A Cognitive Theory of Dreams

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In the final years of the nineteenth century, Freud formulated a theory of the dream which has proved exceedingly useful to the clinical practitioner and to a lesser extent to the personality theorist for verifying propositions derived from dynamic theories of personality. Freud was very proud of his first original and independent achievement in psychological theorizing, so much so that he appears to have been reluctant to alter it as he did so many other discoveries of these early years.

In a singularly mistitled lecture Revision of the Theory of Dreams published in 1933, Freud revises his original theory to the extent of adding the italicized word to the fundamental proposition, "the dream is an attempted wish-fulfillment." In this same essay, Freud observes that "the analysts behave as though they had nothing more to say about the dream, as though the whole subject of dream-theory was finished and done with." Freud must have had himself in mind as well as his colleagues when he made this observation for in his valedictory he abides by his original formulation, despite the fact that the psychoanalytic theory of the person had made great strides in the intervening 40 years. Probably the most noteworthy advances made by Freud in his later years were a revised theory of anxiety, a new theory of motivation, and the development of a far reaching ego theory. Of these three, ego theory has had the greatest impact upon current psychoanalytic theorizing.

What we should like to do in this paper is to bring dream theory within the context of ego psychology by defending the proposition that dreaming is a cognitive process. Before addressing ourselves to this theisis, let us define a dream. A dream is a succession of images, predominantly visual in quality, which are experienced during sleep. A dream commonly has one or more scenes, several characters in addition to the dreamer, and a sequence of actions and interactions usually involving the dreamer. It resembles a motion picture or dramatic production in which the dreamer is a participant-observer. Although a dream is an hallucination, the dreamer experiences it as he does any perceptual phenomenon. Scenes, people, objects, and actions are experienced as though they were impressing themselves on the senses from the external world. The world of dreams, it goes without saying, is a world of pure projection.

The principal thesis of this paper is that these images of a dream are the embodiment of thoughts. They are a medium by which a psychological process, cognition, is transformed into a form that can be perceived. Although images are the only means by which ideas find sensible expression in dreams, other media such as words, numbers, gestures, and pictures are employed in waking life for making one's thoughts known. When thought is made perceptible, it is said to be communicated. Unlike the communications of waking life, which may have an audience of millions, the audience of a dream
consists of only one person, the dreamer himself. A dream is a highly private showing of the dreamer's thoughts.

In order to develop the thesis of this paper, it is necessary to say a few words about thinking. Thinking is a process of conceiving. The end-product of this process is a conception (idea). A conception is an item of knowledge, a formulation of experience which has meaning for a person. It is derived ultimately from experience but it is not dependent for its existence at any given moment upon the reception of sensory impressions from the external world or from one's body. In other words, conceiving is an autonomous process that requires no direct sensory data. It may be contrasted with perceiving, a process which is dependent upon direct stimulation of the senses. One perceives a wintry landscape when one looks out at a scene as it exists in the world and incorporates through the eyes a pattern of light waves which is the raw material for the formation of a perception.[1] One has a conception of winter when one thinks of it as being a time of cold weather, snow, short days, icy streets, and bare trees. One can conceive of winter at any time of the year, but one can only perceive winter during the winter. Although not a great deal is known about the process of conceiving, we are fairly well acquainted with its products, i.e., conceptions or ideas, since they are rendered perceptible in a variety of forms including dreams. An artist expresses his conceptions in visual terms, while writers and speakers use words to make their ideas public. Mathematicians employ numbers and symbols for conveying their thoughts, and musicians express themselves in patterns of tone, rhythm, intensity, and quality. A dancer embody her ideas in physical movement, a sculptor in three dimensional forms, and an architect in buildings. The formulation and communication of ideas are the essence of all creative endeavors.

We return now to dreaming and dreams. If dreaming is defined as thinking that occurs during sleep, and if thinking consists essentially of generating ideas, then dreaming is also a process of conceiving and the resulting dream images may be viewed as the embodiment of conceptions. That which is invisible, namely a conception, becomes visible when it is transformed into a dream image. The images of a dream are pictures of conceptions. A dream is a work of art which requires of the dreamer no particular talent, special training, or technical competence. Dreaming is a creative enterprise in which all may and most do participate.

If dreaming consists of transforming conceptions into images, then dream interpretation reverses this process; images are translated into their referent ideas. How is this translation accomplished? It is accomplished by drawing inferences from material in the dream text, and by checking these inferences against other dreams of the person or against other information about the person. Although we cannot describe the methods of interpreting dreams within the limits of this paper, some general remarks regarding dream interpretation may be made here. To interpret a dream means, according to the theory presented in this paper, to discover the conceptions or conceptual systems of the dreamer, these conceptions may be inferred from a number of lines of evidence, some of which are as follows: (a) the actions and qualities of the dreamer in the dream, i.e., the role or roles played by the dreamer, (b) the kind of characters introduced in the dream, (c) the actions and qualities assigned to them, (d) the nature of the interactions between the dreamer and these characters, and between the characters themselves, (e) the setting or dream scene (f) transitions within the dream, and (g) the outcome of the dream. The final objective of dream interpretation is not to understand the dream but rather to understand the dreamer.

What kinds of conceptions are found in dreams? One is tempted to reply all kinds but this is not correct since many ideas seem to be excluded from dreams. Dreams are relatively silent regarding political and economic questions; they have little or nothing to say about current events in the world of affairs. I was collecting dreams daily from students during the last days of the war with Japan when the first atomic
A bomb was exploded, yet this catastrophe did not register in a single dream. Presidential elections, declarations of war, the diplomatic struggles of great powers, major athletic contests, local happenings that make the headlines, all are pretty largely ignored in dreams. A count of characters in a large sample of dreams reveals that the number of prominent people appearing in dreams is very small. Nor are intellectual, scientific, cultural and professional topics or the affairs of finance, business, and industry the subject matter of dreams.

What then is left? The whole world of the personal, the intimate, the emotional, and the conflictful remain. These are the ideas which register in dreams. For the sake of discussion, we shall present a classification of some common conceptions found in dreams.

(a) Conceptions of Self.

A dream is a mirror that reflects the self-conceptions of the dreamer. Ideas of self are revealed by the repertoire of parts taken by the dreamer in a series of dreams. The repertoire may consist of a few roles, or it may be extensive and varied. In one dream series, for example, the dreamer is pictured as a great general, a rich and influential man, and an important steel manufacturer. In each case, however, he loses his power by being disabled in vigorous combat with a superior force. Here we see that a self-conception of strength and potency cannot be maintained. A typical dream of strength turning into weakness is the following one:

"I was sitting knee deep in quarters in my room. People kept rushing into my room and stealing handfuls of money. I chased after them, grasping them violently and retrieving my money. But after a while so many people kept grabbing my money at once that I couldn't chase them all so I just sat there and cried."

This young man's conceptions of himself are disjunctive; he is both strong and weak, with weakness winning out over strength.

Perhaps no other medium gives us a more candid picture of what a person thinks about himself than do dreams. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote: "A skillful man reads his dreams for his self-knowledge."

(b) Conceptions of Other People.

Dreams reveal what the dreamer thinks about his mother and father, his brothers and sisters, his spouse and children, and diverse other classes of people. These conceptions, like those of self, are embodied in the roles played by the various characters. If the dreamer conceives of his father as a stern demanding, autocratic person, the father is assigned a part that is in keeping with this conception. If he thinks of his mother as a nurturant person, she will perform some service in the dream to depict her nurturance. Young men commonly dream about being attacked by other men, thereby displaying a conception of enmity that exists in males for other males. Less commonly young men are friendly with other men. Women also conceive of men as attackers but their dreams reveal many other conceptions. In a single dream series, multiple conceptions of the same person or class of persons are the rule rather than the exception, which suggests that the average person has a network of conceptions regarding his mother, father, siblings, and various other individuals and classes with whom he interacts during waking life. These ideational or cognitive networks are conceptual systems, and it is one of the aims of dream analysis to delineate these conceptual systems.
(c) Conceptions of the World.

By the world is meant the totality of the environment, that which is not-self. In dreams as in poetic fancy the world may be invested with animistic qualities which reflect the dreamer’s conceptions of the world. It may be viewed as benign, hostile, turbulent, sorrowful, lonely, or degraded depending upon the mood of the dreamer. These world-conceptions are often conveyed by the character of the dream setting. If the dreamer feels that the world presents a cold, bleak face, he may materialize this conception in the form of a cold climate and a bleak, rocky setting. A dreamer who feels that his world is one of turbulence and agitation, may dream of thunderstorms, raging seas, battles, milling Crowds, and traffic jams. A feeling that the world is benign and peaceful can be scenically represented in dreams by serene natural settings.

(d) Conceptions of Impulses, Prohibitions, and Penalties.

Since dreams are filled with impulse gratification, in particular those of sex and aggression, it is not surprising that Freud came to the conclusion that wish-fulfillment is the essence of dreams, and that the objective of dream analysis is the discovery of the wish which is fulfilled. It is hardly necessary, however, to consult dreams in order to learn that man seeks gratification of his urges. What dreams can tell us more profitably is how the dreamer conceives of his impulses, for it is these conceptions, not the impulses directly, that ordinarily elicit specific ways of behaving. Most people experience a sex drive, but they differ in respect to their conceptions of the sex drive. The sex impulse may be regarded variously as wicked, as unclean, as a mechanical pressure needing periodic release, as a natural force serving reproduction, as a way of expressing love and tenderness, or as a primitive and uncontrollable form of energy against which one wages a losing battle. Among our collection of nocturnal emission dreams, these and many other conceptions of this biological force appear. The following dream reveals a purely mechanical conception of sex.

I got out of bed and went into the bathroom and attempted to turn on the water faucet. I turned and turned but no water came out. I then decided to call a plumber. Soon afterwards the door opened and an individual dressed in coveralls approached me. Upon closer examination I discovered the plumber was a female. I scoffed at the idea of a lady plumber, but unruffled she went to the basin, turned the faucet, and water immediately flowed. An emission occurred.

Dreams also show the person’s conceptions of the obstacles that stand in the way of the gratification of his impulses. These obstacles are often prohibitions emanating from his conscience and may be represented in dreams by such obstacles as walls, curbs, and locked doors, by acts of restraint such as putting on the brakes of a car, or by the appearance of authority figures who interrupt the dreamer’s pleasure. If an impulse is gratified, the dreamer may express his conception of the punishment that will be visited upon him for his transgression. He may be punished directly by another person, or he may be the victim of misfortune. In any event, the kinds of obstacles and the kinds of penalties which appear in dreams are interpreted in order to throw light upon the nature of the conceptual system which is called the superego. This conceptual system which is assumed to be detached from the ego contains the moral ideology of the person.

(e) Conceptions of Problems and Conflicts.

Perhaps the most important information provided by dreams is the way in which they illuminate the basic predicaments of a person as that person sees them. Dreams give one an inside view of the person's problems, a personal formulation that is not so likely to be as distorted or as superficial as are the reports
made in waking life. Since it is the way in which a person conceives of his conflicts that determines his behavior, the inside view is a prerequisite for clear understanding of human conduct. . . . the delineation of a person's conflicts may be made by analyzing a dream series.

Of what value is it to know the conceptions of a person as expressed in his dreams? How does it help the psychologist to understand the person and thereby to predict and control his behavior? Of one thing we can be quite certain, namely that these conceptions are not dependable guides to objective reality; what one conceives to be true and what is actually true do not invariably coincide. A person may conceive of his father as a stem, autocratic unreasonable person, when, in fact, his father does not possess these characteristics in the eyes of impartial observers. Dreams should not be read for the purpose of constructing a picture of objective reality. [2]

Our thesis is that dreams are one dependable source of information regarding subjective reality, and that knowledge of subjective reality is useful precisely because it does have effects in the conduct of a person. If a boy sees his father as an autocratic authority, he will react toward his father as though he really is that way. In other words, these personal cognitions are the real antecedents of behavior.

Parenthetically, we would like to observe that psychology may have been hampered in its development because it has tended to ignore subjective cognitions in favor of objective stimulus variables. Stimulus conditions are varied and the effects in behavior are noted, often without taking into consideration that the person's conception of the stimulus may be the decisive factor. People may react differently to the same stimulus because they have different conceptions of the stimulus or they may react in the same way to different stimuli because they have similar conceptions. This is a truism whose truth is too often forgotten in psychological experiments, although there are indications that the pendulum is swinging back in the direction of cognition variables.

Although this is not the place to develop fully our theory of conceptual systems, it is not inappropriate to mention briefly our view that the conceptions of a person are organized into interconnected networks. One network may consist of the conceptions that a person has of his family, and this network in turn may be interconnected with a network of ideas about government, or religion, or education. A recent study has demonstrated in a convincing manner how ideas about minority groups are intimately related with ideas about family, religion, government, and economics. It is the task of psychology, as we see it, to explore these conceptual systems or personal ideologies, to show how they are interrelated, to learn how they are developed, to demonstrate how they control and regulate conduct, and to discover how they may be changed. In order to do all of these things, it is necessary to devise methods of finding out what a person's conceptions are. Attitude-opinion questionnaire methods have reached a high level of development and are employed on a large scale to determine people's beliefs about everything under the sun. The value of such methods, although great, is nonetheless limited by several factors inherent in the methods. The respondent may not answer a question either because he does not want to or because he does not know the answer, or he may answer it untruthfully either intentionally or unintentionally. Moreover, the wording of the question is an important variable. At best, questionnaires get at the conscious and verbalizable conceptions of a person.

If one assumes, as the writer does, that the contents of personal ideologies are pretty largely unconscious or preconscious, then methods have to be used which will reveal these unconscious conceptions. Projective methods, especially of the picture-story type, lend themselves to the exploration of conceptual systems, although they have not been employed to any great extent for this purpose. Picture-story tests do have one drawback, however, and that is that the person's conceptions may not be fully laid bare by
the collection of pictures used. Since the material obtained will be a function of the kind of pictures shown to the person, it is possible that those conceptions which are of greatest significance for him may not be tapped. This limitation does not apply to dreams. The dreamer makes his own pictures of those conceptions that are of greatest importance to him currently. Over a period of time, his dreams will depict the essential features of his conceptual systems. Moreover, dreams tap the unconscious and bring to the surface those prototypic conceptions around which conceptual systems are formed. It is our view that prototypic conceptions have their origin in early life and that they are more likely to express themselves in dreams than through any other medium. For these reasons, we feel that dreams constitute the best material for studying the conceptual systems of a person and that such knowledge is absolutely essential if we are to understand why people behave as they do.

We shall conclude by demonstrating how the views presented in this paper may be utilized in analyzing a dream. The following dream was reported by a young man.

I was at the blackboard in a school room doing a trig problem but I was having trouble with it because I could not remember the valence of nitrogen. I was about to give up on it when a girl came up to me and asked if I would like to dance. The music was good but very erratic, being very fast one instant and very slow the next; however, we were always exactly in step. She was an excellent dancer. When the music stopped we were both in the school shower but we still had our clothes on. I wanted to take hers off and make love to her but I had never done anything like that before so we just laughed and splashed water.

Then I was outside the school. It was night and lights shone in all the windows silhouetting a wild orgy of a party. I felt very lonely. I wanted to go inside but something seemed to hold me back. I heard chimes ringing in the church.

In the opening scene, we see the dreamer hard at work on a mathematical problem with which he is having difficulty. His self-conception is that of an industrious student engaged in a purely intellectual task for which he does not have the requisite knowledge. A girl appears and invites him to dance; that is, he conceives of the girl as a temptress and of himself as her victim. At her bidding, he leaves the hardships of intellectual activity for the pleasures of sensuality. Their sensuality stops short of complete fulfillment because he cannot conceive of himself as consummating the sexual act. The scene changes in line with a new conception. The dreamer now sees himself as a lonely outsider looking in on a wild orgy. He would like to go in, but he is held back by an unidentified force. The church bells, embodying as they do ideas of virtue and morality, suggest that the unknown force is his own conception of moral conduct.

This dream, then, reveals two opposing conceptual systems, one which contains the young man's conception of himself as a moral, industrious, and intellectual person, the other which contains his conception of himself as a sensual being. These disjunctive conceptions tend to inhibit one another. He cannot maintain a consistent conception of himself as being either moral or sensual. When he is doing the "right" thing, he is lured away by sexuality; when he is doing the "wrong" thing, he is pulled away by morality. A self-conception of inadequacy for either role is portrayed by his inability to solve the intellectual task or to fulfill his sexual wish. In this dream we see that it is not the sex drive per se that is of significance, but rather his conception of it as being forbidden to him.

Other dreams collected from this young man help to fill out the contents of his conceptual systems. In one dream, he does consummate the sex act, but only because the girl actively seduces him. This
suggests that his conception of morality can be subordinated when he sees himself as the victim of external forces. Even in this dream, however, the dreamer feels ashamed because he is so easily excited. His personal ideology regarding women is an interesting yet not uncommon one. Women are of two types: aggressively sexual women who seduce men and pure women who are to be loved in a respectful manner but with whom sexual relations are forbidden prior to marriage.

We have spoken of the disjunctive nature of the dreamer's moral and immoral self-conceptions. In one dream he makes a partial fusion of these opposed views.

I was studying for a test with my girl. We were lying on the bed in her room reviewing our notes and asking each other questions about them. As each topic would come up, instead of discussing the text, I would demonstrate a different point in making love to her. Although each type of love making seemed different, it never got beyond the kissing stage.

Work and sex are integrated, although the sex impulse is kept within bounds. The girl in the dream is one of the "nice" girls in the dreamer's life toward whom he would not be likely to have unrestrained sexual feelings.

**Concluding Statement**

The argument presented in this paper consists of the following assertions:

1. Dreaming is a cognitive activity, and a dream is a pictorial representation of the dreamer's conceptions.

2. Dream interpretation consists of discovering the conceptions that lie behind the dream images.

3. Conceptions represented in dreams usually fall into one of the following classes: (a) self-conceptions, (b) conceptions of other people, (c) conceptions of the world, (d) conceptions of impulses, prohibitions, and penalties, and (e) conceptions of conflicts.

4. Conceptions are organized into conceptual systems, and these systems are the antecedents of behavior.

5. Dreams provide excellent material for the analysis of conceptual systems since they portray unconscious and prototypic conceptions.

6. The theory presented in this paper represents an extension of ego psychology to include dreaming as a function of the ego.