Understanding One’s Dreams

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Dreaming is a human experience that psychologists have been studying and working on for many years. The Merriam dictionary defines a dream as a series of thoughts, visions, and feelings that happen during sleep. The phenomenology and the emotional impact of dreaming have a great impact on the dreamer. This has led people to attribute many various meanings to their different patterns of dreaming. One of the most common conceptions, depending on perspective about a dream, it is an important message from a specific deity or holds incredible predictions of the future. In a number of cultures, it is believed that dreaming is entering into an alternate reality, thus granting access to the esteemed spirit world.

Scientifically, however, there are many theories regarding dreams. One known theory explains that dreams serve humans as a means for bodily cleansing and emotional release. Throughout the day, we may repress our negative feelings, like anger, or our desire to act in ways that others consider socially incorrect. Thus dreams are believed to serve as a safe outlet for us to release our negative emotions or intangible desires or fantasies.

Another theory suggests that dreams are a biologically necessary aspect of sleep. The REM (Rapid Eye Movement) stage of sleep is a state in which we reach our deepest sleep (Fathering, 1992). First come the NonRem sleep followed by a shorter period of REM sleep, then the circle start over again. Dreams typically happen during the REM sleep. During this stage, the eyes move quickly in different direction and that doesn’t happen during NonRem sleep. There are short phases of NonREM before a person reach the REM sleep. The REM sleep has also different stages, the first ones are short and the later stages get longer. We may have intense dreams during REM sleep because our brain is more active at that time but dreaming can also occur during NonRem sleep. Our dreams may be vague and blurry or vivid and filled with detail.
They may also be filled with joyful emotions or with the most frightening secret fears. They may be focused and completely understandable or incredibly unclear and utterly confusing. The average person has approximately 3 to 5 dreams per night, but some people on some nights may have up to 100 dreams in that single night (Porte and Hobson, 1983). Usually, most dreams tend to progressively last longer as the night unfolds. During a full night’s sleep, usually consisting of approximately eight hours, two of those hours are spent in a dreaming state. It is still relatively unclear and not agreed upon as to why we dream, for it is still an unresolved topic amongst researchers as to the reason humans have dreams (Hobson, 2007).

Many people will say that they do not dream because they are not able to remember their dreams. Many of us wish to remember all our dreams but it is not easy to remove the obstacle that led to forget them. Some people have trouble remembering one single dream or all of their dreams. Even though, scientists have proven that everybody dreams. The explanation on this issue is that there is a significant difference in the quality of dreams occurring during REM sleep and NonREM sleep. Dreams that occur during REM sleep are longer, dreamy and show more visually vivid, dramatic, emotional and bizarre content, with much more active participation from the dreamer. Contrarily, dreams that occur during NonREM sleep tend to be limited to simple imagery, or non-imagery conceptual thinking, and are seen as comparable to daydreaming (Farthing, 1992). As it turns out, the quality of each late night NonREM dream largely resembles the REM dreams that were had in the early night. This suggests that the complexity of dreaming readily increases, positively corresponding with the time spent sleeping, and that it is not directly related to specific sleep stages after all. (Fosses, Stickgold and Hobson, 2004).
Considered as the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), believed that dreaming was “the royal road to the unconscious” (Farthing, 1992, p. 289). He held the belief that dreams represent our deepest unconscious desires, thoughts and motivations. He theorized that dreams may carry two types of content. The first he called manifest content and the second, latent content. In dreams that hold manifest content or superficial content, objects and events take the form of symbols or representations of real aspects of our lives. Those same dreams may hold latent or hidden content that are clearer depictions of the aggressive and sexual instincts of people that have been suppressed during our daily conscious awareness, making way into our dreams (Domhoff, 1996). Freud believed that no human actions occur by chance. Every action and thought is motivated by the unconscious at some degree. According to Freud (1900/1965, cited in Farthing, 1992), the unconscious, or “Id”, has desires that we cannot fulfill in our everyday life. Carrying out such desires could, for example, be punished by society, because the desired behavior is not tolerated or socially accepted but still instinctual to that specific being. Even if the “intolerable” action could go by unnoticed, and we could easily avoid punishment, we would still feel guilt and anxiety over what we have done because we also hold views that are contrary to our instincts. All of these desires create an incredibly strong energy that needs to be released in one way or another. One seemingly healthy way they can be released is through our dreams. Just as stated before, the knowledge of these desires potentially creates anxiety for us, so we can’t dream about them directly. If the desires were shown to us directly in our dreams, the resulting anxiety would cause us to wake up. So the preconscious takes on the task and mask our desires as symbols or representations of other things in the dreams that we have and allow them to be admitted freely to consciousness without causing unnecessary stress or anxiety. (Freud,
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1900/1965, cited in Farthing, 1992) This concept explains why dreams are necessary for psychological function by way of causing less stress to the human.

The issue that has arisen regarding Freud’s theory is that it is considered to be too vague, and is therefore not properly testable (Grünbaum, 1986). This manifest dream content can be interpreted to represent any number of different latent content depending on who is doing the interpretation, and consequently there is no real way of accurately acknowledging what the correct latent content is. On the other hand, there is also no direct way of falsifying Freud’s claims because it is not precise enough to predict any specific outcome. So it is flexible enough to explain all possible outcomes and unable to be disproven yet so vague that it cannot be considered accurate or able to be proven as true. For these reasons Farthing claims that Freud’s theory cannot be used because a scientific theory has to be able to predict specific outcomes, not only explain them in retrospect (Farthing, 1992).

Foulkes’s theory (cited in Farthing, 1992), describes dreaming as a type of by-product. Foulkes believed that dreams are created from exactly the same system and methodology that causes narrative production and simple imagination in our everyday waking life. This system, he believes, take a slightly different form during sleep to allow for dream production. It creates the dream images using both semantic and episodic memories as well as imagination. “It combines completely random memories with the dreamer’s knowledge of narratives, for example, how to construct a linear chain of events over time, or script knowledge, i.e. how a plausible and common sequence of events might play out in typical situation, like going to the restaurant, taking a bath, etc., in a way that creates a comprehensible and most often plausible dream” (Farthing). These dream images have no deeper meaning in themselves, but are only
representing their waking life counterparts randomly. But Farthing argues that, by saying that dreams are simply and only the result of a more or less random activation, Foulkes ignores the fact that many dream images are actually not very random at all. Residues left over from the day and issues that are currently concerning to us are more often represented in our dreams than what would be expected from this so-called random selection of memory traces. Many emotionally charged memories, for example after traumatic experiences, seem to be especially over-represented in the dreams after the fact. (Farthing, 1992). This also doesn’t explain recurring dreams, in the exact same sequence over and over again. It is impossible for something to be claimed as random yet it remain exactly the same when it has the ability to change if it were in fact random.

Departing to my own experience about dreams, I sometimes experience my own feelings or emotions while dreaming. My dreams that I remember usually reflect my own current concerns and fears. I would argue that my dreams also integrate much past data with various recent experiences and the result is expressed metaphorically in the form of visual images and conceptual thinking. I’ve found that I can solve many problems more easily and quickly if I allow myself to dream about them. So I believe that it is another possible function of dreaming—a cognitive process to allow for complex problem solving. In summary, nobody really knows the reason that dreaming occurs. All theories are simply that, theories, and are as numerous as there are dreams.
References


