



The Importance Of Facial Expressions In Dreams

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In a discussion focused on analysing defences in dreams, I described the use of superego derivatives as defences (Goldberger, 1989). I said, 'Very important references to the superego are often contained in the facial expression ... of a person in a dream' (p. 410). At that time I did not elaborate more fully on either the phenomenon or how to help make it useful to a patient in analysis. The purpose of this brief communication is to do so.

I want to emphasise the fundamental importance of the visual sphere in the formation of the superego functions of the ego. Facial expressions in dreams provide a unique opportunity to study the vivid re-externalisation of various kinds of authority. For this reason, facial expressions in dreams can be extremely useful for the analysis of the superego. This is in keeping with Gray's view of the technical advantage of approaching superego manifestations from the point of view of hierarchical functions of the ego (1987p. 152). *Since the dreamer is both creator and interpreter of the facial expressions in a dream, the re-externalisation of authority can be more convincing than when one studies a patient's 'reading' of the facial expression of another person in waking life.*¹

I have been impressed by the frequency with which patients make only casual reference to someone's facial expression in a dream. A patient may not return to this consciously available detail unless the analyst draws his or her attention to the 'passing over' of the image. In other words, the superego reference is very often warded off, and by subtle means. In my experience, once the analyst simply points to the inattention, patients often discover richly affective experiences having to do with early signals of approval or prohibition from important authorities. I emphasise the visual aspects because these communications from authorities can be extremely powerful yet may *never* have been verbalised. Their re-emergence in the telling of a dream is often warded off exactly because of the non-verbal, powerful but unpleasurable affects that might be remobilised.

Dreams from the analyses of two patients illustrate the initially vague but ultimately richly detailed and very significant superego derivatives represented in facial expressions.

A man dreamt about an encounter with a woman in which they were discussing some plans regarding work that he was supposed to complete. *'She had some kind of look on her face and was doing most of the talking. She showed me pieces of paper that listed what needed to be done and I thought there was an awful lot and wondered whether I'd be able to do it all.'* His associations were that he had felt overwhelmed at his job the day before, that he had left the office late and still had a great deal to do. He doesn't like women who are too bossy. That reminded him that his secretary had not been her usual co-operative self yesterday and he had kept wondering if something was the matter. He mentioned that he could usually discern his secretary's mood

¹ This is not to minimise the importance of patients' reactions to the facial expressions of others in waking life, especially to those of the analyst. For example, it was almost three years before an analytic patient revealed that each day as she passed me on entering my office, she glanced at my face 'to see what the weather was'.

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because of her mobile face. The analyst mentioned that he had been vague regarding the expression on the face of the woman in the dream. At first the patient demurred, saying he had been vague because he could not describe the expression. On second thought, he realised she had a slight resemblance to his sister. With palpable hesitation he then began an attempt to 'get hold' of her look. It was mostly in her eyes, a sense of reproach in her eyes. After a deep sigh, he said,

This is something I never like to think about ... how she feels about my having gotten further in life. I always did better than her in school, and the worst was when they sent me to a better college. My father was for it, but I could tell from my mother's eyes that she was unhappy about it.

Reading this material, many potential latent themes will spring to the mind of any analyst, but I only want to highlight the defences that will need analytic attention before the patient can become more free from the constraint of 'never liking

to think about this'. Initially, the reproachful look *itself* was warded off, as if the patient were trying to shield himself from it. The look represented the re-externalised authority, and when he finally did experience the painful feelings evoked by that look, he had nothing but painful thoughts and feelings about his capabilities and achievements. In this way, any aggressiveness towards his sister was kept far away from his awareness.

The second dream comes from the analysis of a young woman who was raised in a rigid, strongly authoritarian household where the children's upbringing was in the hands of a kind but firm German nanny. The patient dreamed that: *'A woman was showing me around an apartment. I followed her from room to room until we stopped in one room. She had a funny look. I began to rearrange objects in the room the way I like them to be'*. She said that the dream was just like real life and she sounded as if she were ready to dismiss it on that account. She had been apartment hunting and had looked at lots of different places with her real estate agent. The last part was just like the way she often goes around her own apartment when someone else has been there—that is, she touches various objects to make sure each one is in its right place.

The analyst wondered if she could describe the 'funny look' of the woman. The patient responded, 'Now that you mention it, it wasn't so funny. It was a stern look. It was the look of my old nanny when she didn't like something we were doing. We would know just from one of those looks that we had to stop whatever it was. But I wasn't doing anything bad in the dream'. She became silent. The analyst pointed out her protest about 'not doing anything bad', as if her nanny were right now putting a stop to all bad thoughts. Then there were further associations and the patient was able to talk about various kinds of touching that had indeed been strongly prohibited in her early years.

When the patient first related her dream, the nature of the look had *itself* been kept out of full awareness by maintaining its vagueness. Once her attention had been drawn to the look, she could describe it without difficulty, but then her thoughts came to a stop. Finally, she was able to experience the old prohibition during the hour.

Observational studies of young children give ample evidence supporting the importance of pre-verbal communication between children and parents. Studies of 'social referencing' point to the significance of non-verbal signals on specific aspects of ego development—for example, the infant discerns the safety of a physical activity, such as crossing a 'visual cliff', by examining the mother's facial expression. Emde has been particularly interested in observing the early moral development of infants and toddlers. He has found the tendency towards fairness and reciprocity beginning to develop during the latter part of the second year. He described the process of social referencing during which the child checks with significant others for guidance by means of various signs of prohibition or approval. A whole set of affective consequences are already apparent at the end of the second and third years of life as language is just beginning to become coherent. Although data from infant and child observation are not comparable to data derived from the analysis of adults, I mention them here because they are of interest in relation to

- 592 -

the early origin of functions pertaining to moral inhibitions.

In summary, I have used two clinical examples to demonstrate how the vividness of the re-externalisation of authority in dreams can often enhance a patient's emotional conviction about the specific ways that prohibitions are used to interfere with free verbal expression in the analytic situation. Over the years I have come to recognise that the phenomenon of vague reference to facial expressions in dreams is encountered in analysis with considerable frequency. Drawing the patient's attention to the vagueness has been remarkably useful for me and a number of colleagues in eliciting new material. I hope that readers of this report will also find the technique helpful.

References

- Goldberger, M. (1989). The analysis of defences in dreams. *Psychoanal. Q.*, 58:396-418. [\[↗\]](#)
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- 593 -

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