History of Dream Interpretation in Social Work

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About the Author
Lesley Zaret, received a Bachelor of Science in psychology from Lesley University and a Masters of Social Work from Simmons College School of Social Work (1989). She is a psychotherapist in private practice in North Hampton and Wolfeboro, NH. Lesley provides counseling to adults and adolescents as well as teaching dream classes and leading dream groups. She is a member of the international association for the study of dreams and has been working with her own dreams since she was 17. Lesley has studied and practiced mind/body awareness such as yoga and mindfulness for many years and in the 1990’s worked for the Federal Emergency Management Agency providing mental health consultation, stress management and organizational counseling to disaster workers.
I. Course Summary

This course will present an overview of the history of dream interpretation in order to help social workers and mental health workers identify the major theories regarding the use of dream interpretation in psychology. Ancient history and examples of well known dream interpretation in arts and sciences will be discussed. The course focuses on the major dream theorists: Freud, Jung, Perls and others as well as current trends in dream work. The review of these theories will illustrate the concept that clinicians who have worked with dreams have found therapeutic benefits from the material that dreams present. This course will be a helpful introduction to social workers who are interested in exploring the use of dream work as an adjunct to their work with clients. Examples and definitions will be given to familiarize the reader with theories and vocabulary of dream interpretation. Exercises are provided to deepen the students understanding and ability to consider use of the methods.

II. Course Objectives

Upon completing this course students will:

1. Assess the benefits of incorporating dream work in social work practice
2. Identify sources for further learning about dream interpretation
3. Discuss some of the historical significance of religious and cultural interpretation of dreams
4. Recognize the contributions of dream interpretation to psychology
5. Identify major theories of dream analysis and how they relate to a social worker’s assessment strategies for incorporating these theories in practice.
6. Be able to contrast and compare the theories of Freud, Jung, Adler and Perls
7. Identify the influences of Freud and Jung on contemporary dream theorists
8. Recognize some current scientific theories regarding dreams.

Dream interpretation has a long history in which dreams have inspired questions, hope, debate, fear and mystery. Historical accounts of dreams suggest that they have been thought to be meaningful to individuals and societies, yet there are many who have dismissed dreams as a neurological process that produces random pictures and residues as the brain rests during sleep. Kings, warriors and leaders have looked to dreams for wisdom and predictions. Poets, scientists and philosophers have studied and written about dreams and argued their significance. Dreams and nightmares have long captured the imagination and caused people to wonder if they could derive advice, inspiration and meaning from them. Ancient cultures and religions did find meaning in dreams often believing that they were Divine messages that could lead to a better life or to healing physical ailments.

The purpose of this course is to:

Familiarize the student with the history of dreams in ancient and other cultures and religions in a brief overview. There is also a list of a few of the many artists, musicians, religious leaders and scientists who have used interpretation of their dreams to solve problems or inspire creations that have lasted for centuries. Most of the course focuses on the ideas of practitioners, from Freud to the present day, who have put forth theories that have developed the use of dreams to understand psychology and deepen the human experience. Exercises or summary lists are provided to help explain the major theorists so that the student can more easily increase their own understanding and experience of dream interpretation. Terms that are not defined in the text will be found in the glossary. A bibliography is provided to facilitate further individual study of the theories presented.
III. History:

Dream interpretation was regarded by many ancient peoples in with great importance. Though different cultures had differing beliefs, each acknowledged the significance, mystery and usefulness of dreaming and believed that attention to dream analysis provided significant information that could be used in developing strategies for interpreting dreams for useful waking life purposes. Some cultures, had a sense of the symbolic language of dreams.

Mesopotamia:

Documented dream history can be traced back to Mesopotamia in 3100 B.C. where the dreams of kings were preserved on clay tablets. Based on interpretations of the writings on those clay tablets it appears that the dreams of 5000 years ago were categorized as three types (Oppenheim, A. 1956)

1. Message dreams: communications from deities; gods and goddesses that were seen as helpful to leaders in making decisions.
2. Prophetic dreams called “Mantic”: consulted to determine what the future might bring
3. Warning dreams where symbols might include gods and goddesses, animals, and people.

Historical research indicates that the Mesopotamians believed that dream content should be used to identify and change the negative situations in waking life.

Hebrews:

It is written in the Old Testament that God said “if anyone among you is a prophet, I will make myself know to him in a vision, I will speak to him in a dream”. There are famous Biblical dreams, such as in Genesis, when Jacob wrestles with the dream angel and
promises him that he will bring forth a new nation called “Israel”. His son, Joseph, became an interpreter of dreams in Egypt for the Pharaoh where he correctly predicted times of famine and plenty. The stories of Abraham say that through dream wisdom and his dialogue with God he received guidance to lead his people. One much quoted line of dream wisdom comes from the Jewish book of law, the Talmud (200 to 500 AD): "An uninterpreted dream is like an unread letter".

**Early Christians:**

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the men-servants and maid-servants in those days, I will pour out my spirit" (Joel 2:28-29).

The New Testament also has stories of visions and waking dreams. Joseph received dreams about the Virgin birth, instructions for naming their baby Jesus and a warning to flee to safety and when to return (Gospel of Matthew 1 and 2). After Christ, dreams were less likely to be considered to be revelations, but were viewed by some as a way of illuminating their faith, providing warnings or giving encouragement. Saint John Chrysostom, St Augustine and St Jerome are all quoted as believing that dreams were guidance from God. Others who came later such as Martin Luther, saw dreams as the work of the devil and preached that it was only the church, not dreams, that were the conduit of God's word.

**Greeks:**
In the second century Artemidorus wrote five volume book called “Oneirocritica” (The Interpretation of Dreams). Artemidorus believed that some dreams were visions or oracles. He demonstrated an understanding that dream symbols are metaphors specific to the individual dreamer that may reflect the conditions of waking life. Such ideas were the forerunners of 20th century psychological theories.

The ancient Greeks had temples called Asclepieion for the purpose of healing the sick through dream “incubation” (asking a dream for a solution to a problem or a cure for an illness). A person who was ill in body or mind slept in the temple and took part in rituals that were designed to prepare them to receive dreams from the Gods. When the person received a dream and listened to its wisdom it would often provide ideas that would lead to healing.

Plato (428-347 BC) studied emotion in dreams and wrote that they were an outlet for thoughts and actions of the human “lawless wild beast nature”. His student, Aristotle (384-322 BC) disputed the idea of dreams coming from the gods and did not believe that dreams were prophetic. He thought that the dreamer’s waking life could be influenced by dreams and imagination and that in dreams people might become more aware of the condition of their bodies and therefore dream warnings of illness. (Van deCastle, p. 64)

Islam:

"Clear dream visions are from God. Allegorical dream visions, which call for interpretations, are from the angels. And ‘confused dreams’ are from Satan, because they are altogether futile, as Satan is the source of futility.” (Rom Landau “The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi” quoted by Kelly Bulkeley in Sleep and Hypnosis 4:1, 2002)
Almost 1,400 years ago Mohammed the prophet of the Islamic religion had a dream of
the Angel Gabriel who told him to lead his people from Medina to Mecca, and so the
religion is considered to be formed from a dream. Traditionally, it is said that he also
received the holy Koran from the angel in a dream. The history of Mohammed’s words
and deeds known as the “hadith” contains many references to dreams and their
interpretation. Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Arabi (1164-1240) and Ibn Khaldun
(1332-1402) developed theories about various types of dreams and their spiritual
significance. Similar to the history of dreams in Christianity there have been periods of
time where dreams were suspected of misleading pious people and were not trusted or
encouraged by leaders. However, the tradition of honoring metaphysical forms of
communication have been so much a part of the Islamic past that many Muslims today
find significance and sacredness in their dreams and visions. (Bulkeley, Kelly, …)

Australian Aborigines:

“Aboriginals believe in two forms of time. Two parallel streams of activity. One is the
daily objective activity ... The other is an infinite spiritual cycle called the ’dreamtime,’
more real than reality itself. Whatever happens in the dreamtime establishes the values,
symbols, and laws of Aboriginal society. Some people of unusual spiritual powers have
contact with the dreamtime.” (Wolf, Fred Alan The Dreaming Universe (1994) quoting
the film “The Last Wave” by Peter Weir.)

There are many different tribal groups of Australian Aboriginal people, but they have in
common what they call “Dreamtime” a time when their ancestors “sang” them into being.
Dreamtime is a place of timelessness, where people connect with their ancestors and
there is no separation of past, present and future. It is believed that a person leaves their
body when they sleep and enters Dreamtime (Crisp, Tony dreamhawk.com) where they may meet relatives living and dead and travel to other times and places. Dreams are felt to be so important that some Aboriginal tribes meet each morning to share their travels (dreams) in order find the significance and possible messages contained in the dreams that will give help and advice to the tribe about healing, hunting and other matters of survival.

Senoi:

The Senoi are a Malaysian hunting and gathering tribe that lived in isolation from the outside world until World War II and were studied by psychologist Kilton Stewart. At that time it was reported that the Senoi had a method of dreamwork that was used everyday by the adults and children in that culture. These principles were popularized in the 1960’s and enthusiastically used by some a useful way to expand personal growth through learning from dreams.

1. Confront and conquer danger in dreams. Such as, if an animal looms out of the jungle, go toward it.

2. Move toward pleasurable experiences in dreams. If you are enjoying the pleasurable sensations of sex, flying or swimming, relax and experience them.

3. Always make a positive outcome from your dreams and create something from them such as a painting, song or dance.
There is much controversy regarding the accuracy of the reported Senoi research, which claims that these practices were a form of Lucid Dreaming (which will be discussed later in this course). Some theorists claim that the Senoi did not practice this technique and regard it as a fiction by Kilton Stewart and a way of manipulating dreams, (Domhoff, asdreams.org) others believe that it is an accurate portrayal. All agree that in spite of the doubts these dream work principles are interesting, valuable and worthy of attention.

Native American:

Dreams are regarded by many Native American tribes as a way of receiving sacred wisdom, visits from ancestors and prophecies. Individuals have animal “totems” (animals that are seen as guides and kindred spirits) and those animals may appear in dreams with special messages or warnings for a dreamer who has asked for visions and dreams to answer waking life questions. Like the Australian aboriginal people, many native tribes believe that an individual’s dream could speak for or advise the whole tribe. Historical records indicate that Native medicine men had dreams that predicted the coming of the white man, the killing of the Buffalo and the near destruction of the Native American culture and way of life.

IV. Creative Dreaming:

Dream history is rich in reports of creative inspirations! It is interesting that many creative people have been famously receptive to interpreting the messages of their dreams even in cultures where dream interpretation was not widely accepted. The following are brief descriptions of just a few of the reports describing the way experiences and symbols
of dreams led to solving problems and creating art, spiritual growth or a scientific breakthrough.

**St. Francis of Assisi:** Founded the Franciscan order because of a dream in which Christ spoke from the cross and said “go set my house in order”.

**Friedrich A. Kekule:** Chemist who made a major scientific breakthrough by discovering that the Benzene molecule had a unique circular structure when he dreamed of a snake “seizing hold of its own tail” and rolling downhill. In 1890 he told a conference of scientists “Let us learn to dream gentlemen, and then we may perhaps find the truth”.

**Elias Howe:** He had a dream of spears of cannibals with holes near the points which resulted in the design of the sewing machine needle after he had been pondering the problem of how to have a needle hold thread for his invention.

**George Frederic Handel:** Heard the last part of his masterpiece, the Messiah, in dream.

**Mary Shelley:** Author of “Frankenstein” based that horror story on a nightmare that woke her in 1816.

**Harriet Tubman:** An escaped slave who led hundreds of slaves to freedom on the “Underground Railroad”. The trips from South to North were extremely dangerous but Harriet Tubman was successful based on her dreams showing her safe routes North.

**General George Patton:** General in World War II who often dreamed about detailed battle plans. Patton often called and woke his junior officers in the middle of the night to tell them the plans in order to put them into action. Patton claimed that his dreamed plans were most often successful.
Jack Kerouac: Author of “On the Road” and “Dharma Bums” kept a dream journal and used dream events and characters to populate his best selling fiction.

Paul McCartney: Dreamed of a classical string ensemble playing a melody. When he awoke he played the melody on his piano. It became the song “Yesterday” one of the most recorded songs in history. He also attributes some of the song “Let It Be” to hearing his mother Mary’s voice in a dream advising him in a crisis to “let it be”.

Jack Nicklaus: A Champion Golfer who, in a period where he was not having much success with his game, had a dream where he was holding his golf club in a new and different way. When he awoke and imitated his dream grip his game was once again successful.

V. History of Dream Interpretation in Psychology:

Sigmund Freud:

“Dreams are the royal road to the unconscious”

Sigmund Freud is considered to be the father of psychoanalysis and the creator of the modern view of dreams and of their interpretation based on the popularity of his book Interpretation of Dreams (1899) in which he introduced the ideas of psychoanalysis and dream interpretation to the world. His most famous theory is that “wish-fulfillment is the meaning of each and every dream” and that most unconscious wishes and impulses are of a sexual nature. He believed that emotions, desires, and fears of which the dreamer is unaware, will show themselves in disguise through dreams. Since he thought that dreams were fundamentally about wish-fulfillment it naturally followed that he saw even
"negative" dreams (punishment dreams and other anxiety dreams) as a form of wishfulfillment; the wish being that certain events do not occur.

Sigmund Freud was born in 1856. He began his career as a neurologist specializing in “nervous disorders”. He studied hypnosis with Jean Charcot the French neurologist who treated what was referred to as “hysteria” a constellation of symptoms that appeared to have no physical origin. He also worked with Josef Breuer a Viennese physician who practiced the revolutionary idea of the “talking cure”; curing patients’ of hysteria by talking with them about their feelings, and symptoms and by using hypnosis to remove barriers to feelings. While talking with his patients, Freud found that they often shared their dreams and he was intrigued by the idea that dreams contained material that was mysterious to the patient when they were awake. Instead of hypnosis he began using a process he called “free association” in which he asked his patients to begin talking about a dream symbol without censoring their train of thought. His experience with dreams, the talking cure and free association led him to develop the theory of the human mind as a complex system, a theory that has had an enormous influence on the practice of psychology. His work brought him to believe that much of the activity that goes on in the mind is not conscious, and he proposed a three-part model. He called the parts the Ego, Superego and Id. (See Glossary)

Freud’s had extensive familiarity with the history of dream interpretation through his education that had included study of the Bible and ancient cultures. His work was preceded by centuries of philosophers who had developed dream theories and presented dreams as psychological rather than religious in origin such as Aristotle and many theorists of the earlier 1800’s. Freud combined his studies of previous dream theories,
his work with hypnosis, the talking cure and free association and his theories of the unconscious to create psychoanalysis

Freud believed that life in the civilized world made it necessary to repress primitive impulses such as urges, anger and sexual feelings. His theory was that repression of impulses leads to psychological illness or “neurosis”. His premise was that in dreams the primitive impulses were alive and active. He said that “dreams are the Guardians of sleep” and function to protect the ego. The protection is done by the Superego function which censors and disguises unacceptable primitive impulses and hides the patient’s true wishes. He called the actual content of the dream "manifest content" (an example would be a dog baring its teeth) and the disguised primitive wishes "latent content" (dog symbolizing the patient’s own murderous rage). Thus, in order to protect the ego, the Superego makes use of “defenses” in dreams that he called displacement, condensation, symbolization and pictorialization. (see glossary)

Freud's method for analyzing dreams used “free association” with which he brought out the latent content of the dream. In free association the patient is asked to look at the thoughts and emotions generated by the dream and begin to talk or write without self consciousness or censorship the waking thoughts and emotions they led to. A simple way of using free association is to spontaneously respond to words or images with the first idea that comes to mind. He believed that the process of free association would allow the analyst and dreamer to “fool” the unconscious into exposing what was hidden in the dream.

He did acknowledge that certain dreams might bring to memory traumas from war or childhood (which we would classify in contemporary psychology as post traumatic
stress). Those dreams were seen by Freud as the exception to the wish fulfillment rule as he accepted that the mind was dreaming as an attempt at dealing with extremes of traumatic and negative waking stimuli.

Summary:

1. Dreams are the “guardians of sleep” protecting ego from inner and outer disturbances.
2. Dreams are disguised and the latent content holds the true meaning of the dream.
3. The disguised content of dreams is about wishes, desires, sexuality that are forbidden in waking life.
4. The conscious mind actively tries to reject the messages of dreams and the wish is repressed, leading to inner conflict, the source of mental disturbance.
5. Dream work brings the latent content to the surface through free association allowing the dreamer to work through conflicts.

Exercise:

Try “free association” using a section from your own dream that has some feeling associated with it. For example, your dad playing Frisbee with you at the beach. List the words of that dream section on one side of a page. Then using free association either write quickly or say aloud an association to each major word. The new words will lead to ideas and memories and are expected to proceed without logic or constraint even if they seem trivial or bizarre. Try to associate without censoring your thoughts which is accomplished most successfully by doing it quickly. Finally, think of or write your dream section using the associated words and see if the images that arise out of free association
might lead you to thoughts and feelings that seem far from the original beach, but may help you to see connections from your dream to waking life.

**Carl G. Jung**

Dreams, “they do not deceive, they do not lie, they do not distort or disguise…They are invariably seeking to express something that the ego does not know and does not understand” (Jung, C.G., Collected Works, xvii paragraph 189)

Born in Switzerland in 1875, Jung began his studies in archaeology before studying medicine and eventually psychiatry. Jung was a close friend and colleague of Sigmund Freud, and was considered by Freud to be his successor. After a few years Jung began to develop his own theories that differed from Freud’s. Jung had in common with Freud the belief that dreams can lead the patient to greater understanding of self. However, while Freud believed that the unconscious wishes responsible for dream imagery were personal and predominantly sexual, Jung’s view was that dreams imagery helped the human psyche in its urge toward wholeness. Eventually Jung had a painful break with Freud over their differing positions. In childhood, Jung had powerful dreams and intense fantasies that had been unusually memorable. After his break with Freud he had a “period of disorientation” when he in a scientific way, studied his own dreams and painful psychological processes which he later wrote about in his memoir and in his more academic writing. (Memories, Dreams and Reflections)

In contrast to Freud, Jung believed that the purpose of dreaming was for the unconscious to communicate with the conscious self to assist the process of growth toward
“wholeness”: depth, stability, authenticity and creativity. In Jung’s theory it is believed that dreams can express parts of the personality that “compensate” for what has not been developed in the waking ego. He called the social personality the “persona” and a hidden part of the personality opposite to the persona the “shadow”. Jung saw the personality as made up of interacting systems and instead of Freud's superego, ego and id, Jung saw an ego, a personal unconscious and a collective unconscious. The personal unconscious is said to contain “complexes” which could be called neurotic patterns, and in the collective unconscious were archetypal patterns of thinking, acting and perceiving in certain ways. Also unlike Freud, Jung taught that the dreamer could work on the understanding of his/her own dream. He developed the idea that the individual could explore feelings about particular dream images through the systems of “amplification” (entering the atmosphere of the dream and immersing oneself in the depth, details and feelings of an image) and “active imagination” in which the dreamer engages in an inner dialogue with dream images. Jung approached a dream through his belief that within the dream there were symbols of a personal unconscious (the context of the dreamer’s waking life circumstances), cultural unconscious (the culture and time the dreamer lives in) and a collective unconscious (connections to symbols and “archetypes” common to all humanity). In his words:

“My thesis, then, is as follows: In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually, but is inherited. It
consists of pre-existent forms, the *archetypes*, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents”. (Jung, C.G. Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious Collected Works, 1936 Vol. 9.i, pars. 87-110)

The concept of the collective unconscious and archetypes in dreams is an essential part of Jungian dream interpretation. Archetypes are considered to be common human experiences that are presented as “archetypal symbols” recognized in dream images, fantasy and emotions and are, in Jungian psychology, considered to carry deep and primitive meaning. Jung considered archetypes to be universal and fundamental structures in the psyche of all humans and found they existed across cultures and to have been seen in even in ancient myths. Some of the more common archetypes are:

**Anima/Animus**: the male/female sides of each person. Often appear in a dream as a powerful person of the opposite sex representing the dreamers “other side”.

**Divine Child**: Innocent and unaware part of self appearing as babies and children.

**Wise Old Man**: The wisdom within often appears as a father or teacher.

**Great Mother**: Mysteries of birth, death, cycles of Life and appearing as mother, pregnant woman, crone or witch.

**Trickster**: Unpredictable, joking, changeable figure. The trickster figure shakes up the dreamer.

Jung’s theory of dreams can be summarized as (Stevens, 1994):

1. Dreams are not willed, they are natural events and are in the language of pictures.
2. Dreams serve to promote balance and wholeness in the personality.

3. The symbols of dreams are creative ideas that help to change waking psychological states.

4. Allow the dream to reveal itself rather than breaking it down to intellectual ideas.

Jungian Exercises:

Using a symbol from a recent dream that you or a client have had apply the following:

Amplification: Close your eyes and return to the dream observing and feeling one particular image such as a beach. Begin with personal meanings. Describe image as if to someone who had no idea what the word “beach” meant. What is the shape of the image? What is the function? What does it remind you of? What do you like or dislike about the image? Then move on to consideration of cultural and societal meanings related to the image. The last level is the archetypal associations from fairy tales, myths, stories or religious practices when you look at the dream symbols. Are there any of the common archetypes present?

Active Imagination: Sit quietly and clear the mind by taking slow deep breaths with eyes closed. Allow dreams images to arise. Ask questions of the image: Who are you? Why are you here? Do you have something to tell me? Why are you doing that? Is there something you would like to do or would like me to do? Allow your images and feelings to speak to you without judging them. Jung said of his own exercises with active imagination: "One of the greatest difficulties for me lay in dealing with my negative feelings. I was voluntarily submitting myself to emotions of which I could not really
approve, and I was writing down fantasies which often struck me as nonsense, and toward which I had strong resistances.” [C.G. Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections]

Working with the Shadow: Choose a particularly irritating or annoying image from your dream and keep it with you during the day. Observe your thoughts, feelings and reactions to that image and see what the image feels like to you as you move through your day. Since the shadow is often an uncomfortable and “un-owned” part of the self make note of how it feels to “own” that image for the day.

Alfred Adler:

“ In dreams we produce the pictures which will arouse the emotions we need for our purposes, that is, for solving problems confronting us at the time of the dream in accordance with the particular style of life which is ours”

“…we may see that dreams are determined by the individual goal of superiority” (Adler, 1929, p. 155)

Born in 1870 Alfred Adler was for a brief time an associate of Freud, but broke with him to develop an alternative form called Individual Psychology. Adler believed that the primary urge of each individual is control and mastery over childhood feelings of inferiority and believed that people create stories and styles of life that reflect internal problems. He saw dreams as problem solving tools whose purpose it was to help the dreamer have a successful experience of gaining control in waking life. He interpreted dreams in a fairly literal way looking at parts of a dream and analyzing it for signs of inferiority complexes or other problems. For instance, dreams of falling indicate the dreamer is afraid of falling in power in their life whereas flying dreams would indicate
someone who is wishing for or attaining success. He believed that dreams could aid the
dreamer in gaining awareness by observing in the dream the way they chose to solve
social problems and changing behaviors in waking life.

James Hillman

“Stick with the image.”

“As I grow familiar with my dreams I grow familiar with my inner world. Who lives in
me? What inscapes are mine? What is recurrent and therefore what keeps coming back to
reside in me?”

James Hillman is a Jungian psychoanalyst who developed “Archetypal Psychology” and
set out on a new path of “befriending” the dream rather than imposing an interpretation
upon it. Archetypal psychology focuses on myth, images and fantasy and has a slightly
different point of view than Jung regarding dreams. Hillman does not see dreams as
compensating for waking life or to have secret meanings for creating wholeness, but as
reflections of who a person is. He has written (Insearch, 1967) that by listening to the
dream images the dreamer learns about their own particular inner world and what sort of
symbols and feelings are unique to them. He suggested that the dreamer approach the
dream as if it were a world that existed on its own. Hillman found “interpretations and
explanations” to be rationalizations originating in the conscious mind in an effort to
“tame” the mysterious and sometimes frightening, symbolic world of the dream. In
“sticking with the image” the dreamer experiences the images in dreams in the same way
one experiences a piece of music or art. The image itself inspires and creates
psychological depth that does not necessarily benefit by interpretation or analysis.
Fritz Perls:

"The dream is a message of yourself to yourself"

Born in 1893 and known as the creator of Gestalt Therapy, Perls initially trained as a Freudian psychoanalyst and believed, as Freud did, that unresolved conflicts from the past needed to be worked through. His theory was that past conflicts were continually being acted out in the “here and now” and applied that to his theory of dream interpretation. His theory was that every part of the dream, every person and object, is the dreamer, and are parts of the dreamer that have been repressed or rejected and need to be integrated with the conscious self. Perls had the dreamer describe the dream object as if it were him/herself. For instance if the dream image was a houseplant the dreamer might say: “I am healthy and vibrant and soak up the sun” or “I’m neglected and wilted”. This would help the dreamer to integrate the object (house plant) in the dream with the waking self. Perls often used the technique of having a dreamer sit across from an empty chair. The dreamer would then imagine that an image from the dream was in that chair and engage in an active dialogue to see what it had to say. This technique is similar to Jung’s active imagination.

Exercise: Tell a recent dream in the present tense as if it were happening right now. Take the part of a character or object in the dream and speak as this object out loud or on paper. For instance: a common dream is one of being chased. Take the part of the person chasing, ask “why are you chasing me?” and answer from the pursuer’s point of view.

VI. Themes
Content Analysis

“It is clear that man’s conduct is a visible embodiment of his conceptions……..during sleep, when the mind turns in upon itself, these recesses are explored and charted in the shape of dreams” (Hall, C., The Meaning of Dreams, pp230)

Calvin S. Hall, a psychogist, collected more than 50,000 dream reports at Western Reserve University over a period of 40 years. He developed a way of understanding dreams called “Content Analysis” and along with his colleague Robert Van De Castle, a way of coding the content of dreams in an effort to understand their meaning. (The Content Analysis of Dreams, Hall and Van De Castle). His system is based on the distinction between “perceiving” (looking at an image) and “conceiving” (thinking about an image). He believed that dreams are a reflection of the dreamers conceptions about life, and therefore by analyzing the content of dreams, the dreamer’s systems and patterns of thinking would be clearly seen. Once the concepts are identified they can be used for psychological insight. Hall found that people all over the world dream of mostly the same things and presented five basic concept categories:

**Concepts of self:** the kind of social roles we play in dreams which reflect a person’s idea of self.

**Concepts of others:** roles of friends, family and others in dreams, reflecting feelings and interactions with others.

**Concepts of the world:** the dream setting and environment gives information about the dreamer’s view of the world (harsh, welcoming, beautiful, etc.)
Concepts of impulses, prohibitions and penalties: Reflect the way one behaves and issues of ethics, conscience and morals.

Concepts of problems and conflicts: Relates to issues, conflicts and problems in life and the dreamer’s style of resolving them.

Studies of content analysis (Domhoff, *The Scientific Study of Dreams*) have shown that there are many commonly reported themes:

- A child’s struggle to understand himself and his parents
- Conflicts between freedom and security
- School, failing an exam, being late, being chased, falling
- Death, flying, tooth loss, naked in public

EXERCISE:

Hall believed that dreams revealed a person’s thoughts, a theory in contrast to Freud’s belief that dreams were hiding true feelings. He said that dreamers make illustrated stories of the conceptions and conflicts most important in waking life, at the time of the dream.

Using the list of five concept categories, refer to a current dream and categorize the dream people and objects according to the list asking questions such as: what role am I playing in this dream? What are the roles and attitudes of the other people in my dream? What is the setting like? How do I feel in that setting? How am I and others behaving?
Do I have a choice to make or an ethical dilemma? What are the problems and conflicts in my dream? Do I resolve them or do I have some ideas of resolving them in the dream?

Reflect on your answers to these questions and the information you may have learned about your concepts of yourself and your world.

**Dreaming and the Body:**

Practitioners who view the body as a source of understanding of dreams are currently growing in number. One of the originators is Eugene Gendlin born in 1916 who brings his therapeutic system called “Focusing” to dream work. Focusing is a system of paying close attention to the “felt sense” of the body in a psychotherapeutic setting. Gendlin’s style of dream work covers many styles of dream interpretation in a series of questions. The unique aspect is his focus on the body as being the authority regarding the accuracy of interpretation and paths to growth. (see the book: Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams for specific questions)

1. Gendlin asks a series of questions that come under the headings:
   - Associations
   - Drama
   - Working with the Characters
   - Decoding
   - Developmental

2. Stage 1: the dreamer contemplates the questions while paying careful attention to their bodily reactions. In this system they are looking for a sense in their body of
“knowing” what dream is about in a *felt sense*. Felt sense is a sense of rightness that might not be a verbal or even cognitive interpretation, but a physical sense.

3. Stage 2: Growth. The dreamer tries to sense a direction of a way to grow in awareness or understanding. Again, the sense of direction is sought in paying attention to the body while tolerating all feelings about the dream especially those that are uncomfortable. The dreamer experiments with feeling what it would be like for the dreamer or other dream character to act opposite to the way they usually do. The theory states that by accepting the uncomfortable feelings and trying on a different behaviors or attitudes the dreamer is more likely to become aware of habitual patterns of behavior or thought and to be able to change and grow.

Another pioneer in the field of body focused dream work is Arnold Mindell born 1940, who studied physics at MIT and became a Jungian analyst. He developed a form of bodywork (along with his wife Amy) called “Dreambody” to expand on Jung’s ideas. His theory is that all body problems and symptoms are mirrored in dreams. For “Dreambody” work a dreamer will focus on a physical problem and associate it with an image and then to a remembered dream. For example a person with an intense headache, might associate the pain to having stones falling on their head. They might then remember a dream of an avalanche burying their house. The next step in Dr. Mindell’s work helps the dreamer understand a way to use the dream metaphor (avalanche) to change her behavior in waking life. Behavioral changes made in response to the dream might lead to a change or healing of physical symptoms.
“Embodied Dreamwork” is pioneered by Robert Bosnak a Dutch Jungian analyst. This body and memory centered work has its roots in the work of Jung on “alchemy” and amplification and echoes the advice of James Hillman to “stick with the image”. In this form of dream work the dreamer enters a “hypnagogic state” (a relaxed state between waking and sleeping) where he/she can reenter the dream and through questioning with a therapist or group, explore the details of the landscape, images and feelings in the dream. When the dreamer explores the details using amplification the dream images change and develop depth which can lead to new and increased awareness. References are made to the symbols of alchemy is this form of dreamwork as metaphors for the process of change and transformation. Dr. Bosnak has also pioneered “cyberdreamwork” creating a way of doing dream work over the internet with people participating from all over the world. The website includes a “nightmare hotline” that was developed after the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 as a way to help people cope with trauma.

Group Dream Work

Dr. Montague Ullman has been the leader in a movement to encourage “dream sharing groups” by teaching a safe, effective and confidential group process. His early career was in neurology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis and he initiated one of the first sleep laboratories in New York City at Maimonides Medical Center in 1961, a laboratory devoted to the experimental study of dreams and telepathy.

Following his basic theory that each person has a personal dream language in which every symbol, object, animal, feeling or person has a particular meaning to the dreamer
that might differ from the dream meaning of another person. Anyone who wants to help the dreamer understand a dream must be aware that they must ask many questions.

Dr. Ullman’s pioneering work with groups has the members listening carefully to the dreamer recount a dream. The group members follow with questions about the dream, characters and daytime events. Then the group members “project” their own feeling about the dream by saying “if it were my dream I’d wonder about….”. The dream is returned to the dreamer who generally finds that some of the projections by the group members have inspired feelings about the dream that will help gain insight to the dream’s importance for themselves.

Jeremy Taylor is a Unitarian Universalist Minister who is a teacher and leader in the field of projective dreamwork and social change. His group dreamwork, based on Dr. Ullman’s, adds awareness of the religious and spiritual nature of dreams. He believes that group dream work can change the world by highlighting all dreamers’ common humanity. He said “I began to notice not only that dreams are inspirations for creative life and interesting puzzles to be solved but also that they provided access to a world of meaning…” that he feels can be a powerful force for social change. (sfgate.com “finding my religion, 2005)

**Lucid Dreaming**

Lucid dreaming: the awareness, in the dream, that you are dreaming. The dreamer has a moment of realization that they have some control over their dream activities and can manipulate dream events or confront danger or threat in order to change it. One of the
leaders in the field of lucid dream research in Stephan LaBerge, PhD. (Lucid Dreaming) who has developed techniques for teaching people to become lucid dreamers.

Lucid dreaming has long been associated with spiritual and religious life in the history of Greeks and Romans, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism dating to the 4th century. (Van DeCastle, pp 440). Tibetan Buddhists consider lucidity in a dream to be a necessary part of the path toward enlightenment (further information can be found in Evans-Wentz's 1935 book Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrine).

Lucid dreams are often used therapeutically. The lucid dreamer may employ awareness and control. While dreaming they may turn to confront a threat, perhaps asking why the image or character is acting the way it is, or coming up with creative ways to deflect pain or negativity. There are reports of lucid dreaming being used to reduce phobias as the dreamer can use the technique of “desensitization” in their dreams. Examples of these therapeutic uses might be a dreamer stopping to question or scare away a pursuer or turning an attacker’s knife into a banana in the dream. For a phobia about elevators, the dreamer could enter one in a dream for increasingly long periods of time until the waking phobia has reduced.

Scientific Research and Dreaming

Laboratory studies of the dreaming brain in the 1960’s and 70’s proposed that all dreaming was done during the segment of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep and was merely a series of random images based on common human emotions of anxiety, anger or joy. Consequently, the dream research scientists were in conflict with the psychoanalytic belief that dreams are meaningful and useful to waking life circumstances.
Current dream research is benefiting by the use of technology to study the living brain. In one study (NY Times 11/2/99) at the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Allen Braun and colleagues found an interesting pattern of brain arousal and shut down. They found that the brainstem and “limbic system” were very active, while the Cortical regions was shut down. The Limbic system is involved with emotions and the visual and auditory areas used for processing sensory input and includes the amygdala, the structure involved in engendering anxiety in response to stress. The Cortical regions control mental processes such as logical thinking and planning and short term memory (which may explain the difficulty of remembering dreams).

These findings can be interpreted to support some of the theories of Freud and Jung. The Cortical regions could be seen as the “ego” and “superego” and the limbic system could represent the “id”. However, the part of the brain that creates symbols in order censor and disguise was inactive. This inactivity would contradict Freud and support the theories of Jung and Hillman, suggesting that dreams are do not disguise, but instead reflect in pictures and feelings the direct concerns of the dreamer. It has also been shown in contemporary dream studies that people dream not only in REM sleep, but in other stages as well, which further complicates the debate among scientists as to why we dream.

The following is a list of current scientific theories about why we dream (Richard Wilkerson, Dreamgate.com)

1. For restoration of mind and body
2. Moving memories from short to long term memory.
3. Organizing things learned during the day
4. To regulate the brain’s level of awareness/rest during sleep.
5. Allowing imagination to make stories from disturbances instead of waking us
6. To maintain a sense of self and wholeness through sleep.
7. To explore new and unusual areas of ourselves.
8. To resolve conflicts and find creative solutions.
9. To put new emotions felt in waking life in a context

VI. Conclusion:

I am pleased to have presented this overview of the history of dream interpretation. For the past ten years, I have been using dream work as an adjunct to psychotherapy practice. My practice is based in traditional clinical social work adapting a wide range of techniques, from those based in psychodynamic theory to practical cognitive and behavioral interventions. Working with clients’ dreams supports social work by opening doors to deeper understanding and more effective treatment goals and plans and therapeutic interventions. Irvin Yalom, an inspiring psychiatrist who does existential and group psychotherapy has said this about clinical use of dreams: “…dreams are useful not because of astonishing deep insights that emerge from exhaustive dream analysis but simply because the patients’ associations to dreams lead them to unexpected memories, reflections and disclosures.” (Yalom, I., pg. 423)

As Freud found, more than a century ago, when clients tell a dream, they present to the therapist and themselves an opportunity to look at feelings, wishes or conflicts that, in
their waking-life, they may find uncomfortable or even surprising. As Jung taught us, the attention to the material of dreams can offer the therapist insight into helping a client find their way to balance and individual authenticity in dealing with life’s challenges and crises. Jung pointed out that dreams assist a client to be more aware of the universality of their own problems in the context of the collective human struggle shown in the symbols of dreams and stories. Dream work can be energizing and illuminating in the therapy hour. An example of bringing more action and energy using dreamwork is Fritz Perls’ active way of having a client talk to dream characters in the empty chair. I have found that Calvin Hall’s work of content analysis lends itself to more focused cognitive behavioral work as it shows the client’s conceptions of life through dream environments, relationships, feelings and events. Psychology and science are learning more about the strong ties between trauma, stress, body and mind and dream interpretation that involves awareness of the body and physical feelings is increasingly acknowledged as being helpful to clients. Brain research using new technology to understand the dreaming process is supporting the theories of Freud and Jung! Dream interpretation is also building community, as projective dream groups proliferate. In dream groups, whether clinical or non-clinical, people are creating supportive relationships based on the goal of personal development. Group dream sharing often leads to reduced feelings of isolation, and increased empathy and compassion for others.

I hope that you will use the exercises in this course to experiment with your own dreaming. If you find one theory particularly interesting the bibliography will lead you to further study. The International Association for the Study of Dreams has a yearly conference that includes many workshops that will help you to incorporate dream
interpretation in clinical practice. Working with your own dreams can be a steppingstone
to using dream interpretation in your work with clients. You may find that just listening
to a dream and acknowledging the symbols, feelings and characters in your client’s
dream will lead to a deepening of content and increase in awareness of affect. At times it
may be especially appropriate to listen without interpretation when there is a concern
about a client’s fragility or decompensation. Another course will be offered to follow
this one that will address the use of dreams in clinical practice in depth.

VIII. Glossary

Freudian terms:

**Ego**: The conscious self that is called “I” and experiences and interacts with outer world.

**Superego**: Enforces moral codes for the behavior of the ego that censors unacceptable
impulses from the Id.

**Id**: The unconscious. The primitive part of the psyche focused on pleasure, desire and
socially unacceptable impulses.

**Displacement**: a dream object’s or person’s importance is assigned to an alternate object
that does not raise the censor’s suspicions

**Projection**: unconsciously attributing to other people the traits, motivations, feelings and
thoughts that are unacceptable to the self

**Symbolization**: an action, person or idea is converted into a dream symbol

**Condensation**: one dream object or situation stands for several latent thoughts
**Rationalization**: substituting an explanation or creating an excuse for something that may have different, unconscious or unreasonable motives.

**Representation**: a thought is represented by an image

**Pictorialization**: to represent a feeling, impulse, wish with a picture as in dreams.

**Jungian Terms**:

**Alchemy**: is popularly defined as a medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy aiming to achieve the transmutation of the base metals into gold. Jung studied alchemy in which he saw a symbolic process of looking for God in matter that parallels the psychological process of individuation.

**Anima**: Image of the Feminine nature in the unconscious of man

**Animus**: Image of the Masculine nature in the unconscious of woman.

**Archetype**: Element in the psyche that is expressed as a dream image and is shared over time and cultures with human consciousness and seen in fairytales, ancient stories and symbols and religious rituals.

**Collective Unconscious**: Differs from Freud’s personal unconscious in that it is the container of the human experience.

**Compensation**: Counterbalance to one-sided behavior.

**Individuation**: "Individuation means becoming an 'in-dividual,' and, insofar as 'individuality' embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self." (C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, par. 266).

**Metaphor**: Image or idea used in place of another which suggests a likeness.

**Projection**: An unconscious process in which one’s own feelings, anxiety, motivations etc are attributed to another person, animal, image or object.

**Psyche**: All psychological processes both conscious and unconscious.
IX. Bibliography


