

Meredith Sabini

THE FIELD OF DREAMS



Challenges to the Field of Dreams

When I originally conceived of this column, I had in mind the byline, “The field of dreams.” The phrase has three distinct meanings. First, it refers to the existing knowledge and practices regarding dreams, just as we refer to the field of microbiology or the field of dentistry. Our dream field would include dream research, dream studies, dream training, dream art, theater and literature, as well as dreams in clinical practice.

The byline also implies a field in the agrarian sense, like a field of poppies or a field of wheat. I sometimes picture dreams growing out of the ground seemingly on their own, naturally, without having been planted or cultivated—as if they have an underground root structure, like the mycelium of mushrooms, invisible to the naked eye. This subterranean source of dreams reaches down into the psychophysical substrate of our existence and has a long evolutionary history. A dream is like the fruiting of that underground system, much as a cluster of mushrooms is the fruit of one season. And, as with mushrooms, taking one dream for “eating” does not diminish their root stock; they are self-renewing.

The third meaning of my byline relates to the new para-

digm of interconnectedness, which emphasizes field phenomena. Influenced by work in areas as diverse as physics, sociology, and biology, it focuses on micro- and macro-field phenomena. In her excellent work, *The Field*, Lynne McTaggart summarized this topic. The chapter on “Sharing Dreams” begins with a description of the

practice of the Achuar people of Ecuador, who believe that dreams are a field phenomenon that pertains primarily to the life of the tribe.

In the years since I was a doctoral candidate, in the 1970s, the field of dreams has grown enormously. At that time, one could easily read every book that had been published, classified by the call number BF1078 at university libraries and comprising not

more than one shelf. Forty years later, there are hundreds of books on dreams, and I can’t keep up with them. Our field has mushroomed.

I envisioned my column as a place for delving into cutting edge topics, and, since it began in 2006, I have touched on topics as diverse as intersubjective dreams, dreams about the earth, dream work as meditative practice, and objective dreams about others. In working with gradu-

recognized phenomenon that has received attention by researchers and clinicians of various theoretical orientations, and there is agreement on the unique contribution it can make in doing clinical assessment. This is a good example of an edge in the field of dreams where a contribution should be easy to make; the student merely has to come up with a good question that could be explored theoretically, experimentally, and/or clinically.

I’ve wondered whether someone skilled at computer graphics might be able to create a visual display of topical areas within the field of dreams so that the degrees of development and differentiation in each would be readily visible. For example, in individual and group psychotherapy, dreams are fairly recognized as having a place, both in theory and in practice; this can be ascertained by a simple literature search. Likewise, there is ample literature on dreams that therapists and clients have about each other; on lucid, precognitive, and telepathic dreams; on dreams related to illness; and so on. In the creative arts, artists, playwrights, filmmakers, and novelists are familiar with the value of dreams, and perhaps even their use in the history of these fields.

Wouldn’t it be marvelous if we had a visual portrayal of the

*“Each of our available dream theories
pertains to some dreams some of the
time; no single theory pertains to all
dreams all of the time.”*

overlap of the field of dreams with other areas of culture and professions? We wouldn't expect much overlap with the sciences, even though Barrett's excellent work, *The Committee of Sleep*, cites numerous examples of discoveries influenced by dream knowledge. Nor would we find much overlap between the field of dreams and, say, trauma intervention, meditation training, organizational consulting, or environmental activism. This is not surprising considering the focus and bias of modern society. And yet I find it regularly troubling, for I consider dreams to be a methodology applicable to any human endeavor; everyone dreams, and dreams seem capable of commenting on any theme.

In addition to a visual map of our field, I would also love to see a meta-analysis of dream studies that would make it possible to look up normative data on a topic of interest. Have there been normative studies, say, of women's dreams at menarche and menopause; of twins or adoptive children; the elderly with dementia; musicians or mathematicians? There are so many areas in which we have no normative data on what people dream. Many normative studies use easy target populations as subjects: college students and clinic patients. What if our field considered making a commitment to plotting the dreamscape, in the same way that geneticists committed to mapping the human genome?

The field of dreams bears an interesting parallel to the new field of evolutionary psychology, which has emerged over the past decade. Both deal with something that is fundamental to our species; both involve people from a wide range of profes-

sions. Within evolutionary psychology, creative criticism has arisen. Those on the side of evolutionary studies claim that psychologists develop theories about human behavior that are not grounded in evolutionary findings; and those in psychology assert that evolutionary theories do not take empirical findings from that field into account.

Perhaps similar critiques can be applied to dream studies. Jung's notion that dreams bear a compensatory relationship to conscious attitudes and Freud's idea about dreams containing fulfillment of unconscious wishes have both been tested and found to lack substantiation because not all the dreams studied contained those themes. My impression is that the operational definitions of compensation and wish fulfillment were overly simplistic and the methodology superficial.

Although the model of the detached, objective researcher has been fairly well deconstructed, the implications of this milestone in epistemology have yet to penetrate much of the social sciences, dream studies included. What if we encouraged and expected researchers to be familiar with their topics from actual experience? The person intending to study the compensatory or wish fulfillment hypothesis would thus have a period of Jungian or Freudian analysis, in order to appreciate and apprehend the dynamic involved first-hand. The few contributions I have made to cutting edge topics—on dreams related to illness and healing, on objective dreams about people and situations in the world around, on dreams of our phylogeny—each have been based on a cluster of dreams that

came to me over many years; the dreams themselves formed the empirical foundation of the subsequent research I published.

By now, we have a host of excellent theories to draw upon: dreams as problem-solving; as memory storage and retrieval; as rehearsal for new stages of life; as reflections of self-states; as repetition of trauma; as ways new psychic structures are built; as means of having contact with the ancestral realm; as paralleling our object relations. We probably need a more careful delineation between the overall, basic functions that dreaming serves, and the purposes that single, individual dreams can have. As a trait in all mammals, REM dreaming appears to have a variety of survival functions, for instance; but it may be only

infrequently that this function manifests in any given individual dream, such as a precognitive dream warning of an auto accident that might occur. Thus, some dreams may compensate a conscious attitude or solve a problem or fulfill an unconscious wish, but not all; some dreams provide x-rays of our personal complexes and some give an objective portrait of a situation, but not all. Given the complexity of the human psyche, don't we need room for all legitimate and well-tested theories?

The multiplicity of dream theories presently available is itself evidence of the health of our growing field. The list will surely expand, limited only by the parameters of our amazing, astonishing, puzzling, perplexing, and altogether marvelous dreaming minds.

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