Directions: Read the Excerpt of information dealing with the theories of Sigmund Freud from Simply Psychology and answer the series of thought questions below.

Dream Analysis

Freud (1900) considered dreams to be the 'royal road to the unconscious' as it is in dreams that the ego's defenses are lowered so that some of the repressed material comes through to awareness, albeit in distorted form.

Dreams both perform important functions for the unconscious mind and serve as valuable clues to how the unconscious mind operates.

On 24 July 1895, Freud had his own dream that was to form the basis of his theory. He had been worried about a patient, Irma, who was not doing as well in treatment as he had hoped. Freud in fact blamed himself for this, and was feeling guilty.

Freud dreamed that he met Irma at a party and examined her. He then saw a chemical formula for a drug that another doctor had given Irma flash before his eyes and realized that her condition was caused by a dirty syringe used by the other doctor. Freud's guilt was thus relieved.

Freud interpreted this dream as wish-fulfillment. He had wished that Irma's poor condition was not his fault and the dream had fulfilled this wish by informing him that another doctor was at fault.

Based on this dream, Freud (1900) went on to propose that a major function of dreams was the fulfillment of wishes.

Freud distinguished between the manifest content of a dream (what the dreamer remembers) and the latent content, the symbolic meaning of the dream (i.e. the underlying wish). The manifest content is often based on the events of the day.

The process whereby the underlying wish is translated into the manifest content is called dream-work. The purpose of dream work is to transform the forbidden wish into a non-threatening form, thus reducing anxiety and allowing us to continuing sleeping. Dream work involves the process of displacement, condensation and secondary elaboration.

Dream analysis involves the translation of the (inevitably distorted) manifest content into the (truthful) latent meaning. Understanding the various distorting processes would help us to understand the latent meaning of a dream.

The process of condensation is the joining of two or more idea/images into one. For example, a dream about a man may be a dream about both one's father and one's lover. A dream about a house might be the condensation of worries about security as well as worries about one's appearance to the rest of the world.

Displacement takes place when we transform the person or object we are really concerned about to someone else. For example, one of Freud's patients was extremely resentful of his sister-in-law and used to refer to her as a dog, dreamed of strangling a small white dog.

Freud interpreted this as representing his wish to kill his sister-in-law. If the patient would have really dreamed of killing his sister-in-law, he would have felt guilty. The unconscious mind transformed her into a dog to protect him.

Secondary elaboration occurs when the unconscious mind strings together wish-fulfilling images in a logical order of events, further obscuring the latent content. According to Freud this is why the manifest content of dreams can be in the form of believable events.

In Freud's later work on dreams he explored the possibility of universal symbols in dreams. Some of these were sexual in nature, dancing representing sexual intercourse.

However, Freud was cautious about symbols and stated that general symbols are personal rather than universal. A person cannot interpret what the manifest content of a dream symbolized without knowing about the person's circumstances.

'Dream dictionaries', which are still popular now, were a source of irritation to Freud.

Critical Evaluation

Freud's theory is good at explaining but not at predicting behavior (which is one of the goals of science). For this reason Freud's theory is unfalsifiable - it can neither be proved true or refuted.

For example, the unconscious mind is difficult to test and measure objectively. Overall, Freud's theory is highly unscientific.

Despite the scepticism of the unconscious mind, cognitive psychology has identified unconscious processes, such as procedural memory (Tulving, 1972), automatic processing (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Stroop, 1935), and social psychology have shown the importance of implicit processing (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Such empirical findings have demonstrated the role of unconscious processes in human behaviour.

However, most of the evidence for Freud's theories is taken from an unrepresentative sample. He mostly studied himself, his patients and only one child (e.g. Little Hans).

The main problem here is that the case studies are based on studying one person in detail, and with reference to Freud the individuals in question are most often middle aged women from Vienna (i.e. his patients).

This makes generalizations to the wider population (e.g. the whole world) difficult. However, Freud thought this unimportant, believing in only a qualitative difference between people.

Freud may also have shown research bias in his interpretations - he may have only paid attention to information which supported his theories, and ignored information and other explanations that did not fit them.

However, Fisher & Greenberg (1996) argue that Freud's theory should be evaluated in terms of specific hypotheses rather than as a whole.

Thought Questions:
1. In Freud's theory what purposes do dreams have?

2. What is the difference between manifest content and latent content?

3. Explain Dream-Work and the processes of displacement, condensation and secondary elaboration.

4. What role does Dream Analysis have in Freud's Theory and what makes it particularly difficult?

5. What is the actual value of Freud's theories and why might they be considered controversial in the scientific community?

6. What are the problems with Freud's methods?

7. What, if anything, do you think Freud's ideas of Dream Analysis contributed to the study of Psychology?