THE SOCIOCULTURAL SOURCES OF OUR DREAMS

Adrian Medina Liberty

*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*

A new way to understand and interpret dreams is presented. The main goal was to illustrate how the cultural milieu and specific social activities children are involved in are primordial determinants of how dream content is constituted. Data were collected from nine male middle class children (ages 5 to 10). During four months 35 dreams were collected once a week by the parents and/or by the researcher using a mini tape recorder. Direct observations and in-depth interviews were conducted to gather information about children’s typical day, family and school activities, favorite films and TV shows, etcetera. An analytic model based on sociocultural psychology and Kenneth Burke’s pentad (Burke, 1989) was applied to explore the narrative nature of dreams. Each dream was analyzed trying to answer five main questions: What actions were accomplished? What were the scenarios in which they occurred? Who performed the actions? How were they done? Why were they done? Focus of inquiry was dream content and its possible cultural source. Data confirmed previous studies (Medina-Liberty, 2010, 2011) that showed that several culture expressions—notably Media, school, and family—were appropriated by children and constituted importantly their dream’s content. In children’s dreams these cultural elements were combined in novel ways and produced original meanings.

**Keywords:** Dream content, Cultural sources, Interpretation, Metaphors.

**Introduction**

After Freud seminal book *The interpretation of dreams* (1899/2010), there has been an increasing interest on dreams and dreams interpretation. According to Sigmund Freud, dreams have two levels of meaning, the individual and the general or universal. At the individual level, Freud viewed dreams as indicators of the unconscious desires of the dreamer. At the universal level, Freud was specifically concerned to penetrate beneath the manifest content of the dream (that is, the dream itself as experienced by the dreamer) to its latent content (the recent experiences that were emotionally relevant for the dreamer). He suggested, for instance, that all elongated objects might stand for the male organ, and all boxes for the uterus. Current research, however, have contradicted these ideas and pointed to more concrete causes of dream content and have shed light to many cognitive processes involved in dream formation. In fact, some authors such as neuroscientist J. A. Hobson have continually struggled to undermine Freud’s main concepts (Hobson, 2003).

One of the main problems about dream interpretation consists in trying to find the ‘occult message’ or the ‘hidden meaning’ of dreams without grounding the interpretation work on a specific theoretical framework. In other words, dream interpretation cannot be separated from theoretical considerations, if it is true that conceptual work can’t affect the oneiric experience it is also true that dream reports can’t be analyzed without a theoretical framework.
In developing theories of dreams and dreams interpretation, scholars have always made assumptions about how people live, think, feel, and are motivated to experience a particular dream even if those assumptions have remained in some cases implicit and unexamined. These underlying assumptions about mind and human development—whether implicit or explicit—outline our approach to dreams and how we imagine the ways in which, and the extent to which, culture influences dream content. If we assume that the mind is an autonomous entity that is developed according to internal or subjective determinants, our conceptualizations of the role of culture will be radically diminished. By contrast, if we assume that culture plays an active role in the genesis and developing of human mind, we must conclude that many—if not all—cognitive functions are intertwined with specific cultural resources. In this view, the question of how the human mind works cannot be fully appreciated without appealing to the cultural tools at its disposal. As Bruner stated it: “It is culture that provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds in communicable ways... Without those tools, whether symbolic or material, man is not a “naked ape” but an empty abstraction.” (1996, p. 3).

In this paper, I examine this sociocultural model and discuss its implications for the study of dreams. Although the model I discuss draws upon symbolic anthropology, cultural psychology, symbolic interactionism, and semiotics, I focus primarily on how the model is emerging within the field of cultural psychology, which has been my own academic field for the last ten years.

My arguments are presented along three main parts. In the first, I begin by discussing the main premises of the sociocultural perspective and how human mind is approached. This leads, in the second part, to a discussion of the implications of this model for the study of dreams. In the third part, I illustrate this approach by describing the preliminary results of an empirical study of children’s dreams content.

**Mind, Symbols, and Dreams**

Dream’s content has been approached from diverse theoretical views (i.e. neurophysiologic, Freudian, Jungian) and many models have been deployed in trying to understand their meaning. One customary problem, however, is the tendency to treat dream content as self-contained. That is, in general dreams are considered as an enclosed phenomenon. Some authors even explicitly diminish the context significance in dream interpretation (Kramer, 1993). The main claim of this solipsistic assumption of dreams is that they are produced by internal or individual variables such as personality, character or cognitive system. In this view, dreams—as well as mind—are considered as a relatively self-contained or self-sufficient unit. If dreams are only the product of autonomous processes such as memory, perception or emotions, the sociocultural milieu could not play a specific relevant role in their constitution and/or comprehension.

Instead, in my approach mind is defined as sign operations that are the product of specific cultural conditions. From the shared perspectives of cultural psychology (e.g. Vygotsky, Bruner, Rogoff), symbolic anthropology (e.g. Turner, Geertz), and the social analysis of Burke (1969), we sketch a preliminary framework for understanding the role that symbols play in the genesis and development of human mind and children dreams.

The main idea is to consider that all children grow up to be cultural beings. Thus, the process of human development is unavoidably coupled to the process of enculturation, of orienting oneself within systems of meaning. In other words, children are not only active beings but culturally active, they are participants in negotiations with others in the communal events that are the basis of shared meaning. In this view, mind is both constituted by and realized in the use of those symbols that are available in each cultural space (Bruner, 1990, 1996). For Geertz, culture itself is a semiotic system and mental functions are thoroughly dependent upon cultural resources that are not adjuncts to, but constituents of mental activity.

Based on these authors, I designed the basis for a new perspective named “Structurant interpretation” (SI), which considers interpretation as the main methodological source for acquiring knowledge and understanding of human actions, in general, and children’s dreams, in particular (Medina-Liberty, 2010).
To interpret something is to figure out what it means. In this way interpretation is fundamentally about meaning.

The three main premises of this approach are:

a) Human beings act toward persons, things, and events, on the basis of the meanings that these persons, things or events have for them. This works for both the wakeful and the sleeping mind.

b) Mind is both constituted by and realized in the use of symbols; that is, mind is defined as sign operations that are the product of specific cultural conditions.

c) Child development inevitably takes place within cultural spheres of shared meaning where meaning is shared through the mediation of symbols.

Within this framework, dreams are considered as meaningful narratives. That is, through SI analysis of several children’s dreams, it is argued that dreams constitute a subjective instantiation of culture’s ‘webs of meaning’ that basically—but not exclusively—adopt a narrative organization.

According to this view and echoing Vygotsky, early in development action is initially dominant over meaning and is incompletely understood. The child is able to do more than he/she can understand. We can represent this process with the following ratio:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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</table>

This means that actions begin as the numerator.

As the child grows, however, this ratio is inverted and meaning becomes the numerator:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Actions</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>

When this happens, meaning becomes an essential dimension of analyses.

In this sense, younger children (4 to 6 y. o.) experience more frequently dreams that include actions and physical objects while older kids have more complex dreams were meaning becomes the main factor that organizes their content.

I approached children’s dream content by focusing on their meaning. My main goal was to illustrate how the cultural milieu and specific social activities children are involved in (rather than only a subjective or cognitive individual states), are primordial determinants of how dream content is constituted.

Meaning, it’s important to emphasize this, does not only own a cognitive dimension— which has been the general focus of the majority of psychological studies—but also an affective or emotional component. In fact, there is not an absolute or sharp partition between cognition and emotions but a continuum between them. “Cognitive” and “affective” content are two terms designating a single phenomenon: dreams’ meaning.

The method consists in the interpretation of dream content on the basis of three analytical levels: distal, mediate, and concurrent meaning ordinates, which identify different interrelationships orders between culture and dreams, that is, from more socio-cultural situated to more personal–subjective.

This approach is exemplified with preliminary data from 21 middle-class children (4 to 9) whom average age was eight years. 98 dreams were collected in children’s homes twice a week and were audio recorded. Concurrently, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather information about children’s typical day, family and school activities, favorite films and TV shows, gender differences, if any, friends, frequency and type of games played, etcetera. Through SI analysis of several children’s dreams, it is argued that dreams constitute a subjective instantiation of culture’s ‘webs of meaning’ that basically adopt a narrative organization.
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Main Themes in Children’s Dreams

Table 1 shows the most frequent themes among children dreams and somehow it also shows children’s waking life concerns. Children dreams portray their view of the world, not in an objective way but in a modified or refashioned mode. In other words, these topics can be considered as the prime subject matter of oneiric content. Depending on the child current concerns, these topics are configured to produce a particular oneiric narrative.

These findings raise some interesting questions about the relation between dream content, and the actual experiences of the children. It can be said that dreams contain something of a “re-elaboration” of the children’s experiences and their definition of the situation.

Table 1. Description of the most frequent themes in children’s dreams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play Situations</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candies, Ice Creams</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toys</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Usually this refashioned material is selected and edited according to the particular concerns of the children. For example, in Paula’s dream described below she dreamt of a witch and a schoolmate, and both characters were ‘pick up’ and re-elaborated from actual events that were affecting the child.

Along with Ricoeur (1982, 1991), I consider meaning as organized in narratives. A narrative is a synthesis of multiple events or manifold happenings that are transformed into a story. Narratives, then, are more than a mere enumeration in a simple or successive order of incidents or events. Narration organizes them into intelligible wholes. Children dreams, likewise, are constructed this way. Apparently dreams are but a series of unconnected incidents but if they are considered as parts of a whole they appear as intelligible stories. Children aren’t isolated individuals; from the very beginning they immerse themselves into the culture that surrounded them. Let’s examine some examples of children’s oneiric narratives.

Sample Dreams

Pablo (5.8): In the Field

I was with my little brother, Daniel... he was crawling and yelling. I was looking for some worms for Shrek and Daniel came and tried to grab it... I said No!... but my other brother, the older, came and told us that we should be playing a “cascarita” (soccer in the streets or public yards) and suddenly we were on a garden playing soccer and Daniel was chasing us; we all were laughing but my mother appeared holding some dish and asks us to wash our hands and to go with her to have lunch... then... something else happened but I don’t remember.

In this dream we can clearly identified four composing elements: a) family members, b) play activities, c) a film character, and d) what appears to be the initiation of the lunchtime routine.
The child dream was configured combining these sources within one single narrative. The story describes the ongoing of one Mario’s favorite activities: free-play. This was combined with a film character, Shrek. In the interview, Mario complained a little about his younger brother because he doesn’t know how to play. The older brother (7.2 years old), however, felt the same way about Mario because he was continually trying to pull him to play something for bigger children.

Somehow, Mario represented this play “imbalances” by showing his brothers interrupting his play. Next, however, the mother order them all three to have lunch, which is a “higher” command that also interrupted the game in a more authoritative way. Globally considered, this dream was not unpleasant and only represented four of the child major concerns seamlessly entangled. Although Mario created an imaginary plot, he did it on sociocultural grounds combined with his own ideas, motives, and interests.

In my view, Mario was expressing the usually strong and positive emotions found in children’s games. That is, during free-hour play the child feels in complete control of his actions, and he is able to create characters or roles, dialogues, and situations according to his motives and imagination. He feels entirely free and happy. In this dream, this relevant activity appears interrupted by his mother’s request. In sum, the dream was representing a common childhood conflict between the child’s needs and the adult norms. The three main characters (the two brothers and the mother) are, naturally, projections or “voices” of himself, and the dialogues and the situations were a moving representation of his own emotions and thoughts.

Teresa (4.2) The School Event

Last night I dreamed that I was hiding behind the couch because the witch [a Harry Potter’s character] was trying to grab me... but there was this kid, Javier, who made her disappear with his magic wand... and Miss Karla [his school teacher] asked us to come back to the classroom and stop playing in the yard; then, Jackie showed me many stickers of princesses and we began to stick them everywhere.

Although school is a salient motive in this dream and her classmates, three specific elements are worth mentioning:

a) play actions illustrates how school rules are being violated; that is, she was putting princesses’ stickers wherever she wants to,

b) school teacher played the role of a person who ensures the respect of those rules, and

c) the classmates as “adventure partners”.

In this dream, Teresa was expressing her view of peer’s solidarity in two basic ways: first, her “rescue” from the witch by Javier’s magical intervention, and second, by Jackie’s invitation to put princesses’ stickers on any available wall. This second activity was clearly opposed to formal or adult’s world by breaking a common school rule: one is not supposed to stick princesses’ labels on walls nor furniture.

School and school peers are a common and salient motif in children’s dreams. Teresa’s dream, for instance, served as a mean for expressing a usual school conflict: she likes to go to school because she can play and talk with her friends but she also hates it when the teacher behaves strictly or when classes are boring. Somewhat, the witch threaten is a representation of those uncomfortable aspects of school while Javier’s intervention symbolizes peer support and friendship.

Another interesting aspect, which also shows the school’s conflicts, is the sequence with Teresa’s friend, Jackie. In it, Paula shows her interest in doing amusing things although they are not allowed; and, perhaps, that’s why they are funny.

Although Teresa could have dreamt about putting stickers alone she involved another peer and it was her friend, precisely, who instigated this activity. Naturally, there was no other actual kid; it was Paula herself who configured her dream and who gave “voice” to Jackie. In other words, Paula considers senseless doing things alone in school. A simple act of putting stickers is enhanced when you do it in the company of friends.
Teresa’s dream, then, is essentially emotional since it depicts her desire to have pleasurable moments at school and share them with her peers. Her dream plot shows the confrontation of her wishes with the school norms. The teacher, as an authority figure who occasionally exerts pressure over her pupils, is possibly represented by the anxiety generated by the presence of the witch.

In sum, the entanglement of affective configured this dream—the strong desire of having fun moments at school—and cognitive—the mental balance of what is forbidden and aloud inside school—components. Both components, however, were clearly situated within a sociocultural context, in this case the school, from which Paula took all the elements to build up her dream.

Concluding Remarks

A dream is mainly a visual phenomenon that occurring during sleep. Its content is scarcely influenced by the immediate external environment but previous waking experiences are crucial for the constitution of oneiric content. There is an evident relationship between children’s memories and experiences and the topics deployed during dreams.

Children 4 to 6 years old report dreams that included physical activities (i.e., running, jumping, playing) and actions that often were described with short sentences (i.e., I was chasing… He was pushing me… I was drinking…). In sum, dreams seem to be slices of life not yet fully elaborated. As children grow (6 to 9 years old), their dreams still contain actions but they appear within a story line and characters are more developed often accordingly to actual persons.

Research on children’s dreams has a narrow base and although more information is needed, data found in this study suggest that several culture expressions—i.e. Media, school, and family—were appropriated by children and constituted importantly their dreams content. In children dreams these cultural elements were combined in novel ways and produced original meanings. Although dreams show some degree of modification, refashioning, and personalization by children, they were nevertheless the expression of children’s abilities to adapt to social, familiar, and cultural surroundings.

Recently, the narrative quality of dreams has been the subject of much investigation (Hunt, 1989, States, 1993, Foulkes, 1999) and this paper can be inserted within this trend.

Acknowledgement

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References


Inherent in this dynamic field concept is the notion of some source of energy, some generator. Let me begin, therefore, with the relational field and then show how this forms either an equilibrium or dynamic social field. A dyad of socially interacting individuals forms the smallest sociocultural field. The interaction comprises a cluster of values and meanings, involves a set of norms, is within a structure of mutual expectations and roles, and has all the characteristics that we find within the most comprehensive social systems, such as that of nations. The components I seek should similarly determine the sociocultural position of individuals relative to their social interaction. Sociocultural evolution, sociocultural evolutionism or cultural evolution are theories of cultural and social evolution that describe how cultures and societies change over time. Whereas sociocultural development traces processes that tend to increase the complexity of a society or culture, sociocultural evolution also considers processes that can lead to decreases in complexity (degeneration) or that can produce variation or proliferation without any seemingly significant changes in complexity.

Lev Vygotsky is one of those figures in the social sciences whose name is seen popping up in everything from education and psychology to philosophy and linguistics. Perhaps most importantly, the social lens that drove his theory of the nature of human cognition was deeply influenced by his strong admiration for Marxist philosophy. But one of the main contributions of this Marxist influence on Vygotsky’s view on language and mind was that human thought was fundamentally a dialogical rather than mechanistic phenomenon. Our primary goal in the present work was therefore to extend and elaborate previous avenues of investigation that have specifically addressed typical dreams by validating a questionnaire on typical dreams and examining its dimensional structure. We undertook a study of some of the psychometric properties and demographic correlates of the Typical Dreams Questionnaire (TDQ) and determined whether multivariate analyses of it support the existence of basic dream types or dimensions. Such a probe might warrant further study of prevailing social or economic conditions as possible sources of typical themes.