

2. Is ‘psychoanalysis’ now defunct?

1989 words

For this essay, let *psychoanalysis* refer to Sigmund Freud’s theory and therapeutic method for treating unconscious forces that affect an individual’s mental functioning and adjustment (APA Dictionary of Psychology 2023). However, the phrase “now defunct” is defined slightly differently depending on interpretation. The standard definition for *defunct* is “no longer in existence; having ceased” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). However, this could mean the discipline is no longer accepted, or widely practised, or influential; different viewpoints will lead to different answers. Therefore, this essay will explore aspects of psychoanalysis that have displayed deficiencies. It will contend that classical Freudian psychoanalysis is considered defunct as a dominant scientific and clinical framework. Despite this, it remains prominent because of the questions and research that it initiated, which aided in the evolution of psychology.

1. Scientific Psychology

Psychoanalysis had once dominated psychiatry, making us question what caused its significant decline in authority and influence. The rise of scientific psychology was a major challenge to psychoanalysis. It demanded and increasingly valued empirical evidence, falsifiability and reproducibility, which psychoanalysis was arguably “unable to generate” (Tuck, 2017). Freud’s psychoanalysis relied more on clinical case studies (Ratnayake, 2024), which are now less reliable in evidence-based medicine. As a result, it becomes easy for the discipline to be rendered defunct by psychologists and medical institutions when the psychological definition of good evidence has changed since the nineteenth century.

Sigmund Freud had a highly academic background: studying medicine at the University of Vienna, neuropathology at Vienna General Hospital and working with many famous neurologists (“Sigmund Freud | British Psychoanalytical Society,” 2015). Despite this, Freud, at times, built his theories on obsolete scientific ideas. For example, he believed that individual psychology is derived from biological inheritance of events in ancient history (Slavet, 2008). The idea of Lamarckian inheritance rapidly declined in the 1880s, after being discredited by August Weismann’s experiments in the late 19th century. Nevertheless, Freud occasionally continued to draw upon these ideas that were outdated in his time, as seen in his

later works (*Totem and Taboo*). Given that, some parts of his theoretical framework already rested on unstable foundations during his time, critics may raise questions about the foundations of other psychoanalytic concepts.

In terms of the scientific discipline of psychoanalysis, one must take into account the noticeable inability of some psychoanalytic concepts to move past Sigmund Freud's ideas. Compared with many scientific disciplines, psychoanalysis remained unusually committed to Freud's original ideas (Tuck, 2014). Ostensibly, this could indicate that many psychoanalysts believed they had some value. However, upon further reflection, the discipline's difficulty in developing and revising itself could have contributed to its later decline, as most scientific disciplines are constantly being refined.

2. Karl Popper

Central to the debate surrounding the scientific validity of psychoanalysis is the criticism advanced by philosopher of science Karl Popper. Popper argued that scientific theories must be falsifiable by observation to evaluate their validity (Ratnayake, 2024). Many of Freud's psychoanalytic concepts were unfalsifiable, leaving little room to verify them empirically, which consequently led to them being viewed as defunct in a contemporary setting.

Freud's Oedipus Complex, which he regarded as the reasoning behind psychological conflict and psychosexual stages (Trotta & Formica, 2018), was a highly significant part of psychoanalysis. Yet, Freud's oedipal reductionism was difficult to test empirically, because both acceptance and rejection of an interpretation could be explained within the theory itself. Popper's famous quote, "they always fitted, that they were always confirmed" (Ratnayake, 2024), reflects his realisation that its unfalsifiability was its greatest weakness, as it appeared capable of accommodating almost every outcome. Because of this, psychoanalysis's scientific validity was questioned.

The disagreement between psychoanalysts themselves appeared to reinforce Popper's criticism. As different schools emerged with contradictory interpretations that could often be applied to the same evidence, some psychologists believed that, because of this, "they cannot all be true" (Tuck, 2014). The lack of clear methods for determining which of these interpretations was correct raised more concerns towards psychoanalysis's scientific validity.

Like most arguments and concepts in this essay, Popper's critique was challenged. Adolf Grünbaum, philosopher of science, argued that this wasn't entirely correct (Adolf Grünbaum, 1984). Grünbaum believed that Freud attempted to engage with empirical evidence and to revise his theories (Ratnayake, 2024). This could suggest that perhaps the relationship between psychoanalysis and science had more layers than what Popper initially proposed.

3. Replacements

Today, Freud's psychoanalysis has lost its dominant position as a psychotherapeutic approach because it has been superseded by alternative approaches that are often perceived as more scientific and effective, making them more acceptable to contemporary psychology. A prominent example is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), developed by psychiatrist, Dr Aaron T. Beck. It was said to be one of the reasons why "psychoanalysis declined in popularity" as it was "supplanted" by CBT (Ratnayake, 2024). Initially, working within a psychoanalytic tradition, Beck tested and experimented with psychoanalytic explanations for depression. However, his results failed to support key psychoanalytic hypotheses, which ultimately contributed to the development of cognitive therapy. Because CBT accumulated a larger body of empirical support, revealed flaws in psychoanalytic explanations, and, unlike psychoanalysis, became an increasingly evidence-based practice, it gained more acceptance among psychologists and healthcare systems. Consequently, this led to the decline in popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis within mainstream psychology, implying that its status for understanding and treating mental illness was less influential.

Other therapeutic approaches, such as psychodynamic therapy, counselling, integrative psychotherapy, and psychoanalytic therapy (American Psychoanalytic Association, 2023), have all contributed to the decline in popularity of psychoanalysis. Most of them adhere to evidence-based clinical practices that meet today's ethical standards.

4. Developers of Psychoanalysis

However, psychoanalysis cannot be considered entirely defunct because it continued to evolve beyond Freud through the work of later theorists whose ideas remain influential today. Leading proponents of the Neo-Freudian movement built upon Freudian ideas, which means that the legacy of psychoanalysis remains influential today and did not end with Freud.

Anna Freud's work was tied closely to her father's core psychoanalytic principles. However, she was widely recognised for her contributions throughout the twentieth century on ego psychology and the systematic study of defence mechanisms (Department & McGrath, n.d.). Unlike some traditional neo-Freudians who moved further away from Freud's original theories, Anna Freud expanded her father's original work through her work on child psychoanalysis. By refining and developing existing psychoanalytic concepts rather than abandoning them, she demonstrated that psychoanalysis continued to grow and evolve beyond Freud. Furthermore, the continued discussion of defence mechanisms in contemporary psychology meant that core elements of psychoanalytic tradition remained useful today.

Donald Winnicott further contributed to the evolution of psychoanalytic thought throughout the twentieth century. He shifted the focus from psychosexual development and built upon psychoanalytic principles to form his Object Relations Theory (Xie, Yan, & Peng, 2023). This work has had a "revolutionary impact on contemporary psychoanalysis" but has also influenced other fields, such as "literature". Through this, Winnicott reveals that the continuation and development of Freud's psychoanalytic concepts can still have a major impact on the world, not just in psychology.

Carl Jung differed slightly from the other neo-Freudians mentioned above. He was once a close partner to Freud until they split in 1913 due to differences in "theoretical positions and personalities" (The Society of Analytical Psychology, 2025). Despite this, Jung attempted to investigate some psychoanalytic ideas empirically through techniques such as the Word Association Test. He used the idea of the unconscious and conscious to develop Analytical Psychology. Although the framework differed from Freudian psychoanalysis, the development itself portrayed Freud's psychoanalysis's ability to spark interest and generate entirely new schools of thought. This can arguably be one of psychoanalysis's greatest aspects; its intellectual value was enough to inspire the development of entirely new theoretical frameworks beyond Freud's time.

Finally, contemporary psychoanalysts, such as Peter Fonagy, are examples of how psychoanalysis is integrated into psychology today. He argued that attachment theory and psychoanalysis are not competing theories, but can be integrated to strengthen each other (Fonagy, 2001). This reflects how psychoanalysis is being built upon, as it remains relevant within contemporary clinical psychology and is not just a historical legacy.

Fundamentally, the contributions of Anna Freud, Donald Winnicott, Carl Jung and Peter Fonagy meant that psychoanalysis did not end with Freud's death; it continued to evolve through successive generations of theorists who all explored different aspects. Therefore, it's important to consider whether Freud's psychoanalysis is defunct if it has evolved into something new.

5. Relevance for the Present Day

As discussed earlier in the essay, there are numerous components of Freud's psychoanalysis that have been developed and have indirectly influenced new theories. However, it is equally important to recognise the few original psychoanalytic concepts that are accepted in contemporary psychology. For example, transference continues to be widely recognised as an unconscious psychological phenomenon. Freud initially identified this concept within therapeutic relationships. Beyond psychotherapy, the concept has been applied to interpersonal relationships. Its survival outside a therapeutic setting conveys the impact of psychoanalytic ideas. Because of this, it becomes difficult to label Freudian psychoanalysis as entirely defunct when some of its foundational concepts remain in contemporary psychological thought and practice.

6. Historical Context

Sigmund Freud received several awards, such as the Goethe Prize (1930), and recognition from American psychologists and neurologists ("Sigmund Freud | British Psychoanalytical Society," 2015) throughout his development of psychoanalysis. His methodology relied heavily on case studies and clinical observations, whereas modern medicine places more emphasis on systematic empirical evidence (Sur & Dahm, 2011). In light of this, it is necessary to understand that Freud's methodology reflected the standards and clinical culture during the nineteenth/early twentieth century. As psychological treatment standards are re-evaluated and changed substantially, methods which relied on forms of evidence, now considered weaker, struggle to sustain their positions as dominant clinical approaches. With this historical background, psychoanalysis's decline becomes clearer.

Now, let us consider the perspective of Freud in the late 1800s:

Trained as a physician and neurologist, he decided to propose a radically new theory of the human mind during a time when psychology was still establishing itself as a scientific discipline. Over the following decades, the theory starts to inspire professional societies, attract followers, and receive global recognition and awards. He initially believed this theory was true, and now many other leading scholars do too.

Under such circumstances, it is unsurprising for a theorist to become more confident in their work. Freud once said, “How bold one gets when one is sure of being loved” (Sigmund Freud & Freud, 1970). Although written in a personal context, it provides an interesting lens for Freud’s confidence in his work. The success, recognition, and social validation could have increased his confidence in his beliefs and decisions. Given the time period and the fact that he received such widespread intellectual support, we should be cautious of judging Freud solely on today’s deficiencies in psychoanalysis. From his perspective, psychoanalysis appeared to be succeeding and gaining intellectual legitimacy day by day, to the point that perhaps the criticism he received was not enough to stop him. That being said, in the twenty-first century, the classical Freudian discipline is no longer widely practised in its original form. But rather, new concepts and ideas branch from it. The historical development of psychoanalysis illustrates that a discipline in its original form is still capable of generating new ideas, but also that its legacy should not be conflated with its continued survival.

7. Conclusion

Freud once recalled that “*No one who disdains the key will ever be able to unlock the door*” (Freud & Strachey, 1905). While he used this statement as a defence to one of his controversial theories, concerning sexuality, it does capture an important aspect of psychoanalysis. Whether his explanations were correct is a separate matter from whether they are valuable. Being scientifically wrong or outdated is not necessarily the same as being defunct. Many subsequent research programmes and therapeutic approaches emerged in response to psychoanalytic concepts. Additionally, psychoanalysis’s cultural impact in feminism and film studies reflects its contemporary relevance outside psychology. In this way, it is possible that psychoanalysis acted as a catalyst to open new doors in psychology. Although classical Freudian psychoanalysis is now defunct as a mainstream clinical treatment, Sigmund Freud’s concepts act as a foundation for what has become of it today.

Appendix

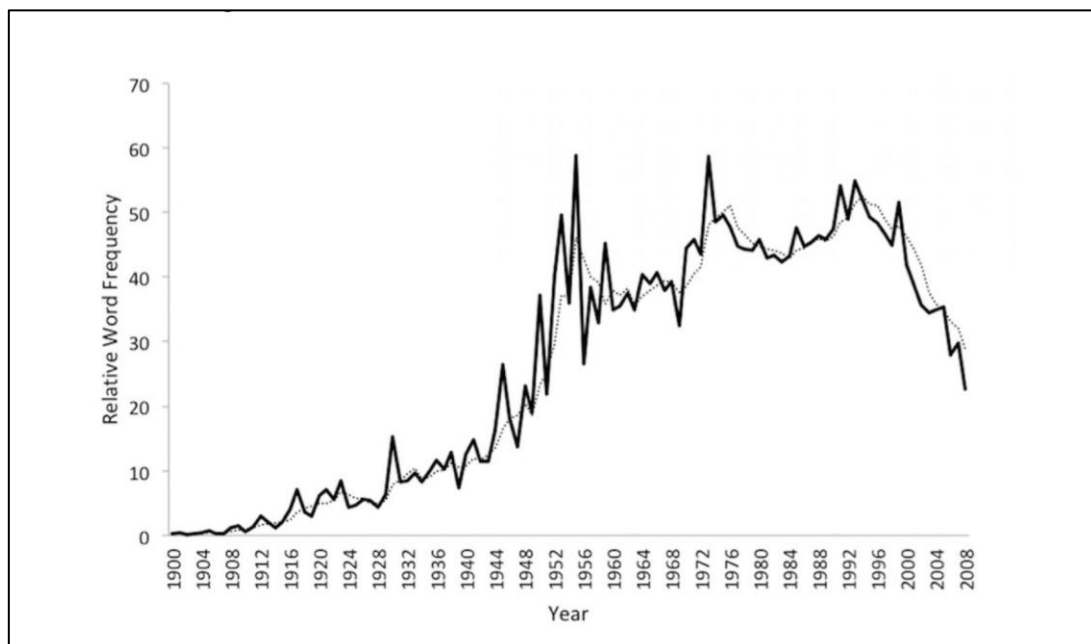


Figure 1. Frequency of psychoanalytic terminology in published texts, adapted from Haslam & Ye (2019)

Evidence-Based Medicine in Medical Literature 1992-2001

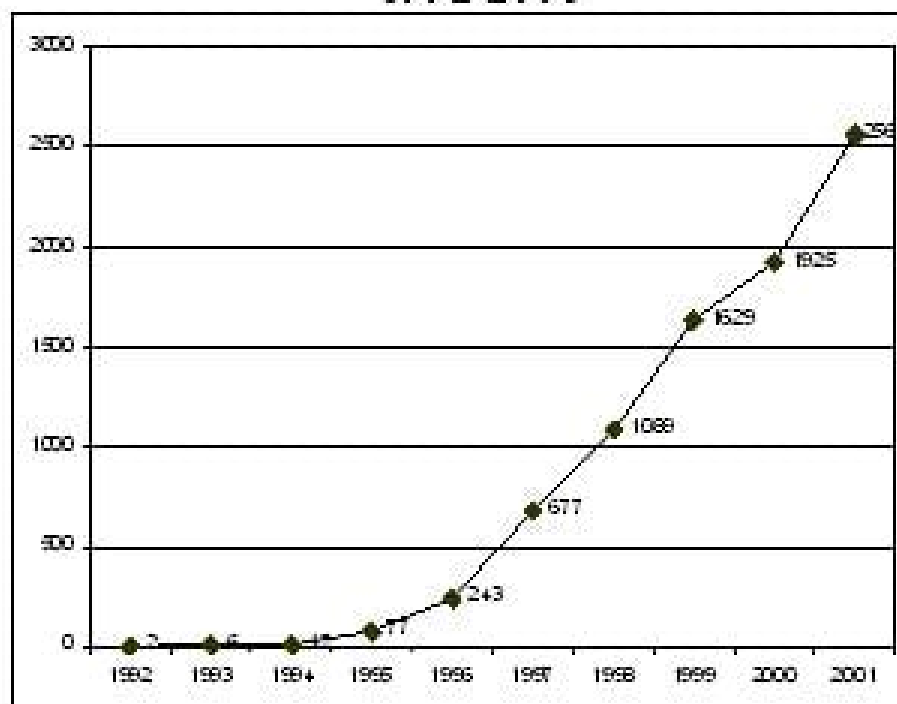


Figure 2. Annual number of publications using the term “Evidence- Based Medicine” in the medical literature, PubMed (Zimmerman, 2011)

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