



**ASeTTS**

**Assisting Torture  
and Trauma Survivors**

# ASeTTS Newsletter

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### History of Dreams and their Interpretation

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Dreams reveal a mystery to the waking state and as every mystery, they need to be unravelled. In this brief article, I will review the history of dreams, explore some of the well known theories of understanding, and summarise how dreams can be a useful tool in therapeutic practice.

#### The Understanding of dreams throughout the ages

In many indigenous cultures, it is believed that, dreams keep a relationship with the supernatural world and they are seen like messages or revelations to the dreamer. From these revelations, the processes will deduce the nature of the psychic forces whose conflict or cooperation is responsible for our dreams.

Beliefs were different among different cultures; for example, in New Guinea if a man dreamt that he fell in love with his friend's wife, he would be punished by all the tribe and was obliged to pay a fine. If he dreamt that his wife was unfaithful to him, then it was her who had to pay a fine. In Egyptian culture, the oracles were dictated through dreams. The consultant went to sleep and during the dream, it was believed, God would answer. The scenes of these dreams were interpreted as graphic symbols, which had to be interpreted at a later time. In India, as in other countries, dreams were recognized as a path to abstract thoughts. Many Indian schools of thought, use dreams to captivate the essence of life and penetrate into the Universe. With the Hebrews and in the Holy Scriptures, dreams were conceived with an extraordinary value, it was as a revelation of God's will. In Greece and Rome dreams were considered as communications with God, made in a symbolic language. According to Aristotle, "sleep and waking, the examination of which is indispensable for understanding dreams, are two states of the same faculty whereby waking is the positive and sleep is the negative state." Aristotle associated dreams with digestive problems; he believed dreams were demonic and not divine. It was subject to the law of the human spirit, which has a kinship with the divine. Aristotle was acquainted with some of the characteristics of the dream-life, for example, he knew that a dream converts the slight sensations perceived in sleep into intense sensations ("one imagines that one is walking through fire, and feels hot, if this or that part of the body becomes only slightly warm"), which led him to conclude that dreams might easily betray to the

physician the first indications of an incipient physical change which escaped observation during the day.

#### Theories of Understanding Dream Process

For Alfred Adler (1870-1937) (psychologist born in Vienna), "dreams were a way of addressing insecurities. In a dream we can safely face things that would otherwise scare us. We can try out strategies for overcoming our shortcomings or simply compensate for them via wish-fulfilment". Adlerian dream analysis involves looking at the parts of a dream and analysing what problems or inferiorities they might represent. Then how we act in response to those dream elements represents a way of overcoming the issue. The method indicated by the dream might be realistic - a dress-rehearsal for life - or totally unrealistic wish-fulfilment.

Carl Jung (1875-1961) (Swiss psychotherapist), adopted the term mandala (which term derives from manas, the Sanskrit word for mind). He referred to one of the categories of symbols, an archetypal dream image that regularly appears in dreams.

Jung postulated a drive towards self-realization and self-integration which he referred to as the individuation process. Dreams were a way of the unconscious communicating with the conscious part of ourselves in order to bring something to our notice and restore our equilibrium.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) (neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, born in Vienna), wrote about the Interpretation of Dreams. For him, dreams were a direct way to an unconscious desire, a disguised substitution of an unconscious event.

Freud had said, "generally a patient would hide during the narration, some part of the dream because there appear certain resistances, obstacles that make the dream difficult to be interpreted". In Freud's view, the purpose of dreams is to allow us to satisfy in fantasies the instinctual urges that society judges unacceptable. So that we do not awaken, as a result of the strong emotions that would be evoked if we dreamed about the literal fulfilment of such desires. The part of the mind that Freud called the 'censor' transforms the dream content so as to disguise its true meaning. Freud called the censorship process the 'dreamwork'. Freud explicitly identified five processes brought into play

during dreamwork: displacement, condensation, symbolization, projection, and secondary revision.

In displacement we repress an urge, which is then redirected to another object or person. Condensation is a process that disguises a particular thought, urge or emotion by contracting it into a brief dream event or image, the deeper meaning of which is not readily evident. In symbolization, the repressed urge is acted out in a symbolic manner. Projection refers to the tendency of the mind to project our repressed desires onto other people.

‘Secondary revision’ is Freud’s expression for what he regarded as the final stage of dream production. After undergoing one or more of the dreamwork process, the secondary processes of the ego reorganize the otherwise bizarre components of a dream so that it has a comprehensible surface meaning, called ‘the manifest dream’. The process of dream interpretation in psychoanalysis involves ‘decoding’ the manifest dream content to discover the real, hidden meaning of the dream, called the latent dream. Freud believed that the psychotherapist has a lot of symbolic meaning to decipher via the associations of the client.

In 1977 Robert McCarley and J. Allan Hobson of Harvard Medical School proposed the activation-synthesis model of dreaming. These authors put forward a hypothesis that refuted the notion that dreams are meaningful, especially refuting Sigmund Freud’s notion. They said that during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, the stage of sleep most closely connected with dreaming, a portion of the brain generates electrical signals that go to many different brain areas, including those associated with motor activities, sensory activities and conscious thought. They hypothesized that one of the effects of this electrical activity is to send series of random images, feelings to the mental centres of the forebrain. This is the ‘activation’ stage of the theory.

In normal waking consciousness, the forebrain sorts through various kinds of internal and external sensory input to create a meaningful experience of the world.

During REM the higher mental centres attempt to impose order on the incoming messages, creating whatever narrative structure dreams have. This is the ‘synthesis’ stage of the theory. The many dreams are just masses of incoherent images representing incoming groups of signals that the brain was simply not able to synthesize.”

Anthropology has contributed considerably to the cross-cultural understanding of dreams. The earliest anthropological research on dreams, which dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, considered the dream beliefs and practices of other cultures as evidence of their savagery, in contrast to modern Western civilization’s relative disinterest in dreams. The only area of investigation where dreams played a significant role was psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis had a

tendency to portray dreams as primitive and childish, thus reinforcing the dominant negative image of dreams. With the spread of psychoanalytic theories, various anthropologists tried to prove the accuracy of Sigmund Freud’s ideas about dreams by analysing dream experiences of non-Western people. Some anthropologists, such as Kilton Stewart, provided romantic idealizations of dream practices in non-Western cultures. Anthropologists have long been interested in cross-cultural experiences of dreaming and interpretations of dreams concentrating especially on the latter interest, rather than on the dream as an experience and its narration.

The culture to which the individual belongs largely determines the social context in which the dream is narrated and how it is interpreted. Dreaming experience also reflects important beliefs about reality, death, the soul, and the boundaries between self and others. Thus, to achieve a good understanding of dream experiences of other groups, it is fundamental to fully understand their culture through the study of their language, their social institutions, and their psychological, philosophical and religious beliefs.

### **Conclusion**

Psychotherapists and related caseworkers, have important tools with dream work in current practice, bearing in mind the culture to which the client belongs, according to the abovementioned.

It is always beneficial for torture and trauma survivors to relate to dreams and nightmares in their therapy, to assist debriefing of their traumatic experiences. It is important for our clients to understand that dreams are not a threat or a warning that something terrible will actually happen to them. For example, many clients dream that someone is dying or is sick or they relate to someone whose face cannot be seen or whose body belongs to one person and face to another person (displacement process). It is important to decipher their dreams through the different processes and to use the symbols for their learning experience.

We, as professionals, can use dreams as an important part of our job, in order to get the pieces of a broken story that the client tries to put together. Dreams, among other tools, will help us to construct meaning and work towards their trauma recovery. If a client is able to speak about nightmares, by putting these nightmares into words, it will help to debrief what is unspeakable to them, providing appropriate support is given.

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