

# How Systems Theory and Postmodern Ideas Can Influence the Way We Perceive and Analyze Dreams

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Systems oriented family therapy is based on the premise that the individual is embedded in various nested systems, including the family and the community. In order to effect constructive change, a family therapist has to understand the relationship dynamics among the family members that create and perpetuate individual distress. Then, armed with this understanding, the therapist can formulate interventions that are designed to alter the system's dynamics, rather than merely addressing the complaints of its members.

While the schools of systems-oriented family therapy share the view that working with the system is the best way to facilitate change in its members, they differ when it comes to interventional approaches. Members of Bateson's Palo Alto group—known as the cyberneticists—believed that the therapist had to defeat or circumvent the family's resistance to change, and that the family's insight or collaboration in the process was wholly unnecessary. Virginia Satir took a completely different tack, teaching the family how to communicate with each other, and relating to them on a deep emotional level as a way to catalyze change. Salvador Minuchin combined the aggressive style of the Palo Alto group and the engaging style of Satir into a hands-on, collaborative approach that inspired the formation of the most popular school of family therapy to date.

The postmodern therapies of Solution-Focused Therapy and Narrative Therapy were developed more recently by family therapists who reacted to the intrusive style of the prevailing schools, and were influenced by the social constructionism. Believing that a person's reality is a unique product of beliefs, experiences, gender, relationships and cultural influences, a postmodern therapist endeavors to leave his or her assumptions at the door and enter into a client's reality in order to facilitate change.

Solution-Focused therapists pursue this ideal by exploring the client's life for exceptional moments, during which the problem did not seem to exist. They link these moments to the client's own actions, and treat these actions, however tangentially related to the problem, as competencies that can be built upon as solutions. The therapist imposes nothing except a view of the client's own unacknowledged competencies, and the support to enact them.

Narrative therapists emulate the ideal of nonintrusive collaboration by entering into a dialogue in which the client's language-based assessment of the problem is explored. The therapist frames the problem as a socially constructed label, and sets about helping the client to externalize the problem and emancipate himself or herself from its oppressive effect. Similar to Solution-Focused therapists, Narrative therapists cite these exceptional experiences as evidence of the client's ability to claim power over the problem.

Recently, the concepts and tools of this evolving tradition have been employed in

working with the intrapersonal, subjective world, as well. Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems is an example of how principles of family organization and structure have been effectively applied to intrapsychic realities. His system shows the influence of Gestalt therapy, Jungian psychology, and Psychosynthesis, but supplements those traditions with interventions derived principally from Structural Family Therapy. In essence, Schwartz treats the inner family of subpersonalities and complexes much in the way that a family therapist would approach an external family. In particular, IFS uses joining, collaboration, and enactment in order to modify internal hierarchies and boundaries. The overall objective is to foster the expression and authority of an integrated self.

In a similar vein, I have found that the concepts that govern family systems and their postmodern offshoots can be applied to dream analysis in order to produce a dynamic, process oriented, and competency-based approach to therapeutic dream work. Specifically, I'd like to show you how a dream work method that I have developed and used over the last 25 years—that is, the Five Star Method—reflects many of the principles currently espoused by systems-oriented family therapy and postmodern therapy.

The assumptions about the dream experience upon which the Five Star Method is based, and which allow for the incorporation of systems and postmodern concepts and methods, are as follows:

- 1) What we call "a dream" is not a given—that is, not created from the outset—but the

product of a dynamic interaction between dreamer and the dream imagery.

2) The dreamer and the dream imagery are somewhat distinct aspects of the dream, and the dream imagery can be considered a third aspect of the dream—the “mutable interface” between dream ego and emergent content.

3) Whether the dreamer is aware of it or not, he or she is potentially free to respond to the dream content in a variety of ways, and in virtually every dream, there is some evidence of the dreamer's being aware, and responding out of choice.

4) The dreamer's responses are in a circular causal, or reciprocal relationship with the imagery, such that a change in one will usually be mirrored by a change in the other.

5) The dream process is purposeful and integrative. It can evolve toward a synthesis of dreamer and dream content, or regress toward a widening split between dreamer and the content, depending largely on the dreamer's responses to the dream content.

Now, let's look at how some of the concepts and interventions of family therapy and its postmodern offshoots have been incorporated into the FSM.

### *Joining and Collaboration*

A central tenet of contemporary family and postmodern therapy is the idea that we

can only effect change by appreciating the unique values, beliefs and cultures of our clients. Taking time to inquire into each person's values and experiences, and relating to each individual on a personal, feeling level establishes a sense of trust and rapport, which enhances the family's acceptance of the therapist's subsequent interventions. Since each family is unique, the therapist's expertise is limited to his or her ability to relate to the family, and to facilitate change in the context of it own distinct values and goals.

*Dream Work Parallels.* The first step of the FSM is to share the dream in the first-person, present tense (as Perls recommended), and then for the dream worker(s) and dreamer to share their respective feelings that were aroused during the dream sharing (as Ullman recommends).

In addition to reawakening the affective intensity of the original dream and converting it into a present, living experience, this process also establishes a shared communal space in which everyone's emotional reactions to the dream are taken into account. The dream worker(s) come to know the dreamer through their vicarious participation in the dream sharing. The dreamer, in turn, gets to know the dream worker(s) through their empathic responses to the dream. Through this mutual exchange, rapport and trust are established, laying the groundwork for the subsequent analysis.

*Structural Assessments*

Before a systems oriented family therapist intervenes in the family, he or she carefully observes the family's "spontaneous sequences of behaviors." These ordinary exchanges between family members allow the therapist to perceive and map out the family's relationship structure. While the family may be focused on resolving specific presenting problems, such as Johnny's "disrespectfulness" or his "lack of motivation at school," the therapist focuses instead on how the members are relating rather than what they are complaining about. This focus on process, or structure, rather than the content of the family's presenting problem, allows the therapist to intervene at the level where the problem is sustained, without being caught up in the family's preoccupation with specific details or problem-saturated labels.

*Dream Work Parallels.* In the FSM, the second step involves formulating the dream's theme or action statement. Those of you who have worked with the dream theme method that Mark Thurston and I wrote about in late 70s know that it is a brief summation of the dream's action that avoids all mention of specific names and labels. A well-formulated dream theme will read something like, "Someone is trying to get away from something, and no matter what he tries, he doesn't succeed until he gets help from someone else." Similar to a family's structural map, the theme allows the dreamer and dream worker(s) to perceive the essential dream process without being distracted by the specificity and drama of the dream content.

*Circular Causality*

Perhaps the most important contribution of Gregory Bateson's Palo Alto group was the concept of circular causality—also referred to as reciprocity, or cybernetics. Whereas individuals will typically blame each other for starting a problem, the Bateson group viewed problems as reciprocal dynamics in which both parties participate. Because synchronous feedback sustains the relationship dynamic, neither party can be considered the cause of the problem once it is up and running. Family therapists often teach their clients to see their problems as a product of circular causality, in order to encourage them to avoid "the blame game," and to take responsibility for their respective contributions to the problem.

The Palo Alto group also believed that dysfunctional relationship patterns are a result of a failure to accommodate a need for change in the family rules. Instead of interpreting developmental and environmental stressors as occasions to revise the family rules, families will often assert the old rules, resulting in an escalation of tension between those who espouse the old rules and those who challenge them.

*Dream Work Parallels.* In the FSM, the third step is the heart of the method. It involves highlighting and troubleshooting the dreamer's responses to the dream. While the dreamer may feel that he or she had no choice and reacted in the only way imaginable, the dream worker(s) encourage the dreamer to see the ways that the dreamer's responses may have impacted the subsequent unfoldment of the dream. The concept of circular causality, and of "cocreating" the dream is introduced in this step of the process. The dream content, by definition, is considered an "intrusive

novelty" (Ullman) that ultimately offers the dreamer an expanded sense of self through, essentially, a revision of the ego's "rules." The dreamer's responses are evaluated on the basis of whether they reflect an habitual style, or represent something new. Just as family distress is treated as a failure to revise the family rules in order to accommodate change, the dreamer's distress is seen as a function of his or her attachment to familiar ways of responding. As Puryear once said, "There are no bad dreams, only unfortunate dreamer responses."

### *Process Questions*

Murray Bowen, founder of Family Systems Therapy, conducted conjoint therapy from the standpoint of a dispassionate witness who would ask each member "process questions" designed to increase an awareness of one's role in a problematic dynamic. Bowenian therapists encourage each member to avoid blaming the other party, and to reflect on what he or she has done to contribute to the problem, and what might be done to alleviate it. Questions such as, "What tells you that he isn't aware of your feelings?" or "What else could you do when she insists on talking to you?" are predicated on the principle of circular causality, and work powerfully to create an awareness of one's part in the problem and one's power to bring about change in the relationship.

*Dream Work Parallels.* This line of inquiry is, once again, related to the third step of the FSM, which focuses on the dreamer's responses. Similar to Bowenian therapists, the dream worker(s) will ask the dreamer to reflect on what he or she was thinking, feeling

and perceiving as the dream unfolded, and how those qualities translated into convictions about other characters and situations in the dream. If the dreamer simply assumed something, the dream worker(s) will ask "what if" questions such as, "What do you think he would have said if you'd asked him?" or "What do you think would have happened if you'd stood your ground?" This mode of inquiry gently challenges a one-dimensional view (Rossi) and supports the dreamer's acceptance of responsibility and agency.

### *Enactment and Structural Interventions*

Structural Family therapists encourage family members to address each other directly, in order to provoke the problematic dynamic between them. While this may seem counterproductive, the SFT therapist uses the real-time interaction as a basis for making structural changes, such as insisting on direct communication, having the parties prevent interruptions from triangulated members. The therapist works to open boundaries that have been too rigid, and establish stronger boundaries that have been too open

*Dream Work Parallels.* Step Four of the FSM involves working with the imagery, not so much to draw parallels with specific waking state referents, but to come to an understanding of the generic issues represented by the imagery, and how the relationship with this issue can become more fulfilling if the dreamer adopts a different stance in relationship to it.

In this step, the familiar Gestalt technique of dialoguing with the imagery is an important way to explore the differences between dreamer and dream characters. Asking the dreamer to address the characters and engage in playing their roles, as well, serves the goals of this important step in the dream work. Similar to family therapy, the dream worker(s) oversees the enactment, and encourage directness, feeling statements, and I-messages in order to restructure the relationship by opening the boundary between the dreamer and the dream characters. Afterward, the changes in the dream imagery are noted and credited to the dreamer's willingness to engage them directly.

#### *Equifinality, Finding Exceptional Moments, Reframing, and Shaping Competency*

These concepts are closely related. Equifinality is a principle that is central to all schools of systemic family therapy. It means that any constructive change, however small, will affect the whole system. To put it in familiar terms, the family therapist thinks globally, but acts locally with the conviction that any positive change will have an overall positive effect on the system and all of its members.

In Solution-Focused Therapy, therapists uphold this concept by looking for exceptional moments when the problem did not occur, and tying the client's activities at these times to the suspension of the problem. For example, the therapist might ask a couple who is ongoing conflict if the problem has ever subsided. If the couple reports that they stopped arguing during a time then they were going to the movies a lot, then the

therapist would cite their moviegoing as a solution to their problem, and one within their own power to enact. The principle here is that people are so focused on their problems that they do not realize that they have already enacted solutions. When the therapist discovers these exceptional moments, he or she supports and shapes the competency that the client has already evidenced. In many cases, the therapist will also reframe the behavior so that the client can more easily perceive it as a competency. The therapist might reframe movie going, which on the surface may seem like a rather trivial activity as "involving themselves in the arts," or "showing an interest in the lives of others," so as to render it a more serious endeavor and offer subtle suggestions as to how this inclination might be broadened into other activities.

*Dream Work Parallels.* In the FSM, there is an emphasis on locating the moments where the dreamer deviated, if only slightly, from a chronic or habitual style of responding, or was particularly creative or resourceful. As we know, dreamers are often preoccupied by a sense of failure or victimization, especially in conflict-ridden dreams. Consequently, they may overlook instances of their own incipient competency.

Any sign of strength can be supported, and built upon. For instance, a man had a dream of floating above a beautiful laughing woman, who was trying to grab his heels and bring him down to earth. Anxiously, he was able to flap his arms in order to stay just beyond her reach. It is easy to denigrate the dreamer's response, and to concentrate on the avoidance of contact with the woman as a problematic issue. While probably true, this imposition is anathema to the systems-oriented and postmodern therapies, which

are focused on finding competencies to support. In order to support the dreamer in making the changes he needs to make, it is far better to point out just how effective he is in remaining aloof from the woman. For example, reframing his behavior as "not giving in too easily" might further support a positive view of an actual strength that he needs in order to preserve his integrity under the real pressures of an intimate relationship.

The final step in the FSM involves the application of the dream work. Specifically, dreamers are encouraged to find a place in their lives, including their future dreams, where they can practice, or imagine practicing the responses that would have made a constructive difference in the dream. There is no effort to arrive at an interpretation, or answer questions such as "What does my dream mean?" or "What is it telling me?" Addressing such questions would represent a regression into treating the dream as an oracle and the dreamer as a passive audience. In the words of the late clairvoyant Edgar Cayce, the interpretation of the dream is its application. And the application has to do with making choices to respond in ways that would have made a constructive difference in their dreams. The dream worker(s) supports the principle of equifinality by encouraging dreamers to apply themselves concretely in one area—but to look for positive effects in all areas of life, including their future dreams, as a consequence of their willingness to respond in new ways to an ongoing life challenge.

## Summary

I have cited only a few of the central tenets and tactics of systems-oriented family therapy and its postmodern offspring, and explained how these approaches have

influenced a five-step systematic approach to dreamwork called the Five Star Method.

These ideas are developed further in my papers, found here at <https://>

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