

# This Week's Citation Classic

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**Smith M L & Glass G V.** Meta-analysis of psychotherapy outcome studies.  
*Amer. Psychol.* 32:752-60, 1977.  
[University of Colorado, Boulder, CO]

The outcome of 375 studies, in which clients who received psychotherapy were compared with untreated persons, were quantified and statistically summarized. Findings showed psychotherapy to be effective and that the different varieties of therapy do not produce differential effects. Both good and poor designs produced positive effects. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®) indicate that this paper has been cited in over 180 publications since 1977.]

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"For 30 years, scholars have argued over questions such as, 'Does psychotherapy work better than the mere passage of time or the kind attention of another person in alleviating psychological maladjustment and distress?' 'What form of therapy (behavioral, cognitive, psychodynamic, drug) is the most efficacious?' 'How scientifically rigorous are the studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of psychotherapy?'

"Individual researchers by the hundreds have addressed these questions, and research reviewers have summarized the studies to arrive at overall conclusions. The conclusions have been energetically rebutted by scholars representing adversarial philosophies and interests. Perhaps we were naive to believe that by applying a new set of procedures for extracting the meaning from large collections of studies—procedures that are quantified, replicable, and objective—that we would settle the con-

trovery. We were wrong, a fact which is not in itself interesting, but which certainly explains the selection of the article as a *Citation Classic*. The work has been praised by advocates and vilified by opponents of psychotherapy as well as those who advocate specific forms of therapy such as psychoactive drugs or behavioral treatments. The latter groups have a stake in the aggrandizement of their therapies over competitors' and therefore were displeased by the finding of no differential efficacy among the forms of therapy. The work has been called everything from 'mega-silliness' and 'blossoming nose blemish' to a 'classic of social science.' The work has also attracted considerable attention, both positive and negative, from research methodologists because it was an early example of the technique of meta-analysis (the quantitative synthesis of results of extant research studies). Researchers who have subsequently applied the technique to other bodies of literature have cited the article. These facts explain the citation rate, which, as anyone can see, is a mixed blessing.

"Originally, the psychotherapy outcome literature was selected as an appropriate test of meta-analysis. Funding was received from the Spencer Foundation for the years 1975-1976. The findings were first presented as part of Glass's presidential address to the American Educational Research Association. Submitted to the *American Psychologist*, the manuscript was accepted with minor revisions. What followed were the reactions noted above, the reprinting of the article in several books, and renewed funding from the Spencer Foundation. During 1977-1978, we added nearly 100 studies of psychotherapy effectiveness and a separate meta-analysis of research on the effectiveness of drugs compared with psychotherapy. Eventually these analyses were transformed into a book manuscript<sup>1</sup> which also documented the history of the controversy as well as the methodological arguments about controlled studies of psychotherapy and meta-analysis. Since then, we have evoked more variegated reactions, several successful replications,<sup>2</sup> a follow-up of later studies,<sup>3</sup> and considerable methodological work on meta-analysis."<sup>4</sup>

1. Smith M L, Glass G V & Miller T I. *Benefits of psychotherapy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. 269 p.
2. Landman J T & Dawes R M. Smith and Glass' conclusions stand up to scrutiny. *Amer. Psychol.* 37:504-17, 1982.
3. Shapiro D A & Shapiro D. Meta-analysis of comparative therapy outcome studies: a replication and refinement. *Psychol. Bull.* 92:581-604, 1982.
4. Glass G V, McGaw B & Smith M L. *Meta-analysis in social research*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981. 279 p.