

Dreams and Vightmares

Theory, Research & Practice

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Theories and Models of Dreamwork

Robyn and I began our work on dreams with a lot of information about the historical and current theories of dreams but only one basic assumption, namely, that dreams are the creation of the dreamer. As with any creative product, dreams both reveal aspects of their creator's personality and may be used by their creator to gain insight and foster self-development. We were not committed to any particular theory of dream interpretation but were prepared to foster any approaches or techniques that seemed to fit both the dreamer and the dream, and which could encourage the dreamer ultimately to find her or his own way of integrating dream life and waking life. From the beginning our approach to dreamwork developed thanks to the creative sharing and enthusiasm of many people who attended our workshops, the ideas they sparked off and the opportunities they gave us to link the material they brought with existing information and theory.

Initially the approach adopted was mainly a Gestalt one. This approach will be explained in detail later but it essentially emphasizes 'here and now' methods of bringing dreams to life. Some dreams fitted more readily into this model than others and some people did not find this way of working productive. Gestalt methods are primarily aimed at healing internal splits in the personality, and some of the dream material presented was not about internalized aspects of personality but related to everyday life and the real external world of the dreamer. Faraday's ideas of working with dreams at different levels enriched and amplified the understanding of this material. Her work, outlined in *Dream Power* (1972), emphasized the metaphorical nature of dream symbols. As we developed our interest in the symbolic value of dreams we began to look more closely at the analytic approaches of Freud and Jung. The work of Lillie Weiss and her method of symbolic interpretation, described in *Dream Analysis in Psychotherapy* (1986), was also influential.

Many people described dreams which were long and detailed; the dreams might have many sequences, a long and complicated storyline, or much



complex and rich detail. Gestalt methods or approaches that encouraged a purely symbolic interpretation seemed inappropriate here since much material, such as the dream sequences, could be lost. Methods were needed that would bring out the richness of the textual details and so we utilized techniques, which today would be badged as 'cognitive', expounded by Strephon Kaplan Williams in The Dreamwork Manual (1984). These methods allowed the dreamer to stand outside the dream and focus on the story, themes, actions, symbols and other relevant aspects, using a wide range of questions aimed at relating the dream contents to the dreamer's life situation.

Another important aspect of the early work in the dream workshops was the sharing of dreams within the group. Often it was the emotional impact of sharing the dream with a supportive group, rather than any specific analysis of the dream state or an interpretation of dream symbols, which was of most value to the dreamer. Hence we looked for effective ways to share dreams in groups. Additionally, we used group imagination to continue the dream story or to elaborate or act out the dream where the dreamer has felt this kind of group input could be helpful.

In the last 20 years the cognitive model has been expanded and developed and as it has done so it has also matured. Early cognitive therapists would probably have seen dreams as the hallmark of psychoanalysis and as such would have eschewed them. Although clients might bring their dreams to cognitive therapy, until the twenty-first century, there was no systematic technique for working with dreams in cognitive therapy. Nevertheless, dreams can be defined as 'the images and thoughts that are experienced during sleep' (Blagrove, 2009: 1), and so it was only a matter of time before creative cognitive therapists were devising, rebadging and adapting dream methods for their purposes. Many of the contemporary methods for working with nightmares, particularly those working with imagery, have been developed within the cognitive model (Hackmann, Bennett-Levy & Holmes, 2011).

The experience of working essentially from an integrationist perspective inevitably leads to looking for the similarities and contrasts between different theories. In following the dream theories over the last 25 years, it is interesting to see how the various models and theories have developed from each other. Much contemporary writing has been based on the work and concepts of Carl Jung, even though much of the groundwork for Jung's theories was laid by Freud. At this stage it is helpful to discuss some of the main theories and models that have been influential in shaping contemporary dreamwork.

Freud's theory of dreams

Freud saw dreams as the 'royal road to the unconscious', where the memories, desires or impulses that were unacceptable to the conscious waking mind were repressed or buried. He understood dreams as largely the









product of this unconscious mind and believed that one function of the dream is to preserve sleep by resolving these buried impulses or desires that would otherwise disturb sleep. By examining his own dreams, as well as those of his patients, Freud came to consider that repressed wishes in the unconscious mind found substitute gratification during sleep in the form of dreams. Thus he believed that the dream is a kind of neurotic symptom in its own right. Often, then, the dream reflects the fulfilment of an unsatisfied wish. Freud gave the example of a small boy who dreams of eating a basket of cherries which he was not allowed to eat the day before. In this case the simple, direct wish fulfilment is obvious from the story or 'manifest content' of the dream. However, Freud believed that as people grow older many of the wishes and desires that are associated with earlier stages of development are unable to be fulfilled in reality and so become repressed and generally inaccessible to our conscious mind. He believed that these desires could find fulfilment in the form of a dream but also thought that they would cause us to awaken in intense anxiety, and so he believed that they were disguised. Therefore the dream imagery might symbolize a hidden, or disguised, meaning, which Freud called the 'latent content' of the dream. For example, in an older person the boy eating a basket of cherries might have represented a latent unfulfilled oedipal wish of a boy wishing to possess his mother sexually. The disguise function of dreams not only allows the dreamer to discharge forbidden wishes, but also allows the dreamer to sleep undisturbed by concealing the nature of the wish. Freud saw the dream as functioning both as a guardian of sleep and as a safety valve for unacceptable wishes.

The dreamwork is that process by which the latent content of the dream (its original disguised text) is translated from its manifest content (the text as reported by the dreamer). Freud's method of dream interpretation for arriving at the latent dream thought involved free association, in which the analyst would break the dream down into its different elements and ask the patient to allow his or her mind to roam freely and to say what associations each item has, what recent events it might be connected with and what meaning is suggested. This process might lead a long way from the manifest content of the dream. Freud also based his process of dream interpretation on the belief that certain elements in dreams have a common symbolism for many people. For example, he believed that a house usually represents the human body, kings and queens represent parents, water usually represents birth or life force, and travelling may symbolize dying. Many of Freud's ideas were based on his theory of infantile sexuality, and probably the most well-known, as well as the most misrepresented, of Freud's ideas is that he believed that many symbols had a sexual nature. For example, umbrellas, poles, trees, guns and other similar implements in dreams are thought to represent the penis, while caves, rooms, cupboards and other containers are thought to stand for the vagina and womb.







Faraday (1972) commented that modern research indicated the need to revise Freud's notion of the dual function of dreaming as the guardian of sleep and as a safety valve for repressed wishes. For one thing, there seems little evidence to support the view that all dreams are repressed infantile wishes. In fact, research reports indicate that the majority of our dreams are rather dull and bland. Reporters have noted that many dreams appear to be memories of thoughts and events of the previous day, sometimes called 'day residue', rather than unconscious impulses. Of course it could be argued that this is just a disguise for repressed infantile wishes, but this does not seem a particularly useful viewpoint when a more straightforward interpretation may be more helpful to the dreamer. It is also evident from the literature, as well as from our own dreams and those of our clients, that we often sleep happily through some quite shocking dreams with explicitly sexual or aggressive content which is not particularly disguised. This is not to argue that dreams do not sometimes express wishes either directly or obliquely. However, the fact that we all dream regularly and naturally every night, as well as the fact that we make up REM sleep when we are deprived of it, indicates that rather than dreams being the protector of sleep, one of the functions of sleep may be to allow dreaming.

There has also been controversy over the value of Freud's work for women. As early as 1981, Ernst and Goodison commented that the male bias of traditional Freudian thinking may lead to women's dreams being misinterpreted in a distorted way, especially since it is evident that the analyst's own views and prejudices inevitably will affect the interpretation made. Ernst and Goodison also questioned whether patients, of either gender, get the chance to fully 'feel' the emotional content of the dream and how much use they can make of the interpretation given to them. They believed that the meaning of the dream cannot be reduced to a disguised thought, capable of being spelled out in words. As Jung and later theorists believed, a dream can speak to us in a different language, revealing conflicts, feelings or buried parts of our personalities.

Many authors have also criticized Freud's view of the sexual nature of symbols. Few dreamworkers now believe that certain symbols regularly stand for certain elements and most object to the reduction of all symbols to a single idea. Especially as it has been popularized, this approach often degenerates into interpreting dreams mechanically from an index of symbols and fails to allow for individual or cultural change. Symbols are determined in part by the society and situation we live in, but can vary from one individual to another and within each of us over time, changing as we change.

Although there are some shortcomings in Freud's original theory and method of dream interpretation, it should be remembered that Freud himself was analysing dreams of patients coming to him for treatment and that most dream interpretation should be seen within the context of an ongoing analysis. Also Freud was working without the benefit of modern dream









research. All the dream writers agree that Freud's theory of dreams was a crucial landmark and laid the groundwork on which most subsequent theories are based. Jung's theory, described next, is a development and extension of Freud's theory.

Jung's theory of dreams

A crucial difference between Jung and Freud, and one which accounts for much of the popularity of Jung's views, is his belief that the dream is a normal, creative expression of the unconscious, rather than Freud's perception of the dream as a disturbed mental activity. Jung thought that dreams frequently reflected the workings of an inner drive towards health and maturity and believed this was a drive with which the conscious mind could cooperate. He also emphasized that symbols cannot be reduced to set formulas, but encouraged exploring the quality and texture of a symbol rather than the meaning behind it. Thus, rather than seeing a symbol as a disguise for something else, Jung believed symbols should be recognized as having power in their own right and therefore laid more emphasis on the manifest content of dreams to see what they revealed rather than what they were hiding. Jung believed that pictures and symbols are the natural language of the unconscious and that a dream symbol expresses a psychic fact which can only partially be described in verbal and rational terms. So he laid less emphasis on the interpretation of a dream, and felt that the experiencing of the telling of a dream was an important therapeutic process in itself. Jung looked to religious myths and legends in his search for the most significant symbols of the human mind; he believed that universal themes revealed the existence in each individual of a layer of the mind common to the whole universe. He called this 'the collective unconscious'. Archetypes of the collective unconscious are expressions of the fundamental and perennial interests of humankind which are so pervasive as to appear in the symbolism and languages of many people. Examples of archetypal symbols will be given in the next chapter.

Because Jung did not think that all dreams were infantile sexual wishfulfilment needs, he emphasized the present situation in the life of the dreamer. He thought that dreams are a self-representation of the unconscious mind of the dreamer and that each element or symbol portrays a mood, emotion or part of the dreamer's personality. He believed that the 'I' in the dream represents the conscious ego of the dreamer. For Jung the function of the dream was to restore our psychological equilibrium. Ernst and Goodison (1981: 6) quote the example of a patient with a high opinion of himself who dreamed he was a tramp lying in a ditch. According to Jung this dream was attempting to balance the one-sided picture the man usually presented to the world. He called this the 'compensatory role' of dreams. Jung disagreed with Freud's method of free association, which he felt could







lead away from the story of the dream. He did not have one clear method of dream interpretation but felt that the dream was interpreted when it made sense to the dreamer. He often worked with a series of dreams rather than a single dream and used a variety of meditative, artistic and imaginative methods which he felt would amplify the story and meaning of the dream.

Although Jung's ideas form the clearest basis for many contemporary methods, they do have some limitations. Whereas Freud probably overestimated the role played by repressed sexuality in dreams, Jung probably underestimated the sexual element. There is little reference in his work to the body and physical sensations. Also, it is possible that the classical and literary references in Jung's writings may seem to imply that those of us without the benefit of a classical or literary education may not be able to interpret our own dreams. Indeed, some people have been put off by his somewhat esoteric style of writing. Nevertheless, Jung's theories do bring dream interpretation within the range of any of us: we do not have to be analysts to understand our own dreams. Most of all, Jung's theories of dreams show a respect for the unconscious. Rather than a repository of shameful events and thoughts, Jung represents dreams as an abundantly creative treasure trove with the potential to strengthen the personality. For those readers wishing to pursue Jung's theories in greater depth, helpful books are Jung's Man and His Symbols (1978) and Dreams (2002).

Perls's Gestalt theory of dreams

Fritz Perls, who founded the Gestalt school of therapy and who died in 1970, developed and extended Jung's theory of dreams. Although he was originally trained as a Freudian, Perls rejected the idea of the unconscious and focused on the 'here and now' present verbal and non-verbal behaviour of the dreamer. Whereas Freud described the dream as the 'royal road to the unconscious', Perls called dreams the 'royal road to integration' because he believed that by working with dreams we can reclaim the lost parts of our personality and become more integrated or whole. Perls viewed the dream as an existential message, as opposed to Freud's view of the dream as wishful thinking. He saw the main function of dreams as being to resolve unfinished situations and to integrate fragments of our personalities. He believed that each character or object in a dream is a part of us, a fragment of our personality that we have projected out of ourselves. He believed that people needed to re-own each of these fragmented parts of the personality in order to become a whole.

The Gestalt method is to bring a dream to life by having the dreamer tell the dream in the first person, present tense as if it were happening now and then to identify with, and speak as, each element in the dream. The different characters or parts of the dream may then dialogue with each other. The technique usually involves each dream item occupying a different chair,





and the dreamer moving between chairs as she or he conducts the dialogue, in an attempt to identify and ultimately integrate the conflicting parts of the personality. Perls introduced the concepts of 'topdog' and 'underdog'; the topdog is the parental, critical and self-righteous part of the personality that makes unrealistic demands of the underdog, which is the whining, childlike, manipulative part of the personality. Often the two parts are locked into a struggle and a dream dialogue turns into a topdog/underdog conflict. Perls felt that by acting out this conflict people may be able to integrate the two aspects of themselves. Perls's theory is similar to Jung's theory in so far as the characters and items in a dream are viewed as repressed parts of the dreamer's personality. Using Perls's method, the dreamer acts out these repressed parts in order to re-own aspects of the personality which have been alienated, and thus to come to a fuller and stronger sense of the self as a whole personality. So Gestalt therapy is a vivid method for bringing disconnected or discredited parts of ourselves into awareness. Perls believed that each time we identify with some part of a dream, turning 'it' into 'I', vital energy is reclaimed.

While Gestalt methodology can be immensely productive, even with snippets or fragments of dream material, it has some limitations. For instance, it can take the dreamer a long way from the narrative of the dream, and it is unlikely that even the most energetic or enthusiastic person can act out and dialogue with each element in a long and complex dream. Despite these limitations, the method can be very helpful for working with nightmares or recurring dreams, since they are likely to reflect long-standing conflicts or splits within the personality, triggered off by some present life situation of the dreamer. The techniques can be used individually, although they are often very powerful in a group setting. Gestalt methodology can be extremely powerful and when a dreamer works in the first person and the present tense he or she can be encouraged to connect quickly and directly to their feelings.

Faraday's theory of dreams

Ann Faraday, whose first book Dream Power was published in 1972, utilized many Jungian and Gestalt concepts. She emphasized that dreams can reflect the present life situation of the dreamer and also largely rejected the wishfulfilment and disguise elements of Freudian theory. Her main contribution from our point of view was her belief that a dream could be interpreted at different levels, and this can be a helpful approach for the therapist to adopt. Faraday identified three levels ('looking outward', 'through the looking glass' and 'looking inward') and believed that a comprehensive approach to dream interpretation could be achieved by examining a dream from any one of the three standpoints to be described and selecting the method of interpretation most suitable. Like Perls, she also felt that a dream was interpreted when it felt satisfactory to the dreamer.







Faraday called her first level 'looking outward' and believed that, at this level, dreams may provide objective truth about the outside world. She thought that the sensible procedure was, initially, to look at any dream to see if it could be throwing up real information about external events which have not been assimilated by the conscious mind in waking life. Such dreams are usually triggered by subliminal perceptions picked up during the day but not consciously registered by the waking mind. Faraday stated that dreams that give the most useful message at this level are usually warnings and reminders, and her book contains many examples. The following is an example from one of our dreams:

Robyn, returning from a driving holiday abroad, found it necessary to switch on the rear demister; she thought to herself that she must not forget to switch it off. Some time later she pulled into a motorway service station for a short sleep and dreamed that she was driving along when she was passed by a car full of people all gesticulating and pointing at her rear window. She awoke and realized that she had left her rear demister on. For her this was the essential message of the dream.

Faraday called her second level 'through the looking glass'. This is a reference to Alice Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll, and means that the dream can act as a distorting mirror which has twisted external reality according to the dreamer's inner attitudes and conflicts, and can give a picture of the dreamer's own unique reality. Thus, through the looking glass of our dreams we receive messages about our subjective reactions to the people and situations in the external world. Faraday comments that all dreams are, in a way, pictures of subjective reality, but some have more objective validity than others and it is up to the dreamer to decide where the energy is.

Nazir had a dream in which he was having a blazing row with his father. On the surface this appeared uncharacteristic of the relationship in waking life, which generally was controlled and restrained. On reflection, Nazir began to realize that the dream was revealing some of the things that he would actually like to say to his father, but which he refrained from saying in waking life for many reasons.

The third level of dream interpretation, according to Faraday, is the level at which dreams can give insight into the dreamer's deepest self. She called this level 'looking inward' and believed that such dreams concern conflicts which are not primarily with characters in the external world but rather with internal conflicts or split-off portions of the self. For working at this level Faraday suggests using Gestalt techniques.

Maggie reported a dream in which the Queen was visiting her house for tea. Despite all Maggie's efforts to tidy up, piles of little pieces of paper kept appearing in places where she had just tidied. Maggie set up an imaginary dialogue between herself and the Queen. During the dialogue it became apparent that the Queen









represented the authoritarian parts of Maggie's own mother which she had introjected, or taken into herself, in her desire to be neat and tidy. When Maggie dialogued with the untidy piles of paper, she realized that these represented the creative parts of herself which were not willing to be tidied away. Maggie later revealed that, although she had been good at writing, she had been discouraged from pursuing it as a career.

It is, of course, possible to analyze the same dream at different levels, and while there are no absolute guidelines that will determine at which level it is appropriate to work, there are some hints which will be explored later.

Cognitive theories of dreams

Cognitive therapy, first expounded by Aaron T. Beck in the 1960s, attempts to help the client by identifying and changing dysfunctional thinking, behaviour and feelings. (Beck, Rush, Shaw and Emery, 1979). Therapy is based on collaboration between therapist and client and on empirically testing beliefs. This may be done by testing the client's, often unquestioned, assumptions and by identifying those that are distorted, unrealistic and unhelpful. Once these, for the most part automatic, thoughts have been challenged then the feelings around these thoughts are more easily changed. Beck's early work centred on depression, and he believed that depressed people acquire a negative schema of the world in childhood and adolescence. A schema can be described as a structured cluster of pre-conceived ideas. A depressed person might acquire a negative schema through a number of difficult early events such as the loss of a parent, criticism by parents or teachers, bullying, rejection and other negative events. When a person with such schemas meets a situation that, in some way, resembles the original situation, the negative schemas of the person are activated. Beck's negative triad posits that depressed people have negative experiences about themselves, their experiences in the world, and the future. Beck also described what he termed 'cognitive distortions' or errors in thinking which can all contribute to depression. Examples of these are all-or-nothing thinking, over-generalization, and selective perception.

Beck was also theorizing about dreams as early as the 1960s (Beck & Ward, 1961) and formulated a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) method in 1971 (Beck, 1971). He initially regarded dreams in the clinical context as a kind of snapshot or 'biopsy' of a client's dysfunctional schemata that were analogous to automatic thoughts. He also suggested that focusing on the more obvious or 'manifest' content of dreams was more satisfactory than trying to infer hidden meanings. He understood a client's dreams as 'idiosyncratic and dramatic expressions of the patient's view of self, the world, and the future (what Beck termed the "cognitive triad")'







(Freeman & White, 2004: 74). Since dream material reflected the cognitive triad, it followed that the dream would also demonstrate the client's cognitive distortions. Doweiko (1982) used rational emotive therapy (RET) to encourage the client to directly challenge depressive cognitions reflected in the dream. Following the cognitive tradition, dreams can be thought of as core cognitive schemas (J. S. Beck, 1995) or early maladaptive schemas (Young, 1999).

Contemporary cognitive writers have been debating a distinction between objectivist and constructivist views of cognitive therapy (e.g. Neimeyer & Stewart, 2000). Constructivist philosophy emphasizes both personal and social processes of meaning. In particular the individual is seen as an active participant in construing reality rather than on reflecting or representing reality. This rather vague definition of constructivism has meant that it might be seen as a meta-theory that has influenced a number of psychotherapies including existential-humanistic therapies, personal construct psychotherapy (PCP), and narrative therapy as well as CBT.

Recent cognitive writers on dreams (Rosner et al., 2004) suggest that cognitive dream methodology can be divided into basic epistemologies: objectivist and constructivist. Adherents of the 'objectivist' tradition believe that the rational and logical manipulations of classical cognitive therapy should be used to challenge those assumptions and beliefs associated with a client's dream. For example, Doweiko (2004) and Freeman and White (2004) argue that dreams are amenable to the same cognitive restructuring and reality testing procedures that can be applied to a client's waking automatic thoughts and belief. Adherents of what Rosner et al. (2004) describe as 'constructivist' approaches encourage clients to enter into the metaphorical, subjective and affective experiences in their dreams, consistent with the constructionist perspective. For example, Barrett (2004) argues that dreams function as powerful, condensed metaphors, and that modern, psychodynamic dreamwork can act as a useful shortcut for getting at a client's idiosyncratic cognitive patterns and meanings. Another example of a constructivist approach, included by Rosner et al. in their book (2004), is Hill's (1996, 2004) cognitive-experiential method of dream interpretation. This model is an integrative model that has evolved from a number of different theoretical orientations. It involves three stages: exploration, insight and action.

From the above it can be seen that there is no one cognitive method but rather a broad collection of methods used by cognitive therapists, 'particularly therapists working at the intersection of cognitive therapy and other therapeutic traditions' (Rosner et al., 2004: 3). Dowd writes that 'cognitive therapy in the early 21st century is a great deal more than talk. It involves nonverbal cognitions (imagery) as well as embodiment techniques' (2004: xi). It is also clear that cognitive theorists have an increasingly integrationist perspective which fits well with the integrative approach of this book. Coincidentally, the first edition of this book







also divided dream methodologies into two broad categories, 'objective' and 'subjective' approaches, very similar to those described above. Therefore it makes conceptual sense to integrate cognitive methods into the current structure of the book and examples of some of the cognitive methods mentioned above will be described in detail, with examples, in the chapters that follow.

An integrationist model of dreamwork

The background to the integrative model and the theories most influential in shaping it have been described, and it will be clear that it is based on a number of sources. It is also highly congruent with the principles underlying cognitive approaches but is not bound by any one tradition and is thus truly integrative. The principles are:

- 1 A dream is the personal creation of the dreamer and, as such, belongs to the dreamer and is available for them to use in any way they choose.
- The dreamer is free to tell their dream story in a way that makes sense to them. Therefore it is unhelpful for a therapist to rigidly impose an approach or technique and it is suggested that together therapist and client select an appropriate method from a range of approaches.
- The dream is satisfactorily 'interpreted' when it makes sense to the dreamer.
- 4 A dream does not have to be interpreted by 'professionals' and the dreamer can use most of the methods that we will describe by themselves. It is also true that a co-worker or therapist skilled and experienced in dreamwork methods may provide more effective help from the dreamer's point of view.
- 5 Dreams may represent early material that develops in childhood and that exists at the periphery of consciousness not directly or immediately accessible to the dreamer.
- Dreams reflect the concerns, worries and desires of our conscious, waking lives.
- Dreams are messages from a part of our conscious selves that speak verbally, visually and metaphorically.
- 8 Dreams can offer direct access to cognitive and affective processes the clients' cognitive and affective schemata; they could be termed 'dream thoughts' or 'dream feelings'. Cognitive, analytic or experiential approaches can be used.
- Dreams are not regarded as neurotic symptoms indicating pathology. Therefore the approach adopted is a psychological humanistic model indicating that dreams can be used therapeutically or creatively in a striving towards wholeness.
- 10 As well as using methods accessible and acceptable to the dreamer, it is important to use methods appropriate to the nature of the dream itself.
- 11 Dreams can be interpreted at any level. The level of interpretation is usually indicated by the nature of the dream material and/or the wishes and feelings of the dreamer. The skills of the therapist are also relevant here.
- 12 It is often therapeutically helpful, though not essential, for the dream to be 'actualized' in waking life. That means that the dreamer formulates an action or a decision from the dream that can be carried into waking life.







Summary

The background to the integrationist approach adopted by Robyn Sewell and myself and the theories shaping it have been described. This is followed by an explanation of the two classic theories of Freud and Jung, as well as their strengths and limitations. Two theories, particularly helpful for exploring dreams, and developing out of Freud and Jung's ideas, namely those of Fritz Perls and Ann Faraday, are described. This is then followed by an outline of the main ideas of the cognitive model of dreams and a brief outline of its broad collection of methods. Finally, the principles of an integrationist model of dreamwork, which underpin the dreamwork in this book, have been outlined.





