

Dream Interpretation and Human Motives

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Received: February 12, 2020; **Published:** March 16, 2020

Abstract

This study investigated the specificity of dream content and its continuity with waking life. The systematic study of dream content has led to many interesting and useful findings concerning developmental changes, gender differences, cross-cultural similarities and differences, consistency in what individuals dream about over decades, and the continuity between dream content and waking thought. Although there are many dream research fronts currently, it is sustained, that dream content interpretation has been seldom treated within psychology with the notable exception of clinical psychologists. Precisely, this paper presents a preliminary framework for interpreting dreams content within the boundaries of sociocultural psychology [1-3]. This approach consists in the interpretation of dream's content on the basis of three general steps; 1) recollection and first inquiry, 2) categorizing and seizing dream content and 3) reflecting on the dream and linking to previous experiences. This approach is described and exemplified with data from 21 middle-class children.

Keywords: *Dreams; Oneiric Content; Dream Interpretation; Culture*

Introduction

One of the main problems about dream interpretation consists in trying to find the 'occult message' or the 'hidden meaning' of dreams without grounding the interpretation work on a specific theoretical framework. In other words, dream interpretation cannot be separated from theoretical considerations, if it is true that conceptual work can't affect the oneiric experience it is also true that dream reports can't be analyzed without a theoretical framework.

In developing theories of dreams and dreams interpretation, scholars have always made assumptions about how people live, think, feel and are motivated to experience a particular dream even if those assumptions have remained in some cases implicit and unexamined. These underlying assumptions about mind and human development- whether implicit or explicit-outline our approach to dreams and how we imagine the ways in which, and the extent to which, culture influences dream content. If we assume that the mind is an autonomous entity that is developed according to internal or subjective determinants, our conceptualizations of the role of culture will be radically diminished. By contrast, if we assume that culture plays an active role in the genesis and developing of human mind, we must conclude that many-if not all-cognitive functions are intertwined with specific cultural resources. In this view, the question of how the human mind works cannot be fully appreciated without appealing to the cultural tools at its disposal. As Bruner stated it: "It is culture that provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds in communicable ways.... Without those tools, whether symbolic or material, man is not a "naked ape" but an empty abstraction" ([4], p. 3).

In this paper, I examine this sociocultural model and discuss its implications for the study of dreams. Although the model I discuss draws upon symbolic anthropology, cultural psychology, symbolic interactionism, and semiotics, I focus primarily on how the model is emerging within the field of cultural psychology, which has been my own academic field for the last ten years.

The symbolic mind

Dream's content has been approached from diverse theoretical views (i.e. neurophysiologic, Freudian, Jungian) and many models have been deployed in trying to understand their meaning. One customary problem, however, is the tendency to treat dream content as self-contained. That is, in general dreams are considered as an enclosed phenomenon. Some authors even explicitly diminish the context significance in dream interpretation [5]. The main claim of this solipsistic assumption of dreams is that they are produced by internal or individual variables such as personality, character or cognitive system. In this view, dreams-as well as mind-are considered as a relatively self-contained or self-sufficient unit. If dreams are only the product of autonomous processes such as memory, perception or emotions, the sociocultural milieu could not play a specific relevant role in their constitution and/or comprehension.

Instead, in my approach mind is defined as sign operations that are the product of specific cultural conditions. From the shared perspectives of cultural psychology (e.g. Vygotsky, Bruner, Rogoff), symbolic anthropology (e.g. Turner, Geertz) and the social analysis of Burke [6], we sketch a preliminary framework for understanding the role that symbols play in the genesis and development of human mind and children dreams.

The main idea is to consider that all children grow up to be cultural beings. Thus, the process of human development is unavoidably coupled to the process of enculturation, of orienting oneself within systems of meaning. In other words, children are not only active beings but culturally active, they are participants in negotiations with others in the communal events that are the basis of shared meaning. In this view, mind is both constituted by and realized in the use of those symbols that are available in each cultural space [2,4]. For Geertz, culture itself is a semiotic system and mental functions are thoroughly dependant upon cultural resources that are not adjuncts to, but constituents of mental activity.

Based on these authors, we designed the basis for a new perspective named "Structurant interpretation" (SI), which considers interpretation as the main methodological source for acquiring knowledge and understanding of human actions, in general, and children's dreams, in particular.

We approach children's dream content by focusing on their meaning. Our main goal is to illustrate how the cultural milieu and specific social activities children are involved in (rather than only a subjective or cognitive individual states), are primordial determinants of how dream content is constituted. It is assumed that both mind and dreams are importantly related to the symbolic resources provided by culture. More specifically, it is sustain that children's dreams this paper presents both a sociocultural theoretical approach [1,2-4,7-9] and a method-structurant interpretation-for analyzing meaning in children's dreams.

Meaning, it's important to emphasize this, does not only own a cognitive dimension-which has been the general focus of the majority of psychological studies-but also an affective or emotional component. In fact, there is not an absolute or sharp partition between cognition and emotions but a continuum between them. "Cognitive" and "affective" content are two terms designating a single phenomenon: dreams' meaning.

The method consists in the interpretation of dream content on the basis of three analytical levels: distal, mediate, and concurrent meaning ordinates, which identify different interrelationships orders between culture and dreams, that is, from more socio-cultural situated to more personal-subjective.

This approach is exemplified with preliminary data from ten middle-class children (4 to 8) whom average age was eight years. 98 dreams were collected in children's homes twice a week and were audio recorded. Concurrently, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather information about children's typical day, family and school activities, favorite films and TV shows, gender differences, if any, friends, frequency and type of games played, etcetera. Through structural interpretation analysis of several children's dreams, it is argued that dreams constitute a subjective instantiation of culture's 'webs of meaning' that basically adopt a narrative organization.

We found the most frequent themes among children dreams were:

- Family
- Play situations
- TV/Movie
- Toys
- Candies
- Animals.

Somehow these topics also shows children's waking life concerns. Children dreams portray their view of the world, not in an objective way but in a modified or refashioned mode. In other words, these topics can be considered as the prime subject matter of oneiric content. Depending on the child current concerns, these topics are configured to produce a particular oneiric narrative.

These findings raise some interesting questions about the relation between dream content, and the actual experiences of the children. It can be said that dreams contains something of a "re-elaboration" of the children's experiences and their definition of the situation. Usually this refashioned material is selected and edited according to the particular concerns of the children. For example, in Paula's dream described below she dreamt of a witch and a schoolmate, and both characters were 'pick up' and re-elaborated from actual events that were affecting the child.

One example of dream interpretation

The School Event

Paula (4.2)

Last night I dreamed that I was hiding behind the couch because the witch [a Harry Potter's character] was trying to grab me... but there was this kid, Javier, who made her disappear with his magic wand... and Miss Karla [his school teacher] asked us to come back to the classroom and stop playing in the yard; then, Jackie showed me many stickers of princesses and we began to stick them everywhere.

Although school is a salient motive in this dream and her classmates, three specific elements are worth mentioning:

- a) Play actions illustrates how school rules are being violated; that is, she was putting princesses stickers wherever she want to,
- b) School teacher played the role of a person who ensures the respect of those rules, and
- c) The classmates as "adventure partners".

In this dream, Paula was expressing her view of peer's solidarity in two basic ways: first, her "rescue" from the witch by Javier's magical intervention, and second, by Jackie's invitation to put princesses' stickers on any available wall. This second activity was clearly opposed to formal or adult's world by breaking a common school rule: one is not supposed to stick princesses' labels on walls nor furniture.

School and school peers are a common and salient motif in children's dreams. Teresa's dream, for instance, served as a mean for expressing a usual school conflict: she likes to go to school because she can play and talk with her friends but she also hates it when the teacher behaves strictly or when classes are boring. Somehow, the witch threaten is a representation of those uncomfortable aspects of school while Javier's intervention symbolizes peer support and friendship.

Another interesting aspect, which also shows the school's conflicts, is the sequence with Teresa's friend, Jackie. In it, Paula shows her interest in doing amusing things although they are not allowed; and perhaps, that's why they are funny.

Although Paula could have dreamt about putting stickers alone she involved another peer and it was her friend, precisely, who instigated this activity. Naturally, there was no other actual kid; it was Paula herself who configured her dream and who gave "voice" to Jackie. In other words, Paula considers senseless doing things alone in school. A simple act of putting stickers is enhanced when you do it in the company of friends.

Paula's dream, then, is essentially emotional since it depicts her desire to have pleasurable moments at school and share them with her peers. Her dream plot shows the confrontation of her wishes with the school norms. The teacher, as an authority figure who occasionally exerts pressure over her pupils, is possibly represented by the anxiety generated by the presence of the witch.

In sum, the entanglement of affective configured this dream-the strong desire of having fun moments at school-and cognitive-the mental balance of what is forbidden and aloud inside school-components. Both components, however, were clearly situated within a sociocultural context, in this case the school, from which Paula took all the elements to build up her dream.

Conclusion

Dreams are not exclusively a cognitive act, in which things once perceived are recombined and reexamined in the children's mind. Instead, dreams are a selective, edited and sometimes highly distorted version of the children's actual experiences.

Data suggest that several culture expressions-i.e. Media, school, and family-were appropriated by children and constituted importantly their dreams content. In children dreams these cultural elements were combined in novel ways and produced original meanings. Although dreams show some degree of modification, refashioning, and personalization by children, they were nevertheless the expression of children's abilities to adapt to social, familiar, and cultural surroundings.

Recently, the narrative quality of dreams has been the subject of much investigation [10-12] and this paper can be inserted within this trend [13-19].

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by DGAPA-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (PAPIIT IN300215).

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Volume 9 Issue 4 April 2020

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