On the Prevalence of the Unconscious in Dream Interpretation

In their search for a dream’s meaning, the dream theories studied in this course take one of two approaches: interpretation (such as Freudian analysis), and non-interpretation (such as cognitive theories). According to the interpretive theories, dreams contain a message for the dreamer that, if understood, can improve the quality of his life. However, the questions of the dream message’s origin and purpose remain at large. While the theories of Freud, Jung, and the existentialists differ as to the definition of life “quality” and hence, the purpose of the dream’s message, one aspect remains the same: this message originates from a non-conscious (or in other words, unconscious) part of the dreamer’s mind. Regardless of the claims put forth by particular dream theorists, dream interpretation relies on the existence of an unconscious part of the mind as the source of the dream’s meaning.

First off, in Freud’s theory of mental health, humans are driven primarily by instinctual drives. The energy of these drives induces desires and wishes that seek fulfillment, and people quickly learn (through socialization) that a hedonistic fulfillment of these desires is unacceptable. Thus, these wishes (and all of the associated energy) are forced into their unconscious minds, guarded heavily by a conscious “repressor.” Nevertheless, as they continue to seek alternate forms of fulfillment to release the pent-up drive energy, the wishes ultimately express themselves either in socially-acceptable (as deemed by the repressor) alternate forms, or in anti-social neurotic symptoms. However, a loophole exists in this repressor: during sleep, the repressing agent is relaxed, allowing the drive energy of the unfulfilled desires to be released (and the wish to find fulfillment) in the form of the dream (Shafton 51-52). Or in other words, dreams are caused by unconscious desires seeking fulfillment. Hence, according to Freud, the true meaning of a dream is found only by uncovering the underlying repressed wish that has been buried in the unconscious.

On the other hand, Jung does not hold such a simple view of mental health. According to his theory, mental health is achieved by means of an abstract concept of “wholeness” and “individuation.” A full understanding of this can only be achieved by a deep investigation into Jung’s notion of the mind, which unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this paper. Even so, a simplified description (that does not even begin to do justice to Jung’s theory) of the Jungian unconscious and the parts of the psyche will follow, since the interplay of the mind, consciousness, and the drive toward wholeness is paramount in Jung’s conception of dreams.

Originally one of Freud’s followers, Jung adopted Freud’s concept of the unconscious. However, as he split off from Freud, he subsequently redefined the unconscious, perhaps influenced by the fact that in one of his own dreams, he focuses more on a “feeling for the transcendence of the past” rather than a past that is neurotic or traumatic (Delaney 78-79). Moreover, from a Jungian standpoint, the unconscious mind has two main parts — a personal unconscious, and a collective unconscious — both of which influence dreams. However, the specific details of the aspects of Jung’s unconscious are beyond the scope of this paper; instead, it is most important to note is that unlike Freud, Jung believes that the unconscious is not solely “evil,” containing only those elements from the past that are too
painful to deal with. For Jung, the unconscious also contains those items that are too good or beautiful to acknowledge consciously (Shafton 77).

Additionally, according to Jung, a person’s psychological essence is composed of two main parts: an unconscious “Self” and a conscious “ego” (Delaney 85; Shafton 93). In general, one only has access to his ego, while the mostly-inaccessible Self encompasses the totality of his psyche (or in other words, the ego is the small subset of the Self that is consciously known). Further, “the Self is the archetype of the ego,” and the “ego acts for the Self, but is not the center of the Self” (Shafton 92). Simply put, the ego is the means by which the Self is expressed and assimilated in one’s (conscious) life through the process of individuation (Shafton 93). But what is the Self’s purpose that is expressed by the ego? Jung believes that the Self has an innate drive toward wholeness – loosely defined as a state of mental health characterized by balance in all aspects of the psyche, conscious and unconscious (Shafton 123-124). As such, a person’s life is dominated by the interaction between the Self and ego – the Self’s desire for wholeness and the attainment of this wholeness via the ego.

This Self-ego interaction can summarized in the following process:

1. The ego participates in daily life.

2. The Self evaluates the ego’s attitudes and actions against those necessary to achieve wholeness

3. The Self provides feedback to the ego and orients it toward wholeness, if necessary.

To accommodate this process, the Self must be able to communicate with the ego (to provide feedback), thus giving rise to the purpose of dreaming: a dream “carries a message from the unconscious [Self] to the conscious [ego]. Frequently, it has a point, purpose, or punch line” (Delaney 84). Often, the dream is compensatory: its plot makes up for an action or attitude that is missing from the ego’s conscious interactions by either acting out the opposite (or missing) action, or exaggerating the current one to the point of absurdity. In this light, then, a dream’s true meaning lies in the unconscious’ assessment of its own progress toward wholeness. Through interpretation, the ego then becomes aware of this message from the unconscious Self and assimilates it into daily life.

By contrast, the existential/phenomenological (hereafter referred to as “existential” only) perspective differs from Freud and Jung on two main points: (1) dream experiences are no different than waking experiences, and (2) there is no unconscious mind (or so they claim). First, existentialists emphasize the immediate experience over any “meaning” or “significance” that can be assigned to it; or in other words, “existence precedes essence.” As described in the phenomenologist Husserl’s concept of bracketing, the proper way to discover the subsequent meaning of an experience or object is to take it for what it is, “bracketing out” (or ignoring) all preconceived notions or expectations as to what it might be. Therefore, when dealing with dream images, one must take them as they were experienced within the dream, and not look for any further meaning beyond that (Shafton 141; Delaney 104-105). Second, in a similar fashion, the existentialists conclude that an “unconscious” mind that affects the content of dreams does not exist (Shafton 154); dreams are merely an extension of waking life experience, and are thus every bit as “conscious” (Shafton 141).

However, if dreams are to be taken only at face value with nothing to offer beyond that which is already manifest, dream analysis becomes meaningless. To this end,
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despite its superficial claims that an unconscious mind does not exist, the existentialist
dream-interpretation method hints at the influence of “non-conscious” aspects of one’s life.
With regard to the various existential possibilities, the existentialists claim to be “concerned
not only with what is immediately manifest but also with what may eventually make itself
manifest” (Delaney 108). Specifically, in the discussion of unacknowledged existential possi-
bilities (Delaney 111-114), it is conceded that “certain possibilities which an individual may
successfully ignore in waking life may appear...while dreaming” (Delaney 111). By consider-
ing tertiary allusions in the process of dream elucidation, these possibilities are revealed
to the dreamer, allowing him to relate the dream images to elements of his daily life. As a
result, the dreamer may become aware of an attitude that was previously unacknowledged
(or unconscious) in his waking (or conscious) life (Delaney 132-133). And in this light, an
unconscious mechanism must exist in order to “store” these ignored possibilities on the brink
on conscious awareness and embed them into the manifest dream images.

In addition to the three presented in this paper, even other theories of dreams rely on an
“unconscious” element, providing further evidence of its necessity in dream interpretation.
In the Gestalt literature, for instance, the dreamer is encouraged to confront the “disowned”
or “incomplete” (unconscious) parts of himself that seek to be re-owned (Shafton 213-214).
And in the literature on artistry in dreams, a dreamer is encouraged to first meditate on the
dream, and then set his “non-conscious” mind free in the creation of designs on a canvas,
with minimal interaction from conscious awareness (Mellick 177-178). At a high level of
abstraction, psychological paradigms that involve dream interpretation can be summarized
by the following aspects:

- a notion of (mental) health and well-being that is independent of dreaming
- an unconscious mind that knows how to make itself “healthy,” and is unable to do so
directly
- a conscious mind whose vision of this health is clouded; however, this conscious must
  bring about the state of health desired by the unconscious
- dreams are the means by which the unconscious expresses itself; and interpretation is
  the means by which the conscious becomes aware of the unconscious’ message

While this may be little more than a gross over-generalization of a number of independent
dream theories, it is still interesting to consider the implications of such a generalization. Or
in other words, why is the unconscious so prevalent in dream interpretation?

Perhaps it can be concluded that the prevalence of an unconscious and its consistent
role in multiple dream theories indicates a basic human need to be a rational being that is “in
control” of his own life in two aspects: (1) being able to explain and come up with a reason
for everything, and (2) claiming to have all the necessary knowledge of one’s life within his
grasp. Here, the unconscious is merely a “catchall” scapegoat used to explain everything
that cannot otherwise be explained: so long as the unconscious mind (as a concept) exists
as the origin of a dream, dreams are thus completely rational. At the same time, this
“catchall dream explanation tool” must be contained within one’s own mind; otherwise,
dreams would be out of a person’s own control. By describing the unconscious as “on the
fringe” of consciousness, as these dream theories do, the claim to “know it all along” is
validated, thus preserving for the dreamer the illusion of complete knowledge and control of his own life. As ridiculout as an idea such as this may seem, it is only one of many possible explanations for the prevalence of the unconscious in dream theories; indeed, a “real” explanation may in fact never be known.

Regardless of intent, however, the interpretation of dreams implicitly relies on the existence of an unconscious mind as the source of the dream’s meaning. While the explanation for the universality of an unconscious can be debated extensively, it must be noted that as Freud was one of the first to introduce dream interpretation, his influence invariably shows up in subsequent theories. In fact, Freud is famous for remarking that “dreams are the royal road to the unconscious.” In light of the prevalence of the unconscious as the source of meaning in dreams, perhaps it could be further stated that the this “royal road” is actually paved by the unconscious itself.
Works Cited

