

Dream Interpretation

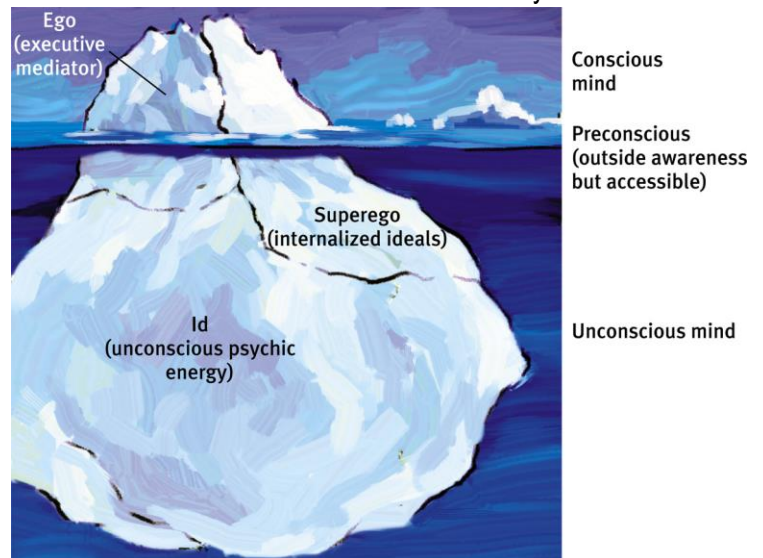
Dream Analysis Part I: Dreams as Wish-Fulfillment (Sigmund Freud)

Sigmund Freud placed tremendous emphasis in the psychoanalytic value of dreams. He believed that dreams provide rare insight into one's unconscious mind. Freud was so fascinated by dreams that he kept a dream diary even as a young child and used these dreams as the source for many of the ideas outlined in his first and most well-known publication, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In order to better understand Freud's ideas about dream interpretation, it is helpful to have some background knowledge of his overall theories.

Freud Basics

Freud is often quoted as saying, "The mind is like an iceberg, it floats with one-seventh of its bulk above water." He was stating his belief that our unconscious wishes and desires can have a great deal of influence over our outward behavior. He believed that getting in touch with these hidden desires was the key to a healthy and fulfilling life. Dreams act as keys to unlocking these hidden secrets, he felt, thus making them invaluable to mental health.

Furthermore, Freud believed that the mind was subdivided into three parts: the id, the ego, and the superego. According to Freud, we are born with our **Id**. The id is an important part of our personality because as newborns, it allows us to get our basic needs met. Freud believed that the id is based on our pleasure principle. In other words, the id wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the reality of the situation. When a child is hungry, the id wants food, and therefore the child cries. When the child needs to be changed, the id cries. When the child is uncomfortable, in pain, too hot, too cold, or just wants attention, the id speaks up until his or her needs are met.



The id doesn't care about reality, about the needs of anyone else, only its own satisfaction. If you think about it, babies are not very considerate of their parents' wishes. They have no care for time, whether their parents are sleeping, relaxing, eating dinner, or bathing. When the id wants something, nothing else is important.

Within the next three years, as the child interacts more and more with the world, the second part of the personality begins to develop. Freud called this part the **Ego**. The ego is based on the reality principle. The ego understands that other people have needs and desires and that sometimes being impulsive or selfish can hurt us in the long run. It's the ego's job to meet the needs of the id, while taking into consideration the reality of the situation.

By the age of five, or the end of the phallic stage of development, the **Superego** develops. The Superego is the moral part of us and develops due to the moral and ethical restraints placed on us by our caregivers. Many equate the superego with the conscience as it dictates our belief of right and wrong.

In a healthy person, according to Freud, the ego is the strongest so that it can satisfy the needs of the id, not upset the superego, and still take into consideration the reality of every situation. Not an easy job by any means, but if the id gets too strong, impulses and self gratification take over the person's life. If the superego becomes too strong, the person would be driven by rigid morals, would be judgmental and unbending in his or her interactions with the world.

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What are dreams?

According to Freud, then, dreams are the id's attempt to psychically fulfill its wishes, especially those that can not be fulfilled in waking life. Because the id's desires are often objectionable to the superego, the id must disguise its wishes in symbolism. Thus, a dream has a manifest content (the actual storyline you remember from a dream) and a latent content (the underlying meaning). The manifest content is often confusing and misleading unless one knows how to properly interpret his or her dreams. The symbols are not universal but reflect one's personal associations. However, as they reveal the wishes of the primal id, they often symbolize sexual or aggressive urges. Freud believed that the id was a powerful force and suppressing its desires could lead to neuroses in our conscious self.

Tips used for a Freudian analysis of dreams:

Step 1: List specific items from the manifest content and try to identify their symbolic meaning. Since you can't ask Lisa her specific associations, just make some up. Here are a few guidelines: 1) Dreams tend to reflect things from childhood, and 2) dreams often bring to light details that seemed trivial to us at the time, and 3) dreams reflect the wishes of the id, which are primal and often repulsive.

Step 2: Find the wish that is being fulfilled by the dream. What is the latent desire of Lisa's id? Remember, it is probably something she would find repulsive or else there would be no need for her id to hide it in symbols.

Dream Analysis Part II: Activation-Synthesis

Activation Synthesis Theory is a neurobiological theory of dreams, put forward by Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley in 1977, which states that dreams are a random event caused by firing of neurons in the brain. This random firing sends signals to the body's motor systems, but because of a paralysis that occurs during REM sleep, the brain is faced with a paradox. It synthesizes a narrative by drawing on memory systems in an attempt to make sense of what it has experienced.

The original 1977 theory denied that dreams have meaning or are related to our real-world environments. But this point drew criticism from other dream experts. In response, in 1988, Hobson published a revised theory acknowledging that dreams do reflect past memories, fears, hopes, and desires.

To put it simply, Hobson and McCarley suggest that during REM sleep the cortex is highly active and activity in the brain triggers certain neurons at random (activation). The brain then tries to make sense of this by synthesising and interpreting this activity, producing the dream. The activation synthesis hypothesis would explain why we do not experience taste or smell in dreams as these neurons are not triggered. It is also supported by the fact we are paralysed in REM sleep.

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Dream Analysis Part III: Information Processing Theory

Proposed in 1993, social scientists claim that dreams allow people to review and address problems they faced during waking life. During dreams, our brain processes sensory and conceptual information accumulated during the day. This information is sorted, and new neural connections are made to accommodate newly forming memories. In other words, dreams allow us to rehearse experiences as we sleep so that we remember them better. Plus, they allow us to rehearse hypothetical situations so that we can learn from them. As such, dreams aid in memory and problem-solving.

This theory is supported by several arguments and research:

- 1) In experiments, people given a memory task before sleep perform worse if awakened each time, they enter REM sleep as compared to those awakened each time, they enter other sleep stages.
- 2) Rats that are made to spend much of the day running mazes are found to have similar brain activity patterns during REM sleep as when they were running the mazes.
- 3) REM sleep (when dreaming is most common) is limited to mammals. The mammalian class is distinct from other vertebrates in the adaptability and higher learning capacity of its species. Thus, it makes sense that dreaming may be related to learning.
- 4) Dreams are usually disjointed and illogical. If your brain were attempting to make sense of random neural firing, wouldn't the storyline, make sense?
- 5) It has been demonstrated that mental rehearsal can facilitate physical performance (imagining shooting free throws can make you a better free throw shooter). Thus, mental rehearsal during sleep could be selected for evolutionarily.
- 6) Newborns spend a large percentage of their sleeping time in REM sleep as compared to adults. If dreaming necessary for learning, then it would make sense that newborns would need to do more.

If dreams are simply opportunities to mentally rehearse daily experiences (either real or hypothetical), then why are they so bizarre? One explanation is that regions of the brain that typically edit and make judgments about our thoughts are disabled during dream sleep. The belief is that dreaming is an opportunity to rehearse different scenarios without censoring ideas that could generate novel solutions (kind of like brainstorming). Thus, even the most bizarre thoughts and ideas creep into our dreams.