

## **Dreamtelling as a request for containment and elaboration in group therapy**

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### **Abstract**

The traditional, intrapersonal way of working with dreams has been enriched by an interpersonal approach (Ferenczi, 1913, Kanzer 1955). Dreaming may no longer be viewed as an exclusively internal and autonomous working-through (event) occurrence, as classical approaches suggest (Freud 1900, 1932, Meltzer 1983). Containment and elaboration of the exciting and the dreadful in dreams can be placed on a continuum from autonomous through dependent. Sharing a dream with a therapist or a therapy group may be done (unconsciously) in order both to represent the self (Neri 1996) and "use" significant others to further the unfinished psychic work of the dream.

When the dreamer's own container for the unbearable is insufficient or damaged, he may search for an external container, as he may have done in his childhood. Group participants may sometimes serve as appropriate recipients for split-off emotions, and by listening to their "echoes" all involved may be helped to integrate projections and work them through. A clinical vignette of a "dream group" will be presented to illustrate how dreams loaded with unbearable aggression are contained and elaborated in the group, allowing for better integration of newcomers and threatening emotions.

**Key words:** Dreamtelling, group psychotherapy, projective identification, aggression, integration of newcomers

### **The interpersonal origins of dream work**

Coping with the "exciting and dreadful" in dreams is considered to be mainly to be an intrapersonal matter executed by autonomous mechanisms.

How a person protects himself from difficult and conflictual emotions in order to preserve sleep always was an interesting process. A dream – the result of this process – maybe seen as the soul's "newspaper" and a main road to the unconscious. It provided Freud (1900, 1932) and all of us since, evidence of the patient's ego strengths, id and superego manifestations, etc.

The origins of the intrapsychic mechanisms which take part in containing and working through dream thoughts can be traced back to the interpsychic process between mother and child (Bion, 1963): in order to transform beta elements (primitive and unbearable feelings) into thinkable (alpha) units the child needs his mother's capacity for reverie. This natural and complex process is a containing and elaborating function – called alpha function – through which the mother "digests" the sensorial input still inedible for the child. She helps to

metabolize it for him while immature. His developmental task consists of introjecting his mother's alpha function.

This function gives the possibility to dream without (usually) having nightmares - If a person is not psychotic he should develop an autonomous mechanism whereby excessive fears are worked through. "The beta-element has had removed from it the excess of emotion that has impelled the growth of the ...expulsive component" (Bion, 1963, P. 27).

An additional viewpoint of an interpersonal containing and elaborating dream thoughts was introduced by Fairbairn (1963). Fairbairn saw the dream-stage, an intrapersonal space, as divided between the self and "the others". On this stage the dreadful/exciting can be split off and projected into a "not me" dream-object.

For example, dreaming of being attacked by a stranger, serves the purpose of putting some distance between one's self and one's aggressive emotions. Placing the aggression onto an "external" object (the stranger) may also be conceived as an attempt to "evacuate" emotions into an other more capable than oneself of tolerating them. This attempt to cope autonomously with the conflictual emotions make use of the projective and evacuative function of dreaming, and at the same time may serve a working through purpose. If the working through fails the dreamer may be forced into a last coping attempt: using interpersonal containment and elaboration through a "real" external object. Given the right interpersonal situation (psychotherapy, love, friendship) this kind of developing dialogue may be the next developmental opportunity for everyone to manage difficulties better.

### **The need of the Dreamteller of an Audience**

Children's' nightmares have a compelling interpersonal functions: overwhelming emotions that cannot be contained and elaborated by his yet immature ego (alpha function) wake the child up in panic. His communication is often of a tone that is almost impossible for his parents to ignore. If they function as "container-on-call" they will calm the little dreamer mainly by their presence and by being receptive to the child's evacuation. I believe this kind of interaction continues to a certain degree throughout life. This process is part of normal life and does not appear only in psychotic dreams, as Bion describes in "Second Thoughts" (1967, P. 78). Using significant others- even traditional dreaminterpreters (Michael, 1993) is part of "the interpersonal functions of dreamtelling" (see also Ferenczi, 1913). Projective identification is the mechanism responsible for such forceful interactions (Bion 1963, 1967).

### **Dreams in the Group**

In groups projective identification seems to be the main unconscious interpersonal relational process (Rafaelsen, 1996). Projective identification aims at three targets: building some kind of object relation through communication of a message, changing a significant "other" through this message and changing the self through the process this "other" will accomplish for him. Through projective identification, the message

sent is pregnant with projected contents that influence more mature external receptive objects and may enable elaboration. The unbearable emotions which are split-off from the self and experienced as "not-me" (Fairbairn, 1963) are transformed into projections which may be "echoed" by the audience. I consider these echoes the reverie which enables alpha function and further elaboration. All audience resonances are efforts to process the dream material told &ndash; including the therapist's interventions. These affective resonances range from verbalizations to acting out a neurotic pattern unconsciously initiated by the dreamer. Two further aspects of this understanding should be stressed: the specific quality of the "container" and the complex relationship in the group between container and contained.

The first aspect pertains to the quality of the container for the dreamer: is it possible to evacuate into it split-off emotions or is it not safe enough, too defensive or unavailable (Grinberg, 1973)? The therapist has the task to try and build a space where the dreadful, unspeakable etc. can be tolerated and elaborated in a "good-enough" manner. Relations in dyads and groups are full of unsuccessful attempts to integrate material which remains split among individuals and subgroups: one feels the aggression, the other the fear and still others the sex. The clinical material presented later concerns developing interpersonal situations in which alpha functions will effectively process threatening emotions. More specifically it concerns the ability of female alpha functions to process male violent aggression. To emphasize this point: it is the group's function to provide many "mothers" &ndash; every alpha function available - for the evacuated emotions. But maybe the "mothers" in the group need to learn to become containers for extreme violence.

The second aspect has to do with the gains the group has by agreeing to contain a participant through identifying with his projections. In my view the origins of the dream contents are not to be found only in the individual participant: the group certainly influences the dreamer to dream. A "dream... is being generated in the intersubjective analytic dream space"(Ogden 1996, p. 896) Into the "psychoanalytic third" the group may also evacuate through projective identification disintegrating emotions. It is the dreamer's function to tell the dream that may help the group to better integrate, in this way enriching everyone's psychic life.

## **Techniques**

The group therapist listens with the group to the dreamstory and invites everyone to share their own personal resonance. These "echoes" amplify different split-off emotions touched by the dream material. Together with the therapist's own emotional resonance and tendencies to interpret they should be regarded as part of the general "reverie" process. After sharing all the "echoes", an attempt is made to integrate all associations to an effective narrative. The therapist helps to involve all participants in an effort to use all parts of the puzzle to further "think the dream". This narrative usually concerns the dreamer, his relations with the group and the group as-a-whole. A clinical vignette &ndash; men's dreams meeting feminine containers

### **A male replacement in a dream group**

In this "dream-group" therapy is carried out through dreamtelling and sharing of associations. Interpretations are aimed both at the group-as-a-whole and at the individuals. Eight group members met twice a month for three hours for more than a year. After the summer break the seven women and one man group became a five women and three men group, as three women were replaced. The integration of the new members was difficult: they felt left out, did not understand many of the codes of the group and had bad feelings about their place in the group. Although the "veterans" tried to elaborate on their ambivalence, it was obvious that subgroups of new vs. old members had a hard time uniting into one group.

### **Dreamtelling as an integrating experience**

Interestingly the newcomers first attempts to become part of the group were not made through dreamtelling: the female newcomer shared with the group a sexual abuse experience she had had as a child and one of the men behaved ever more passively. The most direct encounter between the subgroups was enacted by a very angry and frustrating rejection of the active male newcomer by one of the veteran women after he had touched her chair.

Perhaps these direct interactions gradually and unconsciously built the conditions for integration, but in the group's atmosphere this process was experienced only after dreamtelling. For some months, there was a good deal of tension and mostly unspoken hostility in the air, as work continued towards developing an aggression-container for the dreams of all participants. This was the unthought known (Bollas, 1987) by the group after sensing the newcomers' aggression. We tried to build a stable and open relationship between participants and subgroups, which could bear the appearance of the dreaded split &ndash; about which we had only vague and mostly unconscious "warnings". The changes in the group's attitude and its actual behavior was the only evidence for the introjection and reowning of these split-off emotions.

Aggression had taken a very mild and gentle (feminine?) form until the newcomers' arrival. During its first year, the group was normally very open and honest, mostly kind to one another and the affective themes they mainly identified with and elaborated were mostly "pains and sorrows". Judging from the dream material there were many losses, ambivalent relations with men and groups and victimization by outside aggression. The "echoes" in the group were mostly to neglect and hurt. The strongest manifest aggression in dreams was expressed by dreaming of some far away "intifada" (A Israeli-Palestine violent armed conflict) and a baby who slipped from parental "caring" hands and hurt his head. Aggression could also be detected in a dream in which a frustrated participant leaned on a huge window causing it to fall from the 16th floor.

### **Male aggression in dreams and a tentative theory why participation in a dream group is difficult for men**

Four months after the newcomers joined, the quality of dreams in the group began to change: the participant who was the only man in the group until then, lifted the bar of aggression threshold as if (unconsciously) joining the male subgroup now permitted it. He told a dream in which he was part of a terrorist group who wanted to conquer a house in a village and murder the family living there. Bombing and blowing up a youngster ended by being pursued by the army and the police and finally chased down to the point of feeling: "that's the end". There were other "army" dreams, which contrary to what could be expected, are not often aired in this country. When those dreams started, they came as an avalanche. Another man joined later with dreams about life-threatening snakes and after some months the third male participant told two very frightening dreams. In the first one his two children, a small boy and his somewhat older sister, stand on a window and though the dreamer warns his daughter to hold her brother &ndash; he falls out of the window. In the second dream he desperately searches for this same daughter and gets involved in the most violent fight with another man whom he had warned before the violent encounter began. Later on we understood that we were, as a group, warned too, from the beginning. But the culmination of this set was the telling of a dream dreamt a year before by the man who had participated in the group from the start. Though the dream had shocked him, he could not tell it to the group in real time &ndash; I suppose it was because the "feminine" container was considered by him as not yet ready to help him deal with his fears of his own aggression. "In the kibbutz the word spread that the Nazis were coming. I hid with my girlfriend in a place that was crowded with "hidlers". A male Kapo (Jewish police in concentration camps) came with a club to hit us and we barely could persuade him to remember he is Jewish and join us. The same happened with a female Kapo. Then we both continued to escape and hid inside two drawers. A Nazi soldier passed by with his barking dog who also scraped with his feet under the cupboard doors - but somehow we were saved. Then I found myself in an orphan house incessantly asking the question: Where is E? Where is E? (the dreamer's own name). I decided to return to the hiding place, only wishing not to find that E. has already rotted. I open the cupboard and see him small and shrunk as a fetus. I take him back to the orphanage."

The immediate emotional response of the group ranged from identification, memories typical to "second generation" of holocaust survivors and some more detached associations. These were connected with the film "The Good Life" . The strongest voice representing the repression of fears and aggression came from one female participant who thought the dream was "optimistic". The group "echoes " a process of less distance between subgroups by talking rather freely about emotional differences. I interpret the encounter between the aggressor with a club and the victim as a possibility to identify and incorporate aggression inside the individual mind and in the group.

The next session's dreams, atmosphere and behavior gave dramatic evidence of the trend to integrate the splits by both assertiveness to the threshold of (newly elaborated) aggression and the joining of genders. A forth newcomer, the first after 7

months, was "welcomed" by two contradicting events. First she was asked to change the seat she took because "it belonged" to somebody else in the group. Then she was presented a participant's dream in which the dreamer watches her parents copulation which ends with blood on her mother's body. The dreamteller continued with a dream of being at a party and feeling good to lie near a man &ndash; without sexual feelings. After trying to sleep alone in a huge tent, she goes back to feel the proximity of a men.

This process seems to embody the struggle of the men of this group to form together with the women a (transitional) space receptive of the fantasmatic. It is clear that men struggling with their masculine violent feelings may be afraid of exposing unbearable contents which may not be contained by the others and result in regression. This is an example of the work a therapist needs to do in order to enable a group to accept hitherto dreadful material &ndash; a process that can be done very well by working with dreams.

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