

On Dreams and Dreaming...

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Discussion of the paper

Dreams as Subject of Psychoanalytical Treatment Research

by

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“Could you please introduce the discussion of a dream in your presentation?”...this is probably one phrase that many candidates in psychoanalytic training around the world have heard at least a few times and I believe most of us are quite familiar with the feeling of anxiety it always triggers.

It's never easy to find the ‘perfect dream’, the One which the patient could emotionally relate to and which generated lots of associations laddering downwards towards the prescribed significant persons of his or her past, the One which happily met with a good ‘inspiration/intuition’ of the analyst who, in his turn, could thus help the patient towards uncovering the thoroughly -searched-for infantile wish.

The history of psychoanalysis is intimately related to the issue of dreams – as Freud himself considered the “Interpretation of Dreams” as the true starting point of his newly-created science and ‘dream interpretation technique’ has been for over a century one of the cornerstones of psychoanalytic training.

Even if interest in dreams has steadily diminished in psychoanalytic literature and their preeminence within the realm of analytic material was successively superseded by the analysis of defenses, by the exploration of the internalized objects, the organization of the Self or the ‘real’ relationship patterns of the patient and subsequent counter-transferential reactions of the analyst as experienced in the analytic situation, the ability to follow the “Royal Road to the Unconscious” never truly lost its status as one of the main tools of any psychoanalyst.

Traditionally, this ‘journey through the dream’ has more or less retained the main character which was endowed upon it by Freud: that of a trip through a more or less complicated labyrinth built by the patients’ defenses towards the ultimate goal of uncovering some deeply-hidden and long-forgotten longings.

This focus on the ‘final destination’ or, more metaphorically, this ‘treasure hunt’ approach to dreams is, I believe, highly significant for the Freudian implicit paradigm regarding the way in which psychoanalysis heals: through the uncovering of memories related to infantile wishes and the dissolution of contemporarily unnecessary defenses against them, with repression occupying the place of honor.

And, although the psychoanalytic technique has greatly diversified since the beginning of the 20th century – becoming more suitably described nowadays by the use of the plural ‘techniques’ – dream interpretation (with its underlying fantasy of finding the ‘treasure’ which will almost magically bring healing and peace of mind) was rarely truly questioned by our professional community. Maybe, after all, we all need our ‘Holy Grail’ or ‘Philosopher’s Stone’ in order to pursue a profession which permanently confronts us with the uncertainty of not knowing if we are on the “right track” and, even more so, of not knowing if there is a right track at all...

Professor's Kächele paper might seem to many of us – and certainly seemed to me – as quite unfamiliar and hard to understand because of its abundance of figures (we're psychoanalysts and thus, almost by definition, in love with words and rather distrustful of figures) and emphasis on statistically-based conclusions; a strange approach for the assumed wholly subjective mindset of the 'regular' psychoanalyst.

But Professor Kächele seems to be quite different from a 'regular analyst' and,, beyond the statistical correlations (which, I confess, I took for being valid as I have long forgotten how to interpret them) we can find an approach to dreams which can both widen our theoretical understanding of dreaming as a crucial psychological phenomenon and, even more so, our clinical use of dream material.

I insist upon the idea of widening – and not changing or challenging - our theoretical and practical 'arsenal' because my first consideration regarding Professor's Kächele material is that it brings experimental and statistically-based proof to observations which most clinicians with enough experience already had in the back of their minds, without "competing" with or trying to contradict more classical views about dreams.

His team's approach is provocative and original first of all because it is tackles a sort of "gray area" usually left unattended by the dream research specialists; in most cases "Dreams" (as unique and unrepeatable constructs of the mind) are thought to be the realm of psychoanalysts while "Dreaming" (as an activity of the brain) falls within the expertise of neuroscientists. Quite rarely seem the analysts interested by the process itself and, even more so, the neuroscientists by the eventual meanings of the process's outcome, that is the individual dream.

I will left aside the very challenging question of why psychoanalysts do not consider themselves as "neuroscientists" – or, differently phrased, why psychoanalysis is not perceived as part of the "neurosciences" – when Freud and his immediate followers very much saw themselves as such , and focus on this aspect of the work of Professor's Kächele team: the bridging of the gap between the study of the process and the interest upon the meanings of its individual products.

The results of their studies shows that meanings - in the sense of significances to be attributed to one particular subject- are not limited to each individual dream but encompass the entire series of dreams a patient might recall and bring during the analytic treatment.

Besides showing proof that "*psychic change does occur*" during an analytic treatment – a purpose concerning mainly those outside the psychoanalytic community, as I suppose most of us are already convinced of the statement's validity – the studies provide ample food for thought to psychoanalysts themselves as it proves that while every dream - as every picture – tells a story there is also 'a story' to be heard while going through the pages of the "album" of dreams collected throughout an analysis.

Of course, psychoanalytic literature abounds in accounts, some with taxonomical purposes, of time-framed "dream types": pre-first encounter dreams, first dream including the analyst's image, termination dreams and so on. Most of them, though, are concerned mainly with the hic and nunc meaning of these dreams in relation to the analyst and the analytic situation and to their value as gates to the repressed past of the patient and not with the value of dreams as permanent indicators of the patient's inner processes during the cure.

Thus, reading Professor's Kächele paper after a quite extensive review of the contemporary psychoanalytic literature on dreams (necessary to the writing of my own paper at this Conference) seemed to me, in this respect, quite similar to the experience of first looking to the drawings in a book and then, by quickly shuffling the pages, making them become alive (that is "animating" them in the most literal sense of the word) and, through their very inscription in time, perceive new meanings unavailable by even the most detailed study of any individual drawing.

Looking at dreams in their dynamic throughout the analytic cure becomes, in view of these findings, a source of knowledge qualitatively different from both the neurologically-termed ‘dream activity’ of the brain and the psychoanalytically-phrased “dream interpretation”.

A second highly interesting finding included in Professor’s Kachele paper is that – for a patient whose 113 sessions were transcribed - although the narrative and dream topics were congruent (thus supporting the view that dreams have also an adaptative function by addressing topics which are relevant to the individual at a certain moment) dream content was strikingly divergent from the patient’s narratives during the sessions in terms of relationship patterns and emotional tonality.

Of course, the results are drawn from following just one case and we may need further studies supporting them but still, this finding supports the view that dreams are not (or not only) bouts of emotional discharge of forbidden/repressed wishes/dreads figured in a contextualized and cryptic manner but also a true “parallel psychic life” whose dynamic might be used by the analyst as a monitoring instrument for understanding and assessing the patient’s change potential during the cure.

Finally, the third element which drew my attention in this presentation is the well-documented “rehabilitation” of the manifest content of dreams, this “poor parent” (if not “sworn enemy”) of dream interpretation which is still so widely seen as nothing more than a disguise of the “dream thoughts” (in classical Freudian terms) good only to be dismantled by the analyst’s skill and intuition and valued only in the ways it can account for the particular defensive operations of the patient.

The fact that the manifest content of whole series of dreams show an organized and consistent pattern is certainly not a novelty for us – and not necessarily as psychoanalysts but even as ‘normal citizens’ who remember some of their own dreams – but the approach of analyzing their dynamic in parallel with the evolution of a patient’s narratives throughout the cure certainly is.

Many other such studies might be necessary in order to broaden our perspective on the always intriguing phenomena of dreams and dreaming but Professor’s Kächele paper brings us a step closer to be able not only to pursue the goal of finding the ‘ hidden treasures’ of repressed wishes, traumatic events or transferential strivings but to also ‘ enjoy the journey’ and look around the landscape of the patient’s oneiric life in order to draw a slightly more comprehensive map of his or her inner realities .

At the end of this discussion I propose all of you a short exercise for when you’ll find a moment of relaxation: do you remember the words of the famous song from the 1972 movie “Man from La Mancha”?

To dream the impossible dream

To fight the unbeatable foe

To bear with unbearable sorrow

To run where the brave dare not goand so on...

To reach the unreachable star

Now, let’s try to imagine – as an individual exercise in creativity -what would Don Quijote sing after a few years of psychoanalytic treatment.

THANK YOU