

Dream and families

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Abstract

At the sitting family or couple in principle after the dream every member associations to the dream. The final interpretation takes into account the collective work, rather it is itself the fruit of collective work. The dream interpretation considers the expression of the general shared, but must also respect diversity and unique individual defenses. In the subjectivity analytic space of couple and family interpretation accentuates its size research and building a sense of shared and open to the contribution of other family members that play in this sense, a co-therapeutic function. However, it shall also report to individual differences, the defenses of the individual than collective and transgenerational anxiety, defense mechanisms transpersonal and the use of the other. In any case, the communication session in a dream represents a point of processing to which the family group is reached and a symbolic language that has in turn stimulated further processing of the family.

Key-words: dream, family, narration

Theory, clinical practice and the understanding of dreams in the analytic setting changed deeply since the Traumdeutung was written, even if they still are the "royal road to the unconscious". For many analysts, belonging to different schools, dreams are no longer "the fulfillment of wishes". Bionian discoveries shed a completely different light on dreams and their use, making clear first of all that dreams cannot be compared to a "micropsychosis", as Freud said, but they rather "preserve personality from a virtually psychotic state" (Bion, 1962). In Bionian terms dreams are the first stage in the evolution of thought. In this sense they are generated only when an experience can begin to be represented. This fact is deeply related to another Bionian assumption.

In his posthumous book "Cogitations" (1992), Bion returns to his dream theories and delves deeper. Dreams are seen as mechanisms through which the Ego binds the sensory data from external experience with the conscious awareness associated to sensory impressions. The Ego organizes then according to internal relations and rapports, the flow of events and impressions, apparently unconnectable, in order to store them in memory. Dreams thus create a time and space order. According to Bion there is a domain of dreams where sensory impressions associated to the principle of reality and preverbal impressions associated to the pleasure principle flow, but none of these impressions can be modified or integrated, remembered or suppressed or made aware without the dream work, which becomes crucial for allowing the material coming from the external world to access personality. Freud had already

discussed dream work in a 1925 footnote (Freud, 1900) warning psychoanalysts who wanted to reduce dreams only to their latent content.

Dreams coming to the fore in the psychoanalytic scene show the existence of a dream space, which in turn shows the existence of private boundaries of the self, of an autonomous Ego capable of performing symbolic work and give up concrete narcissistic satisfaction which can be obtained by acting in reality. This space, intended as a closed area which contains the dream material and process, is progressively defined in time and is a "conquest of the individual developmental process facilitated by care and support provided by the environment" (Kahn, 1974).

The space of dreams mentioned above, the domain of dreams seen as the flow of sensory impressions coming from the internal and external world, the work of dreams, seen as the process of elaboration and transformation into visual imagery – a metaphorization of images, we could say – are the three relevant elements where a disorder or dysfunction can take place. All these three elements, space, domain and work, are interrelated. The dream work, for example, can be a problem in itself due to the organization of a specific personality, but can also be challenged by a lot of impressions, memories, verbal and preverbal sensations which overcharge the subject's ability.

The Bionian conceptualization of the dream-thought allowed to understand phenomena ranging from dream to hallucinations going through what Malzer (1948) and, in Italy, Bezoari and Ferro, called dream flashes during wakefulness. It was understood that the inability to dream amounts to somatizing or acting a dream in reality.

It was also seen that there can be an abuse of dreams, that beside "good" dreams there are also "evacuative" dreams (Segal) or dreams that prevent development or birth of transformational processes in the mind. There can thus be an acting of the dream and in the dream.

Who does the dreamer's dream belong to?

On the background of this discussion remains the central issue of how much should the context of the dream presentation be considered in the understanding of the dream. In other words, we should ask whether, besides being an expression of individual functioning, the dream also shows aspects of couple dynamics in the couple setting or family dynamics in the family setting.

Born in the dreamer's mind, in his "private" room, dreams transcend the individual dimension because they set up the scenario and narrative plot where the dreamer's emotional dynamics and significant relations are expressed and also because through remembering and telling the dream opens up to the public dimension of speech and interpretation.

But this is not the only reason why many psychoanalysts related dreaming and the narrative of dreams with the relation and interaction with others. Anzieu (1975), for example, presents an analogy between groups and dreams in the case of all groups,

including natural groups like families. Kaës, however, provides a particularly brilliant contribution when illustrating the five functions of dreams in a group, after having mentioned the importance of subjective elaboration through dreams of daily residues (similar to what Bion said), he shows the container and content function of these representations that find a dramatization in dreams. Referring it to the issue of transference, Kaës describes the function and specific location of the dreamer in group topics, dynamics and economy. The dreamer is in a way the speaker of the group.

Meltzer described dreaming as a generator of sense and Ricoeur says that "sense is a taste felt by a conscience when it tastes a combination of elements, none of which in itself would provide an aroma comparable to this". Ricoeur's combination can be referred to what exceeds single elements and mere content referentiality in narration and to the different minds to which the dream is addressed in analytic couples and families, for which it has to find a sense.

The value of a dream, then, is determined by the conditions of its birth (how, why was the dream's plot enacted, why that plot with those characters) and by its "operating" conditions (why is it born and why is it remembered now in the analytic situation, why in this phase of the analytic process, why this "offering" to the other family members and how are their minds set to receive it, in the sense of an available emotional-mental space).

Despite the importance of this understanding of dreams in group economy, some distinctions still need to be made and some questions asked.

The first one is: if it is true, as Meltzer says, that "the starting thought can be turned into social participation of an "unthinkink" kind, i.e. the participation to a group as a basic assumption, which is the non thinking social form" (Meltzer), we can also think of the opposite: the transformation of the group working in the direction of a starting thought can be shown by one member's expression or dream? We know, in fact, that thinkability in a family does not have to take place in all members, but can be a function of the whole. At times only one member performs it, also on behalf of others, while the function of emotional containment or affect circulation can be performed by others.

Due to the peculiarity of family functioning characterized by a) coexistence of primitive and developed functioning levels, b) the presence of cross and mutual projective identifications, c) the use of transpersonal defense mechanisms, is there a valuable specific use of dreams in family or couple sessions?

In our experience 1) at times it happens that in couple sessions one partner dreams instead of the other or of the other's action. 2) There are collusive dreams of both members of a couple, dreams that are presented by both partners in sessions and show complementary aspects as concerns possible collusive levels. 3) One member can dream on other's problems, which was dreamed and discussed also by other, but with different defenses. 4) Some dreams indicate the beginning of a differentiation or a de-collusion. 5) There are some perverse uses of dreams with exhibitionist or voyeuristic

function. 6) Some dreams are evacuated, but are true actings through which the dreamer tries to influence the emotional experience of the analyst and other family members.

There is also a problem concerning the use of dreams by other members. A member of a family, for example, can use a dream told in session by another member with the aim of taking it or intruding upon the dreamer.

A dream can be an elaboration for one and an intrusion or persecution for another. And this poses problems for the analyst's interpretation.

To dream instead of another

In his *Traumnovelle*, Schnitzler (1931) tells the vicissitudes and difficulties of Fridolin and Albertine.

Fridolin seems to run serious risks while looking for a mysterious woman with whom to betray his wife, Albertine. At the end of a long period of misunderstandings and disillusionment she dreams of a situation that ends in an exciting betrayal of her husband with a mysterious man. The dream contains some events of Fridolin's real life that Albertine did not know directly.

Albertine's dream ends with a catharsis and elaboration of the confusion and derealization anxieties that had characterized her husband and had led him to act while searching for a mysterious and idealized woman.

The author highlights a moment of deep change in the couple and each partner's search for a new identity in himself and the other, going through aspects of depersonalization and confusion of reality and fantasy.

Couple analysts know many clinical examples that remind the dynamics so beautifully described by Schnitzler. Often in fact we find in dreams aspects concerning the couple, or in either one's dreams contents or dimensions are present that are acted by the other in everyday life.

Most of the times the partners are unaware of these aspects and of the depth of their engagement, which becomes clear to the analyst, especially in the case of dissociated behaviors or perverse or psychotic functioning.

I will now present a vignette from a consultation session for a couple that should decide on a possible therapy.

After the failure of earlier marriages, Patrizia and Lorenzo get married. Each has already made an individual analysis with positive consequences, but some central issues are still unresolved. Lorenzo is 50, but has serious impotence problems if intercourse is not preceded by precise sadistic rituals, which irritate e depress Patrizia, 38.

After a first diagnostic session where the hypothesis had been made of further individual analysis with different therapists, in the second session the couple tells they have discussed therapy at length. Patrizia says that that morning they had had positive intercourse because they had had a fight the night before. She had forced him into a discussion, while he usually retreats and rationalizes everything. Then he talks of his analysis, how he recovered the extraordinary ability to fall in love with Patrizia

and to have with her a long relation. He also tells that he hid from his former analyst the fact that his sadistic rituals had not disappeared. He discusses the idea of resuming an individual analysis. The analyst, in fact, discussed this option too because he was uncertain about what indication was best (individual or couple therapy) for such a complex and long-term pathology.

Patrizia with a certain anxiety tells a dream she made in the night: "I was in kitchen with Lorenzo, but he was a child. She realized that the furniture was huge and wondered why". When awake she suddenly realized that she was looking at the world as if she was Lorenzo as a child, through his eyes. She cries and discusses this aspect with the analyst. When her husband asks for an explanation, she tells him that she dreamed instead of him.

Comment

This clinical vignette shows a great complexity of functioning. The communication of the dream in fact is an answer for the analyst who is wondering about the best indication. It is as if Patrizia said to the analyst that this questions concerns her, also because of this cancellation of her infantile aspects and this looking at the world in the eyes of her child husband.

The kitchen: a motherly world full of mechanical objects reminding also of the couple space and the therapeutic space, where there are devices for washing, cleaning and the like, but they are dehumanized and affectless.

The characteristic of this kind of dream is that the dream effect and function are not enclosed in dream space but are located outside, in the session. It implies the other in group interaction and is complemented by his participation.

In this clinical case the dream was a message for the analyst in the last and decisive diagnostic session, but most of all it implied the other couple member.

Lorenzo does not understand, the dream and its dynamic are foreign to him &endash; or so he says. He qualifies, in the session and in couple life, as the active pole, that of splitting, the bearer of a perverse acting, the one acting on the sadistic and sadomasochistic side.

Patrizia can dream for both, she is the pole of the possibility for representation in the couple. She can dream the child in the other.

This makes us reflect on couple and family functioning, on how our focus should be on the individual on the one side, and group functioning on the other, but most of all on the relation binding them. In the case of Patrizia and Lorenzo, each of them lends to the other in a highly split way, parts of their psyche or body to be used. So the relation is the central element, capable of influencing the context. This relation reenacts roles and functions, somehow extracts those versions of the self that are complementary to those of the other member of the couple or family. So a group of soloists becomes an orchestra. Other versions of the self (borrowing Mitchell's terms) remain obsolete.

In a dimension qualified from the very beginning as deprived of future and evolution, i.e. in an immobile time, Lorenzo and Patrizia discuss in the following session. Lorenzo talks of his idea that, if Patrizia accepted his sadistic ritual, he would be potent again and the couple could be fecund. Patrizia is distressed because she cannot accept the split between affects and sex and feels insulted by Lorenzo's effort at changing her. She knows that even if she changed and accepted this ritual, she would become like all the other women that Lorenzo used and threw away. Her distress is also the expression of Lorenzo's distress and idea that he cannot change her. The ghost of an impossible separation is thus kept in suspended animation.

Collusive dreams

We will now discuss collusive dreams.

A short set of examples may be useful, so we now present some sketches from couple sessions along with the interpretations provided.

This couple has been in treatment for about one year due to serious problems in the wife. Agoraphobia, anxiety and panic seizures.

She starts her session by telling the dreams she had the preceding night, in one she saw herself surrounded by a swelling river by which she risked to be overwhelmed. Somebody had opened a dam, may be it had been her mother and she did not know what to do. Somebody miraculously saves her by picking her up and preventing her from being dirtied by the river's black waters.

The husband too tells a dream: he went to the bathroom and saw a big shit sitting on the bowl lid. He was angry and wondered who could have done that, he tried to clean up by pouring lots of water that overflowed and was flowing around him like a swelling river.

The wife comments the fact that she becomes anxious when her mother communicates her worries to her. She then complains that her husband is harsh because he is worried for an economic problem in the family.

She adds she has always had difficulties with her mother in law, but that these relations get worse and end up in a fight when her husband is present.

The husband talks of the economic problem he is trying to cope with and his wife protests because she did not know about it.

He defends himself by saying that often she exaggerates when he tells her something and ends up reproaching him.

We feel it necessary at this point to interpret the collusive nature of both dreams to highlight those collusive aspects of their relation (the presence of collusive contents in each partner's dreams is a frequent experience in couple therapy).

In this case one can see that the wife feels overwhelmed by the swelling river, but a similar content (water flooding the bathroom) is found in her husband's dream, but in this case he feels he is the cause of this.

We interpret that both are overwhelmed by exceeding emotional contents. The wife seems unable to cope with the anxiety deriving from her mother and from the worry she feels is emerging in her husband.

It is difficult for them to find an alternative to the paralysis and block that characterizes them both.

She hopes to find in her husband a miraculous being capable of magically solving any problem.

This expectation seems to block her husband who feels trapped in the problems he must solve without his wife's help, but feeling clumsy and rejected by her in his limiting aspects, as emerged from previous associations.

Even toward the therapists' couple, the wife expects to find a sort of wizard who can miraculously save her without putting her in touch with dirty or intense feelings inside her.

The relation with their mothers, felt as intruding and bringing them back to children, is another common element which is complicated and accentuated by the couple situation rather than changed.

This is confirmed by projective identifications, jealousy, anger and the sense of exclusion felt by either towards the other.

A member dreams the same issues of other member showing different defenses

A family has decided to make a family therapy even in the absence of Laura, their eldest daughter now 22 who left school at 15 and developed anorexic-bulimic symptoms which are slowly but clearly becoming more evident with extended periods of withdrawal alone in a house in the country. It rather seems to be a borderline personality disorder with aggressive episodes, reviling and suicide threats.

Laura's mother is 50, she is extremely skinny because – she states – of never diagnosed and cured digestive disorders. She is clearly depressed and comes to session with disheveled hair, ruined hands and blackened fingernails because of an impressive mycosis.

The father is a professionally very busy person.

Roberto and Patrizia, her siblings attend university.

An abandonic and depressive core characterizes both families of origin: an early psychotic and paranoid rejection by the maternal grandmother of Laura's mother and of Laura and a suicide of the father's brother (a schizophrenic who hanged himself in late adolescence). The father will always feel guilty for this suicide, convinced that his leaving the family induced a loss of autonomy in his brother.

The family appears very controlled, except for the mother, whose frequent crying induces unease and a block, which I think masks fear.

The family sits in the same configuration every session: the parents at the center, Roberto near her mother, Patrizia near her father.

In the course of the following months family history will emerge, characterized by the father's absence in all the crucial moments. In these and other sessions father identifies with his own father, always absent and peripheral, mother was always

reviled and battered by her original family, where her mother idealized her sister at the expense of Mrs. G. up to delusional levels. In the following months mother recovers greatly and takes care of herself, the parental couple starts finding private spaces. Patrizia expresses her wish to go and live on her own after she graduates in a small flat owned by the family and even Laura – they fantasize – could leave the family. Just before Christmas the whole situation worsens and at the same time father has to change his place of work. He accepted some work he shall perform outside Italy. The family panicks, but immediately tries to reorganize. Follows a fragment of session just before the Christmas break.

Session

Mother, father and Patrizia are present (Roberto comes in later).

Mother (has lost a lot of weight and looks very tired) tells one of Laura's dreams that visibly shook her. "She was alone in her room, she threw up blood. Nobody listened to her".

She was very upset and feels guilty.

In the same night she too had a dream: "At home, her mother and sister – her mother's favorite – talked in secret. Father indifferently left and she was sorry, then with pleasure she let herself be caught by whirling water that was growing in the room and taking her in. It was pleasurable."

She cries because she finds the dreams alike, because she is afraid to have passed on her depressive states and because this morning Laura doesn't want to go to her session because of that dream. Laura remained in bed, it's quite a while that things go wrong. She's worried, her children don't react to their mother's grief. Father asks her if she went to the doctor to check her drug prescriptions. Roberto says that mother already said a lot when she talked about her mother talking with her sister.

The analyst asks the mother what she was thinking.

She says she is going out with her friends. She says that she had to prepare the Christmas crib by herself. She would have liked her children to help her, like when they were little kids, when she made a beautiful crib and won a prize.

Her children resent this memory. She says it was a nice thing to do.

The analyst interprets the dream as being caught in by depression without asking for or expecting any help, like Laura who vomits blood without asking for help. Some things are changing, are developing, on the contrary she would like to go back, when her children were small and building a crib with her, instead of becoming autonomous. Maybe this scares her.

Mother agrees and adds that she is going on a trip with some friends. Things changed indeed, now her husband spends his weekends at home, her daughter is better and she cares more about herself.

Roberto tells his dream: "It was with grandmother. If he had fallen asleep death could have come, but he enjoyed falling asleep, Although he knew it, he couldn't" He is worried about this dream, but the session is over. Mother thanks me for what I do.

In this session we find three dreams made by different members. When the dream language becomes an expression that can be shared and is felt as significant, frequently family member relate some dreams. At times, as in this case, we see different defenses, experienced differently against shared anxieties. Roberto and mother, for example, both share a wish to find peace in regression (represented by lack of thinking, depressive whirls, equivalent to death). Up to this moment the person acting out the risk of death had been Laura, the "repository" of these aspects, which were especially visible in her. In her dream of vomiting blood without any help, she shared her mother's sacrificing attitude. As Laura's dream was related by her mother, we can imagine that it was a content of mother's displaced onto her daughter and told in session, as well as a content of Laura's. Every time that family life reached a critical point (as concerned a separation, an unlinking, a need for empathic attuning, for sharing in the family or couple) a transpersonal defense was enacted consisting in a block, absence, flight as a common collective product, which could be expressed by one member or by more members in varying degrees.

Even in her individual sessions Laura used the same flight mechanism: she did not show up or slept to interrupt a particularly emotional moment.

We could even say that the dynamic combination of the partners in the couple was based in part on this mechanism. We can assume that mother had married in father a man with a homeostatic blocking function of the worsening of her depressive manifestations. She even married a man who unawares repeated her mother's neglect. Father had married in his wife those depressive and abandonic aspects of his mother, on one side to repeat them and on the other to unsuccessfully repair them.

Through the dream and its narration in session, however, there emerged a new opportunity for the family and its members to open up an elaboration space instead of a symptom or somatization.

The arrival of a dream and its interpretation in the family and couple setting

After five sessions with one couple, the wife brings a dream, the first dream for this couple in session. It is clear that she wants to communicate something, but what?

There are many possible levels of interpretation (use) of this material. What do we make out of the fact that she brings in a dream and not her husband? What is the sense of this dream within this couple's relations? Why is it brought at this point of the session, no earlier and no later than this? Why is it brought at this moment of the therapeutic process? What can be its relation to the preceding session and with the preceding period in general? Why this time, without anybody asking it, is a dream brought to communicate within the therapeutic system? Why this dream with its content and not another? What is the relation between this told dream and the undreamed dream of other members?

What is certain is that now the wife "...had an emotional experience the preceding night and this occasioned a dream; ... that she turned the dream experience into a text, by mixing visual images and their translation into verbal language; ... then she

told the dream which thus entered into the emotional experience of the session." (Riolo, 1983)

As Riolo suggests, 1) the interpretation of a dream is the translation of images into words and relations (just like the interpretation of non verbal events and/or symptoms). "This second text which includes "objects" and relations to the context is a construction of therapy, in the sense that the therapist builds a "personal" meaning for reality, as he subjectively perceived it." 2) The sequence of images representing dreams have polysemic and metaphoric value, in the sense that they are signifying productions and not mere vehicles of given meaning. (Riolo, 1983). In family or couple sessions usually after a dream narrative each member free associates.

The final interpretation takes into account this collective work, or rather is an outcome of this work. Interpretation considers the dream as an expression of the global shared functioning, but should also respect differences and individual defenses.

In the multi-subjectivity of couple or family analytic space, interpretation enhances its aspect of research and construction of a shared sense and opens up to the contribution of other family members, who in this sense perform a co-therapeutic function.

But it should also highlight individual differences, each member's defenses from collective and transgenerational anxieties, transpersonal defense mechanisms and the use of the other.

In any case, the communication of a dream in session represents a moment of elaboration to which the family group has come which in turn stimulated a further elaboration by the family.

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