

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC QUARTERLY

(1987). *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 56:251-262

Reflections on the Self State Dream

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ABSTRACT

Self psychologists contend that patients with narcissistic personality disorders have dreams which cannot be understood in terms of current psychoanalytic dream theory and that these dreams, called self state dreams, have a different origin and structure. The manifest content of these dreams is said to reveal the reactions of healthy sectors of the psyche to disturbing changes in the condition of the self. Self psychologists are said to be able to understand these dreams directly, without the patients' associations, as portrayals of the dreamers' dread of threats to the integrity of the self. The authors raise questions about these contentions. They conclude that the self state dream will remain a dubious concept until a more extensive psychology of dreaming is provided by self psychologists.

The concept of the self state dream constitutes a difficult challenge for one attempting to assess its validity. One problem derives from the circumstance that the concept arises from and is a facet of the psychology developed and elaborated by Heinz Kohut and his followers, which has come to be known as self psychology. Thus, any scrutiny of the self state dream will entail some consideration of how the psychic apparatus is conceptualized by self psychologists. A second difficulty has to do with the clinical examples offered by self psychologists: since they arrive at interpretations without the guiding test of the patient's associations and other clinical data of the sessions in which the dreams were reported, they do not provide this material, and, consequently, one is handicapped in any effort to see if these dream specimens can be shown to agree in conceptual detail with dreams as we have understood them.

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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SELF STATE DREAM

The term self state dream was introduced by Kohut in *The Restoration of the Self* (1977): therein he contended that patients suffering with narcissistic personality disorders have dreams of a kind different from those reported by neurotic patients. These dreams are considered typical of those conditions in which the cohesive self is vulnerable to fragmentation. They are regarded as a different sort of dream which cannot be explained by traditional dream psychology (Kohut, 1984p. 113). In keeping with this understanding, the manifest content of such dreams is said to reveal the reactions of healthy sectors of the psyche to disturbing changes in the condition of the self. Associations, the self psychologists maintain, do not lead to hidden layers of the mind; rather the "correct interpretation ... explains the dream on the basis of the analyst's knowledge of the vulnerabilities of his patient in general, including his knowledge of the particular situation that, by dovetailing with a specific vulnerability, had brought about the intrusion of the hardly disguised archaic material" (Kohut, 1977p. 110). In his effort to interpret such dreams, the analyst oriented to self psychology does not search for day residue, nor is he concerned with the sources of the various dream details; rather, by virtue of his empathy and knowledge of the state of the patient's self, he is able to understand the dream directly as a portrayal of the dreamer's dread of threats to the integrity of the self.

It is worth noting that Kohut introduced the concept of narcissistic transferences in his earlier book, *The Analysis of the Self* (1971pp. 4-5), using dreams of this kind. In one instance the dreamer was going around the globe in a spaceship far away from the earth but was held by the pull of gravity toward the earth's core, and in the other the dreamer was swinging higher and higher on a swing. Kohut believed that these dreams demonstrated that the pull on the narcissistic transference, represented by gravity and by the ropes of the swing, held these

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dreamers from flying off into psychosis. His treatment of these dreams exhibits two facets which will be discussed below but which can be mentioned here. First, in his reliance on the manifest content Kohut is selective; he places significance on proprioceptive sensations and affects while showing little interest in the specificity of other dream elements. Second, in

likening the ropes of the swing and the pull of gravity to the narcissistic transference he is suggesting that a component of the psychic apparatus (as he understands it) is being graphically represented in the manifest dream.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Psychic Determinism

In presentations of self state dreams Kohut and other self psychologists read the meaning of the dream directly from manifest content without considering the various aspects of each element of the manifest dream as determined by multiple unconscious forces. For example, one member of this school, Paul Tolpin (1980), defended alterations made in presentations of a particular dream as follows:

Does it matter in essence whether one is lonely in a lake resort town or in a ghost town? Does it matter in essence if the self is depicted as depleted by the use of an underpowered boat or an underpowered automobile? I think not (p. 9).

For many analysts such an attitude raises serious questions. They would, for instance, anticipate that the patient's associations would reveal reasons for the appearance of particular images in a dream. One should keep in mind that apparently minor dream details can frequently lead to major discoveries about the dreams in which they appear, the dreamer's life, and her or his psychology.

It is true that our literature includes such concepts as typical dreams and universal symbols which, some may argue, lend

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support to the idea that one may understand certain dreams directly from manifest content. Even in these instances, however, the dreams and symbols should serve to orient the analyst to possible or likely themes in the latent content rather than serve as a direct statement of this content. A flight of stairs, a street, and a flying object may all be considered universal symbols, but in order to interpret a dream in which such a symbol appears, one should pay attention to which flight of stairs, which street, or which flying object appeared in a particular dream, and what links the particular elements had with latent content. "Often enough a symbol has to be interpreted in its proper meaning and not symbolically ..." (Freud, 1900p. 352). For example, an analysand recently engaged to be married dreamed that he was in some romantic relationship with the wife of the President; he was content to say that it showed that he was attached to his mother. When pressed for associations, however, he recalled seeing the first lady on television in a situation which brought to mind a woman who worked in his office. He had developed a crush on this woman, which understandably created conflict, and he had not mentioned his disturbing infatuation in the analysis.

Dream Interpretations without the Aid of the Patient's Associations

It is not in itself unusual to deal with dreams without the aid of explicit, deepening associations to each element reported. It appears that many analysts rely at times on their knowledge of the patient to select out only a few elements for interpretive comment. Brenner (1976p. 142) pointed out in this connection that "the more one knows about the dreamer, the more likely it is that one is able to understand the meaning of his dreams even without many further associations." After citing examples from Freud, he went on to observe "When one knows very much about the psychological context in which a dream appears, as is often true in analysis, one can understand a good deal of the meaning of a dream as a patient tells it." Freud, too,

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felt that at least some typical dreams could not be interpreted from associations; one had to rely on one's knowledge of symbols and of the patient's associations. Still, when one dispenses with the guidance of the dreamer's associations, one should be cautious and alert to possible additional determinants for the particular form taken by the dream.

Freud (1900p. 305) believed that some dreams were less disguised than others. At times he went so far as to state that there seemed to be two groups of dreams: dreams in which the wish fulfillment is unrecognizable and disguised by every possible means, and a second group of "undistorted" wishful dreams (1900pp. 550, 551). However, he never suggested that these dreams were structured differently so that different psychological theories were necessary for their explanation. Rather, he understood that dreams whose meaning was most obvious were, in their structure, exactly the same as more obscure dreams but with less disguise by the displacements prompted by censorship (1900p. 308). In both groups of dreams, the dream work, characterizing the relationship between latent and manifest dream, is the same, save for less disguise at the behest of the dream censor. As stated before, when one interprets without the dreamer's associations, one

should be aware of the possibility that the form taken by a dream contains important additional but successfully concealed determinants.

When we consider the dream reported by Anna Ornstein, to be described below, and the one referred to by Paul Tolpin (in which a ghost town was replaced with a deserted lake resort), we are hesitant to accept the idea that self state dreams can be read directly from manifest content: there are too many elements unaccounted for. The latter dream was reported by M. Tolpin and Kohut (1980); this dream had appeared in a different form in oral presentation (see Levine, 1979) and in *The Psychology of the Self* (Goldberg, 1978). The distortions do not seem to affect confidentiality: the dreamer should have no trouble recognizing the dream as his in all of the presentations, and the distortions do not appear to hide the identity of the dreamer from

¹ The dream in its unaltered form was presented by Marion Tolpin in her reading of Tolpin and Kohut (1980) before the Philadelphia Association for Psychoanalysis in November 1979, as follows: "... the patient was in a ghost town. He was surprised to see his parents there. Their house was different and unusual; it had a special room for his (younger) brother, and he (the patient) felt surprised. Then he noticed that something had happened to his sportscar—it had become ordinary looking. It was underpowered, smaller and he couldn't make it work right." A disguised version had appeared in Goldberg (1978): "... he had a dream about an empty lake resort town and how upset he is to discover his parents there. Their own cottage is different and unusual in that it has a special room for his older brother, and he is surprised at this. Moreover, something seems to have happened to his little fishing launch: it has become an ordinary-looking, underpowered rowboat which he can't make work" (p. 380). The dream then appeared in the published version of Tolpin and Kohut (1980) as follows: "... he was in an empty lake resort town. He was surprised to see his parents there. Their house was different and unusual; it had a special room for his (younger) brother, and he (the patient) felt surprised. Then he noticed that something had happened to his fishing launch—it had become an ordinary looking rowboat. It was underpowered, smaller, and he couldn't make it work right" (p. 429).

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readers, since it would not be possible for readers to identify the dreamer on the basis of the manifest content.¹

We believe that it is not unfair to consider whether the willingness to alter the manifest content in dream reports in this literature is reflective of an a priori belief that associations to these elements are of no utility in understanding the dream. With Levine, we believe that dream elements are determined by the patient's psychology and are not random events. One distortion in *The Psychology of the Self* version changed the younger brother to an older brother. When one recognizes that it was actually a younger brother who was represented in the dream and that the patient's parents had just rented his room to a young college student and seemed cheerful about having replaced him (Goldberg, 1978p. 379), one arrives at a quite plausible and internally consistent interpretation of the dream and its likely precipitant. While we cannot claim that this treatment of the dream, which relies on an accurate dream report and specific day residue, is beyond any doubt valid, we do feel that it deserves serious consideration when compared to the interpretation made by M. Tolpin and Kohut.

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New data, understandings, and theoretical formulations have evolved from the dream research conducted in sleep laboratories over the past several decades. While these findings are only beginning to be integrated with the corpus of psychoanalytic knowledge, it is nonetheless true that very little of our previous understanding of dreams and dream processes has been challenged. Rather, our knowledge has been enriched. Dreaming is understood by some contributors as a process of the integration of new experience with existing structures. Palombo (1978p. 12) speaks of current experiences being superimposed on and fused with the past. Hartmann (1973) understands this process of integration to be the principal function of the dream. This dream research would not seem to support the notion of a dream in which the manifest content reflects the distress of healthy sectors of the psyche in response to the threat of disintegration of the self.

Along these lines, it may also be noted that in sleep laboratories subjects awakened during REM sleep produce pertinent memories which are later forgotten and not retrieved through association to the dream elements. Thus, the inability to find meaningful memories and other associations does not conclusively indicate that this material was absent (Palombo, 1978, p. xii).

Representation of Psychic Structures in Dreams

Kohut (1984p. 113) contended that while the traditional models of the psychic apparatus are sufficient for explaining the majority of dreams, they do not suffice for self state dreams. These latter dreams, as they are conceptualized, have to do with the direct representation of structures and endopsychic perceptions in the manifest dream. In contrast, we are accustomed to regarding dreams as disguised primary process expressions of latent dream thoughts. The manifest dream is made up of perceptions and affects that have been registered from experience.

Clearly, here we have a radical alteration in the theory of dreams and one which so far has not been buttressed by a

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searching discussion of the problems it raises. Perhaps we can best explain our concerns on this point by making reference to a similar attempt made by Freud (1911) in the Schreber case:

Schreber's 'rays of God', which are made up of a condensation of the sun's rays, of nerve-fibers, and of spermatozoa ..., are in reality nothing else than a concrete representation and projection outwards of libidinal cathexes; and they thus lend his delusions a striking conformity with our theory... these and many other details of Schreber's delusional structure sound almost like endopsychic perceptions of the processes whose existence I have assumed ... as the basis of our explanation of paranoia (pp. 78-79).

Freud here regarded the "rays of God" in two ways. First they were elements in a fantasy expressive of a conflict involving Schreber's relationship to his father. In addition, Freud saw them as concrete representations of a metapsychological concept. Kohut put aside the opportunity to understand the dream as an expression of fantasies but insisted on regarding the manifest dreams exclusively as reified, concrete representations of hypothetical structures.

The Representation of the Self in Dreams

While Kohut claimed that the self state dream is a different sort of dream and one that cannot be satisfactorily explained by the traditional model (1984p. 113), he did not provide an extensive dream psychology. Indeed, the only article specifically devoted to the self state dream is one by P. Tolpin (1983), and the literature on the topic is sparse when one considers the challenge it constitutes to our understanding of dream psychology. In Kohut's usage self state dreams were typically brief dreams in which the self is represented by proprioceptive sensations and emotions. However, the self psychologists tend to treat all the dreams they report as self state dreams and include as representations of the self such images as underpowered sports cars and capsized boats. For example, P. Tolpin (1983p. 260) presents a self state dream which is long and complicated,

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is filled with many elements, and has several action sequences. Goldberg's (1974p. 251) treatment of a dream which he understood to have been precipitated by the patient's reaction to a failure of empathy on the part of the analyst is treated as such a dream.

Kohut's examples of self state dreams frequently contain proprioceptive sensations, although he did not claim that they were pathognomonic. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that there are many references in the literature to dreams which contain proprioceptive sensations but which are understood in the usual way. Freud (1900p. 394) discussed such dreams as having erotic meaning. Saul and Curtis (1967) and Saul and Fleming (1959) have provided other instances in which these sensations of movement were interpreted as elation or depression.

An unpublished example provided by a colleague appears to be exactly the sort of dream which is classified as a self state dream. The dreamer experienced himself as flying an airplane. At first it was very pleasurable, but he became uneasy with the realization that he was flying solo and this was only his fourth flight—too soon to be flying alone. This dream occurred the night before he was to teach a seminar. The subject of the seminar was one with which he was quite familiar as he had taught it three times before. However, this was the first time he had taught it alone, that is, solo. The dreamer was not in analysis at the time of the dream, but he realized that he was missing the company of his former associate in the seminar, and he did some working on his dream. He recalled that as a child he had enjoyed having his mother dress him in the mornings, and his father had expressed the opinion that he should dress himself. He had responded that he was only three and that he would do it when he was four. His father accepted this.

It would be hard to challenge the idea that the dreamer was longing for the self object relationship with his former associate, but it would be difficult to substantiate the idea that the dream represented a threat of fragmentation to his cohesive self. The circumstances for the dream and the minimal associative material

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do fit with a traditional treatment. The dream was an expression of issues of separation and competition which were being stimulated in the dreamer's life.

We do know that the dreams which are reported by patients constitute only a small fraction of the actual dreaming each night. It is entirely possible, therefore, that the short, proprioceptive dreams described by Kohut are fragments of longer dreams. For example, Anna Ornstein (1983) reported the following dream as a self state dream. This dream has already been alluded to in this paper:

I was a mate on a ship. the captain wanted to rebuild the inner workings of the ship. We took the boat to a lagoon and undid all the screws holding the hull, the ship, together. That made the ship turn over, but it still kept floating—the screws were rusty, some were missing. The boat began to drift. There were two other boats on a collision course. The waves from that affected our ship. But we were able to get the boat back to shore (p. 143).

Although Ornstein was the patient's analyst, Kohut (1983p. 405), in his discussion, insisted that the patient's dream "contained no reference to a shore," no reference to "not reaching a shore." He focused on the parts of the ship not being held together firmly and the danger of capsizing as reflective of the patient's insecure self state. He made no mention of two other boats on a collision course which created waves affecting the patient's boat.

SUMMARY

The concept of the self state dream was introduced by Kohut in 1977; he contended that patients suffering with narcissistic personality disorders have dreams in which the manifest content reveals the reactions of the healthy sectors of the psyche to disturbing changes in the condition of the self. Self psychologists maintain that associations do not lead to hidden layers of the mind but that the dream may be correctly interpreted by taking into account the patient's vulnerability and the situation which

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led to the intrusion of the archaic material. Thus, in his effort to interpret such dreams, the self psychologist does not search for day residue, nor is he concerned with the sources of various dream details; rather, by virtue of his empathy and his knowledge of the state of the patient's self, he is able to understand the dream directly as a portrayal of the dreamer's dread of threats to the integrity of his self.

Any attempt to assess the validity of this concept is made difficult by the circumstance that self psychologists do not provide associations and other data from the sessions in which dreams are reported when they, the self psychologists, present material to the psychoanalytic community. They omit this data because they believe it does not contribute to their understanding of these dreams. Thus one is handicapped in the effort to determine if these dream specimens can be shown to agree in conceptual detail with dreams as we have understood them.

We have nonetheless examined the concept and some dreams offered by the self psychologists as examples; we have discussed what we see as difficulties with the concept. These include the disregard for psychic determinism and the claim that hypothetical metapsychological components of the psychic apparatus are graphically represented in the manifest dream. We have also examined the proposition that the proprioceptive sensations and affects which appear frequently in Kohut's examples of self state dreams can be interpreted directly as indications of distress being experienced by the self.

Given that self psychologists are arguing for a major revision in our understanding of dream psychology, remarkably little has been published on self state dreams. The authors believe that the self state dream will remain a dubious concept until a more extensive psychology of dreaming from the perspective of self psychology is provided as a basis for further discussion.

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Article Citation [\[Who Cited This?\]](#)

Slap, J.W. and Trunnell, E.E. (1987). Reflections on the Self State Dream. *Psychoanal. Q.*, 56:251-262