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The Role of Dream Work in Contemporary Psychoanalytic Practice

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One's approach to dreams is based on one's preferred theoretical model. This panel, supported by the IPA's Committee on Analytic Practice and Scientific Activities, attempted to facilitate a cross-cultural dialogue about dream work in contemporary analytic practice. Glen Gabbard introduced the panel by providing an overview of dreams in psychoanalysis. He believes that Freud's views on dreams have stood the test of time. He cited the work of the neuroscientists Allen Braun and Mark Solms (**Braun et al. 1997**; **Solms 2000**) to support Freud's idea that dreaming is a higher mental function, a "wishing system." Gabbard outlined Freud's technical procedures, still used by analysts today to understand dreams. He further reflected that dreams are no longer regarded as being the only "royal road" to the understanding of the unconscious. Developments in the past three decades lead us to add other sources of information about the patient's unconscious—fantasy, transference, countertransference, enactments, and the nonverbal characterological dimensions of the patient's style of interacting.

Gabbard commented that there have been only a few novel contributions to the dream literature in recent years. He cited the work of Jean-Michel **Quinodoz (1999)**, who has written of dreams that turn over a new page. Quinodoz argues that the reintegration of previously expelled fragments of the patient's self causes anxiety but also gives the dreamer a sense of inner cohesion. Hanna Segal, examining termination dreams, noted that the analyst can detect a transition from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position, a higher degree of internalization of good experiences, and an increased capacity to cope with conflicts and separation. Gabbard commented also on a paper in which he and Thomas Ogden

Panel held at the Winter Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association, New York, January 16, 2009. Panelists: Glen O. Gabbard (chair), Paul Denis, Vincenzo Bonaminio, Robert Michels.

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argue that dreaming is to some extent a joint construction between patient and analyst (**Gabbard and Ogden 2009**). This panel provided an opportunity for three analysts from different cultures to compare and contrast their views on dreams and dream work.

Paul Denis, a French psychoanalyst, provided an overview of his ideas on the use of dreams in psychoanalytic technique and provided a brief case presentation and sample dreams. He pointed out that the concern of making the unconscious conscious has led to a focus on using dreams as "a royal road to the unconscious." He cited the tradition in the Paris Psychoanalytical Society of interpreting transference only as it appears in dreams. He presented a clinical case, an analysis conducted by a female colleague, to illustrate the use of dreams to elaborate negative elements of the transference. The patient, a thirty-year-old woman, had not written her dissertation and was working without title or remuneration as a specialist accountant. Her past history is significant in that she is an only child, born to an unmarried eighteen-year-old mother and a South American father of whom she has no memory. She was raised early on by her grandparents while her mother studied, and then spent long periods living alone with her mother. Her adult life has been marked by many separations, as she flees any relationship that risks leading to a life shared with someone. She agreed to commit to a three-times-weekly psychoanalysis but made a habit of attending only two of the three sessions. She never really lay down on the couch, instead leaning on her elbows, always ready to leave. The analytic situation with a woman took her back to various situations in which she found herself almost gripped in the intimacy with her mother.

The analyst's interpretations during the initial phase were based on analogies between anecdotal situations reported by the patient and certain aspects of the analytic situation. Eventually the regression fostered by the analytic work led to the appearance of dreams like the following: "I'm pregnant. I give birth to a little girl, not a baby, a little girl of about a year old, who can walk and talk. I show her to a couple of friends and I'm surprised to find myself alternating between moments of pleasure and moments of annoyance when I no longer know what to do with this little girl. I call her Elvira, like the character in *Don Juan* who imprisons herself in a convent."

In response to this dream report, the analyst intervened by pointing out to the patient that she has given this little girl an age that corresponds to the duration of her analysis; that she has given her the name Elvira,

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a name that emerges from a mass of anonymous women who for Don Juan are interchangeable. Elvira places herself beyond any sexual temptation in her convent. "But," said the patient, "she finally gives in and then she is lost and nothing goes right for her anymore. She is lost because she has stopped resisting." The analyst intervened again: "Would you be lost if you gave into the desire to come to all three of your sessions?" The patient immediately associated: "Is it true that an analysis can last ten years? I often imagine your other patients, I imagine you have some, I don't know how many, you collect them just as Don Juan collects women and you abandon them like Elvira after having seduced them."

Denis commented that this dream interpretation was initially based on the most manifestly transference element: the coincidence between the little girl's age in the dream and the duration of the analysis, and then the patient's constant temptation to flee from the analyst. In relation to the analytic situation, the fear of being lost if she gives in lifts the repression of the desire to be dependent, to be loved without danger of being abandoned. The interpretation that emerged from this exchange was ultimately classical: "Here and now, you're afraid—as previously with your mother—of being seduced and abandoned." The interpretation leaves open the entire loving and homosexual dimension of the transference without reducing it to early mother-child relations. Denis later elaborated on two other dreams in this analysis. The analyst continued to focus on the patient's conflicts over involvement with the analyst, leaving open for possible later interpretation the patient's homosexual impulse and further elaboration of oedipal material.

Denis summarized his view of dreams. The mere occurrence of dream reports is a sign that the patient accepts at least one aspect of the regression induced by the analytic situation. It is on the basis of dreams that the most significant memories resurface: memories of fantasies, daydreams, impressions, emotions, and affects; it is also often the context of a dream that gives a different quality to memories that are already known but were not inscribed in the patient's affective history. Finally, the use of transference elements of the dream can lead to a mutative interpretation.

Vincenzo Bonaminio, a colleague from Rome, presented the first discussion. He stressed that we cannot speak of an established tradition of psychoanalysis in Italy, as we can with countries like France, Britain, and the U.S. The Italian wave will be evident in the years to come. He did, however, note that there is a characteristic trait that makes Italian psychoanalysis recognizable: though it has been deeply influenced by

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several different schools, this is a strength and not an eclectic mishmash or the passive acceptance of colonization. He believes that Italian psychoanalysis has taken the best points of the various schools and mixed them up in an original blend. He cites the following themes as characteristic of his work: (1) to pay close attention to the relationship between patient and analyst in the consulting room; (2) to focus on how patient and analyst feel moment by moment, paying attention to the state of the self in each particular moment of the session; (3) to contextualize what happens between patient and analyst in terms of mutual influence; (4) to be deeply attentive to the theory or frame of reference that backgrounds the session without interfering with it.

Bonaminio contends that when a dream is narrated in analysis, it is told to the analyst, *specifically* to him. He must strive to relate the dream to himself, to contextualize it with what has been happening in that moment or in the previous session or over the entire course of the analysis. He considers dreams to be transference communications in the here and now. He considers them *unidentified flying objects*, unexpectedly landing in the session, that need to be noted, understood, and interpreted. He attributes this view to Winnicott. He contends that there is no special role of the dream as *the* royal road to the unconscious; that role is shared with many other communications of the patient. This is in no way a co-constructivist view, as it preserves the individuality of both patient and analyst.

Bonaminio applied these considerations to Denis's presentation and focused on the Elvira dream. He agreed with Denis that the interpretation was initially based on the most manifestly transference element. He agreed also that this kind of interpretation promotes and facilitates the analytic relationship. Bonaminio wondered, though, whether the patient's fear of being lost if she gives in is exclusively the actualization of something "inside" her that comes out in the analytic listening; perhaps it is also the result of something she fears in the here and now because the analyst has contributed in some way, "giving body" to this fear with her own attitude toward the patient. An analysis of countertransference would be pivotal here and would be Bonaminio's priority. He believes that what should be in the foreground is first to pick up where the analyst is in the dream, and after acknowledging that to himself, to offer the patient an interpretation that includes this acknowledgment. This signals to the patient that the analyst has received the message and that perhaps a change in the analyst's attitude will contribute in a mutative way to alleviating the patient's fear. Bonaminio attributes this position to Winnicott:

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in making an interpretation, "the analyst reflects back what the patient has communicated" (1968, pp. 208-209).

Robert Michels presented the "North American" attitude toward dreams. He agrees with Denis that it is difficult to systematize the use of dreams in the psychoanalytic method, that all dreams in analysis are transference dreams, and that the task with a dream is to facilitate and foster the analytic process. He agrees also that though dreams were traditionally viewed as the "royal road to the unconscious," they are now properly regarded as having multiple functions (to Denis's list he would add defense and compromise).

Michels focused on what is missing from the report of the patient. He pointed out that we hear little about her current circumstances, her living situation, her arrangements for sexual pleasure, her motives for seeking treatment, and the nature of her emotional difficulties. Turning to the description of the dreams, he noted that there was no discussion of what led to them and little in the way of the patient's associations. In the Elvira dream, the analyst intervened by pointing out a connection between the manifest dream and the duration of the analysis. Though the patient seems to have validated the interpretation, Michels does not believe that this means it is "true." Rather, it means that the patient's response deepens and enriches the process.

Michels pointed out an additional area of agreement with Denis. Dreams are useful and have lost none of their interest to analysts. But he sees a difference in emphasis. He posits that for Denis the central goal of dream interpretation is to explore and understand the patient's unconscious mental life. For him, it is to explore and understand how the patient's unconscious mental life shapes and influences his current behavior, his relationships, his conscious life, and his work. He believes that North Americans are regularly more concerned with material that bridges unconscious and daily life, including current life arrangements and relationships, complaints, symptoms, and reason

for treatment. It is a rich opportunity to link the material that emerges from that regressed state to an understanding of the patient's problems in living.

Denis responded to Michels first, agreeing with all he said. He pointed out that his presentation was not meant to be exhaustive and that he had restricted his focus to the dream. In responding to Bonaminio, Denis added more information about the analyst, who he felt was very insecure and in a difficult place in this analysis. The analyst's insecurity thus reinforced that of the patient. He agreed with Bonaminio's metaphor

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of the dream as an unidentified flying object and how important it is to know what in the session preceded the dream report and to know where the analyst is in the dream.

Gabbard expanded on the issue of theory. He believes that often there is a gap between the theory the analyst is using and what in fact is effective.

Bonaminio talked about the dilemma of when to interpret. An early interpretation may traumatize a patient or it may give the patient a sense of hope. This dilemma is always present. Each of the presenters focused on the patient's leaning on her elbows. Michels saw this as an enactment that needs to be translated into language. Denis suggested that it indicates a very strong conflict in the patient. The analyst initially tries to reassure the patient, without result. Her interpretations to facilitate speech fall flat. For Bonaminio, the enactment must be noted and understood.

There were many comments from the audience. Francis Baudry questioned Michels's call for a more complete clinical presentation and discussion of context. He pointed out that Denis focused on the dream as transference and that this can be understood without the clinical material and context. He reminded the group that Don Juan is the one who abandons. He further added that there is no mention of the father in the patient's dreams and that the patient has an absent father. He believes that the patient is reenacting the position of the father and that in the Elvira dream the patient is both victim and victimizer, the one who can abandon or be abandoned at any moment.

Dominique Scarfone pointed out that one must not lose sight of the fact that dreams give access to two states of mind, the sleeping mind and the waking mind.

Henry Smith characterized what each of the presenters would do differently in an analysis. Michels would focus on the context. Bonaminio would focus on the transference context and give deep interpretations. The context is in the analyst's mind and what he or she privileges. Denis countered that it is hard to speak about differences culturally, as each analyst is unique. In a given situation, the analyst's response will be informed by personality, implicit theories, explicit theories, and the context for the patient. Bonaminio argued that he was misunderstood. He does not favor deep interpretations and again pointed out the dilemma of whether to interpret something in the moment or to wait. Michels countered that all communications are based on context. The analyst makes a selection, informed by theory, countertransference, and signal responses.

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The dream presents an occasion to select crucial elements of context and reconfigure them.

Cordelia Schmidt-Hellerau commented on how much pleasure there is in dreams. Dreams show how the mind of the patient works and how elaborate it is. She commented also on the difference between night dreams and daydreams. Bonaminio responded by pointing out the capacity of the patient for dreaming and creating a space for dreaming.

Earl Baughman asked about affect in dreams. Denis responded that the affect is often obvious. The patient may tell the analyst, or it is symbolized by color. Theodore Jacobs noted that none of the participants paid attention to the day residue as a context for the dream. He believes it anchors the analyst. Michels and Denis agreed that the day residue is important, while Bonaminio stressed the complexity of the context and the need for the analyst to select the factors on which to comment.

In sum, dreams and dream interpretation remain, across cultures, an important aspect of analysis. Although not the only royal road to the unconscious, they offer the possibility of increased understanding of the patient's unconscious. They can provide a view of the patient's immersion in the analytic process, of the prevailing transference-countertransference process, and, at times, of powerful resistance to the analytic process.

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