

## Communicative functions of dream telling

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#### Introduction

Why do people share their dreams? What motivates patients in therapy to communicate their dreams to their therapists and analysts? What expectations are connected with telling dreams?

In psychoanalysis we assume that the analyst is the expert in the interpretation of dreams; analysands tell the analyst their dreams to learn something about themselves (Boothe, 2006). In the favourable case, analysands are able to examine and analyse their dream contents, and in the even more favourable case there is appropriation and reconciliation with portions of their personality that are alien to them and not very welcome. Bartels (1979) emphasises that the motivation to communicate dreams lies in the irritating experience of the mysterious, the enigmatic: we know what we dreamed, but we do not know why and what for (see Freud, 1916/1917, p. 94). It is this *break* between dream and waking life that provokes the wish for an explanation, for interpretation (Bartels, 1979, p. 102, freely translated here). This was the starting point for the single case study of the dream dialogue between “Amalie X” and her analyst presented in the following.<sup>1</sup>

#### Strange disinterest in her own dreams

I assumed that the analysand, Amalie X, and her analyst would to some extent be interested in and make an effort to understand the contents of the dreams that Amalie X told. However, I found that this was not necessarily the case with the analysand. She seemed strangely uninterested in the content of her dreams, or better said, in joint examination of the meaning of

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<sup>1</sup> The psychoanalytic treatment of “Amalie X” was tape-recorded in its entirety as a German specimen case by Kächele et al. (2006). In the total of more than 500 sessions, Amalie X told ninety-five dreams, distributed over seventy-two sessions. Sometimes she told more than one dream in a therapy session. The basis of this study is our transcription of the tape recordings of these “dream sessions”. At the start of her therapy, the patient Amalie X was a thirty-five-year-old, single teacher. Her reason for initiating therapy was considerable vulnerability to depression accompanied by low self-esteem. Starting in puberty Amalie X had a somatic illness, the main symptom of which was idiopathic hirsutism, or unwanted, male-pattern, excessive hair growth all over the body. Due to her inhibitions, which her idiopathic hirsutism only reinforced, Amalie X had not yet had any sexual contacts at the time of the initial interview.

her dreams. The question thus arose: why did this patient share ninety-five dreams in her analysis, if she did not at all want to know what they meant?

This phenomenon is not unknown in psychoanalysis. There is risk involved when we share our dreams. Just how much we are disclosing is not at all foreseeable at the point in time when we communicate the manifest dream. It is only through the course of in-depth conversation on the dream and in (joint) thinking about the hidden meaning of the latent content that the challenge that is hidden in the dream becomes gradually revealed. Dream narratives thus involve a great deal of lack of control. This is why persons sharing dreams have such mixed feelings. For one, dreamers want to share the enigmatic experience with someone, in the hope that the expert can say what the dreams mean. For another, dreamers do not want to share the dream at all, because things can come to light that they do not want to know anything about. If the latter feeling dominates, we call this resistance.

However, in the sessions that I examined, the resistance interpretation did not always fit. Instead, I found that this patient often communicated her dreams in a very particular way – namely, she shared her dreams in a way that the telling of the dream had a very definite function in the course of the conversation. In psychoanalytic dream research, this way of looking at things has come to be called the “communicative function of dream telling”.

### **The communicative function of dream telling**

Kanzer (1955) originally used the phrase, “the communicative function of the dream”. Starting out from a comment by Ferenczi (1913), Kanzer (1955) began to develop a perspective according to which the person chosen by the dreamer to listen to a dream was “preferably the actual subject of the dream” (p. 260). According to Kanzer, “The urge to communicate, therefore, arising out of the dream may be seen as a continuation of a tendency within the dreamer to establish contact with reality, as represented by the day’s residue” (p. 260). A good ten years later, Bergmann (1966) developed this idea further, among other things by placing it in a historical/cultural context. Especially interesting for the psychoanalytic situation is Bergmann’s explanation of how communication of a dream comes about at all. Bergmann saw the telling of dreams as arising out of the simultaneous mobilisation of two antagonistic driving forces: a desire to communicate, and resistance to communicating. The wish to communicate puts the dream on the agenda, so to

speak; resistance makes the dream incomprehensible. The telling of dreams thus has a function of lightening a person's load, for by sharing the dream, conflict-laden feelings can be expressed that cannot otherwise be communicated. This assessment was taken up by John Klauber, who also studied the meaning of the telling of dreams in psychoanalysis. Klauber (1969) presented further ideas on this in the form of eight metapsychological assertions defining dream telling as a clinical phenomenon, which can be read as the instinct theory foundation of Kanzer's and Bergmann's ideas:

The partial breaking through of a repressed wish in a dream produces in the dreamer the urge to share the dream, since drive impulses that are no longer under complete control by the ego must seek discharge. The verbalization of the dream and also the dream itself are a substitute for discharge. (p. 282, freely translated here)

In the German language literature, the question concerning the communicative function of dream telling was taken up by Morgenthaler (1986) under the term *Traumdiagnostik* (dream diagnostics) and by Deserno (1992) as *funktionaler Zusammenhang von Traum und Übertragung* (the functional connection between dream and transference), and further developed by Ermann (1998), who saw dream analysis as relationship analysis.

The transcript excerpts in the following will serve to illustrate what is meant by the communicative function connected with the sharing of dreams.

### **Do these dreams show me to be very odd? (session 7)**

The first passage presented here is from Amalie X's seventh session and thus quite at the beginning of her analytic treatment. After telling some stories about teaching school, Amalie shared a dream:

#### Passage 1<sup>2</sup>

1 P: Oh yes but I am concerned about something else entirely (2.0) and it's (6.0) hm (15)

2 A: Yeah

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<sup>2</sup>For detailed transcription rules, see Deppermann (2001): (P = Amalie; A = analyst). The numbers in parenthesis mean: seconds of silence. The method used here was conversation analysis, which is a qualitative, ethno-methodological procedure for analysis of interaction. The principle of conversation analysis is to carve out how the participants in the conversation implicitly interpret each other, in that they respond to the other person's last utterance or "turn" in the conversation (Deppermann, 2001; Peräkylä, 2004; Streeck, 2004).

- 3 P: Yeahhaaaa (laughs) I'm embarrassed, as it were  
4 A: Hmm  
5 P: Well, yeah, I had a dream last night and ...  
6 A: Yeah ...  
7 P: And I would actually like to know whether it, hm (7.0), makes me totally weird compared to others (3.0)

This announcement of having had a dream is obviously connected with shame (I'm embarrassed, line 3). And the dream is announced together with a very specific concern (line 7). This concern forms the contextual frame for the telling of the dream.

Her actual telling of the dream then takes place in her third try. The dream was the following (here translated from the German):

And I dreamed there was a woman; she looked like a Madonna by Raphael, and she came in the door; it was probably some kind of wedding night. Well, that's what it seemed to me, and uh, her dress was very low-cut and more transparent than anything else, and she lay down and then came, I'm not sure what, na yeah in any case, a relatively young man came in, and uh, he tried to deflower the woman, and it didn't work, uh, and I think he said so, too. And then a second man came, oh yeah the first man he also, uh, practically like a child, he allowed himself to be breastfed, and the second man, he, yeah, he managed to do it, yeah, as far as I remember.

In the dialogue on this dream, Amalie expressed her astonishment that her dreams could have such concrete and undisguised sexual content, and she asked herself whether this was normal, as dreams usually appeared in a more encoded form. In the further course of the conversation, it became apparent that Amalie was not very interested in the specific content of her dream or the question as to what it might mean for her. Instead, she told the dream mainly in connection with her question at the start: she wanted to know whether this kind of dream showed her to be odd or weird as compared to other people, and further, whether she was different from others in the whole area of sexuality.

### **Sharing a dream opens up communicative possibilities**

Amalie used dream telling in session 7, and in numerous other sessions, such that through referring to the dream, she could express something that could otherwise not have been

communicated in this way or at all. The sharing of the dream serves first and foremost to prepare the way, as an introductory preparation to be better able or able at all to speak about delicate, difficult, or shameful things. The sharing of the dream is meant to create a kind of atmosphere for this. The mode of dream telling is eminently suitable for this purpose. Dreaming happens at night and nowhere else other than inside oneself. And yet it does not feel as if one had produced it all by oneself: The German expression *mir hat geträumt* (it came to me in a dream) in the passive voice illustrates this point. There is no subject, no I, that sees itself as the author of the night-time scene. Instead, the dreamer experiences the dream as something that happens to him or her, that comes from the outside. And yet, of course, the dreamer himself or herself is the director and producer of this short and often surreal film that plays at night on the inner dream screen. The dreamer is never merely an uninvolved spectator – even though it often feels just and only that way.

This subjective feeling that the dream is one's own but also alien creates a great deal of freedom for the dreamer to position herself. She herself can determine the extent to which she can and wants to appropriate this mental product or can and wants to leave it in distanced foreignness. In the case examined, Amalie used the dream in a very specific way. To paraphrase, she was saying, "What these two men and the Madonna have to do with me I really don't know. But what interests me is, is it actually normal to dream about sexual things in such an open way? And while we are on the topic, am I normal in my sexuality, or am I very odd?"

### **How do you say goodbye to your analyst? (session 517)**

A second passage, which is taken from the final session (session 517), shows Amalie's specific handling of her dreams very clearly. How do you do this in the very last therapy session? How do you say goodbye to your analyst after more than five years and more than 500 sessions?

#### **Passage 2**

- 1 P: 'oh (hh.)<sup>3</sup> (3) (hh.) (hh.) oh dear; (hh.) (14) how do the politicians put it
- 2 so nicely when it's their birthday, (1) just a normal workday. (hh.) (hh.) (2)
- 3 just a normal workday (53) hm (hh.) (hh.) (exhales very deeply) (2) I'll
- 4 tell you a dream;
- 5 T:A hm

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<sup>3</sup> (hh.) means deep breathing

- 6 P: hm; (4) heard there are patients that just don't show up for their final sessions I  
 7 was close to doing that; (2) or (1) not saying anything more (-) you can do that, too (2)  
 8 you can do all of that sure (7) I dreamed that (1) Doctor \*171 <sup>4</sup>  
 9 walked somewhere, (-) NO (-) that's not right at all; \*59 (3) among colleagues and (2) I don't know  
 10 I laughed about him or people laughed about him (-) because of the way he did this or that;  
 11 AT: went, you mean walked away=  
 12 P: no he ran.  
 13 AT: (-) h=hm yeah.  
 14 P: but I think it was Mrs. \*95 and it was about (.) ending analysis and and (.hh) uh  
 15 somehow they were (.) making fun of him how he did it ah yeah it was HIM!

This excerpt is from near the beginning of this session, after the analyst had given Amalie a questionnaire to take with her to fill out for evaluation purposes. What is noticeable is that Amalie's opening (line 1) is spoken in a pronouncedly hesitant way and accompanied by moans and groans. It gives the impression that it is not easy for her to speak. What she says in line 2 makes it clear that she would like this occasion, the final session of her analysis, to be handled as normally as possible. She knows full well, of course, that this is not a normal session, but she would like to treat it as though it were. But she also knows that the analyst expects her to view this as a special session. What to do? Ah, she had a dream last night ... and conveniently, it was about ending analysis (line 14).

Passage 3 is part of the dream dialogue about the first dream, where the scene changes to a cemetery, and where elderly ladies and shoehorns play a central role. After line 6 Amalie then tells a second dream.

### Passage 3

- 1 P: I can only say again that your wife =  
 2 AT: h=hm  
 3 P: got into the shoe very well. (--) and I could only do it with the aid of a shoe horn. (1) (moans)  
 4 AT: It was also a question of how much help you got here and (1.5) uhm  
 5 P: You know I still wanted to tell you quick what I [dreamed] last night  
 6 AT: [h=hm]  
*(P: among many other things. When it, it, I have a kind of intercom, a kind of door opener, with a telephone, and it rang and somebody said, 'I just want to find out from you what interpretation is, or how*

<sup>4</sup> (\*number) is a code for the name of a person

*you interpret.' And then I said ,are you an academic,' and then the voice said yes and then I pushed the button, and then it was not a woman who came up the stairs as I had expected, from her voice, but a whole family, a whole lot of people, men, women, most of them older, and, and that, they said we are all anthroposophists and downstairs below me, that was at home in my apartment in the dream, a door opened quickly and \*239 handed out a book ad said here's everything you want to know about interpretation. And then as they stood at my door they said so we are anthroposophists. And then there was a big piano in my apartment and it was suddenly a complete: mess it was horrible! There was a dress lying on the glass table, and underpants on the couch. And it was terrible and in the dream I was thinking but I tidied up when \*197 came, and, it was, then, I didn't think it was so terribly tragic then and I just stuffed everything under the couch cushion. And I tried to tidy up a little. And then we talked about, hermeneutics, or, somebody suddenly went to the piano and I don't know what else. In any case it didn't look like guests in my apartment. And that was astonishing. Yesterday evening a talked to a woman acquaintance on the telephone and she told she had been invited somewhere and there it was astonishing there. The place stank and stank of cats and everything was strewn around, pants, a man's athletic pants on the table and, it was terrible she said. A dirty apartment. That conversation was yesterday evening and. That's it looked in my apartment like it never looks. And recently at the X-ray I met a very interesting man who was an anthroposophist, from \*955. (groans) and up the stairs.))*

- 7 P: But I believe you wanted to say something else (2.0) how much help I got do you want to know that  
 8 in grams and decimal points? I can't give you [an answer].  
 9 AT: [h=hm] no and not that I wanted to know that and it was (.) your thought. and it was (.) a thought  
 10 about the (.) shoehorn (.) and on help.  
 11 P: yes (h.) (5.0)

In line 4 the analyst, starting out from the first dream, addresses something that has been in the air since the last session: what did the analysand actually receive here in therapy; what does she take with her when the final session is over? Perhaps the analyst would like to hear his patient say with gratitude that the treatment had helped her a lot, the therapist had done a good job, and that parting was difficult for her. And how does Amalie react to this remark? She does not utter one syllable in response to that request (line 5) and instead tells the analyst another dream. In line 5 (I still wanted to tell you quick) it becomes clear that she has no intention of devoting full and detailed attention to what happened in the dream or to invite the analyst to join her in examining the last dream carefully. The function here is very similar to the function of her telling of the first dream. Here again the focus is on handling a communicative task, a task that Amalie solves by sharing a dream. It is interesting that with this the topic is not over and done with. Line 7 refers directly back to the conversation prior to her telling the dream (line 4). Amalie's comment unmasks the suspected expectations of her analyst. The analyst states neutrally in line 4: It was

also a question of how much help you got here. In Amalie's rephrasing she stresses that it is the analyst who much desires to know this. Using an extremely sarcastic metaphor, she lets him know what she thinks of this request. She depicts the analyst as a bookkeeper who seeks to measure the treatment success in precise quantities – in numbers, grams, and decimal points. By portraying the whole undertaking as absurd, she has done with the topic surely and finally.

## **Results**

In session 517 Amalie does not tell the two dreams so that she can talk about an important concern, which had been the case in session 7. Instead, here she shares dreams so that she does *not* have to talk about something: she thus can initially avoid the topic of saying goodbye to the analyst and avoid an evaluative look back at her therapy. But it is interesting that telling the dream does not mean that these topics are done. The beginning sequence of the first dream deals explicitly with the current conversation context – namely, how do you end analysis. In the second instance of dream telling, after recounting the dream, Amalie immediately and explicitly takes up the question that the therapist had asked before the dream, although her comment does not match the preferred expectation. In both instances the conversation gets back to the original topic via the detour of a dream.

It was found that Amalie used this very particular pattern often. The undisguised sexual dream in session 7, which is taken as a given and about which one cannot do anything, serves as a welcome opportunity to be able to speak at all about the shameful topic of sexuality, which is connected with a lot of insecurity (session 7). And when it is time to say goodbye to the therapist and there is the question about how this is to be best handled, and when the analyst even wants to know what he has given the patient, it is extremely advantageous to have one or two dreams that you can tell, so as to get through the delicate and difficult farewell ceremony more easily (session 517).

What is happening here, actually? What does this very specific use of dreams mean?

## **Dream telling as a triangulating mode of communication**

Introducing a dream into the conversation establishes a triadic form of communication out of a dyadic one. This is equivalent to a form of regulation of relations between analyst and analysand. This function is found so consistently in Amalie's therapy, from the start of treatment to the end, that it can be assessed as very important. I call it the triangulating function of sharing dreams.



Stated very simply and independently of dream telling, the meaning of triangulation is as follows: in a triangle, the relationship between two points is regulated by reference to the third point (Grieser, 2003).

In many cases Amalie introduces a dream narrative to modulate and regulate her direct relationship to the analyst via the triangulating factor of the dream. This is not only distancing herself from the here and now, but it is also often a successful achievement of a compromise, in that the dream continues to take up the topic of the analytical relationship but does so in the dream mode and thus in the mode that is more distanced and entails less responsibility. A look at several passages reveals a clear interactive pattern that shows how the temporary distancing of herself from the here and now of the analytic relationship via the detour of the dream accomplishes a new approach towards being able to talk about delicate, shameful, or unpleasant things.<sup>5</sup>

### **Dream telling in the service of wish fulfilment**

Whereas this triangulating function plays a constant central role in Amalie's analysis from the start to the end of treatment, another interesting phenomenon in handling dreams in the sessions develops, starting at approximately the middle of her analysis. More and more, Amalie tells not only her own dreams but also other people's dreams, such as her boyfriend's or her mother's. But not only that – she also interprets these dreams in the presence of her analyst. She thus performs dream interpretations of other people's dreams. And she apparently expects that the analyst will take a position on her interpretations.

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<sup>5</sup> In the symposium at the Sandler Conference in Frankfurt, a member of the audience objected that the dream as a triangulating element was not comprehensible, because it was clearly something produced by the patient and not any third party thing. This comment starts out from a metapsychological understanding of the dream and not from the experience of the patient and the way that she uses the dream in the sessions. Although analysands know intellectually that no one other than themselves produces their dreams, this personal mental product, the dream, feels alien enough for them to see it and treat it as something coming from outside. The fact that strange and outlandish dreams *do* have something to do with the dreamer, and what that is exactly, is after all the very process that must be accomplished and worked out in psychoanalytic dream sessions but that is not given per se and assumed from the start.

In the second half of her analytic treatment, Amalie involves her analyst more and more in using the dream sessions as a kind of further education course in dream interpretation. This is shown on the basis of three guiding principles in working with dreams:

1. Amalie's aim is not interpretation of the contents of her dreams in a cooperative dialogue; instead, she is interested in the act of interpreting dreams itself.
2. Her goal is to learn and master the art of dream interpretation, an art to which she ascribes a phallic quality.
3. The way to her goal is via participation in the analyst's art of interpretation, which she perceives as phallic (for a detailed derivation of this function, see Mathys, 2010).

This development, described only briefly here, reaches its logical conclusion in the last analytic session, session 517. The manifest dream story and its starting point are about no less than the high point of Amalie's interpretation abilities: people come to her to learn, from her, what interpretation is and how it is done.

The positioning of this dream narrative in the last session of her therapy is decisive. Immediately before Amalie tells the dream, the analyst posed the question as to what help she had received from her analysis. This is followed by Amalie telling her dream about "interpretation for anthroposophists". Based on this sequence, the analyst's question about what help she had received in the analysis can now be answered conclusively from Amalie's point of view: in the analysis she learned what interpretation is. Amalie positions herself as a self-appointed, successful interpreter (of dreams), who does not need anything more and who distances herself from any form of gratitude for what she has received. In her dream, people who want something from her make a pilgrimage to her door, and she gives them something – namely, instructions on interpretation. With this literally dreamlike triumph, she need not fear to part from her analyst, and at the end of the session – that is, at the end of her therapy – she can say to him, "I have to go now."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Here the focus is not on what the latent content of the dream is. What is crucial is how Amalie uses it. Here she of course starts out from the manifest form of the dream.

**Conclusion: the telling of dreams has a multitude of communicative functions**

To the practising dream analyst, I propose a differentiated attitude of reception. The analyst must find out what a patient's dream telling is all about. A kind of triage is necessary.

If on the part of the analysand there is a recognisable desire for interpretation that finds expression in a wish to learn something about the content of a dream together with the analyst, then work on the content of the dream stands in the foreground. This is the classical work of dream analysis, for which a wide range of different approaches exist.

But it is possible, as in most of the cases of dream telling by Amalie X, that a dream is being "deployed" by the analysand mainly for its communicative potential. The analyst's task is then to find out what function the sharing of the dream has. Communicative-functional dream analysis thus examines this question: what is the analysand telling me, when he or she shares with me precisely this dream at precisely this point in time?

The communicative functions can be various:

- The dream can be told primarily for purposes of containment, that is, as a way to move indigestible material to the outside. According to Deserno (2007), we can assume that in psychoanalysis the container-contained model is used the most frequently, and used "mono-conceptually", meaning without any connection to other approaches (see, for example, Weiss, 2002).
- A dream can be very illustrative of the presence of a transference tendency (Deserno, 1992; Ermann, 1998).
- Dreams can be shared with the analyst in the service of resistance, of course (Freud, 1900; Moser, 2003).
- It is a very interesting phenomenon, if for the dream dialogue between analysand and analyst particular patterns of interaction can be discovered, as was the case in the example presented here. Through this and with the aid of the psychoanalytical concept of enactment, it was shown that dreams can be told in the service of wish fulfilment. In the present case, the wish for phallic features was phrased in the form of competency in dream interpretation.
- Finally, sharing a dream can constitute an attempt at triangulation, an opportunity so to speak to use the dream to say something in a roundabout way (Mertens, 2005/2006).

For Amalie X, this latter function is central and might be expressed as follows: "I refer to a third instance so as to be able to speak about a topic at all that I cannot bring up in the

direct, dyadic constellation. I can only put forward the topic by referring to something that I myself produced but that now, at the moment of telling it, seems foreign to me (which is most welcome) and where I can for now leave open the issue of whether I see this as my own personal issue or view it with distance as alien to me.”

In this regard, the telling of dreams serves as a playful form of communication with a great degree of freedom for analysands to present topics that they cannot otherwise bring up in the same way or at all – and is thus also a possible way to expand the dyadic form of the analytic relationship to a triad and to regulate it.

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