The use of dreamwork in TA helping relationships

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Abstract
It is widely accepted among professionals working in helping relationships that dreamwork can be effectively applied to different contexts in order to help clients clarify their issues, facilitate changes, and promote personal growth.
This article presents a reflection on these possible different uses. It focuses specifically upon the use of transactional analysis of dreams *either in a process of* decontamination *and* deconfusion.
Two examples of mock sessions on the same dream (including transcripts and audio-video recordings), each of which focus upon the two aforementioned work processes, will help to clarify the theoretical and methodological premises here presented.

Dream, dreamwork, decontamination, deconfusion, ethical code

Premise

As effectively stated by Margaret Bowater (2003), dreams provide us with images and metaphors which show us how we approach our inner and outer world. They shed light upon our behavior and script patterns,

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* In writing these pages I made much use of Margaret Bowater's papers on dreams and dreamwork, published in the *Transactional Analysis Journal* since the early two thousands. I consider it to be among the most effective and enlightening in this area (Bowater 2001, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013; Bowater & Sherrard 1999, 2011). For a synthetic, updated survey on dreamwork and helping relationships literature I take the liberty of refer to Tangolo (2015).

reveal the effects of traumas, alert us to dangers and inspire us by their symbolic visions.

Dreams, says Bowater, emerge from the creative inner core of our psyche, which some might define as our "soul" or our "spirit" (Bowater, 2003, p. 37). However, labels aside, what Bowater suggests for the most part is that dreams are an intimate part of everyone's psychic baggage. Should a dreamer decide to share their dream with a professional, dreams represent a precious resource both for dreamers and for helping relationships.

Various uses of the dream in history

Dreamwork is part of a millennial history which crosses the historical and geographical coordinates of our planet, so generating an endless source of meaning throughout the centuries: culture, the arts, the sciences and politics have all been equally influenced by dreams. Often they have produced remarkable outcomes, some of which worth-considering to this day (Cfr. Pick and Roper, 2004; Shoulman and Stroumsa, 1999).

Evidence of this influence is numerous, almost unlimited, and the task here of reporting a short synthesis which expresses the scope of the subject, even modestly, would be impossible in the brief lines of this essay.

As such, the list of scattered references to follow can only suggest the sheer abundance of declinations and uses of dreamwork throughout history. Indeed the presence of dreams in the great classics of antiquity spans time from the Epic of Gilgamesh (Oppenheim, 1956) to the Epic Poetry of Ancient Greek Literature, as well as the second century BCE in texts from Greek Tragedy by Artemidorus Ephesius and Galen (Harris, 2009; Devereux, 1976); Medieval culture considers dreams in theology, science and literature (Kruger, 1992); The Renaissance represents them in literature and in the arts (Brown, 1999) and studies them as part of the alchemic sciences (Vickers, 1984); on one hand, "renown thinkers" such as Aristoteles, Descartes and Schopenhauer devote reflections and

essays to them (Dreisbach, 2000); on the other hand, common people constantly refer to them in their everyday lives as reported in registers of the Holy Inquisition or as illustrated in popular narratives (Burke, 1973). And there is more. Even in more recent times, the presence of dreams and dreamwork maintains its presence and relevance. In eighteenth and nineteenth century culture, its presence spanned from Swedenborg's alchemic Spiritism (Brock, 1988) to the romantic aesthetics of Coleridge, Blake and de Quincey as well as Füssli, Linnell, and Granville's iconography (Myrone, 2006; Ford, 2005; Shefer, 1998). Dreams are studied in the new disciplines of anthropology – as with Spencer and Tylor - in the first modern psychiatry, and, of course, in Freud's psychoanalysis (Groth and Lusty, 2013).

Therefore, as it can be easily guessed by just glancing at the few references mentioned above that dreamwork has been part of our lives for a long time and its place has assumed very different forms to serve very different ends.

It is used as an instrument in cosmological divination in classical antiquity *as well* as for humoral diagnosis; during the Middle Ages it is considered to be a privileged channel for communication with the divine and as an instrument in voicing political claims; during the Renaissance it represents an artistic and literary *tòpos and* a link between micro and macrocosm; to the thinking of many philosophers it affords space for critical reflection on identity, otherness and reality *and* it serves as a bridge towards the "unknown", either by addressing the transcendent, spiritual nature of the Other or the subtle and elusive nature of our inner energy; in studies by the early anthropologists it is applied as a term of comparison between cultures *and* as a means for traversing the boundaries of the known and the rational. From Freud onwards, it becomes "the royal road to the unconscious".

The different uses of dreamwork in today's helping relationships
History offers us many different possibilities for using dreams, each of which is uniquely characterized by the specificity of its cultural

and anthropological framework, its approach, method, end use and outcome. Similarly, in present times we may still observe an interesting variety of possible uses of dreams and of dreamwork.

The first half of the nineteenth century, following the publication of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900/1953), seemed to sanction a sort of cultural and professional "monopoly" of dreams by psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts. Yet over time and specifically since the latter half of the twentieth century a progressive differentiation in approaches and declinations by psychotherapies as well as helping in relationships also encouraged some recovery of the use of dreamwork outside the corral - by then all too narrow - of the psychoanalytic setting.

In a recent article written with Evan Sherrard (Bowater & Sherrard 2011), Margaret Bowater clearly expresses her concern about the possible undervaluation, among transactional analysts, of this important resource.

Berne himself, with his own original psychoanalytical – Freudian – training, consistently writes enthusiastically at first about the value of dreams in his book *The Mind in Action* (1947, it will be republished, partially revised, in 1957 under the title *A Layman's Guide to Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis*). But after that, maybe also because of his dramatic break with the psychoanalytic matrix, he loses almost all interest in the subject except for a short mention treating of script in chapter 9 of his last book *What do you say after you say hello?* (Berne, 1972).

Transactional analysis expresses the depth of its ethical principles in clearly distinguishing four distinct fields of intervention (i.e. Psychotherapy, Counselling, Organizational, Educational).

This internal distinction reflects the acknowledgement of multiple possibilities of intervention, each expressing its specific effectiveness in responding to the particular needs of clients in relation to the different life passages and issues they are going through at a given moment of their lives.

With Bowater and Sherrard we acknowledge that transactional analysts

working in the four aforementioned fields should treasure the resources provided by the dreams of their clients by supporting their own practice of dreamwork in a strong ethical frame of reference inscribed within a psychodynamic framework free of the more rigid features of the Freudian legacy at its most heavy. For us, today, dreamwork does not represent just "the royal way to the unconscious" (Freud 1900/1953) but also a precious mental activity of problem solving in itself.

Toward an ethical frame of reference for dreamwork in TA
The ethical code proposed by Bowater and Sherrard includes a detailed series of points, of which some are worth quoting in the following paragraph.

The value of dreams
A series of studies recently published by members of the International Association for the Study of Dreams (Bulkeley & Domhoff, 2010; Hartmann, 1998; Siegel, 2003) states that **the majority of dreams people dream are strictly related to emotional preoccupations associated with events and situations in the here-and-now of their lives**.
Thus, there is a good chance that many of the dreams shared by our clients are either implicitly or explicitly related to the object of our contract with them.
Besides representing a potential resource of insight for both clients and professionals, dreams can definitely constitute a way of bringing in the helping relationship aspects as well as issues which are otherwise not so easily faced "spontaneously". In many cases, dreams allow clients to face their issues by bypassing the weight of their parental judgment. By so doing, dreams allow clients to more lightly consider a set of options which diverge from the most adapted part of their self.
Here, clients can simply share their dreams in the session by saying: "Look at what I happened to dream, I don't understand … I am puzzled … let's look together for a possible meaning".
This brings us to the second, fundamental, point of the ethical code.

Collaborative interpretation
Bringing a dream into a helping relationship represents a meaningful act of trust on the client's part.

A dream is, indeed, a "piece" of our inner world that we are questioning or about which we are feeling ambivalent at the moment we decide to share it.

In view of the abovementioned clients' feelings, straightforwardly imposing upon them an interpretation of their dreams can result in negative and counterproductive effects potentially liable, as can easily be guessed, to turn a resourceful instrument into a dangerous trigger for dynamics, defenses, resentment, and passivity which can ultimately compromise the relationship itself.

Dreams involve an important part of the clients' self. Professionals must thus be aware that if they are the experts insofar as technical skills, assessments and methods are concerned, then the ultimate experts concerning knowledge of the clients' background, their lives and their contexts, are the clients themselves.

This **mutuality of respect, which suggests a symmetrical but not a specular relationship, should remain central during the whole dreamwork project**.

The case of group sessions proves, here, to be particularly meaningful (Bion, 1961; Neri, Pines & Friedman, 2002; Tangolo, 2015).

In the group setting, it is important that *all* members of the group show a respectful and welcoming attitude towards the dream brought by the client. The group shows its efficacy in this context, since it reproduces in its protected setting the basic social and communicative dynamics related to the collective use of dreams that we currently recognize as fundamental parts of our most ancient collective background.

The (lack of a) specific training on dreamwork
It is legitimate to ask whether, in order to work with dreams, a professional lacking specific training in dreamwork should or should not

fill this gap with supplemental training.

My answer is that it is necessary for psychologists and therapists to undergo specific training in dreamwork, thereby allowing them to treat these particular narratives brought into sessions by their clients.

Transactional Analysis of dreams: decontamination, deconfusion and, work methodologies

In this paragraph I present the results of a "double mock therapy session" experiment designed with my colleague, Psychotherapist Francesca Vignozzi, in which we have staged two excerpts from mock sessions, showing two examples of dreamwork based upon a narration of the same dream.

These transcripts of the sessions, along with their audio-video recordings, are included here in the sections entitled *Decontamination through dream* and *Deconfusion through dream*.

 The goal of this "double mock session" consists in emphasizing, for educational purposes, possible differences and declinations in the way a dream can be treated in a helping relationship which is aimed at producing changes and implementing wellbeing in the lives of clients. More specifically, as already mentioned, the differences in the dreamwork here explored are respectively related to the *decontamination* and the *deconfusion* process. The following paragraph provides a short definition of both processes.

Decontamination (Berne, 1966) is a cognitive and emotional process through which clients learn how to recognize the "contaminated" and "contaminating" elements in their personality. These are aspects of themselves that had been defined earlier and that were maybe functional (or considered functional) to their former needs in the past, though presently they remain inadequate to their situation and experience in the here-and-now.

In TA terms, through decontamination process clients learn how to recognize facts registered by their Adult as distinct from early beliefs formerly internalized as parental voices or child fears and later

assimilated to the point of being considered to be mere facts themselves. The decontamination process thus has the effect of empowering clients' resources by supporting and activating them in the most congruous and effective way in relation to their situation end experiences in the here-and-now.

Deconfusion follows the decontamination phase and consists in the systematic analysis of conflicts inside the Child (Berne, 1966). Differently from decontamination, deconfusion pertains exclusively to the psychotherapeutic work. It is the strategic phase that, through a redecision on the client's part, leads to the resolution of impasses, considered as conflicts between messages/injunctions and decisions (Goulding, 1978; Mellor, 1980).

On the one hand, the strategic goal of decontamination was to make clients aware that the materials they used to consider as Adult facts actually belong to their Parent and Child, so favoring the emergence of their inner conflicts. On the other hand, the deconfusion phase aims to help clients in re-experiencing and elaborating their archaic, unresolved conflicts between Parent and Child.

The following notes will assist readers in articulating this reflection in regard to the mock sessions whose transcripts are reproduced in the sections: *Decontamination through dreamwork* and *Deconfusion through dreamwork*.

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Whenever a client brings a dream to a work session, either when the work is focused on decontamination or when it is focused on deconfusion, we can single out a series of recurrent elements as far as the professional's attention is concerned. Firstly, all dreams should be welcomed and listened to and this means that whoever listens to them is supposed to empathize with a situation in which the client is essentially bringing them a *gift*.

As already mentioned, dreams are part of an intimate dimension in everyone's life and wanting to share them is tantamount to sharing a

very intimate part of a person's private sphere.

 How then do we receive a dream? We receive it empathically, not judgmentally, keeping in mind that it is a gift that comes from the most intimate sphere of our client's life, allowing us to access their inner world.

Decontamination and dreamwork

As for the *differences* in treatment relating to the two distinct goals of decontamination and deconfusion, first of all it is important to emphasize how professionals working on decontamination always rely on a well determined and specific contract with their clients. It is aimed at individuating the problem, at acquiring awareness about it and/or at consolidating a change that is happening in the here-and-now.

In this context, then, they must work on dreams in accordance with the problem to hand: *what is the contract? What is the issue we are talking about? Is the dream you are bringing to session somehow related to the issue we are talking about? I remind you that you are bringing this dream to me, in a context in which we are working on a specific contract.*

In this case it is important to keep the contractual dimension of our work in mind, inviting our clients to focus on the relation between their narrations and the contract at the very basis of the helping relationship. This connection is likely to remain present, either in a clear and explicit form or in a way which is less evident but which should nevertheless be found out. Sometimes this could become the object of our work.

In the case presented in the mock session on decontamination the connection is evident: the client is working on a counselling contract related to the recent purchase of a house, to a change of job and to the need to reinforce the new choices and to deal with the anxiety related to them; the dream tells about a newly purchased house but the dreamer does not know who bought it.

The professional notices the possible presence of script elements in the dream but she *does not work* on them.

Instead, she focuses, on purpose, on two aspects, namely:

- individuating more precisely the initial sense of disquiet;
- emphasizing the positive emotion related to the client's opening to new experiences (script-free emotions).

All this work is done without exploring archaic and script-related aspects though the dream does invite some focus on them.
The professional could also have considered such relevant aspects related to the client's past (i.e. the fact that the client has been told by an *unknown person* "this is your house", here referring to a house she bought without choosing it).
Working on this first part, the professional could have touched issues that at were still confused inside the client's Child at the time. But this is not part of the contract and this material is consequently left out of the work session.
Instead, the professional stays in the framework of a decontamination work, which means that, though she considers it useful to show the disquiet and the fear of 'new things' and, more specifically, to name the feelings of anxiety and discomfort mentioned at the beginning, she likewise considers it important to emphasize that the fear has not been blocking for the client who, notwithstanding, has faced the changes she intended to pursue and is now enlarging free space for herself.
The professional thus directs her work towards empowerment of the client's free Child and Adult. The client did ask the professional to "support" her in this phase of change, and a contract focusing on reinforcing the client's resources is indeed a valid and acceptable one. If, for instance, the client, after buying her new house, had returned to living in her old house and feeling a strong sense of guilt, the professional could have intervened by suggesting the presence of some conflictual, archaic elements in her behavior which require some in-depth analysis in a different setting.
As such, the aforementioned path, as far as the dream is concerned, can end in one of two ways:

1. the professional "crystallizes" the fact that the client's fear did not block her and that she is now able to live her new life, though some element of "confusion" still remains present at some nuclear level (albeit an element the client does not consider to be blocking and for which s/he does not request treatment); in this case we can see a conflict between P_2 and C_2, which is the typical object of a decontamination work aimed at contrasting driver messages with reinforcement of the client's Adult;

2. if, conversely, the client's behavior is aimed at boycotting her present life because she feels "her leash is short" and she needs to return (for instance, whenever she enters the new house she shows symptoms of panic attacks or the like and, in consequence, she feels forced to return to sleeping in her old house), then the professional must accompany the client towards a new contract which is aimed at some deconfusion work.

Deconfusion and dreamwork

In the decontamination process the contract orients the work toward script analysis. The focus is not limited to supporting the changes happening at the present moment but further includes a work on the emotional parts of this change. In this case the focus of the dream analysis is on connecting old and new contents and processes. Analytically speaking, this work amplifies themes relating to the archaic dimension included in the dream, that is, the way in which the script conflict is represented. The focus is on defining how the script conflict is expressed in the dream and on exploring which strategies are adopted by the client with a view to facing such conflict.

In this perspective, the dream presented in the mock session on deconfusion includes some relevant elements. Here I refer specifically to the first scene showing script strategies related to the "breaking free from home" theme.

Indubitably the second part of the dream is about the psychotherapy work. This is suggested by the image of the client discovering one new

room after another and finding new "space inside the rooms". This is a reference to a dimension of further investigation which actually corresponds to what the client is currently doing: she seeks her freedom, not so much for a "kilometric" definition of distance as for some emotional permission to define herself differently from the "conformist way" suggested at the beginning. Therefore the message in the dream sounds more like : "let's see what's inside of me". In the final scenes we notice a growth in the number of options the client has as well as opportunities arising from her further exploration.

At this point, infinite (or, at least, very numerous) emotional possibilities open up. Among the possible paths, the therapist choses to follow the client in exploring her emotion as it is represented by the sadness of the empty wall.

As for the deconfusion work, the relevant aspect consists in contacting the script emotion so as to favor some emotional redecision. This redecision could not happen unless the client is eventually able to endure the "emptiness" represented by the empty wall which waits to be filled. In this sense, it is important for the therapist to not reproduce a script-related, "leash-like" dimension to her relationship with the client at the risk of too rigidly leading her in the exploration of her dream.

The client chooses, among the different opportunities available to her, to emotionally contact the specific feeling produced by her impact with the empty wall. The therapist seizes this opportunity and stop there. Here we are entering an extremely delicate space in which the therapist should accompany the client with the utmost respect in exploring her old and new emotions.

What is empowered here is some possibility for the client to be able to follow her own paths, to choose her own rooms, to stay with her empty walls, experimenting with hanging her pictures upon her walls and feeling an extension to her possible choices.

In short, therefore, this work simultaneously involves different levels which request some interlocking:

- The first level refers to the contents: both the script contents as well as new ones need to be analyzed;
- The second level refers to the script emotions: both archaic and current;
- The third level involves transference-related emotions, that is, the dimension related to the fact that "you are narrating this story *to me*". It also includes the modeling of a new, reparative Parent and prevents this kind of client from adapting to therapy.

As for specific emotions brought into session by the client, it is possible to work on the fact that the emotion of sadness contacted by the client in front of the empty wall is, indeed, an *archaic* one.

At that moment the client is once more in her Child ego state, which is something to work on, also considering the associated transferal dimension: the client experiences the emotion and she brings it to the therapist; the latter leaves her free to feel what she feels, while remaining present to her.

In other words, the therapist stays with the client as she is experiencing this emotion of loneliness, and this fact alone means that the client is no longer alone; she can share this moment of intimacy without her emotion of sadness being erased: the sadness can be narrated. The therapist can work at this level, exploring the emotion experienced by the client who is facing this reality by asking her how she feels in this new closeness between the two of them and thereby exploring the transference dimension.

This passage contains a breakthrough moment that could be defined as a *deconfusion* moment.

Conclusion. Comparison and synthesis

Upon comparing the two mock sessions, it is interesting to note how in the first, at the end of the narration, the therapist questions the client on her emotions by asking: "You smile as you bring me this dream. What was your mood when you woke up?" And the client answers that she

woke up with a pleasant sensation, still present as she speaks.

That "emotional recognition" at the end of the first session thus seems to emphasize emotions which differ from those referred to in the second session (serenity and smiles for overcoming difficulties accompanying changes in the first session; sadness before the "empty wall" in the second).

One might ask how the work presented in the first session could still "preserve" the client's emotion of sadness. Specifically, how can that be achieved without first accessing archaic emotional content related to the "empty wall" without simultaneously risking its cancellation by emphasizing the "smile" associated with successful intervention in reinforcing the client's resources.

In order to understand this, it is useful to explore the different levels of intervention involved in each of the two contracts.

Actually the client feels fine in her "here-an-now" situation because the change she has promoted has effectively taken place. The sense of wellbeing related to her achievement of this goal is also clearly recognizable in the second case.

Nonetheless the client simultaneously contacted an archaic emotion of loneliness as well as sadness in the latter case.

The wellbeing expressed by the client *in the here-and-now* does not therefore represent an obliteration of some sadness in the here-and-now. "Today" the client feels fine but, were we to keep exploring, we would find an underlying, archaic emotion of sadness whose emergence could be facilitated by the helping relationship.

This example clearly shows how the decontamination work aims to favor empowerment through reinforcing the Adult and free Child ego states without dismissing the complexity of the situation experienced by the client.

On the contrary, this dual reading displays the coexistence of multiple levels, respecting them all.

At the same time, the possible multiple reading of a similar dream shown in the two aforementioned examples further illustrates effectively

the theoretical and methodological differences which
distinguish most of the current approaches to dreamwork from the first
"orthodox" psychoanalytic interpretation originally theorized by Freud.
Differently from Freud's view, new perspectives on dreamwork do
not seek for the one and only, right, true, and objective interpretation
of a dream. As in the above examples, we have (at least) two ways of
using dreams here, two possible readings and two different emotional
outcomes, so implying differences in the relationship and demonstrating
various ways of saying goodbye at the end of the session, with both
remaining "true" all the while.
The two specific kinds of intervention can effectively be made explicit
by considering the contract and treatment plan. In this case the starting
question is pluriform:

1. what is the client asking?
2. what does the client need?
3. what is the role of the professional in this helping relationship?

There are indeed moments in life in which one type of treatment
represents a more adequate option than another.
In this respect we might conclude by saying that an ethically correct
approach to the helping relationship must induce professionals to give
priority to what, at a certain moment, is most needed by the client in
order to face life. Does the client need training in emotional literacy?
Does he or she need coaching support in order to learn how to take
practical decisions? Does he or she need counselling to clarify her
problems? Does he or she need psychotherapy to remove his or her
archaic hurdles?

Referring and sending clients
In this perspective it is worth devoting some lines here to the delicate
ethical theme of referring/sending clients. In which circumstances
it is right to send clients for therapy, counselling, training or other

experiences?

We need to ask how much the advisor (medical doctor, teacher, family friend etc.), who suggests a specific path is actually conscious of what he or she is doing. How competent is he or she ?

There is ample evidence of "damage" produced by advisors who improperly suggest to clients that they undergo psychotherapy, psychology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry as well as counselling and coaching paths. We believe that the psychologist's role is specifically defined by his or her capacity to listen to the help request, to provide a diagnosis and to orient clients toward the type of help which best responds to their problems. In this sense, within the Italian legal framework psychologists represent the best technical referees in choosing the adequate helping relationship.

The clients' dreams are thus analyzed in relation to the period of life through which they are passing. The specific needs they present can provide psychologists with useful diagnostic elements to orient them toward the kind of help they need in the here-and-now, such as therapy, counselling or training activities.

The presence, from step one, of a competent advisor who can provide a highly individualized response to the help request can be of the utmost importance in the face of persistence of a notable percentage of iatrogenic risk which, as can be easily guessed, grows even higher whenever minors or clients presenting severe pathologies are involved. In this sense, TA provides a highly ethical approach, both in insisting on reinforcing each and every client's Adult, and in diversifying the fields of intervention.

As we have already mentioned, the formal distinction of the four fields – i.e. educational, psychotherapy, counselling and organizational – represents in this sense a practical application of these ethical principles of acceptance and respect.

 In sum, we can say that, in an ethical framework of meta-disciplinary correctness, priority should always be given to client safety. And in most cases the first priority is represented by the possibility for clients

to be able to face life again, provided by all the resources and protection needed to begin anew – also, and above all, in the first person – the (self)healing and development processes which is required to achieve and improve one's wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

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