

Dream Content Corresponds With Dreamer's Psychological Problems and Personality Structure and With Improvement in Psychotherapy: A Typology of Dream Patterns in Dream Series of Patients in Analytical Psychotherapy

Christian Roesler

Catholic University of Applied Sciences Freiburg; University of Basel; and Kyoto University

This qualitative study of patients' dreams in analytical psychotherapy using the method of Structural Dream Analysis investigated 15 cases and 202 dreams. In total, 5 major dream patterns were identified and that accounted for the majority of the dreams. The clients' dream series were dominated by 1 or 2 repetitive patterns, which were closely connected to the psychological problems of the dreamers. In addition, typical changes in the dream series' patterns could be identified that corresponded with therapeutic change. These findings support Jung's theory of dreams as providing a holistic image of the dreamer's psyche including unconscious aspects. The implications for different psychoanalytic theories of dreaming and dream interpretation are discussed as well as implications for the continuity hypothesis.

Keywords: dreams in psychotherapy, psychoanalytic dream theories, typical dream patterns, psychotherapy process, continuity hypothesis

In contemporary theories of dreaming, it is widely accepted that dreams contain meaning that is closely connected with the waking life of the dreamer and that dream interpretation is helpful as part of psychotherapeutic interventions (Hill, 1996). DeCicco, Donati, and Pini (2012) gave a current overview of studies investigating the use of dreamwork in psychotherapy for a range of mental health problems as well as an overview of different therapeutic methods of dream interpretation. Among these is the storytelling method of dream interpretation, which is an example of a newly developed method. Dream interpretation in psychotherapy originated in psychoanalysis with Freud's (1900) seminal publication. In the psychoanalytic tradition, work with dreams has always played an

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Christian Roesler, Department of Clinical Psychology, Catholic University of Applied Sciences Freiburg; Department of Psychology, University of Basel; and Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christian Roesler, Department of Clinical Psychology, Catholic University of Applied Sciences Freiburg, Karlsstraße 63, 79104 Freiburg, Germany. E-mail: christian.roesler@kh-freiburg.de

important role in the treatment of psychological disorders, and it is still considered as the royal road to the unconscious (Fonagy, Kächele, Leuzinger-Bohleber, & Taylor, 2012; Fosshage, 1987). Even though in the different psychoanalytic schools, quite different approaches to the interpretation of dreams have developed—for example, C. G. Jung from the beginning had a different perspective on the dream—there is general agreement that dreams give access to an understanding of the unconscious roots of psychological problems as well as indicating potential therapeutic pathways. The dream can be seen as a subtext that points to the unconscious conflicts underlying neurosis, and it also contains constructive indications for the overcoming of problems. The assumption that the dream is mainly influenced by unconscious content may be the main characteristic that differentiates between psychoanalytic and other contemporary perspectives in psychotherapeutic dreamwork. In the past decades, there has been development in the reconceptualization of psychoanalytic dream theories influenced by insights from empirical dream research. This has led to a convergence of contemporary Freudian dream theories moving toward Jung's understanding of the dream (Fosshage, 1987; Levin, 1990). According to Barrett and McNamara (2007), the results of empirical dream research can be summarized in the following way: in the dream, the brain is in a mode where it does not have to process new input but can use larger capacities for working on problems and finding creative solutions. The dream especially focuses on experiences in waking life that have emotional meaning for the dreamer. The dreaming mind can find solutions for problems more readily compared with waking consciousness because it is able to connect different areas and functions of the brain. This supports the view taken by Jung (1971) that sees the psyche as a self-regulating system and the dream as a spontaneously produced picture of the current situation of the psyche in the form of symbols. Jung differentiates between a “subjective” level and an “objective” level to dreams. In the first perspective, the figures and elements of the dream are interpreted as representing parts or qualities of the dreamer's personality (especially conflictual parts, i.e., complexes), whereas in the objective perspective, they are seen as representing persons or entities existing in reality. In dreams, the unconscious psyche attempts to support ego consciousness and foster a process of personality integration by pointing to parts of the psyche not yet integrated into the whole of personality or to indicate unresolved conflicts. Through dreams, the unconscious, because it contains a more holistic knowledge about the development and integration of personality, brings new information to consciousness, which can then be integrated if a conscious understanding of the information is possible. This is the aim of dream interpretation in psychotherapy. So, Jungian dream interpretation focuses on the relationship of the dream ego (i.e., the figure in the dream that experiences the dreamer as “myself,” psychoanalytically representing ego consciousness) to the other figures in the dream. The imagery of this relationship indicates the capability of the ego to cope with emotions, impulses, and complexes (being represented in this symbolic form in the dream). This capability is called ego strength in psychanalysis. As the information in dreams comes in the form of symbols and images, it needs translation to be understood by the conscious ego. For this purpose, Jung developed the method of “amplification”: the symbolic form is enriched with information coming from cultural parallels, the meaning the symbol has in different cultures, mythologies, religious traditions, and spiritual belief systems. Through

such amplification, a network of meaning is constructed around the symbol—the aim is not so much to give a precise interpretation of the symbol but more to stimulate processes in the dreamer to become more conscious of potential solutions offered by the dream.

Findings from empirical dream research support this view of the dream. Hall and Van de Castle (1966) argued that it is possible to draw a personality profile based only on the dreams of a person. In a study on the dreams of persons with multiple personality disorder, Barrett (1996) was able to demonstrate that the split-off parts of their personalities appeared personified in their dreams. Furthermore, there is substantial continuity in the themes in dreams of a person over a long period (Levin, 1990). And Cartwright (1977) found that the themes in the dreams change when a person goes through psychotherapy. Greenberg and Pearlman (1978) compared the content of dreams of patients currently in psychoanalysis with the protocols 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. The dream could be read as a report about the current conflictual themes in the waking life of the dreamer. Schredl (2008) found a correlation between the motifs of flying and of falling in dreams and neuroticism scales. Palombo (1982) could show that clients reprocess contents from their last analytical session in their following dreams. Popp, Luborsky, and Crits-Christoph (1990) investigated dreams and narratives from therapy sessions using the methodology of the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme, and they found that both narratives and dreams were structured using the same unconscious relationship patterns.

The Jungian view of dreams could also provide a synthesis for the debate around continuity versus discontinuity of dream content and waking life experience. As Hobson and Schredl (2011) in their discussion of the continuity hypothesis pointed out, dreams actually contain elements of waking life on a thematic level, but this does not explain the occurrence of elements in dreams that dreamers have never experienced in their waking life. As they say, “This raises the intriguing question: If dreaming is not entirely derived from waking experience, then just what is the source of the anomalous content and what is its function?” (p. 3). Hoss (2011), in his commentary on the debate, argues, following Jung, that the distortions of waking content are not misrepresentations but are rather the “unconscious aspect” of the waking event expressed in the dream not as a rational thought but as a symbolic image.

It seems that empirical dream research, though not having any intention of testing Jungian theory, has become quite supportive of Jung’s theory of the dream. Furthermore, contemporary conceptualizations of dreaming based on empirical research strongly question the assumptions in Freud’s classic theory on dreaming and dream interpretation: There is no evidence for a process of distortion that leads to a difference between manifest and latent meaning and also the dream is not “the guardian of the sleep” and so forth (for an overview, see Fiss, 1995). As a result of this research, some contemporary Freudian dream theories have incorporated a number of aspects of the Jungian dream theory. An example of this convergence can be found in the dream theory of Fosshage (1987, 1997), which focuses on the functions of the dream as a regulator of emotions and integrator of psychological organization. On the other hand, scholars and researchers from the Freudian tradition (even though quoting the empirical evidence speaking against Freudian

assumptions) still argue for a process of censorship in dreaming—which results in a distortion of the latent content—and also for the theory of wish fulfillment of dreams. The overall function of dreaming is still supposed to be protecting the sleeper from being alarmed by repressed impulses (Fisher & Greenberg, 1977, 1996; Werner & Langenmayr, 2005).

So even though there is some evidence supporting psychodynamic theories of dreaming and the role dreaming can play in psychotherapy, there is a strong need for more systematic studies on the relationship between the content of dreams of a person, namely, the development of recurrent themes and figures in a series of dreams, and the course of psychotherapy, namely, the development of core conflictual themes of the patient and the overall development of the personality. It also has to be clarified which of the different psychodynamic models of dreaming and dream interpretation are supported by empirical findings.

Based on these considerations, this study aims at investigating the following questions:

Is the content of dreams connected to the psychological situation and especially to the psychological problems of the dreamer in a systematic way? And if there is therapeutic change over the course of psychotherapy, is this change paralleled in the content of the dreams?

Do dreams give a picture of the total situation of the psyche, including unconscious aspects (Jung), or should dream content be regarded as a distortion of the latent (unconscious) meaning that serves the function of wish fulfillment (Freud)? If Jung's perspective is more realistic, we hypothesized that the connection between dream content and the psychological problems of the dreamer would be revealed in the relationship of the dream ego to the other figures in the dream, and in the extent of the dream ego's agency, that is, its capability to act, to execute willpower, and to cope with problems in the dream.

Method: Structural Dream Analysis

The usual research approaches investigating the meaning of dream content make use of coding systems, for example, the well-known coding system of Hall and Van de Castle (1966). Also in psychoanalytic dream research, elaborated coding systems for dream content have been developed and used in studies investigating the process of psychotherapy (Moser & von Zeppelin, 1991). In psychoanalytic research on dreams (for a current overview, see Fonagy et al., 2012), there is often the problem that basic assumptions about the function of dreams are taken for granted. For example, the Moser and von Zeppelin coding system is based on the assumption that the function of dreaming is to protect sleep and so investigates the changing positions of elements in the dream that “evidences” this function. But as it is, this coding system is not able to falsify any Freudian assumptions. In our study, we attempted to prevent the research method from implicitly including any theoretical psychodynamic assumptions about the dream. Consequently, structural dream analysis (hereafter, SDA) was developed as a method to investigate dreams from a structuralist point of view. The assumption is that the meaning of a dream consists not so much in it containing certain symbols or elements but more in the relationship between the elements and in the course of action that the dream takes,

that is, its structure. The aforementioned coding systems, which count the appearance of certain elements and symbols in dreams, from our point of view, are not able to identify the meaning of dreams, as meaning is the result of interpretation. An example is the famous system built on content analysis of over 50,000 dreams by Hall and Nordby (1972). Typical dreams reported in this classification involved aggression, predatory animals, flying, falling, being persecuted by hostile strangers, landscapes, dreams of misfortune, sex, getting married and having children, taking examinations or undergoing some similar ordeals, traveling, swimming or being in the water, watching fires, and being confined in an underground place. The problem with this kind of classification, from our point of view, is that these typical dream motifs describe very different entities, from objects and beings to action patterns and story structures. There is no theoretical model behind such a classification that could connect the dream motifs with a meaning for the dreamer. This was already criticized by Stevens (1995), who gave the following example:

Simple content analyses reveal that agonistic dreams are more common among males of all ages and hedonic dreams more common among females, but both types of dreams occur in both sexes. A more significant variable than gender in determining the relative incidence of such dreams is the kind of family the individual grew up in. (p. 249)

SDA is a qualitative, interpretive research method that attempts to formalize the process of interpretation of the dream in a way that the conclusions are independent from the interpreter. In our study, a reliability test found an interpreter agreement for the results coming from the same case of $k = .70-.82$. SDA sees the dream as a narrative. In narratology, a narrative is defined as a development from a starting point, which often is a problem that needs repair or solution. The narrative goes through ups and downs leading to the solution of the problem or a valued end point to the story (Gulich & Quasthoff, 1985). Similarly, the dream is a short story about how the protagonist, in most cases the dream ego, processes a problem. SDA thus makes use of analytic tools developed in narratology. Two earlier methods of narrative analysis were incorporated: (a) Vladimir Propp's (1975) structuralist method of functional analysis used to investigate the structure of fairy tales. Each fairytale is divided into its functional parts (e.g., "The King is ill and needs healing"; "The hero fights the Dragon"), and each functional part receives an abstract symbol, for example, a letter or number. As a result, each fairytale can be written as an abstract formula of symbols and then different fairytales can be compared regarding their structure. (b) Boothe's (2002) narratological method JAKOB used in analytical psychotherapies for the analysis of patient narratives and their development over the course of the psychotherapy. This method focuses on the role the narrator takes in the narrative in terms of activity versus passivity and his or her relation to other protagonists in the narrative, as well as on different episodic models that describe the course the narrative takes. The meaning of symbols in the dreams we investigated was analyzed by a systematized form of amplification. In psychotherapy, the analyst assumes that the series of dreams presented by the analysand follows an inner structure of meaning. SDA aims at identifying this inner structure of meaning from the series of dreams alone without referring to additional information about the dreamer, their psychodynamics, or the course of psychotherapy. The meaning conveyed by the dream is analyzed in a systematic series of interpretive steps for

which a formalized manual is available (for more details, see Roesler, *in press*). The interpreters, who have no information about the dreamer, are given a series of 10 to 20 dreams covering the whole course of the psychotherapy and that ideally mark the core points and topics of it. The dreams are provided by practicing analysts who also write a case report about the psychopathology and psychodynamics of the patient involved as well as about the development of core conflicts and themes in the course of the therapy. Only when the dream series are completely analyzed using SDA are the results compared with the reports by the therapists. This method is currently being applied by research teams in the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and Japan with the aim of building a larger corpus of cases so as to formulate an empirically founded theory of dreams and their meaning in psychotherapy.

Participants

The current study is based on a sample of 15 cases and 202 dreams (see Table 1). All cases were treated by analytical psychotherapists. Cases 1 to 11 were provided by members of the German Association of Jungian Analysts, and Cases 12 to 15 were provided by members of the Association of Jungian Analysts of Japan. The therapists provided the text of the dreams as well as a report including biographical data about their patient, psychopathology and diagnosis, psychody-

Table 1
Description of All Cases and Number of Dreams

Case	Sex	Age	Diagnosis	<i>N</i>
1	F	16–19	Anxiety, depression, narcissistic personality, aggression inhibition, identity problem	13
2	M	29–34	Ejaculatio praecox, decision problems, test anxiety	17
3	F	37	Depression, narcissistic personality, obsessive-compulsive, female identity problems	5
4	M	18	Obsessive-compulsive, migraine, aggressive impulses	11
5	F	47–50	Hysterical neurosis, narcissistic personality	10
6	M	32–38	Depression, traumatization, aggressiveness, sexual obsessions, antisocial behavior	11
7	F	28–29	Adjustment disorder, depressive and anxiety symptoms, alcohol abuse	9
8	F	52–56	Depression, narcissistic personality, infantile traumatization/abandonment	13
9	F	35–39	Depression, low self-esteem, obsessive-compulsive, psychosomatic symptoms	30
10	F	18–20	Depression, narcissistic personality, aggression inhibition, test anxiety, psychosomatic	8
11	M	18	Depression, test anxiety, school refusal, aggressive impulses	13
12	M	18	School refusal, aggressive impulses	19
13	F	20	Narcissistic personality, female identity problems, marital problems, (anorexia)	10
14	F	28–30	Social phobia, nausea, marital problems	19
15	F	18	Insomnia, dissociation, self-injuries, relationship problems	14

Note. F = female; M = male.

namic considerations, and a summary of the development of the patient and their improvement over the course of therapy.

Case Example (Case 6): Dreams

I walked down the street in the darkness, on both sides small houses behind fences. Lots of barking dogs jumped against the fences. I was frightened but then I became brave. I barked like a dog myself aggressively and the dogs immediately fell silent.

I am on my way with my bicycle up a hill. It is demanding. Around me are large trees, it's like in the mountains. Arriving on top there is a little white poodle, it barks, it is on a leash. I'm driving home downhill in sharp curves. Doberman dogs are behind me, I cannot get rid of them because of the curves. They run at my side and bark at me. Then it is light and sunny, arriving on the pass it's beautiful. There is a restaurant, like in Italy, beautiful houses. On top of the pass the black dogs are coming.

There is a stillwater, a river? There is a little bridge, somebody on the other side. He falls into the water, he somehow slipped as if under a log. I pull him out, but first I hesitate. He is like dead. But that guy has a sharp knife and he cuts the other helper's throat. I flee.

In black and white: at a nearby train station. A girl and another person, who seems to be masochistic, and a very energetic black dog. The dog pulls the other person into the little pond, then pulls the person out of the water and up the hill. The person gives himself a blow job, then to the dog. Then I am at the foot of a tall building. I say: the dog must be put on a leash. The masochistic person says: you have to stroke the dog. I say: no, it must be put on a leash and then removed. The masochistic person is angry and goes into the tall building. The other person says: you have to follow him, he is sad. The dog smells, I put him on a leash but it is disgusting.

An elderly, badly smelling dog is with me and my girlfriend in Paris. It just found us. We get on the bus, the badly smelling dog could not go with us, we left it outside. We are already outside of the city limits, but will return to the city on the highway. The dog would not have been able to come along behind us.

I was the manager of a café in the house. I was promoted like Joseph in the house of Potifar. Everybody says goodbye to a father with his little son, he's in the backyard. There is an elderly man with a Pitbull. He says: I can show you how evil the dog is. But I just had to go. I walked into a vineyard. The dog runs from its leash and goes behind me, but I jump over fences and walls. The path goes uphill through the yard and back down on the other side.

(about two Romanian criminals)

A little baby is in danger. I cover it with newspaper and carry it with me through a sewerage system. Then I forget about it and leave it somewhere. But then I realize that the baby is missing and go back and find it again. I carry it with me and feed it. I think: the baby is so small, it should get mother's milk, but I can just feed him solid food.

(drinking beer with my father)

My father dies at the age of 49 years.

I saw a giant toe and found it is my toe. The skin on the nail was grown very wide. I thought: this has to be removed. It could be moved back easily. There was another level of skin below, this one could be taken off easily, too. I was surprised that it did not hurt. Below the skin were very small black worms, everything was rotten, but you could remove it without difficulty. Below that everything was new.

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Case Report (Delivered by the Analyst)

The client was imprisoned having committed physical violence in more than 100 cases. Being not openly violent any more after imprisonment he suffered from a severe depression. The only means to deal with these depressive states was a strong compulsion to consume pornographic media containing physical violence toward women. The client's father suffered from severe alcoholism, was violent against his wife and children and several times almost killed the client. The father also seems to have been suffering from a sexual obsession: he collected pornographic videos in large numbers and stored them in his bedroom, which was fascinating for the client. In adolescence the client was taken out of his family by the welfare authorities because of the difficult situation and was given into custody. Later he joined a group of hooligans and committed a large number of violent crimes. In prison the client experienced a religious conversion and became member of a fundamentalist Christian sect. His intimate relationships often followed a sado-masochistic pattern. The client experienced severe abandonment, helplessness and anxiety in childhood leading to compensatory aggression and a severe depression based on a narcissistic disorder; violent contact with women serves as a defense against depression. The religious conversion has equipped the client with a strong superego which helps him to control himself in social life, nevertheless this does not solve the inner conflicts. There is a very strong and violent destructive complex in the psyche which formerly was dealt with by directing it outward to other people, now it goes up against the ego. In the first years of therapy the focus was on helping the client to formulate his needs and feelings and communicate them in social relationships, which helped to decrease the pressure of frustration aggression. The experience of safety in the therapeutic relationship which also included a certain control over the analyst helped to integrate these experiences and strengthen ego functions. In the course of therapy the relationships with women changed and the client became capable of building a marriage and family. When his first son was born the client experienced such panic that he felt aggressive impulses toward the infant. By working through these impulses and their connection to early experiences in life, the inner pressure of frustration and aggression slowly receded. At the end of therapy the client was living in a very solid social, family and job situation. The low-frequency therapy took six years with two minor interruptions and 206 hours.

Results

A major finding is that a high percentage of all dreams from all cases can be categorized by a very limited number of structural patterns. The most *general pattern* can be described as: *the ego is confronted with a requirement, has to cope with a challenge, and has to fulfill a plan or task*. This general pattern can be differentiated into five more specific patterns regarding the extent of agency of the dream ego.

Whereas in Pattern 1, there is no ego present at all, in Patterns 2 and 3, the dream ego is present but under pressure from other forces in the dream and the initiative is not with the ego but with others. The ego is subjected to their activity, power, and control. In Patterns 4 and 5, the ego has taken over the initiative and attempts to follow a personal plan but may be confronted with difficulties. In Pattern 5, this activity focuses on a social relationship.

Pattern 1: No Dream Ego Present

In the dream, there is no dream ego present, the dreamer just observes a scene as if watching a movie and does not actively take part in the dream. In some cases, the dream ego flies above and looks down on a scene or happenings in the dream.

Pattern 2: The Dream Ego Is Threatened

In dreams of this kind, the dream ego is threatened, for example, attacked or injured and usually tries to escape or protect itself against the threatening figures. In b) to d) below, the dream ego very often reacts with panic and either feels powerless or tries to escape from the threat. Often this results in the dream ego being chased by the threatening figures. The dreams in this pattern can be differentiated depending on the severity of the threat.

- a) The dream ego is damaged, for example, severely wounded, or even killed. In some cases, the killing has already happened and the dream ego is found as a dead body.
- b) The threat to the dream ego comes from a force in nature, for example, a natural disaster, earthquake, fire, flooding, storm, and so forth.
- c) The dream ego is threatened by (dangerous) animals.
- d) The dream ego is threatened by human beings, for example, criminals, murderers, or “evil people,” or human-like figures, for example, ghosts, shadows, and so forth.

Pattern 3: The Dream Ego Is Confronted With a Performance Requirement

The dream ego is confronted with a performance requirement, which is set by another figure or agency in the dream. The dream ego is confronted with a task that it has to fulfill or is required to find something or to give something to another person in the dream so that they can fulfill a task and so forth. The most common form of this pattern is the examination dream. An important part of this pattern is that the initiative is not with the dream ego but with other figures confronting the dream ego with a requirement. The dream ego is subjected to their control and power.

- a) Examination in a school or university setting.
- b) The dream ego is subject to an inspection by an official person, for example, a ticket inspection on the train where the right of the dream ego is questioned.
- c) The dream ego has the task to find something (which was lost before), get something, produce something, and so forth.

A very typical pattern in these kind of dreams is that the dream ego does not feel capable of performing the task, does not possess the right tools or capabilities, or has failed to bring these devices, has lost them on the way, and so forth. For example, the dream ego is not prepared for the examination, or arrives too late for it.

Pattern 4: Mobility Dream

The dream ego is moving toward a specified or unclear destination, for example, traveling and making use of different forms of transportation like bicycle, car, bus, train, airplane, ship, and so forth. An interesting differentiation is the question whether these transportation devices are public or individual. Again this form of dream can be differentiated depending on the extent of the dream ego's agency, which shows in the extent to which the dream ego determines its own movement.

- a) Disorientation: The dream ego has no idea where to go, even where it is, and there are no signs of direction and so forth.
- b) The dream ego is locked up in a closed space, imprisoned, and so forth, and is looking for a way to get out.
- c) The dream ego wants to move, travel, and so forth but has no means to do so, for example, it misses the train.
- d) The dream ego attempts to move and has some means of transportation but cannot control the movement, for example, it cannot steer a car.
- e) The dream ego is moving but the way is blocked or the means of transport breaks down or crashes and movement cannot be continued.
- f) The dream ego is moving, making use of some means of transportation, but it is going the wrong way, is in the wrong train or bus, or is not authorized to use it (e.g., has no ticket) and therefore cannot continue the journey.
- g) In the positive form, the dream ego succeeds in moving toward and reaching the desired destination.

Pattern 5: Social Interaction Dream

The dream ego is occupied with making contact or communicating with another person or figure in the dream. The dream ego wants to get in contact with another person, or is in communication and attempts to communicate something to the other person, or is more generally occupied with creating a desired contact with the other person, which can include sexual contact. This dream pattern can be differentiated depending on the dream ego's activity and how successful it is in reaching its desired contact.

- a) The dream ego wants to get into contact but is ignored by others.
- b) The dream ego is criticized, devalued, or made ridiculous by others and feels shame.
- c) The dream ego is successful in creating the desired contact.
- d) A special case: The dream ego is aggressive toward others (even kills

others), which expresses the will of the dream ego to be separated and autonomous.

Only six dreams out of the 202 in this sample could not be categorized into one of the abovementioned patterns. Pattern 2 (the dream ego is threatened) was the pattern most often found in the sample (42%), followed by Pattern 4 (mobility; 28.7%), Pattern 5 (social interaction; 19.8%), and Pattern 3 (performance requirement; 10.4%). The total is higher than 100%, as some dreams include two patterns. Pattern 1 with no dream ego was found in only two cases (11 and 12).

Patterns of change in the structure of dreams over the course of therapy. In this study, we not only found typical patterns in the structure of the dreams but also across the whole series of dreams. A general finding was that in those cases in which the psychotherapeutic intervention was successful such that there was an improvement in symptoms, psychological well-being, and regulation of emotion and, from a psychoanalytic point of view, a gain in psychological structure and ego strength, we found a typical pattern of transformation in the structure of the dreams. Typically the first half of the psychotherapeutic process was dominated by a repetitive pattern in the dreams, which was connected with the psychological problems of the dreamer, in the sense as described earlier. Generally, in the middle of the dream series, there appears a dream or dream symbol that marks a change in the pattern (see more details mentioned later). The second half of the dream series is then typically characterized by a change in the repetitive pattern.

In Pattern 2 (the dream ego is threatened), the dream ego changes its reaction to the threat. Instead of escaping, it confronts the threatening figures, fights actively, finds constructive strategies to cope with the threat, and toward the end of the dream series succeeds in overcoming the threat. Example: In Case 7, the dream ego in the first half of the series is threatened by water in the form of giant waves, flooding, and so forth and usually drowns in the flood. In the second half of the series, however, the dream ego more and more succeeds in moving to a safe place on dry land. Furthermore, a transformative pattern emerges in which the dream ego realizes that the seemingly threatening figures are not as dangerous and even makes friends with these figures. Typical examples of the second transformative pattern are seen in Cases 5 and 6: in Case 5, in the first half of the series, the dream ego is threatened by snakes. Then, in the midst of the dream series, a golden snake appears, which is not dangerous. In the next dream, the threatening figure changes into a salamander, then into a dark man. In Case 6 (see earlier case example), the dream ego in the first half of the series is chased by dogs and tries to escape, then in the midst of the series, there appear helpless and wounded dogs that need the dream ego's support but the dream ego reacts with disgust. Finally, the dream ego finds a helpless baby who needs care and support. To summarize, in the dream series dominated by Pattern 2, the threatening figures tend to change from natural disasters or threatening wild animals to less dangerous animals and then into human beings. This transformative pattern can be found in nine of the 15 cases in this study (Cases 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 14, and 15). A similar pattern of transformation in the series of dreams can be found for those cases that are dominated by Patterns 3 and 4.

In Pattern 3 (performance requirement), the first half of the series is typically dominated by the dream ego failing to fulfill the required task. This is seen in Cases 1, 2, 8, and 10, where the dream ego repeatedly is confronted with an examination,

is not prepared, is too late, or even forgets about the examination, thereby fails and escapes and so forth. Change in this pattern is characterized typically by the disappearance of examination dreams in the second half of the series.

In Pattern 4 (mobility), typically in the first half of the series, the dream ego is not able to reach the desired aim, is on the wrong bus or train or has no ticket and so forth, the road is blocked, or the dream ego is not capable of controlling the car. In some cases, the dream ego is even walled-in and not able to escape. In the second half of the series, this typically changes into the dream ego succeeding in reaching the desired aim and controlling the means of transportation. This applies in Cases 1, 4, 8, 9, 11, and 13.

In Pattern 5 (social interaction), the cases dominated by this pattern usually are characterized by failed attempts (or passivity) of the dream ego to get into a desired contact or communication with others in the first half of the series—the dream ego is ignored by others, others forget about the ego's birthday, or the dream ego is even criticized and devalued by others. Toward the end of the dream series, the dream ego is more and more capable of creating satisfying interactions with others or it experiences care and support from others (as seen in Cases 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13). In those cases with successful therapeutic change, the second half of their dream series is dominated more and more by Pattern 5, that is, the dream ego becomes occupied with creating a desired social interaction. And this occurs after the dream ego has succeeded in overcoming a repetitive negative pattern of being threatened or having failed mobility or negative examination dreams.

These transformative patterns were only found in cases where the therapists reported improvement on the symptom level as well as positive changes in personality structure. By contrast, there are two cases (2 and 3) in the sample where the therapists delivered dream series to the researchers even though the therapy was not yet completed (and this information was not given to the interpreters). In these cases also, repetitive patterns can be found but with no change in the repetitive pattern in the way described earlier: for example, in Case 2, the dream ego in most of the dreams is in a movement, usually by public transport but fails again and again to reach the desired aim because has no ticket, or the train or tram breaks down, and so forth.

These transformative patterns in the dream series are interpreted from a psychodynamic perspective and are seen as speaking to the fact that an initially weak ego structure that fails to regulate and integrate threatening emotions, impulses, and complexes gains in ego strength over the course of the therapy and more and more succeeds in coping with initially suppressed or split-off parts of the psyche and integrating these into constructive interactions with others. As a result of such gains in ego strength, the dream ego is capable more and more to execute willpower, conduct its plans, reach aims, and express its needs in social interactions. This interpretation is supported by the findings from the two cases where there is no therapeutic change and where there is also no transformation of the repetitive dream pattern.

Dream patterns and symbols are connected with psychological problems of the dreamer. As a result of our study, we not only found a clear correlation between therapeutic change and a transformation of patterns in the dream series, but there is also a clear connection between the patterns that dominate the dream series (or at least the first half of the series), on the one hand, and the psychological problems

and the personality structure of the dreamer, on the other hand. The five patterns can be interpreted psychologically as imaging the capacity of the ego to cope with and/or control emotions, motivations, and complexes (as unintegrated parts of the psyche). The extent of agency of the dream ego is equivalent to that which in psychoanalysis is called ego strength or maturity of the personality, that is, the degree of integration of the ego and other parts of the psyche into the whole of the personality, thus enabling positive ego functioning.

There is only one case (12) in the sample in which Pattern 1 (no dream ego present) is found in its full form. In the first five dreams of the series, this dreamer just observes a scene as if watching a movie. This case is a Japanese male student, 18 years of age, who was treated because of severe school refusal over several years. The patient had retreated into total passivity and several attempts of psychotherapy, including an inpatient setting, had failed to change the situation. This storyline in his dreams can be interpreted as an imaging of a deeply regressed personality structure and lack of a clear identity, where ego strength is at a very low level. There is an interesting parallel to another case (11), again a male student 18 years of age with the diagnosis of school refusal and where ego strength and identity structure are at a comparably low level as in Case 12. In this latter case, in several of his dreams, there is a dream ego but it is hovering above the actual happenings in the dream and does not participate or be active in any way.

Pattern 2 (the dream ego is threatened) is found in those cases diagnosed with a narcissistic disorder connected with a very weak ego structure, where there is an unclear personal identity or blocked identity development and low self-esteem. Often such patients have developed a compensatory “false self” while splitting off unaccepted parts of their psyche. Dream images of an injury or damage to the dream ego, the dream ego being murdered, or the dream ego found as a dead corpse seem to be connected on the psychological level with more severe cases of low self-esteem, a “narcissistic wound,” or even traumatization. From a psychodynamic point of view, such motifs in the dreams can be interpreted as a weak ego struggling with overwhelming forces derived from split-off emotions, impulses, and complexes, as well as devaluing introjects that continually threaten the functioning of ego consciousness. Development in psychotherapy—and in the dreams—is characterized by a growth in ego strength, which becomes more and more capable of coping with the threatening parts of the psyche and accepting them as an integral part of the personality. Pattern 3, especially examination dreams, and Pattern 4, where the dream ego attempts to move in a desired direction, are found to occur in those cases with a more stable ego structure (as diagnosed by the therapist) but where the patient has problems with making decisions and taking progressive steps in life, such as completing exams and deciding on a professional career.

Pattern 5, where the dream ego is involved in social interactions, characterizes those cases where a stable ego is diagnosed by the therapist but where the patient struggles with neurotic problems around interpersonal relationships, such as finding an intimate partner and creating a satisfying intimate and erotic relationship. This pattern can be interpreted as imaging a more mature personality structure, which is not so much struggling for integrity of the ego but rather more with interpersonal relationships. This interpretation is supported by the finding that in positively developing psychotherapies/dream series, often a repetitive pattern on a lower level is overcome and replaced by dreams following Pattern 5 in the second half of the

therapy. It is also found in a number of cases that a dominating symbol which appears repeatedly as part of a repetitive pattern, e.g., the dream ego being threatened by figures symbolized as dogs, the symbol is strongly connected with the psychological situation or problem of the dreamer. In Case 5, the female dreamer is repeatedly threatened by snakes. In this case, the therapist diagnosed a strong tension in the personality between a very moralistic superego, on the one hand, and very lively erotic and sexual desires, on the other hand. The snake can clearly be interpreted as a sexual, phallic symbol, which appears threatening to an ego under the pressure of the moralistic superego. But there is also clear evidence from the dreams in this study that the meaning of a symbol can be totally different in other cases; for example, the snake in Case 8 has the role of a helper. In the case example (Case 6) described earlier, the threatening dogs are symbolically summarizing the unresolved problems of the dreamer around violence, sadism, sexual obsessions, and a deeply wounded self-esteem. In summary, symbols appearing repeatedly in dream series can often be interpreted as symbolic images for parts of the psyche (e.g. unmet needs or aggressive impulses), that are not yet integrated into the whole of the personality. That is the reason why they are experienced as threatening to the ego.

Transformative dreams: dream patterns and symbols connected with therapeutic change. In those cases that were considered as successful therapies from the viewpoint of the therapist, that is, with improvement or even fundamental changes in the personality structure of the patient, certain changes in the dream stories coincided with positive shifts in the therapy. Usually such transformative dreams were found in the middle of the dream series following a series of dreams with a repetitive pattern, for example, threat and escape imagery that was not continued after the transformative dream. These transformative dreams stand out, they show a great variety of images and structures, and they are usually experienced with positive emotions in the dreamer. The data in this study do not allow for any further interpretation of these dreams and more cases would be necessary to develop any theory of such transformative patterns. Nevertheless, a similar motif was found in six of the 12 cases who had transformative dreams: a baby or young child, who needed help and support, played a major role in these dreams. The dream ego was asked to care for and give support to the child but had initial difficulties in turning toward and taking appropriate care of the child (see earlier case example). This motif is interesting insofar as Jung pointed out that the archetype of the child is connected with transformation in psychotherapeutic processes (Jung, 1981), and further, a number of models of psychotherapy focus on supporting the patient to turn toward and take care of his or her “inner wounded child.” Other motifs in these transformative dreams included the appearance of helpers who support the dream ego in coping with threatening figures, the dream ego succeeding in working its way through narrow tubes or tunnels, and the dream ego celebrating freedom with a dance. In two cases (5 and 6), a similar pattern was found in the transformation of the threat—escape pattern. An initial change was marked by the dream ego not experiencing any further fear but rather disgust, which turned into an attitude of caring for the formerly threatening figures (see earlier case example).

Discussion

The results of this study indicate a strong correlation between dream content and repetitive patterns in dream series, on the one hand, and the dreamer’s personality structure and psychological problems, on the other hand. In addition, changes in the course of psychotherapy are paralleled by a transformation in the dream patterns of the patient. It can be purported that information carried by the dream about the psychological situation of the dreamer is not only reflected in static symbols or content but also in patterns of the relationship of the dream ego to other figures in the dream.

Based on these findings, a psychological interpretation of the dream patterns and the patterns of transformation over the course of psychotherapy is possible. The five patterns detected can be interpreted psychologically as an expression of the capacity of the dreamer’s ego, on different levels, to cope with and/or control emotions, motivations, and complexes (as unintegrated parts of the psyche). The extent of agency of the dream ego is equivalent to that which psychoanalysis calls ego strength or maturity of the personality as well as the degree of integration of ego and other parts of the psyche into the whole of the personality and the capacity of ego functioning.

Those dreams in which no dream ego is present are only found in cases with a very low level of ego strength and personality integration (and only in the initial phase of psychotherapy). Usually the patient has regressed into a state of deep passivity. Pattern 1 exemplifies this extreme state of low agency of the ego. Japanese colleagues involved in the international SDA research project report a growing number of cases with such phenomena in their practices, mostly students with the problem of school refusal (Tanaka, 2014). Often in these cases, high-functioning autistic spectrum disorder is diagnosed. So, the lack of an active dream ego in their dreams is equivalent to a lack of personality structure and a low level of ego functioning in the life of these patients.

Similarly, the different shapes of Pattern 2 can be seen to parallel the level of integrity and maturity of the ego and the stability of its boundaries. This pattern of threat and escape is often found in dreams in the first half of the psychotherapy process and can be interpreted as the ego being still too weak to be able to confront with or regulate some parts of the personality or certain emotions and motivations, for example, aggressive impulses that become threatening to ego integrity. Change through the psychotherapeutic process is marked in the dreams by the dream ego becoming more capable of confronting the threatening figures. Consequently, the threat is often diminished and the threatening figures are often surprisingly identified as not being really dangerous. Dreams of Pattern 3, in which the dream ego is forced by others to fulfill a task and/or is controlled by others and so forth, can be seen as an image of a psychological situation in which the ego has established a certain integrity with boundaries but is still too weak to take an active part in interaction with the superego and its requirements.

As a result of a growth in ego strength and a higher integration of ego, superego, and other parts of the psyche in the course of therapy, the pattern of the dreams shifts to Patterns 4 and 5, where the ego becomes more active in the dream as well as in real life. The patient can cope with problems and is more capable of following individual plans and shaping interpersonal relationships. On the other

hand, patients whose dreams from the beginning of the series can be categorized as mainly following Patterns 4 and 5 usually have more mature personalities with clear boundaries and a higher level of ego strength. The initial difficulties bringing these patients into psychotherapy usually circle around the struggle to create desirable interpersonal relationships rather than to stabilize a weak ego and a fragmented personality or to regulate extremely low self-esteem. With regard to the psychological level in Pattern 4 (mobility dreams), there is a defined activity of the ego that has an aim and that uses energy to move toward it. This can be understood as a moderate level of ego strength that allows for the execution of willpower. In dream series, very often the first half of the psychotherapy process is characterized by failed attempts of the dream ego to reach the desired aim (a to f), whereas in the second half of the process, the growing integrity and strength of ego functioning is symbolized by successful mobility dreams (g).

Pattern 5 dreams picture interactions of the dream ego with others who either appear as a group of others representing the generalized other or are characterized as real persons in the social life of the dreamer (in psychoanalytical terms: object relations). Again, in the first half of the dream series, the dream ego's attempts to create desirable relationships are usually failing—the dream ego is ignored or feels shame. However, through successful psychotherapy processes, the dream ego succeeds more and more in actively shaping its relationships with others.

As a result of our findings, we would form this hypothesis: the relationship between the dream ego and threatening figures and the reaction of the dream ego to the threat is imaging the relationship between actual ego strength and unintegrated or conflicted parts of the psyche, unconscious and repressed needs, motivations, and complexes. The special form the threatening figure takes in the dream can be seen as symbolizing the psychological problem, the complex, or repressed impulse with which the dreamer is struggling, especially if the dream pattern is repetitive. Patients whose dreams are shaped mainly by the threat–escape pattern usually struggle with structural problems around an unstable ego and personality with unclear boundaries (at least in the first half of the psychotherapy process), whereas patients with dreams of mobility and interpersonal relationships seem to have more integrated personalities and higher ego strength and are preoccupied with more neurotic and interpersonal problems. We would also hypothesize that there is a change in dream patterns over the course of successful therapies. Dreams move from Patterns 1 and 2 in the first half of a successful therapy process, where there are failed attempts by the dream ego to move and create relationships in a desirable way, to Patterns 4 and 5, where successful activities and control by the dream ego are seen.

The above have to be seen as hypotheses given the small sample size in this study. Nevertheless, the patterns found in this study can form the basis for future research.

The fact that there is a strong correspondence between agency of the dream ego and ego strength in waking life somehow parallels the findings of [Sándor, Szakadát, and Bódizs \(2016\)](#), who found that the dreamer's presence in their dreams, manifested in activities, interactions, self-effectiveness, willful effort, and so forth, is correlated with more effective executive control in waking life and the subject's capacities for emotional processing. In addition, in parallel with the findings in this study, [Ellis \(2016\)](#) found typical changes in dreams of trauma

survivors with repetitive posttraumatic stress disorder nightmares as a result of treatment using focusing-oriented dreamwork. As he says, “Dream ego actions moved forward on a continuum from freeze to flight to fight as dreamers began to find their voices, seek help and/or take action” (p. 185).

The findings of this study also support the hypothesis that dreams can be understood as an image of the current situation of the dreamer’s psyche as a whole, including aspects and processes that are unconscious and not accessible to waking life consciousness. The findings of this study show no evidence of a psychological process of censorship in the sense of Freud’s concept, which purportedly distorts latent dream content into manifest content. Even though psychological problems and the state of ego integrity of the dreamer were symbolized in the dreams in the form of images as well as in the form of patterns, no distortion could be found. Instead, the manifest content of the dream was clearly picturing the psychological situation of the dreamer, in most cases even dramatically. Our findings also refute the hypothesis of wish fulfillment of dreams. Instead, most of the dreams, especially in the first half of the psychotherapy process, were putting the strongest fears of the dreamer into clear images. In general, the first half of the dream series in parallel with the first half of the psychotherapy process were clearly picturing the failing attempts of the ego to reach its goals and create satisfying life conditions and relationships. In particular, dream series with repetitive motifs of threat and escape, failing examinations, and blocked mobility left the dreamers with very unpleasant feelings of frustration, fear, and shame. It also has to be questioned whether the content of the dream, when interpreted, reveals sexual desires and sexual relationships in each case. There are indeed cases in which the dreams take up sexual topics, either directly in the form of Pattern 5 (social interactions) or by symbolizing sexual desires (e.g., Case 5: snakes), but this parallels the problems of the dreamers, which were also explicit themes in the psychotherapeutic processes of these patients. The majority of the patients in this study were struggling with problems that did not focus on sexual desires or sexual relationships. Therefore, the processes of symbolization actually found in this study covered a wide variety of psychological themes, and again, the symbols were not hiding the unconscious issue but instead presented a clear and often drastic image of the dreamer’s psychological problem.

Insofar as the extent of ego functioning and the psychological problems of the dreamers are mirrored in the dream patterns and symbols, these findings support the continuity hypothesis of dreaming and waking life. Our findings strongly support the position taken by Domhoff (2017) who pointed out that continuity does not mean a correspondence between dreams and banal events of the day. Rather, the intensity of personal concerns and interests shape dream content, and “in particular, the frequency of characters or activities reveals the intensity of various concerns” (Domhoff, 2017, p. 14). From our point of view, it has to be added that the dream images include unconscious aspects of the waking life of the dreamer. This aligns with the view on dreams taken by Jung, who sees the dream as compensating an attitude of consciousness by presenting a more holistic picture of the total situation of the psyche, including unconscious aspects.

It has to be noted that there are limitations to the design and the results of this study. The first limitation is the small sample size, which was owing to the fact that the application of SDA in the initial cases was very time-consuming. Now, after having identified structural patterns to be found in a number of dreams and cases,

an accelerated version of SDA can be developed that will focus on a quick identification of the patterns. So, future studies should focus on testing the hypotheses formulated earlier. A second limitation lies in the very unsystematic reports delivered by the analysts providing the cases. For future studies, a more systematic form of case reporting should be developed and analysts providing cases should be asked to apply this form for delivering their information on the case. Furthermore, standardized measures should be used on the cases to add to the analyst's case information, thus providing objective data about the severity of the patient's symptoms as well as about the degree of improvement over the course of therapy. An international research project has just been started in Germany and Switzerland that attempts to gather this form of data. However, as analytical psychotherapies are usually long-term psychotherapies, it will take a number of years before these data will be available. It also has to be pointed out that SDA by having the explicit aim of identifying the core structure of the dream leads to a strong reduction of the initial variety, richness, and colorfulness of dream images. SDA does not claim to be able to interpret any aspect or element of a dream. Even though this study was able to identify general patterns in the dreams, a number of dreams in this sample could not be categorized and their meaning in the context of the case and the series remains unclear. This also applies to a number of the symbols and elements in the categorized dreams. So even though the study could identify some aspects of the meaning of dreams in psychotherapy, other aspects remain mysterious.

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