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THE EMPIRICAL STUDY OF INFANTILE  
WISH-FULFILLMENT DREAMS: A REPLY TO  
ALLAN J. HOBSON’S RESPONSE

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We are pleased that Hobson now agrees that many dreams are wish-fulfilling. We, unlike Hobson, however, see this fact as highly significant because it raises important scientific questions. Why do many dreams gratify desires? Why is the diurnal origin of wishes that appear in children’s dreams invariably represented by an intense emotional day-  
10 time experience of the child? Can the dream really gratify a wish by reducing the intensity of the wish when one awakens? What is the precise relationship between wishes and dreams? And, more generally, what is the relationship between motivational states and dreaming? These are  
15 questions that any science of dreaming is naturally interested in.

We’re trying to give a more solid empirical footing to some concepts—which in a Freudian psychoanalytic therapeutic setting are well-known facts—by using research programs that are repeatable by any researcher, whether psychoanalytically or nonpsychoanalytically oriented. Through  
20 studies such as those cited in our article, we hope to move the study of several concepts (such as those of wish-fulfillment and others of general psychoanalytic theory) from the analytic setting into the realm of empirical research on dreaming, so as to make direct comparisons with data from other theoretical approaches to dreaming.

25 We believe that studies such as those on children’s dreams and drug dreams provide a greater understanding of the role of wish in the dream.

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In providing this understanding, we, as researchers, operate with conscious wishes: We know that Freud attributed the ability of such conscious wishes to trigger dreams in children, thereby constituting the driving force of dreams in the same way as unconscious wishes trigger dreams in adulthood. Thus, this type of model is “small scale” but faithful, and allows us to draw inferences on a general model of dreaming. The studies on children’s dreams (including infantile dreams in adulthood) therefore provide evidence to assess the general thesis that the dream is the fulfillment of an unconscious wish. Indeed, it would be complicated from both theoretical-conceptual and empirical perspectives to assert that dreams in adulthood draw their motive force from unconscious wishes, if it appeared that even children’s dreams do not draw their motive force from conscious wishes. However, given the results of studies on children’s dreams, we have no cause to abandon the argument that the basis of dreams in adulthood is an unconscious wish.

Studies on children’s dreams provide a phenomenological picture of the different types of wishes that appear in dreams—the diurnal affective situations in which the wishes are matured—and allow us to study the temporal distance of the daytime sources of dream. This has further allowed us to sketch a hypothesis about the function of affective restoration of dream (i.e., the “affective-reestablishment” hypothesis). What these studies tell us is that: 1) desires are the stuff of which children’s dreams are made; 2) these dreams are meaningful and comprehensible in relation to the dreamer’s daily life experience and do not appear in any way to be random products; and 3) these dreams have an individual meaning and function that is clear and understandable.

We believe that this type of study (i.e., infantile wish-fulfillment dreams) represents a continuation of the work of Freud while simultaneously providing an empirical investigation of his theory. This also allows us to preserve what is valuable from Freudian theory for understanding dreams, as well as discarding that which does not stand up to empirical scrutiny.

In addition, we have not abandoned the idea of dream content being transformed and deformed as a product of motivational factors, such as those that affect mental content in waking life: having found that dream bizarreness is positively correlated with the development of the super-ego is a fact consistent with this model (a point that Hobson appears to miss). We are equally aware that the bizarreness of the dream is not entirely explained by the mechanism of dream-censorship, as Freud

himself was well aware. Yet, given what we know about motivational conflict, waking censorship and defense (from nonpsychodynamic fields including experimental psychology and social psychology), there is all the more reason to hypothesize that motivational factors influence the manifest content of dreams.

In conclusion, we reiterate that we are pleasantly surprised with Hobson's acknowledgement that Freud's theory of dreams is potentially empirically testable, and we further agree with him that finding the relevant evidence, if it exists, will occur with considerable difficulty. However, where we depart from Hobson's position is our belief that "fruitful" research programs, such as those mentioned in our article, will eventually allow us to accumulate empirical data that can unambiguously tilt or strengthen some of the cornerstones of Freudian dream theory. We want to further reiterate that any evaluation of the Freudian dream model must take into account developments in knowledge about the neurobiological and neuroanatomical substrates of dreaming, even if the neurobiological facts alone cannot exhaust the field of psychological explanation in dreaming.

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