

## **PSYCHOANALYSIS AND GENDER INEQUALITY: A DEEP DIVE INTO PENIS ENVY**

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**Abstract:** *This paper critically reevaluates Sigmund Freud's concept of penis envy and its implications for psychoanalytic theory. While Freud's theory was groundbreaking in its time, this study highlights its limitations and questions its applicability in understanding women's desires. By examining the historical context of Freud's work, we revisit the development of his theory and its impact on the field of psychoanalysis. Through a contemporary lens, we argue that penis envy primarily serves as a symbol of social gender inequalities rather than an accurate representation of women's longings. This analysis emphasizes the importance of interpreting symbols in their broader social and cultural context, offering a fresh perspective on the unconscious and its role in psychoanalytic practice. Ultimately, we challenge the traditional interpretation of Freud's penis envy theory and advocate for a more nuanced understanding of the unconscious within psychoanalysis.*

**Keywords:** *Freud, penis envy, psychoanalysis, unconscious, gender inequality*

### **1. Introduction**

Throughout the literature, Pierre Janet (1869-1947) is acknowledged as one of the first scholars to conceptualize the “unconscious” in a meaningful way. Others, during his lifetime, also noted the existence of the unconscious. These theoreticians recognized the unconscious but offered little guidance on operationalizing the concept (Hunnex, 1986). It was Freud who took the unconscious and applied it to help his patients (Lothane, 2006). Through his knowledge of hypnosis, Freud delved into the unconscious mental images of his female upperclass neurotic patients.

Within his therapy sessions, Freud continued to extract mental images of socially oppressed *but* intelligent women. He unambiguously recognized frustration and anxiety for which men and husbands were the central focus. Symbolically, these emotional responses elicited by his female patients were interpreted as being envious of men. Why? Men have penises and women don't? Thus, Freud concluded that the envy of the penis (that he discovered through hypnosis) constituted a social and psychological reality. He failed to consider that his interpretation of the penis was a hypnotic symbol of social inequality between genders. Accepting penis envy as a reality rather than a symbol of gender inequality established a weakness within psychoanalytic theory. The penis is not something women envy. In fact, women envy the social advantages of being male.

Freud's use of the unconscious was shown to be a practical tool in identifying the source of frustration and anxiety. From the unconscious emerges symbols which are representations of a social reality. If one takes the symbol as a *real* source of mental health problems, one misses the point. The patient becomes focused on the symbol rather than the social reality. The fact is, sometimes a cigar is really just a cigar.

Penis envy is considered the most patently offensive of all Freudian and offers little assistance in addressing mental health dysfunctions within our contemporary social structure (Ruti, 2018). Addressing penis envy in direct services for women is more likely to sabotage the therapeutic process rather than facilitating successful treatment.

Shulman (2021, p. 1093) states “Data from the PEP-Web archive reveal the declining use of a set of once important, closely linked conceptions—Freud’s psychosexual theory and his characterology—and illustrate the kinds of Freudian ideas that have lost their usefulness.” Shulman’s observation is shared by many current mental health practitioners. Such talk is common within breakrooms of mental health facilities. However, is such an observation factually accurate? This concern is an empirical question which will be addressed.

The debate related to the credibility of Freudian theory is unambiguously acknowledged within the writings of psychoanalytic scholars and practitioners. The pervasiveness of the debate has been so profound that *Psychanalytic Psychology*, a publication of the American Psychological Association, devoted an entire issue to the debate (Reppen, 2006). To sum up this special issue, (entitled “The Relevance of Sigmund Freud for the 21st Century”) the relevance of Freud in contemporary mental health practice is addressed from numerous angles. Meissner (2006) embraces the concept of collaboration which seems unprecedented within the realm of Freudian theory. In an effort to bolster Freud’s relevance in the 21st century, Grünbaum (2006) addresses the “pillars” of Freudian theory. Within his writing, he fails to include penis envy as a pillar within Freudian thought. To bolster Grünbaum, Strenger (2006) notes that Freud’s sexual concepts (e.g., Oedipus Complex) are disappearing from the psychoanalytic nomenclature. This position is diametrically opposed to the 177 authors in our study who contend that penis envy is a vital component to psychoanalytic theory. Alternatively, within the 241 pages of *Psychanalytic Psychology*’s special issue, the concept of penis envy is *not* mentioned.

## 2. Review of Literature

In November of 1938, less than a year before he passed away, Freud gave a short talk for the British Broadcasting Company. Within this short “speech,” Freud alluded to the problematic nature of sexuality embedded within his overall theoretical framework. He did not directly speak about the sexual component of his theory:

I started as a neurologist trying to bring relief to my neurotic patients... I discovered some important new facts about the unconscious... the role of instinctual urges and so on. Out of these findings grew a new science, psychoanalysis, a part of psychology and a new method of treatment of neurosis. I had to pay heavily for this bit of good luck. Look, people did not believe in my facts and thought my theories unsavory. Resistance was strong and unrelenting. In the end, I succeeded... but the struggle is not yet over (Freud, 1938). Although Freud had sexuality embedded within his theoretical framework, his direct writings do not correspond to the content emphasized by some of his predecessors.

Freud has been discredited for his seemingly preoccupation with sexuality. However, if one reads his original writings, his emphasis on sexuality is congruent to social norms found in current situation-comedies on television (e.g., *Friends*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Two and a Half Men*). Freud’s sexual content was outside of social norms during his lifetime but are not outside of today’s social norms. His fixation on sexuality clearly fits into current social norms within everyday common discourse. His followers and students have taken Freud’s position several steps further. For example, in our literature

search we found 276 publications between 1930 and 2022 that emphasize the concept of “penis envy.” Of these, 175 publications/authors advocate for the continued use of the penis envy concept. These authors support a definition of penis envy which can be summarized as:

The acknowledgement among females that they lack a penis, and this missing sexual appendage leads to a psychiatric disturbance that reinforces feelings of inferiority when compared to males. Students and followers of Sigmund Freud appear to have placed more emphasis on the concept of penis envy than Freud did within his original writings. For example, Freud never provides a standardized definition of penis envy. In fact, his discussions of penis envy are always couched within the context of other Freudian concepts – such as the castration complex. He never wrote about penis envy as an independent concept – as many neo-Freudians do.

Within these 175 reviewed publications, we find a theme which asserts that the theoretical concept of penis envy is a hallmark or “pillar” to Freud’s framework. These publications stress that if the concept of penis envy is discredited and removed from the Freudian perspective, the entire theory will collapse. The credibility of these authors must be questioned. Within Freud’s original writing, it is challenging to find any commentary in which he alludes to the collapse of his theory if penis envy were to be excluded. In this manner, some post-Freudians seem to be exaggerating the theoretical importance of penis envy. Most importantly, some of his contemporaries found the concept of penis envy to be abhorrent.

When students are first introduced to penis envy in the classroom, one commonly asked question is: “How did professional women respond to penis envy?” A knowledgeable professor will respond by citing the work of Horney (1924; 1926) – pronounced “Hor-neye.” Taking a bold feminist stance, she referred to Freud’s position as “masculine narcissism.”

In as polite words as humanly possible, Horney suggested a need for a total reinterpretation of the penis envy concept. She also contended that Freud’s position was a result of an unconscious motive to secure male superiority. Freud’s (1931) reply to Horney’s criticism can best be described as feeble. First, Freud stresses that Horney underestimates the importance of penis envy within psychoanalytic theory. Specifically, he writes, “This [Horney’s criticism] does not tally with my impressions” (p. 242-243). He offers no “forms of support” to refute her position. In addition, we could identify a Freudian slip within Freud’s writing. He spells her name incorrectly.

During Freud’s lifespan, chauvinism was the norm (Bizzi, 2022). It was quite a herculean task for a woman to be admitted to medical school and have the endurance to complete it. Even after completion of a medical degree, women were not afforded the same level of respect seen among their male counterparts (Heidenheimer, 1989). Although Horney’s two publications criticizing Freud were well articulated and organized, it is clear that few professionals would take her seriously. In fact, professionals did not begin to take notice of her until after she established the American Institute of Psychoanalysis in 1941 [see: <https://www.sunsigns.org/famousbirthdays/d/profile/karen-horney/>]. Horney gained the notoriety she deserved – two years after Freud died. Within the academic world, Horney (1967) fell into prominence during the 1960s/70s women’s liberation movement when her book entitled *Feminine Psychology* was posthumously published. Within these pages she argues that psychoanalysis focused more on male development than on female development. No one, including Horney, focused on theory construction as a springboard to criticize Freud. Basic elements of theory construction can unravel the notion that penis envy is the pillar of Freudian theory.

## 2.1 Issues Related to Theory Construction

Those of us who are deeply entrenched within the study of theory construction often establish categories to understand the differences between and among theoretical frameworks. One categorization system is based on the purpose or function of a theory. There are two categories. These include *theories of understanding* and *theories of action* (Marson, 1991). It is rare to find a theory that equally embraces both types, but Lothane (2006) and Summers (2006) note that this dichotomy exists within the Freudian theory.

Theories of understanding tend to focus on the abstract and the academic. These theories have a central focus on offering an intimate understanding of the human condition. The major thrust of theories of understanding is toward providing scholarly insight. The insight is provided without the suggestion of intervention or attempts to change the individual or social structure. An example of a theory of understanding is the work of Piaget (1963). In Piaget's work, he offers a detailed analysis of child development. Piaget's work is held in high esteem but within his original writing he does not offer guidance to employ his theory as an intervention. Clearly, Piaget's central focus was on the understanding of development rather than intervention.

Theories of action are quite different when compared to theories of understanding. Theories of action focus on theoretical frameworks that guide an intervention. These theories do not require that the change agent have an intimate understanding of why and how clients behave the way that they do. The focus is on interventions that will lead to a desirable outcome. Understanding how the intervention works is much less important than being successful in achieving a therapeutic goal. An example of a theory of action is the work of Skinner (1938) and all other scholars who focus on behaviorism. Skinner envisioned the person to be an empty box. It is not necessary to understand what's in the box, but rather how to go about to achieve a particular desired goal. Like Piaget's work, Skinner's work is held in high esteem among those who use it.

The unusual aspect of the Freudian framework is that it is both a theory of understanding and a theory of action. The central focus within Freud's theory of understanding is its submergence into the realm of sexuality. His entire developmental schema has sexual content. The sexual content is most notable within Freud's phallic stage. At this stage, Freud includes the concept of penis envy. His theory of action includes the tools he used for intervention. For example, Freud instructs his followers on how to delve into the unconscious through the use of various tools including hypnosis. He stresses the importance of confidentiality between therapist and patient for relationship building. More importantly, Freudian theoreticians, such as Bornstein (2006), Pincus (2006) and Wallerstein (2006) are placing much greater emphasis on practical intervention and minimizing the understanding dimension of the theory. The largest proportion of publications assessed within our research consistently contend that Freud's theoretical framework would collapse if concepts such as penis envy were removed. This is not true. Regardless of how one uses Freud's theory of understanding, his theory of action remains relevant and continues to be useful for mental health practitioners. The reality is that his theory of understanding lacks relevancy, but his theory of action remains useful today. Thus, it is false to contend that Freud's theory will collapse if the sexual component is eliminated. His action theory does not necessarily need to be bolstered by his theory of understanding.

Introduction to psychology textbooks were reviewed to bolster the lack of impact that the concept of penis envy has on the initial presentation of Freudian theory. Within this review, the failure to include

the acknowledgement of Freud is nonexistent. Nevertheless, within our nonrandom review of such textbooks, we do not see the concept of penis envy being introduced. If penis envy is the pillar of the Freudian theoretical framework, as stressed by *more than half* of Freudians reviewed within this research, one would expect that the concept of penis envy would be included in every introductory presentation. It is not. We can only conclude that penis envy is *not* a pillar of Freudian theory. However, penis envy is part and parcel of Freud's theory of understanding and exists independently from his theory of action. Simply stated, Freudian theory will continue to exist in the absence of Freud's many sexual/theoretical propositions.

### 3. **Mission of Research**

Two issues emerge from and among discussions with mental health practitioners. First, in casual conversations, it is common for mental health practitioners to express the lack of relevance that Freud has on contemporary mental health practice. Second, within the same conversation, mental health practitioners will commonly acknowledge that Freud provides theoretical contributions that continue to be used within today's mental health practice. The bottom line is: Since Freud has such a degraded reputation, his fruitful therapeutic concepts are not acknowledged and attributed to him. Practitioners appear to be embarrassed with their use of Freudian concepts. They are neither likely to share the utility of Freudian concepts with their clients nor with their less experienced colleagues. The *degree* of relevance of Freud's work is, in fact, an empirical question. Addressing this question is a simple matter of assessing the number of journals in which Freudian theory is the central mission. Such a list can be found in Table 1.

<b>Table 1</b> <b>Freudian Journals</b>
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<p><b>Currently Published</b></p> <p><i>American Journal of Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>Analysis (Australian Centre for Psychoanalysis)</i>  <i>Cadernos de Psicanálise - SPCRJ</i>  <i>Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis</i>  <b>European Journal of Psychoanalysis</b>  <i>International Forum of Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>International Journal of Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>International Journal of Psychoanalysis and Education</i>  <b>International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology</b>  <b>International Review of Psychoanalysis</b>  <i>Issues in Psychoanalytic Psychology</i>  <i>Jahrbuch Der Psychoanalyse</i>  <i>Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry</i>  <i>Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association</i>  <i>Language and Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>Ma'arag: Israeli Journal of Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>Psychanalyse et Psychopathologie</i>  <i>Freudiennes yche: Zeitschrift Für Psychoanalyse Und Ihre Anwendungen</i>  <i>Psychoanalysis (Seoul)</i>  <i>Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy</i>  <i>Psychoanalysis Self and Context</i>  <i>Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society</i>  <i>Psychoanalytic Dialogues</i>  <i>Psychoanalytic Inquiry</i>  <i>Psychoanalytic Psychology</i>  <i>Psychoanalytic Quarterly</i></p>	<p><i>Psychoanalytic Review</i>  <i>Psychoanalytic Social Work</i>  <i>Psychoanalytic Study of the Child</i>  <i>Psychodynamic Practice vista Brasileira de Psicanálise vista Chilena de Psicoanálisis vista de Psicanálise da Sociedade Psicanalítica de Porto Alegre vista de Psicoanálisis de La Asociación Psicoanalítica de Madrid vue Française de Psychanalyse</i>  <i>manian Journal of Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>andinavian Psychoanalytic Review</i>  <i>mpo Psicanalítico</i>  <i>itschrift Für Psychoanalytische Theorie Und Praxis</i></p> <p><b>No Longer Published</b></p> <p><i>Analytic Psychotherapy &amp; Psychopathology</i>  <i>Annual of Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>Bulletin of the Anna Freud Centre</i>  <i>Gender &amp; Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>Issues in Ego Psychology</i>  <i>Journal of a Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>Journal of Clinical Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>Modern Psychoanalysis</i>  <i>Psychanalyse à l'Université</i>  <i>Psychoanalysis ychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice</i>  <i>Topique: Revue Freudienne</i></p>
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As illustrated in Table 1, within the 21st century there have been 51 journals whose primary mission is Freudian thought, 12 of which are no longer being published. In assessing the rejection among mental health practitioners for Freudian thought, 39 contemporary journals are a rather large number to honor a man who generates significant rejection.

To empirically assess the contemporary impact of Freudian theory, we decided to assess the most questionable aspect of his theory. Without a doubt, the concept of penis envy is universally accepted as the most cringe-worthy concept of all mainstream psychological theories (Gersick, 2020). Surely the concept of penis envy would be absent within contemporary psychological and clinical social work literature.

To empirically assess the pervasiveness of Freud's concept of penis envy, we can examine the patterns within the literature. Several statistical concepts will act as indicators of the prevalence of the penis envy concept. First, we will systematically collect literature with the central focus of penis envy. Second, we will construct a frequency distribution line graph. A frequency distribution line chart that is chronologically graphed will visually demonstrate the theoretical interest for penis envy over the progression of years (1930 to 2023). Our research hypothesis presumed an intense interest in the elaboration of penis envy in the years immediately following its theoretical introduction. We would expect to see a high frequency of literature in the early years followed by a waning interest with the progression of time. Visually, this association would be theoretically plotted as a strong negative correlation. It was hypothesized that with the progression of time, the number of publications addressing penis envy would progressively decline.

#### **4. Sample Collection and Organization**

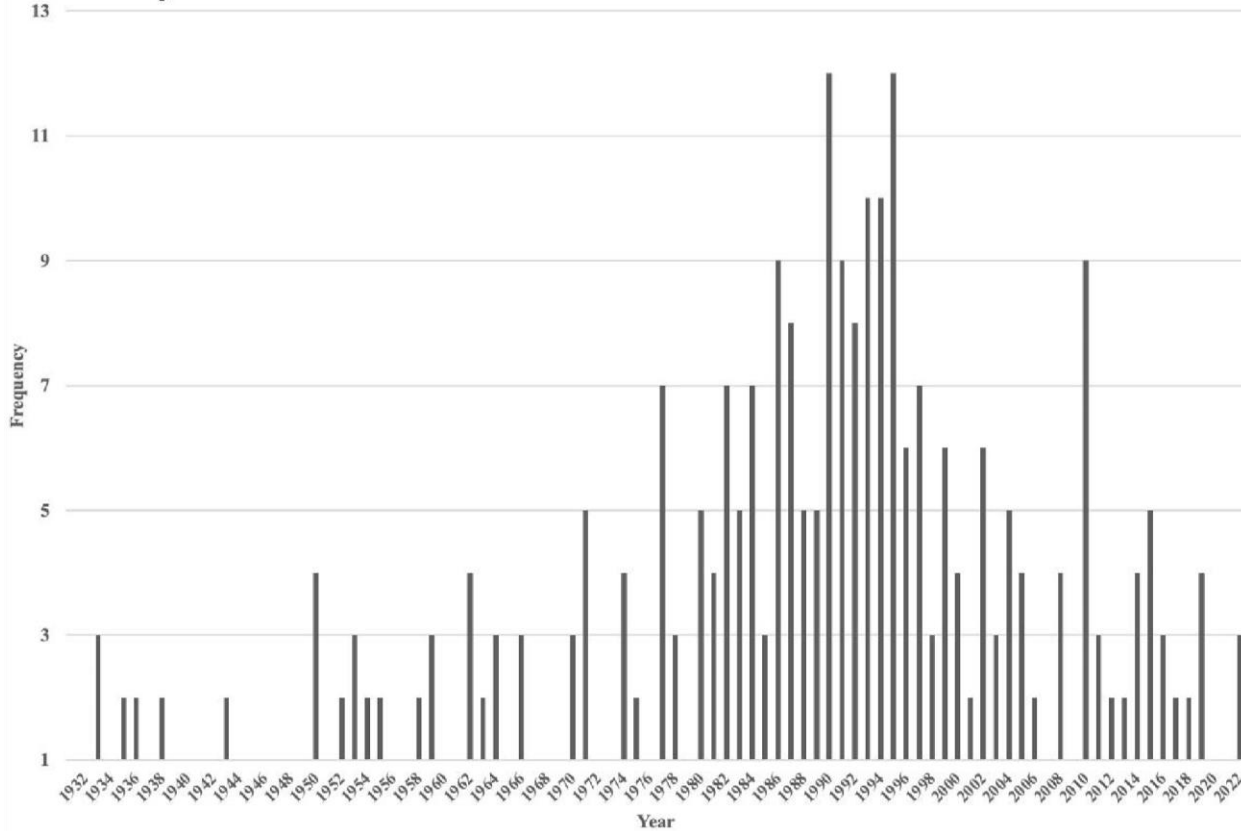
The American Psychological Association's (APA) PsycArticles and PsycInfo are library databases that includes references from the early 1800s to the present. Books, book chapters, dissertations and refereed journal articles are part of these two databases. In addition, references are included from at least fifty countries representing at least 29 different languages. Most, but not all, references are available in PDF (seemingly<sup>1</sup>) or HTML. If the reference is not immediately available, such references can be accessed through interlibrary loan.

In searching within the PsycArticles and PsycInfo databases, the term "penis envy" was inputted and 305 citations with abstracts were uncovered. Each abstract was read twice. During the first reading, duplicates were deleted. With the elimination of duplicates, references that failed to address penis envy were also deleted. A sample of 277 references were collected. With this sample, a frequency line chart was constructed. The original research hypothesis, which inaccurately predicted that references related to penis envy would decline, had to be rejected. As illustrated in Figure 1, the original research hypothesis generated no validity.

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<sup>1</sup> The term seemingly is used because some files are designated as PDF but are actually JPEG files. Such mislabeling produces problems related to searching.

**Figure 1**  
**Penis Envy Publications**



The data demonstrates a lack of interest in publishing articles addressing penis envy immediately following Freud's first proposal. Instead, starting approximately in 1976, during the height of the women's movement, we see a dramatic and continuing increase of penis envy citations. In order to uncover the increased interest between 1976 to 2010, a typology had to be constructed. In this manner, publication patterns could be identified.

As a result, the mission of the second reading included an effort to identify ideal types or categories that could emerge into a typology. Six (6) of the 289 abstracts failed to elicit adequate information in order to be categorized. With those six cases, the entire document was read. In only one case, interlibrary loan was used.

In reviewing this extensive list, five Weberian types were constructed in the following manner. First, all the abstracts and titles were read in a cursory manner. In this quick overview, three patterns emerged:

- a total acceptance of the original Freudian meaning of penis envy.
- a total rejection of the penis envy concept.
- a revision of the penis envy concept.

Second, after the cursory reading, an intense and detailed reading was done. It was acknowledged immediately that the three original types would not be sufficient to accurately portray all of the

abstracts. The categories of acceptance and rejection were retained while the term “revision” was renamed “reinterpretation.”

Citations that embraced the standard Freudian penis envy (women wish they had a penis) were labeled “Acceptance.” The concept that is close to acceptance has been entitled “Application.” Within this type, a particular patient or a group of patients (such as a case study) was presented in which penis envy was an integral part of an intervention and/or analysis. The categories of acceptance and application share the vision that penis envy is a pillar of Freudian analysis.

Within the “Reinterpretation” category, a portion of the citations embraced the Marxian concept of false consciousness. This pattern was probably influenced by Friedan’s (2010) highly influential book that was originally published in 1963. She seems to be reluctantly proposing that Freud’s theoretical influence was so profoundly inculcated within our social structure and mental health paradigms that it has become a herculean task to refute it.

Although she did not use the Marxian term, she presented the best argument for describing the existence of “false consciousness” among women of her generation. Thus, the reinterpretation category was split into two: reinterpretation and false consciousness.

From this analysis, five Weberian ideal types emerged:

1. **Rejection:** These citations unambiguously rejected the entire concept of penis envy.
2. **False Consciousness:** This type emerges from the writings of ego psychologists. Within ego psychology, women are said to feel measurably more anxious than males. This heightened anxiety may manifest itself as a result of penis envy. However, a better explanation for the anxiety is found within our social structure which assumes that females are less competent than males. Within this type, women falsely accept and sometimes embrace their inferior status.
3. **Reinterpretation:** These articles were somewhat ambiguous. They did *not totally* reject the concept of penis envy but offered a reinterpretation in a manner that can best be described as less offensive to female readers.
4. **Application:** These references identify penis envy as a real psychological entity that emerges within women who are emotionally disturbed. Thus, women, who are emotionally disturbed, are envious of men because they lack a penis. These articles are often case studies or case illustrations of a particular patient with a psychiatric disorder that includes a desire to have a penis.
5. **Classical Penis Envy:** These articles contend that a preconscious anxiety disorder exists for all women. Thus, all women feel cheated in their lives because of the absence of a penis.

A close inspection of these five ideal types reveals that they are an ordinal measurement. This type of ranking will be beneficial in future research. The common bond or thread among these five ideal types is **advocacy**. That is each type advocates individually for a particular position regarding the concept of penis envy. Type one advocates for the total rejection of the entire concept of penis envy. Type 2 advocates for the position that the existence of penis envy is an error in interpretation. The anxiety felt by women is, in fact, anxiety related to being denied white male privilege. Type 3 advocates and acknowledges that a new concept similar to penis envy must exist in order for Freudian theory to survive. Type 4 advocates for the concept of penis envy to exist within an intervention or case study of patients or a group of patients. Type 5 strongly advocates for the existence and importance of penis envy within the context of the overall Freudian theory.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Box and Whisker Plot

Box and whisker plots are particularly useful for contrasting the configuration of multiple small distributions. Typically, data used within box and whisker plots fall within the category of nonparametric. In addition, these distributions tend to be small. There are five characteristics of a box and whisker plot which are known as the “5-number summary.” A box and whisker plot within a graphic illustration illustrates the minimum number, the first quartile, the median, the third quartile, and the maximum number within the distribution. A comparison to the more familiar quantitative descriptive statistics would be: The median is similar to the mean, the first and third quartile are similar to standard deviations, and the upper and lower limit are comparable to the variance.

### 5.2 Interpretation

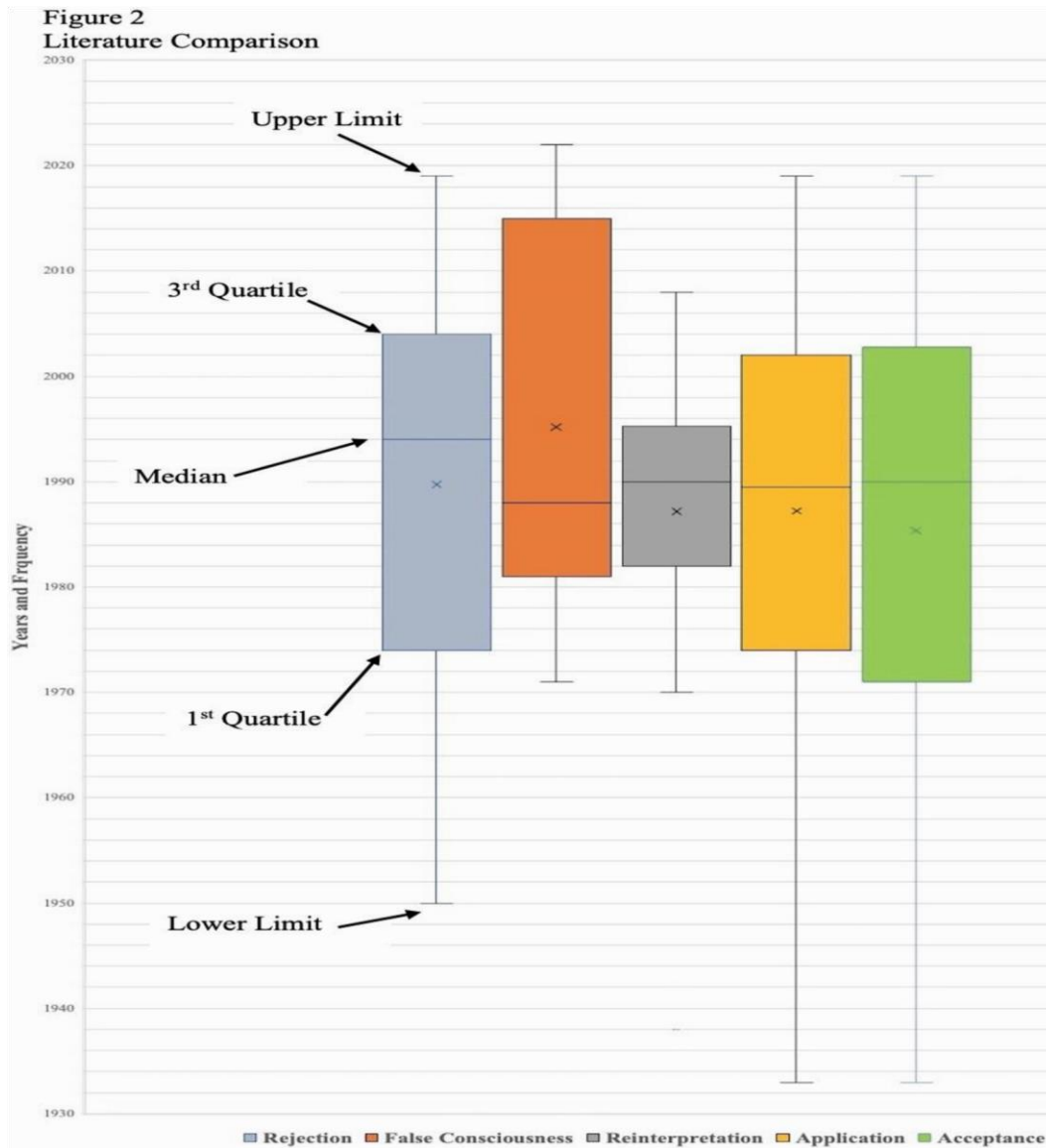
As stated earlier, the findings contained within Figure 1 are totally unexpected and shocking. Based on the general abhorrence of Freud's concept of penis envy, one would expect that the greatest frequency of literature about penis envy to be at the height of Freud's career and several years after his death. Then, we would expect a decline of penis envy publications and its gradual disappearance. Figure 2 demonstrates the exact opposite. Establishing Weberian ideal types was hypothesized to provide insight into the totally unexpected frequency of interest in penis envy over time.

First, within Table 2 we compare the overall descriptive statistics. The categories of rejection, false consciousness, and reinterpretation refute the traditional and original definition of penis envy (n=101). The categories of application and acceptance embrace the original notion of penis envy (n=175). Clearly, the frequency of authors/publications that advocate for the traditional definition of penis envy outnumber the authors/publications who reject the original conceptualization.

**Table 2, Five Number Summary**

	Rejection	False Consciousness	Reinterpretation	Application	Acceptance
<b>Upper Limit</b>	2019	2022	2008	2019	2019
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Quartile</b>	2003	2011	1995	2002	2003
<b>Median</b>	1994	1988	1990	1990	1990
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Quartile</b>	1973	1981	1982	1974	1971
<b>Lower Limit</b>	1950	1971	1934	1933	1933
<b>n</b>	25	12	64	70	105

Second, it is critical to examine the overall distributions of the five categories within the box and whisker plots (Figure 2). The medians express an insightful theoretical issue. There is very little difference among the medians for the categories of false consciousness, reinterpretation, application, and acceptance. The position among those who advocate for rejecting the concept of penis envy, have a much different median. The median for the total rejection distribution is considerably more recent than the other four. The median for the rejection category suggests a shifting trend in addressing penis envy. For decades, a pattern of acceptance and use of penis envy within mental health practice was identified. The shift in the median supports the water cooler talk addressed earlier. In practice, mental health professionals are moving away from envisioning penis envy as a central pillar for Freudian thought.



Third, a comparison among the overall distributions is also critical. The categories of application and acceptance appear to be normally distributed with the largest amount of variance among the five groups. The reinterpretation category shares the characteristic of being normally distributed but with a considerably smaller n. The rejection and false consciousness distributions are clearly skewed. The most profound insight is the direction of the skew for false consciousness. Within the false consciousness category, we see the bulk of the distribution being more recent than all of the other categories combined. This distribution suggests a critical pattern when the category of false consciousness is combined with the categories of interpretation and rejection. A new pattern emerges. These three groups of authors/publications contend that Freudian theory can and will predominate our

thinking in regard to mental health treatment but with an absence of penis envy. The findings also suggest that other Freudian sexually based concepts have diminishing interest.

#### **6. A False Narrative?**

Some of the greatest advances in physics from the 20th century emerged from Einstein's thought experiments (*Gedankenexperiment*). Thought experiment emerged as a fruitful theoretical foundation in physics. We can follow Einstein's model to help us gain insight into the existence of penis envy. In our thought experiment, we begin with a separate reality that states that everything written and/or discussed about the existence of penis envy is *unequivocally false*. Our thought experiment focuses on scientific findings that would explain how a false narrative could become the centerpiece of a major theoretical paradigm.

We begin by asking the question: How could intellectuals initially accept the theoretical concept of penis envy? First, we must recognize patterns within the social structure during the late 1800s and early 1900s. During this time frame, two social-psychological and cultural phenomena dominated. First, we observe superiority of men and the prestige of science (Heidenheimer, 1989). Second, women are envisioned (by both men and women) as being second class humans. Three studies can be generalized to explain how penis envy became normalized within Freudian theory:

- Milgram (1963) illustrated that people, but not all, will succumb to the directions of an authority figure. This willingness to succumb is particularly salient when the authority figure is a doctor wearing a white lab coat. The centerpiece of Milgram's experiments focused on the willingness of subjects to inflict direct harm to another person under the direction of an authority figure. Freud's authoritarian persona certainly fits into Milgram's paradigm, except Freud's directions did not invoke direct harm to other humans. Milgram's intention was to see how far an authority figure can go -- to produce harm. Some research subjects refused to inflict harm to others. The element of inflicting harm to others is not part of Freud's ability to convince other professionals to accept the theoretical concept of penis envy. Milgram's study has been replicated many times since 1963. The research outcomes have not changed.

- Asch's (1956) research has also been replicated many times since it was first published in 1956. The results of replicative research have not changed. The concept of groupthink emerged from this research. Essentially, Asch found that a falsehood will be accepted by others on the basis of symbolically meaningful gestures among peers who accept the falsehood as truth. In examining the acceptance of penis envy, it is apparent that if a group of professionals accept penis envy as a reality when, in fact, it is false, others are likely to accept this false concept because they do not want to be part of the minority who fails to understand the complexity of the theory.

- Unlike the work of Milgram (1963) and Asch's (1956), Zimbardo's (Zimbardo, Haney, Banks & Jaffe, 1973, April 8) research has never been replicated because it would never pass an IRB inspection. In addition, Zimbardo's research is different from Milgram and Asch because he focused on the authority figure rather than those who succumb to authority figures. Zimbardo demonstrates when the social structure sanctions the actions of an authority figure, authority figures will succumb to their own imagined prestige and superiority. When an authority figure is socially sanctioned as possessing a higher level of scientific credibility, the authority figure is propelled to exploit the power of the social position. Other professionals will accept with limited questioning the position of the overly confident authority.

Past research unambiguously demonstrates that the general population can easily succumb to the directions of an authority figure. There is no reason to believe that professionals lack the same frailties of other humans. Experienced professionals would manifest the same type of characteristics as the general population. We could surmise that they *might* be less susceptible. Unfortunately, there is no research that targets the emotional vulnerability of psychoanalysts.

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that professionals have the same human characteristics as the general population. We can conclude that if penis envy is not a reflection of reality, under the circumstances described above, professional therapists would embrace such a falsehood.

Although not empirically supported, the Thomas Theorem reports, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas, 1928). Within the context of penis envy being a falsehood but treated as a reality, mental health practitioners would automatically interpret client behavior within a penis envy paradigm. "Penis envy is a reality because I believe it is a reality. All my clients respond in a manner that is consistent with the trauma associated with penis envy."

## 7. **Conclusions**

Our findings show that for nearly 100 years, the majority of Freudian scholars accept penis envy as a pillar of psychoanalysis. However, we are beginning to see a shifting trend. There is a growing pattern in which authors/publications are rejecting and/or reinterpreting penis envy. Most of the authors envision psychoanalytic theory as an important component to mental health treatment. Nevertheless, we see a new pattern in which psychoanalytic theory continues to be embraced by practitioners but in the absence of many concepts within Freud's "theory of understanding." The question that one must ask is: Can Freud's theory be fruitful when his "theory of understanding" is eliminated or partially eliminated from practice? Our analysis suggests that penis envy and many of Freud's developmental concepts can be eliminated and his theory of action would continue to be considerably fruitful.

To illustrate the fruitfulness of removing Freud's theory of understanding, a case illustration provides insight. A man who has been subjected to an industrial accident, has become blind and has no hope for visual recovery. He must undergo rehabilitation services, but an emotional crisis emerged from his loss and has inhibited him from accepting rehabilitation services. Freud's theory of action can become a successful catalyst to enable the man to gain the emotional strength to follow the rehabilitation protocol toward recovery and regain a social and vocational life. On the other hand, employing Freud's theory of understanding will be of no benefit to the man without vision. This illustration clearly demonstrates that Freud's theory of action is independent from his theory of understanding.

There is no such thing as a scientific fact. Those who say science "proves" something *definitively* are clearly not scientists. All scientific findings are tentative, and this fact is clearly articulated by Kuhn (1996). Freud has a history of being uncompromising about his theory. This is understandable but, nevertheless, it is irresponsible for professionals and other social sciences to envision his theoretical framework as being infallible. We can only assume that Freud projected the image of being intellectually superior to those around him. People, including women professionals, were reluctant to provide a counterargument because, frankly, Freud was an intimidating character. We see this exact kind of intimidation within the Milgram (1963) studies. People accept the direction of the white man and the white coat because he is a white man in a white coat.

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