

Viewing the Dream as Process: A Key to Effective Dreamwork

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The practice of dream analysis 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). Moffitt's generic definition leaves the endeavor of dream analysis rather open-ended, but most would agree that when unsophisticated dreamers share their dreams with a therapist or a lay dream worker, they focus principally on the question, "What does this dream mean [in relation to my waking life]?" or more specifically, "Who or what does this symbol refer to [in my life]?" These questions derive from an implicit assumption that the dream content is composed ahead of time by some intelligent unconscious process, is experienced passively as a "given" by the dream ego, and bears a direct correspondence with people and situations in one's waking life. Through such inquiry, this reductive enterprise arrives at equivalency statements in the form of "This means (or refers to) that." This relieves the dreamwork enterprise from deriving broader implications from an indeterminate experience, but satisfies most dreamers in the time frame usually allotted for such exploration.

While it may be justifiable to simply correlate dream content with specific waking scenarios and persons if the goal is to distill something immediately useful, it can also overlook the narrative process or plot that holds the content together,

and which may hold broader meaning for the dreamer independent of the dream's specific visual components.

The co-creative dream paradigm (Rossi, 1972; Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010) treats the imagery as responsive to the dream ego's mindset, rather than strictly determined from the outset, much in the way that quantum theorist view subatomic reality as indeterminate. Co-creative dream theory views the overall dream as unfolding in real time, portraying a synchronous exchange between the dream ego and the emergent content.

From the standpoint of co-creative theory, a dream that is ambiguous from a content standpoint may nonetheless reveal a discernible narrative flow punctuated by the dream ego's responses. Further, these responses may illustrate *relational process parallels* between the dream and waking scenarios, even if *content parallels* cannot be easily discerned. If the narrative process and the dreamer's responses can be unambiguously observed in the manifest dream report, one might argue that the best initial approach to dream analysis is to analyze the dream process as a disciplined prelude to further analysis, especially in cases where the dream content may seem unrelated to waking life concerns. Indeed, this analysis of unambiguous process may effectively establish a context that focuses the analysis and meaningfully constrains the range of dreamer associations. As we will see, the

illumination of the dreamer/dream interactive process may reap considerable insights apart from the consideration of dream imagery.

Relational Therapy Provides a Clue

The importance of process-oriented analysis has become especially important in relational therapy, and further justifies analyzing dreams from a process-oriented standpoint. Following WWII, in treating veterans in group therapy, Lewin discovered that therapy could be ahistorical and interpersonal, taking place in the relational field *between* group members, rather than within them. Building upon this relational paradigm, systems-oriented family therapy embraced this process-oriented approach beginning in the 1950s, and built its foundation on the premise that relationships were driven by reciprocal, synchronous feedback *between* family members, and could be analyzed by emphasizing *how* members related as opposed to the content of their interactions.

Structural Family Therapy (Minuchin, 1974) is a systems-oriented therapy built on the premise that reciprocal interactive process accounts is “the governing principle of relationships” (Nichols, 2012). A fundamental tenet of SFT is the importance of assessing the “structure” of a family. For SFT practitioners, the word “structure” means the “recurrent patterns of interaction that define and stabilize the shape of relationships” (Nichols, 2017, p. 303). More simply, “structure” means the *relational process* of the family’s interactions, as opposed to

the content of those exchanges. Once a therapist embraces SFT, or any systems-oriented therapy for that matter, the therapist shifts the principal emphasis from *what* the family is saying to *how* they are confronting the problem. Once the interactive process becomes illuminated, then working with the problematic content can be surprisingly easy, or even rendered unnecessary since the family's basic competency in dealing with *any* content issue is fostered through restructuring the way that its members interact in general.

An Unexpected Contribution

The field of dream analysis has been slow to adopt a process orientation for a variety of reasons, not least of which was the focus on interpreting dream content fostered by Freud and Jung, albeit from wildly contrasting theoretical orientations. In the early 70s, one of the first indications that dream analysis was shifting away from a strict content orientation can be seen the formulation of the dream “theme” that was originally formulated by us in the mid-70s. As employees of the Association for Research and Enlightenment—the organization that was founded to study the psychic “readings,” or trance discourses, of the late Edgar Cayce—we were hoping to discern a method of dream analysis that was evident in Cayce's 600 readings pertaining to dream interpretation. Cayce's readings had become widely respected by theologians, psychologists, and health professionals, so it made sense that his dream interpretations would reflect the same sophistication; but we were

stumped in our efforts to discern a consistent methodology in his often terse analyses. Eventually, however, the second author realized that in most cases, Cayce's interpretations were brief process-oriented summaries that neglected mention of specific dream content. When he suggested that Cayce was essentially *removing the content and summarizing the process*, Cayce's method of dream analysis suddenly became evident. We decided to call this summarization process, "The Dream Theme Method," and initially described how to use it in the *Sundance Community Dream Journal* (Sparrow, 1978), and in a book on dream interpretation (Thurston, 1978). Since then, several well-known dream workers and authors have also cited the benefits of viewing dreams as plot or theme rather than content alone (Garfield, 2001; Gendlin, 1986; Gongloff, 2006). Hartman, whose dream theory focuses primarily on the significant "contextualizing" metaphors in dreams, acknowledged that there was a "background plot" that connected the metaphors into a seamless whole.

All of this discussion of powerful metaphors of dreams does not imply that every element of every dream ... can be seen as an emotional concern pictured as an image in the dream. There is also an element of "continuity"—an ongoing background ... or a background plot. Even the most powerful dreams...also have more ordinary portions that seem to serve as continuity. (1998, p. 116)

The formulation of the dream theme, or process narrative (PN) has become one step in a comprehensive five-step method of co-creative dream analysis called the FiveStar Method.¹ Whenever we teach students how to formulate the PN, we caution them by saying that while the method is simple to describe, it is exceedingly hard at first to formulate a PN without introducing content features of the dream. After all, two thousand years of Western thought regarding dreams has consistently emphasized the way dream imagery is the carrier of meaning, regardless of its origins (Sontag, 1966). To help my students extricate themselves from the embedded assumptions of Plato and Freud and most everyone in between, we tell them, “Restate the dream as succinctly as possible, but as thoroughly as necessary, to capture the main action or story line of the dream, without mentioning the names of people, places or objects. Replace all specific nouns with generic pronouns such as someone, something, or somewhere.”

As mentioned already, the value of the PN lies in its capacity to provide a content-free pattern that may parallel relational dynamics in the waking life, as well as in other dreams. By summarizing the interactive process of the dream rather than the visual content, the PN illuminates often-overlooked properties of the dream ego’s experience, such as intention, conflict, resistance, avoidance, willingness, and resilience. As such, the PN assists the dream worker in assessing

¹ See Sparrow (2013) and Sparrow and Thurston (2010) for the complete methodology.

the movement toward or away from integration or development (Rossi, 1972).

Take for instance, the following dream of a 25-year-old man:

I am living in a house that is mine, and Roger is visiting. Suddenly, I hear someone in the cellar, and know that no one else should be in the house. Alarmed, I run from the house, and get in my car, waiting for Roger. He hesitates, however, and suggests that if we leave, the intruder will still be there, and we won't have anywhere to go. So I get out, and go back in. We hear someone coming up the cellar stairs, and suddenly an elderly woman appears. She says she lives in the basement, and is only interested in getting along with me, but needs some quiet to live peacefully. I relax and assure her that we can live cooperatively.

This dream exhibits a PN of, "Someone becomes aware of an unexpected intrusion, and initially avoids it. He then reconsiders, and decides to confront the problem in order to protect his interests, and then finds that he can coexist with it." Note that this PN omits all names, labels, places, etc., and retains only the verbs and modifiers.

This dream initially puzzled the dreamer because of its unfamiliar imagery. He was married and owned his own home without a basement, and the older woman in the dream was a stranger. Approaching the dream from the standpoint of content, the imagery might seem to make immediate sense, however. From a

Jungian standpoint, the basement is an obvious metaphor for the unknown, or the unconscious, and the woman can be seen as the dreamer's female side, or *anima*, with whom he appears to have an uneasy relationship at the time of the dream. However, formulating the PN revealed an underlying *relational style* of avoiding situations that could become confrontational. Thus the PN revealed the status of the dream ego's *relationship* with a broad content domain. From a therapeutic standpoint, it was more important for the dreamer to realize how he had reacted reflexively to avoid strong emotions than it was to interpret the meaning of the elderly woman or the basement. This process orientation assisted him in applying the dreamwork in several areas, including his relationship with women, where avoidance of strong emotion had become a "chronic adaptive response" (Sparrow, 2012) that had lost its usefulness.

By summarizing the PN, the dream worker helps to insure that the application of the dream will not be driven by content parallels alone, but governed equally, if not predominantly by *process parallels* between dream and waking relational dynamics. From a therapeutic standpoint, the value of a process-oriented analysis is obvious: It effectively keeps the focus on the client's role and response style, thus permitting an assessment of the client's agency and resilience, or the lack thereof. By focusing overly on content, we easily overemphasize presumably autonomous factors outside of the client's control, and thus may inadvertently

underscore a client's sense of powerlessness and victimization in the face of distressing content. Content oriented dreamwork may, consequently, focus more on environmental pressures than upon the dreamer's agency or deficiency of response. Of course, we can go too far in emphasizing client accountability, especially in abusive and dangerous relationships, but therapists usually err in the other direction, especially when working with individual clients, from whom we inevitably hear only one side of the story. By analyzing client dreams from the standpoint of relational process, we can more easily avoid the biases that effectively preserve the client's status quo. Instead, the dream's PN can assist us illuminating relational deficiencies, as well as underscoring emergent relational competencies that can be supported by the therapeutic process.

Most students of co-creative dream analysis, for whom the FiveStar Method may be the dreamwork method of choice, tend to report (Sparrow, 2020) that extracting the PN is initially the most difficult step in dream analysis. It is probably true to say that dream sharing activates the unbridled imagination of listeners, and generates intuitive, but overly precipitous equivalency statements based on identifying with the dream ego and then projecting one's own feelings and biases onto overall narrative. In contrast, extracting a PN restricts all input to *immediately observable* aspects of the dream. As stated above, the PN is a purely descriptive

statement of events and actions within the dream report itself, and thus avoids the projection of meaning from the dream workers and the dreamer, alike.

The Process Narrative Sets the Course for Effective Dreamwork

Extracting the PN can provide an immediate overview of a dream that guides a subsequent discussion. While not addressing content areas, it establishes a sense of movement *through the dream*, which then can be broken down into sections divided by the dream ego's responses to events in those sections. Take for instance, the following dream of a woman trying to get home on her bicycle at night:

I'm riding a bicycle and have my cat, M. with me. I'm walking through houses of strangers, just trying to find my way home. I'm not sure why I enter their houses. I'm being a little sneaky about it, but it seems like it is just a means for me to get to the other side of the houses. One of the families sees me and asks me what is going on. I tell them that I am just trying to get home. I realize M. has gone outside by herself and I look for her with no luck. The couple suggests that I spend the night with them and begin my ride in the morning. I tell the man/the husband that I live close by. He says "in Kensington?" I am a little confused. I don't know of a Kensington neighborhood, but I don't question it. I take off to ride in the night and I quickly realize it is a dangerous neighborhood. There is a group

of monstrous looking men staring at me and I begin to flee with them chasing me.

The dreamer shared this dream in an online groups, comprised of four members and the first author. We arrived at the following PN: “Someone is trying to get somewhere on her own, turns down the help of others, loses track of something she loves, and then feels exposed and vulnerable to people she perceives to be a threat.” When presented with this PN, the dreamer was immediately able to see a familiar tendency to remain aloof from others in her search for security, and how that tendency left her feeling especially vulnerable in times of stress, when the presence of others would provide some reassurance and comfort. Again, we can see that this PN reveals the basic interactive process of the dream by initially eliminating all of the visual content. While postponing a consideration of content analysis may seem counter-intuitive for those who are unfamiliar with co-creative dream theory, this disciplined preliminary step reaps considerable benefit because the dreamer-dream interactive process almost always maps onto the waking relational style, and results in significant insights on the part of the dreamer/client. This assessment, which is often overlooked in traditional content-focused dream analysis, is at the heart of effective competency-based coaching, mentoring, or therapy, and so the PN illuminates what is arguably the most important dimension of the dream. While the dream content may be unfamiliar, even unknowable, the

PN clearly indicates the level of waking ego's "relational competency" (Jordan, xxx) as it manifests in the dream encounter. Thus it can be said that one can draw parallels between dreams and waking life by exploring *parallel process* before attempting to establish *parallel content*.

Perceiving dream process becomes easier once the dream worker's paradigm has shifted away from the traditional content-oriented approach to dreams toward the co-creative paradigm. Once a dream worker views the dream as indeterminate, and the dream as an unfolding interactive experience, then one's attention naturally shifts away from *what* the dreamer reports to *how* the dreamer proceeds through the dream experience. Take for instance a dream in which a dreamer hooks a big fish.

I am flyfishing with C. in the clear water of a lagoon, near a shore line. Mom (deceased) is standing nearby watching. I cast my fly blindly to a dark area where I sense a big fish lies. Something takes my fly as it sinks. There is slack in my line, and I quickly strip it in so I can get tight to the fish, hoping that it will still be there. Sure enough, when I lift my rod I feel the steady heavy pull of a large fish that has not begun to fight. It swims toward me. I keep my line tight, preparing for the fish to run once it realizes that it's hooked. I put my feet together to keep it from swimming between my legs, as big trout are prone to do. When it gets close, I am able to lift the fish to

the surface where we can all see that it is a huge trout. It lies in water, shimmering. But before I can land it, it comes loose. I am not disappointed, but rather pleased that I was at least able to bring it to the surface. Then, almost immediately, it seems that I have caught a slightly smaller trout that I have in hand, waiting for C. to take my photo with it. Mom stands beside me as I submerge myself up to my neck in the clear water, and hold the fish beside my face, just above the water line. C. takes one photo, and I immediately return the fish to the water, unharmed. There is a great sense of celebration among the three of us.

Within the traditional content-oriented dreamwork paradigm, one's attention would gravitate toward the compelling imagery—the dreamer's deceased mother, his brother, a giant trout, a smaller trout, a camera and a photograph. This preoccupation with discrete imagery would support the extraction of meaning from the individual components of the dream, rather than its organic whole, which is comprised of much more than the visual imagery. Even Gestalt therapists, who customarily facilitate a here-and-now interaction between the dreamer and particular dream characters or objects, might disregard the overall narrative in favor of singling out compelling content features for the dialoguing process. The PN, in contrast, precedes any consideration of content, regardless of theoretical or practical differences in how to treat the content, by omitting *all mention of specific*

content. This is a tall order for those of us accustomed to treating the symbols or metaphors as the exclusive carriers of meaning. However, by willing to suspend all interpretive assessments—and for that matter, non-interpretive Gestalt dialoguing, as well—and concentrate on the overall narrative flow, the dream work more easily reveals a sophisticated level of meaning expressed by the intact, generic process. In this particular dream, the PN could be formulated as, “Someone connects with something invisible and significant in the presence of loved ones, is concerned that he will not be able to keep it, but succeeds briefly before losing the connection. Then he succeeds to a somewhat lesser extent, and enjoys the recognition from those he loves before willingly surrendering it.”

The dreamer was able to relate the dream process to his struggle as a writer, and his fear that he’s lost his creative edge at the age of 68. He realized that by persisting in his efforts, “taking up the slack and staying connected” with the process of writing on a regular basis, and celebrating modest levels of achievement while remaining unattached to the outcome, he would satisfy his deeper creative impulses. Without formulating the PN, the dreamer may have been overly focused on specific content parallels between dream images and his waking life. While, of instance, the big fish may represent a “bestseller,” and the smaller fish a less significant work, such conclusions remain speculative. In contrast, the PN was

unambiguous and provided a clear plan of action in regard to creative pursuits of all descriptions.

The formulation of the PN can be done without the dreamer present, since it is based entirely on the manifest dream report, rather than on hunches or presumed expert knowledge regarding the dream imagery. But when the dreamer is present, he or she should be, as always, the final judge of whether the PN accurately captures the dream ego's movement through the encounter with the content. In my experience, the dreamer and the dream worker rarely disagree on this initial formulation, but typically work together to refine the statement until it resonates with the manifest dream process. Because the PN is purely descriptive, the dream worker rarely knows what associations it may set in motion in the dreamer. Nor does the dream worker know whether the process reflects a constructive development in the context of the dreamer's own beliefs and values. For instance, the dream ego may report killing a bully from childhood, or having sex with an old lover. The PN mute the drama of such dream encounters, and provide a values-free description of pure process. It is then up to the dreamer/client to determine if such dream behaviors represent interim developmental accomplishments, or should be regarded as unacceptable behaviors from a moral perspective.

Summary

We have seen how the PN represents a noninvasive preliminary step in the dreamwork process that can awaken a sense of understanding that would otherwise go unnoticed in the headlong pursuit of “equivalency” statements that translate the content into something familiar, if not already known, such as “the woman represents your feminine side,” or “the fish represents your life force.” Such equivalencies may satisfy the puzzle solver within us, but one might ask, “So, what next?” Unless the dreamwork initially clarifies the relational process—the dynamic movement of the dream through time, rather than an array of standalone components—it will neglect the dream ego’s participation in the unfolding narrative, thus depriving the dreamer of any sense of responsibility or agency, as well as a plan of action. In contrast, the array of associations derived from an accurately formulated PN can spawn a bounty of insights and further questions that can be explored as more understanding emerges in time.

The PN is similar in many ways to what person-centered therapists refer to as a paraphrase. Although a Rogerian therapist can mention content (i.e. people, places, and other nouns) in a paraphrase, the emphasis is always on a non-interpretive, succinct summation of a client’s communication, which inevitably focuses on process over content. As the relationship deepens, the counselor may also reflect feelings and meaning, but the paraphrase represents the first and least

ambitious reflective tool mastered by the person-centered therapist. The “genius” of the PN and the paraphrase, alike, lies in the strict commitment to reproducing the client’s subjective experience without embellishment or interpretation. In both cases, it takes discipline and faith on the part of the dream worker by establishing from the onset an attitude of respect for the dreamer’s autonomy.

The following dream represents a realistic admixture of stable content and robust dreamer intention, and encourages an exploration of the dreamer’s responses. However, before moving on to an exploration of the analysis of dream ego responses and their impact on the content, as advocated in a systematic approach to process-oriented dream analysis (Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010), it is initially important to obtain an encompassing view of the dream from the perspective of generic PN.

I’m in a busy foreign airport on a layover. I’m traveling with a group of people. I go off by myself to get some food and go to the bathroom. I almost get lost trying to find a bathroom but eventually find one. I go into the stall that has a hanging basket in front of it. I need to relieve myself and there’s no privacy. A woman comes in and I try to direct her to the second stall but she disappears. There are only two stalls. Then I discover a curtain that I pull in front of me for privacy. Other people come in. Then I leave the bathroom and get disoriented and lost for a moment, there are a lot of different

hallways. I look at the time and I'm afraid I'm going to miss my flight. I check the time and I'm running late. I find my way back when I see a restaurant or cafeteria that I recognize and know I'm close to where I started from. I make it back in time to see my friends. I don't remember getting on the flight.

When the dream group explored the PN, we arrived at, "Someone is involved with others in an effort to get somewhere, is awaiting the next step, and feels that she needs to attend to personal needs. She finds it difficult to achieve the privacy she seeks, but eventually succeeds only to find that she's lost her way. She finds her way back, reestablishes her connection with others, and awaits the next step." When presented with this PN, the dreamer was able to map the dream process onto her waking life, where she was in transition between one career track and another, and trying to fulfill her personal needs at a time of financial and interpersonal upheaval. While the content parallels between the dream and her waking life were pretty obvious (i.e. the journey was clearly a metaphor for her career change), the PN illuminated the way that she was able to take time to address her own needs without losing the momentum of her overall life change. Indeed, the PN revealed a movement away from others and the immediate demands of the moment to address her own personal needs, and then finding her way back to a sense of belonging and a readiness for the next stage of the journey.

Is the Process Narrative Sufficient for Effective Dream Work?

Formulating an accurate PN can inadvertently bring further discussion to a halt if the dreamer has an “ahah!” moment and is eager to explore the insights stimulated by this “simple but difficult” step. The dreamer may immediately perceive straightforward dream-waking life process parallels once the often-confusing imagery has been temporarily set aside. Exploring the dreamer’s immediate insights may be something that the dream workers wishes to support, at least on occasion, if time constraints prevent a more comprehensive application of co-creative dream analysis. However, if the dream worker has the time, he or she may wish to encourage the dreamer/client to postpone making hard and fast conclusions based on the PN alone until the conversation can proceed to the subsequent steps of the FSM that will supplement the initial insights awakened by the PN. In most cases, taking the path of “slow arrival” will permit the dreamer to see how the PN applies to more than one area of the waking life, as well as to explore how the dream ego’s responses, and the associations to the dream metaphors, may establish a much richer understanding of the dream’s overall meaning than the PN alone can provide.

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