

ADLER'S DREAM THEORY

Alfred Adler (1870–1937), an Austrian psychiatrist at one time closely associated with Sigmund Freud, separated from him to develop an alternative to psychoanalysis known as individual psychology (Ansbacher and Ansbacher, 1956). Adler did not devote the same degree of attention as did Freud to dream phenomena, and his ideas are neither extensive nor consistent enough to constitute a genuine theory. Nevertheless, his writings (Adler, 1931/1958; Adler, 1927/1963) anticipated many later neo-Freudian dream theories and even some of the more recent changes in psychoanalytic theory itself.

One of the basic principles of Adler's general theory is the pervasive influence of a striving toward mastery that originates during a period of infantile helplessness. Thus, mind develops as the means by which infantile inadequacy is overcome and world mastery is achieved. As a mental act, dreaming also is imagined to be harnessed to the goal of mastery. Specifically, for Adler, dreaming is an anticipation of or preparation for future situations. It attempts to solve interpersonal problems rather than, as for Freud, to discharge intrapsychic tensions.

Problem-solving theories of dream function face a number of problems: dreams do not seem to contain many obvious problem solutions; many people do not take their dreams seriously enough to act on any suggestions about waking life that might be found there; and the particular content of most dreams is too quickly forgotten to be useful later. Adler developed one ingenious way around such difficulties. He admits that the *ideational* and *perceptual* content of the dream has little adaptive value. Instead, he focuses on the *mood* or *feeling state* created by the dream. Adler notes the common experience of carrying a dream-instigated mood well into the following day, even though the events that created the mood are quite fictitious and readily forgotten. But Adler vacillates on how adaptive these dream-created moods actually are. He allows that dreams and dream-instigated moods may provide only unrealistic or deceptive solutions to problems in waking life.

Adler does not entirely neglect the ideational and perceptual content of dreams. Here, too, however, he vacillates on its unrealistic versus adaptive nature. For example, he links a fantastic or unrealistic (bizarre) quality of some dream imagery to the diminished reality contact of sleep, a state in which the dreamer is not stimulated to deal honestly with real-life situations. And yet, Adler also holds that dream imagery is largely expressive in nature; that is, particular dream portrayals emerge for their ability, not to disguise the dreamer's underlying thoughts, but to express them.

Adler's theory, though not always internally consistent, nevertheless offers significant alternatives to Freud's: that the dream itself is concerned with present and future experience rather than with the infantile period alone; that waking and dreaming are related aspects of mental life and more continuous than discontinuous; that the process of dreaming is driven by realistic adaptive needs rather than by childish wishes; and that dream imagery is a unified expression of the dreamer's character rather than a piecemeal construction designed to conceal its origins. In the hands of later psychologists (for example, Hall, 1966; French, 1954), many of these ideas found more consistent expression and greater acceptance.

(See also CONTENT OF DREAMS; FREUD'S DREAM THEORY.)

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