

# Freud's Interpretation of His Own Dreams in "The Interpretation of Dreams": A Continuity Hypothesis Perspective

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*Summary.* From Freud's statement that the manifest or remembered dream is a disguised fulfillment of a suppressed or repressed wish and the extensive use of sexual interpretations, one might infer that dreams do not relate directly to the conscious waking life of the dreamer – as stated by the continuity hypothesis of dreaming. The five dreams of Sigmund Freud presented in this paper demonstrate that Freud himself linked these dreams (as his other dreams) to significant experiences, events, feelings of his waking life: his professional life with all the worries of being a pioneer in the field of psychotherapy, his relations to colleagues, to his father and to his son, and health problems. This claim does not refute Freud's dream theory but supports modern dream research in investigating the direct relationship between waking life and dream content as well as the factors affecting this continuity.

*Keywords:* Freud; Continuity hypothesis

Sigmund Freud's dream theory distinguishes between the manifest and the latent content of dreams (Van de Castle, 1994; Bulkeley, 1997; Delaney, 1998). The latent content, or so-called dream thoughts, consists of unconscious and often unacceptable wishes that could not pass censorship and thus have to be transformed; a process Freud called dream-work. The four mechanisms of dream work are (1) condensation (fusion of several disparate elements, e.g., soldiers, horses, dancers; Van de Castle, 1994), (2) displacement (e.g., minor details might be of great importance to the understanding of the dream), (3) considerations of representability (expressing abstract thought in pictures), and (4) secondary revision (smoothing over the edges of the manifest dream). The manifest or remembered dream is therefore a disguised fulfillment of a suppressed or repressed wish (Freud quoted in Delaney, 1998). According to this theory, one might think that dreams do not relate directly to the conscious waking life of the dreamer. Freud, however, acknowledged that in dreams various elements of the previous day, so-called day-residues are present. They were – as the manifest dream itself – not of special importance; the real meaning of the dream is only revealed by tracking down the latent dream thoughts and this is only achieved by eliciting the patient's free associations and by dream interpretation.

Another aspect of Freudian dream theory, the interpretation of a large variety of dream elements as being sexual references, also might lead to the impression that dreams do not simply reflect general waking life but repressed or unconscious thoughts. Although Freud claimed that "the assertion that all dreams require a sexual interpretation, against which critics rage so incessantly, occurs nowhere in my Interpretation of Dreams (Freud, 1991, p. 521), he wrote just on the previous page that "the majority of the dreams of adults deal with sexual

material and give expression to erotic wishes (p. 520)". The following citations give an impression that almost every dream element might bear sexual meanings. "All elongated objects, such as sticks, tree-trunks and umbrellas (the opening of these last being comparable to an erection) may stand for the male organ – as well as all long, sharp weapons, such as knives, daggers and pikes. (p. 470)", "Boxes, cases, chests, cupboards and ovens represent the uterus, and also hollow objects, ships, and vessels of all kind. Rooms in dreams are usually women ('Frauenzimmer'). (p. 471)", and "A little time ago I heard that a psychologist whose views are somewhat different from ours had remarked to one of us that, when all was said and done, we did undoubtedly exaggerate the hidden sexual significance of dreams; his own commonest dream was of going upstairs, and surely there could not be anything sexual in that. We were put on the alert by this objection, and began to turn our attention to the appearance of steps, staircases and ladders in dreams, and were soon in a position to show that staircases (and analogous things) were unquestionable symbols of copulation. It is not hard to discover that basis of the comparison: we come to the top in a series of rhythmical movements and with increasing breathlessness and then, with a few rapid leaps, we can go to the bottom again. Thus the rhythmical pattern of copulation is reproduced in going upstairs. (p. 472)" This, the sexual symbolism, – as Freud wrote himself – was a major critique regarding his dream theory because people did not understand why dreams do not reflect all aspects of life. Interestingly, a recent study (Schredl et al., in press) showed that the amount of time spent with sexual fantasies during the day correlated with the frequency of sexual dreams (including any overt form of eroticism, e.g., kissing, masturbation, intercourse) but not the time spent with sexual activities like intercourse or masturbation.

The continuity hypothesis in its general form states that dreams reflect waking life concerns (Hall & Nordby, 1972), waking thoughts (Strauch & Meier, 1996) or waking life experiences (Schredl & Hofmann, 2003). Schredl (2003) formulated a mathematical model for the continuity between waking and dreaming to stimulate research into the factors that affect the probability of incorporation of waking life experiences into subsequent dreams. Some of the factors are the time interval between waking life experience and a subsequent dream, the

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emotional intensity of the waking life experience and personality dimensions.

Before starting to quote some of Freud's dreams, the study of Hall and Domhoff (1968) will be briefly reviewed. They analyzed 28 of Freud's dreams published in "The Interpretation of Dreams" and in the book "On Dreams" and compared them with 31 of Jung's dreams published in his autobiography "Memories, Dreams, and Reflections". Jung's dreams were longer and included more references to nature and architecture. Freud, on the other hand, dreamed more often about food, oral references and success. There were more dream characters in his dreams than in Jung's dreams. But the gender ratio of dream characters were comparable (men occurred twice as often as women) – for both Freud and Jung and for a large sample of male students (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966). The authors interpreted the differences in dream content as a reflection of their different personalities, e.g., Jung was living more solitary than Freud with his large group of close friends and disciples. Hall and Domhoff (1968), of course, also pointed out that the findings should be viewed with caution because Freud and Jung selected these specific dreams for publication and for supporting their dream theories (if it were possible, it would be nice to analyze large samples of unselected dreams of these famous psychoanalysts).

The present paper does not aim at a critique or defense of Freud's dream theory nor at adding new interpretations to Freud's dreams (for a review on the interpretations of Irma's Injection dream see Kramer, 1999; 2000) but wants to highlight how Freud's own comments about his dreams can be conceptualized within the framework of the continuity hypothesis, i.e., dream content as a direct reflection of issues important in the waking life of the dreamer.

One of the most famous dreams in the history of psychoanalysis is Freud's dream of Irma's injection, sometimes called the dream specimen of psychoanalysis (cf. Erikson, 1954).

*"Dream: A large hall – numerous guests, whom we were receiving. – Among them was Irma. I at once took her on one side, as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my 'solution' yet. I said to her: 'If you still get pains, it's really only your fault.' She replied: 'If you only knew what pains I've got now in my throat and stomach and abdomen – it's choking me.' – I was alarmed and looked at her. She looked pale and puffy. I thought to myself that after all I must be missing some organic trouble. I took her to the window and looked down her throat, and she showed signs of recalcitrance, like women with artificial dentures. I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that. – She then opened her mouth properly and on the right hand I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modeled on the turbinal bones of the nose. – I at once called in Dr. M., and he repeated the examination and confirmed it.... Dr. M. looked quite different from usual; he was very pale, he walked with a limp and his chin was clean-shaven.... My friend Otto was now standing beside her as well, and my friend Leopold was percussing her through her bodice and saying: 'She has a dull area low down on the left.' He also indicated that a portion of the skin on the left shoulder was infiltrated. (I noticed this, just as he did, in spite of her dress.) .... M. said: 'There's no doubt it's an infection, but no matter; dysentery will supervene and the toxin will be eliminated.' ... We were directly aware, too, of the origin of the infection. Not long before, when she was feeling unwell, my friend Otto had given her an injection of a preparation of propyl, propyls ... propionic acid ... trimethylamin (and I saw before me the formula for this printed in heavy type) .... Injections of that sort ought not to be made*

*so thoughtlessly.... And probably the syringe had not been clean. (Freud, 1991, p. 182)"*

In his preamble to the dream (Freud, 1991, pp. 180-181), Freud clearly related the dream to the treatment of one of his patients. Whether Irma within the dream is a reference to Anna Hamerschlag or Emma Eckstein seems not to be fully clarified (Thomä, 1987). The rich imagery of this dream stimulated subsequent authors to discuss the meaning of the dream, very much beyond Freud's own interpretation (Freud, 1991, pp.183-195). Kramer (2000) pointed out that several interpretations might be far-fetched and does not fit within the context of Freud's waking life. For example, the symptoms reported by Irma within the dream have been linked to his lip cancer in 1923 (Hersh, 1995). Since the dream was about a patient, the dream can also be considered as a counter-transference dream; Rohde-Dachser (1992) interpreted this dream and how Freud treated the woman in the dream as reflecting his patriarchic world view. From the viewpoint of the continuity hypothesis of dreaming, the dream clearly reflects the main issues present in Freud's life at that time, his profession, his development of a new treatment method, and his fear as to whether this non-organic treatment method really helps his patients. Three of his closest colleagues were present in the dream, Dr. M., Leopold, and Otto. It would have been interesting if Freud had applied Jung's subjective level to his interpretation of the Irma dream, i.e., that other dream characters might be associated with different aspects of the own personality.

The associations to the next dream were also related to Freud's professional life.

*"Dream: I was very incompletely dressed and was going upstairs from a flat on the ground floor to a higher storey. I was going up three steps at a time and was delighted at my agility. Suddenly I saw a maid-servant coming down the stairs – coming towards me, that is. I felt ashamed and tried to hurry, and at this point the feeling of being inhibited set in: I was glued to the steps and unable to budge from the spot. (Freud, 1991, p. 335-336)"*

In his analysis (Freud, 1991, p. 336ff), he linked the dream to his own home, an incident when he worked late and went upstairs, his fears about his heart trouble (attributed to his smoking), the staircase of a patient's house he visited twice a day at that time, the argument with the maid-servant of his patient and the concierge about his spitting on the floor of the staircase (and not wiping his boots on one occasion). He even mentioned possible sexual references but dismissed them because he did not find the maid-servant, an older, surly woman, attractive. Thus, his own analysis pointed to major current issues in his waking life (work, health problems, interpersonal issues, evaluating women's attractiveness).

The next dream also deals with professional issues and Freud's health.

*"Dream: I was riding on a grey horse, timidly and awkwardly to begin with, as though I were only reclining upon it. I met one of my colleagues, P., who was sitting high on a horse, dressed in a tweed suit, and who drew my attention to something (probably to my bad seat). I now began to find myself sitting more and more firmly and comfortably on my highly intelligent horse, and noticed that I was feeling quite at home up there. My saddle was a kind of bolster, which completely filled the space between its neck and crupper. In this way I rode straight in between two vans. After riding some distance up the street, I turned around and tried to dismount, first in the front of a small open chapel that stood in the street frontage. Then I actually did dismount in front of another chapel that stood near it. My hotel was in the same street; I might have let the horse go to it on its own, but I preferred to lead*

*it there. It was as though I should have felt ashamed to arrive at it at horseback. A hotel 'boots' was standing in front of the hotel; he showed me a note of mine that had been found, and laughed at me over it. In the note was written, doubly underlined: 'No food', and then another remark (indistinct) such as 'No work', together with a vague idea that I was in a strange town in which I was doing no work. (Freud, 1991, p. 325)"*

Freud related the dream to a painful stimulus: "But for some days before I had been suffering from boils which made every movement a torture; and finally a boil the size of an apple had risen at the base of my scrotum, which caused me the most unbearable pain with every step I took (Freud, 1991, p. 326)" And he went on: "I was not properly capable of discharging my medical duties. (p. 326)" and "But I knew that could not go on long with my peculiarly difficult work unless I was in completely sound physical health; and my dream was full of gloomy allusions to the situation in which I should then find myself (referring to the note 'No work, no food). Again, the dream reflects his worries how his current poor health affects his professional life, and, again, a colleague of his was present in the dream.

The next dream is about Freud's father.

*"Dream: I received a communication from the town council of my birthplace concerning the fees due for someone's maintenance in the hospital in the year 1851, which had been necessitated by an attack he had had in my house. I was amused by this, in the first place, I was not yet alive in 1851 and, in the second place, my father, to whom it might have related, was already dead. I went to him in the next room, where he was lying on his bed, and told him about it. To my surprise he recollected that in 1851 he had once got drunk and had had to be locked up or detained. It was at a time at which he had been working for the firm of T--. 'So you used to drink as well?' I asked; 'did you get married soon after that?' I calculated that, of course, I was born in 1856, which seemed to be the year which immediately followed the year in question. (Freud, 1991, pp. 565-566)"*

First, Freud related the difference in dates to a remark of a senior colleague "whose judgment was regarded beyond criticism (p. 566)". He "had given voice to disapproval and surprise at the fact that the psychoanalytic treatment of one of my patients had already entered its fifth year. (pp. 566-567)". Freud explained later on: "The dream-thoughts protested bitterly against the reproach that I was not getting on faster – a reproach which, applying first to my treatment of the patient, extended later to other things. Did he know anyone, I thought, who could get on more quickly? Was he not aware that, apart from my method of treatment, conditions of that kind are altogether incurable and last a life-time? What were four or five years in comparison with a whole life-time, especially considering that the patient's existence had been so very much eased during the treatment?" From what Freud is writing, it seems clear that the reproach of his colleague must have hurt Freud and, thus, the dream deals with his confidence in the newly developed therapy method. The period of five years was also related to "the length of time during which I made my fiancée wait for our marriage (p. 569)"; a remark closely linked to "Thus the sentence 'I went to him in the next room' ..... correctly reproduced the circumstances in which I informed my father of having become engaged to be married without consulting him." The term 'eigenmächtig' in the German text is even stronger than 'without consulting him': independent, arbitrary. Freud wrote: "This sentence was therefore reminding me of the admirable unselfishness displayed by the old man on that occasion... (p. 567)". The dream reflects thus events of Freud's life, his relationship to his father (he passed away in 1896) and his engagement to Martha Bernays.

The last dream in this series deals with Freud's son.

*"Dream: Indistinct beginning. I said to my wife that I had a piece of news for her, something quite special. She was alarmed and refused to listen. I assured her that on the contrary it was something that she would be very glad to hear, and began to tell her that our son's officers' mess had sent a sum of money (5000 Kronen?)... something about distinction... distribution... Meanwhile I had gone with her into a small room, like a store-room, to look for something. Suddenly I saw my son appear. He was not in uniform but in tight-fitting sports cloths (like a seal?), with a little cap. He climbed up on to a basket that was standing beside a cupboard, as though he wanted to put something on the cupboard. I called out to him: no reply. It seemed to me that his face or forehead was bandaged. He was adjusting something in his mouth, pushing something into it. And his hair was flecked with grey. I thought: "Could he be as exhausted as all that? And has he got false teeth?" Before I could call out again I woke up, feeling no anxiety but with my heart beating rapidly. My bedside clock showed that it was two thirty. (Freud, 1991, p. 711)"*

He began his analysis with: "I must restrict myself to bringing out a few salient points. Distressing anticipations from the previous day were what had given rise to the dream: we had once more been without news of our son at the front for over a week. It is easy to see that the content of the dream expressed a conviction that he had been wounded or killed. (p. 712)" Although there is sure much more to the dream, the major issue reflected in the dream is the Freud's fear about his son's welfare.

## Conclusion

The five dreams of Sigmund Freud presented in this paper demonstrate that Freud himself linked these dreams (and his other dreams) to significant experiences, events, feelings of his waking life: his professional life with all the worries of being a pioneer in the field of psychotherapy, his relations to colleagues, to his father and his son, and to health problems. A recent study (Schredl & Piel, 2005) reported that men dream quite often about their professional life; more often than women. But the gender difference is decreasing over the years parallel to increase of the percentage of women as wage-earners (Schredl & Piel, 2005). So it not astonishing that Freud who devoted a lot of energy to his profession dreamed often about work-related issues. Without referring to unconscious or repressed material (by Freud himself or other authors) the dreams showed direct relationship with waking life as has been conceptualized by the continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Schredl, 2003). This claim doesn't refute Freud's dream theory nor the claim that there is much more material within in the dream to deal with if associations, childhood memories, hidden wishes etc. were taken into account. On the other hand, the material presented in "The Interpretation of Dreams" supports modern dream research into the direct relationship between waking life and dream content as well as the factors affecting the continuity. It is also in line with modern approaches to the psychotherapeutic work with dreams with relate the emotions, thoughts, and behavior patterns present in the dream with the current waking life of the dreamer without including suppressed or other material (Schredl, 2007).

Last but not least, the following quote of Freud reflects the closeness to the continuity hypothesis of dreaming: "The view that dreams carry on the occupations and interests of waking life has been entirely confirmed by the discovery of the concealed dream-thoughts. These are only concerned with what seems important to us and interest us greatly. (Freud, 1991, p. 746)"

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