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Dream Interpretation: The Next Frontier of Psychoanalysis

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## Abstract

An examination of the history of dream interpretation reveals its significant role within psychotherapy, drawing upon religious texts, ancient philosophers, and modern uses. Many prominent psychologists such as Freud and Jung contributed to our knowledge of dreams and how they can be interpreted. The problems clinicians face today is that most methods for analyzing dreams are scattered and contrary. Several specific theories, from Freudian theory to the Hill Cognitive-Experiential Model of dream interpretation, are discussed and analyzed. Research has slowed on this topic due to methodological problems and diverse interpretations of dream content. Subsequently, the potential benefits of using dream analysis is shown, as well as methods that have proven useful. Those who use dream interpretation have consistently have achieved desired results (Pesant & Zarda, 2004). Using dream interpretation in therapeutic settings can help therapists better understand and aid their clients. Clara Hill (2004) suggests a set method known as the cognitive-experiential model, which integrates aspects from several existing dream theories to help clients explore their dreams, gain insight into their meaning, and take action to resolve issues in their waking life. Further research is necessary to determine the reliability and validity of this method, and whether it should be broadly implemented.

### Dream Interpretation: The Next Frontier of Psychoanalysis

Flavia has been seeing a therapist for the past several years to help cope with her delusions and violent behavior. As the session commences, she brings out her dream journal and tells her therapist about her latest nighttime vision filled with intense and dark conversation between Flavia and her cousin. Immediately the therapist sees a connection between the meaning behind the dream and his client's current situation. The pair jumps on the opportunity and dives into a conversation through which Flavia ultimately discovers a key to controlling her aggression (Marozza, 2005).

People such as Flavia, who take note of and discuss their dreams with those trained in the field of psychoanalysis, surely recognize the potential power behind their dreams. Dreams have long been an item of study among psychologists. Before proceeding, it is necessary to define what version of "dream" will be used throughout this paper. According to Hall and Castle (1966), the operational definition of a dream is "that which a person reports when he is asked to relate a dream, excluding statements which are comments upon or interpretations of the dream" (p. 18). In other words, a dream is whatever each individual perceives it to be. Still, some commonalities exist among definitions, such as the occurrence of dreams when the mind is in a state of unconsciousness or subconsciousness (Black, 2000).

Past research indicates that there is often a powerful connection between dreams and experiences in the "waking world", though there is no conclusive method of analysis available today that would result in accurate interpretations. Relatively little empirical research has been done recently pertaining to how modern individuals in the "Western" world can understand their dreams (Malinowski, 2016). By considering well-known religious interpretations of dream meanings, ancient psychologists' perspectives and modern psychological theories, it is shown

that dreams should be used more in psychotherapy as a method for helping individuals understand themselves on a deeper level. Dreams have been found to represent the issues of the waking life on which the individual is emotionally focused, sometimes even showing specific hardships that the dreamer has a difficult time managing (Jaenicke, 2008). By analyzing the various ways that dreams are used in psychoanalysis, or have been used in the past, a more effective and efficient way of analyzing dreams—and implementing them into psychotherapy—can be determined.

### **Literature Review**

From a very early time period, it was apparent that dreams were used as a method of self-analysis. Ancient works of holy writ are rampant with examples of dreams that are followed by significant symbolic interpretations (Bar, 2001). Judges 7:13-15 (King James Version), tells the story of a man who relates his dreams of seeing a falling loaf of barley to his friend. The friend went on to interpret the dream for him, ultimately resulting in a conversation about the individual. Additionally, in the Qur'an, a prophet, Abraham, receives a dream that he must sacrifice his son and ends up sharing his interpretation with his son (Quran 37:102, Oxford World's Classics edition). For Abraham and many others within these ancient religious texts, dreams were an integral part of life and carried deep meaning. Regardless of individual beliefs, these ancient texts reveal that people living thousands of years ago believed in dreams as having deep meanings, and not as simply random projections of the brain. From these examples, it is clear that people who lived many centuries ago used dreams as a method of gaining insight into their lives. Although these early forms of therapy may be considered primal, it is still significant that both dreams and the desire to understand and interpret them have possibly been around since the commencement of the human race.

Though dreams have long been around as a source of personal insight and awareness, they became a significant topic of study just over a century ago. Sigmund Freud (1900) invented psychoanalysis and was well known for his studies on potential meaning behind dreams. Freud noted that some desires, such as those that are sexual or aggressive in nature, are unacceptable to the conscious awareness, so they appear instead in dreams in a disguised (symbolic) format. From a more psychological standpoint, Sigmund Freud was arguably the most popular early psychologist who postulated on the importance of dreams and the attached interpretations. He believed that dreams were ultimately a form of “wish fulfillment,” and, since that information is unruly and often disturbing, the preconscious often censors it so the individual cannot fully understand the context in the waking world. Psychoanalysts still use this idea today in helping their patients understand some of their unruly desires by offering dream interpretation, reporting that this method aided them in successfully diagnosing the root problem in their patients (Forrer, 2014). However, while still practiced by psychoanalytically inclined therapists, these methods are not nearly as used today as they were almost a century ago, because of more theoretical diversity in therapy practice. (Malinowski, 2016).

Carl Jung is another example of a psychologist whose work on dream interpretation left a positive mark, but whose findings are being used much less today. He focused more on how his dreams and the interpretations he attached to them resulted in his life experiences. Jung also expressed that dreams guide people through their lives, feeling strongly that following a single dream can offer additional input about an individual while following a string of dreams over time offers a much more accurate picture of the person’s life (1965). Using this method has been noted as effective in discovering the “working” —the why, where, and how— in an individual’s

development. Yet, similar to Freud, these insights have decreased in popularity as modern-day therapy has continued to evolve (Forrer, 2014; Matthews, 2016).

Though dreams used to be a significant focus within the psychology field, the major methods for dream interpretation today are still relatively scattered. Arguably the most popular is that developed by Calvin Hall, a modern-day psychologist who based his beliefs off of Aristotle's views. The major premise of Calvin's method is the idea that dreaming is simply thinking during sleep, but that the concepts of dreams are expressed as visual images as opposed to waking thoughts (Black, 2000). Several psychologists have built off of this idea to create their own theories. One such example of this is shown by Hall and Nordby (1972), who believe that during sleep dreamers are thinking of problems and predicaments, fears and hopes. They also believe that motives behind thoughts in dreams have a common origin (wishes or fears originating from childhood). Though this idea is broadly accepted among modern psychologists (Black, 2000; Pesant, 2004), there is little research done to support it.

Another popular method used today among psychologists is based off the Hill Cognitive-Experiential approach (Pesant & Zarda, 2004), which states that dreams can often be categorized into one of six major groups: 1) worries and emotions; 2) relationships; 3) work and studies; 4) events and situations; 5) desiring, wanting, and longing; and 6) symbolism. Hill further states that those whose dreams are of a symbolic nature tended to have more thought suppression, aggressive behavior in dreams, and intense emotions (Malinowski, 2016). Though it is often used within psychotherapy, this theory remains separate from other approaches such as Calvin Hall's, and is therefore used sparingly in all other settings. Growing off of the Hill theory, several researchers and clinicians state that dreams, especially those related to worries and emotions, are the mind's way of modulating those moods in a controlled way. Others have taken

it a step further to suggest that dreams not only help understand emotions and conflicts while sleeping, but also serve a similar role in the waking state because individuals tend to attempt to recall and analyze them, which frequently leads to problem-solving (Givrad, 2016).

Perhaps the most consistent modern theory available is that of Clara Hill, who developed the cognitive-experiential model for working with dreams. She believes that dreams are useful therapeutic tools which aid people in circumventing their defenses to really get at their self-awareness (Hill, 2004). The cognitive-experiential model implements aspects of many existing dream theories, such as Freudian, Gestalt, Jungian, client-centered, and behavioral. Through this *mélange* was developed a three-staged model where therapists aid clients in exploring their dreams, gaining specific insights into their meanings, and then taking action to resolve the issues at which the dreams hint at in their waking lives (Hill, 2004). This approach offers therapists and clients a structured but flexible method that amplifies therapeutic benefits of psychoanalysis.

### **Resistance to Dream Analysis**

Several hypotheses exist as to why these current theories to approaching dream interpretation are slow in their progression and acceptance among the psychological world. Perhaps the most prominent hypothesis relates to the intense methodological problems that scientists face when studying dreams. Dreams can only be studied retrospectively and through the subjective report of the dreamer. Any attempt to study dreams must include the account of the dream from the dreamer's own words. Due to biases and memory failure, the dream reports are understandably questionable, if not entirely untrustworthy (Givrad, 2016). Another potential reason for the slowed progress of dream interpretation as a method of psychotherapy began in the twentieth century. Both psychoanalysis and behaviorism had started to grow and gain popularity, the former begging for a greater focus on the meaning attached to dreams, while the

latter questioned the existence of dreams altogether. In separate ways, these theories weakened the systematic study of dreams in larger sample sizes, thus reducing the work and research done on dream therapy during this time period (Desseilles, Dang-Vu, Sterpenich, & Schwartz, 2011).

Another important and common issue among psychotherapists regarding the use of dreams is the varying ideas behind what dreams consist of and what they do to the individual mind (Givrad, 2016). Several researchers have gone into great detail on this subject, resulting in a hypothesis that is broadly accepted: dreaming causes an increase in affective arousal—which includes both physiological responses and limbic system activity (Kramer, 1993). Further studies built off of this fairly recent acclaim by suggesting that dreams often produce parallel emotions, actions, or images (Matthews, 2016). These new ideas support the idea that dreams can be studied, analyzed, and interpreted to understand an individual on a biological, emotional, and subconscious level.

Regardless of the problems facing the growth of dream therapy for therapists and counselors, there are those who consistently use dream interpretation and achieve the desired results. A recent study of dream reports from women who have been exposed to addictive behavior by a romantic partner or a close family member resulted in an undeniable correlation between the intensity and themes within their dreams and their waking lives (Parker, 2015). These results suggest that over 90% of clients who were exposed to family members or significant others with alcoholic problems experienced significantly higher themes of violence and anger in their dreams. Another counselor recently shared the story of a client who came in with built-up anger so intense he was sure he was going to do something he would regret. By analyzing the man's latest dream together, the counselor was able to help the man discover the symbolism behind what his mind had played during sleep. This ultimately led to him discovering

that his anger was actually directed toward himself due to unresolved issues he had left behind with family members and past friends (Perelberg, 2016). Through the process of dream sharing and interpretation, the client was ultimately able to understand the problem at hand, which is the breakthrough that therapists and counselors desire to have with their clients.

### **Moving Forward**

As has been shown, dream interpretation as a form of psychoanalysis can be effective and should be used more in therapeutic settings. Much research has been done on the good that comes about from dream interpretation (Kramer, 1993; Hall & Castle, 1966; Hall & Nordy, 1972). One set of researchers, Pesant and Zarda (2004), went so far as to lay out the five ways in which dream interpretation within psychotherapy has helped and can help patients. Their study, which followed several hundred participants in clinical settings as they shared their dreams with professionals, produced the following list: Working through dreams can aid clients in learning powerful insights about themselves, increase their involvement in therapeutic settings, make access to important issues much easier, establish a protected and unguarded environment, and deepen the clinician's understanding of the client's current state and growth (Pesant & Zarda, 2004). This, accompanied by many other researchers' findings (Hartmann, 1995) suggests that clinicians have much to gain by using their clients' dreams. Sufficient clinical and empirical information is available to surmise that dream interpretation is both useful and effective within psychotherapeutic settings.

In addition to the benefits that dream interpretation offers clinicians, there has been a larger focus on scrutinizing the effects that it has on participants of psychotherapy within the past century. Dreams have been found to represent the issues of the waking life on which the individual is emotionally focused. In some cases, they even go as far as showing the specific

hardships of the dreamer which they struggle with accepting because of its extreme difficulty (Jaenicke, 2008). Dreams seem to contain particles of conscious life and subtly show a problem or mood that is being pushed aside or subdued. Jaenicke's (2008) study takes this idea a step further by suggesting that finding mutualities between dreaming and waking experiences often lead to the base issue that is most strongly affecting an individual (2008). The implications of this finding are incredible; if clinicians can determine what emotions and moods are being presented within a client's dream, then they will have access to the core issue of their client's problem. This possibility is built upon by the idea that a single dream contains a lot of significant information, but that following a series of dreams over time expands the meaning to include where the dreamer perceives he or she is heading and what they most need to work on (Jaenicke, 2008; Matthews, 2016).

The facts supporting the use of dream interpretation in psychotherapy are substantial, but the question of how to implement this method still remains. It is necessary, before the interpretation commences, that the interpreter knows the background of the client (Artemidorus & Harris-McCoy, 2012). This may include occupation, health, status, habits, and age. Directly following the account of the dream, the dreamer should be strongly suggested to give a description of their feelings about each topic, allowing the interpreter a glimpse into the client's emotional connection to the significance behind each element (Artemidorus & Harris-McCoy, 2012). In regard to the actual interpretation and seeing as there are many varying methods of interpretation available, integrating aspects of different approaches into one flexible and sustainable form could prove to be most beneficial to clients and clinicians alike (Pesant & Zarda, 2004). However, Clara Hill (2004) suggests a set routine to approaching interpretations

that would likely cause more clinicians to use interpretation, permitting clients to experience this new and useful method of analysis.

### **Conclusion**

Creating a single, specific organization to dream interpretation may seem like a lofty and unrealistic goal, but if achieved, the results would be positive. However, the development of several varying methods is much more likely, and would still allow for creativity and client-centered decisions for clinicians. One possibility for a set method of dream interpretation is that of dream dictionaries. This idea, which has existed for over a century, suggests that dream dictionaries would be made with set interpretations to potential dream scenarios and themes, allowing clinicians to simply look up the symbolic meanings to their clients' dreams (Szpakowska, 2002). The idea that it is possible to obtain universal meaning from dream symbols or to predict future events from them has been around at least as long as the written word, as was shown in the ancient epic, *Gilgamesh* (Artemidorus & Harris-McCoy, 2012). Modern-day psychologists and scholars tend to agree that having such a set method would increase the use of dream interpretation, but would lower its effectiveness (Sparrow, 2013). Even though a set method such as using dream dictionaries could potentially decrease the effectiveness of dream interpretation, it would still cause an increase in its usage and would make available this unique approach to therapists who wish to use it, which, as previously discussed, will bring positive results.

There are, however, some professionals who are already comfortable with using dream interpretation within psychoanalysis and therefore do not need a set method. For such therapists, Sparrow (2013) suggests that if set methods are the future approach to working with dreams, then a co-creative approach that is aligned with a variety of themes in contemporary

psychotherapy—such as choice and personal freedoms—would be the most supportive and supplementary way to go about it. Setting methods for dream interpretations with these ideas in mind will allow for the practice of dream interpretation to slide seamlessly into contemporary psychotherapy. A model such as Hill's cognitive-experiential model meets these needs and wants, and would likely persuade more therapists to include dream interpretations in their practices. Additional research is undoubtedly necessary in order to specify set methods for dream interpretation, particularly in regard to the usage of dream dictionaries, yet once these varying methods are available, the use and effectiveness of dream interpretation will likely increase.

In conclusion, the idea of interpreting dreams as a means of learning more about individuals has been around at least since the beginning of the written word. Varying methods of interpretation have come and gone, and the use of dream work within psychotherapy has begun to wane. However, as set methods for interpretation become available, dream interpretation can become a strong and important factor in contemporary therapy. Dream interpretation may not be the set road to a perfect understanding of humans, but it is certainly an effective and useful road that can and should be pursued (Pesant & Zarda, 2004).

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