

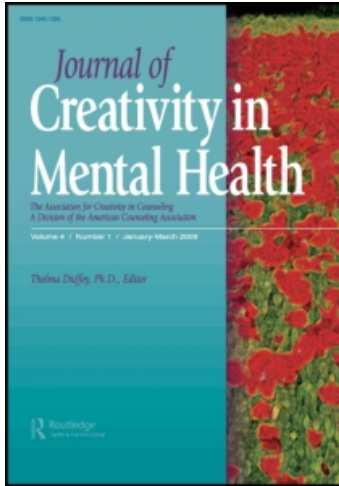
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### The Five Star Method: A Relational Dream Work Methodology

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## **The Five Star Method: A Relational Dream Work Methodology**

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*This article presents a systematic method of dream work called the Five Star Method. Based on cocreative dream theory, which views the dream as the product of the interaction between dreamer and dream, this creative intervention shifts the principal focus in dream analysis from the interpretation of static imagery to the analysis of the dreamer's specific responses and overall style of relating to the dream content. Using this method, counselors can foster clients' awareness of problematic patterns of relating, underscore competencies, and elicit a commitment to relating intrapersonally and interpersonally in more resilient and responsible ways. A step-by-step explanation along with a case example illustrates the technique.*

**KEYWORDS** *dream sharing, relational dream work, lucid dreaming, relational competence, cocreative dream theory, Five Star Method, creativity*

According to recent research, the sharing of dreams in psychotherapy increases self-disclosure and exploration (Provost, 1999), results in deeper work in the early sessions of therapy (Diemer, Lobell, Vivina, & Hill, 1996), produces superior client outcome measures when compared with self-esteem and insight work (Falk & Hill, 1995), and fosters intimacy among couples (Duffey, Wooten, Lumadue, & Comstock, 2004). And yet, practitioner use of dream sharing appears to be minimal. In one survey of therapists, 83% of the respondents reported discussing dreams at least occasionally,

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but only 13% employed dream work on a regular basis (Keller et al., 1995). In a more recent study (Crook-Lyon & Hill, 2004), 92% of therapists surveyed reported that they worked with dreams at least occasionally, but only 15% had worked with client dreams during the previous year. Thus, the positive benefits of dream work and dream sharing stand in contrast to low practitioner use.

This failure to encourage dream sharing may be due, in part, to a perceived mismatch between dream material and the therapeutic goals of a variety of contemporary nonpsychoanalytic models, which tend to focus on here-and-now affective states, personal choices, cognitions, relational processes, and behavioral outcomes rather than the interpretation of intrapsychic content. To bring dream work into alignment with nonpsychoanalytic therapy, we propose that dreams be viewed as indeterminate from the outset, and cocreated through the interaction between the dreamer and the emergent dream content. This cocreative, relational orientation, which parallels the way we analyze waking experiences, allows for the somewhat independent character of dream content, while encouraging a parallel analysis of the dreamer's responses to the dream and, by implication, to waking life. From our clinical experience, this form of dream inquiry enhances the client/dreamer's capacity to relate inwardly and outwardly with a greater sense of agency and resiliency and fosters authenticity and relational competence as described by relational-cultural theory (Jordan, 1999).

When using this intervention, counselor and client track the dreamer's interaction with the imagery through the course of the dream. Counselors avoid language such as, "What does this image mean?" or, "What is this dream saying to you?" Instead, counselors ask process questions (Bowen, 1978), such as, "What do think would have happened if you had stood your ground?" While this style of "circular" inquiry represents a significant departure from a content-analysis approach, it generates an approach to dream work congruent with an array of modern therapies that focus on interpersonal relating.

The Five Star Method (Sparrow, 2006a, 2007b) is an intervention designed to help counseling clients benefit from the predictive and explanatory power of retrospectively exploring the dreamer's relationship with the dream imagery. This intervention includes or accommodates aspects of well-known dream work approaches, including sharing the dream in the present tense (Perls, 1969, 1973), exploring feelings (Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985), listening to the dream as if it is one's own (Taylor, 1992; Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1985), distilling themes (Delaney, 1993; Garfield, 2001; Gongloff, 2006; Sparrow, 1978; Thurston, 1978, 1988), and using nonintrusive methods for analyzing the imagery (Jung, 1974, 1984; Taylor, 1992). However, it departs from well-known approaches to dream analysis by including an exploration of the

dreamer's responses to the dream, the impact of those responses on the visual content, and the reciprocal nature of the dreamer/dream relationship (Sparrow, 2006b, 2007a).

## THEORETICAL RATIONALE

Rossi (1972) was the first to articulate an encompassing theory around the dreamer's capacity to reflect upon and freely interact with the dream imagery. In his "cocreative" view of dreaming, the synthesis of new identity takes place through the interaction and dialogue between the dreamer and dream imagery. According to Rossi (1972), dreamer self-awareness manifests to some extent—sometimes minimally—in virtually every dream, such that there is "a continuum of all possible balances of control between the autonomous process and the dreamer's self-awareness and consciously directed effort" (p. 163). Rossi (2000) has continued to develop his theory without, as yet, translating it into an imminently applicable dream work methodology.

### Lucid Dream Research

In his initial work, Rossi (1972) never mentioned *lucid dreaming*, which is defined as the experience of becoming aware that one is dreaming during the dream (Van Eeden, 1913). This is not surprising given the fact that it was not until the late 1960s that the work of early lucid dream researchers was introduced in contemporary literature (Green, 1968; Tart, 1968). Subsequent writers (Gackenbach & LaBerge, 1988; Kelzer, 1987; LaBerge, 1980, 1985; Sparrow, 1976) demonstrated that some dreamers, at least, were capable of becoming fully conscious in the dream, and act creatively and autonomously during the experience.

Lucid dream researchers may have undermined lucid dreaming's broader impact on the field of dream analysis by minimizing the importance of the dream imagery in favor of emphasizing the lucid dreamer's powers (LaBerge & Reingold, 1990). Although this emphasis on the dreamer's emancipation compensates for the traditional one-sided focus on visual content, it overlooks the possibility that the dream may be an interactive process between functionally independent systems. Using this intervention, the role of dreamer awareness and responsiveness is acknowledged, while maintaining a view of the dream imagery as a somewhat autonomous creation. This sensitivity to the constructed nature of the dreamer's narrative allows the therapist to communicate an empathic understanding of how subjective factors interact with the waking and dream environments alike to create one's experience of the world.

## ASSUMPTIONS

Two related assumptions provide the basis for this work.

1. *Dreamers evidence measurable reflective awareness and agency in the recollection of their dreams.* This assumption is consistent with Rossi's (1972) observation that dreams reflect "a continuum of all possible balances of control between the autonomous process and the dreamer's self-awareness and consciously directed effort" (p. 163).
2. *The dreamer and the dream content are functionally autonomous systems, and thus, the analysis of the dream should ideally reflect a systemic orientation that takes into account circular or reciprocal relationship dynamics.* Borrowing from general systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1968; Weiner, 1948), Bateson and Jackson (1964) are credited for establishing that "reciprocity is the governing principle of relationship" (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004, p. 8). From the perspective of systems theory, reciprocity and bidirectional feedback should be observable in dreams if the dreamer and the dream are at least somewhat autonomous systems and capable of adjusting to feedback from the other. As Tarnas (2006) says, "In a relationship of true reciprocity—the potential communication of meaning and purpose must be able to move in both directions" (pp. 484–485).

## OBJECTIVES

This work incorporates the following objectives.

1. Encourage the sharing of the client's dream in such a way as to establish an appropriate context for a congruent relational exchange between therapist and client, as well as a relational orientation to the dream imagery.
2. Remain focused throughout the dream work principally on the dreamer's responses, as well as the impact of the responses on the dream imagery and the dream outcome.
3. Assist the client in seeing parallels between dream and waking relational processes, such that a consideration of alternative responses to waking parallels can emerge as a natural outgrowth of the dream work.

## THE PROCESS

This intervention commences by sharing the dreams in the first person, present tense (Perls, 1969, 1973). This enables the dreamer to relive the original experience and its attendant emotions and reflective awareness,

and for the facilitator to experience the dream *as if it were one's own*, as advocated by Taylor (1992) and Ullman (1996). This exchange converts a private dream into a here-and-now, shared experience to which the dreamer and facilitator alike can relate directly. Also, by reliving the dream in the present tense from beginning to end, the dreamer is better able to experience the dream's initial indeterminacy, as well as the dreamer's influence on its outcome.

### Step 1: Sharing Feelings Aroused by the Dream Sharing

Various dream work methods include an assessment of the dreamer's feelings (Gendlin, 1986; Hill, 1996; Mahrer, 1990; Ullman, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979). However, we posit that the dreamer's feelings, thoughts, assumptions, and behaviors interact with the content to cocreate the dream's outcome. With this in mind, the dreamer's feelings provide an initial entry into the dreamer's response set. It is also valuable for the facilitator to reveal his or her feelings, as a way to build rapport and to illuminate emotions that may be implied by the dream, but not fully felt by the dreamer.

For instance, consider the following dream described by Sarah, a 42-year-old female client who had been sexually abused by her stepfather.

I awake to find myself on a bed. I look up and see holes in the ceiling, and rats dropping down through the holes. Horrified, I jump and run out of the room. The rats seem to chase me, so I fearfully run up a stairway to get away from them. When I reach the top, I turn around to see if the rats are still following me. A huge rat is climbing the stairs and is within a few steps of where I stand. I look at it closely, and I'm surprised to see that its fur looks soft and lustrous. Intrigued by its beauty, I reach down as it comes closer and touch its fur. As soon as I do, the rat changes into a snow leopard.

When asked to describe her feelings in the dream, Sarah said, "terror," "nausea," "hopelessness," and then, toward the end of the dream, "fascination" and "relief." By listening to the dream as if it had been his own, the first author felt all of the dreamer's feelings but added that he felt "courage." He shared these feelings with the dreamer, as is customary during this initial step.

### Step 2: Formulating the Process Narrative or Story Line

Some dream analysts have formulated lists of themes that typically occur in dreams (Garfield, 2001; Gongloff, 2006). However, such an approach runs the risk of fitting the dream into pre-established categories. The Five Star Method uses a purely phenomenological approach to summarizing the dream's underlying structure (Sparrow, 1978; Thurston, 1978, 1988) and

uses the phrase *process narrative*, or *simple story line* (Thurston, 1988) to describe this objective.

To formulate the process narrative, the therapist and client work together to summarize the dream's essential action while removing the specific names of characters, colors, places, and objects. All interpretive and evaluative statements are promptly discouraged. A correctly formulated process narrative might be, "Someone is trying to decide between two courses of action, one apparently easy and the other more challenging."

Systems-oriented therapists will recognize the importance of observing and describing *how* the dreamer and the dream imagery are relating without reference to *what* is being communicated. This content-free description paves the way for interventions that can restructure problematic interactional patterns and foster relational competence without trying to resolve the problem on the level of content alone.

In regard to Sarah's dream of the rats, Sarah and I (G. S. S.) worked together to formulate the dream's process narrative. This joint effort had the effect of underscoring the client's unique and valued perspective and ensured that the final version reflected the client's authorship. We agreed it was as follows: "Someone becomes afraid of something and tries to get away from it but eventually considers it more closely and discovers attractive qualities that she was previously unaware of." As a generic summary of the dream's story line, the process narrative illuminates the existing structure of the dream without encumbering it with assumptions and interpretive impositions. This protects the dreamer from the facilitator's projections as well as simplistic, precipitous conclusions.

### Step 3: Cooperatively Exploring the Dreamer's Responses to the Dream

This step is the heart of this work. Helping dreamers see the places where their responses may have made a difference represents a significant departure from content-oriented dream analysis. Because of its novelty, it may pose somewhat of a challenge for clients who are new to this way of thinking. But once dreamers become aware of their responses in the dream, the dream work allows them to troubleshoot their responses and to imagine new outcomes in future dreams and parallel waking relationships.

To accomplish this step, the facilitator and the dreamer look for points in the dream where the dreamer responded emotionally, cognitively, and/or behaviorally in ways that could have affected the course of the dream from that point. Subtle or otherwise, these response points are like forks in the path where dreamers effectively codetermine the next phase of the dream by their reactions to the visual imagery.

Then, the facilitator and dreamer work together to critique the dreamer's responses to the dream encounters and to imagine what the

dreamer might have done differently at the obvious choice points in the dream. Following this freewheeling consideration of alternatives, the facilitator engages the dreamer in determining whether the responses were predictable or a departure from his or her usual reaction to such situations. As a final measure, the facilitator may ask the dreamer to consider alternative responses in future dreams with similar situations. This consideration of diverse responses to the dream has a way of challenging old patterns of relating to the world, while probing for emerging competencies.

It is not unusual for a highly significant response in the dream to seem entirely natural to the dreamer, especially if it reflects the dreamer's habitual style in responding to similar situations. For instance, Sarah was inclined to accept without question her decision to flee from the rats. But, even though it was a "natural" and ordinary response, it set in motion everything that followed. As such, it was a highly significant moment that needed to be underscored and challenged. Existential therapists will recognize the importance of recovering a sense of free will and personal responsibility in the midst of outwardly overwhelming circumstances. Such a discovery has the potential of freeing oneself from the tendency to blame circumstances and others and forging an authentic, self-determined existence. From a different standpoint, relational-cultural theorists may consider whether a dreamer's responses to dream stress, such as Sarah's flight from the rats, may represent appropriate self-protection or *strategies of disconnection* designed to avoid the vulnerability it takes to fully connect with others in growth-enhancing relationships (Miller, 1988).

In Step 3, the interpersonal exchange between counselor and client helps to offset the tendency of dreamers to disavow responsibility for the outcome of the dream. This step raises questions about unexamined assumptions and reactions, especially when the dreamer's responses seem counterproductive. Indeed, it represents the kind of cognitive-behavioral inquiry that characterizes contemporary action-oriented therapies, such as cognitive therapy, rational-emotive behavioral therapy, and reality therapy. Further, by highlighting emergent competencies, Step 3 comes into alignment with the philosophy and objectives of competency-based therapies such as solution-focused brief therapy (de Shazer et al., 2007). It also helps to correct longstanding survival strategies of disconnection that may have worked in the past to protect the client from relational wounding but have nonetheless prevented authentic, growth-enhancing relationships (Miller, 1988). In this regard, the therapist's conversation with Sarah highlighted her bold and surprising willingness to make contact with the rat and helped Sarah consider how this pivotal stance could translate into a broad-based willingness to confront a variety of life challenges with greater curiosity, courage, and vulnerability.

Sarah's surprising response altered the course of an experience that could have turned out much differently. It is, therefore, incumbent on the dream worker to underscore, and even to exaggerate, the impact of these



moments so that clients will learn to recognize the importance of their choices and actions on the dream's outcome. By underscoring these shifts in the dreamer's relationship to the dream content, the therapist may help clients become more aware of their emerging relational competence, as well as solutions that may be adapted to current or future interpersonal relationships.

#### Step 4: Analysis of the Imagery

Standard nonintrusive approaches to imagery analysis, such as Jung's amplification method and the Gestalt practice of dialoguing with the images, can be introduced in Step 4. In regard to Sarah's dream, it was, of course, useful for her to amplify her associations to the rats, the bed, the staircase, and the snow leopard. When she explored her associations to the rat image, she felt it represented both the loathsome qualities of her perpetrator, as well as the unwanted aspects of her own sexuality. At the time of the dream, she was unable to fully embrace her sexuality as a positive aspect of her self-expression and marital intimacy and expressed a certain guardedness in her relationship with her therapist, who was also a man. She associated the bed with the usual context of sexual encounters. As for the snow leopard, Sarah, who had studied the world religions and embraced an ecumenical approach to spiritual practice, associated it with the high spirituality of Tibet. As such, the snow leopard represented a synthesis of her rejected instinctuality and her spiritual aspirations, providing a powerful symbol for courageous efforts to reconnect while allowing herself to become vulnerable again.

Beyond exploring the dreamer's associations with the images, the facilitator may also assist the dreamer in Step 4 in exploring how imagery and scene transformations are *reciprocally related* to the dreamer's responses. By emphasizing the impact of the dreamer's responses, the facilitator draws a contingent relationship between dreamer response and outer change, thus continuing to support a sense of personal responsibility. Along these lines, Sarah was able to see that her flight from the bed reflected her contemporary ambivalence toward her sexuality that formed the basis for various strategies of disconnection. Her flight up the stairs paralleled her unsuccessful attempts to transcend her childhood memories through concerted spiritual practices, and again invited the pursuit of her neglected instinctuality. And finally, Sarah was able to see how the dream's dramatic reversal was contingent upon her courageous response to the rat, and the appearance of the snow leopard was itself made possible by her willingness to touch the rat's fur. Being able to reach out to the rat represented a simultaneous act of curiosity and acceptance—a profound rapprochement that permitted her in that singular moment to put aside her fears and perceive the unsullied power and beauty of her instinctual nature in the form of the snow leopard.

Of course, few dreams reveal such bold responses and dramatic reversals. But regardless, the facilitator can engage the dreamer in examining

*any* changes in dream imagery that might relate to, or mirror the dreamer's changes in response. Even if the dreamer and the dream imagery are locked into a relationship of escalating tension—as Sarah and the rats had been prior to the dreamer's remarkable response—the facilitator can assist the dreamer in imagining what could have happened if his or her stance had been different. The use of process questions (Bowen, 1978), mentioned previously, is especially useful at this point in the dream work to convey the principle of circularity or reciprocity so that the dreamer never loses sight of the contingent relationship between response and outcome.

At this stage in the dream work, the facilitator also asks the dreamer to imagine what the culmination of such an encounter would look like in future dreams or parallel waking relationships. Such a consideration leads naturally to the idea of identifying relationship contexts in which to apply the fruits of the dream work process.

### Step 5: Applying the Dream Work

Because this intervention is founded on the dreamer's capacity to enact a variety of responses to the dream, and correspondingly in parallel waking relationships, the final step involves identifying areas of one's life where new responses might precipitate positive changes. If dreamers can see a parallel between the dream issue and some waking situation, then the facilitator may encourage dreamers to practice new, contextually appropriate responses that can be made in that waking life relationship.

As for Sarah, the dream work encouraged her to accept the possibility that her willingness to become aware of and to confront her past was bringing about healing and reconciliation and that a closer relationship with her sexuality could be confidently explored, not apart from, but aligned with her highest aspirations.

## REQUIREMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

The Five Star Method cannot be easily adapted to every dream and every therapeutic context. For instance, dreams that consist of single, static images—or for that matter, dreams in which the dreamer only observes the dream content, however active the other characters might be—do not avail themselves to this form of analysis, except to the extent that feelings and thoughts that arise in the course of such dreams can illuminate aspects of the dreamer's idiosyncratic response set. In such cases, the therapist can use Gestalt dialoguing or Jungian amplification, while reserving this intervention for those dreams that involve some interplay between the dreamer and the imagery.

## ADAPTATIONS OF THE PROCESS

Although this intervention can also be used in group, marital, and family therapy, the therapist is advised to model the work to avoid traditional content interpretations that could derail a dreamer-focused, relational analysis. Once family and group members experience dream work from this perspective, they begin to explore the dreamer-dream interactional process.

## CONCLUSION

Dream analysis has traditionally involved treating the dream as a fixed narrative and the dreamer as a passive witness and proceeds to analyze the visual content for its presumed meaning. Add to that the object-oriented language that characterizes the traditional consideration of dream “symbols” and “content” apart from the dreamer, and dream interpretation arguably fails to acknowledge the relational and process-oriented focus of contemporary psychotherapy. However, dream analysis, as seen in this work, can shift naturally to what the dreamer unequivocally did, could have done, and might conceivably do in similar future dreams and parallel waking relationships. By remaining focused on the dreamer, this perspective supports an engaging dialogue between the dreamer and the facilitator that may stimulate an awareness of chronic patterns of responding, deconstruct old patterns, underscore emerging competencies, and foster a commitment to relating inwardly and outwardly in more resilient and creative ways. Such inquiry brings dream work into alignment with a variety of themes in contemporary psychotherapy, including the centrality of choice, freedom, and personal responsibility in existential therapies; the constructed nature of personal reality; the reciprocal nature of human relationships in family systems; and the fundamental need for connection in relational-cultural theory.

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