

80 THE ROLE OF PRIOR INFORMATION IN DREAM ANALYSIS

Douglas A. Bernstein

University of Illinois

In this activity, the class receives a handout describing the demographic characteristics and brief life history of a woman named Doris, along with a dream she reported having. At the bottom of the handout, there is space for the student to interpret the meaning of Doris's dream. The dream is the same on each handout, but the description of Doris is not.

CONCEPT This activity is designed to help students understand that the interpretation of dreams, like the interpretation of other stimuli, can be influenced by prior knowledge, expectancies, motivation, emotion, and other top down processes. More specifically, it illustrates how easily a clinician's prior knowledge about a client might prompt very different conclusions about the meaning of dream content.

This activity provides an easy way to show students the link between principles that guide the perception of objects and those that operate in social perception in general and in psychotherapy in particular.

**MATERIALS
NEEDED** You will need copies of each of the three handouts given in appendixes A, B, and C. Collate the three items before you hand them out, so that one third of the students will receive each version.

To aid class discussion of varying dream interpretations, it is helpful to have each version of Doris's demographics and life history on overhead transparencies in print large enough to be read from the back of the room.

INSTRUCTIONS Give each student a version of the Doris handout. After a few minutes, ask the students to write their interpretation of the dream at the bottom—and perhaps the back—of the handout. You can either collect and read aloud some of the interpretations, or just ask students to read them aloud.

DISCUSSION As the readings proceed, it will soon become obvious to the class that something is amiss. At this point, reveal the differences in the three descriptions of Doris and point out the influence those differences had on the interpretations of Doris's dream.

You can end this demonstration by pointing out that clinicians are aware of the role of prior knowledge in dream analysis (and other aspects of therapy). This is why, for example, they tend to base conclusions about clients on a series of dreams rather than on just one and why they seek to combine assessment information from various sources, such as tests and interviews. I have found that stimulating class discussions result from pointing out that, in spite of such efforts, clinicians are as vulnerable as the rest of us to the biasing effects of expectancy in dealing with clients.

**WRITING
COMPONENT**

In addition to having students write their interpretation of the dream in class, you might also ask students to write a summary of the purpose of the demonstration and what they learned from it. This can be done in 5 min at the end of the exercise or at the end of class. A quick perusal of the summaries can show if students understood the point that you were trying to make. Summaries are efficient ways to check for student understanding.

REFERENCE

Ullman, M. (1986). Access to dreams. In B. B. Wolman & M. Ullman (Eds.), *Handbook of states of consciousness*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.