Theoretical Basis for the Dream Exploration Workshop
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The Dream Exploration Workshop described on www.spiritmirrorstudio.com is structured around six steps, listed below, which guide participants in exploring a dream for insight and inspiration regarding a meaningful question about their life experience.

Step 1: Review dreamwork ground rules
Step 2: Formulate a meaningful question about your life experience
Step 3: Reflect on how to listen to a dream
Step 4: Tell a partner a dream in the first person (or write a dream)
Step 5: Identify an aspect of the dream to explore (a character or object in the dream, or a place in which the dream occurs)
Step 6: Respond to questions in a dream exploration worksheet, as a journaling exercise

The following paragraphs describe the theoretical basis for each step of the workshop.

Step 1: Review dreamwork ground rules

In Step 1, the workshop leader describes the following ground rules to maintain a safe environment for conducting ethical dreamwork:

- Only the dreamer is the decision-maker regarding the meanings of the dream
- The dreamer's decision to share or discontinue sharing a dream will be respected
- Participants are advised that unexpected issues or emotions may arise during dreamwork
- Participants are requested to agree to keep information confidential, meaning that they will not share with others the dreams and other personal information that are shared in the workshop.

The Ethics Statement of the International Association for the Study of Dreams\(^1\) is the basis for these ground rules. A copy of the Ethics Statement is included in the workshop handout.

Step 2: Formulate a meaningful question about your life experience

In Step 2, the workshop leader asks the participants to each formulate a meaningful question about their life experience, around which they would like to cultivate insight and inspiration. The basis for Step 2 comes from Gestalt therapy, in which clients are guided through a dialogue process with various aspects of a dream.\(^2\) Step 2 of the Dream Exploration Workshop lays the groundwork for Step 6, during which each participant will be invited to dialogue with an aspect of their dream, as a journaling exercise.

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The meaningful question formulated in Step 2 will be one of the questions that participants are encouraged to ask, as they dialogue with an aspect of their dream.

Sometimes workshop participants have expressed concern about how closely a “meaningful question” should relate to the dream that they select to explore during the workshop. In my experience, there is no need to consciously establish a relationship between the meaningful question that is formulated in Step 2 and the dream that is selected in Step 4. The aspect of a dream that is dialogued with in Step 6 often provides new and thought-provoking insights into a meaningful question that, at first appearance, did not seem related to the dream that was being explored. This is related to Carl Jung’s observation that, “… as a rule the standpoint of the unconscious is complementary or compensatory to consciousness and thus unexpectedly ‘different.’”3 Dream characters and objects, and other aspects of a dream, are products of the unconscious; as such, they are likely to provide an unfamiliar and different perspective on any question that we may ask. People often find it refreshing and even inspiring to receive a new and unexpected “take” on an issue they have been pondering. What is most important about formulating a meaningful question is that it resonate with meaning for the participant. The workshop handout includes the following three “generic” questions that a participant could consider using, if a meaningful question does not come to mind. These are questions that perennially resonate with me, and have proven meaningful to others:

- How can I feel a stronger connection to something larger than myself?
- What lessons can I learn from my current or past work situation?
- What lessons can I learn from my current or past family situation?

**Step 3: Reflect on how to listen to a dream**

In Step 3, the workshop leader passes around a bowl of artificial butterflies and invites each participant to take a butterfly, and hold it in their hands, as they reflect on the personal nature of sharing a dream with another person. The Greek word “psyche” means both soul and butterfly.4 To share a dream is to share part of your inner life, which may feel delicate – like a butterfly.

Workshop participants are advised that the next step of the workshop will be to share a dream with a partner – although anyone may opt out of that activity and write down a dream instead. Those who participate in dream sharing will find a partner and take turns sharing a dream aloud. When it is their turn to listen, participants are encouraged to hold a butterfly in their hands, as a reminder to listen to their partner’s dream as gently and respectfully as they would hold a butterfly that chooses to alight on their hand.

The physical sensation of gently holding a butterfly supports the participants in adopting an attitude of tenderness and respect toward their partner and the dreams to be explored – regardless of the dream

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content. In addition to providing a safe environment for sharing personal information, this simple butterfly ritual is designed to counteract derogatory messages about dreams that are common in modern Western society, such as “it’s only a dream.” In contrast, the words, actions, and symbolism of the simple butterfly ritual seek to elevate the status of dreams to a position of respect and dignity.

The participants receive further instruction to simply listen to their partner and appreciate the gift that the dreamer is giving by revealing a dream – without making any attempt to suggest any potential meanings of the dream or make any value judgments about the dream. These instructions help the participants understand their role as listeners, and are also intended to support them when it is their turn to share a dream. If participants feel confident that their partner will simply listen and appreciate the fact that they are sharing a dream, they are more likely to be willing to share a dream.

**Step 4: Tell a partner a dream in the first person**

In Step 4, the participants are invited to choose a dream to tell to a partner (or to write down if they opt out of sharing a dream with a partner), and to tell the dream to their partner in the first person. For example, a participant would say, “I am walking down the street,” as opposed to “I was walking down the street.” Participants are advised that any dream can be selected, and that even scary dreams with negative content often provide profound insights. The workshop leader encourages any participants that want to work with a scary dream to consider what they would need to feel safe working with the scary dream, and to mention those needs to their partner and/or the workshop leader.

The purpose of telling a dream in the present tense is for the dreamer to re-experience feelings from the dream. The recommendation to tell a dream in the present tense is based on the Gestalt approach to dreamwork, which seeks to make the dream a currently-experienced reality during a dreamwork session. The emphasis on re-experiencing feelings is based on findings from neurological studies that the rapid eye movement (REM) phase of sleep, which is strongly associated with dreams, involves high activity in the limbic system, sometimes called the “emotional brain,” suggesting that emotions are critical factor in understanding a dream.

The observation that scary dreams have potential to bring forth deep insights is based on Carl Jung’s theory of the “shadow,” a term he used to describe despised or rejected aspects of the self, which are banished from conscious awareness but do not leave us; they continue to influence our behavior, even as we are largely unconscious that these despised qualities actually belong to us. Until we acknowledge and integrate the shadow into the conscious self, our authentic creative energies are bound up in self-rejection; integration of the shadow is needed for each person to “succeed in the universal task of maturing to social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual adulthood.” Negatively-charged aspects of a

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8 Ibid. 27.
remembered dream are often expressions of the shadow,\(^9\) and they present opportunities for integration into waking consciousness. Jeremy Taylor suggests that the “distinctly frightening quality and seemingly negative appearance of the shadow figure is always a reliable measure of the value of the positive energy and gift for transformation that lies hidden within it ...”\(^{10}\)

In my experience, workshop participants can derive benefit from exploring negatively charged aspects of a dream whether or not an explanation of Jung’s concept of the shadow is given, and whether or not participants view those aspects of the dream as representing parts of themselves. I follow the participants’ lead with regard to how much (if any) theory to explain. If a participant asks about the basis for any part of this approach to dreamwork, I will explain as much as seems appropriate for the group as a whole, and encourage individuals who are interested in dream theory to read this document.

**Step 5: Identify an aspect of the dream to explore**

Step 5 occurs after the dreams have been shared. In Step 5, the workshop leader invites the participants to write down the names of characters (people, animals or other beings), objects, and places that occurred in the dream and notice how they feel about these different aspects of their dream. The workshop leader asks the participants to choose a character, object, or place from their dream to explore, encouraging them to choose an aspect of the dream that they feel drawn to or curious about, or one that brings up strong feelings.

Exploring a dream by focusing on one aspect at a time is now a common method in dream analysis. It dates back to Sigmund Freud, who made the following observation based on his clinical practice:

“If I say to a patient who is still a novice, ‘What occurs to you in connection with this dream?’ as a rule his mental horizon becomes a blank. If, however, I put the dream before him cut up into pieces, he will give me a series of associations to each piece...”\(^{11}\)

**Step 6: Respond to dream exploration questions, as a journaling exercise**

In Step 6, each participant responds to a set of questions in the workshop handout, as a journaling exercise. This includes the following two types of questions:

1. Questions to evoke associations about an aspect of the dream
2. Questions to inspire dialogue with an aspect of the dream, as part of the journaling exercise

The first type of questions – questions that will help the client make associations to an aspect of the dream – comes from Freud’s approach to dreamwork. It is one of the hallmarks of Freud’s method of dream analysis to emphasize the dreamer’s own associations with aspects of a dream in order to discover the dream’s meanings. He found this method yielded better results than approaches such as

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\(^9\) Ibid., 72.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 73.

relying on standard meanings offered by dream dictionaries or analytical systems that seek to “decode” dreams using an established key.  

The second type of questions – questions to inspire dialogue with an aspect of the dream – is based on a Gestalt approach to dreamwork. In Gestalt theory, every aspect of a dream is considered to be part of the dreamer. The Gestalt approach has the dreamer dialogue with different aspects of the dream, using an “empty chair” technique, in which the dreamer sits in one chair and takes on the characteristics of one aspect of the dream, and then addresses an empty chair as if another aspect of the dream were seated there. The Dream Exploration Workshop offers a variation on this, by having the participants write out a dialogue with an aspect of the dream, as a journaling exercise.

References


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12 Ibid., 129-145.
14 Ibid., 193.
This supplement of the International Journal of Dream Research includes the abstracts of presenters who gave consent to the publishing. The abstracts are categorized into thematic groups and within the category sorted according to the last name of the first presenter. Theoretical Basis for Exploring Wildlife Value Orientations Cross-Culturally, Human Dimensions of. Wildlife: An International Journal, 12:5, 297-305, DOI: 10.1080/10871200701555857. To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10871200701555857. Our ability to explore change. If trends suggested by research in the United States are any indication of what may be taking place in other countries, a global shift in wildlife values.