

Theories of Dreaming

*Theories of dreaming are an attempt to explain why we have dreams. In general, they fall into two varieties. **Psychological theories** tend to assume that the content of a dream is important. They are based on the idea that the experience of the dream is what matters and that it represents something of importance on the psychological level. **Neurobiological theories**, on the other hand, tend to see the experience of a dream as unimportant and instead emphasise what is happening on a biological level. The main assumption is that the experienced dream is just a meaningless by-product of the biological process that caused it. In other words, they see dreams as an **epiphenomenon**.*

You need to be able to describe and evaluate two theories, one psychological and one neurobiological. The theories we shall look at are:

- **The ego-defence theory** (Freud, 1900). This theory suggests that dreams are related to the unconscious mind.
- **The activation-synthesis theory** (Hobson & McCarley, 1977). This theory suggests that dreams are what happens when we try to make sense of brain activity during REM

Freud's Ego Defence Theory (a Psychological Theory)

Freud (1900) believed that our conscious experience was just a small part of what actually takes place in our minds. Much of what goes on is hidden 'below the surface' in the **unconscious mind**. In the unconscious mind are all the unacceptable thoughts and impulses that our conscious mind cannot deal with. The contents of the unconscious are always trying to 'break through' into the conscious mind. However, this cannot be allowed to happen, as if it did, we would become very disturbed. Freud suggests that, when we dream, the unconscious mind is trying to break through into consciousness. More specifically:

- We need to sleep in order to rest and restore our bodies.
- When we sleep, the ego lets down its guard, and the unconscious mind starts to impinge upon consciousness.
- If this happened, we would wake up and hence never be able to rest.
- To prevent us from being woken up, the ego does **dream work**.
- In dream work, the ego disguises the thoughts from the unconscious using symbols.
- The symbols do not disturb us, so we are able to continue sleeping.

This means that a dream always exists on two distinct levels:

- The **manifest content** is what we remember of the dream after the ego has disguised it.
- The **latent content** is the true meaning of the dream.

Freud suggested that the symbolism in a dream is of two types. **Personal symbolism** can only be understood by knowing something about the experiences and personality of the dreamer. On the other hand, **universal symbols** can be understood by anyone. Some common universal symbols are:

- **Powerful figures** (e.g. kings, queens, prime ministers, doctors etc.) represent the mother and father.
- **Vermin** (e.g. rats, cockroaches etc.) represent the brothers and sisters.
- **Water** (either climbing into or out of) represents birth.
- **Phallic symbols** are anything vaguely penis shaped e.g. baguettes, trains, cruise missiles etc.
- **Vaginal symbols** are anything you can put something else in e.g. ovens, bowls, wardrobes etc.

Evaluation

Much of the evidence for Freud's theory comes from his own cases studies. These show how a person's unconscious wishes can be manifested in their dreams. For example:

Freud (1900)

Aim: to understand the content of a patient's dream.

Sample: a young man.

Design: case study.

Method: during psychoanalysis, the man kept a record of his dreams. These were reported to Freud, who interpreted them.

Result: the man had a dream in which he had a secret affair with a woman who was engaged to someone else. He was worried about the other man finding out and therefore behaved in a very affectionate way towards him.

Conclusion: this dream relates to the man's Oedipus complex. The woman symbolises his mother, whom he desires and the 'other man' his father. In order to prevent his father from discovering his desire for his mother, he pretends to love him.

Although Freud provided plenty of this sort of evidence, there are a number of problems with it.

These include:

- His **sample** was small and consisted mainly of middle class women with psychological problems. It is not wise to generalise from this sort of sample.
- The dreams were recorded or recalled by the patients, making them **retrospective data**, which is often unreliable.
- The method of interpretation is very **subjective** (i.e. it relied on Freud's own personal opinions). This does not mean that Freud was wrong, but it makes it impossible to check his conclusions.
- The theory as a whole is **difficult to test**, because it relies on ideas (such as the unconscious mind) whose existence is difficult to prove.

Some researchers have tried to test out Freud's ideas in a more scientific way. For example:

Hall (1963)

Aim: to test out Freud's ideas of the Oedipus complex by examining dreams.

Sample: 3000 dreams collected from 2000 people, male and female.

Design: content analysis.

Method: dreams were recorded by the pps and then analysed by the researchers.

Result: it was found that male pps were more likely to dream about male strangers. Additionally, in the dreams of male pps, male strangers were more likely to be aggressive.

Conclusion: the higher numbers of aggressive male strangers in the dreams of men results from their Oedipal fear of their fathers.

The problem with this research is that it relies upon the assumption that male strangers in dreams represent the dreamer's father. All sorts of other interpretations are possible. For example, **Eysenck & Wilson (1973)** suggest that men are more likely to dream about aggressive strangers simply because they are more likely to meet aggressive strangers in their waking lives. Ultimately, the problem is that there is no way of performing a valid test of Freud's theory. This does not mean that Freud's theory is wrong, but it does make it **unscientific**.

Hobson & McCarley's Activation-Synthesis Theory (a Neurobiological Theory)

Hobson & McCarley (1977) take the view that dreams are what happens when the mind tries to make sense of brain activity that occurs during sleep. They believe this brain activity (especially during REM) has some other purpose, probably to do with brain restoration and protein synthesis (see the handout on theories of sleep). Their theory suggests:

- During sleep, the information from the senses does not reach the brain areas that usually interpret it (**input attenuation**). Additionally, during REM, the skeletal muscles are paralysed (**output inhibition**).
- The pons starts generating PGO waves (see the handout on studies of brain activity during REM sleep).
- The PGO waves travel up through the brain and reach the brain areas that would normally interpret sensory information.
- These areas in the **cerebral cortex** treat the incoming activity as if it was real sensory information.
- In interpreting the stimulation, the mind tries to form it together into a coherent whole (a process called **synthesis**). In order to produce synthesis, the brain draws upon its own stored memories.
- However, because the PGO waves activate many different brain areas simultaneously, the result is highly changeable and often rather strange.

Evaluation

The main strength of the activation synthesis theory is that it is consistent with what we know about both

brain activity during REM sleep and what we know generally about how the mind works.

In general, the mind always tries to make the most amount of sense out of whatever it is presented with. For example, in Bartlett's work on schema driven processing (see unit 1) he showed that people would distort information until it fitted with their schemas. Activation synthesis is also consistent with what is happening in the brain during REM sleep (see the handout on brain activity during REM). For example:

- The higher level of brain activity during REM explains why we are more likely to remember dreams that occur then.
- The fact that visual, auditory and motor areas are activated during REM explains why dreams usually involve seeing, hearing and moving.
- However, the fact that brain areas to do with smell and taste are not activated explains why dreams rarely involve these senses.

However, it is worth remembering that the activation synthesis theory is not incompatible with other theories. Dreaming may have all sorts of functions besides being a by-product of biological processes. Besides Freud's ideas, for example, it has been suggested that dreams are there to help us sort out the events of the day or (**Ornstein, 1986**), alternately, that dream are there to help us get rid of unwanted memories (**Crick and Watson, 1983**). As **Gross (1994)** concludes:

'[activation-synthesis] may account for where dreams come from, but not what dreams are for.'