Is psychoanalysis a pseudoscience?

Psychoanalysis has long been accused of being a pseudoscience (Popper, 1963; Meyer, 2011; Pasternak & Orsi, 2021; Ferreira et al., 2022). Despite its influential status in disciplines such as continental philosophy and literary studies, its standing as both science and therapy remains controversial. Critics argue that psychoanalysis does not follow the scientific method, while its proponents claim to follow a better method of knowledge creation that is fundamentally beyond measurement (Teixeira, 2013).

Psychoanalysis operates according to what Foucault (1996) calls "the commentary principle," where new ideas must be traceable back to Freud's original texts. This method is similar to a characteristic of religious discourse that Latour (2013) calls "perpetuation," which focuses on the fidelity to an original text or cause.

> If I were asked ... what is new in psychoanalysis, I would answer: Freud. (Green, 1990, p. 1)

This presents a stark contrast to Popper's (1963) definition of science: a process of conjectures and refutations (trials and errors), the testing of predictions, and the refutation of hypotheses. Scientific discourse aims to be communicable and replicable, emphasizing empirical evidence and causality over mere correlation. In contrast, psychoanalysis is insular, subjective, interpretive (rather than predictive), with a focus on tradition rather than progress. Instead of seeking collective, objective truths, psychoanalysis is concerned with individual, subjective truths.

Many psychoanalysts actively reject the scientific method, defining themselves in opposition to it (Antonio, 2015; Simanke & Caropreso, 2015; Castel, 1978). While Freud himself saw psychoanalysis as part of science (Freud, 1933), his followers have taken a different stance. Lacan (1965/1998) argues that psychoanalysis does not "foreclose truth" in the same way as magic, religion, and science. This has been interpreted as a critique of science as repressive, while psychoanalysis is understood as liberating desire (Beer, 2017).

> ... the truth that no amount of control can domesticate ... The Freudian truth ... (Miller, 2012, p. 25).

Miller, Lacan's appointed intellectual heir, suggests that psychoanalysis is "a new and strange theory of truth and the real" (Miller, 2012, p. 30). Millerian psychoanalysis and its proponents argue that scientific rationality is delusional, while psychoanalysis is the only approach capable of addressing the Real (Santos & Santiago, 2012; Forbes & Riolfi, 2014; Barroso. 2013; Teixeira, 2013; Sobral, 2014).

Regardless of these objections, we can still try to apply the scientific method to psychoanalysis. The question of whether psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience can be examined from two angles: its therapeutic efficacy and the theoretical grounding of its concepts.

Evidence of efficacy: does it work?

Yes, it works. Empirical evidence – meta-analyses of meta-analyses comprising thousands of studies – suggests that all psychotherapeutic approaches are roughly equivalent in outcome, a conclusion known as "the Dodo's verdict" (Budd et al., 2009). Studies by Leichsenring et al. (2023) argue that psychoanalysis "proved to be an empirically-supported" and it "represents an evidence-based psychotherapy" (p. 1). Similarly, Gonon and Keller (2021) find psychoanalysis to be as effective as other therapies, while Solms (2018) finds that psychotherapy in general is highly effective and that it has been "unequivocably established" (p. 1) that psychoanalytic therapy is as effective as other kinds of therapy.

Nevertheless, the issue remains controversial. One big challenge in assessing psychoanalytic efficacy lies in defining therapeutic success. Different psychotherapeutic approaches have different goals, making it difficult to measure outcomes in a standardized way. Many studies are biased, and randomized controlled trials – considered the gold standard in medical research – may not be well-suited for evaluating psychotherapy.

Evidence of conceptual validity: is it real?

Another way to assess psychoanalysis is through its conceptual validity. Critics such as Popper (1963) and Grunbaum (1984) argue that psychoanalytic claims are not falsifiable. However, neuroscientific research has provided some support for psychoanalytic concepts like unconscious conflict and repression. For instance, Shevrin (2013) show increased alpha wave activity (a marker of repression) when specific subliminally presented words trigger unconscious conflict. This constitutes one of the first legitimate attempts at "extraclinical validation" of psychoanalytic concepts in a falsifiable manner (Beer, 2018).

Conclusion

Psychoanalysis is not scientific in the conventional sense because its values, practices, and discourse do not align with those of empirical science. However, it can be investigated scientifically in terms of its efficacy and conceptual validity. The controversy surrounding psychoanalysis has resulted in a highly polarized body of research, with much of the available evidence being biased. While some studies provide empirical support for psychoanalytic theory, rigorous scientific validation of its concepts remains limited. In comparison, there is extensive scientific literature documenting its effectiveness – which is, ultimately, what matters for patients.

This work contains 770 words.

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