical reflections. The remaining 14 publications involved case studies—eight of which had the clinical case as the central object of analysis, while in the other six, the case served to illustrate the theoretical discussion (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Distribution of Studies According to Methodology Employed

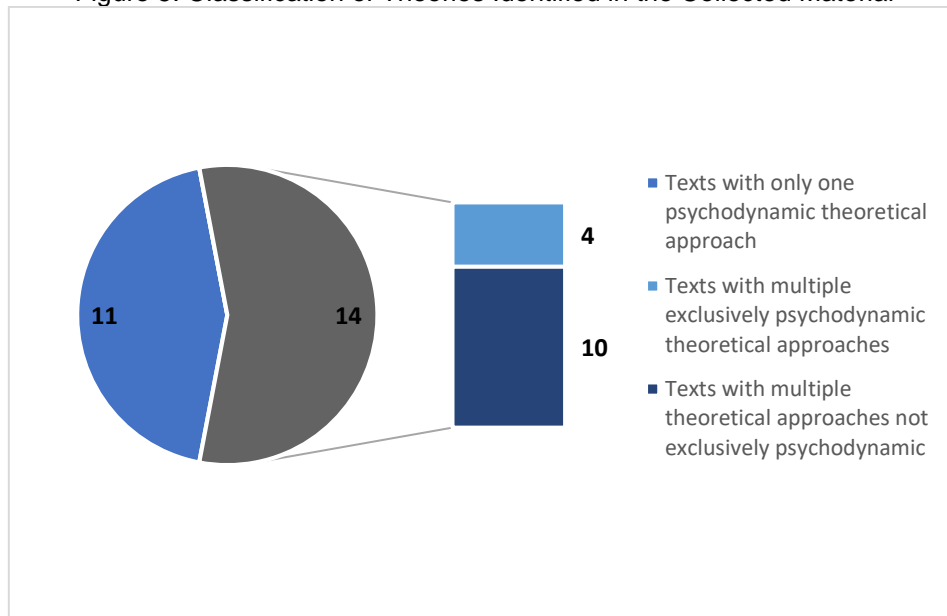


Source: Data collected from the PsycInfo database in 2023.

Figure 5 classifies the productions listed in Table 1 according to the type and number of theories used. Of the 25 selected records, 11 studies relied exclusively on a single psychodynamic theory (Lomax; Kripal; Pargament, 2011; Richards, 2010; Shafranske, 2009; Malark, 2017; Tillman, 1998; Arkema, 2018; Gleig, 2010; Guillory, 2010; Ventimiglia, 2009; Holliman, 2009; Hall; Edwards; Hall, 2006), and 14 used multiple theoretical frameworks. Among these 14, ten combined psychodynamic theories with other psychological approaches (Halstensen *et al.*, 2022; Tummala-Narra, 2022; Cohen, 2019; Jones, 2010; Northcut, 2000; Stålsett; Engedal; Austad, 2010; Doghor; Marshall, 2018; Kuchan, 2008; Gurney; Rogers, 2007; Gaztambide, 2008), while four used

multiple approaches within the psychodynamic tradition exclusively (O'Rourke, 2008; Shafranske, 2004; Corveleyn *et al.*, 2013; Rizzuto; Shafranske, 2013).

Figure 5. Classification of Theories Identified in the Collected Material



Source: Data collected from the PsycInfo database in 2023.

4 DISCUSSION

Psychodynamic research on religiosity/spirituality is situated within the field of the Psychology of Religion. This subfield of psychology originated and flourished in Europe and the United States; however, according to Valle (2009), it was in the American territory that it developed more vigorously, with a strong empirical tradition and significant concern for the dimensions of religious experience. This scenario seems to correspond to the findings of this study, which show a concentration of studies especially in the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, in Europe, as illustrated in Figure 1.

It is interesting to note that the study by Paiva *et al.* (2009) on publications in journals and books on the Psychology of Religion in Brazil from 1950 to the first decade of the 2000s reveals a similar result. In it, the psychodynamic approach is prominent, with an increase in empirical and applied studies, predominantly qualitative in nature. According to the authors, Freudian, Jungian, and Winnicottian theories stand out from the beginning for being open to the

relationships between the psyche and religious interest. The study also reveals that the motivation to explore this topic arises in the same period identified by us in the international literature, as shown in Figure 2.

A crucial aspect raised by this research—fundamental to the discussion on the contributions of the psychodynamic approach to the teaching of religiosity/spirituality in psychology training—concerns the methodological designs usually employed in its studies. Questions about the scientific status of these theories have been present in psychology since its establishment as a science; hence, the debate regarding the research methodologies used is often intense. As shown in Figure 3, more than half of the materials found ($n=14$) used the clinical case study as the data source from which theory is constructed, and also used clinical vignettes as illustrative tools.

Despite relying on only one database, the representativeness of this quantity is evident due to the sample's saturation, which confirms other analyses on the psychodynamic field, such as Corveleyn *et al.* (2013), which show a preference for case studies in psychodynamic empirical research on personal religion. According to the authors, major theoretical contributions and hypotheses regarding religious experiences, beliefs, and behaviors originate from such works. However, studies of this nature—focused on meaning analysis—can appear to lack validation, highlighting important methodological flaws, such as the influence of researcher subjectivity in data selection and interpretation, resistance to falsification, excessive reliance on anecdotes and authorities (Corveleyn *et al.*, 2013), lack of standardized techniques, idiosyncratic practices that are difficult to observe, the non-specific focus of treatment, and its emphasis on structural change in the subject, which occurs outside of consciousness (Shafranske, 2009).

The recognition of these limitations within a context increasingly shaped by Evidence-Based Practices has led to a certain decline in prestige of the psychodynamic approach within the dominant scientific community. This, in turn, has somewhat forced the development of new methods more suitable for hypothesis testing, as well as the expansion of dialogue both within its own theoretical branches and with psychology in general (Corveleyn *et al.*, 2013). This

movement, although still discreet, seems to have been captured by this study, as seen in Figure 4. Cautiously, we identified two quantitative studies: one that used Attachment Theory and measurement instruments to assess the effectiveness of a psychodynamic therapy model (Halstensen *et al.*, 2022), and another that used Ego Psychology functions to evaluate missionaries' adaptive capacity to cultural change (Hall *et al.*, 2006).

In psychology, Evidence-Based Practice has been established to evaluate the factors responsible for the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of various treatment methods. In this regard, different levels of evidence are acknowledged and classified according to a hierarchy (Rezende; Soares; Veloso, 2023). Case studies or experiential reports and expert opinions correspond to levels 5 and 6 of scientific evidence, respectively, in a six-level scale (Souza; Silva; Carvalho, 2010), meaning they are considered lower-weight, less relevant evidence. As a result, psychodynamic theories are often the target of considerable criticism.

Following the course of this new trend, some members of the psychodynamic field have engaged in rigorous research with high levels of evidence—through meta-analyses and randomized controlled trials, for example—showing that long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy is effective in treating various mental disorders (Rizzuto; Shafranske, 2013; Shafranske, 2009). However, this still does not fully apply to outcome studies on the application of psychodynamic psychotherapy in addressing religious/spiritual issues and mental health, since most of these studies still follow the clinical case format (Shafranske, 2009).

A counterpoint to this movement is raised by Richards (2010), who highlights the limitations of using Randomized Controlled Trials, questioning whether they can, in fact, provide the best empirical evidence. He argues that, despite being highly praised for their scientific rigor, such designs may, for the same reason, create artificial conditions that do not reflect actual clinical practice.

In light of this, both Richards (2010) and Stålsett *et al.* (2010) argue that methodologically rigorous case studies may be a way to overcome the gap between clinical practice and scientific investigation, potentially providing significant contributions to Evidence-Based Practice. However, this requires the

application of advanced guidelines for their development, including the use of mixed methods, which can enhance their internal validity—an approach also supported by Shafranske (2004).

Despite all this debate, the psychodynamic approach still retains a profoundly unique characteristic that radically differentiates it from the natural sciences and their aims of control, verification of realities, and universal patterns. It is situated in the field of historical-hermeneutic science, concerned with meanings that are always unique to each individual, often driven by unconscious motivations and, therefore, not subject to universal replication (Rizzuto & Shafranske, 2013).

With regard to the study of religious life, these reflections are essential, given that the methodology employed can either broaden or limit access to people's experiences. The traditional use of questionnaires, associated with increasingly refined techniques for measuring religious/spiritual factors, although bringing great advances to the Psychology of Religion, clearly shows its limitations in the clinical setting. These instruments are not capable of accessing contents that are not conscious or explicit. That is why Jones (2010) also supports the use of mixed methods in the study of these phenomena, including the application of projective tests, which are more sensitive to unconscious exploration. It is important to note, however, that some cognitive studies may also access unconscious elements; still, they differ from the material accessed through the psychodynamic clinical approach, as they reveal only underlying cognitive processing and not dynamic unconscious content.

Given these considerations, one may ask why this discussion is so important for psychology training—and the answer is not far off. The literature presents well-established arguments indicating the need to train psychologists to deal with the religiosity/spirituality of their patients (Vieten & Lukoff, 2021; Pereira & Holanda, 2019; Raddatz, Motta, & Alminhana, 2019). However, the models proposed to achieve this goal remain under debate.

In this sense, the perspective adopted by this work is to fully embrace the complexity of the phenomenon in question—human experience—which is the object of study of Psychology. With its multiple dimensions, the human being has

been studied in terms of behavior, psyche, cognition, genetic components, and as a socio-historical product. Naturally, the investigative methods vary in accordance with the human dimension being analyzed, which makes it difficult to synthesize concepts and interventions (Marinotti, 2016). Thus, the discussion on method is necessary, as each methodological choice implies a particular conception of the human being and will guide the definition of the practices to be adopted.

In this regard, Paiva (2002a, p.6) offers the following analysis:

In relation to psychology, the religion/science issue takes on various forms. Psychology has one dimension that aligns it with the natural and biological sciences, and another that aligns it with the historical and hermeneutic sciences. Clear examples would be neuropsychology and the cognitive psychology of artificial intelligence on one side, and psychoanalysis and various forms of psychotherapy on the other. Schafranske (1997) summarizes these two facets very well by referring to Habermas, who distinguishes the two types of science by the method used to approach their object: empirical-analytical sciences construct and test their theories based on the covariation of observable events, whereas historical-hermeneutic sciences “gain access to facts through the understanding of meaning, not through observation” (Schafranske, 1997, p.162). When it comes to religion and the search for meaning, psychology finds itself closer to the historical-hermeneutic dimension, where—like religion—it “produces knowledge, awakens motivation, and often leads to social transformation.” However, this dimension should not be seen as separate from the other: “what we seem to be learning through neuroscience research is that brain-based explanations may ultimately require terms like beliefs, desires, and feelings, as well as neurons, synapses, and serotonin.” [...] Drawing on Barbour’s (1990) multilevel theory, Schafranske offers the integrated perspective that it is from the self that events in the brain evolve into psychological meanings, among them the search for meaning.

It turns out that the imposing tendency of the natural sciences’ method over the human sciences within academia seems to exclude a number of aspects related to the singularity of individual experience, offering little clarity about the psyche, while at the same time relegating sciences such as psychoanalysis, for example, to the margins (Marinotti, 2016)—from which psychodynamic theories and their methods originate.

Drawing on Thomas Kuhn (1922–1999), Fulgencio (2013, p.42) presents an interesting analysis that proposes psychoanalysis (which here is extended to include psychodynamic approaches) as a paradigm:

A science, a practice of solving empirical problems, which dictates how a problem should be formulated and resolved; one that has exemplary problems serving as empirical standards for clinical practice and thought; that has a guiding general theory, a model of the human being, a heuristic and value-based model, which guide and direct its research—whether devoted to theory or to the application of that theory in the empirical field.

Furthermore, he also refers to Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), who understood Psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic science—that is, one that seeks the meanings, intentions, and sense behind human behavior, in other words, what motivates it—rather than as an explanatory science that aims to establish cause-and-effect relationships (Fulgencio, 2013).

Thus, we agree with Rodrigues (2009, p. 31) when he states that:

the approach to the theme of religious experience cannot be reduced to only one of its aspects or dimensions, considering the number of layers and possibilities of understanding that both terms in this expression may indicate. On the contrary, I believe that the Sciences of Religion, in their interdisciplinarity and different perspectives on the object 'religion'—despite all the many obstacles this dynamic entails—can, through the sum of the different types of knowledge acquired about it, offer a broader understanding of what one aims to grasp: the movement and the forces in the relationship between the human and the sacred, from the particular to the practical outworkings of life and the relationship with humanity that remains in immanence, with or without the expectation of the transcendent.

Finally, following the line of some American and European researchers—many of them working in the field of the Psychology of Religion—we believe in the importance of recovering the “soul” or the “deep core of the person” (Paiva, 2002b, p.174) in research, and in this sense, psychodynamic approaches prove to be more effective.

From this reflection, we conclude by proposing at least two questions: Is the imposition of the same methods for different objects truly beneficial to psychology? Why should psychology give up its vocation for complexity and privilege the method of the natural sciences as the ideal model of science?

5 CONCLUSION

The scientific literature that addresses religiosity/spirituality from a psychodynamic perspective, as surveyed in this study, shows that Europe and the United States continue to stand out significantly in this field. A trend already pointed out in the literature is also observed: the integration of multiple theories—psychodynamic or not—in the analysis of religious/spiritual experience.

The main criticism of research in this field lies in the predominance of clinical case studies, which, from the contemporary perspective of Evidence-Based Practice, are considered to offer a low level of scientific evidence. However, specialized literature highlights the value of this method, particularly for its ability to access deeper (unconscious) and more singular dimensions of religious/spiritual experience, which are often inaccessible through standardized instruments and experimental methods. This raises the importance of mixed methods, capable of combining the depth of case studies with the breadth and systematization of quantitative approaches, as well as the application of more rigorous protocols to clinical reports to strengthen their validity.

Amid the ongoing tension between the natural and human sciences within psychology, the psychodynamic approach—especially through case study—remains relevant, offering valuable contributions both to the training of psychologists and to the understanding of religiosity/spirituality as a subjective and complex expression of the human psyche. This approach supports a more sensitive listening to how individuals experience and assign meaning to their spirituality, valuing the uniqueness of each life journey.

The findings of this research may contribute to academic advancement by mapping current methodological and theoretical trends in the field of psychology of religion, especially from a psychodynamic perspective, as well as by offering support for the development of teaching and research proposals that are more aligned with the complexity of the topic. Socially, by fostering a deeper and more humanized understanding of religious and spiritual experiences, the results may help mental health professionals ethically and sensitively address their patients' spiritual dimensions, promoting comprehensive and culturally competent care.

As a limitation, it is acknowledged that only one database was used, which may restrict the scope of the results. Future research should expand data sources, explore other indexed databases, and consider different languages and cultural contexts. It is also recommended that future empirical studies adopt more diverse and rigorous methodological designs, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to strengthen scientific production in the field of psychology of religion from a psychodynamic perspective.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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