

The bridge between consciousness and unconsciousness: theoretical approaches of dream analysis in psychotherapy

Sienna-indiya Patidar

Year 2, Medicine, University of Plymouth

Email: Sienna-indiya.patidar@students.plymouth.ac.uk



Introduction

This article explores the theoretical approaches of dream analysis in psychotherapy, incorporating both historical and contemporary perspectives.

Drawing on seminal works by Freud and Jung as well as both peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed articles and books from 1976 to 2024, it explores key developments in the field. No systematic methods or human participants were involved, making ethical approval and informed consent inapplicable.

Methods

A qualitative research approach was used, integrating multiple theories stemming from psychoanalysis and cognitive behavioural therapy. The research primarily explores the significance of dream analysis in psychotherapy. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using academic databases, inclusive of PubMed, PsycINFO and Google Scholar, to delve into the role of dreams in psychotherapeutic practice. The analysis was conducted via thematic content analysis, as the literature was reviewed and organised into key relevant themes, such as dreams revealing unconscious thoughts, Freudian and Jungian theories and cognitive behavioural therapy in addressing dreams. The analysis also involved comparing and contrasting different theoretical perspectives regarding supporting the use of dreams in psychotherapy.

The bridge between consciousness and unconsciousness: theoretical approaches of dream analysis in psychotherapy

Dreams can act as a cathartic function, providing insights into our subconscious by reflecting underlying psychological states. Within

the realm of psychotherapy, some believe that they serve as one of many gateways for exploring the concealed corners of the mind, in turn unveiling profound revelations about our fears, desires and unresolved struggles. It is proposed that we dream for around three to six hours per night, with a staggering 95 percent of us having no recollection upon awakening.¹

The importance of dreaming in psychotherapeutic practice

Dream analysis serves as a possible tool for investigating unconscious psychological processes, enabling therapists to work with clients in an attempt to dissect potential hidden messages, facilitating a deeper insight into self-awareness.

In *New Science of Dreaming*, a book published by the sleep psychotherapists Barrett and McNamara, it is suggested that the 'brain does not have to process new information' when sleeping, and hence uses its capacity to work on problems, based on experiences encountered in waking life that have evoked an emotional response – creating our dreams. This allows the brain to find solutions for problems more readily when sleeping than awake.²

Therefore, a lack of sleep is harmful for the consolidation of positive emotional content as the brain evaluates thoughts and memories, and in turn, influencing emotional reactivity and promoting mental health disorders.³

By incorporating dream analysis into psychotherapy, therapists may be able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the client's psychological function, which can be analysed to resolve lingering issues through cognitive restructuring ultimately enhancing overall mental health.⁴

Interpreting dreams: symbolism and analysis

Dreams can be interpreted through cognitive behavioural therapy sessions and via two main theories: Freudian and Jungian.⁵ Therapists can help clients explore the symbolism and meaning of dreams, which may help them receive an insight into their unconscious emotions, using this to ameliorate their conscious life.⁶

Dream symbolism involves the use of symbols and metaphorical imagery to convey unconscious wishes, conflicts and desires. These symbols can take miscellaneous forms, such as objects, animals, people and locations, and can then be decoded to represent themes such as transformation, emotional turmoil, freedom and vulnerability, which could reflect an individual's mental state.⁷

Evidence of dream analysis linking to psychotherapy

The use of dream analysis as a source of internal thoughts in psychotherapy has been heavily studied. Psychotherapists Luborksy and Crits-Christoph found that both therapy narratives and dreams were underlying the same unconscious relationship patterns, which allowed a thorough analysis and solution to their mental conflicts.⁸

In addition, Hall and Van de Castle developed a coding system for the content of dreams, where they concluded that it is possible to "draw personality profiles" and "predict future actions" solely from a dream.⁹ This information can then be analysed in therapy, providing the support required to the client. Moreover, therapist Palombo proclaims that dreams change when a person goes through psychotherapy, as not only do dreams predict their future actions, synonymous with De Castle's opinion, but it also changes their mentality.¹⁰ For example, in subsequent dreams that carry a storyline, dreamt over a few nights, clients may reprocess the contents from their last analytical psychotherapy session hence in their next dream their actions change, combatting their internal conflict.¹¹

In a study on the dreams of a 28-year-old female with multiple personality disorder, carried out by psychotherapist Barrett, it was demonstrated that the split-off parts of her personality appeared personified in their dreams during a psychotherapy session.¹¹ This case study suggests that we cannot conceal our inner personalities when we dream and that our true conscious thoughts are revealed beyond our control.

Greenberg and Pearlman compared the content of dreams from the client to the content of their therapy sessions that coincided with the time of the dream and found a strong connection between the themes in the dreams and their psychotherapy.¹²

Freudian perspectives on psychoanalysis and its link to psychotherapy Sigmund Freud asserted that dreams are the "royal road to the unconscious" – essentially providing direct access to the deepest layers of the mind.

In his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899, he proposed that dreams represent the disguised fulfilment of unconscious wishes, stemming from childhood experiences and repressed desires. In addition, he defined that dreams contain two different types of content – manifest and latent. Freudian theory states that latent content is not immediately apparent to the dreamer as it is comprised of underlying, unconscious feelings and thoughts experienced, which need to be explored to be fully understood. Whereas manifest content is made up of a combination of the latent thoughts and the images directly seen in the dream. Freud believed that a process called "Dreamwork" would unravel dreams of disguised unfulfilled wishes and allow unconscious thoughts to be transferred into conscious ones – to study the manifest content of the dream.¹³ Latent content also covers the more hidden symbolic meanings within dreams, which can be deciphered through techniques such as free association. Free association involves the spontaneous expression of thoughts, feelings and associations triggered by dream imagery or symbols, essentially saying whatever comes to mind initially, allowing the therapist to explore the underlying meanings of

the dream. Freud claims that free association provides a release valve for pent-up emotions accumulated during waking life, as a form of emotional discharge. It can be interpreted via 'loose free association' or 'broad free association', the first indicating that the client talks in the absence of prompts from their therapist, thus producing a "stream of words with no association to each other" which can be pieced together. The latter refers to the therapist asking the client to close their eyes and state the first thing that comes to their mind.¹⁴

Jungian perspectives on psychoanalysis and its link to psychotherapy psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that dreams provide insights into the collective unconscious, a universal repository of archetypes shared by all humanity, as they reflect personal experiences as well as deeper transpersonal aspects of the psyche. He claims that the figure in the dream psychoanalytically represents your ego consciousness, which is our awareness of ourselves as humans. Moreover, he believed the process of individualisation is the central goal of psychological development, where individuals strive to integrate both conscious and unconscious aspects of the psyche to enhance self-realisation, ultimately improving themselves from the therapy session.¹⁵

In Jungian dream analysis, dream symbols and images are expanded upon by associating them with cultural, mythological, religious and historical references. By drawing connections between dream content and broader cultural symbols and motifs, individuals can uncover the deeper layers of meaning within their dreams. Jung recognised that dreams contain both personal and collective meanings, reflecting the individual's unique life experiences as well as broader cultural and universal themes. Dreams are ultimately an instrument for the diagnosis, research and treatment of mental disturbances in a clinical setting.¹⁶

Cognitive behavioural therapy in dream analysis

Cognitive behavioural therapists assist clients in identifying and challenging beliefs and schemas manifested in their dreams, fostering cognitive restructuring and emotional healing. Practical techniques employed in cognitive behavioural dream work, such as maintaining dream journals and exploring alternative interpretations, facilitate meaningful exploration in psychotherapy. This in turn aids the process of transforming their mental framework by promoting greater emotional resilience and psychological wellbeing.¹⁷

These beliefs often stem from past experiences, traumas or negative self-perceptions and can contribute to emotional distress. Once identified by examining the content of their dreams and further exploring their emotional reactions evoked by dream symbols, individuals can gain insight into underlying processes shaping dream experiences. Cognitive behavioural therapy helps clients challenge and reframe their thoughts through cognitive restructuring techniques; by slowly replacing a belief with one that is more helpful and accurate. Understanding that it is normal to feel such emotions and trying to think positively about them aids the recovery process significantly within psychotherapy.

Therapists' challenges with dream interpretation

Although dreams can be incredibly valuable in psychoanalysis, certain evidence suggests that it is not the best form of extracting information during psychoanalytic sessions. Many therapists feel unprepared to attend to their client's dreams, as the results from one empirical study revealed that most clinicians work with dreams only occasionally as they are "meaningless".¹⁸ This highlights that although dreams are a source of unconscious thoughts, in the realm of psychotherapy, dream analysis may not always be the strongest choice compared to verbal therapy sessions such as CBT, as it is not as accurate. Moreover, the sessions constitute clients retrospectively recalling their dreams, perhaps reflecting their interpretation rather than the actual occurrence of the dream. This is reinforced by a study conducted in Taiwan in 2006, where 177 students agreed that they were more likely to discuss the positive connotations of their dreams rather than the potentially deeper, more upsetting connotations.¹⁹ This accentuates the biases involved in dream analysis as there is not

always an accurate depiction of the dream, nor do some clients find pleasant engagement during the session, reducing the amount of information they are willing to share with their therapist. This study had a large sample size; however, it was produced 18 years ago and therefore is not very up-to-date. Many advancements could still occur in the future using dream analysis, for example by supporting individuals with mental health issues, such as schizophrenia, by using psychotherapy.²⁰

The therapeutic value of dream analysis in psychoanalysis and cognitive behavioural approaches

In essence, dream analysis, whether through traditional psychoanalytic methods or contemporary cognitive behavioural approaches, continues to serve as a potential avenue for self-discovery, healing and personal growth within the realm of psychotherapy. Freud viewed dreams as the 'royal road to the unconscious'¹³, using techniques such as free association, whereas Jung states that dreams are often collective, as many humans experience the same dreams representing different themes such as emotional turmoil. Both theories can be used in dream analysis as an additional therapeutic tool within psychotherapy treatment. It is increasingly advised to document such dreams in journals and diaries to allow a more accurate reflection of their mental and emotional states,²¹ which can then be broken down in psychotherapy.

The potential capacity of dreams to tap into the subconscious and unearth underlying psychological processes remains an asset in therapeutic practices, fostering a deeper client-therapist relationship, which in turn would enhance overall treatment efficacy.

In the future, longitudinal studies could be used to advance research in this field by providing insights into how dreaming patterns evolve over time. This could further support the idea that waking states and concerns are reflected in dreams.²² Additionally, data analysed in psychotherapy could be integrated with neuroscience research to enhance our understanding of dreaming and its cerebral correlates.²³

The author affirms their responsibility and accountability for the published work, having made substantial contributions to its conception or design, or to the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data. They have also actively participated in drafting the work or critically reviewing it for significant intellectual content and have granted final approval for its publication. Furthermore, the author agrees to be fully accountable for all aspects of the work, ensuring that any questions regarding its accuracy or integrity are thoroughly investigated and appropriately resolved.

Copyright This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of the license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>. The copyright of all articles belongs to the author(s), and a citation should be made when any article is quoted, used or referred to in another work. All articles included in the INSPIRE Student Health Sciences Research Journal are written and reviewed by students, and the Editorial Board is composed of students. Thus, this journal has been created for educational purposes and all content is available for reuse by the authors in other formats, including peer-reviewed journals.

References

- Nichols H. Dreams: Causes, types, meaning, what they are, and more [Internet]. www.medicalnewstoday.com. 2018 [cited 2024 Jul 10]. Available from: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/284378#causes>.
- Barrett D, McNamara P, editors. The new science of dreaming. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers; 2007.
- Bernert RA, Kim JS, Iwata NG, Perlis ML. Sleep Disturbances as an Evidence-Based Suicide Risk Factor. *Current Psychiatry Reports*. 2015 Feb 21;17(3).

- Carcione, A., Santonastaso, M., Sferruzza, F. and Riccardi, I. (2021). Esoteric power, useless, useful: considerations about dreams in cognitive-behavioural therapy. *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process and Outcome*, 24(2). [cited 2025 Mar 28]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4081/ripppo.2021.543>.
- Weitz LJ. Jung's and Freud's contributions to dream interpretation: A Comparison. *American Journal of Psychotherapy [PsychoINFO]*. 1976 Apr;30(2):289–93.
- McLeod S. [Simply Psychology]. www.simplypsychology.org [Internet]. 2007;4(25). [cited 2024 May 16]. Available from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psychoanalysis.html>.
- Kramer M, Hlasny R, Jacobs G, Roth T. Do dreams have meaning? An empirical inquiry. *Am J Psychiatry*. 1976 Jul;133(7):778–81. doi: 10.1176/ajp.133.7.778. PMID: 180818.
- Luborsky, L. & Crits-Christoph, P. Core conflictual relationship theme: Understanding transference of CCRT method. 1990.
- Hall, C. S., & Van De Castle, R. L. (1966). The content analysis of dreams. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Palombo, S. R. (1982). How the dream works. The role of dreaming in the psychotherapeutic process. In S. Slipp (Ed.), *Curative factors in dynamic psychotherapy* (pp. 223–242). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Barrett D. Trauma and dreams. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; 1996.
- Greenberg, R., & Pearlman, C. A. (1978). If Freud only knew: A reconsideration of psychoanalytic dream theory. *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 5(1), 71–75.
- Freud Museum London (2025). The dream-work | The interpretation of dreams. [online] Freud Museum London. Available at: <https://www.freud.org.uk/education/resources/the-interpretation-of-dreams/the-dream-work/>.
- Barowski, J. (2015). What is free association? - Definition & concept - video & lesson transcript | Study.com. [Internet] Study.com. [cited 2025 Mar 28] Available at: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-free-association-definition-lesson-test.html>.
- Jeffrey S. The individuation process: Jung's 3 stages to wholeness [Internet]. scottjefrey.com. 2017. [cited 2024 May 15]. Available from: <https://scottjefrey.com/individuation-process>
- Khodarahimi S. Dreams in Jungian psychology: the use of dreams as an instrument for research, diagnosis and treatment of social phobia. *The Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences: MJMS [Internet]*. 2009; 16(4):42–9. [cited 2024 Jul 10]. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3216128>
- Montangero J. Using dreams in cognitive behavioral psychotherapy: Theory, method, and examples. *Dreaming*. 2009;19(4):239–54.
- Pesant N, Zadra A. Working with dreams in therapy: What do we know and what should we do? *Clinical Psychology Review*. 2004 Sep;24(5):489–512.
- Tien H-L S, Lin C-H, Chen S-C. Dream interpretation sessions for college students in Taiwan. *American Psychological Association*. Dec 2006; 16(4).
- Cordonnier MN. How dreams reveal brain disorders [Internet]. *Scientific American*. [cited 2024 May 23] Available from: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-dreams-reveal-brain-disorders/#:~:text=People%20with%20a%20psychotic%20disorder>
- Summer J. What Is a Dream Journal Used For? [Internet]. Sleep Foundation. 2023. [Cited 2024 May 18] Available from: <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/dreams/dream-journal>
- Pesant, N. and Zadra, A. (2005). Dream content and psychological well-being: A longitudinal study of the continuity hypothesis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62(1), pp.111–121. [Cited 2025 Mar 28]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20212>.
- Ruby, P.M. (2011). Experimental Research on Dreaming: State of the Art and Neuropsychanalytic Perspectives. *Frontiers in Psychology*, [online] 2(286). [Cited 2025 Mar 28]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00286>.



Sienna-Indiya Patidar

I am a second-year medical student at the University of Plymouth. This article was written as part of a cross-cutting themes-based student-selected component, which I completed in my first year. Having this opportunity allowed me to further explore my passion for neurology and delve into the profound impact dreaming has on the deep subconscious, including the methods by which this can be analysed. Along this journey, I have also discovered my strong passion for research, and I am excited to explore this further in the future!