



Does Jean Piaget Have a Theory about Dreams and Symbolic Representation?

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Abstract

"I am persuaded that there will come a day when a psychology of cognitive functions and psychoanalysis will be fused in a general theory which by correcting each will improve one another." — Jean Piaget

Appreciating and critiquing Sigmund Freud's contributions and psychoanalysis, Jean Piaget explored children's dreams from the perspective of developmental cognitive psychology. Jean Piaget's concern is to arrive at a meaningful theory of cognitive development, and he proposed a comprehensive theory about the nature and development of human intelligence. For him, dreams are part of our cognitive processes. And they are a reflection of our thoughts and experiences. Piaget's fundamental aim is to comprehend what meaning children get from their dreams and how they understand the genesis, character, and nature of dreams. Piaget examined childhood dreams and explained how they develop in children's growing competence in symbolic reasoning. One of the central theses of Jean Piaget is that children arrive at diverse conceptualizations and meaning constructions concerning dreams on their own. He strongly believed that to understand children's dreams, it is necessary to explore their conceptions of dreams in relation to their other characteristics, like egocentrism, animism, moral heteronomy, dreams as external, a lack of classification and conservation abilities, etc. Jean Piaget explains dreams by referring to the child's mental processes and associating thinking with their dreams. This paper attempts to reconstruct Piaget's theory of dreaming and symbolism.

Keywords: Symbolism, Cognitive Development, Dreams, Egocentrism, Animism, Moral Heteronomy

Introduction

When do youngsters begin to dream? How do they depict their fantasy experiences? Is dreaming a symbolic non-rational activity? What function does the unconscious have in the dreaming of children? How accurate are Sigmund Freud's views on psychosexual development? These are some of the essential issues that Jean Piaget explored in the early part of his life. This paper grapples with some of the aforementioned questions while constructing Jean Piaget's theory of dreaming and symbolic

representation. Dreams are an invaluable, rich source for understanding the conscious and unconscious human mind. Sigmund Freud says, "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind." They reveal waking life issues and enable us to resolve mental conflicts and solve behavioral problems (Van de Castle, 1994).

According to Sudhir Kakar (2011), there are four views on the question, "Do dreams really mean something?" He says, "First, dreams mean nothing; they are random noise in the neurological system. Second, dreams predict the future. Third, dreams aid the creative process, and fourth, dreams are indicators of major personal concerns". According to him, empirical dream researchers and psychotherapists rejected the first viewpoint. According to the dominant viewpoint, Dreams address personal concerns, whether present or past. Dreams are messages from the unconscious to the conscious mind, accounting for only 5% of our mental life. They address our unspoken desires and fears for a variety of reasons. They are messages from night to day, highlighting what we may have overlooked in our conscious, waking lives, but that requires our attention. The dream then reveals one's entire life experience. A dream's primary function is to expand consciousness and cause the brain to grow.

Dream research, dream psychology, and neuropsychology of dreams have emerged as the most respectable interdisciplinary areas of study in the recent past. However, little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of dream interpretation, especially in India. Underlying the importance of dream research, Sudhir Kakar (2011) says, "Dreams still play an important though not as dominant a role in psychoanalysis as they did once. I believe that their once pre-eminent position needs to be restored. Dreams, of course, must be first interpreted since, like poems, they use a symbolic, metaphorical language. A dream that hasn't been interpreted is like a letter that has not been opened." Recognizing the value of these words and the importance of dreams in our day-to-day lives, the author of this paper has designed a comprehensive study with the intent of exploring the dream content, dream beliefs, and dream experiences of children and adults. This paper is a part of the preparatory work for this research work.

Jean Piaget was profoundly inspired by Sigmund Freud's teachings and psychoanalysis in his early life. During his time in Zurich, he would go to Carl Jung's lectures and read Bleuler's writings. Piaget was inspired by Édouard Claparède, who was a hardcore Swiss psychologist and famous for claiming that thinking is a biological activity and for developing the law of momentary interest. Claparede's research findings in child psychology, concept formation, and sleep persuaded Piaget to focus on understanding children's cognitive developmental psychology. In 1907, Claparede was an active member of the Freud Group in Zurich. Jean Piaget's close interaction with Claparede enabled him to demonstrate the presence of multiple processes of motivated thinking that Freud had deduced from the analysis of dreams, parapraxes, and neurosis in

grownups.

The other significant experience that made Piaget study children's dreams was his close interaction with Sabina Spielrein, the first psychiatric patient to become a professional psychoanalyst in Europe. She was a Russian physician and then became a patient and a student of Carl Jung.

Carl Jung treated Sabina at Psychiatric University Hospital Zurich, Switzerland. Her dissertation entitled, "On Psychological Context of a Case of Schizophrenia (Dementia Praecox)" was the first dissertation written upon a psychoanalytic theme. She was directed to Geneva by the *Societe Internationale de Psychanalyse* (Society International for Psychoanalysis) to disseminate the doctrines of Freudian Psychoanalysis. Piaget became a member of this society and showed keen interest in learning psychoanalysis from various members of the society. For about eight months, Piaget took practical sessions in psychoanalysis from Sabina Spielrein. Over a period of time Piaget became frustrated with her sessions and dissatisfied with the entire theoretical apparatus of the psychoanalysis. Piaget became very critical about the epistemological foundations of Freudian psychoanalysis and started working on children's cognition and intelligence. But his attachment and affiliation with Freud's psychoanalysis were very clearly visible in his early writings. Wolfe Mays (1984) says,

"As Piaget admits, there are definite Freudian influences at work in his early studies, and these further show themselves in the Sorbonne lectures of 1954 and in his later books *La prise de conscience* and *Reussir et comprendre*. In these two works he accepts the basic mechanisms of the unconscious and a doctrine of repression, and postulates a cognitive as well as an affective unconscious. These experimental studies are largely concerned with the behavior of subjects when they are asked to solve simple problems of a practical kind, their aim being to show how our thought functions on an unconscious level when we perform such tasks"

According to Piaget, psychoanalytic research on the emotional unconscious addresses similar issues to those brought up by such unconscious cognitive functioning. Nonetheless, Piaget's early psychoanalytic concerns are evident in his psychology of cognitive functions, especially in his theories on the cognitive unconscious. It is unclear if the comprehensive theory he proposes would do anything beyond validating the similarities he asserts between the cognitive and affective unconscious. According to Piaget, Sigmund Freud's findings about our affective lives are unquestionable. But what is questionable is Freud's psychoanalytic theory and his general psychology. In this connection, Wolfe Mays (1984) says,

“This disagreement concerns such questions as: (1) the precise relation between the conscious and the unconscious - there is for Piaget no sharp boundary between them; (2) Freud's account of memory, which assumes that our memories remain stored unchanged through time in the unconscious; and (3) Freud's passive conception of consciousness as simply receiving the products of the unconscious and impressions from outer reality”

Piaget firmly believed that there is a need for the genetic transposition of Freudian doctrines and making the psychoanalytic investigations free from the conventional rigid scientific methodologies and techniques. Dreams are difficult to understand. They appear and disappear. They are very mysterious and complex and abstract. Since Sigmund Freud, researchers worldwide are making their humble attempt to uncover the conscious and unconscious realities of dreams and dreaming. Dreams are individualistic and also social.

Before arriving at the Piagetian theory of dreaming and symbolic representation, a brief note on Sigmund Freud's theory of unconsciousness is presented herewith. According to Freud's romantic approach, psychical processes like instinctive desires, sex drives and cognitive processes like remembering and thinking are unconscious. They are not comprehensible through conscious perception. Freud believed that experience of the external world and the internal feelings are the direct conscious perceptions, since they are the product of memory and thought. Therefore, for Freud the unconscious consists of the following two parts:

1. The unrepresed unconscious: This consists our original instincts, drives, and desires. The majority of mental activity begins from them, under the strain of external circumstances.
2. The dynamic unconscious (repressed): The instinctive desires and unacceptable ideas and feelings that are repressed are part of this repressed unconscious. The censor is one of the most significant of our mental defense mechanisms, which can distort such repressed content before it reaches consciousness.

For Freud the censor acts like a police force that operates to separate consciousness from unconscious mind. Freud in one of his introductory lectures on psychoanalysis says, "the self-observing agency as the ego-censor [Zensor], the conscience; it is this that exercises the dream-censorship [Zensur] during the night, from which the repressions of inadmissible wishful impulses proceed". Regression to ancient symbolic modes of expression that are foreign to the conscious mind is another kind of dream censorship. But if all of these censorship attempts failed, nightmares and

sleeplessness might ensue. Therefore, the censor is theorized as an assessor that assesses which wants, thoughts, and ideas should enter awareness and must be kept unconscious because they violate one's conscience or society's values, contradict other wishes or perceptions, or have an unpleasant or overpowering influence.

Oedipus complex is one of the examples of this dynamic repressed unconscious. The action of these defense mechanisms is especially visible in the dream, which assumes a symbolic disguise to conceal the true process from the dreamer. According to Freud, unconscious symbolic cognition, of which dream symbolism is the most prominent example, is structurally and functionally incompatible with logical thought. Therefore, it needs to be differentiated from conscious cues, like words in our language, whose meanings are clear to us and transferable to other people. Wolfe Mays (1984) says,

“Unconscious symbolic thought on the other hand, mainly occurs in dreams and daydreams and obeys the pleasure principle. It is through such symbolic disguises that our instinctive desires manifest themselves. In the case of dreams, which Freud considers to be wish fulfillments, the real content of the dream (i.e., its latent content) is censored. It is distorted and transposed into symbolic form (i.e., its manifest content), which then becomes a symbolic representation of the repressed desires. Such distortion and transposition may also occur in our everyday conscious transactions with others.”

The issue here is the interpretation of unconscious symbolism. Piaget agrees that the unconscious dream symbol would have been distorted and transposed, preventing us from appreciating and grasping its full significance. This, according to Freud, is the product of the condensation and displacement process. Piaget relates these processes to generalization and abstraction, which he considers as the most important cognitive processes. Piaget argues that “the hypothesis of a censor is unnecessary, as by its very nature the process of condensation always involves displacement - the meaning being displaced from the emotionally charged object to one not so charged.” (Wolfe Mays, 1984).

Another critical topic in the context of childhood dreaming is how children differentiate between reality and fantasy. Both Freud and Piaget addressed the question of when a young child becomes adept at differentiating between nighttime happenings and dreams. Exploring his own children's dreams, Freud (1900) confirmed that children experience dreams as actual events around age two.

According to Krause (1968) “Piaget, when discussing dreams, feels that they first begin in children between the ages of eighteen months and two years. A relationship

exists between the dreams and play of the child; but in dream-symbolism, nightmares appear as something fearful while in play symbolism fear is enjoyed. In the child's symbolic structure, dreams appear to be related to symbolic play. Dreams are generally the result of some actual experience, which the child has undergone in his real environmental world or in his fantasy play- world". Piaget (1929) in his iconoclastic work, *The Child's Conception of the World*, describes three stages in children's understanding of dreams. These stages are:

1. First Stage (around age 5 to 6) : At this stage children experiences the dream as coming from outside of themselves and remaining external. A child's dream memory gets mixed up with other memories, such those of things that happened recently in their lives.

2. Second Stage (around age 7 to 8): Children at this age think that although dreams are internal, they are external to them; they sense that dreams are related to their thoughts, but the dreams themselves manifest as events that happen in their heads or in their bedrooms. Even when the youngster can identify the source of the dream in his own mind, voice, or body, the dream nevertheless appears to be outside of him, in front of him, or in the room.

3. Third Stage (around age 9 or 10): In the child's mind, the dream appears as internal ideas happening inside the brain or eyes. Children perceive dreams, in other words, as internal and originating from within in line with their personal feelings, ideas, and opinions.

According to Piaget, there is a particular developmental sequence in which children learn to understand dreams. In the beginning child believes that dreams are real. The following dialogue with a four-year-old child reveals her dream idea.

- Researcher: Do you get dreams in the night?
Child: Yes, many times I dreamt
Researcher: What do you generally dream about?
Child: Many times, a giant blackish figure chasing me ...
Researcher: Where did you get such dreams?
Child: In our bedroom
Researcher: Whom do you sleep with?
Child: With my parents
Researcher: Did you really see such giant blackish persons?
Child: Yes. I did.
Researcher: Was it in your room? Can I go to your room and see?
Child: No, it disappeared, when I woke up.

For them dreams are visible to others and they come from outside their house. Over a period of time children gradually realize that dreams are not real, invisible and originate in mind. But they believe that their views are totally different from parents and elders. Children discover facts about their dreams by age of 6 or 7 years, at the beginning of concrete operations. Thus, Piaget reports three distinct stages of the child's cognitive understanding of dreams. In this connection Piaget (1929) says, "In all cases, the inquiry has shown that the distinction between the dream and reality is not always easy and that emotional dreams, in particular, have a tendency to be completely confused with reality. ... It is not till about eleven that this distinction between internal and external leads the child definitely to understand that the dream is not a material image, but simply a thought." (pp. 92 -121).

According to Despert J. Louise (2017), "Piaget describes three stages of the origin of dreams: First, the child conceives of his dreams as pictures of air or light which appear before his eyes from the external world, so that anyone can see the dream come and go. At a later stage, the dream is thought to originate from an internal object such as the head or the stomach before it appears in the outside environment. At the last stage, the dream is believed to originate first in the eye and then in the head". Piaget believes that the child learns to distinguish between "being" and "seeming," and localizes the dream, first in the eyes, then in the head.

Differentiating dreams from real occurrences is a gradual learning process that appears to depend on several factors for children. These include the rate of cognitive development, the development of linguistic skills, the child's intelligence, creativity, and the help provided by adults during the night or early in the morning to help the child learn the difference between reality and dreams. For Piaget, dream thinking is mostly assimilated, focusing on internal experience. He believed that the focus of thought is on the self during sleep rather than the outer world. Acknowledging the centrality of assimilation and the emotive perspective in children's dreams, he states:

"In the child this primacy of assimilation constantly occurs, as we saw in considering play, both as regards intelligence and feelings. But in the adult, even when his intelligence is normally adapted, there is at least one kind of situation in which this primacy continues from the affective point of view, quite apart from the pathological states in which there is general regression. This is in dreams, during which affective life goes on, but without the possibility of accommodation to reality." (Piaget, 1945)

Many similarities exist between dreams and fantasies. Both entail the symbolic representation of ideas, pictures, emotions, memories, and uncontrollable urges. In dreams, primary process thought is frequently less concealed or changed than in fiction.

Dreams, imagination, myth, poetry, and art are all expressions of connected creative and symbolic processes. These creative human behaviors share visual imagery, symbolism, pre-logical cognition, powerful emotions, and immediacy.

Piaget explains dreams by referring to the child's mental processes, which he has thoroughly researched. Young children, he claims, associate thinking with their dreams. Since the youngster believes that thoughts and dreams come from outside sources, his perception of reality is thus shaped by his subjective experiences.

Piaget's fundamental aim is to comprehend what meaning children get from their dreams and children's comprehension of the genesis and character of dreams. Piaget discovered that very young infants often assume that their dreams take place in their room or in their bed, but most of these same instances are also translocative and vicarial. As a result, children's recollections of dream characters in the bedroom seem to be post-waking interpretations rather than phenomenological ones. Thus, Piaget examined childhood dreams and explained their development in terms of children's growing competence in symbolic reasoning. Another major thesis of Jean Piaget is that children arrive at diverse conceptualizations and meaning constructions concerning dreams on their own. To understand children's dreams, it is necessary to explore their conceptions of dreams in relation to their other characteristics like egocentrism, animism, moral heteronomy, dreams as external, lack of classification and conservation abilities, etc.

For Piaget, the study of children's dreams would reveal something of the way they develop a sense of the dualities between "the internal and the external, and secondly of thought and matter" Piaget (1926) states, "[The child] will be confronted by grave difficulties when he attempts to explain the most subjective of all phenomena-dreams. The study of children's conceptions as to the nature of dreams is thus of great interest and from a twofold point of view, for the explanation of the dream supposes the duality first of the internal and the external, and secondly of thought and matter". Dreams are part of our lives. Day and night, we live with them. Dreams are personal and significant to the individual dreaming them. The unconscious reflection of our inner emotions, fears, desires, hopes, and fantasies is a clear indication of the psychological relevance of dreams. Dreams are really valuable and should never be undervalued. They can point us in the right way when it comes to important relationships, aspects of our life that we are worried about, or areas of our lives that need attention. From the above discussion, it is clear that Piaget's theory of children's understanding of dreams needs to be further examined from his larger theoretical framework of cognitive developmental psychology and genetic epistemology.

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