Neuro-linguistic Dreaming
(or "Learning the Language of the Unconscious")

Dreams are the playground of the unconscious mind. Stories and art give us tantalising glimpses of the unconscious realm; dreams give us full, associated immersion. If you want to learn more about how the unconscious mind works (and plays) where better to do it than the unconscious' own home.

By Joe Cheal

There are probably as many belief systems about dreams as there are languages in the world. Each culture has its own perspective on what dreams are and what they are about. It would seem that there is a generalised agreement that dreams come from or via the unconscious (or subconscious) mind. Perhaps they may channel some higher connectedness or some deeper consciousness. Or perhaps they may be simply a result of the brain working and sorting through data from short term to long term memory.

According to Carl Jung, dreams are a way for the unconscious mind to communicate with us. Perhaps by paying attention to how dreams are coded, we can learn something about the natural language of the unconscious. But how does this knowledge benefit us? Ericksonian hypnosis and much of NLP is founded on the notion of communicating with the unconscious mind. We have a choice of trying to make the unconscious mind respond to our native language or learning to speak the unconscious language directly. Have you ever found yourself in a place where they do not speak your native tongue? Is it not more rewarding and effective to learn their language rather than expecting them to speak yours? We talk about building rapport with the unconscious mind, so isn't that easier if we speak its language?

As well as leading to further discoveries about how we might communicate with the unconscious in its own domain, dream-world exploration offers us a fascinating and revealing journey as we delve deeper beneath the surface of the dreaming mind.

Surface Structure and Deep Structure

To set the scene, NLP borrows the concept of surface structure and deep structure from Alfred Korsybski. Surface structure is the language we use to describe what we mean. Deep structure is what we actually mean. This is emphasised in the expression 'the map is not the territory'. A description of something is not the thing itself. When someone presents a problem to us in NLP we utilise the metamodel to go beneath surface structure and further into deep structure. This is done to move people beyond their distortions, generalisations and deletions to a clearer idea of what the reality of their problem actually is.

Sigmund Freud, a pioneer of modern dream research made a distinction between what he called manifest content and latent content. The manifest is how the dream presents itself and the latent is what the dream actually means. Whilst this is not necessarily a widely held view amongst dream theorists we could draw an analogy with Korsybski's model where deep structure is like latent meaning, and surface structure is like the manifest.

In both dream exploration and in NLP we talk about metaphor. This is an all encompassing term to include all sorts of symbolism, imagery, analogy, simile etc. If the surface structure language of the conscious mind is words, the surface structure language of the unconscious would be metaphor.

The NLP-Dreaming Connection

Richard Bandler and John Grinder created NLP initially from the works of Fritz Perls, Virginia Satir and Milton Erickson. Fritz Perls was a well known dream theorist who introduced some excellent ideas about how to understand the unconscious and hence how to decode dreams. Milton Erickson, on the other hand, was utilising the language and processes of the unconscious to ease people into a dreamlike state. Let's explore this further…

Dream Parts

Fritz Perls considered that dreams needed to be decoded from a holistic perspective. All parts of the dream are parts of the dreamer. More specifically, Perls believed that dream parts are parts of the individual that have been disowned and projected. Whether he was right about this or not, the idea that every aspect of a dream is part of the dreamer is very empowering (although perhaps a little disturbing at times!)

If each part of the dream is part of the dreamer, this allows us to explore a dream from many perceptual positions. A woman once described a dream in which she was standing in a kitchen. What else was in the kitchen in the dream? A fridge, a cooker, a sink… When she took the position of the cooker she described her frustration of having to cook all the time, that she was taken for granted, she was tied to the kitchen and could never go out. This was a part of herself that she could identify with but she hadn't realised before how angry that part of her was.

Where there is conflict in dreams, there is most probably a conflict of parts in the dreamer. NLP has a range of techniques for integrating parts, including 'visual squash' and 'six step reframe'. As a practitioner working with someone's dreams perhaps we don't always need to decode the dream, but simply resolve the conflict of parts. If the unconscious mind is ready, it will probably present the underlying meaning spontaneously.

Utilisation

When exploring the meaning of dreams, it is useful to understand the process of the unconscious 'dream machine'. Not only is a dream based on our thoughts and emotions (past and present), it is also based on our physiology. Have you ever dreamt of trying to find a toilet and then woken up and realised that you actually do need to go to the toilet? Whilst we are dreaming, the dream machine will also incorporate outside influences (e.g. sounds) and respond to the reactions of the dreamer. Simply put, the unconscious mind will weave whatever it is experiencing into the dream narrative.

Milton Erickson, the master of unconscious communication, worked with the idea of utilisation. Whatever he was presented with, he would use. Not only would he utilise the client's language, metaphors, behaviours and beliefs, he would also utilise visuals, sounds and sensations in the environment. He might utilise a bird singing outside by saying: "and as you hear the distant bird calling… you to… go deeper and deeper into your experience… now." Not only would Erickson use the language of the unconscious, i.e. metaphor, he would also use the process by which the unconscious mind works.

Language Play

The unconscious seems to delight in word play, as if it is creating metaphor out of the conscious mind's learnt language. NLP practitioners are usually taught about the Milton model, including 'phonological ambiguities'. These are the puns and 'double entendres' that are also the stuff of dreams. A person will often be swapped in a dream for someone else with the same name. This can create some interesting scenarios for the dreamer to deal with. I remember one dream where I fell asleep on a rooftop with a friend called Lucy. I later realised that the day before, I had been watching a TV programme where the father of a girl (called Lucy) was angry because she had spent a 'night on the tiles'. For some reason, my unconscious decided, in its own way, to join her. In another dream I was in an ally wondering what was through the other side of a gate. It was an alligator! Only upon retelling the dream later did I get the pun.

As well as the sounds of words, the unconscious seems to like playing with the order of letters in words. The night before we ran our first Practitioner course, my wife Melody dreamt that an NLP Master Trainer was coming to observe the course. This was an understandable connection. However, there was great emphasis on the fact that he was coming by plane and we would have to pick him up on the morning of the course. Beyond some more obvious metaphors, the 'plane' carried a particularly interesting pattern. Look at the letters in PLaNe. Look back along the letters without the vowels… do they mean anything to you? Coincidence maybe, but write down enough of your dreams and you will discover more about the playful nature of the unconscious mind.

If dreams are the playground of the unconscious mind… play on! ●

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The Author

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Joe has always been interested in the science and meaning of dreams, writing a dissertation on lucid dreaming for his first degree. The key findings of this research and many other articles on NLP can be found at www.gwiztraining.com.

Further Reading

Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. "Patterns of Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson MD: Volumes 1 & 2" An analysis of Erickson's approach to unconscious communication by the co-creators of NLP.

Van de Castle, R.L. "Our Dreaming Mind" An excellent introduction to dreams and dream theorists.