

The Dream Narrative as an Interpersonal Event – Research Results

Robi Friedman

Abstract

The author presents a specific type of narration: the dreamtelling as a request for containment and elaboration of specific mental contents. It is underlined how the possibility of communicating and sharing his/her own dreams represents a function learned in the course of the earliest exchanges between parents and children. The results of a research are illustrated - its purpose is to investigate the correlation between either the development or the inhibition of this function, on the part of parents and the gender identity of children.

Key Words: dream, containment, the gender identity.

In psychotherapy, dreams have always been central to understanding and changing the patient. Freud (1900, 1933) stressed the intra-psychic aspects of dreaming without paying much attention to the dream narrative. But there are some important and crucial differences between dreaming and dreamtelling. This article will consider dreams from the point of view of their narrative, especially investigating the interpersonal aspects of dreamtelling in the parent-child setting. In contrast to the classical psychoanalytical intra-psychic point of view, which is interested in a dream told for the personal representation of the dreamer's unconscious, our understanding is that dreaming is an effort to (unconsciously) process overdosed threatening and exciting contents. I regard this emotional material as pertaining both to the dreamer and to significantly close Others. Thus the dreamer unconsciously takes on himself to elaborate his own as well as his environment's hardships and excitements. Moreover, I think that the dream opens the 'royal' way not only to the dreamer's inner life, in accordance with Freud's view, but also to his environment's hardships. I also propose that a dream told may represent a special opportunity to further elaborate emotions not well-enough contained. The interpersonal space created between a dreamer who tells a dream and a receptive audience that 'dreams the dream' may be an opportunity to continue an incomplete digestion process started by the dreaming event. The classic view of the dream mechanism of tension-reduction through disguise and other defenses may be an explanation for the relation with the sleeping process but is not a good enough explanation for dream-telling.

Telling dreams has an interpersonal elaborative aim: it seeks influence through potential external containment. This external containment is achieved through the unconscious meetings between dream-teller and dream-audience and the intersubjective process resulting from this "encounter". For example, a classic view of dreaming of aggressive behavior against one's own parents may be that the dream represents the activation of destructive drives or reactions against the loved ones or a

latent Oedipal conflict. But telling the dream is a (usually unconscious) communication that may potentially ignite a process of closeness and change in the character of the relationship. It may send a threatening potential as well as a request to the audience for help to contain badly controlled impulses.

A request for containment is one of the interpersonal functions of dreamtelling. It usually means that the measure of containment of the over-threatening and exciting emotions achieved by the dreaming process is not satisfactory and an external container is sought out in order to continue the elaboration process. Telling a dream is more than the Freudian, Jungian and Kleinian contention that the dream is an event that points to potential links to unconscious and rejected parts of the Self. In addition to its contribution to the dreamer's psychic development, dreams narrated establish a link with parts of the audience Self, pushing them towards enactments and changes in their mutual future relationship. Dreamtelling has inherent Hope and even Faith (Neri, 2005), feelings which ignite internal and external processes.

Relating dreams may be considered a second step after making a first, autonomous effort to cope with overdoses of feelings. This does not mean that a dreamer's request for containment will always be an event on the edge of crisis. Often telling a dream means influencing a relationship through its contents or the quality of the dream-relation. In spite of the similarity of the contents, there is a huge difference between a patient who, close to panic, recounts that he drove his car on the road at almost breakneck speed and the adolescent who boasts that in his dream he raced his car in the city at maximum velocity. The first seeks a partner able to contain his fears regarding his impulses; the second seeks a partner who can contain his joy and pride at his (omni-) potent power. Imposing power and fears, starting a closeness process or maintaining it are but a few examples of the aims of dream-telling.

In another example from groups, men and women may differ according to gender: women may start by telling anxious dreams in order to establish a familiar relationship through the sharing of anxieties and weakness, which results in the extension of help. Men sometimes start the dream-telling process by sharing a dream in which the dreamer seems to be bragging, taking a (omni-) potent, schizo-paranoid position and pushing to take a leading role in the group.

A person may also be a "non-dreamer", with a Self that may not be capable of transforming beta elements into alpha thinking. The alpha function is not developed enough to "dream" a difficulty, signifying that the individual may not be able to digest well hardships. In this case, the dream-relation may be a narrative whose main aim is to request containment. This person desperately needs another to dream his or her dream— s/he may not know how to be helped otherwise and narrates the dream with the hidden purpose of requesting containment.

Helping to Narrate Dreams

It follows that dream-telling sets up developmental processes through the growth of the alpha function. The second step, containment through the Other, will of course also have its own influence on the first step: self-containment. It may be appropriate

to define this kind of approach to the dream as *formative* in contrast to the more *diagnostic* approach of the classic dream theory and the subsequent *transformative* approach (Friedman, 2004d). Children and patients may be forming the structure of their psyche through working on the complex unconscious sides of dreams. Considering all these different intra- and interpersonal aspects involved, it seems important to promote the dream narrative – the second, interpersonal step in the development of thinking. In order to dream, there already has to be some psychic growth, which may consist of an internalization of the parental containing (alpha) function as a pre-requisite to the ability to think and cope with troublesome emotional material (Bion, 1963, Ogden, 1979). In the next stage, in order to tell dreams, there has to be the feeling that a relationship can contain the dreams told. While dreaming as a mental activity seems to be quite independent of remembering dreams, “dreaming” as a digestive coping activity is not an automatic quality that everyone has (Ogden, 1997, Grotstein, 1979, Bion 1993). If it does not develop naturally, external help is needed. Bion made the remark about a psychotic patient, that he ‘could only dream in the presence of his analyst’. [ibid, p. 40]

There seems to be a strong interconnection between dreamtelling and dream-listening. This link is evident to therapists who discover, along with their patients, that a therapeutic relationship that is open to the unconscious promotes both dream-remembering and the narrative of dreams. Even patients who report ‘not to dream’ are surprised when they start therapy by a spontaneous “new” ability to connect through dreams to their inner world. I believe such a development cannot be the result of suggestion alone. Elsewhere (Friedman, 2002a) I speculated about the nature of remembering dreams: it is connected with the presence of a container for dreams. This container may be a significant relationship that is able to tolerate and even be interested in the world represented in the dream. For many this is the precursor of relationships that help bear and elaborate the hardship of ‘dream life’ (Meltzer, 1980). Moreover, I think (Friedman, 2003c) that before there is a chance to introject this external container, a ‘moment of meeting’ between a panic-stricken child who has an overwhelming nightmare and his receptive parents establishes a special kind of relationship. The child cries out, requesting containment from his genitors, the ‘container-on-call’, who join in an elaborating partnership in order to bear the emotional difficulties of the dream. In spite of the fact that such a relationship begins through a mostly non-verbal interaction, this first imprintive episode contributes to an ability to use dreams personally and interpersonally. It may promote both the ‘dreaming’ of the first stage as an effort for autonomous containment and the following second stage of dreamtelling. This sequela makes it possible to complete a not good-enough oneiric elaboration through external containment. Thus Dreaming Dreamtelling may have learned components initially acquired in a nightly environment.

Furthermore, I draw several conclusions from clinical observations: one is that men are not at all good containers for dreams and that women have difficulties containing male dreams. This observation points to difficulties in parental containment, which

makes it difficult for the development of elaborating partnerships for dreams. Fathers seem to be not good-enough containers for dreams. Mothers may have fewer difficulties containing their sons' dreams as they can be good at bearing them (for a while only), but not at elaborating them. As a result, parents generally are not able to really digest and return the better digested material to their children. Containing reinforces and supports dreamtelling; non-containment extinguishes it. Men do not like to cope with or share threatening contents of dreams, especially if they are opposed to the normative male roles of power and strength. Dreams that expose the dreamer as being panic-stricken, victimized, or avoiding male tasks and assuming female tasks are very difficult to bear, but are dreamt by everyone. Mothers, basically more apt and able to contain many dreams, are much better equipped to bear and elaborate their daughter's dreams than their son's nightmares. This lack of containment of the boy's dreams is learned from both parents and usually starts a reenactment of men's inability to work through many emotional difficulties. This line of thought has led me to investigate dreamtelling patterns in the family, an endeavor still in process.

Investigating Dream Contents in Children

For this purpose, we formulated a questionnaire at Haifa University comprised of 21 questions. Investigations of the **dream contents** of children found that there are significant developments in children's dreams (Ofir Ram, 1997) Five-year-old children dream longer than younger children and have a greater ability to describe the background of their dreams. This is in line with the development of the ego's abilities to 'think', e.g. work through difficulties. There are also significant gender differences reflected by the dream contents. Both genders 'dream' about the emotions and the preoccupations of daily interpersonal situations, even more than adults do. But boys and girls differ significantly in the level and quality of aggressive contents dreamt. Boys dream of more powerful activity and significantly more physical violence than girls do, equivalent to the quotidian games they play. In contrast to girls, who more often dream themselves as victims, boys also tend to distance themselves from victimized representation, preferring to dream of hurt animals rather than humans, especially close ones.

Investigating Dreamtelling

Continuing this line of investigation, I found, like many of my colleagues in clinical practice, that there are significant gender differences in dreamtelling. The difference in contents may be one element responsible for the fact that men tell fewer dreams than females do. We tried to investigate the relationship between container (the parental audience) and contained (the child dreamer) that is hypothetically responsible for the extinction or evocation of dream narrative. This investigation focused on the establishment of an elaborative dialogue, the 'working-through' partnership (Friedman 2002a). It seems possible to apply the narrative abilities of dreams together with their elaboration to specific areas, like coping with male

domestic violence and the relationship abilities of females. Apparently, females' abilities to narrate their emotional difficulties via saturated communicative channels, like dreams, promote the growth of their social skills. On the other hand, we might say that the lack of elaborative spaces like dreamtelling preserves the potential for violence in men. Perhaps such deficient development is unconsciously promoted by the society that profits from primitive aggression, using non-elaborate belligerence for the community's own protection.

In previous investigations we found that children's dreamtelling is not different for boys and girls until about the 5th year. Men's dreamtelling makes a relative comeback when men court, or are in love. We searched for evidence that boys' dreamtelling is extinguished or at least negatively reinforced somewhere in early childhood. We also looked for evidence that women get support for their dreamtelling by a positive environmental (especially parental) response. In individual and group therapy we can easily observe an influence of the therapeutic space generating a diminishment or augmentation of dreamtelling in both men and women

Research on Dreamtelling in the Family

Ninety-five questionnaires were validated in which parents were asked about gender differences in dreams related by their children. They were also asked about differences in their responses to the boy's and girls' dreams and about similarities between the child's tendency to tell a dream and the parent's own history of dreamtelling.

Only 10 men answered in contrast to 85 women. The parents' mean age was 43. They averaged 15 years of education and came mostly from the north of Israel.

Results

In this investigation there was no evidence that boys told fewer dreams to their mothers than girls did. Interestingly, there was significant evidence that girls told more dreams to their fathers than boys did.

There were differences concerning the content of dreams: boys told significantly more nightmares, while girls told more 'pleasant' dreams. However, there seemed to be more interpretative responses to boys' than to the girls' dreams. This investigation corroborates the accepted finding that men remember and report significantly fewer dreams than women do.

Conclusion

Most of the findings provide evidence for the basic assumption that dreamtelling is an acquired interpersonal event. The difference in the dreamtelling of nightmares may be connected to the different interpersonal socialization of boys and girls. Boys' dreams reveal that they have to cope with more overt, and overtly physical aggression, and seem to work hard at night to try and work these excitements through. The inherent difficulties in succeeding to do so may be one of the factors

that inhibit the memory of dreams. This investigation produced no clear results about why there is a significant difference in dreamtelling.

We can assume that the difference in the dream contents will have a differential impact on the audience. Findings about men remembering and telling significantly fewer dreams than women may lead to the assumption that the availability of a container influenced the memory of dreams and thus the use of dream narratives as a further instrument of elaboration. Something in the boys' past seems to have extinguished dream-remembering and dream-telling.

We have the feeling that the questionnaires were not accurate enough to establish and understand gender differences. For example, although we know that boys' dreamtelling diminishes after the age of 5-7 (for whatever reasons), there was no significant trace of such a development in the results. The finding that girls tell more dreams to their fathers than boys do is to be taken with a grain of salt (because of the low number of fathers asked) but leads to interesting speculations. Essentially, the difference strengthens the assumptions that dreamtelling is an interpersonal event. Boys, regardless of the reason, have more difficulties telling their dreams to their parents, and their role as 'male' overtakes every other aspect. This result is in line with the hypothesis that men do not like to cope with 'male' dreams – and as fathers, they certainly prefer their daughters' dreams. Maybe this preference is more for the attachment to their daughters than for the dream contents. The daughter-father bond may be strengthened by being able to contain dreams, while the fathers' containment of their sons seems to be lacking. This finding should be further investigated with a greater number of fathers and deeper quality research of their containment.

Applications for everyday life

These results may contribute to the awareness that many men with a very rich internal life do not tell their dreams because of a faulty interpersonal experience. If we wish to restore the ability to communicate the internal life and re-establish contact with men's unconscious in order to further promote development, we have to build a container that facilitates access to the dreamer's ability to share and work through difficult contents. This can be done at any age, but it seems to be easiest if parents are helped by teaching them to provide a container for the dream narration. Men in particular do not have the necessary skills to promote containment in their children. Perhaps specifically it is the boys' dreams that are especially difficult to contain. Recently, we have had mothers in groups that have learned to cope with their boys' violence in dreams. This is done through understanding the dynamics of dreaming and dreamtelling through reciprocal reflexion on dreams narrated. In addition, exposure to films with violent contents (like *Dogville*, 2003) are instrumental in exploring and facilitating the communication of inner violence, which allows the link and containment between mothers and their children's aggression.

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Robi Friedman Phd, clinical psychologist, analyst of group (*Israel Institute of Group Analysis*), President of Istitut of “Group Analysis”: Member of the Comettee GAS (London), Università di Haifa.
 Mail: robif@netvision.net.il