

Some Further Thoughts on Active Dream Analysis^{1, 2}

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Abstract

During active dream analysis, a dream analyst asks specific questions, such as (1) association-with-each-dream-element question, (2) overall impression question, (3) point-of-dream question, (4) communication-warning question, (5) relationship-between-dreams question, (6) correspondence question, (7) latent feeling question, (8) abstractness-in-dream question, (9) paired-presentation question, and (10) absentee-in-dream question. I formulated these questions in the late 1990's. Clinical interventions in active dream analysis are classified into two categories: general intervention and special intervention. The above-mentioned questions (1) and (2) are classified under general intervention, and questions (3) to (10) are classified under special intervention. As dream analysts develop their skills in the clinical use of dreams, they can impart such skills to their clients. In this article, I reconsider the meaning and significance of active dream analysis.

Key words: active dream analysis, general intervention, special intervention

Introduction

Dreams are complex phenomena that have attracted the attention of fortune-tellers, philosophers, artists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists and counsellors over the centuries. Clinically speaking, there are many ways to analyze dreams.

Active dream analysis refers to an intervention method used during dream analysis. The main characteristics of active dream analysis are dreamer-centeredness and non-intrusiveness. From my perspective, the most important role of the dream analyst (hereinafter referred to as the analyst) is to create an environment in which the client(dreamer) can discover the hidden

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meanings of his or her dreams without the analyst's interpretations. I believe it necessary to refrain from interpretations or suggestions that might prejudice the client. It is of utmost importance that the analyst respects the client's internal frame of reference.

In this article I would like to reconsider the meaning and significance of active dream analysis, which I have discussed in previous publications (Najima, 1997, 1999, 2006, 2012).

Characteristics of General Intervention

General intervention refers to the intervention approach used by many analysts. Here, "general" means commonly used. The three questions included in a general intervention are as follows.

Association-with-each-dream-element question

Dreams have various elements including individuals, objects, actions, feelings, and surroundings. In the association-with-each-dream-element question, the client is asked to make associations for each element of his or her dream. For example, the analyst might ask the client: "What does the man in the dream bring to mind?", "What does the bridge in the dream bring to mind?" or "What do you associate with the sunbathing in the dream?"

Regarding the significance of associations with dream elements, Langs (1989) states:

Associations to dream elements are among the most important avenues of unexpected insights in psychotherapy. Often they lead to latent content that could never have been anticipated by the therapist from the manifest dream alone or in context. Yet, more often, the associations are specific and essential elaborations of unconscious trends to which the therapist has already been alerted from the manifest content of the dream in context, and which lead then to specific interpretations of the currently pertinent unconscious aspects of the material [p. 358].

Although I am not a psychoanalyst, I agree with Langs' opinion concerning the significance of associations with dream elements.

Overall Impression question

For this question, the analyst can ask the client: "What is your overall impression of the dream?" "How do you feel about the dream?" or "What does the dream bring to mind?" In this case, it is better not to ask: "What do you think the dream — or dream element — means?" because this could prompt the client to engage in intellectualization.

Communication-warning question

For this question, the analyst can ask the client: "What is this dream trying to tell you?" or "What is this dream warning you about?" From my perspective, one of the essential roles of dreams is to communicate something important to the dreamer or to warn the dreamer of something important.

Characteristics of Special Intervention

Special intervention refers to a form of intervention that is rarely or never used by analysts.

If an analyst asks a client general intervention questions and the client answers "Nothing is

coming to mind,” the analyst generally cannot do anything but encourage the client to speak further. However, the analyst may opt to engage in a special intervention. There are seven special intervention questions that can be useful when the analyst is trying to grasp the meanings of a client’s dream from various viewpoints. Note that although I have previously used the point-of-dream question as a part of the general intervention, in this paper, I address it as a part of special intervention.

The seven special intervention questions are as follows.

Point-of-dream question

For this question, the analyst can ask the client: “What is the point of this dream?” or “What is the central theme of this dream?” This type of question can function to narrow the client’s awareness regarding the meaning of his or her dream. As a side note, when a point that is different from a point told by the client comes to the analyst’s mind, it may be useful to communicate this to the client. The words of the analyst may stimulate the client to discover unexpected meanings or memories.

Relationship-between-dreams question

If the client reports two dreams, the analyst can ask the client, “What are the similarities between this dream and the other you had last night?” or “What are the similarities between yesterday’s dream and the dream you had one year ago?” The client will often report that some features of the dreams are similar or different.

Correspondence question

The question is focused on the correspondence between the client’s “dream self” and his or her “waking self”. For instance, the analyst can ask the client: “In this dream, you are insulted in public. Does it remind you of anything in your waking life?” When I used the correspondence question for the first time (which was by accident), I recognized its utility in dream analysis (see Najima, 1982).

Latent-feeling-in-dream question

Bonime (1962), a neo-Freudian psychoanalyst, held that the most significant expression of any individual’s personality lies in his or her feelings. Feelings, when detected and fully comprehended, are the most subtle, accurate, and comprehensive indicators of total personality.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of feelings in our dreams: manifest feeling and latent feeling. According to Bonime, these correspond to experiential and symbolized feeling in our dreams.

The manifest feeling is the one that we actually experience while dreaming. In contrast, the latent feeling is hidden in any dream element or material. For that reason, we cannot experience it directly.

As for the manifest feeling, the analyst can ask a question such as: “How did you feel during the dream?” or “What were your feelings in the dream?”

On the other hand, with regard to latent-feeling-in-dream question, the analyst can ask a question such as: “If you compare the burning flame in this dream to any feeling or emotion,

what would it be?” or “If you compare the dead leaf in the dream to any feeling or emotion, what would it be?” The flame may represent anger and the dead leaf may represent a miserable feeling. In the latter case, a miserable feeling might be associated with his low self-esteem. In other words, the client might suffer from low self-esteem, which could prevent him from pursuing his personal goals.

Manifest and latent feelings may exist simultaneously within a dream, and may express the same or similar kinds of feelings, may express entirely different thoughts that are not incompatible, or may express feelings of a conflicting nature. Overall, these two kinds of feelings are very useful for grasping the client’s total personality. In some cases, there is no latent feeling in the client’s dream.

Abstractness-in-dream question

For this question, the analyst can ask the client about an abstractive quality of a reported dream. For example, the analyst can ask the client: “In this dream, you were hit by a deluge and you screamed in terror. For you, when speaking of something very scary, what does it bring to mind?” In this case, a deluge is a concrete thing and something very scary is an abstract thing. For another example, a very high stone wall in a client’s dream is a concrete thing and something towering to the client is an abstract thing. In this case, the analyst can ask the client: “In this dream, you saw a very high stone wall. For you, when speaking of something towering, what does it bring to mind?”

When asking the abstractness-in-dream question, the analyst must say “for you”. However, If the analyst says “for us”, the question may elicit very valuable information about the relationship between the client and the analyst. As an example, the analyst could ask the client: “You dreamed of a furious sea last night. For us, when speaking of something furious, what does it bring to mind?”

Paired-presentation question

Previously, I called this question “the level III question” before (Najima, 2001). For this question, the analyst can combine a dream reported by the client with an actual event that the client experienced in his or her daily life. More specifically, one of the dream element or dream plot and one of the impressive everyday affairs are presented simultaneously to the client.

Absentee-in-dream question

For this question, the analyst asks the client about a person who does not appear in a series of dreams. For example, the mother and siblings of a client might often appear in his or her dreams, but not his or her father. In this case, the nonappearance of the father might be related dissociation or other defense mechanisms.

Combinations of Various Questions

It can be difficult to determine what makes an adequate combination of questions. What follows is a list of important points concerning question combinations.

1. Generally speaking, the association-with-each-dream-element question and the overall impression question are indispensable for analyzing every dream. If an analyst is able to obtain

sufficient information about the meaning of a dream by asking these two questions, it may not be necessary to ask the client additional questions.

2. However, the client does not usually provide sufficient information in response to the first two questions. Therefore, it is often necessary to use seven special questions.

3. When choosing a question (or multiple questions) out of the seven special questions, it may be preferable to follow one's intuition rather than to pose the questions in a systematic order, considering the features of each special question.

4. The communication-warning question is very important. The question often leads the client to understand something from the dream such as a message or warning.

5. The point-of-dream question reveals something that is emphasized by the client or that the client thinks is a key factor in his or her dream.

6. If the analyst feels that the client has problems with feelings, e.g., distortion in feelings, distortion in conceptualization of feelings, detachment from his or her own emotions, it can be useful to ask the latent-feeling-in dream question.

7. The abstractness-in-dream question can elicit interesting responses from clients. Because concreteness is absent from the abstractness-in-dream question, the client tends to give a response that is related to the abstract.

8. If none of the questions produce a useful response from the client, the analyst can use the paired-presentation question as a last resort. First, the analyst must choose one episode in the client's dream, and second, the analyst must choose one actual event out of various events that the client experienced in his or her daily life. Thus, when the analyst asks this question, he or she has no choice but to become a little intrusive. This is the weakness of this type of question.

The Timing of the Questions

When is the right time to ask the different questions? This can be very difficult to determine. When the client continues to associate, the analyst should listen carefully. When the client hesitates to answer or frowns, the analyst must wait. There is a possibility that the client is associating the content of their dream with something scary or that the analyst's questions have caused the client to recall upsetting memories. If the client's sense of security (Sullivan, 1956) is threatened, the analyst should not push the client. In some cases, it is better not to continue questioning regarding the specific dream.

Dreamer-centeredness and Non-intrusiveness

Historically speaking, both Freud and Jung emphasized the importance of dream association, but at the stage of meaning-making they interpreted clients' dreams exclusively as "symbolic" or "archetypal." In other words, they saw the clients' dreams only from their respective points of view.

Dreamer-centeredness and non-intrusiveness are core features of active dream analysis. These two features do not threaten the clients' sense of security.

Client-Analyst Compatibility

Client-analyst compatibility (the match between the characteristics of the client and the characteristics of the analyst) is very important. Generally speaking, a client who is deeply

interested in and spontaneously searches for the meaning of dreams will be compatible with an analyst. However, a client who craves for the meaning of his or her dream one-sidedly may not be compatible because the client is too dependent on the analyst's interpretation.

The Stimulating Effect of Questions

The analyst's questions may simulate the client's mind and bring back recent or old memories (including early memories). In some cases, a client may have another dream after a dream analysis session, by which they regain another recent or old memory as a result of answering the analyst's questions. In this way, the analyst's questions can continue to stimulate the client after the session.

In terms of defense mechanisms, the questions chosen by the analyst and the construction of a good relationship between the analyst and the client can weaken the power of dissociation. As a result, meaning that had been dissociated from a client's self-system may emerge naturally.

Dreams as Indicators of so-called Countertransference

If an analyst has a dream about a client, known as a countertransference dream, this can be very useful in understanding the features of a client-analyst relationship. If the analyst does not understand whether a dream is about a client, the analyst can question him or herself using various questions related to active dream analysis.

Limitations of Active Dream Analysis

There are a number of limitations of active dream analysis. First, if a client is not interested in the meanings of dreams, the analyst cannot use active dream analysis.

Second, the method depends strongly on the client's ability to introspect. If the client has a poor ability to introspect or associate, active dream analysis is not likely to work well. In that case, we have no choice but to wait for a while until the client's ability grows.

A further limitation is the analyst's skill. Almost all analysts, as a matter of course, cannot make full use of the method. The analyst needs to become proficient at active dream analysis.

Some Concluding Remarks

In my view, the role of the analyst in active dream analysis is that of a facilitator who makes the unconscious meanings of a client's dream conscious. With the help of the analyst, the client will be able to organize his or her mind and achieve deeper self-understanding.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript.

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