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The Psychological Function of Dreams: A Revised Psychoanalytic Perspective

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The psychological function that dreams serve is, as with all clinical data, the pivotal theoretical dimension that structures and guides our clinical understanding and interpretations. Within classical psychoanalytic psychology, Freud's (1900) conception of dreams as primarily energy discharging and wish fulfilling in function has undergone limited modification in theory and a comparatively greater change in its clinical use through the development of ego psychology, object-relations theory, and, more recently, self psychology. Despite proposed theoretical modifications, dream theory has not kept pace with contemporary changes in psychoanalytic theory, and Freud's wish-fulfillment hypothesis still remains central in discussion of dreams. At a symposium on dreams at the International Psycho-Analytic Congress in 1975, Chairman Jean-Bertrand Pontalis

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pointed out that “among the major theories of psychoanalysis, the theory of dreams has changed the least” (Curtis and Sachs, 1976). Some examples of the unchanging conception of dreams can be found in Altman (1969) who writes, “No dream can exist without the impetus of a wish representing the claim of an instinctual drive, which, although infantile in origin, retains an appetite for gratification throughout life” (p. 8), and who believes that “when dreams are carefully analyzed they can usually be seen as wish-fulfillment, hidden behind a variety of distortions” (Curtis and Sachs, 1976, p. 345); and in Blum (1976) who states, “... Freud's masterful conceptions and insights into the dream have been so rich and relatively complete that new additions to dream theory have been very limited” (p. 315) (see also the Blancks, 1974, 1979; Garma, 1974, 1978; and Sloane, 1979, for further recapitulations of classical theory). Our unchanging theory of dreams is most probably contributing to the often-cited neglect of dream interpretation in contemporary psychoanalysis (Waldhorn, 1967; Altman, 1969; and Greenson, 1970).

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a revised psychoanalytic theory of the psychological function of dreams based, in part, upon recent developments in psychoanalytic theory. Following a historical review of the theory of dreams as pertaining to their function, I will propose theoretical revisions and will present clinical data to illustrate and clarify the implications for dream interpretation. Regression, primary process, manifest and latent content, and dream function will serve as the major headings for the theoretical discussion.

Dreams: A Product of Regression

Traditionally, psychoanalysts have viewed dreams as a product of regression to an infantile mode of thinking, called primary process, wherein drives are discharged through hallucinatory wish fulfillment. Since within the topographical

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model, primary process was ascribed to the Unconscious System, it required the assumption that dreams, expressions of the Unconscious System, were solely the product of primary-process activity. The dream, metapsychologically speaking, could not utilize secondary-process thinking and, accordingly, the latter's appearance was always viewed as a waking addition serving a defensive function. For example, Freud (1900) viewed the rather common dream statement, “This is only a dream”, as a secondary-process thought defensively added upon waking in order to alleviate anxiety (5:488-489). Hence, the later developed and more complex modes of cognition were theoretically excluded from dreaming activity.

Within the topographical model, instinctual drives are discharged through hallucinatory wish fulfillment and are defensively disguised through the dream-work mechanisms in order to provide a sleep-guardian function for the dreamer. Freud wavered as to whether the dream-work mechanisms were intrinsic organizational properties of primary process or were defenses provided by the censorship (Gill, 1967; Holt, 1967). Regardless, the appearance of the disguise—namely,

the transformation of the latent into manifest content, viewed as an inherent part of the dreaming process—could not be attributed to the Unconscious System within the topographical theory and served as a partial impetus for Freud (1923a) to develop the structural model.

Within the tripartite structural model, dreams are again viewed as a product of a regression, but now a regression in ego and superego systems which allows for a preponderance of id material (Arlow and Brenner, 1964). For the first time in psychoanalytic theory, both primary and secondary processes, as well as unconscious ego and superego functions, are considered to be operational in dreaming. Most significantly, the regression in mental functioning is viewed no longer as total, but as varied for each system within a dream and from one dream to another (Freud, 1917; Fenichel, 1945; Arlow and Brenner, 1964). Our observations that dreams, at times, involve

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highly developed problem-solving secondary-process activity can now be explained as a momentary expression of nonregressed ego functioning (see Hartmann, 1973, 1976). Within this paradigm, the dream statement, “This is only a dream”, is accepted as part of the dream and is understood on the manifest level as a function of the observing ego which may or may not be serving a defensive purpose (Arlow and Brenner, 1964).

However, despite the theoretical possibility of fluctuations in the degree of regression in ego and superego systems and the operative potential for higher-level functions in dreams, dreaming has continued to be viewed as a predominantly regressive process in which higher-level functions participate minimally. For example, Arlow and Brenner (1964) maintain that “...during dreaming the mind functions in a more primitive and infantile way than during waking life, i.e. that during the dream there occurs a profound regression in mental functioning” (p. 135); and Greenson (1970) concurs: “Occasionally one can observe more mature ego functions, but they are rarely dominant” (p. 524). Dreaming activity is so identified with regression that the Blancks (1979) include regression in the definition of a dream: “Every dream is, by definition, a regression” (p. 166).

This prevailing view that dreams are predominantly a product of regression is theoretically linked to or dependent upon the traditional conceptualization of primary process. Since primary process, still viewed as the predominant mode of mental functioning in dreams, is conceptualized as a primitive and infantile mode of functioning which does not change or develop, the dream necessarily becomes, theoretically speaking, a predominantly primitive, regressed product.

The psychoanalytic conception of dreams as a product of predominantly regressive modes of mental functioning profoundly affects our understanding of the psychological functions of dreams and their clinical use. It is my thesis that this metapsychological view of dreams as predominantly a product of regression to primitive-infantile levels of functioning and

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organization has tended to preclude the recognition of the organizational or synthesizing purposes of the dream, the manifestation of varying levels of organization in dreams, and the use of dreams for the assessment of object-relational development or the level of differentiation and structuralization of self and object representations.

Primary Process

Since the concept of primary process is so closely interrelated to the theory of dream formation, I will review briefly the historical changes in its conceptualization (refer to Noy, 1969, 1979, for a thorough review) and will propose theoretical revisions.

Freud (1900) discovered that unconscious processes as manifested in dreams and symptom formation were ruled by a mode of mental organization different from that mode used in our conscious mental activity which he called primary process and secondary process, respectively. His theoretical distinction was based primarily on an economic point of view. The primary process referred to a mode of energy discharge wherein the mobile cathexis pushes for immediate discharge according to the pleasure principle. The energy in the secondary process is bound, and its discharge is delayed in accordance with the reality principle. Freud viewed primary process as the original infantile mode of mental functioning and secondary process as a later development. This original formulation based on economic theory remains with us today, although primary and secondary processes tend to be viewed as the two poles on a continuum of energy mobility (see Arlow and Brenner, 1964; and Beres, 1965).

The conceptualization of primary process, as with many psychoanalytic terms, has led to considerable confusion. Freud varied in his conception of primary process from the more metapsychological description, “a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations” (Freud, 1933, p. 73), to the more clinically

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induced organizational principles of condensation, displacement, and symbolization (**Freud, 1900; Holt, 1967**). While the economic definition of primary process, i.e., mobile cathexes, leads logically to the picture of “seething excitations”, the principles of condensation, displacement, and symbolization (despite their comparative fluidity) imply organization and structure. Indeed, the economic definition of primary process ran counter to Freud's great discovery that dreams and forms of pathological cognition, previously viewed as random and meaningless events, were organized, structured, and meaningful. Shifting from the economic to a structural vantage point, Holt (**1967**), in a significant contribution, emphasized the organizational properties of the primary process and concluded that it is “a special system of processing information in the service of a synthetic necessity” (p. 383).¹ Hence, from this vantage point, primary and secondary processes become two different systems or modes of processing information, both serving an integrative, synthetic function. However, Holt continued to view the primary process as a comparatively primitive system. This revised conceptualization of primary process implied that dreaming *could* be conceived as a primitive organizational attempt at integrating and synthesizing information.

The primitiveness of the primary process again is an assumption based on economic theory. Ideation dominated by mobile cathexes precludes organization and structure and, therefore, conveys a primitiveness. The notion of mobile cathexes also precludes theoretically any possible change or development of primary-process ideation, for psychological development implies increased levels of organization. Hence, when primary process is operative, regression to early primitive-infantile

¹ In a similar departure from economic theory, Loewald (**1978**) redefines cathexis as “... a concept for organizing activity (in contrast to what might somewhat facetiously be described as a fuel-injection notion). Applied to object-cathexis ... this means: object-cathexis is not the investment of an object with some energy charge, but an organizing mental act (instinctual in origin) that structures available material as an object, i.e., as an entity differentiated and relatively distant from the organizing agent” (p. 195).

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(unorganized) forms of mentation is always implied. Within this context, the observed sequential development of images from dream to dream is explained in terms of alterations in the ego and superego systems, e.g., defensive processes such as secondary revision.² However, because primary process is the predominant mode of mentation in dreaming, a more cogent explanation of sequential changes in dream images is the development of primary process itself. This explanation corresponds with Loewald's (**1971**) conceptualization of the development of the id wherein the id both remains within the personality as the original motive force with its corresponding structures and is also transformed into “higher, more individually centered order of motivational energy and structuralization of such energy” (p. 113).

However, because our theory has been primarily energy-based, the notion of the development of primary-process mentation has all but been absent in the psychoanalytic literature (**Holt, 1967** and **Noy, 1969**, are notable exceptions). The structural viewpoint introduces the possibility of developmental changes in levels of organization as primary process carries out its integrative and synthetic function. In this vein, Holt (**1967**) did not assume that the primary process is a constitutional given, but described its emergence during infancy and considered it to be a developmental achievement requiring considerable structuralization. Noy (**1969** and **1979**) extended the developmental schema for the primary process so that it, too (like the secondary process), changes in the complexity of its organizational

² In a recent study (**Fosshage and Loew, 1978**), we presented to five psychoanalysts of various theoretical persuasions six dreams from a four-year period in the analytic treatment of a young woman. All the analysts, with comparatively little contextual material, noted personality development in the patient's dreams. In order to avoid inserting a bias in our dream selection unconsciously, we chose as one of our criteria for selection of dreams the manifest appearance of a cockroach. All the analysts again noted in her dreams sequential change in this cockroach image. (It should be noted, however, that a more rigorous research design would be needed to exclude the possible effect of the judges' expectations. The dreams would need to be presented in a randomized order, while requesting the judges to order them according to their sequential development.)

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structure throughout life. Using dreams and art to support his thesis, he concludes:

... it seems that there is really no difference between the primary process and any other mental function: the processes remain the same, but their level of organization and performance changes, develops and improves constantly, along with general cognitive development. For instance, in logical language, which is a secondary-process function, the processes themselves also remain constant, but their level of functioning changes. For example, the processes of causal thinking or concept formation remain forever as basic constituents of logical thinking, but there is a clear development from childhood causal thinking and concept formation to the same functions in the adult and we cannot compare childish thoughts to adult

ones. Why not apply this knowledge to our theory of the primary processes? It means that the basic processes of condensation, displacement and symbolization remain the same all through life, but their level of functioning and performance constantly develops and improves—and as expression of “concept formation” is not regarded as a regression to a childish kind of thinking, even though this process stems from childhood, so also expression of displacement need not be regarded as “regression” [1969, p. 158].

Hence, while the principles or processes of organization (themselves a product of development) remain basic to the primary-process and secondary-process modes of ideation, the level of functioning and the complexity of organization in both the primary and secondary processes develop or increase more or less throughout one's lifetime. Within this paradigm, regression refers to the reemergence of developmentally earlier (“temporal regression”) and less complex (structural regression) levels of primary-process organization, not to a primitive, unorganized mode of mentation (“formal regression”).

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If both primary and secondary processes develop organizationally in over-all service of a synthetic function, what distinguishes one mode of mental activity from the other? I propose that we define *primary process as that mode of mental functioning which uses visual and other sensory images with intense affective colorations in serving an over-all integrative and synthetic function*.³ Secondary process, on the other hand, is a conceptual and logical mode that makes use of linguistic symbols in serving an integrative and synthetic function. These processes may be described as different but complementary modes of apprehending, responding to, and organizing the external and internal worlds. The right-left-brain-hemisphere research that has established the functional asymmetry of the cerebral hemispheres may support this structural division (Ornstein, 1973; Dimond and Beaumont, 1974; Kinsbourne and Smith, 1974; Hoppe, 1977; and Bakan, 1978). Summarizing this extensive research, Bakan (1978) describes:

There is evidence of left hemisphere superiority in tasks involving grammatically organized word sequences over time, and motor coordination. Right hemisphere function seems dominant in tasks involving imagery, certain visual and constructive activities such as drawing, copying, assembling block designs, perception and manipulation of spatial relations of and between objects or configurations, and the simultaneous grasping of fragments or particulars as a meaningful whole [p. 163].

³ The use of visual and other sensory imagery in primary-process mentation was, of course, well delineated by Freud (1900); but, in addition to this imagery serving a wish-fulfilling function (using the clinical theory while extricating it from the biologically based energy-discharge model), I am, following Holt and Noy, postulating that this imagery is used in the over-all service of an integrative and synthetic function and has a developmental history in organizational complexity.

To define primary process as imagistic or representational thinking also corresponds with Piaget's description of the sixth and final stage of sensorimotor intelligence, as compared to conceptual intelligence, in which the 18-month-old child develops a capacity to perform tasks requiring imagined representation (Flavell, 1963).

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Despite the specialization of function, both hemispheres process not independently, but complementarity (Kinsbourne, 1982). Similarly, both primary and secondary processes are operative and complementarily interwoven in all mental activity (i.e., in waking and sleeping cognition), but their proportional balance may vary from moment to moment and from person to person (i.e., personality stylistic differences). Clearly, both modes are operative in self and in reality concerns as is evident in patients' use of both modes to describe their inner experiences and reality problems. Those patients who logically and methodically describe their experiences in contrast to those who use vivid images and feelings in their communications convey, in part, the stylistic differences in the proportional balance of these two modes.

In view of the revised conception of primary process, our conceptualizations of how primary process utilizes the principles of condensation, displacement, and symbolization also require revision. Instead of an energy-based definition of condensation as a concentration of energies related to different chains of thought, made use of by the censorship to serve a defensive function (Freud, 1916-1917, p. 173), condensation is viewed as a process of organization of mental events, i.e., experiences and memories, through the combination of imagistic mental elements involving similar thematic experiences.⁴ If the primary-process mode is an attempt to synthesize psychic phenomena, the notion that displacement is only a form of concealment whereby the cathectic intensities are transferred to ideas of lesser importance is no longer applicable.⁵

Displacement

⁴ Using information-processing theory, Palombo (1978a, 1978b) refers to condensation as a matching process through the superimposition of memories.

⁵ As explicated later in the text, representational ideation, like secondary-process thinking, can be used for, but is by no means limited to, the service of a defensive function. Through the revision of the concept of primary process, extricating it from the physicalistic-energy model, I am attempting to redefine the major principles of primary-process mentation in which these principles are serving an organizational and synthetic function (which may, in turn, involve certain defensive processes, e.g., regression to earlier levels of organization) in contrast to an exclusively sleep-preservative defensive (disguising) function.

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is conceived of here as an organizing principle in which experiences generating the same affective reaction (the associative connection) are all nodal points or cues for a particular thematic experience. The nodal point, in serving an over-all organizational function, is selected at times for defensive purposes and much more frequently to express a most poignantly affective thematic experience. Symbolization, likewise, refers within this framework to a process of organization whereby a particular image expresses a thematic pattern of experiences and memories. Instead of a disguised representation or substitution for instinctual wishes, ideas, and conflict, a symbol is a particular imagistic configuration that captures and expresses thematic and affective meaning. In other words, in contrast to the energy-based definitions of condensation, displacement, and symbolization which emphasize an exclusively defensive (disguising) function, these terms are conceptualized here as the organizing principles of the primary-process mode of mentation which serve to further the internal process of integration and organization of experiences and memories (which includes, but is not limited to a defensive function).

The thesis that the basic function of primary process is to organize and synthesize mental phenomena also has implications for the manifest-latent content distinction.

Manifest-Latent Content

Freud's differentiation of manifest and latent content was again based on drive theory in which the original latent impulses or wishes are disguised and transformed into the manifest dream, i.e., the reported dream, as a compromise between drive discharge and the work of the censor for the purpose of sleep preservation. Within the tripartite structural model, the omnipresent discrepancy between manifest and latent content is the result of intersystemic conflict wherein the ego's defense mechanisms disguise id impulses in keeping with superego prohibitions, once again for the preservation of sleep.

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However, if from a structural, rather than an economic viewpoint, primary process and, therefore, dreams serve an organizing and synthetic function, *there is no theoretical necessity to posit the ubiquitous operation of disguise and transformation of latent into manifest content*. Indeed, object-relational processes (**Fairbairn, 1944**), self-esteem regulation (**Kohut, 1977**), the individualized ego modes of experiencing and relating (**Erikson, 1954**), and the developmental, organizational and regulatory processes, posited in this paper, are all manifestly observable in dreams. This thesis is additionally supported by the well-replicated dream content and REM research finding that emotionally stimulating and meaningful experiences are directly incorporated into the manifest content of dreams (**Witkin, 1969**; **Breger, Hunter, and Lane, 1971**; **Whitman, Kramer, and Baldrige, 1967**; and **Greenberg and Perlman, 1975**). When psychic conflict is involved, however, the utilization of defensive processes during dreaming potentially increases the discrepancy between the manifest defensive content and the underlying latent content, just as in waking mentation. When conflicting intrapsychic forces are operative, the intensity and, therefore, the psychological priority of these conflictual forces, as compared to other developmental, organizational, and regulatory processes, vary considerably and result in the observed variability of the discrepancy in the manifest and latent content in dreams. In addition, the degree of the dreamer's internal recognition, clarity, and acceptance of the conflict in conjunction with the particular defensive processes utilized and the degree of success of the mastery processes affect the manifest-latent discrepancy. Thus, even when psychic conflict is involved, the manifest-latent discrepancy in dreaming, as in waking mentation, varies according to the level of intensity and priority of the conflictual forces, the degree of recognition and clarity, and the specific mastery and defensive processes. Within this paradigm, we can explain, therefore, the frequently observed phenomenon that as the analysis progresses, "the manifest dreams tend to become clearer and less distorted" (Sloane, **1979**, p. 241).

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Dream Functions

To reiterate, within the topographical model Freud posited that the primary function of the dream was to provide discharge for unconscious impulses and thereby, secondarily, to serve as the "guardian of sleep". The unconscious impulse is experienced as a wish, infantile in origin, which is fulfilled in the dream through a hallucinatory process, a primitive mode of mental functioning.

With the advent of the tripartite structural model, the dream's scope enlarged to include intersystemic conflict. The specific functions of energy discharge and sleep protection remained unaltered, but the inclusion of defensive processes and intersystemic conflictual forces characterized dreaming activity as potentially more similar to waking mental activity than previously conceptualized.⁶ The tripartite model theoretically made possible the participation of later-developed, comparatively nonregressed ego functions in dream formation, e.g., the functions of observation, reality testing, integration, and synthesis. Clinically, psychoanalysts looked less for the latent wish and more for the intersystemic conflictual forces in the dream. Moreover, the nonregressed ego functions were often implicitly operative in the clinical understanding of dreams.⁷ However, the continual emphases on regression, drive discharge, and the economically based conceptualization of the primary process as

⁶ Freud suggested this correspondence between waking and dreaming ideation when in 1923(b) he was deprecating an exaggerated respect for the “mysterious unconscious” and stated: “It is only too easy to forget that a dream is as a rule merely a thought like any other ...” (p. 112).

⁷ A clinical example of the operation of more highly developed ego functions can be found in the following dream reported during a Kleinian analysis (Greenson, 1970, p. 531): “. . . red spiders were crawling in and out of the patient's anus. A doctor examined him and told the patient that he was unable to see anything wrong with him. The patient replied, ‘Doctor, you may not see anything, but they are there just the same’. In his interpretation Greenson suggests that the dreamer may have justifiably reproached the analyst for really missing something. His interpretation is based on manifestly evident material, i.e., there is no discrepancy between the manifest and latent meaning, and implies the functioning of “nonregressed” reality testing in the dream.

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primitive unbound energy have theoretically tended to exclude from dream construction these more highly developed ego functions.

Other theoretical developments have highlighted the operation of the full developmental spectrum of ego functions in dreams and have implicitly moved us toward a major revision of our conceptualization of the psychological function of dreams. For example, Fairbairn (1944) in his development of object-relations theory posited that ‘dreams are representations of endopsychic situations over which the dreamer has got stuck (fixation points) and *often includes some attempt to move beyond that situation* (Padel, 1978, p. 133; my italics). Hence, the dream's function is to work through and master object-relational struggles, in sharp contrast to Garma's (1978) position in which all dream solutions are “fictitious” and serve a defensive function. Fairbairn's conceptualization of the dream function substantially differs from the energy-discharge and intersystemic-conflict models in that the synthetic, organizing, or mastery-competence function (Nunberg, 1931; Hartmann, 1950; Bellak, Hurvich, and Gediman, 1973), a function which has been traditionally ascribed to the ego, predominates in establishing the purposeful direction of the dream. Within the developments of ego psychology, Erikson (1954) introduced, and Jones (1962, 1970) and De Monchaux (1978) extensively elaborated on, the operation in dreams of the ego's organizing or synthetic function. De Monchaux, for example, explained posttraumatic dream repetition as an attempt to synthesize or integrate the trauma into a whole self rather than to leave it as a dissociated fragment and, therefore, as a split in the self. Similarly, psychoanalysts with an interpersonal orientation have frequently noted the synthetic, integrative, and mastery functions of dreams in their attempts to resolve focal conflicts (Ullman, 1959; Bonime, 1962; French and Fromm, 1964; Ullman and Zimmerman, 1979).

The attempt in dreams to rectify problematic endopsychic situations is described also in what Kohut (1977) calls “self-state

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dreams.” In these dreams, the healthy sectors of the personality are manifestly reacting to and attempting to deal with an “uncontrollable tension-increase” or “a dread of the dissolution of the self” (p. 109). Rather than a regression to a primitive mode of drive discharge, the organizing and internally regulating personality sectors predominate in these dreams in the service of the restoration and maintenance of a cohesive self structure.

Recently, within information-processing models, the adaptive function of dreams has also been described (Breger, 1977; Palombo, 1978a, 1978b). According to Breger, “. . . dreams serve to integrate affectively aroused material into structures within the memory systems that have previously proved satisfactory in dealing with similar material” (p. 24). Palombo (1978a) similarly views dreams as adaptively matching new perceptions and experiences with permanent memories and solutions in a continual “reordering and enriching of the associative structure of the permanent memory” (p. 468). Extrapolating from the physiological research finding that REM quantitatively decreases during our life span, Meissner (1968) and Breger (1977) posit that dreaming fosters structuralization of the nervous system which is the physiological analogue to Holt's thesis that primary process serves a synthetic function and, thereby, increases psychic

structuralization. Additionally, the facts well established in the sleep laboratory—that sleep and dream deprivation produce psychological disturbances and disorganization and that sleep and dreaming in turn are rehabilitative—indicate again the organizational function of these two activities (Meissner, 1968; Cartwright, 1981; Hartmann, 1981). Certain properties of dreaming, Breger notes, facilitate the mastery-adaptive or synthetic functioning in dreaming. For example, the relative absence of external stimulation makes dreaming especially suited for “internal transformations of stored material”. A greater number of programs (including what we can now refer to as various developmental levels of primary-process and secondary-process programs), as well as considerably more memory content are available. The

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substantially increased use of visual representations as well as language broadens the range of information-processing methods. And finally, the processing of information is not as limited by the rules of logic and social acceptability which constrain the output of our waking state. Within an information-process paradigm, dreaming is viewed as a creative act in which problem solving is facilitated by the availability of an increased number of psychological elements and a greater flexibility and means of combining these elements.

Despite the clinical and sleep-laboratory evidence in support of a mastery-adaptive model of dream function, and despite the fact that this model is significantly different from those of drive discharge and intersystemic conflict, the classical models continue to be reiterated in direct opposition to the newer ones. For example, Blum (1976) stated: “Dreaming is an archaic process which is not suited to considerations of logic or reality and does not have a primary function of information process, problem-solving, or adaptation” (p. 321).

A Revised Model

To summarize and synthesize, the classical theory of dream formation—namely, dreaming is a predominantly regressed, primitive, primary-process mode of mentation directed toward fulfillment of wishes as an avenue of energy discharge and disguised by the dream-work mechanisms for the preservation of sleep—is often reiterated as a “given” in psychoanalytic discussion of dreams. Even the tripartite structural model, which theoretically made possible the participation of the broad range of ego functions in dream construction, has continued to neglect the integrative, synthetic, and mastery function of dreams due to the repeated emphasis on the predominance of regression and the continued inclusion of the drive-discharge function within the intersystemic-conflict model.

However, new models of dream formation which have emerged in object-relations theory, self psychology, and information-process

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theory have emphasized the function of integration, synthesis, and mastery. Similarly, a structural view of the primary process emphasizes its synthetic function (similar to that of the secondary process) as well as a developmental schema in which the primary process (like the secondary process) increases in its complexity of structural organization. I have schematically characterized primary process as the affect-laden imagistic, sensory mode of apprehension and cognition and the secondary process as the conceptual, logical, and linguistically dominated mode of apprehension and cognition. Both develop in organizational complexity (e.g., compare the intricacy of the artist's imagery to that of the lawyer and the lawyer's conceptual complexity to that of the artist), and both function to bring about integration, synthesis, and mastery. Implicit is a fundamental principle based on evolutionary and developmental theory that all psychic activity, i.e., waking and dreaming mentation, evolves or moves fundamentally toward higher, more complex levels of organization. Loewald (1973) posits just such a direction: “... a force must be assumed to operate in mental processes ... that favors the tensions of mental life, works in opposition to as well as in fusion with the motivating power of the death instinct, and which promotes higher or more complex organization of the psychic structures resulting from, and transforming in their turn, psychic processes” (pp. 79-80).

Hence, my thesis is that *the supraordinale function of dreams is the development, maintenance (regulation), and, when necessary, restoration of psychic processes, structure, and organization*⁸ Dreams, utilizing predominantly but, by no means exclusively, the representational (primary-process) mode, serve this developmental, regulatory, and restorative function in three major

⁸ Stolorow and Atwood (1982) independently arrived at a similar formulation. Jung (1916) was the first to view dreams as regulatory and developmental (“compensating” and “prospective”) in function. Recently, Jones's (1980) metaphor of the dream poet, referring to an adaptive and a creative function, implies a developmental function. However, in classical psychoanalysis, because of the dominance of the energy model and the postulated discharge function of dreams, the psychological-developmental function of dreams has been seriously neglected.

ways. *First*, dreams participate in the development of internal organization through the representational consolidation of newly emergent psychic configurations. Examples are modification of self and object representations and the emergence of unformed and undeveloped psychological processes and configurations. *Second*, dreams maintain, regulate, and restore current psychic configurations and processes, including the maintenance, regulation, and internal balancing of self-esteem (“self-state dreams”), sexual and aggressive processes (including wish fulfillment, which can regulate sexual, aggressive, and narcissistic processes). An example is the reinforcement of current self and object representations, particularly when these configurations are threatened by anxiety-producing, disorganizing change (e.g., when the intrapsychic image of the analyst is shifting from a negative to a positive valence, the dreamer may resurrect the negative, rejecting image of the analyst to restore the prior, and therefore less anxiety-producing, object configuration and level of organization). *Third*, dreams continue the unconscious and conscious waking efforts to resolve intrapsychic conflicts through the utilization of defensive processes, through an internal balancing or through a creative, newly emergent reorganization (this thesis includes the inter-systemic conflict model, but adds the function of resolution through a creative reorganizational process). This latter reorganization may be contributed to by the introduction of new elements previously either unformed or unavailable to consciousness. For example, when confronting sexual or aggressive feelings the dreamer may defend through a regression to an earlier developmental stage or may modify opposing attitudes and frightening feelings through the use of newly emergent, previously unformed, and/or repressed, perceptions of self and object.⁹

⁹ The functional thesis presented herein and its implications for interpretation should in no way be construed as equivalent with the so-called anagogic interpretation, as one reviewer suggested. Silberer proposed that all dreams required two interpretations, the psychoanalytic with its emphasis on infantile-sexual wishes and the anagogic with the focus on what he considered to be the more serious and important thoughts. Freud (1900) assessed anagogic interpretations to be invalid while viewing them as the more “abstract” and intellectualized interpretations “given by the dreamer without difficulty” (p. 524). Following Freud, classical analysts use the term, “anagogic interpretation”, pejoratively, but its meaning remains elusive. In a recent paper, Stein (1982) implies that any interpretation (including even the supernatural or those based on “the view that dreams are generated outside the psychic apparatus” [p. 4]) which does not include the expression of wish fulfillment and the notion of distortion is anagogic and, therefore, is invalid (pp. 4-6). Accordingly, Kohut’s interpretations of the “self-state” dreams are viewed as anagogic (including neither wish fulfillment nor distortion) despite the fact that this type of dream or these interpretations could scarcely be characterized as “abstract” or intellectualized. And what should we do with the frequently observed phenomenon of the increase in manifest clarity of dreams and in the dreamer’s ease of understanding as analysis progresses? To assume the operation of ubiquitous distortion in dreams is unnecessary and misrepresents the facts. I believe it is clear that my thesis of the function of dreams, and implicitly the corresponding interpretations, includes, but is not limited to, the operation of wish fulfillments and defensive functions. And, as I have stated, dreams vary in the degree of obscurity—i.e., manifest-latent discrepancy—which is related to defensive functioning and/or to newly emergent and therefore unclear psychic processes.

With reduced attention and need to cope with the external world, sleep appears to be a time when the organism through the dreaming process, an altered state of consciousness, monitors and regulates, primarily but by no means exclusively through the use of representational ideation, the aroused affects and thoughts of the day which are intricately interwoven with the complex motivational, memory and self- and object-representational network. The reduced demand to deal directly with the external world provides the organism with a necessary and potent time for the development, maintenance, and restoration of internal organization.

Because of the organizational function of dreams, psychological development in terms of the achievement of new levels of psychic organization is observable in dreams. As with waking mental activity (Loewald, 1957), the most recently established levels of organization are also most subject to change, whether due to an instability and regression to an earlier organization or due to a process of a new progressive reorganization, which accounts for the progressive and regressive movements and the degree of dramatic cohesiveness of dream imagery.

Clinical Implications

To view dreams as serving to develop, regulate, and restore psychic organization is to accord dreaming a profound role in psychic life. Within classical psychoanalytic theory dreams have been portrayed as the “royal road” to the latent wishes and as the expression of intersystemic conflicts, but they have been insufficiently recognized for their primary developmental, regulatory, conflict-resolving, and reorganizational functions, a role of even greater import than previously conceived. In contrast to the consistent metapsychological portrayal of dreams as predominantly a product of a primitive and undeveloped mode of mentation, dreaming can now be conceptualized as an extremely complex mode of mentation,

predominantly representational in form, which closely corresponds with the deepest emotional levels of conscious and unconscious waking mentation and continues the many regressions and progressions of waking mentation in experiencing, differentiating, and integrating the self and object world.

This revised conceptualization expands the possible meanings of dreams and the contribution of dreams in the internal developmental efforts of the dreamer. In addition to latent wishes and intersystemic conflict or, more generally intrapsychic conflict, new developments in self and object representations involving previously unformed as well as repressed elements and perceptions may emerge in dreams. Regulatory processes and new developmental movements in the narcissistic, psychosexual, and object-relational arenas may also be expressed in dreams. This revised conceptualization potentially enhances our clinical use of dreams, for dream images that are accompanied by and evoke intense affects may portray not only intersystemic conflict, but also new internal developments (of which the dreamer may be scarcely, if at all, aware), the conscious consideration of which will further the analytic and developmental processes.

To view the manifest level of the dream as the product of

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defensive processes (increasing the manifest-latent content discrepancy) only when intrapsychic conflict is involved diminishes the possibility of facile translations of dream imagery (e.g., the frequent and persistent translations of dream personages as transferential stand-ins for the analyst) and allows us to remain with and understand the poignant dream imagery at the phenomenological level.¹⁰ To work with dreams, as with all clinical material, at the phenomenological level facilitates the dreamer's participation and conviction in understanding dreams and, thereby, increases the potency of dream work. For example, at the phenomenological level a dream's vagueness and incomprehensibility is not attributed necessarily to defensive processes, but possibly to yet unformed and, therefore, unclear intrapsychic processes (just as in secondary-process thinking conceptual clarity is a product of incremental developmental steps). Also, at the phenomenological level it is clear that dreams vary considerably as to their significance or intensity of meaning and impact upon the dreamer. This corresponds with our revised theory, namely: dreams vary according to the developmental, regulatory, and restorative needs of the dreamer.

Clinical Illustrations

Let us turn to clinical illustrations with the specific focus on the psychological function that the dreams served for the

¹⁰ To begin investigation and description at the phenomenological level (see **Spiegelberg, 1965**, and **Boss and Kenny, 1978**) is central to the empirical foundation of the clinical theory and practice of psychoanalysis. For purposes of explanation, the pooling of data into general patterns, of course, requires higher, more general levels of inference and abstraction farther removed from the observed and experienced phenomena. All sciences move back and forth between the observed data and the higher-level (theoretical) inferences. However, perhaps because of an overemphasis on the manifest-latent content discrepancy, as well as the predominant functioning of a different mode of cognition in dreaming, patients' dreams, more frequently than other clinical material, seem often to engender in us leaps into theoretically dominated translations of dream imagery. I am re-emphasizing the importance of not straying too far from the observed and experiential level of the dream and believe that the revisions, set forth in this paper, of the functions of primary process and dreaming encourage in the clinical setting the elaboration of, rather than the translation of—and thereby, the close adherence to—the observed dream imagery.

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dreamer. The interpretations are by no means complete, a task often not possible or therapeutically useful, but rather the most salient molar themes (**Stolorow, 1978**) are examined.

I have selected two dreams which Susan reported during the fourth and sixth years of her analytic treatment. Susan was a bright, attractive, and generally well-functioning young woman who entered treatment following graduate school because of dissociation from feelings, low self-esteem, emotional constriction, and difficulties in establishing a satisfying heterosexual relationship. In a session after a date with a man whom she had recently met and liked, she reported the following dream:

I was in a nice hotel and getting ready to go someplace or go to bed. There were two other people, Ann, whom I work with, and Joan, my ex-roommate. I looked down on the floor and there was a beautiful gold necklace. It had mythological characters—Poseidon and sea horses—like an Egyptian necklace—like a collar. It was very valuable and very pretty. I picked it up and said, “Isn't this beautiful. Ann has some really pretty jewelry.” It belonged to her.

In her associations Susan described Ann as a “super-feminist, angry, but also something kind of attractive about her; I'm more connected to her.” “Joan has a lot of potential, but keeps it down, is super nice, and doesn't dress in an attractive

way.” In the ensuing discussion it became clear that Susan, who was overly compliant and sexually repressed, similar to her associations of Joan, was in process (i.e., the necklace still belonged to Ann) of recognition, appreciation, and integration of her sexuality, femininity, and assertiveness (poignantly imaged respectively in the sea and horses of the Egyptian necklace). The beautiful gold necklace appeared to be a new symbolic configuration which unified partially unformed and partially repressed sexual, feminine, and assertive elements. The dreamer's discovery and appreciation of this gold necklace appeared to

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serve the function of integration and movement toward more complex levels of organization. These elements also emerged in her waking perceptions of others and in the experience of her self both while she was with the new man and in the transference. The latter was indicated when she said for the first time in the session, “I feel you're feeling positive about me, seeing beauty in me”.

Clinically, this is not an unusual dream and, perhaps, would be understood similarly by many analysts. However, this understanding is not based on and could not be derived solely from the classical theories of simple wish fulfillment or intersystemic conflict. To view this dream solely as a wish fulfillment, in my judgment, undermines its meaning and its usefulness to the dreamer for the process of integration. The formulation of an oedipal wish, a disguised gratification of sexual impulses, or even an ego wish does not sufficiently incorporate the dreamer's developmental attempt to integrate her feminine sexuality. To view this dream solely in terms of intersystemic conflict is strained, for phenomenologically no conflictual forces appear. The emergence of partially repressed elements indicates the presence of intersystemic conflict, and the fact that the necklace still belongs to Ann suggests the operation of defensive (as well as developmental) processes; but, because the intensity of the conflictual forces is not sufficient to make their phenomenological appearance in the dream, the interpretive emphasis is placed on the developmental movement. The self-state model of dream function also appears to be inapplicable, for the dreamer, as far as my exploration could determine, was not experiencing an immediate vulnerability or a possible threat of dissolution to her self. Instead, with the recognition and appreciation of the gold necklace, the dreamer appears to be attempting to integrate a new configuration which will enhance her self organization. Through the dreamer's associations, we attempted to understand aspects of the symbolic configuration, i.e., the gold necklace, and, in addition, continued to use the image with its powerful affect in its representational mode

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(rather than solely translating it into the logical, verbal mode) to further the process of its integration. Rather than a regression to a more primitive level of organization, the dreamer appears to be moving toward higher levels of organization through the integrative and synthetic efforts in dreaming. Recognizing and understanding this function of the dream, in my opinion, promoted this process of integration and self reorganization.

The second dream was in response to the emergence of intense sexual feelings and fantasies in the transference. The dream is as follows:

I was in a big park in a nice setting. I was with Ted, walking along a path, talking about whether to have sex or not. I was for it. We had known each other all this time—why not? We started. Then he started getting freaked out, going psychotic—it was like a psychotic transformation. I was going, “Oh my God, no wonder he didn't want to have sex”. I was scared of him. He was terrified. I left him. I went off to the park to enjoy my mother and brother.

Following the dream report, Susan described Ted, her high-school boyfriend, as brilliant, rigid, controlled, and extremely afraid of sexual involvement. She recalled a painful experience in which Ted had verbally denigrated and rejected her upon discovery of a prior minor affectionate involvement with another young man. This experience exacerbated her fear of sexuality and men, which was genetically related to her father's unpredictable alterations between seductive behavior and prohibitions.

On the manifest level of the dream, Susan first expresses her desire for sexual involvement. The dream, thus far, approximates the dreamer's current articulated waking level of organization (i.e., her recent expression of sexual wishes toward the analyst) with no evidence of a structural regression to a lower organizational level. The appearance of Ted instead of

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the therapist in the dream is viewed in this instance not as a defensive disguise, but rather as the utilization of a poignant experience in memory which serves as an organizational nodal point for all such similar thematic experiences (displacement, condensation, and symbolization as redefined in this paper). However, as the dreamer begins to engage in sexual intercourse, a momentarily profound disorganizing and frightening regression to a more primitive and archaic level

of organization occurs, again manifestly portrayed in the dream. In order to reestablish a sufficiently nonthreatening level of organization, the dreamer leaves the man to rejoin her mother and brother (a regressive defensive solution in the face of genital sexuality). The emergence of intense sexual feelings in the dream (precipitated by the same in the transference) was a movement in the direction of integration of her sexuality, but precipitated a profound anxiety about a disorganizing loss of control on the part of the man which threatened to overwhelm her. The dreamer momentarily resolves this disorganizing encounter with a frightening object representation by moving toward a more secure and more tranquil level of organization, but without, momentarily, the achievement of the increased integration of her sexuality. Thus, the dream portrays intrapsychic conflict in the form of the emergence of a frightening repressed object representation associated with sexual feelings and provides a reorganizing function by regressively restoring an old psychic configuration which excludes the frightening object image and the sexual feelings. Despite the terrifying intensity of this conflict, both the conflict and its momentary regressive resolution are manifestly portrayed in the dream, suggestive of the dreamer's lucidity and comparative nondefensiveness (lack of disguise) in her intrapsychic encounter.

Summary

In an attempt to extricate the dream from the biologically based drive-discharge model, a revised psychoanalytic model

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of the psychological function of dreams has been presented. It is posited that the supraordinate function of dreams is the development, regulation, and restoration of psychic processes, structure, and organization. Dreams attempt to integrate and organize current cognitive-affective experiences through the development and consolidation of new structures, the maintenance of current structures, and conflict resolution. The dual purpose in dreaming, as with all mental activity, is the maintenance of current structure while concurrently moving progressively toward more complex levels of organization.

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