

Dream telling as a request for containment – approaching dreams intersubjectively

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Abstract

The dream as a means of access to the contents of the individual and unconscious element in the psychoanalytic discipline is revisited in the light of inter-factor, considering the functions it performs within the group context, with particular reference to the nature of communication and relational request. Food for thought comes from clinical practice and require the viewer a 'study on dreams and the attribution of new meanings and functions of inter-subjective nature.

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The beginnings of Psychoanalysis are closely connected with dreams. Freud started a real revolution by understanding their significance. He believed in his revolution: it was his dream...and he wanted to publish “The interpretation of Dreams” precisely in 1900, not before, in order to influence 20th century western civilization. Classic approaches to dreams regard them as texts in which the analyst has to discard the manifest and detect the disguised latent material. Although this exciting approach is quite problematic for the modern and post-modern practice, it has not changed much even more than a hundred years later. Many colleagues still struggle with the dream as a symptom formation, a representation of an internally driven world, a newspaper in a dictatorship that absolutely must come out every morning, but has to disguise its hidden motives.

For our work in groups, there is a further dilemma: how can the most private be combined with the most public sphere? This riddle has to be solved, especially for our small therapy groups. Difficulties about “published” dreams had influence on our approaches and technique, mostly in the direction of a heightened interest for the more social and political aspects of dream-telling.

I wish to stress two things in this talk right from the start: I think we should generally reconsider our approach to dreams and complement it by interpersonal and intersubjective aspects of dream-telling. I also think we should better understand the interplay between the personal and the social in groups. We should search for a better use of dreams in groups.

What is a dream?

Dreaming is an intra-psychic, autonomous function. But is it only intra-psychic? Freud considered it a mental function that mainly preserves sleep by coping with the Threatening and Exciting, e.g. very strong internal and external stimuli – with the help of disguising mechanisms. He thought it was through displacement, condensation and reversal that a dreamer defended himself and his sleep.

Dreaming was later considered to process these difficult materials by thinking and unconsciously comparing former solutions to problems, coping with the Threatening and Exciting with what Meltzer regarded as part of a Dream- Life, the self's development of thinking. I think we may also consider dreaming (together with imagination, but in a more complex and unconscious way) as the transitional space in which an internal object world is developed. It is the space in which unbearable beta emotions first appear as transformations into more mature alpha material (Bion, 1960). It is where Fairbairn's splitting occurs, by projecting unwanted feelings, like aggression or unwarranted sexuality, into another, dreamt up, object. Winnicott would have called the course of events in dreams: "object relating", and I want to add that there are Projective Identification processes in Dreams in which stored up internal objects are used to contain and elaborate unbearable or conflictual material. We have large and sophisticated stores of "objects" and relational patterns that may help us process problems. I call it Projective Identification "in the dream".

A dream may open a very special dialogue: it is usually a glimpse into a special world – it is ours, but we do not have full access to it. It is a world from which we are often excluded just when we want desperately to remember a dream. More often than not, a dream may reveal more than the dreamteller knows he wants to share. Dreams are also so emotionally loaded that not every listener can bear them, and so vague, that they must match a willingness to feel unclear and not understood. For example, a dreamer wakes up in the middle of the night and excitedly tells his wife he had a great time with a girl friend in Paris. He is happy as he comes to therapy because he has been feeling increasingly lifeless, and intuitively considers the dream to be an important development. But his wife was furious, responding: "I'm busy all night long figuring out how we can manage with our salaries while you are having a great time with another woman." The naivete and the gap between dreamer and listener are obvious.

Dreams are full of fascinating material and reveal even more interesting processes – all of which contributes to turning dreams told in therapy into "Special Objects". Most analysts (except the American Charles Brenner in the 50s) would agree that dreams are specially cathected and loaded material, as they are very authentic and personal. Not considering the dream a "special object" may result from strong personal and counter-transference feelings on the part of the therapist (or other dream- listener - see Friedman in *funzione gamma*).] The special place of Dreams in our analytic work has to match our efforts to understand it, like now, in this congress. I think that the approach to a dream as an intra-psychical event, as self-containing and self-developing, is not the whole story. Dreaming may be an intra-psychic creation, and may authentically represent the self. It may be a window to personal ways of "thinking" and coping, and be of special use for diagnosis. But dream-telling is an inter-personal event, in which many relational and intersubjective variables other than the dreamt material play a decisive role. Encountering a dream seems not only to place us in the "presence of the unconscious" but may also unconsciously change the listener's feelings and his or her relation to the dreamer as a result of the dreamstory.

I think many dreams may not only convey information, but may carry the energy and the need for transformation.

I want to tell you about two interpersonal functions of the dream, how I came upon them, and what their relevance for therapy and change is.

The dream of the kiss – opening questions

More than 20 years ago a young patient told me a dream along with some interesting circumstances. He had participated in a party on Friday evening, where he was attracted to a young lady, whom he had been watching all evening – but couldn't find the courage to approach. That same night he had a dream in which he saw her with beautiful red lips. In the dream he went to her, kissed her and received a warm response.

If this had been all, I might have considered it just a "wish fulfillment dream" (Freud, 1900). My patient dreamt something up that he did not dare do in reality. But some later events gave the dream a very special significance. The whole group that had had the party met the next morning at the beach. This time he approached, and what did he do? Did he kiss her? No. He did something more "successful" for him: he told her the dream. My first thought was, "If he hadn't dreamt it, it would have had to be made up!" Of course, if he had kissed her, he might have been considered rude and tactless, and even an eventual success might have been short lived. But telling her the dream started a very intense affair. For me, it raised many questions.

For the first time, I understood that one could dream in order to achieve a special relationship by later telling the dream. It meant that besides the whole apparatus of having a stage director, a cast director, a producer etc., there was a dreamer who "planned" how could the dream be used in order to influence a relationship, to change it in some way. The dream was a content; dream telling was part of an interpersonal process.

I searched in the literature for the idea that dreams told have not only a representational aim but also an interpersonal objective and found only Ferenczi's short article: "For whom a dream is dreamt". Although he did not develop this idea, the great clinician, having a deep understanding of relations as well as contents, caught something of the dream's purpose almost a 100 years ago.

This is how I translate Winnicott's idea that "object relating" becomes "object use" (1960). An inner issue is enacted in a real-life, external connection. The ability to "dream for someone" uncovers a dream's hidden purpose to influence the listener. A dream might be dreamt, remembered and told in order to change a relationship. How does dream telling achieve this aim? Soon.

The special relationship between the dreamer of nightmares and the audience.

An interesting phenomenon taking place between sleep and awakesness attracts special attention in children's or family's therapies. It is not uncommon for a child between 3-6 to wake up incredibly scared, screaming in the middle of the night. Normal parents invariably drop everything they are doing immediately, and rush to assist the frightened child more quickly than usual. It is not the sort of cry a parent

will ever delay response to. Even more interestingly, if the “responsible parent” is away, his counterpart, who might usually “not to wake up”, will get up and rush to the child. The parent will then simply comfort the child, maybe by giving him water and bodily warmth – while they unconsciously “breathe in” his fears. When the child returns to sleep, which may happen swiftly, he or she often leaves the parent full of unspoken dread. I call this normal relationship, in which a 3-4 year-old asks for nocturnal help, and transfers his anxieties to a (pre-consciously) prepared parent: a child’s Request for Containment; and the mental position of the parent: “Container-on-Call”.

Although the child’s growing Self” abilities may be good enough to cope with distress during the day, autonomic Self-Containment at night may be still deficient and he or she may need external containment. The child’s available elaboration mechanisms will not be enough to process the Exciting and Dreadful and he or she will need the containment of a more mature person. The experiences in childhood with supportive Container-on-Call relationships may also unconsciously model future potential container/contained patterns.

The two interpersonal functions of dream-telling

I consider classic approaches which stress intra-psychic aspects in dreams to be “diagnostic”. I believe their contribution to be very valuable, and am not objecting to the Freudian and post-Freudian way of treating dreams. On the contrary, it is important to develop the dream’s diagnostic aspects. For example, often it helps to consider a dream to be a play, and I watch for its introduction, its different acts and its end – which I consider to be the structural aspects of dreaming, as they convey the ego’s structure. And the dream may also be regarded as a projective test, exhibiting features like movements, specific objects and relations, colors, etc., which may also say something about parts of the personality.

In a workshop some weeks ago someone told the group a dream: “I am riding on a roller-coaster with some friends. It gets terribly fast, and at the highest place I suddenly fall out, barely hanging from it by my fingernails. I think about the patient who committed suicide some time ago in a hospital.” She woke up terrified from the nightmare.

This dream itself is a roller-coaster – but what starts as fun seems to become unbearable, almost suicidally dangerous. If you watch the contents, their features you can get a taste of the “emotional movement” of the dreamer, living between these fearful moments. Yet the structure of the play is good enough, it has an introduction, a middle of the story, and no end. The dreamer is in clear distress and requests containment, but she seems to be goodenough for growth if such a relationship is granted.

My interpersonal approach defines at least two intersubjective functions: the first function is the relationship with a Container-on-Call: Requesting from a significant “other” containment for emotions, which the dreamer’s capabilities were not sufficient to process successfully. My proposition is a two step developmental

approach in the encounter with difficult emotions, where in a first - autonomous - step a dreamer tries to cope with them during his sleep. Only if he is unsuccessful and a relational possibility is available, will he engage in a second step and tell the dream, hoping for external containment and elaboration.

Here the woman telling the dream requested the audience's help in order to process her anxiety after getting on an exciting "roller-coaster"- her pattern of daring, on one hand, and feeling uncontrollable fear, on the other. Accepting and emotionally echoing her dream's unconscious conflictual pattern of excitement and anxiety, of temptation and dread, and processing these feelings, help in this direction.

The second intersubjective function is the unconscious wish to influence the feelings of the audience and establish a new kind of relationship with it. This is done by interpersonal unconscious communications, cues that "push" the audience into different moods: love, sympathy, guilt, caution, fear, pity, mercy, compassion, etc. These feelings, moods and tendencies to act arouse sometimes through the content and often through the when and how a dream is told.

The roller coaster dreamer, for example, was a candidate in an Analytic Institute, who wanted to convey a sense of the course's difficulty. On the one hand she was a voice for the group's difficulties. On the other the effect of her dream was to push the course managers, the analysts and the supervisors to ease the course requirements. Still on further interpersonal level, it was also a "naive" way to enlist the identification of her group, to find and change her place in it. I believe it is the total group interaction which will change the participants' attitude in a dynamics of reciprocity, not only to the dreamer and the material she voiced.

Dreaming and Dreamtelling is both "one-person" and "multiple-person" psychology. Without the intersubjective functions, the dream would have remained a picture of intra-personal conflict between sexual wishes and fears of losing control at the climax. The interpersonal approach is also a far cry from regarding the dream as picturing transference with the group or the group conductor, although these aspects may also be included in the dream.

Both functions are intersubjective in the sense that they interpenetrate open interpersonal psychic boundaries as in Bion's container/contained model. The interaction is effected through projections that meet identifications, and thoughts that search and find thinkers. The identifying audience processes these projections in order to help the dreamer re-integrate the projected split-off. Both functions are not mutually exclusive, but are still separated enough to warrant a strong difference. One criterion for the separation between the containment and the influence function is the degree of elaboration reached by the dreamer. If self-containment is low, the external processing function has strong valency, more than the the influence level. But it may also be speculated that the dreamer is establishing a connection with a Container-on-call.

Partnerships in Inter-subjective Space

In the classic approach, dreams are handled by interpretations. Most interestingly, even in group therapy, the analyst is informally considered the “only” bridge to the dream’s unconscious material. Most of the group will, in so many ways, reject a dream told. They will talk “about” the dream without really relating to it, at best naming a metaphor from the dream, or will misuse the dream-story in order to further their own placement in the group. Moreover, the group analyst or some other dream-interpreter will sometimes (unconsciously) gain power through a “clever” remark about some hidden dream content. A dream narration will stage a pattern which may often be re-enacted in the group, possibly as a result of the listeners’ projective identifications with the dream-teller or the dream content. Group therapists should learn to use the rich encounter around dreams. I think that a dream told creates a “total situation” - in Betty Joseph’s words –imposing itself on the entire Inter-Subjective Space (Ogden). Through the re-creation in the Here-and-Now of emotions and interactional patterns between the dream-teller and his or her audience’s personal responses, it may transform both their relationship and the as yet unprocessed dream elements.

A dream told is a request for psychic partnership. In such a partnership unbearable and destructive emotions, such as fears, anxieties and aggression, may be contained and elaborated. I define a partnership as an inter-subjective space where there is a possibility for mutual and reciprocal processing of emotional difficulties. A Mental Partnership involves more than one person investing (maybe X Euro) in a property together with another person (who maybe has Y Euro). “Becoming Partners” is a more complex event than investing X+Y Euro. Growth by reciprocal containment is possible only when partners are able to have and keep their other partner in mind. A “transitional space” must be established in which mutual reciprocity exists. The concept of Partnership suggests some measure of symmetry, although at specific moments – perhaps even most of the time – Partnership may be mainly asymmetric. Frustrations caused by asymmetry seem to be a major obstacle to the establishment and maintenance of a partnership. The parent/child and the patient/therapist relationships also have partnership potential: These relationships may be a-symmetric for a while, but their (partly unconscious) potential reciprocity is obvious. Both include “moments of partnership” and distinct “feelings of partnership”, which enable them to become not only a co-operating but also a co-containing and co-elaborating team.

Another feature of partnership is the concept of relinquishing – giving up – some ownership. It is common knowledge among group therapists that sharing is always a form of giving up ownership (of what we think and feel) – a difficult but worthwhile investment. Relinquishing ownership, accepting mutuality, and long term symmetry processes, is sowing now in order to reap later.

When working with dreams (and generally heavily loaded interpersonal material), dream tellers and listeners should become partners. Only if they mutually contain and elaborate the encounter with the Threatening and Exciting, and make a joint effort in their relationship, can they grow – and do so together. If they relinquish ownership, e.g., “knowing” the “Truth” the “Real Meaning” of the dream, can they meet the told

dream, “co-dream” (think it) once again together, and encounter it - without memory, desire or knowledge.

Preparing the container (technique)

Technically, I think the best way to understand a dream is by echoing it emotionally. The listener then considers the related dream “as if it were his or her own” and link it to his or her own life. These personal links usually resonate significant material more accurately than any wise interpretation. The group’s different echoes reflect the projected splits communicated through the dream story, and the thoughts have to find a thinker, an identifying ear willing to meet the projections. “Dreaming the dream” told and “thinking the dream” by sharing personal resonance creates an emotional narrative that usually helps the growth of the participants as well as the dreamer, his or her relations with the group, and the group as-a-whole.

Group therapists face some challenges, especially when the first dream in the group is told. The analyst may prepare the setting to “receive” the dream, as a midwife receives the baby by protecting the dreamteller and by providing security to the audience, as well. On the one hand, the analyst has to prepare the “container” by contracting an alliance with the participants to encounter and cope with difficult materials. Most important is to dissuade participants to “interpret” the dream told and it is often the first step in facilitating a constructive group approach. Interpretations are often both a defense, helping the interpreter disown the relevant materials in the dream, and a harm to the dream-teller. Sometimes the group will imitate an interpreting therapist, because he or she models desirable interpersonal behavior. I try to encourage the participants to meet and connect to the dream by relating to it “as if it were their own”. Participants also have to be helped to register their emotional reaction to the dream.

But the audience should also be protected from a dream too difficult to bear. Group participants will not have the choice of being witness to the dream told, but they must be able to not join or succumb to the imposing presence of the dream. This is very important with more regressed groups. The group therapist has to legitimize (at least temporarily) non-aggressive refusal to encounter unbearable dread. Therapist and participants should then reflect on the dream’s and the dreamteller’s influence on their emotional position (pity, fear, legitimization, cohesion, sexual arousal, etc.). If no participant reacts, the dream should at least be acknowledged, and the possible reasons for the rejection (the dream’s content or the relations in the group) reflected on.

Generally, we help the group develop its alpha- and gamma-processing functions. In order to establish a *funzionegamma* for the group, and not only for the usual subgroup of 1-2 members, there has to be ongoing work.

A complicated example is Iris, a patient in group analysis whose dreams had been rejected for two years. Then she told another very significant dream, in which incest anxieties were evident. Waking up from this dream, she also thought it was connected with me. For the first time the group was able to understand its rejection of Iris’

dreams. Although they were full of personal connections, the dreams' function was also to push the group into accepting her pairing with me and the group could not tolerate it. Only after this dream was the group able to investigate pairing tendencies and try to tolerate envy. Learning more about how dangerous and ambivalent everyone feels – women and men – towards the other gender, it was also possible to reflect on projecting sex and inducing erotization.

Finally, I wish to share with you a thought in the social realm, which is a direct result of these reflections:

Coming from a very difficult environment, I have great concern for the existing and growing violence, not only between people but also inside families and the society. I consider dreams to be one of the more effective investments possible to further the containment of aggression,. Anyone who has ever participated in processing a dream's difficult emotion knows how worthwhile it is. I consider the mother-son relationship to be a special potential partnership in the elaboration of dreams. If aggression could be worked through, starting from the kernel of the family, it would promote social change. But if the container (mother) is not "prepared" for her alpha function in this area, the largely unattended aggression (appearing in early dreams) is rejected and left split-off.

For a while, a great partnership exists between toddlers and their well-attuned mothers, who wonderfully contain their children's emotional difficulties. Boys, after having had the favour of parental "Container-on-Call" for their nightmares, and the benefit of a partnership around fears and stress, are later left with their (partly unconscious) aggressive feelings, to undergo repression or acting out. The mother's ability to stay attuned and contain her daughters' dream-material does not seem to hold for boys' aggressive contents in this partnership.

Why do the requests for containment not meet a prepared container? Research shows that boys dream significantly more actively aggressive contents than girls do. I suspect that because of women's aggression-forbidding and aggression-denying upbringing, their ability to process their sons' dreams is reduced. This is too bad because it is my belief that mothers of violent boys are usually the only potential containing and transforming agents in the family for the boys' aggressive material. The children's fathers, who traditionally have not worked through their own aggression, are usually unable to process their sons' violence. In the best case, they exert a limited punishing function on inter-family aggression. Moreover, fathers are often the first to react without containment to violence, modelling "action-dialogues". Without a "well-enough prepared" container, the boys' readiness to tell more dreams is extinguished. But a lack of dreamtelling – offering significant opportunities to process male aggression – may also have possible frightening consequences – and the violent split-off feelings will be acted out at the first opportunity. It is my experience that dreamtelling stops very early for boys, and goes on for life for girls.

Groupwork in which participants (Parents? Mothers?) become partners in processing aggressive emotions may be one answer to further the containment.

I invite you to use the possibilities this great congress has to offer, to explore different sides and perspectives of the dream, this internal–external world of ours, which is so easy to exclude into the realm of “not-me” and so difficult to include into “me”.

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