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Working with Dreams as Co-Determined Outcomes

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Abstract

Dream analysis appears to deepen and accelerate the psychotherapeutic process, but it is not widely employed in contemporary practice. This may be due, in part, to an age-old belief that the value of a dream lies in the analysis of its visual content, and that the qualities valued in contemporary psychotherapy—self awareness, volition, and a sense of personal responsibility—are apparently lacking in most dreams. While research into “lucid dreaming” has established that some dreamers can become aware that they are dreaming, the emphasis on lucidity per se overlooks the possibility that nonlucid dreams may exhibit varying degrees of dreamer awareness and agency. This paper treats the apparent absence of these qualities in ordinary dreams as a problem in reporting and in perceiving dreams, and cites three sources that contribute to this problem. It then presents a view of normal dreaming as an interactive process between the dreamer and the dream imagery, and the dream outcome as a co-created experience. From this standpoint, dreams are indeterminate from the outset and co-created through the reciprocal interplay between dreamer and dream content. By shifting the principal focus in dream analysis to the dreamer, a psychotherapist can foster the client/dreamer's awareness of problematic patterns of responding, underscore competencies, and elicit a commitment to respond to life in new ways. The theory and research that supports a co-created view of the dream are reviewed, some testable hypotheses are submitted, and a systematic method of dream analysis consistent with this model is introduced.

Keywords: dream analysis, lucid dreaming, psychotherapy, co-creative dream theory,
five star method

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Dream analysis has been used in psychotherapy since Freud declared that dreams were “the royal road to a knowledge of the activities of the unconscious” (1900/1965). Other theorists have since incorporated dream analysis into Analytical Psychology (Jung, 1974, 1986), Individual Psychology (Adler, 1936) existential-phenomenology (Boss, 1958, 1977; Craig & Walsh, 1993), Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1968, 1973), Focusing (Gendlin, 1986), person-centered counseling (Barrineau, 1992), group therapy (Taylor, 1992; Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985), cognitive-behavioral therapy (Freeman & Boyll, 1992), family systems (Beck, 2005; Bynum, 1980, 1993; Kane, 1997; Kaplan, et. al, 1981), and contemporary psychoanalytic therapy (Weiss, 1993). Systematic, eclectic methods that can be used in individual therapy regardless of one's theoretical rationale for practice have also been introduced (Delaney, 1993b; Flowers, 1993; Hill, 1996, 2003; Reed, 2006).

As for the effectiveness of dream analysis in psychotherapy, the results are limited by the paucity of studies to date, but studies have shown that dream analysis increases self-disclosure and exploration (Provost, 1999), results in deeper work in the early sessions of therapy (Diemer, et. al, 1998), and produces superior client outcome measures when compared when self-esteem and insight work (Falk & Hill, 1995). And yet only a small percentage of practicing psychotherapists actively solicit dream reports from their clients. In one study, 83 percent of the respondents reported discussing dreams at least occasionally, but only 13 percent of the therapists employed dream analysis on a regular

basis (Keller, et. al, 1995). Another survey (Schredl, et. al, 2000) of German psychotherapists indicated that while respondents used dreams in 28 percent of their sessions, their clients initiated the dream work two-thirds of the time. And in a more recent study (Crook & Hill, 2004), 92 percent of therapists surveyed reported that they worked with dreams at least occasionally, but only 15 percent had worked with client dreams during the previous year.

Since the kind of information that therapists elicit from their clients has to do with whether they believe it can be useful in furthering the goals of therapy, the low utilization of dream analysis may be due, in part, to a mismatch between the material that dreams provide and the goals of the therapeutic process. For instance, dreams seem to be lacking in reflective awareness, volition, and a sense of personal responsibility. Consequently, therapists who embrace an existential or cognitive-behavioral framework might find dreams devoid of the qualities that they hope to foster in their clients. Similarly, therapists who practice systemic or relational therapies, and who favor an analysis of interactive process, might be deterred from exploring dreams because of how they seem to be comprised of riveting visual content.

But it could be that the current low utilization of dream analysis has more to do with the way that clients *report* their dreams and practitioners *perceive* them. From this standpoint, the problem of incorporating dream analysis into the therapeutic process may have less to do with the *kind* of information that dreams provide, and more to do with the way that clients and therapists *view* dreams in the first place.

In this paper, we review several theoretical factors that can account for the perceived absence of reflective awareness and agency in dream reports. In addition, we review some research that supports the idea that ordinary dreams contain a measurable degree of reflective awareness. On the basis of this foundation, we then conclude that the dream is an interactive, reciprocal exchange between the dreamer and the dream content. When viewed in this way, dreams are *indeterminate* from the outset, and *co-created* through the interplay between the dreamer and the emergent dream content. This orientation allows for the autonomous character of dream content, but permits an analysis and troubleshooting of the dreamer's responses to the dream—and by implication, to waking life, as well. After reviewing the basis for "co-creative dream theory" (CDT), we will outline an approach to clinical dream analysis based on this model.

The Dream as an Interactive Process

Approaching the dream as an interactive, co-created process requires that we treat the dreamer and the dream content as independent contributors to the experience. Instead of asking content-oriented questions such as, "What does this image mean," or "What is this dream saying to you?" we would track the dreamer's interaction with the imagery through the course of the dream. We would ask process questions (Bowen, 1978) such as, "What were you feeling before she gave you the hug?" or "What do think would have happened if you had stopped running?" While this style of relational inquiry represents a significant departure from the traditional content-analysis approach, we will present theoretical and empirical evidence to support it. Further, we believe that this orientation generates a dynamic approach to dream analysis that is congruent with an array of

modern therapies. Specifically, this approach: 1) focuses on the affective relationship between the dreamer and the dream imagery, thus supporting the goals of object relations and attachment theory; 2) analyzes the dreamer's responses in the dream for evidence of chronic patterns of thinking and reacting, which supports the aims of cognitive-behavioral therapy; 3) explores the dream for unacknowledged competencies that may serve as solutions for presenting problems, as emphasized in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (de Schazer, 1988; de Schazer, Dolan, Korman, Trepper, Berg, & McCollum, 2007); 4) examines dreamer responses and content changes in light of “circular causality” or reciprocity (Bertalanffy, 1968; Weiner, 1948)—the focus of systemic therapies; 5) maps the interactive process onto general waking scenarios in order to formulate a plan of action that respects the emphasis on behavior change as a principal goal of the therapeutic process.

A systematic approach to clinical dream analysis that incorporates each of the above objectives has only recently been introduced (Sparrow, 2006, 2007), even though the theoretical foundation for such an approach has been in development for some time (Rossi, 1972, 2000; Sparrow, 1997).

Antecedents to Co-Creative Dream Theory

Some dream theorists have ventured to say that the dreamer plays a more active role in the dream's construction, giving rise to a view of the dream as an indeterminate, interactive *process*. For instance, Jung cited the dreamer's direct participation in the co-creation of the manifest dream when he said,

This constellation [dream image] is the result of the spontaneous activity of the unconscious on one hand and of momentary conscious situation on the other. The interpretation of its meaning, therefore, can start neither from the conscious alone nor from the unconscious alone, but only from their reciprocal relationship (Jung, 1966; p. 386).

Jung's statement promotes a view of the dream image as a moment-to-moment vectoring of conscious and unconscious influences—a mutable interface between the observer and the unseen. In retrospect, Jung's well-known preoccupation with the archetypal elements in dreams *in practice* (Delaney, 1993b, p. 206) may have neglected the dreamer's unique contributions to the dream's creation and the “reciprocal relationship” to which he once alluded.

Boss (1977) implicitly affirmed the co-created nature of at least some dreams, when he asserted that people can exercise volition while dreaming:

Again and again it happens that a dreamer purposefully decides to intervene in the dream events, then carries out his decision to the letter. Even people who don't quite know what is happening to them in their waking lives, allowing themselves to be driven by their momentary moods, often show astounding strength of will while dreaming (p. 184).

While Boss acknowledged the dreamer's capacity to exercise volition, he did not emphasize this dimension in his approach to dreams, perhaps because a theoretically driven analysis of the dreamer's influence as a general practice is inconsistent with a purely phenomenological orientation of accepting the dream “as it is.”

Perls viewed the dream as co-created—or even largely self-created—when he argued that the experience of the dream's "happening to us" is a fiction born of our unwillingness to take

responsibility for the dream. Speaking of the dream's frustrating qualities, Perls says, "You prevent yourself from achieving what you want to achieve. But you don't experience this as your doing it. You experience this as some other power that is preventing you" (1973, p. 178). For Perls, the dream depicts our alienation from parts of ourselves, the solution to which is a here-and-now dialoguing with the various dream characters and objects. Thus a co-created view of the manifest dream, while implied by Perls' words, is unimportant within the exclusively present-oriented Gestalt method.

Rossi (1972) was the first to articulate an encompassing theory around the dreamer's capacity to reflect upon and freely interact with the dream imagery. In his "co-creative" view of dreaming, the synthesis of new identity takes place through the interaction and dialogue between the dreamer and dream imagery. According to Rossi, dreamer self-awareness manifests to some extent—sometimes minimally—in virtually every dream, such that there is "a continuum of all possible balances of control between the autonomous process and the dreamer's self-awareness and consciously directed effort" (1972, p. 163). Further, he has observed that as dreamer self-awareness increases, the autonomous quality of the dream decreases. Rossi has continued to develop his theory (2000) without, as yet, translating it into an imminently applicable dream work methodology.

Lucid Dream Research

In his initial work, Rossi (1972) never mentioned the term lucid dreaming, which is not surprising given the fact that it was not until the late 60s that the work of early pioneers such as Van Eeden (1913) was introduced in contemporary literature (Green, 1968; Tart, 1968). Subsequent writers (Gackenbach & LaBerge, 1988; Kelzer, 1987; LaBerge, 1980, 1985; Sparrow,

1976) demonstrated that some dreamers, at least, were capable of becoming fully conscious in the dream and influencing its outcome. LaBerge's *Lucid Dreaming* (1985) has been hailed as "one of the most influential books on modern dream research since Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*," and "a major turning point in twentieth-century dream study" (Bulkeley, 1994, p. 59). And yet, one can argue that the phenomenon of lucid dreaming has not influenced the practice of dream analysis to any significant extent. Delaney's (1993a) review of contemporary approaches to dream interpretation includes only a single passing reference to lucid dreaming (Flowers, 1993, p. 251). While Delaney's work is dated, it appeared over a decade after lucid dreaming was established as a REM-correlated phenomenon (Hearne, 1978; LaBerge, 1982), and two decades after Rossi (1972) introduced his co-creative dream theory. Hill's more recent work (1996) on the use of dreams in psychotherapy mentions lucid dreaming briefly in the larger context of various strategies for changing unpleasant dream endings (p. 110-120), but stops short of incorporating a co-created view of the dream's formation.

Lucid dream researchers may have undermined lucid dreaming's broader impact on the field of dream analysis by minimizing the importance of the dream imagery in favor of emphasizing the lucid dreamer's virtually unlimited powers. LaBerge and Reingold (1990) capture this pioneering spirit when they say, "If fully lucid, you would realize that the entire dream world was your own creation, and with this awareness might come an exhilarating feeling of freedom. Nothing external, no laws of society or physics, would constrain your experience; you could do anything your mind could conceive" (1990, p. 14-15). Such enthusiasm can tilt so far in the direction of solipsism that the dream imagery by implication ceases to have any independent agency or meaning apart from the dreamer. While this emphasis on the dreamer's

powers may compensate for the traditional focus on content, it overlooks the possibility that the dream may be an interactive process between functionally independent systems, both of which deserve consideration in the analysis of dreams.

We have seen that the traditional content-oriented approach to dream analysis fails to raise the possibility of the functional independence of the dreamer and the interactive potential of the dream. Conversely, the singular quest for lucidity effectively overshadows the relational potential of the dream by overlooking the independent agency of the imagery. Co-Creative Dream Theory arguably synthesizes these two orientations. It acknowledges the role of dreamer awareness and responsiveness, while maintaining a view of the dream imagery as a somewhat autonomous creation. By regarding the dream as an interactive process, CDT preserves a relational orientation to the dream experience.

A Crucial Question

Lucid dream researchers, by placing so much emphasis on lucidity per se, may have inadvertently overlooked the presence of nonlucid reflective awareness in ordinary dreams, leaving open the important question: Can the ordinary dream be regarded as an interactive process between the dream content and a somewhat reflective, freely choosing agent?

The validity of CDT ultimately depends on the answer to this question. If the answer is "yes," then researchers and dream workers can legitimately turn their attention to the analysis of the dreamer-dream interactive process. If, however, the answer is "no," then CDT cannot reasonably apply to the vast majority of dreams reported, and an approach to dream analysis based on CDT would have to be reserved for those dreams in which the dreamer is clearly

reflecting on alternatives, and exercising free will. During the early years of modern lucid dream research, Rechtschaffen expressed a belief that the answer was "no":

Only when we can see the possibility of the lucid dream do we fully realize what a massively non-reflective state dreaming usually is—what a truly distinctive psychological experience it is. In fact, I can think of no other single state short of severe and chronic psychosis in which there is such a persistent, massive, regular loss of reflectiveness . . . (Rechtschaffen, 1978)

Rechtschaffen's statement contrasts starkly with Rossi's observation that there is a "continuum of all possible balances of control between the autonomous process and the dreamer's self-awareness and consciously directed effort" (1972, p. 163). Commenting on this discrepancy, Moffitt acknowledges that in a preliminary study of Rossi's Self Reflectiveness Scale (Rossi, 2000), most dreams scored low on reflectiveness, but that frequent dream recallers scored "slightly but significantly higher" than low recallers. On the basis of this finding, Moffitt concluded, "In Rossi's terms, it could be argued that Rechtschaffen painted with too broad a brush, ignoring . . . the potential for the emergence of self-reflective awareness in dreaming" (p. 151). Some researchers agree theoretically with Rechtschaffen that reflective awareness is temporarily withheld in dreaming (Cicogna & Bosinelli, 2001) to allow for the consolidation of new information into long-term memory. Weinstein, et al. (1988) find support for this hypothesis in the discussion of their research. However, other studies have found evidence of significant measurable reflective awareness in ordinary dreams (Snyder, 1970; Kosmova & Wolman, 2006), or shown that reflectiveness can be enhanced through a variety of pre-sleep

strategies (Purcell, 1987; Sparrow, 1983). One might ask, What accounts for these contrasting findings?

We believe that there are two unacknowledged factors that may account for the apparent paucity of reflective awareness in dream reports.

Factor One: Viewing the Dream Through The Theory of Mimesis

The traditional practice of dream interpretation treats the dream "as a *product* drawn from sleeping into waking, to be worked with by the application of various *waking* techniques" (Moffitt, 2000, p. 162). Whether one believes the dream is a clever disguise for an unacceptable truth (Freud, 1900/1965), the message itself (Jung, 1984, 1986), a part of ourselves from which we are alienated (Perls, 1968, 1973), or another experience in the life of the individual (Boss, 1958, 1977), there is an assumption embedded in the Western view of dreaming—that the dream is a product whose value lies in the consideration of its visual content.

The assumption that the dream is synonymous with its visual content can be traced to ancient Greece and the theory of *mimesis*. Plato believed that the physical world was a mere shadow of the supraordinate realm, and that dreams and art, in turn, mirrored the physical world. From this premise, dream content came to be seen as *representative* of the world we knew. This belief is so deeply embedded in the Western worldview that most of us are unaware of its influence. Sontag puts it this way:

The fact is, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art, have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art [and dreams] as *mimesis* or

representation . . . it is still assumed that a work of art is its content. Or, as it's usually put today, that a work of art by definition says something" (1966, p. 4).

The Talmudic saying, “A dream unexamined is like a letter unopened” expresses the same idea—that the dream contains *information* about our waking lives that has to be translated to be of any value. This approach has time-tested usefulness, but it also has its limitations. When one contemplates a completed work of art, or a published text, it may make sense to analyze its content in terms of what it means or says. But when a dream can unfold in a number of possible directions based on the dreamer’s responses to it, treating the experience as a fixed, interpretable communication effectively disregards the dreamer's influence in the quest for the dream content’s presumed meaning.

Consider, for instance, a recurring dream in which a 23-year old man dreamt—over the course of almost a year—that a deceased friend kept appearing and attacking him. During the first occurrences of this dream, the dreamer did what most people do: He tried to get away. But in one dream that took place several months after the series began, he fought back when his old friend cornered him and attacked him with a knife. To the dreamer’s surprise, he managed to disarm the assailant. Shortly afterward, he dreamt that his old friend attacked him, pinned him the ground, and proceeded to pummel the dreamer’s face. The dreamer believed that the man would soon kill him, but in struggling for his life, he managed to free one arm. Instead of hitting the attacker, the dreamer simply rubbed the man’s shoulder. The crazed assailant immediately stopped hitting him and began to cry, saying over and over again, “I only want to be loved” (Sparrow, 1997).

It is likely that interpreting the content of each dream in this series would have produced useful information. However, the real value from a developmental or therapeutic standpoint can be seen in the dreamer's *changing responses* over the course of the dream series, and the apparent impact of these responses on the relationship with the dream imagery.

This is no different than the way that we treat most waking experiences that clients disclose in therapy. Upon receiving an account of a waking experience, we assume that the person was an autonomous agent involved in an exchange the environment. Thus we treat any account as an interactive process that was indeterminate from the outset. We listen for feelings, thoughts, assumptions, and behaviors that may have influenced the direction or quality of the experience. This sensitivity to the constructed nature of a person's narrative allows us to communicate an empathic understanding of how these subjective influences interact with the environment to codetermine one's experience of the world. Such an orientation mirrors the shift away from *realism* or modernism with its emphasis on the independent existence of the world toward *idealism* with its emphasis on subjective and phenomenological knowledge. Idealism's postmodern expression of *social constructionism* (Gergen, 1985, 1999) stresses the client's reality without disputing whether it is accurate or rational (Weishaar, 1993), and has deeply influenced modern psychotherapy (Berger & Luckman, 1967) by challenging the role of the expert and objective assessment methods, and by mandating a multicultural approach. Similarly, if the dream is constructed through the interaction

between the dreamer and the dream content, then effective dream analysis can proceed only on the basis of a method that reflects this constructionist orientation.

In summary, the suppression of reflectiveness in the dream report by the dreamer may be due to a paradigm-driven emphasis on dream content as the sole carrier of meaning. That is, if dreamers are governed by the assumption that *the dream is its content*—as per the theory of mimesis—then they will record their experiences accordingly with an emphasis on the content and a concomitant disregard for the dreamer’s subjective states. Then, when evaluating such reports, researchers and dream analysts who are influenced by the same assumption may further disregard whatever traces of reflective awareness may remain in the dreamer’s report. Subtly influenced by the same unexamined premise, dreamers, researchers and dream analysts alike may unwittingly produce an experience that fits their jointly held paradigm.

Factor Two: Punctuated Communication as a Way of Disavowing Responsibility

Another possible reason that dream reports exhibit minimal reflective awareness may stem from the way that people minimize their role in interpersonal conflict. Systemic theorists have observed that when people report stressful exchanges with others, they tend to emphasize the causal nature of what the other person did. In turn, they tend to see themselves as passive participants or victims of the other person’s actions. Bateson and Jackson (1964) referred to this as *punctuated* communication. Since we know that dreams overrepresent interpersonal conflict and violence (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966), it makes sense that dreamers minimize their roles in having promoted or fueled the

unpleasantness, and that such dreams reports thereby suffer from a commensurate absence of dreamer agency.

Overcoming the Barriers to Reporting Reflective Awareness in Dreams

In summary, the apparent absence of reflective awareness in nonlucid dreams may be a function, at least in part, of how dreamers perceive, recall and report their dreams. Kahan & LaBerge have noted the way that dreamers tend to report only the concrete attributes of the dream, such as *where*, *when*, *what*, and *who* (1994, p. 237), and that “this concentration on recounting the story of the dream does not allow researchers to discern how the dreamers recognize their own experiencing and doing” (Kozmova & Wolman, 2006, p. 201). While one might expect a person to recall "their own experiencing and doing" during the original dream, this subjective dimension may be left out due, in part, to the two Factors that we have cited.

Significantly, Kozmova & Wolman (2006) implemented a style of inquiry in their study which effectively *elicited* what the dreamer had originally experienced, but had not recorded. They ". . . investigated experiential features and self-knowledge that are a) not directly observable and retrievable during dreaming, b) probably would not appear in spontaneous dream reports, and c) might nevertheless be retrievable after a certain period of time" (p. 201). This approach parallels the mode of inquiry pioneered by Murray Bowen (1978) in marital therapy, in which therapists use *process questions* that are designed to elicit a person's awareness of the impact of his or her assumptions and responses in relationships. Bowen's approach effectively elicits reflective awareness and

personal accountability in regard to critical marital events where both parties had been exclusively focused on what the other person was saying and doing.

Such process-oriented inquiry can feasibly counteract the potential suppression of reflective awareness in dream reporting the two reasons that we have cited. Until the preoccupation with dream content is more widely challenged, however, it is likely that researchers and therapists who accept CDT will have to alter their instructions for recording and recounting dreams, and/or retroactively tease out instances of reflective awareness and volition that were not included in the dreamer's initial narrative.

Testable Hypotheses

While we have outlined two factors that may account for the paucity of reflective awareness in dream reports, further research is clearly indicated in order to establish whether measurable reflective awareness exists in the original dream experience and/or can be elicited through process-oriented inquiry; whether the dreamer-dream interaction exhibits true reciprocity, and whether the dreamer-dream interactive process evidences a particular direction or purpose. In specific, three related testable hypotheses grow out of CDT.

Hypothesis One: Dreamers evidence measurable reflective awareness and agency in the recollection of their dreams.

This hypothesis is consistent with Rossi's observation that dreams reflect a "a continuum of all possible balances of control between the autonomous process and the dreamer's self-awareness and consciously directed effort" (1972, p. 163). There is some empirical support for this hypothesis (Kaslova & Wolman, 2006; Snyder, 1970), and it

can be further tested by altering the instructions that researchers use in soliciting dream reports to offset the influences of above-cited factors that weigh against including reflective awareness in dream reports.

Corollary One: The degree of measurable reflective awareness in dream reports is influenced negatively by mimesis—that is, the belief that a dream's value lies in the analysis of its visual content (Factor One). This could be tested by surveying the extent to which dreamers subscribe to the theory of mimesis. Any subject who believes in the possibility of enhanced dreamer awareness and agency—perhaps through exposure to the lucid dream literature—will likely evidence a different reporting style than those believing that the dream is synonymous with its visual content. Thus, a research study could be conducted in which measures of reflective awareness in dream reports would be taken before and after exposing subjects to the premise that dreamers can potentially experience significant awareness and agency in their dreams.

Corollary Two: The degree of measurable reflective awareness in dream reports is influenced by the tendency for people to minimize their contributions to conflict and violence (Factor Two). This can be tested by comparing the degree of reflective awareness in low-conflict and high-conflicts dreams of the same persons. If conflict exerts a dampening effect on reflective awareness in dream reports—and since we know that dreams contain more conflict and violence than waking experiences (Hall & Van de Castle, 1964)—we could conclude that punctuated communication (Bateson & Jackson, 1964) accounts for lower overall reflective awareness in dream reports than in waking recollections.

Corollary Three: Dreamer reflectiveness that was present in the original dream can be accessed can be through a style of inquiry that focuses on the dreamer's subjective awarenesses during the dream's unfoldment. This has already been demonstrated, in particular, by Kozmova & Wolman (2006), and is a methodology commonly employed in marital therapy to restore a sense self-awareness, choice, and personal accountability in relationship conflicts (Bowen, 1978).

Hypothesis Two: The dreamer and the dream content are functionally autonomous systems, and the interaction between them reveals circular causality, or reciprocity.

It is a small step to go from observing correlated changes in dreamer responses and dream imagery to concluding that the changes are causally related. Borrowing from general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968; Weiner, 1948), Bateson hypothesized that living systems are constantly monitoring the feedback they are receiving, and adjusting their output accordingly. This leads to the notion of circularity as opposed to simple cause and effect in understanding the origins and perpetuation of relationship dynamics. Bateson and his colleagues are credited for establishing that "reciprocity is the governing principle of relationship" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004, p. 8).

From the perspective of systems theory, reciprocity should be observable in dreams if the dreamer and the dream are at least somewhat autonomous systems and capable of adjusting to feedback from the other.

This hypothesis can be tested by tracking changes in dreamer response and dream imagery through the dream report for evidence of circular causality. That is, if a dreamer response leads to a shift in imagery—which, in turn, prompts another response from the

dreamer, and so on—then it would be parsimonious to conclude that the dream process reflects a reciprocal relationship between functionally independent systems. However, it is also necessary to ascertain if this process is truly *bidirectional*; that is, if the "first cause" can conceivably originate in either system. As Tarnas (2006) says, “. . . in a relationship of true reciprocity—the potential communication of meaning and purpose must be able to move in both directions” (P. 484-485). If bidirectional, reciprocal exchanges are evident in dreams, then it is reasonable to conclude that dreams represent an unfolding relationship between independent systems. However, if the dreamer (or the imagery) is observed to be the "first cause" in any measurable alteration of the dream drama, then the systems are not in a true reciprocal relationship. A reciprocal relationship requires that each system register and adjust to the feedback received from the other.

Hypothesis Three: The dreamer-dream interactive process reveals no discernible purpose or function. This hypothesis is stated in the null, because CDT is not, in itself, a theory of dream function. Just as a process-oriented therapist will examine *how* a client is relating to others, rather than *what* is being communicated—or, for that matter, *why*—a researcher or therapist who accepts CDT may conduct an interactional analysis of the dream without necessarily assigning an overall purpose to the experience. Refraining from taking a position on overall dream function respects the dimensionality of dreaming, and enables a nonintrusive, value-free assessment of the phenomenology of the dream process. However, if the interactive process in a particular dream—or in a series of dreams—reveals a clear purpose, then Hypothesis Three can be rejected without necessarily establishing a function for *all* dreams.

In summary, shifting to a co-created view of the dream permits one to perceive and measure aspects of the dream that make little sense within a traditional content-oriented approach. Specifically, CDT predicts that dreams reveals measurable *dreamer awarenesses and responses* (Hypothesis One) that precipitate *shifts in imagery* which, in turn, impact the dreamer's subsequent awarenesses and responses (Hypothesis Two). This reciprocal process, in turn, may or may not reflect a directional thrust or purpose (Hypothesis Three).

A Dream Work Methodology Based on Co-Created Dream Theory

Some researchers, who have established the capacity of dreamers to increase their reflective awareness through presleep efforts (Purcell, 1987; Sparrow, 1983), have gone on to train individuals to use dreaming as an arena for further self-development. These efforts parallel the trajectory of some of the lucid dream researchers (LaBerge, 1985; LaBerge & Reingold, 1990) and popular dream authors (Garfield, 1995), who—in establishing the availability of lucid dreaming to at least some dreamers—have focused on ways to help people induce lucid dreams. However, we believe that there is a need for an approach to dream analysis based on CDT, which permits psychotherapy clients to benefit from its predictive and explanatory power by retrospectively exploring the dreamer's relationship with the dream imagery. Building upon the clinical work of the first author—who began developing a dream work methodology based on CDT over 35 years ago—we have arrived at an approach that we believe not only reaps the maximum therapeutic benefit from recollected dreams, but also serves as an effective rehearsal for increasing the dreamer's reflectiveness and interactivity in future dreams.

As for specific techniques or practices, this method—called the Five Star method (FSM)—includes or accommodates aspects of well-known dream work approaches (Jung, 1974; 1984; Perls; 1969; 1973; Taylor, 1992; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985; Ullman, 1996). But FSM features original interventions and perspectives based on CDT, and can be used flexibly in individual, conjoint, family, and group therapy. What distinguishes FSM principally from other contemporary approaches is that it involves a process-oriented inquiry through the first three steps.

Establishing the Context for Dream Work

The Five Star Method commences by sharing the dreams in the first person, present tense (Perls, 1969, 1973). This enables the dreamer to relive the original experience and its attendant emotions and reflective awareness, and for the facilitator to vicariously appropriate the dream—that is, to experience the dream *as if it were one's own*—as advocated by Taylor (1992) and Ullman (1996). This shared exchange converts a private experience into a here-and-now, shared experience to which the dreamer and facilitator alike can relate directly. Also, by reliving the dream in the present tense from beginning to end, the dreamer is better able to experience the dream's initial indeterminacy and the dreamer's moment-to-moment influence on its unfoldment.

Step One: Sharing Feelings Aroused by the Dream Sharing

Various dream work methods include an assessment of the dreamer's feelings (Gendlin, 1986; Hill, 1996; Mahrer, 1990; Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979). However, CDT posits that the dreamer's feelings, thoughts, assumptions, and behaviors work together to co-create the dream's outcome. With this in mind, the dreamer's feelings

provide an initial entry into the dreamer's response set. It is also valuable for the facilitator to reveal his or her feelings as a way to illuminate emotions that may be implied by the dream, but not fully felt by the dreamer.

Take for instance a dream of Sarah—a 42-year-old female client, who had been sexually abused by her stepfather:

I awake to find myself on a bed. I look up and see holes in the ceiling, and rats dropping down through the holes. Horrified, I jump and run out of the room. The rats seem to chase me, so I fearfully run up a stairway to get away from them.

When I reach the top, I turn around to see if the rats are still following me. A huge rat is climbing the stairs and is within a few steps of where I stand. I look at it closely, and I'm surprised to see that its fur looks soft and lustrous. Intrigued by its beauty, I reach down as it comes closer and touch its fur. As soon as I do, the rat changes into a snow leopard.

When asked to describe her feelings in the dream, the dreamer said, "terror," "nausea," "hopelessness," and then—toward the end of the dream— "fascination," and "relief." By listening to the dream as if it had been his own, the therapist (first author) felt all of the dreamer's feelings, including "courage." He shared this feeling with the dreamer, as is customary during this initial step.

Step Two: Formulating the Process Narrative or Story Line

Some dream analysts have formulated lists of "themes" that typically occur in dreams (Garfield, 2001; Gongloff, 2006). However, such an approach runs the risk of fitting the dream into pre-established categories. We have taken a purely

phenomenological approach to summarizing the dream's underlying structure (Sparrow, 1978; Thurston, 1978; 1988) and prefer the phrase "process narrative" to describe the objective, even though the phrase "simple story line" (Thurston, 1988) provides an excellent way to describe this step to client/dreamers.

To formulate the process narrative, all one has to do is to restate the dream's essential action while removing the specific names of characters, colors, places, and objects. All interpretive and evaluative statements are discouraged during this step. A correctly formulated process narrative might be, "Someone is trying to decide between two courses of action, one apparently easy and the other more challenging."

Systems-oriented family therapists, and group leaders familiar with Lewin's concept of field theory (1951), will recognize the importance of observing and describing *how* the dreamer and the dream imagery are relating without reference to *what* is being communicated. This content-free description highlights the relationship dynamics that perpetuate or alleviate distress, and pave the way for interventions that can restructure problematic interactional patterns without trying to resolve the problem on the level of content alone.

In regard to Sarah's dream of the rats, the therapist and client worked together to formulate the dream's process narrative. They agreed it was, "Someone becomes afraid of something and tries to get away from it, but eventually considers it more closely and discovers attractive qualities that she was previously unaware of." As a generic summary of the dream's story line, the process narrative illuminates the existing structure of the dream without encumbering it with assumptions and interpretive impositions, thus

protecting the dreamer from the facilitator's projections as well as simplistic, precipitous conclusions. At this point in the process, it is not uncommon for the dreamer to see parallels between the process narrative and a waking scenario, and to conclude that the dream is "about" a particular situation in the waking life. Nonetheless, we have found that it is important to encourage the dreamer to continue to the next step, if time permits, in order to consider the dreamer's role in the interactive process.

Step Three: Analyzing the Dreamer's Responses to the Dream

This step is the heart of FSM, and is a pure outgrowth of CDT. Helping the dreamer see the places where his or her responses may have made a difference represents a significant departure from traditional dream analysis. Because of its novelty, it may pose somewhat of a challenge with clients who are new to this way of thinking. But once the dreamer becomes aware of his or her responses in the dream, dream analysis takes on a new dimension of troubleshooting the dreamer's responses and imagining new outcomes in future dreams and parallel life situations.

To accomplish this step, the facilitator and the dreamer look for points in the dream where the dreamer responded—emotionally, cognitively, and/or behaviorally—in such ways that could have affected the course of the dream from thereon. As we have stated, some of these responses may be entirely unstated in the dreamer's initial recollection, so it may take some practice to elicit the more subtle dimensions of the dreamer's responses. Subtle or otherwise, these response points are like forks in the path where the dreamer effectively determines which way to go by his or her reactions to the visual imagery.

Then, the facilitator and dreamer work together to critique the dreamer's responses to the dream encounters, and to imagine what else the dreamer might have done differently at the obvious choice points in the dream. Following this freewheeling consideration of alternatives, the facilitator engages the dreamer in determining whether the dreamer's responses were predictable, or a departure from his or her usual reaction to such situations. As a final measure, the facilitator may ask the dreamer what he or she would have preferred to do in the dream, as well as what he or she would like to do differently in future dreams with similar situations.

This consideration of diverse responses to the dream has a way of challenging old patterns of relating to the world, discerning emerging competencies, and introducing alternatives for future consideration.

Of course, the dreamer sets the standard for the direction of desirable change. What is considered "better" has more to do with what deviates constructively from a person's chronic patterns of relating. This criterion helps the facilitator and dreamer evaluate the dreamer's responses against a customary or habitual style of relating, which may become clearer over time as the person shares further dreams and/or waking experiences in which the customary style becomes evident.

It is not unusual for a highly significant response in the dream to seem entirely natural to the dreamer, especially if it reflects the dreamer's habitual style in responding to similar situation.

For instance, Sarah was inclined to accept without question her decision to flee from the rats. But even though it was a "natural" and ordinary response, from the

standpoint of CDT, it set in motion everything that followed. As such, it was a highly significant moment that needs to be underscored and challenged. Existential therapists will recognize the importance recovering of a sense of free will and personal responsibility in the midst of outwardly overwhelming circumstances. Such a discovery has the potential of freeing oneself from the tendency to blame circumstances, and forging an authentic, self-determined existence.

Step Three helps dreamers become more aware of chronic dysfunctional responses *and* emergent competencies, both of which are easily overlooked in the context of the often-distressing circumstances depicted by the dream content. To put it simply, the interpersonal exchange between therapist and client in Step Three offsets the tendency of dreamers to disavow responsibility for the outcome of the dream. While this step can provoke the dreamer's defensiveness by raising questions about unexamined assumptions and reactions—especially when the dreamer's responses seem counterproductive—it represents the kind of cognitive-behavioral inquiry that characterizes contemporary action-oriented therapies—such as Cognitive Therapy, Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy, and Reality Therapy. Further, by highlighting emergent competencies, Step Three comes into alignment with the philosophy and objectives of competency-based therapies such as Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (de Schazer, 1988; de Shazer, et. al, 2007). In this regard, the therapist's conversation with the dreamer highlighted her bold and surprising willingness to make contact with the rat, and left the dreamer considering how this pivotal stance could translate into a broad-based willingness to engage a variety of life challenges with greater curiosity and courage.

While Sarah never became lucid in her dream of the rats, she was nonetheless able to stop and reflect, and to change her responses to the dream imagery. While her turnaround lacked the drama of a full-blown lucid experience, it clearly altered the course of an experience that could have turned out much differently. It is, therefore, incumbent on the dream worker to underscore, even to exaggerate the impact of these moments so that clients will learn to recognize the importance of their choices and actions on the dream's outcome.

Step Four: Analysis of the Imagery

In this step of FSM, the facilitator assists the dreamer in exploring how imagery and scene transformations are related to dreamer's responses. This contingent relationship may not be evident to the dreamer, who may experience the changes as unrelated to his or her responses at the time. However, by emphasizing the impact of the dreamer's freely chosen responses, the facilitator draws a contingent relationship between dreamer response and outer change, thus supporting a sense of personal responsibility and an awareness of emergent competencies.

While standard nonintrusive approaches to imagery analysis—such as Jung's amplification method, and the Gestalt practice of dialoguing with the images—can be introduced in Step Four, a nontraditional approach to the imagery proceeds from the principles of CDT. Just as the dreamer's responses are no longer considered a *given* in CDT, the imagery itself is no longer considered *static*: Both can change in the course of a single dream's unfolding process. Indeed, changes in the dreamer's responses and the

dream content are viewed as reciprocally related, such that a change in one will usually mirror a change in the other.

In regard to Sarah, it was, of course, useful to amplify her associations to the rats, the bed, the staircase, and the snow leopard. When her associations to the rat image were explored, she felt that it represented both the loathsome qualities of her perpetrator, as well as the unwanted aspects of her own sexuality. At the time of the dream, she was unable to embrace her sexuality as a positive aspect of her self expression. She associated the bed to the usual context of sexual encounters, and her flight from the bed as her contemporary ambivalence toward her sexuality. Her flight up the stairs paralleled her unsuccessful attempts to transcend her childhood memories through concerted spiritual practices. As for the snow leopard, Sarah—who had studied the world religions and embraced an ecumenical approach to spiritual practice—associated it with the high spirituality of Tibet. As such, the snow leopard represented a synthesis of her rejected instinctuality and her spiritual aspirations.

Beyond supporting these conventional amplifications of the dream imagery, the Five Star Method helped Sarah to see how the dream's dramatic reversal was contingent upon her courageous response to the rat, and that the appearance of the snow leopard was itself made possible by her willingness to touch the rat's fur. Being able to reach out to the rat represented a simultaneous act of curiosity and acceptance—a profound rapprochement that permitted her instantly to experience the unsullied power and beauty of her instinctual nature in the form of the snow leopard.

Of course, few dreams reveal such bold responses and dramatic reversals. But regardless, the facilitator engages the dreamer in examining *any* changes in dream imagery that might relate to, or mirror the dreamer's changes in response. Just as systems-oriented therapists will teach family members to see their problem as a function of circular causality or *reciprocity* (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004, p. 8), a dream worker using FSM will encourage the dreamer to learn to see the impact of his or her reactions on the dream imagery itself, and to extrapolate on possible changes that may have occurred if the responses would have been different. Even if the dreamer and the dream imagery are "locked" into a relationship of escalating tension—as Sarah and the rats had been prior to the dreamer's remarkable response—the facilitator can assist the dreamer in imagining what could have happened if the dreamer's stance had been different. The use of process questions (Bowen, 1978), mentioned previously, is especially useful at this point in the dream work.

At this stage in the dream work, the facilitator also asks the dreamer to imagine what the culmination of such an encounter would look like—in future dreams or parallel waking scenarios. Such a consideration leads naturally to the idea of identifying contexts in which to apply the fruits of the dream work process.

Step Five: Applying the Dream Work

Since FSM is founded on the dreamer's capacity to enact a variety of responses to the dream—and correspondingly, to parallel waking scenarios—the final step of the dream work process involves identifying areas of one's life where new responses might precipitate positive changes. If the dreamer can see a parallel between the dream issue

and some waking situation, then the facilitator may encourage the dreamer to practice new, contextually appropriate responses that can be made in that waking life scenario.

As for Sarah, the dream work encouraged her to accept the possibility that her willingness to become aware of, and to confront her past was bringing about healing and reconciliation, and that a new sense of connection with her sexuality could be confidently explored—not apart from, but aligned with her highest aspirations.

Conclusions

Dream analysis has traditionally involved treating the dream as a fixed narrative and the dreamer as a passive witness, and proceeding to analyze the visual content for its presumed meaning. Add to that the object-oriented language that characterizes the traditional consideration of dream "symbols" and "content" apart from the dreamer, and dream interpretation arguably becomes an expression of modernism rather than postmodernism, resulting in a mismatch between the practice of content-oriented dream analysis and social constructionistic flavor of contemporary psychotherapy. This approach owes its dominance to a pervasive belief rooted in our cultural foundations, as well as to the assumption that dreamers are largely incapable of reflecting upon, and interacting with their dreams. The model that we have proposed as a basis for a therapeutic approach to dream analysis enjoys considerable theoretical support, and some empirical validation. It treats the dream as an interactive process which is indeterminate from the outset and co-created by the dreamer's responses to the dream content. As such, the dream becomes a way of evaluating the dreamer's responses toward dream scenarios

and parallel life challenges, rather than interpreting aspects of the dream content which may remain outside of the dreamer's immediate comprehension.

The independent analysis of the imagery is, at best, an intuitive process that opens the door to precipitous conclusions on the part of the dreamer and intrusive projections on the part of the facilitator, alike. Because of this, some of the best-known contemporary dream work methods endeavor to insulate the dreamer from the interpretive leaps of the dream facilitator(s) (Delaney, 1993b; Flowers, 1993; Ullman, 1996; Ullman and Zimmerman, 1985). However, as one adopts a co-created view of dreams and a dream work methodology consistent with that paradigm, dream analysis shifts naturally to what the dreamer unequivocally did, could have done, and might conceivably do in future dreams. By focusing on the dreamer's responses and their impact on the imagery, an understanding of the dream can be furthered without depending as much on a special knowledge of dream symbology—a knowledge that too often elevates the facilitator to the status of an expert. By remaining focused on the dreamer, a co-created view of the dream supports a dialogue between the dreamer and the facilitator that may stimulate an awareness of chronic patterns of responding, underscore emerging competencies, and foster a commitment to respond to life in more resilient and creative ways.

Unlike traditional content-oriented approaches, a co-created approach to dream analysis comes into alignment with a variety of themes in contemporary psychotherapy, including the centrality of choice, freedom, and personal responsibility in existential therapies; the constructed nature of personal reality in social constructionism and postmodern therapies; and the reciprocal nature of human relationships in family systems. As a co-created view of the dream gathers

more support from research and clinical application, dream analysis may increasingly come to be seen as a modality that is consistent with a diverse array of theoretical rationales associated with the contemporary practice of psychotherapy.

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