# Analyzing chronic dream ego responses in co-creative dream analysis

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*Summary*. With the advent of the co-creative dream paradigm, which is based on the principle that dreams are indeterminate from the outset, and co-created through the reciprocal exchanges between the ego and emergent dream content, the analysis of the dreamer's responses becomes an important new dimension in dream analysis. In this paper, the author develops the hypothesis that chronic dream ego responses can be traced to two sources in the individual's prior experience: 1) trauma and loss, and 2) introjected parental and cultural ideals. The individual's efforts to prevent trauma and loss from recurring accounts for "reactive adaptive responses," and attempts to emulate introjected ideals results in "compliant adaptive responses." Both of these types of chronic responses can be identified with the dreamer's help in dream analysis, and facilitative alternatives can be formulated in dialogue with the dreamer. The author presents a sequence of steps that can be used as a standalone method, or incorporated into existing dream work methods.

*Keywords:* co-creative dream analysis, lucid dreaming, adaptive response, dreamer response analysis, imagery change analysis

## 1. Introduction

In The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Kuhn says that "when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them," and that "scientists see new and different things when looking...in places they have looked before" (1962, p. 110). Thus, operating from within a new paradigm, a researcher will become aware of new phenomena, raise new questions, and be able to solve problems that have remained heretofore unsolved.

Co-creative dream theory (Rossi, 1972, 2000; Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow and Thurston, 2010) represents a paradigm that accounts for the formation, development, and outcome of the dream experience. It posits that the dream experience is indeterminate from the outset, and unfolds according to the real-time reciprocal interplay between the dream ego and the dream content. Rossi captured the essence of this relationship when he stated, "there is "a continuum of all possible balances of control between the autonomous process and the dreamer's self-awareness and consciously directed effort" (1972, p. 163). As for the purpose that this interactive process fulfills, Rossi (1972; 2000) anticipated Hartmann (1998) by suggesting that it serves an integrative function, but went further to assert that the dreamer-dream interactive process either facilitates or retards that aim.

The co-creative paradigm has been slow to take hold in dream analysis, perhaps because until recently it has lacked a sufficient foundation in research to challenge the "deficiency hypothesis," which holds that the dream ego is deficient in self-reflectiveness and volition (Rechschaffen, 1978), and that the manifest dream is "strictly determined" (Freud, 1900; Kramer, 1993). While the lucid dream phenomenon suggests that the dream ego can, at least in the lucid state, reflect upon, and modify the dream content, the categorical distinction of "lucid" vs. "non-lucid" has continued to support the view that the non-lucid dream ego is largely deficient in higher mental functions. More recently, however, empirical studies have established the presence of waking-style metacognition in non-lucid dreams, as well (Kahan, 2001; Kahan and LaBerge, 1994, 2010; Kasmova and Wolman (2006). Thus it is now reasonable to assume that the nonlucid dream ego continuously reflects upon, and responds to the dream imagery throughout the dream. Thus the most significant objection to the co-creative paradigm—that non-lucid dreamers are deficient in self-reflectiveness and volition—has been largely dispelled.

While traditional content-oriented dream inquiry treats the dream imagery as "strictly determined" (Freud, 1900; Kramer, 1996) and proceeds to analyze the images apart from the dream ego, the co-creative paradigm looks at how the dream ego's moment-to-moment responses impact the dream imagery, and vice versa, in a circular, synchronous exchange that results in one of many possible contingent outcomes. Family therapists have referred to this reciprocal process as "the governing principle in relationships" (Nichols,p. 8 ), but this level of assessment is relatively new to dream analysis. Once adopted, however, it leads naturally to a comparison of the dream's interactive process with waking relationship parallels. Thus, in the co-creative model, the search for process parallels supplements the traditional search for content parallels, thus serving as an encompassing, relational lens through which one can analyze the overall dream experience.

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## 2. The Emerging Importance of Dreamer Response Style

In co-creative dream theory, it follows that the dream ego's style of relating becomes an important new dimension in dream analysis. When analyzing the interactive process, the dream ego's responses can be viewed as either facilitative or obstructive in an unfolding relationship with the dream content. LaBerge uses the term "adaptive response" to denote when dreamers respond in ways that facilitate psychological integration and overall health within the dream.

*In general terms, health can be conceived of as a condition of adaptive responsiveness to the challenges of life. For responses to be adaptive, they must at least favorably resolve the situation in a way that does not disrupt the individual's integrity or wholeness. Adaptive responses also improve the individual's relationship with the environment. There are degrees of adaptiveness, with the optimum being what we have defined as health. (LaBerge, 2009)*

LaBerge also uses the term "maladaptive response" to signify reactions that impede the integrity and health of the individual. He says, "maladaptive responses are unhealthy ones and....any healthy response by definition leads to improved systemic integration, and hence is a healing process" (LaBerge, 2014). The adaptive/maladaptive dichotomy is a useful construct in co-creative dream analysis, but in practice it becomes difficult to determine if a particular dream ego response is adaptive or maladaptive without inquiring into an individual's unique history. That is, what may appear to be "adaptive" may actually represent something that comes too easily for the dream ego, and which may actually arrest a developmental process. Conversely, what may appear to be destructive and harmful may represent a necessary expression of autonomy and power. For instance, LaBerge considered the following dream indicative of a significant positive transformation:

*Having returned from a journey, I am carrying a bundle of bedding and clothes down the street when a taxi pulls up and blocks my way. Two men in the taxi and one outside it are threatening me with robbery and violence. . . . Somehow I realize that I'm dreaming and at this I attack the three muggers, heaping them in a formless pile and setting fire to them. Then out of the ashes I arrange for flowers to grow. My body is filled with vibrant energy as I awaken. (La Berge, 2014)*

While the lucid dreamer seems to have asserted his or her own power, such "success" begs the question of whether true growth can proceed for long on the basis of merely destroying dream characters, and by implication suppressing whatever the dream imagery represented. Commenting on the futility of destroying dream characters, Rossi flatly states, "Kill a man once and his physical body remains permanently dead; kill a fantasy image once and the battle has just begun" (1972, p. 47). LaBerge acknowledges that while attacking threatening dream characters may be therapeutic for dreamers who have suffered at the hands of abusers, in most cases a more conciliatory, engaging response effects a positive, and perhaps more lasting transformation of the dream character. Drawing on Tholey's (1983) work, LaBerge suggests that "when the dream ego looks courageously and openly at hostile dream figures, their appearance of-

ten becomes less threatening" (LaBerge, 2014). Citing Rossi (1972; 2000), I have suggested that the dream ego's responses can be viewed on a developmental continuum, whereby flight, expressing power, or even destroying dream characters, can serve as interim achievements that may progress eventually to dialogue and reconciliation (Sparrow, 2014). Clearly, one's attempts to identify adaptive and maladaptive dream ego responses should proceed on the basis of a careful and sensitive consideration of the dreamer's psychodynamic and interpersonal history. In practice, a dream worker can assist a dreamer in discriminating between adaptive and maladaptive responses by determining whether a specific response represents a habitual response, or a creative departure from the status quo, and "at least favorably resolve[s] the situation in a way that does not disrupt the individual's integrity or wholeness." (LaBerge, 2009, p.107-108).

## 3. Tracing the Origins of Chronic Adaptive Dream Responses

It is useful, in and of itself, to help dreamers identify chronic responses and to encourage the formulation of new ones. However, such efforts are even more useful if the origins of the chronic responses can be understood, as well. By tracing the dream ego's responses to their origins, and developing an empathic understanding of how such feelings, thoughts, and behaviors may have once fulfilled an adaptive function in earlier contexts we can conceivably assist the dreamer in considering whether such responses are still useful in contemporary contexts.

## 4. The Development of the Theory of Chronic Adaptive Responses

I developed the theory of chronic adaptive responses through teaching group therapy to graduate counseling students, and conducting therapeutic groups in private practice. One might ask, what does group therapy have to do with dream analysis? Once one adopts the co-creative paradigm—with its emphasis on interactive process—then knowledge of relationship dynamics in other fields, such as group therapy and family systems therapy, can potentially shed light on heretofore unacknowledged relational dynamics in the dream.

Specifically, it is widely accepted that therapy groups pass through an unstable stage of adjustment immediately following the initial meetings. This stage is called by various terms, including the "storming" stage (Bormann, 1975) and the "transitional" stage (Corey, Corey, and Corey, 2014; Gladding, 2012). Lasting until the group achieves sufficient cohesion to enable passage into deeper work, this problematic stage is characterized by an array of behaviors that come about, according to most theorists, as a way to resist the growing intimacy and interpersonal risks inherent in group work. Most of these behaviors are not disruptive in and of themselves, but become problematic over time as members resort to them again and again as idiosyncratic and predictable ways of responding to interpersonal challenges. For instance, a member may initially receive accolades for asking incisive questions of other members, but this same behavior may eventually provoke the group's annoyance as they become aware of how the questioning behavior hides the questioner's own feelings and thoughts. Behaviors that are cited in the literature (Corey, Corey, &

Corey, 2014) as resistive or disruptive include excessive questioning, advice giving, storytelling, hostility, peacemaking, silence, rescuing, monopolization, dependency, and superiority. But virtually any behavior that becomes repetitive over time can serve to veil a person's authentic feelings and wider potentialities, and thus prevent greater intimacy.

## 5. Two Categories of Chronic Adaptive Responses

In teaching group therapy to counselors in training, I was dissatisfied with the traditional view that "resistive" behaviors arise only in reaction to the group's transitional stage. Not only did I notice members resorting to such behaviors from the outset, but I also observed the same behaviors occurring beyond the transitional stage, albeit in muted and more functional ways. On the basis of these observations, I concluded that individuals have stable, idiosyncratic responses to perceived interpersonal stress. The traditional belief that these behaviors are uniquely tied to the group's transitional stage obscured, in my opinion, the possibility that these behaviors have always been there, and have possibly served positive, adaptive functions in earlier life contexts. Given my observation that the responses were stable and evident throughout the group's development, I began to examine the sources of these chronic behaviors by interrupting group members who were exhibiting them, and asking them simply to get in touch with the underlying emotions. To facilitate the exploration, I used an "affect bridge" (Christiansen, Barabasz, & Barabasz, 2009) to help members get in touch with the source of the emotions. That is, I asked them to get in touch with the feelings prompting the behavior as a bridge to its original context.

### 5.1. Reactive Adaptive Response.

When group members were given a chance to explore the origins, they typically discovered one of two underlying causes. First, some members traced their repetitive behaviors to past trauma or loss. When this was true, then such behavior represented a strategy for preventing similar painful interpersonal experiences from recurring. For instance, a 50-year old male client, whose alcoholic stepfather would periodically beat his frail mother, developed a tendency to crack jokes in order to defuse the tension at home. While the behavior worked in that particular context to distract his stepfather, it proved disruptive in later relationships—including his involvement in a therapeutic group where he would resort to humor without remaining sensitive to the unique demands of the moment. I began to refer to any interpersonal behavior, which is designed to prevent trauma and loss from recurring, as a "reactive adaptive response" (Sparrow, 2010; Sparrow and Alvarado, 2006). This type of adaptive response has a way of suppressing one's direct expression of feeling and need in favor of protecting oneself from real or imagined interpersonal threats.

### 5.2. Compliant Adaptive Response

In other cases, group members revealed that a particular chronic response could be traced to a desire to gain acceptance within one's family and culture. Instead of preventing something terrible from happening again, this type of behavior was designed to win approval by emulating some introjected ideal. For instance, a 31-year-old Hispanic male

who wanted to gain his father's respect and win approval from others, grew up imitating his father's quiet, strong, and unrevealing personality, thinking that to do otherwise would render him less of a man. Or a woman, who always offered to help others in the group even when it wasn't needed, was able to trace her reflexive caring responses to her mother, who gave herself tirelessly to her family's needs. To distinguish this type of behavior from the reactive type, I termed it "compliant adaptive response" (Sparrow, 2010; Sparrow and Alvarado, 2006). The consequence of the early parental/cultural programming results in a splitting of the self into acceptable and unacceptable aspects, thereby giving rise to what Jung has called the persona and the shadow split.

After working with these concepts for several years as a counselor educator, I began to see that reactive and compliant adaptive responses occur in dreams, as well in the waking state, and become especially evident over the course of analyzing multiple dreams from the same client, or sometimes in single dreams with heightened affect. For instance, a 34-year married teacher and mother reported the following brief dream:

*I am standing on the street outside a movie theater with my sister and a friend of hers. My sister is dressed in a beautiful blue outfit. I want to go into the movie with them, but I recall that I have some school work that I need to attend to. My sister and her friend get in line to buy tickets. Meanwhile, I wait for a school bus to pass before crossing the street.*

When the dreamer shared this dream in my group counseling class, we focused principally on her decision not to join her sister and friend, since the dreamer's response is the centerpiece of co-creative dream work. At first, we did not know if the dreamer's behavior was a chronic response, or a creative departure from her usual habit patterns. When she reflected on her pivotal decision to leave the other women and return to work, she said that when given a choice she almost always chose to work, because she felt that her family expected her to be successful and to do the responsible thing. She said that she had reaped a great deal of praise from having an especially beautiful home and a well-organized classroom, but that she often longed for more relaxation and enjoyment in her life. She said that her mother had been the same way, and was now regarded as a veritable saint by her husband, children, and friends. Her sister, however, had always put fun and self-interest on an equal footing with work. She realized that her sister and the unknown friend represented her repressed and unexplored shadow self, who was willing to put personal enjoyment first. So the dreamer helped us to identify the dream ego's decision to choose work over play as a compliant adaptive response.

Another dream of a 27-year-old man shows the impact of an internalized "vow of poverty" that the dreamer had learned from his father.

*I am at my childhood home, and a pickup truck full of gifts—outdoor sports items, in particular—pulls up in the driveway. A man whom I know to be God gets out and walks up to me. He says, "This is all yours." I struggle, feeling unsure of what to say. I then say, "I am not sure I can accept it." He then says, "Will you accept it for me?" I reply, "I don't know." I then sit down on the ground, struggling with the decision, and wake up before I can decide what to do.*

When I asked the dreamer to use the affect bridge to get in touch with the original conviction that he couldn't accept such generosity, he remembered countless times when his father, who grew up during the American Great Depression, would tell him stories of how hardship brought people together. His father was always mistrustful—even subtly contemptuous—of wealthy people, and he missed several opportunities to greatly increase his net worth over the course of his life by reflexively clinging to the "virtue" of self-denial. The dreamer realized that he had unwittingly emulated his father's ideal of poverty, and had often failed to seize the moment when wondrous opportunities had presented themselves. So, in this case, the dreamer was also exhibiting a chronic, compliant adaptive response.

## 6.    Lucid Dreamers Exhibit Chronic Responses

Reactive and compliant adaptive responses can be observed in lucid dreams, as well as in non-lucid dreams. While lucidity may seem to free the dream ego from reflexive responses, even lucid dreamers may be governed by unexamined reactions. Take, for instance, the case of a young female client, who would become lucid in her dreams almost every night. I was impressed by the frequency of her lucid dreams, but then I observed over the course of our work that she would almost always fly away from any stressful event. While she thought nothing of her reflexive response at first, she began to realize that flight was her primary strategy to prevent the kind of wounding experiences she had incurred at the hands of her parents. Flight had become her reactive adaptive response to waking and dream situations, alike.

A therapist using co-creative dream analysis will help a client become aware of crucial junctures in which the dream ego's response, however reasonable it might have seemed at the time, may have thwarted the intergrative process. Perls, whose approach to dream work foreshadowed co-creative dream theory, was well aware of the dreamer's proclivity toward disavowal of responsibility when he said, "You prevent yourself from achieving what you want to achieve. But you don't experience this as your doing it. You experience this as some other power that is preventing you" (1973, p. 178). For instance, a highly intelligent client of mine, whose anxiety had held her back from getting a college education, often dreamt of various true-to-life scenarios in which she had to bear the brunt of an authority figure's anger because she was in a position of relative powerlessness due to her lack of education. As a substitute teacher, she would often dream that the teacher or principal would berate her, even though she knew she was not at fault. Not surprisingly, she would remain silent in such dreams thinking that there was no way she could risk provoking their anger. Over the course of several months, we identified this passive response as a reactive adaptive response. It had become her way to fending off the expected attacks of relatively powerful people. By identifying the dream ego's chronic response, and eliciting the dreamer's determination to respond differently in dreams and waking life, the dream work anticipated, if not also facilitated a significant breakthrough in a subsequent dream. In it, she was in church leading a congregation in song:

*I am getting ready to lead the congregation in singing a new song when I realize that I don't have the sheet music for the hymn. I rush to the back of the church and rum-*

*mage through a sheaf of music, hoping to find the correct song before the pastor calls for it. Suddenly, I look to the front of the church and see that C.—the previous song leader—had returned and taken over my position at the microphone. Without hesitation, I hurry to the front of the church, and say, "This is my job now! You need to sit down!" I become aware that I have asserted myself in front of the entire congregation, and I'm aware of how they are seeing me in a different light than before.*

This dream is good example of how a chronic adaptive response can change abruptly in the context of a dream, and usher the dreamer into a new view of herself. Such pivotal moments can become the proof positive that a client is making significant progress in overcoming lifelong habit patterns.

## 7.    The Same Response Can be Either Type

I have found that the same behavior can be reactive or compliant, or a combination of both. For instance, a 35-year old group member would reflexively offer verbal reassurance to anyone who was in distress. When another group member finally blew up at her for trying to rescue her when she didn't need it nor want it, the helper tearfully admitted that her mother was dying of diabetes, and that she felt powerless to help her. Thus, what appeared on the surface to be a compliant adaptive response—rescuing—was actually a reactive adaptive response. That is, by trying to helping others, she hoped to mitigate the impact of her helplessness in the face of her mother's decline. Such examples should caution a therapist, once again, not to make assumptions about the origins or the function of chronic waking and dream responses.

A single dramatic dream will often signify the resolution of a lifelong chronic response. For example, I worked with 26-year-old woman, who had been abused as a young child by her mother, who would sometimes nearly suffocate her with a pillow in anger. Her mother had also done everything to prevent my client's father from visiting her, and her father, in turn, had effectively deserted her by giving up trying to have a relationship with her. My client grew up expressing a firm resolve never to have children out of a fear of becoming like her mother, and would also abruptly cut off relationships with men for fear of betrayal. After two abortions, she turned to cocaine and alcohol abuse, and then entered therapy. At the end of two years of sobriety and three years of individual and group therapy, she had the following dream in which her chronic reactive adaptive responses gave way to a facilitative, integrative response. Her dream is as follows:

*I am on the shoreline outside the restaurant where I work as a waitress. I see a large wave coming into the inlet from the ocean, which turns toward me. Out of the wave emerges the back of a whale. It turns and heads directly toward me, until its large head comes onto the sand, and stops a foot in front of me. It turns its head, and looks at me with a single large eye. I hold its gaze, and then it slowly backs into the water again, disappearing. I look down and I'm surprised to see a baby whale at my feet. I know that I am supposed to care for it, so I bend down and pick it up.*

Once this client's reactive responses had been identified and traced to earlier abuse from her mother and desertion from her father, it was easy for her to recognize these be-

haviors operating in her contemporary waking and dream relationships. Such a framework provided the basis for her striving to do differently, which ultimately enabled her to en-act new adaptive responses in her dream with the whale—that is, standing her ground in the face of the overwhelming motherly presence, and accepting the responsibility for par-enting its offspring. She terminated counseling shortly af-ter having this dream, got engaged a few months later, and eventually married and gave birth to her first child. Indeed, whenever a dreamer identifies and overcomes such lifelong tendencies, it becomes immediately evident in such dreams as the whale dream. While powerful imagery may indicate a momentous shift, co-creative dream analysis places the greater emphasis on the dreamer's life-altering responses.

Obviously, a great of time and struggle can ensue be-tween identifying maladaptive responses and overcoming them. Fortunately, a variety of methods can be employed to accelerate the client's facilitative responses in both dreams and waking relationships. I have written (Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow, Thurston, & Carlson, 2013) about a methodology that I employ called "dream reliving," in which the dreamer relives in fantasy the dream as if he or she were lucid, and can exercise new responses to the situations that have aris-en in distressing dreams. This practice can serve to attenu-ate the anxiety associated with past distressing dreams, as well to prepare for future ones.

## 8.  Putting the Theory into Practice

I have described elsewhere (Sparrow, 2013) a systematic, five-step approach to dream analysis—the FiveStar Meth-od—that makes the dreamer's responses to the dream con-tent the centerpiece in a comprehensive approach to dream work. While one can adopt the FiveStar Method, one can also use dreamer response analysis as a standalone inter-vention, or as a step in any other systematic dream work methodology. Regardless, in order to remain true to the co-creative paradigm, one should also incorporate imag-ery change analysis (Sparrow, 2013) with dreamer response analysis, in order to explore the way that the dream ego and the dream imagery unfold dynamically in real time. This interventional framework—which is an elaboration of Steps 3-5 of the FiveStar Method (Sparrow, 2013; Sparrow & Thur-ston, 2010)— can be used as a standalone intervention, or incorporated into existing systems. The steps are as follows:

▪    Identify Responses—Locate the pivotal moments in the dream where the dreamer responded—emotionally, cognitively, and/or behaviorally—to the dream imagery.
▪    Evaluate Impact—Engage the dreamer in considering how the dream ego's responses impacted the dream im-agery and the course of the dream, and vice versa.
▪    Determine Effectiveness—Engage the dreamer in as-certaining whether the dream ego's responses facilitated or thwarted the process of integration.
▪    Explore Origins—If a response thwarted the process of integration, explore the origins of the response, by us-ing an "affect bridge" (Christiansen et. al, 2009) to earlier experiences in the waking life.
▪    Assess Type—Discuss whether the response is a reactive adaptive response or a compliant adaptive re-sponse, or both; and then assess what undesirable expe-rience the response is designed to avoid, or what implicit ideal it serves.
▪    Discuss Alternatives—Discuss alternative responses

based on the dreamer's ideals and preferences, and ask the dreamer to imagine how the new responses will affect the dream imagery during similar dream encounters in the future.
▪    Relive the Dream—Engage the dreamer in reliving the dream in fantasy, in which he or she imagines enacting new responses to a similar dream scenario. Discuss the imagined new dream outcome.
▪    Apply Dream Work—Consider parallel waking scenar-ios, and discuss whether the same new responses might be useful in those contexts, or whether they need to be modified to conform to waking rules and contexts.

## 9.  Summary

In summary, the co-creative paradigm shifts dream work to include an analysis of the dream ego's responses; the im-pact of dream ego's responses on the dream imagery; and the integrative process that is served or thwarted by these exchanges. Over time, dream analysis may reveal repetitive patterns of responding, the origins of which may be traced to two types of prior experiences: 1) exposure to trauma and loss, giving rise to chronic reactive responses, and 2) internalization of parental and cultural ideals, prompting chronic compliant responses. While this conceptual frame-work initially grew out of working with therapeutic groups, it becomes useful in analyzing chronic relational patterns in dreams, as well. Taken together, dreamer response analy-sis (DRI) and imagery change analysis (ICA) can assist non-lucid and lucid dreamers, alike, who may wish to examine their characteristic style of responding in dreams in light of past, unexamined influences. Ultimately, troubleshooting and modifying chronic dreamer responses may accelerate the process of integration that is evident in dreams.

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