

Psychoanalytic Approach to Dream Interpretation

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The world of psychoanalytic therapy would not exist today if it was not for its founder Sigmund Freud, a physicist who studied neurophysiology. He was an Austrian who developed a method for treating psychopathology through conversation between a patient and a therapist. His goal was to discover the hidden world or the unconscious mind. Freud introduced his theory of the unconscious in his book titled “The Interpretation of Dreams” published in 1899. He developed the theory of the unconscious and divides the mind into three psychic structures known today as the id, ego, and super ego. He also developed the therapeutic techniques and concepts that are still implemented in therapy today, such as the use of free association, free-floating attention and transference. He was also popular for his interest in how sexuality affects one’s mind in particular how the sex drive can affect the death drive. In regards to this paper, we are particularly interested in his contributions to dream interpretations towards uncovering the unconscious mind.

Psychoanalysis was born in the city of Vienna, and Freud studied in the University of Vienna. This city of Vienna was once known as “die alte kaiserstadt” which meant the old imperial city. It was after the Prussians defeated France in 1870 that Berlin would replace Vienna as the center of the German-speaking world. After this defeat, Vienna would turn to denial as a kind of defense, and would focus more on mental illness than the world itself: “External reality is discounted and all mental energy is turned inward” only the inner life of the individual is allowed to matter. Vienna was one of the first city who was interested in the study of mental illness, but Freud is given credit as the founder of psychotherapy which is a form of treatment that aims to understand a patient’s unconscious, a concept originated by Freud who aimed to create a form a treatment that involves talking with a trained professional, hence the therapist

(Bettleheim, 1990). This paper will focus on Freud's psychoanalytic technique and how it relates to the unlocking of the unconscious mind through the interpretation of dreams.

Dreams according to Freud are extremely important when it comes to exploring the unconscious mind. He was not the only contributor to the field of psychology that was interested in dreams. Carl Rogers was reputed to record his own dreams. He stated that "While dreaming, the whole organism is undergoing a process of self-healing, similar to therapy". Rogers believed the awareness of a dream is one aspect of a fully functioning person. Carl Jung believed that dreams compensate for one-sided feelings borne in consciousness. Freud however believed that dreams were means through which one's unconscious wishes are expressed. He states that dreams were a way the unconscious processed unsatisfied wishes.

Koch (2012) believed that a dream is a process of nightly "self-healing, or nightly "psychological adjustment". She believed that most people remember their dreams in a time of crisis. For example people who are undergoing a divorce or loss of a loved one are more likely to remember their dream. Koch focused more on a person-centered approach to dreams, and states that we should focus more on what goes on in the clients mind and not solely on the therapist's interpretation. She elaborates on the concept of lucid dreaming which is described as "when the dreamer knows she is dreaming while dreaming and can influence her dreaming process in a more active way". She believes lucid dreaming to be an issue that may affect the relationship between the dream experience and the consciousness. She believes a dream is a congruent expression of the dreamer's own experience and symbolization. Sharing a dream within a therapeutic setting allows the dream to become a narrative, and allows a further shift in meaning. She states that "dream

conversations” can be of considerable significance to the therapeutic process and aid in each individual’s quest for meaning and self-understanding as well as providing insight into the patient’s inner world (Koch, 2012). Koch’s research has shown that people tend to experience dreams in a more intense way when dealing with life situations where persons are more prone to seek counseling or therapeutic help. There are different types of dreams that require the attention of therapy in particular, and these are: particularly vivid or salient dreams, troubling dreams, recurrent dreams, nightmares, or sleep terrors. We can use these dreams to increase our understanding of problems and make changes in to fix these problems. This will be discussed later in the paper when we focus on existential art therapy.

In 1899 Freud published his famous book titled “The Interpretation of Dreams”, where he introduces his theory of the unconscious in relation to dream interpretation and also discusses what will later develop into the theory of the Oedipus complex. “The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind” (Freud, 1900). Freud developed a theory that states that dreams are formed by two mental processes. The first is the unconscious forces that construct a wish that is expressed by the dream. The second process is the censorship that forcibly distorts the expression of the wish. He describes the latent content of a dream as the underlying meaning of the dream. Freud states that during sleep, the unconscious condenses, displaces, and forms representations of the dream content, the latent content of which is often unrecognizable to the individual upon waking. Freud believed that the goal of a dream is to be satisfied of a repressed wish, he therefore treated dreams like a language to be deciphered. Freud describes that to understand the meaning of a dream you have to explore both the manifest

content which is what the dream tells and the latent content which as previously mentioned is the concealed meaning of a dream (Freud, 1900).

Psychodynamic theory mainly focuses on treating the patient by exploring their unconscious mind. Cabaniss (2011) describes this as the as “understanding what lies beneath the surface”. Cabaniss emphasizes that in order for dreams to be understood there has to be a strong therapeutic alliance between client and patient. The patient needs to feel safe within the therapeutic setting. For this to happen, the art therapist should establish an appropriate therapeutic frame for the psychotherapy, to allow the therapist to “separate what goes on in the therapy from what goes on outside” (Cabaniss, 2011, p.73). Regarding the understanding of dreams, Cabaniss states “it’s a distortion to think that we ever know what a dream means, all we know is that dreams emerge from the unconscious mind and can thus help us learn about thoughts and feelings that are out of our awareness” (Cabanisset al., p. 259). To encourage the free association of the client about their dreams, Cabaniss suggest the use of techniques involving ambient listening, to begin reflecting an filtering and focusing on our listening. Cabaniss suggest that to better understand dreams one must focus on the following: What came before the report of the dream? What came after the report of the dream? At what point in the session was the dream reported? What words in the dream seem related to material surrounding the dream? As well as themes and concepts in the dream that seem related.

When it concern reflecting on dreams, Cabaniss (2011) describes three important concepts that help in the interpretation of dreams. These concepts are condensation, displacement and symbolization. Condensation is when two elements in the unconscious combine to work a single dream element. For example: I had a dream about a man, he

looked like my ex-boyfriend, but he also kind of looked like a photo of my dad in college. Condensation is when several images are presented by a single image. Displacement is when one element in the manifest dream stands for something in the latent dream. For example a man had a dream before an important medical test. When he reports the dream he said “I had a dream last night about being late for my exam”. It is thus something represented by something else. Symbolization is described as an element in the manifest dream that symbolizes something in the latent dream, such as a person, wish, thought or idea. It is the transformation of latent thoughts into visual elements. Dream-work is composed of these three operations. Dreams are also composed of day’s residue, which are memory traces left by the events and psychic processes of the waking state; they are used as raw material by the dream-work that serves the wishes of the dreamer (Cabaniss, 2011).

Dreams interpretation is greatly aided by art. Freud stated that “It is not without reason that we speak of the power of art as magic” (Freud, 1913). He believed that the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to the knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind. The dream is an unconscious signal and art therapy is also unconscious projection. If the client cannot build up the good quality relationship with the therapist, the client will not explore their unconscious dream by art therapy (Chu, 2014.) Art therapy therefore is incredibly useful in understanding the unconscious mind through dreams. Chu (2014) states that dream work applying in art therapy is helpful for emotion release, self-empowerment and self-acceptance and describes the art therapy process as having three roles: the role of the art therapist, the role of the client and the role of the artwork. The role of the therapist in this situation is to offer the client an environment to explore their dream status and art material without any words in the therapy process. The client has the role of using the art materials to touch the dream and then feel the flow of emotions and then

reframe the meaning of the dream. The artwork also has a role, it allows a visual form for the dream to facilitate therapeutic relationship (Chu, 2014).

With regards to the topic of dreams, there are several art therapy interventions that can be applied. The most popular of these interventions is existential art therapy. Moon (2007) describes existential art therapy as a journey of self-discovery that is shared between the client and art therapist. The goal of this form of art therapy is to search for meaning, which is aided by the art therapist's capacity to attend to the client. The ultimate goal is for the client to become an interpreter of their own dreams, and uses them to uncover a problem that needs to be fixed. Moon applies a metaphor to describe this type of art therapy intervention which he calls the "funnel metaphor". The metaphor compares this type of art intervention to a funnel, because at each step of the process the client will filter and distill the content of their dream until a summary of statements of existential concern is identified and behavioral course of action is defined. Moon describes the various steps of this intervention, which can be broken down into twelve steps.

This intervention is mostly a dialogue between client and therapist. It is a process that helps clarify major issues in the lives of the client and helps them develop specific plans of action to respond to these problems and understand the messages their dream images present. The first step of the intervention involves the the actual art making component which is the creation of the dream image. Once the dream image is completed the second step involves the client creating a written record known as the dream script. It is a basic explanation of what happens in the dream that is written down on paper. Step three is when the image is placed between the art therapist and the dreamer, and the dreamer reads his script out loud to the art therapist. Step four is similar to step three but this time the art therapist reads the dreamer's script out loud to the

dreamer. Step 5 is a very important step in the procedure, it involves identifying the horizons in the dream. Moon (2007) describes horizons of a dream as the major words and phrases in the dream script that hold a particular importance. In this step the art therapist asks the client to find and underline these words or phrases. The sixth step involves the amplification of the horizons. This is where the art therapist documents the client's free association on the horizon. Free association is very important in Freudian approach to psychoanalytic therapy and can be described as the mental process by which one word or image may spontaneously suggest another without any apparent connection. It is the expression of the content of consciousness without censorship as an aid in gaining access to unconscious processes. This technique is used in psychoanalysis as well as existential art therapy (Freud, 1900). The seventh step in the process is repeating the associations. The art therapist reads to the dreamer the notes that the dreamer recorded about their dream associations. Step eight involves clustering these horizons to find connections between them. Step nine involves the creation of existential statements of concern. The following step, is the summary of these statements of existential concern. The eleventh step is very important, it involves defining a course of action in response to the dream. The final step is committing to a course of action in response to the dream. In essence existential art therapy involves the dreamer filtering out his own free associations to the dream until he discovers the problem. In this type of art therapy intervention, the art therapist establishes a structure that serves strictly as a guide, recorder, and witness to the process, while the dreamer remains in control of each step of the process (Moon, 2007).

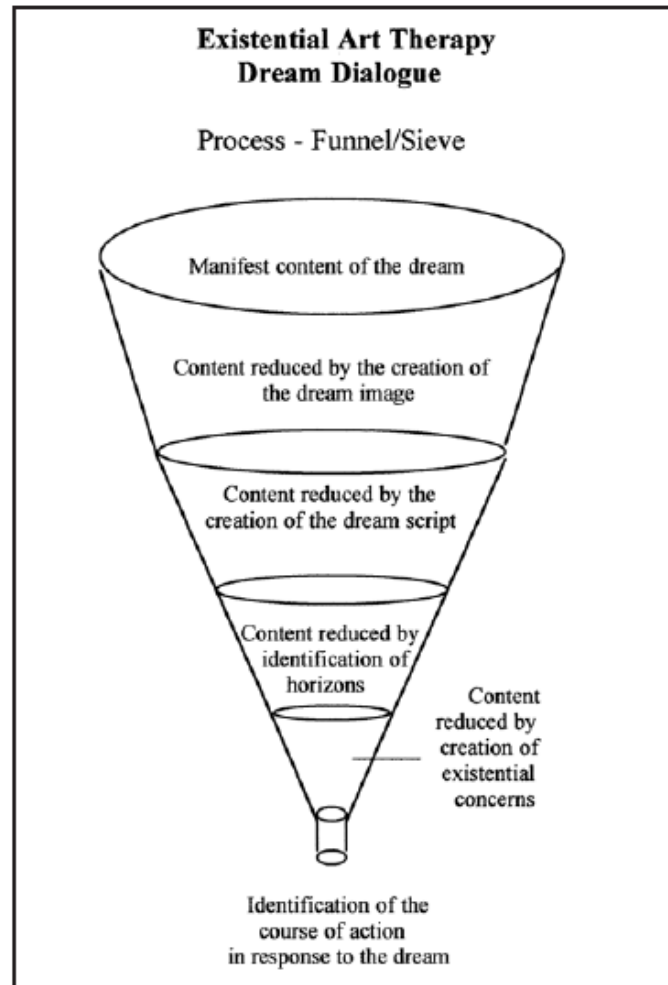


Figure 1: “The Funnel Metaphor for Existential Art Therapy”

According to Moon (2007) there are three premises that guide the existential art therapist’s interactions with the dreamer and their artwork, these are: the dream is what it is as there are no hidden meaning, the art therapist focuses on the manifest content of the images of the dream and client’s artwork and the art therapist refrains from making interpretive comments. Moon states that “through the process of interacting with and analyzing dream images, the existential art therapist attends to the dreamer by doing with, being open to, and honoring the dreamer’s struggles”. In existential art therapy, it is important that all interpretations of the

artwork be left to the client. The role of the art therapist is to refrain entirely from interpretation of the client's artwork or dream content, but rather guide the client to their own interpretations.

Of course this can be a struggle for an art therapist, for they may feel a desire to share their own interpretations with the clients. However it does benefit the clients to learn to form their own free associations and discover the problems on their own. When it concerns dreams, the major limitation is that only the dreamer can see their own dream, the therapist does not get to live the dream except online in the client's descriptive narrative of the dream. This type of art intervention would be ideal for any client who suffers from trauma, for dreams then to happen more to those who suffered traumatic life events. It could also be applied to a population suffering for anxiety and phobias.

For my own personal reflection about this type of art intervention I decided to do the activity myself playing both the role of the art therapist and the client. I decided to focus on a recurring nightmare I often have. I decided to be an artwork based on watercolor, because it's symbolic as watercolor is a very vivid and lose medium and dissolves easily like dreams do once you wake up. I took over thirty minutes to complete the artwork, as I try to consider that in an actual therapeutic session the client would have approximately that amount of time to create an artwork. The struggle for me was to think of a good idea for a dream, one that could potentially lead to an existential concern. I decided to pick one of my most recurrent nightmares which I had experienced over the years. In this nightmare I wake up and gradually lose all my teeth. So in the artwork I painted myself waking up and gradually having all my teeth fall off one by one.

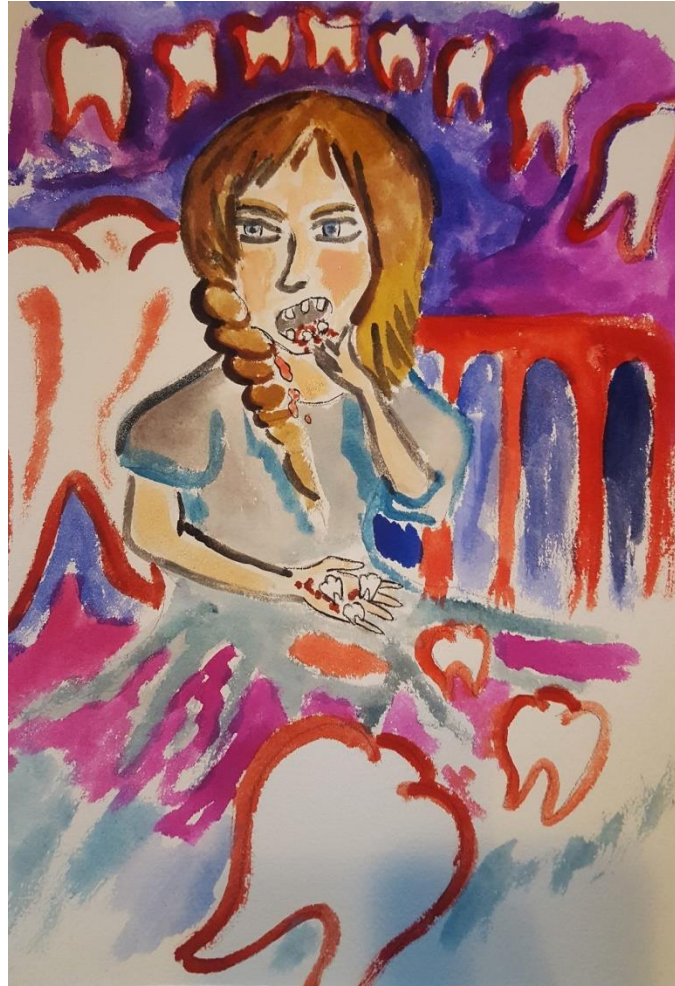


Figure 2: "My Artwork: losing all my teeth"

Once the artwork was completed I typed up a script about the dream. The following is my dream script: "In one of my most recurring dreams, I wake up or had recently woken up. I take my hand and touch my teeth lightly because I feel something strange. As I touch my teeth I can feel one of them is slightly loose, and then I touch my other teeth and feel more teeth are getting loose. Then the first tooth I touch gets very loose. Eventually more and more of my teeth get loose and I panic with the feeling I cannot control. Then my first tooth falls off entirely, and then the more I touch my teeth the more they all start to fall out. In

the dream I panic and feel a lot of stress due to the sense that I cannot control my teeth falling out or the urge to keep touching them.”

The challenge for me was not the artwork itself but following all the steps to discover my own dream horizons and existential problems. I distilled all my free associations until I discovered that most of my free associations were related to anxiety and a fear of losing something. I discovered that my own existential statement of concern was that I feared losing control of myself through failure and anxiety.

I found that applying this art therapy intervention to myself was very useful towards understanding its complexity and the many different steps I had to implement. The major challenge for me was not to make my own interpretations when I played role of art therapist. I discovered how free association is very important in the psychoanalytic procedure. On a personal level it helped me gain a better understanding of myself as well as a better understanding of this art therapy technique. I would definitely love to continue learning more on this subject to perhaps focus more on fears and phobias and implement this intervention more with victims of trauma. This type of population is more likely to dream more symbolic dreams and remember them, which makes them ideal for this type of intervention.

The topic of dream interpretation in understanding trauma and fears is a fascinating topic I would certainly love to explore deeper one day.

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