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# Investigating the Helpfulness of Dream Exploration in Spiritually Influenced Group Work



# Investigating the Helpfulness of Spiritually-influenced Practice

- How does attending to spirituality improve client outcomes, and how does it shape helping processes?
- Goal of our group program is to increase self-awareness & self-esteem – highly experiential & focuses on using arts-based exercises
- Typically we've planned for six, 2-hour sessions



# Research Groups

- Group processes include:
  - meditation and guided imagery
  - mindfulness meditation practice
  - dream interpretation
  - journaling and writing exercises
  - working with drawings, collages, and clay
- The group is unique in its focus on spirituality



# Group Processes

- Group processes don't have to be conceptualized as spiritual but often they are by participants
- We make room for spirituality to enter into healing spaces but participants will find and experience spirituality differently.





- The important point is that in a group that incorporates spirituality, participants are encouraged to make sense of their experiences in a holistic manner if they deem this to be important for them.
- If we ignore the spiritual dimension, we may be missing an opportunity to help people construct holistic narratives that accurately fit their experiences.
- Also, the inclusion of spirituality may shape helping practices in other ways that participants find helpful.

# The research process to date:

- The 1st group was delivered to 8 women affiliated with a community agency in the area of substance abuse
- The 2nd group was facilitated with a group of 4 senior social work students
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4th groups were completed this year with 10 youth-in-care with the local Children's Aid Society (this work is funded by SSHRC)





# Dream Interpretation

- Dreams have been thought to reveal divine will, to foretell the future, to be therapeutic, and to be a rich source for creative work (Miller, Stinson, & Soper, 1982).
- **Why work with dreams?** Everyone dreams - dreaming is a major part of our experience; an aspect that we should not ignore in helping people understand themselves better (Hill 2003 p.363).

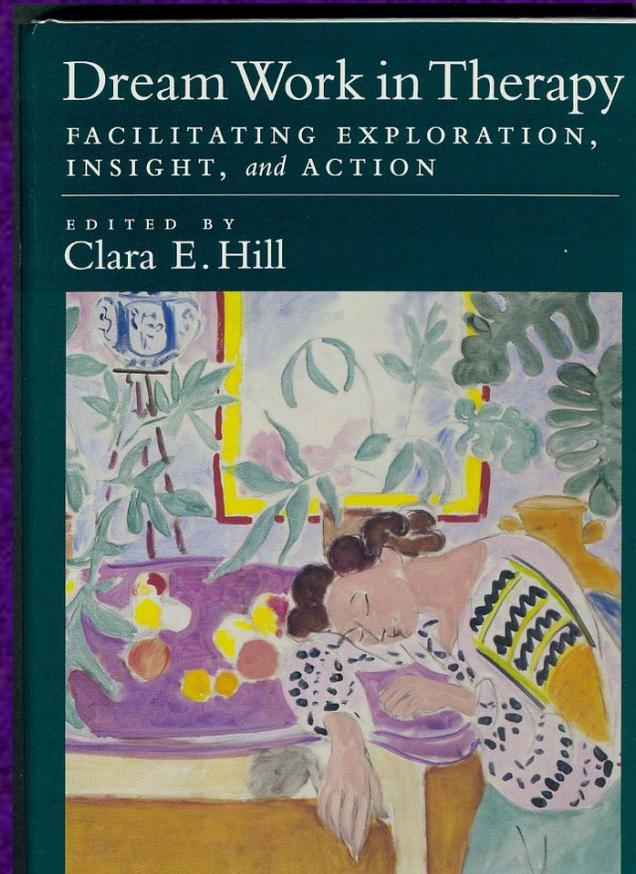
# Dream Work in Therapy – A Renaissance

- Keller et al (1995) found in a survey of 500 psychologists, that many did not introduce dreams or discuss them unless the client took the initiative.
- One does not have to be a psychoanalyst to work with dreams or be engaged in intensive and long-term psychotherapeutic work (Merrill & Cary, 1975; Ullman, 1984).
- There is presently a renewed interest in working with dreams even amongst cognitive-behavioral therapists.



# Recent Models in Dream Work

- Clara Hill's cognitive-experiential dream interpretation model, has been extensively studied in individual, couple and group therapies.
- The model has three stages: Exploration, insight and action.
- The model is eclectic and combines client-centered, psychodynamic and behavioral theories.



# Spirituality and Dreams



- Since the beginning of time all cultures regarded dreams as having some special power that transcended the past, present and future, and that many cultures believe that the messages of the dream are the vehicle through which God can speak (France, 2002).
- Jung (1964) argued that dreams were linked to spiritual life and could be inspired by transcendental forces.

# Spirituality and Dreams

- Although many speculate an association between spiritual phenomena and dreams, no research has been conducted on the effects of helping clients explore dreams from a spiritual perspective [Davis and Hill (2005 p.492)]
- Researchers seem to agree that little is known about how spirituality and dream work are integrated in practice, and how helpful dreams with a spiritual component are (Crook Lyon & Wimmer, 2005; Phillips & Pargament, 2002).



# Dream Exploration



- Dreams in the groups are an avenue for people to learn more about themselves. It's clear from the research literature that dreams can be a wealth of information - they help people gain insight.
- We follow an eclectic approach to dream interpretation, which includes exploring the meaning of a dream within waking life (present experiences) (Barrineau, 1996).

# Using Dreams in Group

- Our aim is similar to that described by Edgar (1992) – to facilitate the participants' own understanding of a dream but with the help and occasional challenge from the group.
- The assumptions underpinning Hill's model:
  - Dreams reflect waking life
  - the meaning of dreams is personal
  - working with dreams should be a collaborative effort.



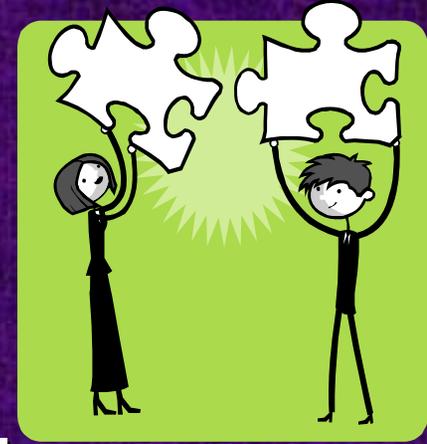


# The Group Process

- We use dream collages. Participants were asked to remember a dream, meditate briefly on it, and then scan through magazines and cut out anything that seems associated with their dream images – a type of free association exercise.
- Collages are useful because dreams are often multilayered and have meanings on many different levels, so the layering of pictures in a collage can reflect the dream.

# The Group Process

- Participants are **always** encouraged to interpret symbols and images according to their own experiences and viewpoints.
- One of the advantages of groups is that there may be a greater diversity of suggestions (Bird, 2005), although the final interpretation is always left to the dreamer (Feinberg, 1981).
- Making connections between their dreams: ***There's some connections there, what she was saying with what I've been experiencing with my dreams.***



# Connecting Spirituality and Dream Work in the Group

- One participant described her belief that a recurring dream was actually representative of a past-life experience.
- She used the dream to make meaning of her current life situation and family dynamics. When she was asked where this idea of past-lives came from she responded ***I have no idea. It's just because I had that one dream when I was younger.***





# Spirituality and Dreams

- Another participant reported that she found that a lot of her dreams manifested in her life: *God was letting me know this all along, that my addiction had to quit, so I went into rehab after [having the dream].*
- There could be psychological truth in premonition in that we may intuitively and subconsciously foresee the future to which we may be consciously blind (Miller et al., 1982).

# Spirituality and Dreams

- Accordingly, for one participant, analyzing her dream was a powerful, emotional experience. The analysis that occurred in group was helpful in that

*Everything clicked into place...it was like an “ah hah” moment of such magnitude, but it was also scary too...because...my dream was exact – like it was almost exactly what had happened to him [her brother].*





# Spirituality and Dreams

- Dreams are spiritual in that they are a gateway to connect with people who have died: ***that's a way of me knowing that there's still a way of connecting with the people that I love and the people that have passed. It's very spiritual for me. It's a gateway...I think without that, then I would have a very difficult...time believing in heaven or hell or whatever I actually believe in.***
- Also, solutions to life's problems also come via dreams – things she can't understand or address in a conscious state of mind. She also described this as a spiritual experience:
- ***Because...when I have an issue that I can't deal with in the conscious state, it always comes to me in a dream...after I dissect it and look it over, then I realize how it's attached. And it's very spiritual for me because then I...can step back and say, "I had no control over that...it's out of my hands"...[I'm trusting in a] greater force and a bigger process.***

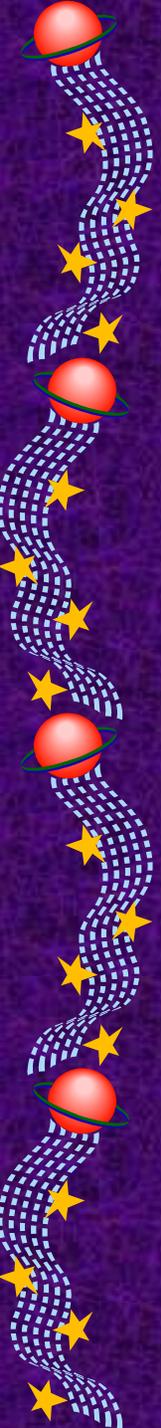


# The Effectiveness of Dream Work

- Davis and Hill (2005) explained that counselors need to ask about clients' spiritual beliefs and purposefully work to understand the dreams from that spiritual perspective in order to enhance their existential well-being: Why are we born?; Why do we suffer?; and Is there a God?
- They are not sure whether the benefits of spiritual dream interpretation were due to the blending of dream interpretation and spiritual exploration, or due to the fact that spirituality was addressed, independent of the dream interpretation.

# Conclusion

- We should not fear utilizing dreams - they can help us to understand clients better, and helping dreamers to understand themselves is the ultimate purpose of working with dreams (Bird, 2005 p.214). Surely, engendering insight is an integral aspect of social work practice.
- Also, several researchers agree that encouraging the client to share a spiritual analysis of a dream can strengthen the therapeutic alliance.
- We make room for spirituality to enter into therapeutic group processes. Similarly, therapists should invite clients to discuss dreams, thereby realizing the possibility of engaging in dream work (Crook Lyon & Hill, 2004).



# References and Bibliography

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