

# STINKS AND INSTINCTS: An Empirical Investigation of Freud's Excreta Theory

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the heuristic value of Freud's theories, they have been plagued by a lack of empirical support (Cast, Raitt, & Runn, 1972; Komp & Sation, 1985). His theory of psychosexual stages of development has been under especially heavy fire on these grounds (cf. O'Rall, 1955; Null, A., 1956; Faylick, 1959; Layten, C., 1962; see Jenn *et al.*, 1967, for an overview). In her scathing critique of Freud's theory of sexuality, D. Nial (1987) vehemently argues that there is absolutely no validity whatsoever to the idea of penis envy. While her paper is typical of the traditional interest in the phallic stage, a number of eminent authors have called for renewed focus on the anal stage (Bough, L., 1965; Dingle & Berry, 1972; Dooty & Pooh, 1973; Fee, C., 1978; Gass, I.F., 1969; see Mye Orfuss, 1982, for in-depth review).

In his landmark publication, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930/1961) noted that ". . .in spite of all man's developmental advances, he scarcely finds the smell of *his own* (original italics) repulsive, but only that of other people's" (p. 52 *n*). We were moved by Freud's astute observation and set about to research this phenomenon. Unfortunately, a review of the salient literature yielded only some soft support (Runns, D., 1975); lacking is any solid evidence (Goodsteel, A., 1986). Thus, it was the goal of this study to experimentally investigate the validity of Freud's excreta theory.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The sample ( $N = 100$ ) was randomly drawn from an introductory psychology subject pool. In keeping with scientific tradition, students were selected against their will. The one student who refused to participate was physically detained and forced to play the role of "learner" in a minor modification of the Milgram (1963) obedience experiment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This one involved real shocks.

<sup>2</sup>The authors wish to extend their gratitude to Edward Norton for procuring the auxiliary stimulus materials. Without his tireless efforts and immeasurable courage, this study could not have been realized.

## Stimulus Materials

Stimulus materials consisted of 100 human stools each procured from a different individual. Specimens ranged in weight from 3 oz to 2 lb ( $M = 5$  oz).

## Measure

Excreta Enjoyability (*EE*) was assessed with the Standard Test of Inherently Noxious and Kinky Secretions (*STINKS*; IBM, 1981). Items on *STINKS* are scored on a 9-point Likert scale (1="absolutely repulsed", 9="love it").

## Procedure

All subjects were instructed to supply the experimenters with a recent sample (i.e., within 2 days) of their own excreta. Samples were weighed and coded for identification. Five samples did not meet the arbitrary minimum weight requirement (*viz.*, < 3 oz), and were therefore disposed of using standard procedure. In their place, five auxiliary samples were utilized.<sup>2</sup>

Subjects were blindfolded and randomly assigned to two conditions: own excreta vs. other's excreta. For both conditions, *Ss* received a 30 sec. exposure to the stimulus material and were instructed to "breathe deeply". Immediately following the introduction of the independent variable, *Ss* gave verbal reactions and completed the *STINKS* scale. In lieu of a formal debriefing procedure, subjects were informed that they would promptly receive a letter from the experimenters explaining the purpose of the study. Of course, such letters were never sent.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scores for the two groups on *STINKS* were compared by *t* test. As can be seen in Table 1, results support the hypothesis that people do, in fact, prefer the smell




of their own excreta more than that of others',  $t(98) = 47.95, p < .0001$ , one-tailed.

**TABLE 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, t Ratio, Degrees of Freedom for STINKS Ratings.

Group	n	M	SD	t(98)
Own Excreta	50	7.62	0.61	
Other's Excreta	50	2.14	0.53	47.95*

\* $p < .0001$ .

The results of this study provide the first known empirical evidence for Freudian theory; however, this is just a beginning. Future investigations should dig deeper to explore the robustness of this phenomenon. We fervently hope that our initial efforts, despite some occasional obstructions, will only serve to open the flood gate and lead to more productive and pleasurable movement in this most important arena. 

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