



An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Psychotherapists' Lived Experience of Dream Analysis in Clinical Practice

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Authors' contributions

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Abstract

This study explores psychotherapists' lived experiences of engaging with dream analysis in clinical practice using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five experienced clinicians trained in psychodynamic, Lacanian, and Daseinsanalytic approaches, the study examines how differing theoretical orientations shape the understanding, use, and meaning of dreams in psychotherapy. The analysis generated five overarching themes: (1) conceptualisations of the dream as either

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a lived experience or a theoretical construct; (2) the “tail” of the dream as either bound to significant others and unconscious desire or free from predetermined associations; (3) the role of the analyst as either a facilitator of hidden meaning or an indicator of openness; (4) interpretation as a calling that sustains the analytic process; and (5) the status of the uninterpretable dream as either temporarily deferred or enduringly open. The findings reveal a fundamental divergence between interpretative, theory-driven approaches that prioritise the decoding of latent content and phenomenological–existential perspectives that emphasise openness, non-interpretation, and the irreducibility of the dream experience. The study highlights how these orientations influence not only clinical technique but also the therapeutic relationship and the ontological positioning of both analyst and analysand. It suggests that dream analysis may be understood not solely as a method of uncovering unconscious meaning, but also as an experiential and relational process that invites engagement with ambiguity, alterity, and the limits of interpretation. These findings contribute to qualitative psychotherapy research by foregrounding the experiential and philosophical dimensions of clinical dream work.

Keywords: Dream analysis; interpretative phenomenological analysis; psychotherapy; psychotherapists; lived experience; phenomenology; psychoanalysis; Daseinsanalysis; Lacanian psychoanalysis; clinical practice.

1. Background

Sigmund Freud’s work on dreams constitutes one of the foundational contributions to psychoanalytic theory. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud proposed that dreams are meaningful psychological phenomena that provide privileged access to unconscious mental processes. Contrary to earlier views that regarded dreams as random or meaningless products of sleep, Freud argued that dreams represent disguised expressions of unconscious wishes and conflicts. In his well-known formulation, dreams function as a form of wish fulfilment, allowing repressed desires to find indirect expression during sleep when the usual inhibitory mechanisms of the waking mind are relaxed (Freud, 1900/2010). This claim positioned dreams as a central method for investigating the unconscious, which Freud famously described as the “royal road” to understanding unconscious processes.

A central feature of Freud’s dream theory is the distinction between manifest and latent content. The manifest content refers to the narrative or imagery that the dreamer recalls upon waking, whereas the latent content consists of the underlying unconscious wishes, thoughts, and memories that the dream expresses in disguised form (Freud, 1900/2010). Freud maintained that the apparent strangeness and discontinuity of dreams result from psychological mechanisms that transform latent dream thoughts into manifest dream images. This transformation is not random but follows systematic processes that Freud collectively described as the dream-work (Freud, 1900/2010).

The dream-work involves several mechanisms that distort and reorganise unconscious material in order to bypass the mind’s internal censorship. Among the most important mechanisms are condensation, displacement, symbolisation, and secondary revision. Condensation refers to the process by which multiple latent thoughts or memories are combined into a single dream image or event. Displacement involves the shifting of emotional intensity from significant ideas to seemingly trivial elements within the dream narrative. Symbolisation allows abstract or unacceptable thoughts to be expressed indirectly through symbolic imagery. Finally, secondary revision refers to the mental process that reorganises the dream after waking, producing a more coherent narrative that may obscure the dream’s underlying meaning (Freud, 1900/2010; Zhang & Guo, 2018). Through these mechanisms, unconscious wishes can be represented in a disguised form that allows the dreamer to remain asleep without confronting the disturbing implications of the latent content.

Freud also emphasised the role of day residues and early childhood experiences in dream formation. Day residues consist of fragments of recent experiences that appear in dreams and serve as associative triggers for deeper unconscious material. These recent impressions interact with unresolved childhood conflicts, particularly those related to early relationships and instinctual drives, forming the basis for dream construction (Freud, 1900/2010). In psychoanalytic interpretation, the analyst’s task is therefore to work backwards from the manifest content to uncover the latent dream thoughts. Freud proposed free association as the primary technique for achieving this goal, encouraging patients to verbalise any thoughts that arise in connection with elements of the dream (Freud, 1900/2010). Through this associative process, seemingly trivial dream images can reveal links

to repressed wishes, conflicts, and memories. Freud's interpretation of dreams also played an important role in the development of psychoanalytic clinical practice. Dream analysis became a central tool for exploring unconscious conflicts and understanding the dynamics of neurosis. Later psychoanalytic theorists expanded Freud's ideas by integrating dream interpretation into broader theories of object relations, ego psychology, and attachment. Although contemporary neuroscience and cognitive psychology have proposed alternative models of dreaming, Freud's theory remains historically influential and continues to shape psychodynamic approaches to dream interpretation (Zhang & Guo, 2018). In particular, Freud's conceptualisation of dreams as meaningful psychological productions emphasised the interpretative relationship between conscious experience and unconscious mental life, an idea that continues to inform psychodynamic theory and clinical practice.

In summary, Freud's theory of dreams established a framework in which dreams are understood not as arbitrary phenomena but as meaningful expressions of unconscious wishes and conflicts. Through the concepts of manifest and latent content and the mechanisms of the dream-work, Freud provided a systematic account of how unconscious material is transformed into the symbolic imagery experienced during sleep. Despite ongoing debate regarding the empirical validity of some aspects of Freud's model, his work remains a landmark contribution to the psychological study of dreaming and the broader exploration of the unconscious mind.

Clinical research outside psychoanalytic settings has also examined dream anxiety and recall in relation to sleep-related arousal, illustrating that dream phenomena are investigated across both interpretative and neuropsychiatric frameworks (Yazla et al., 2017). Recent work in psychotherapy has proposed a triangular clinical understanding in which the dream, the patient, and the practitioner make distinct contributions to therapeutic dream work (Schön, 2023). A review of the available evidence further indicates that structured dream work may deepen sessions and support insight, although the limited and heterogeneous evidence base warrants cautious interpretation (Spangler & Sim, 2023).

In contrast, although Lacan remained faithful to Freud, he conceptualised dream interpretation from an alternative perspective that retained Freud's central concepts while extending them. He proposed the orders of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real as central to dream interpretation (Kovacevic, 2013). Both Lacan and Freud regarded dreams as symbolic narratives encoding unresolved conflicts, anxieties, and repressed desires; however, Lacan viewed dreams specifically as operating within the Imaginary and the Symbolic and as linguistic constructs requiring interpretation (Dhumal, 2023). For Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language (Manzi, 2015). The dream places the signifying language of the Symbolic order within an abstract domain, although it does not follow the rules and structures of language (Ghasemi et al., 2017). The dream is a ciphered truth that is present but concealed; this truth permits translation in terms of desire, and interpretation is practised on the basis of that desire (Miller, 2014–2015). Desire lies at the heart of human existence, as it is through desire that individuals identify themselves as human beings and, by articulating it, bring it into existence (Bonar, 2019). Apart from expressing the dreamer's unconscious, the dream also seeks to respond to the desire of the Other. Indeed, the function of dreams is always associated with the enigma of the desire and jouissance of the Other, and the dream attempts to answer this enigma through the encoding of metaphorical and metonymic formations (Δημητριάδης, 2013) that constitute ciphered truth. Because Lacan (2011) viewed the unconscious as discontinuity, interruption, instantaneousness, and surprise, unconscious desire may emerge in dreams in a ciphered form. Only the dreams of psychotic individuals appear unveiled because, in such cases, the unconscious is like an "open sky" in which repression has failed (Fuentes, 2020). In an analytic context involving non-psychotic subjects, the dream is spoken, and its disconnected elements can be conceptualised one by one so that these fragments become associations that are gathered and eventually knotted with the Symbolic and the Imaginary (Westcombe, 2020). Thus, dream analysis is a methodical deciphering of the dream's enciphering: it fulfils and interprets a desire, unveils itself (Castanet, 2020), and ultimately enters the Symbolic and Imaginary orders.

Regardless of how fully a dream is narrated, something inexpressible always remains and belongs to the order of the Real. In Lacanian terms, the Real is traumatic: a void beyond language that resists symbolisation, represents what cannot be fully captured, and intrudes upon reality, disrupting the illusion of structure and understanding. It thereby creates a sense of existential anxiety by confronting the subject with the ever-elusive and unattainable object of desire (*the objet petit a*) (Dhumal, 2023). As Laurent (2009) claims, although the dream constructs a story, it ultimately fails to bring that story to completion because a point always escapes the power of narration and cannot be represented. Any interpretation gives rise to the subjective realisation of a void and must target the void created by the primordial absence of the lost object (Laurent, 2019). Freud referred to this limit as "the

navel of the dream”, which is unrecognisable and without meaning, and at which desire cannot be represented (Cornu, 2020). This is the point at which, according to Freud, interpretation fails because the patient encounters “the hard rock of castration” (Rousselle, 2021). However, Lacan (2019a) viewed this limit of analysis as a hole, inaccessible through speech, linked to the inaugural trauma that leaves a scar on the body and forms a knot. For Lacan, Freud was mistaken in conceiving it as a substance (a rock), because it is instead a clearing or desert in which everything is expected, and a space in which a person stands alone facing the dark world (Rousselle, 2021). At this point, the dream’s weaving and cipher cease to function, and the dreamer awakens (Rousselle, 2021). This elusive entity becomes central to Lacan’s approach to dream analysis.

A dream represented and interpreted according to the Symbolic and Imaginary orders remains within the realm of desire. However, when this elusive entity emerges, the dream is not a royal road to desire but a secret path to the Real (Leguil, 2020). In this case, the dream cannot be articulated or interpreted in the same way because, as Brousse (2019) suggests, it reflects the inaugural trauma and creates a hole in knowledge that resonates and produces waves. Therefore, the psychoanalyst should turn to poetics as a way of positioning themselves towards the Real, because the poetic function emphasises the material that associates sound and meaning, reveals language as resonance, and somehow closes around the void (Laurent, 2019). According to Laurent (2019), the psychoanalyst adopts this poetic stance when dealing with the dreamer’s nightmares and remains present when the dreamer’s world collapses. However, this “new poetry”, manifested through interpretative jaculations and cuts, is linked to touches [trauma] rather than to beauty as in poetry. A cut is an asemantic unit that returns the subject to the opacity of their jouissance before it closes upon itself (Miller, 1999). In other words, cuts are symbolic acts that operate as “openings” through which patients confront their own experiences of the Real and awaken to their own Real, just as a good poem may awaken someone (Rousselle, 2021). By contrast, jaculation stands for the Real effect of meaning, which is neither imaginary nor symbolic (Miller, 2004), and tightens the knot around the body (Miller, 2001). Thus, cuts and jaculations in clinical practice may address the scar on the body that emerges through the hole.

Miller (2014) proposes that the analyst, through their own presence, testifies to the encounter with the Real, and that their desire is the desire to awaken. Indeed, unlike Freud, Lacan (2019b) was inspired not by the desire to sleep but by awakening. This awakening, however, has nothing to do with the waking state or with the reality in which people ordinarily live. As Brousse and Poliakoff (2019) claim, individuals also dream, delude themselves, or fantasise in everyday life, but their nightmares literally awaken them because they constitute a window onto the Real. This Real must be sought beyond the dream, in what the dream has enveloped but concealed from the dreamer (Lacan, 2011). In traumatic dreams, such as nightmares, it is the Real that awakens the dreamer so that, once awake, they can continue dreaming (Fuentes, 2020). Nonetheless, there is a moment of slight awakening and opening, like a small hole or window beyond which lies darkness (Rousselle, 2021). On emerging from sleep, there is a moment of awareness before any reflection, discourse, or enunciation. This is a profoundly solitary experience that lasts only briefly before attention becomes focused; the moment is then lost, and the individual re-emerges into everyday life until night and sleep resume their course towards death (Westcombe, 2020). This awakening, described by Lacan (1975) as a flash of lightning or lucidity, is an uninvited intervention from the Real (Rousselle, 2021). However, an important question arises as to whether the psychoanalyst should seek to interpret this hole and force it into the Symbolic and Imaginary orders or instead allow it to remain open. If the aim of dream analysis is to realise an awakening through the analyst’s function, insofar as that function sifts out and verifies the Real, then each analytic session embodies an encounter with the Real while inevitably failing to grasp it (Cornu, 2020). The analyst, as a subject supposed to know how to manoeuvre, operates by indicating an index of the Real rather than using it as an index of truth, while recognising that an open end always remains (Giraldo, 2020). The analyst’s function is not to sustain the illusion that knowledge can be formed to provide satisfaction, but to indicate that truth is accessible only through a half-saying that cannot be stated completely, because beyond that half there is nothing to say (Lacan, 2006).

In contrast to the aforementioned theories, Daseinsanalysis rejects dominant theories of dream interpretation and differs radically from Freudian and Lacanian perspectives on dream analysis. The Daseinsanalytic approach opens a path towards a different understanding and therefore relinquishes the customary objectifying, capsule-like representations of a subject, psyche, ego, or consciousness (Cohn, 1996, 1997). Based on Heidegger’s phenomenology, the Daseinsanalytic approach does not distinguish between surface and depth; instead, it attempts to establish ever-widening contexts (Cohn, 1997) and open new horizons. Binswanger (2024), the founder of Daseinsanalysis, argued that the human being is not limited to the narrow confines of biological functions or the laws of the unconscious, but is understood as a person who strives to attune to the world. The

phenomenological perspective does not adhere to a theory that is applied to all human experiences. Instead, following Husserl's (2000) injunction to return "back to the things themselves", Daseinsanalysis calls for a return to lived experience free from theories, prejudices, and preconceived notions or constructs. For example, dreams can be viewed as a change in things and as an event that disrupts "natural determinism" and disregards the scientific worldview, thereby returning things to their enigmatic continuity (Γεμενετζής, 2009). Yet they cannot be understood only in this way.

Binswanger (2024) claims that the dream is nothing more than a specific way of being and that dreams refer to a deeper mystery. This capacity of dreams to speak for themselves has been ignored by mainstream thought because it focuses on why dreams are incomprehensible, foreign, and unrecognisable, resulting in a blind gaze towards dreams as dreams (Γεμενετζής, 2009). Boss also opposed the view of human beings as a psychic apparatus whose reactions to the world are secondary phenomena determined by unseen psychic forces and structures (Spinelli, 1996). Condrau (1996) suggests that Boss succeeded in unmasking the concept of the unconscious as fictional and abstract. For Boss (1957), whether awake or dreaming, human beings always fulfil one and the same existence, while dreams illuminate the dreamer's existence because they constitute a mode of being in their own right. Although Boss (1977) recognises differences between the existential modes of waking and dreaming in terms of freedom and perceptual openness, he maintains that both are states of one and the same human existence and therefore always belong together, revealing existence as an 'ecstatic' opening of the clearing called the world. However, Γεμενετζής, Boss's student, rejected any distinction between waking and dreaming. Γεμενετζής (2009) suggests that waking and dreaming constitute a unity and are equally real. A dream does not exist independently, because the dream and the dreamer are inseparable, and this relationship constitutes the dream's presence (Γεμενετζής, 2009).

Although a dream discloses a person's current concerns (Langdridge, 2006), the primary issue in dreaming is not the concrete source of concern itself, but its existential dimension (Jaenicke, 2008). According to Jaenicke (1996), dreams confront human beings with their being-in-the-world as it matters to them; in other words, dreams embody and reveal the ontological dimension of their current concerns. Ontology addresses the question of what Being is. According to Heidegger, ontology studies Being insofar as it is Being, with the intention of giving a concrete meaning to Being by examining the being of human beings (*Dasein*) (Itohowo & Otto, 2024). For Heidegger, throughout the Western history of philosophy, metaphysicians failed to master the fundamental problem of Being; consequently, metaphysics was reduced to a science and converted into a technique, resulting in the "oblivion" of ontological difference (Gandellini, 2018). By separating Being from beings, ontological difference defines the referential domains of both ontology and metaphysics (Gandellini, 2018), thereby providing the criterion that distinguishes ontology (the inquiry into Being) from metaphysics (the science of beings as such) (Heidegger, 1962). In other words, the "ontological" refers to the Being of a particular being, whereas the "ontic" refers to what a particular being can do or does (Itohowo & Otto, 2024). Heidegger's aim was to identify the ontological features of human existence that apply across particular human beings. These features are termed "existentials": structures that constitute existentiality, openness towards the world, and transcendence, while encompassing diverse ontic modes and contributing to ontic investigations by providing a useful framework for particular inquiries (Fernandez, 2018). One example of these "existentials" is Care (*Sorge*). Care has two manifestations: inauthentic caretaking (leaping-in) and authentic caregiving (leaping-ahead). Inauthentic caretaking occurs when care is taken away from the Other by stepping into their place, replacing them, pushing them aside, and perhaps controlling them; authentic caregiving, by contrast, helps others to clarify themselves, assume their own responsibilities and burdens, and become free within their care (Heidegger, 1962). Inauthentic caretaking reflects an inauthentic mode of living in which individuals are led to forget what it means "to be" in everyday life, and existence falls "victim" to the "dictatorship" of no particular person by allowing itself to be guided by the impersonal and anonymous "they" (*Das man*) (Onwuatuegwu, 2022). The "they" (*Das man*) constitute public opinion, providing relief, covering everything, and making everything familiar and accessible, thereby making decisions and removing all responsibility (Heidegger, 1962). For Heidegger, public opinion could take the form of a dominant theory, ideology, social construct, scientific method, technique, language, or even a book that interprets the dreams of all human beings. By contrast, authenticity stems from human individuality, freedom, and responsibility, and involves a continuous effort to distinguish oneself from the world of *Das man* (Igwe & Ekemezie, 2021). However, authenticity is not another level that a person can attain and inhabit, nor does it imply an evaluative criterion of superiority. Rather, it is a call for constant disclosedness and for living authentically to the extent that *Dasein* relates to the things around it without overlooking the fact that *Dasein* also relates to others (Onwuatuegwu, 2022).

For Binswanger (2024), the basic ontological element of all dreams is that dreaming means not knowing what is happening to the dreamer, because the individual is presented not as the creator of the dream but as the person to whom the dream happens. For this reason, dreams are not puzzles to be solved but openings to be attended to (Cohn, 1997). Indeed, dreams are not considered useful for human self-preservation; rather, they are as real as waking life and are not limited to their narrative (Γεμενετζής, 2009). Γεμενετζής (2009) also views dreams as something that: (a) holds within itself the inconceivable and unimaginable, namely nothingness; (b) opens a view in which everything is illuminated by the distinctive light of an unknown place; (c) brings with it an as-yet-unassimilated abundance of potential; and (d) resembles a portrait of ourselves that does not resemble us but that we are called upon to change and resemble, abandoning the prejudice that our world is determined solely by the reality of sleep. Yet the horizons that open are not limited to these perspectives and remain open to others.

Regarding dream interpretation, Boss proposes an interpretation purely in terms of the dream because he believes that the dream speaks for itself (Holzhey-Kunz, 2014). Any interpretation belongs to the waking state, whereas mystery prevails in dreams because, during sleep, everything is lost (i.e., knowledge, ability, and the personal pronoun of potential possibility) (Γεμενετζής, 2009). Daseinsanalysts do not interpret dreams but explicate them; they do not need to look for anything “behind” the dream, rely on symbols, or ask for associations, because the structures presented are inherently meaningful to therapist and client insofar as they share a common world of meanings and expressions (Kruger, 1982). After all, the attitude that leads to the truth of the dream is a renunciation of that which has proved superfluous and falls away on its own—a renunciation that does not deprive but grants access to the inexhaustible power of simplicity, as Heidegger suggests (Γεμενετζής, 2009). Although the dream appears as alien content after waking, the dream-ego, as a distinctive way of being, is almost indifferent to the phenomena that hold the subject captive. Consequently, dream existence is freer than waking existence, and alternative horizons of meaning can emerge in dreams (Szummer & Almási, 2022). Because no theory serves as a guide in Daseinsanalysis, the analyst remains empty-handed; however, the emptier their hands are, the more open they are to what occurs in the analysis. As the analysis proceeds, the analysand’s relationship with dreams changes: dreams, together with other issues, are freed from the shackles of prejudice, become clear and light, calm down, and disappear (Γεμενετζής, 2009). Hence, the aim is not to assign meaning to the dream but to sharpen the gaze so that it can discern the difference between what can be questioned and articulated and that for which questions and words have no meaning (Γεμενετζής, 2009).

1.1 Research Gap

Recent empirical modelling has related patterns of dream-ego agency to psychotherapy themes and changes over treatment, while also noting that empirical support for dream interpretation remains limited (Roesler et al., 2024).

Despite the theoretical importance of dream work across these traditions, contemporary empirical research has tended to focus more on theoretical formulations than on therapists’ lived clinical experiences of engaging with dreams in practice. Furthermore, while dream analysis continues to be utilized by many psychotherapists, there is limited qualitative research exploring how therapists themselves experience the process of working with dreams in the therapeutic setting. Understanding how clinicians from different theoretical orientations interpret, engage with, and attribute meaning to dream material can offer valuable insight into the practical application of these theoretical models. Exploring therapists’ lived experiences may also illuminate how dream work shapes the therapeutic relationship, clinical decision-making, and the unfolding of the therapeutic process. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is particularly appropriate for this inquiry, as it seeks to explore in depth how individuals make sense of their lived experiences.

1.2 Objective of the Study

By focusing on psychotherapists trained in psychodynamic, Lacanian, and Daseinsanalytic approaches, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how different theoretical frameworks inform the experience and meaning of dream analysis in clinical practice. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to the qualitative literature on psychotherapy practice by highlighting the experiential and interpretative dimensions of dream work from the perspective of practising therapists.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

The present study employed a qualitative research design consistent with the epistemological foundations of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which seeks to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for investigating complex and subjective phenomena because they allow for rich and detailed accounts of participants' perspectives (Smith et al., 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method commonly used in IPA studies because it provides a flexible framework that encourages participants to describe their experiences in depth while allowing the researcher to explore emerging themes (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This interview format balances structure and openness, enabling participants to articulate their personal meanings and reflections concerning their experiences of dream analysis in psychotherapeutic practice.

2.2 Analytic Approach

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach that aims to explore in detail how individuals make sense of their personal and social experiences. Developed within psychology, IPA is grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography and seeks to understand how people interpret significant events in their lives (Smith et al., 2009). Rather than attempting to produce generalisable explanations of behaviour, IPA focuses on examining how participants understand and attribute meaning to their experiences. The approach is therefore particularly suitable for research concerned with complex, subjective phenomena such as emotions, identity, and inner experiences.

IPA involves an in-depth examination of participants' accounts to explore how individuals perceive and interpret particular phenomena. Researchers typically analyse rich, first-person narratives obtained through qualitative data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews. Through careful and systematic analysis, the researcher seeks to identify themes that capture the essence of participants' meaning-making processes. In this way, IPA enables the exploration of how individuals construct meaning within specific contexts while acknowledging the researcher's active role in interpreting these experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

IPA is underpinned by a constructivist and interpretative epistemological position. Within this perspective, knowledge is understood as being co-constructed through the interaction between researcher and participant, rather than discovered as an objective truth. IPA therefore recognises that participants' accounts represent their interpretations of their experiences, which are themselves shaped by social, cultural, and personal contexts (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Consequently, the aim of IPA research is not to access a purely objective representation of experience, but rather to explore how individuals interpret and articulate the meaning of their lived experiences.

The approach also reflects the influence of phenomenological philosophy, which emphasises the importance of examining subjective experience. However, IPA differs from descriptive phenomenology by acknowledging that interpretation is unavoidable in qualitative analysis. Researchers therefore engage actively with participants' accounts, seeking to understand the meanings embedded within them while remaining reflexively aware of their own interpretative role in the analytic process (Smith et al., 2009).

Two central principles that shape IPA are the double hermeneutic and idiography. The double hermeneutic refers to the interpretative process inherent in IPA research, whereby participants seek to make sense of their experiences while the researcher simultaneously attempts to make sense of the participants' sense-making (Smith et al., 2009). This layered process highlights the interpretative nature of qualitative inquiry and acknowledges that the researcher's analysis involves active engagement with participants' narratives. Idiography is another key characteristic of IPA and refers to the approach's commitment to the detailed examination of individual cases. Rather than beginning with large samples or aiming for broad generalisations, IPA prioritises the thorough analysis of a small number of participants. Each case is examined in depth before cross-case analysis, allowing the researcher to identify both shared themes and important divergences across participants' experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This emphasis on the particular enables researchers to capture the complexity of individual meaning-making while identifying patterns that illuminate how a phenomenon is experienced across participants.

Data analysis followed the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) described by Smith et al. (2009): (1) reading and re-reading; (2) initial noting; (3) developing emergent themes; (4) searching for connections across emergent themes; (5) moving to the next case; and (6) looking for patterns across cases.

2.3 Sample and Procedure

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The study sought experienced psychotherapists who regularly engaged with dream material in clinical practice. Potential participants were identified through professional networks and referrals within psychoanalytic and existential psychotherapy communities. Psychotherapists who met the inclusion criteria were contacted by email and provided with information about the study's aims, the nature of participation, and the relevant ethical procedures. Those who expressed interest received a participant information sheet and an informed consent form outlining the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Each interview was conducted online and lasted 45–50 minutes. After the interviews, all participants were thanked and received a debriefing form.

Participants were required to meet the following criteria: (1) be psychotherapists who had completed at least five years of formal training in psychodynamic psychotherapy, Lacanian psychoanalysis, or Daseinsanalysis; (2) have at least 10 years of professional clinical experience practising psychotherapy; (3) have experience of working with dream material in psychotherapy sessions, because dream analysis constituted the focus of the present study; and (4) be willing to participate in an in-depth qualitative interview exploring their lived experience of dream analysis in clinical practice. Participants were excluded if they: (1) practised therapeutic approaches outside the three selected analytic traditions; (2) had not completed formal training in one of the three therapeutic approaches; (3) had less than 10 years of clinical experience in psychotherapy; (4) had limited or no experience of working with dreams; or (5) were unable to participate in a full qualitative interview.

A total of five psychotherapists who met the inclusion criteria agreed to participate in the study. This sample size is considered appropriate for IPA research, which typically employs small, purposively selected samples to allow for an in-depth, idiographic exploration of participants' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, a sample of five participants was considered appropriate for the aims of the present study. The participants comprised three men and two women, with a mean age of 53 years and a mean of 20 years of clinical practice. All participants had completed formal training in their respective therapeutic approaches, with each programme lasting five years or longer.

2.4 Ethics

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout all stages of the research process. The research was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and the Code of Conduct as outlined by the American Psychological Association. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts and participants were assigned pseudonyms. Any potentially identifiable details were modified or omitted to protect participants' identities. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices and were accessible only to the researcher. Given the professional nature of the sample, particular care was taken to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing reflections on their clinical practice. The interviews focused on participants' professional experiences of working with dreams rather than on identifiable client material, and participants were encouraged to avoid sharing information that could compromise client confidentiality. All data were handled in accordance with data protection regulations and used solely for the purposes of this research.

2.5 Analysis

Theme 1: What is a dream?

Subtheme 1: Dream as a lived experience

Extract 1:

"I would say that dream is a phenomenon and an experience. I don't see dreams as anything different from a waking experience. It is the same person who dreams and who lives. So, in essence, dreams show us the world in which we find ourselves. That's how I perceive dreams. And that's how I deal

with them therapeutically... The only thing I can see is that dreams are perhaps more authentic. Because we can't create nor fabricate them. Somehow dreams often capture something more clearly than our waking life" (Marina -Daseinsanalyst)

Marina neither offers a firm, closed definition of dreams nor views dreams as different from waking experience. Accordingly, she attributes no primacy to dreams over the waking state or vice versa. A dream is an experience that occurs to everyone and depicts the world in which people live from a different perspective. This view of the world appears more authentic and unfiltered because, in dreams, no process of deliberate creation or production occurs as it does in the waking state. Dreams simply occur as phenomena, without an attempt to understand or explain why or how. For Marina, dreaming resembles looking at a forest at night when a sudden flash of lightning (the dream) allows the same forest to be seen from a different angle.

Extract 2:

"I think that the very question "what is a dream" somehow presupposes that what I am asking about is foreign to me, something I don't know, and so I seek to define it. Let's say a child might ask "what is parliament". The child does not know what parliament is, hears the name somewhere and asks to find out. This is what happens when our dream becomes an issue. It becomes an issue that I seek to understand. Unlike the child who does not know or has never heard of "what parliament is," this is not the case with our dreams; they are there, we see them. I can only imagine a definition in the context of a scientific view that is not satisfied with the experience of the dream and seeks to define it"(Kevin - Daseinsanalyst)

For Kevin, defining dreams would mean treating the dream as something outside experience and asking about it in the same way that a child asks what parliament is, because parliament is a construct foreign to the child's experience. Dreams, however, are already familiar and form part of experience; therefore, there is no reason to look beyond them. Kevin avoids this metaphysical leap into a scientific world that can be depicted as a greedy creature, unsatisfied with its own experience and constantly seeking more. The moment a person questions dreams, they become an issue requiring further understanding and explanation so that they can be firmly grasped, thereby casting doubt on the person's own experience.

Subtheme 2: Dream as a construct

Extract 3:

"In a sense, dream is a construct. They [dreams] are a mental construct that do not fall under conscious functioning, because the entire process takes place during sleep, when we are not in a conscious state. So, it is a construct that captures and represents our mental state, mainly and usually through images. This mental state is not conscious, but it is in an unconscious state. For that reason Freud used his famous phrase that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious" (Kaleb - Psychodynamic Psychotherapist)

Kaleb views dreams through the lens of his approach. Remaining faithful to Freud, he offers a definition that reflects Freud's perspective that dreams constitute a path to the unconscious. He regards the dream as a psychic construct but overlooks that the theory he embraces is itself another, theoretical construct in which he is confined. Kaleb neither moves beyond nor questions Freudian theory, nor does he contribute his own perspective to it. Imbued with Freudian principles, he remains within the realm of scientific explanation by providing a definition of dreams that focuses on their single objective: reaching the unconscious. The dream appears as something elusive to the waking, conscious state or as a dark path leading to the shadowy realm of the unconscious.

Extract 4:

"Lacan follows Freud in saying that it [dream] is the gateway to the unconscious... it is something that comes from the unconscious and the repressions or anything that has conflicted with the subject in everyday life which cannot be recorded by consciousness, in a way, the dream brings it up. Of course, it needs to be decoded, but it basically comes encoded" (Maya - LacanianPsychoanalyst)

As Lacan follows Freud, Maya follows Lacan by adopting his views on the definition of dreams. Although Lacan considered himself loyal to Freud, he developed perspectives and theories that opened a new way of viewing dreams. However, Maya remains fully faithful to Lacanian views, thereby reproducing the theoretical construct developed by Lacan. For Maya, dreams constitute a complex and ciphered construct that needs to be deciphered by unravelling a tangle. Nothing can remain unrecorded. If consciousness fails to record something, the unconscious, like a well-oiled machine that never ceases, captures and records it. It is then the dreamer's task to bring this material to the surface so that the machine can continue operating through decipherment. Therefore, the dream is a construct, or machine, that draws the unconscious to the surface and into the realm of language.

Theme 2: The tail of the dream

Subtheme 1: Dream chained to the significant others

Extract 5:

"The signifiers in Lacanian psychoanalysis are basic elements of concepts that have been given to a subject by what we call in Lacanian theory of the Big Other, who initially, as we know, is the mother, the nurturer, the place of signifiers, the first place that comes to the subject, so it is foreign, but it marks them. So, through the process of dreaming and through the dreams that the analysand brings to the analytical framework, important elements can emerge about the subject's unconscious desire, about the fantasy in which this unconscious desire is held, therefore, it is very important that people can dream and bring us their dreams" (David - Lacanian Psychoanalyst)

According to David, the dream is chained to the Big Other through unconscious desire. Dreams reveal unconscious desire, which is always attached to the Big Other. The significance of the dream itself disappears as the significance of unconscious desire emerges. This unconscious desire encompasses the unknown marks imprinted by the Big Other. The world of the dream does not exist independently but signifies the world of the unconscious. The dream is exhausted through its articulation within the analytic framework and the Big Other, and through the major revelation of unconscious desire. The dream is lost, and only its aftermath prevails, chained to the significant other.

Extract 6:

"It [the dream] is an indication that something is happening within the analytical framework that has to do with the psychological interaction between these two people, that is, with this intersubjective situation, so in a way it is an expression of what we psychoanalytically call transference. However, because transference is triggered within the psychological interaction with the analyst, does not come out of nowhere but stems from the relationship that already existed and is psychologically engraved with people who were once significant others, and the emotions that accompany them" (Kaleb - Psychodynamic Psychotherapist)

For Kaleb, the dream reveals the past relationship with the significant other. Here, the dream is associated with transference and serves the waking state, as the analysand attempts to view past relationships clearly through dreams. The analyst functions as the trigger that unfolds all past experiences. There is no present and no future. Dreams are trapped in the past and chained to the significant other and to the ways in which others leave their imprint on the dreamer. Dreams appear to exist to reveal trauma that cannot be relieved and continues to return during sleep. The dreamer may forget during the waking state, but dreams remain to recall the potential nightmare experienced in the past. In this sense, nothing can be forgotten. The waking state takes precedence over the dreaming state because past waking experiences form dreams.

Subtheme 2: Dream unleashed from its tail

Extract 7:

"I think that dreams show us our world a bit more clearly. Sometimes during this period, sometimes more generally. But this period also shows the bigger picture. It's never disconnected... our experience

during this period along with what has happened in our lives and how we see our future. So I think that dreams show us the world we live in vividly and clearly. That's what I would say. That's why dreams are important to me. I see them as a reflection of the world my patient is in" (Marina -Daseinsanalyst)

Here, the dream acquires a temporality that encompasses the past, present, and future. The dream is not chained to others, and the tail that would reveal something significant vanishes. Marina claims that dreams show the world in which the dreamer lives. However, she does not specify that this is the world of the waking state; the dream world may be a world in its own right. The dream is neither isolated from the individual's experience nor confined to it. It is free to float across temporality and offers a clear reflection of the patient's world. The nature of this reflection and that with which it may be associated are neither specified nor treated as the core of the dream. The dream experience remains open and brings forth the dreamer's world.

Extract 8:

"My approach would be to view dreams as dreams... as free from prejudice as possible. In other words, if a dream is strange, inexplicable, bizarre, then it is what it is. There is no need, for the sake of supposed continuity, to rush the dream by placing it within my own interpretative framework... this deviates [from the classical concept of dream interpretation] in the sense that it is a view that is not subject to and does not follow the spirit of science. It seeks to let dreams be dreams" (Kevin - Daseinsanalyst)

Kevin cuts off the dream's tail and allows dreams to remain dreams. He dares to discard scientific explanations or interpretations that would place the dream within a meaningful sequence merely because dreams cannot be allowed to remain inexplicable or strange. Kevin opposes the tendency to interpret everything, particularly what appears bizarre, in order to integrate it into experience and move forwards. Any prejudice or scientific explanation poisons and confines dreams. His perspective is released from science and breaks continuity so that something bizarre can remain bizarre and thereby be put to rest. Kevin effects a turn towards the things themselves, echoing Husserl's (2000) phrase "back to the things themselves", so that dreams can return to being dreams and nothing more. This return of dreams to themselves therefore constitutes a revelation in its own right.

Theme 3: The role of the analyst in dream interpretation

Subtheme 1: The analyst as a facilitator of the revelation of the hidden

Extract 9:

"In dreams, we search for the [unconscious] desire, and even if it is difficult to find it, we direct our interpretation towards it. Of course, some subjects may not be ready to see even this desire, so we do not press them, we do not interpret too much. We interpret to the extent that the subjects themselves interpret their dream and to the point that they can reach, or perhaps a little further, in order to spark an enigma and open up the unconscious more" (Maya - Lacanian Psychoanalyst)

For Maya, the analyst functions as a facilitator in the search for desire. Although she claims that interpretation originates from the subject and that no pressure is exerted, the analyst directs interpretation towards desire and reaches beyond the point attained by the subject in order to spark an enigma that may reveal the unconscious. In other words, the analyst digs slightly deeper to gain insight into the desire residing in the unconscious. The analyst presupposes that the dream is exclusively linked to unconscious desire. Other paths or aspects of the dream are considered insignificant. Even when unconscious desire is difficult to identify, it can be constructed and directed towards that realm. Within this perspective, desire cannot be absent, nor can the dream be interpreted otherwise. The confirmation of the theory that dreams reveal unconscious desire appears more important than what occurs during the session, leaving no space for anything else to emerge. The dream is therefore constricted and sacrificed to the revelation of the unconscious, which emerges through an enigma.

Extract 10:

"The role of the analyst is therefore to facilitate the decoding of the elements provided by the dream, not by offering his own assessment and interpretation, but by helping the analysand to attribute

meaning to the content of the dream himself, attempting to understand what we call latent content, that is, what is concealed within the dream from what is apparent as clear content, which we call manifest content” (Kaleb - Psychodynamic Psychotherapist)

In this extract, the analyst functions as a facilitator of the deciphering process until the concealed content of the dream is revealed and the analysand can attribute personal meaning to it. The analyst allows the analysand to interpret the dream, but only on the condition that they reach the latent content and bring it to the surface, as though all hidden aspects of the dream could be illuminated, articulated, and distinguished from the manifest ones. In this way, the dream appears as a tangible object that can be opened, investigated, and deciphered in order to be understood. Once again, the theoretical framework of latent and manifest content appears to take precedence because it establishes the context within which the dream is interpreted. The analysand is free to interpret the dream, but only within a specific framework. The dream’s concealed content, rather than the whole dream, becomes the key to interpretation.

Subtheme 2: The analyst as an indicator of openness

Extract 11:

“First, I ask the analysand about the mood of the dream, how he felt, what he thinks as he hears it now that he is awake. What his mood is now towards the dream. And so what does he say in relation to his life... And then I tell him, if I have something that I really think about or that impresses me, or if there is something prominent in the dream. And I ask him whether he agrees with what I am saying or not... I approach dreams in a completely phenomenological way. That is, I won't give them any extra significance. In other words, if I see that the analysand doesn't give it any extra significance in his life, I won't insist on it” (Marina -Daseinsanalyst)

Marina’s stance towards the dream differs considerably from the preceding positions. Adopting a phenomenological perspective, she neither adjusts dream interpretation to a specific theoretical framework nor attributes additional significance to the dream if the analysand does not. Marina remains open to what she hears. The subject and the dream remain in the foreground without an emphasis on hidden meanings. Her questions arise from the conversation between analyst and analysand about the dream. Marina does not offer interpretations that close into a specific form of meaning-making. The analysand is free to narrate the aspects of the dream they choose and in the manner they prefer. Even when an interpretation is offered, the analysand remains free to agree or disagree. A non-coercive approach to dream interpretation is therefore prominent in Marina’s account. The path is not predetermined, and the analysand is free to explore it without being bound to a theory or a specific destination.

Extract 12:

“If dreams come to mind, dreams come. Perhaps one particular thing is that they are foreign. In this foreignness, I would see more the analyst's "mission" to invite his patient to become familiar with things that are foreign, inexplicable, and to open up a space that can accommodate even the inexplicable things. ... And that is exactly what is required when it comes to dreams, somewhere the possibility of giving up on making sense of them, that is, more or less explaining them, integrating them into the continuity of my life, etc.” (Kevin - Daseinsanalyst)

Kevin highlights unfamiliarity with the inexplicable, which appears alien or foreign. He does not dissect the dream to make sense of it, but remains in this foreign territory and opens a space in which the analysand may embrace mystery and the unknown. No theory directs interpretation, and there is not even a dream interpretation. Instead, there is only the possibility of creating open spaces in which the individual can remain without seeking theoretical supports or meaning-making. Kevin identifies the alternative of renouncing meaningfulness and remaining open to whatever emerges. If a dream comes, so be it; if something foreign and inexplicable comes, so be it. The analyst’s stance is one of openness, and through this openness, the analyst can invite the patient to enter these open spaces together.

Theme 4: Interpretation as a calling

Extract 13:

"Interpretation does not aim at understanding, nor at enabling understanding. According to Lacan, the attempt to understand and to make sense of something is often an attempt to confuse oneself; interpretation therefore needs to be an opening, not something definitive. It is a way for the analysis to proceed" (David - Lacanian Psychoanalyst)

David releases interpretation from closed interpretative frameworks. Any attempt to understand or assign meaning appears confusing and may constitute a fallacy. Regardless of how hard one person attempts to understand another, they cannot escape their own filters, experiences, and knowledge, which prevent complete understanding of the other person. A fallacy therefore always poses a risk and may interfere with and confuse the process. Interpretation is what flows and constitutes a calling for the analysis to continue. It is not a closed construct supplied to the patient so that they can fit within it. Any definitive interpretation would impoverish and diminish the analysis. Interpretation as an opening recalls the analyst's poetic stance as a way of remaining present when the analysand's world collapses (Laurent, 2019).

Extract 14:

"We can always hear it as a dream where what matters is the analyst's daydreaming, that is, his own thoughts as freely flowing as possible without being trapped, let's say, in an attempt to understand the material through theories and logical processes but where his own associative function, whatever that may be and whatever it may bring, usually reflects the latent content of the dream" (Kaleb - Psychodynamic Psychotherapist)

Kaleb proposes an interpretation that is free from theories, preconceived constructs, and prejudices. This constitutes a calling for the analyst to throw off the veil of metaphysics in which they may be trapped. Interpretation derives from the analyst's associative function as it emerges from an authentic conversation with the analysand. Although it is impossible for the analyst to be entirely free from theory, striving towards this position remains a valuable aim. This calling therefore does not occur only once in the analysis but continuously flows and sustains free-floating attention. In this way, the analyst can invite the analysand towards a corresponding liberation from the shackles of prejudice and ontic concerns.

Extract 15:

"I remember a woman who had attempted suicide with her husband. They had locked themselves in the garage, started the engine, and so on. Her husband died, but she survived. She was admitted to the clinic, and when she was discharged, I kept her in for analysis. At first, she sat opposite me, she didn't lie down [on the couch]. And after three months, she dreamed that she was on the deck of a ship in a crowd, with the crowd pushing her towards the stern so that she was in danger of falling into the sea. At some point, she got tired of resisting, fell into the sea, sank into the water, and disappeared. This dream, what moved me, was to invite her from now on to lie down [on the couch]" (Kevin - Daseinsanalyst)

Through his patient's dream, Kevin attributes to interpretation the purity of a calling. This calling is simultaneously literal and metaphorical. On the one hand, Kevin invites his patient to the opening represented by the couch; on the other, he invites her to remain with the mystery of the dream. Kevin does not seek a deeper meaning behind the dream but moves alongside the patient. He renounces interpretations associated with the dream's symbolism and returns to simplicity. Because, as Boss claims, the dream speaks for itself (Holzhey-Kunz, 2014), Kevin, like any other analyst, remains empty-handed; however, the emptier his hands are, the more open he is to what occurs in the analysis (Γεμεντζής, 2009). Kevin looks beyond the dream and opens new horizons that both participants can explore.

Theme 5: The uninterpretable dream

Subtheme 1: The "short-term" floating of the uninterpretable dream

Extract 16:

"I may return to the same dream depending on something, it may take up to two months until it is exhausted. Or maybe some parts of the dream that have remained unexplained are kept aside, and

when something comes up that I think is related, I return to the dream again" (Maya - Lacanian Psychoanalyst)

Maya highlights the significance of the uninterpretable dream. A dream that remains uninterpreted is not depicted as "hitting a wall" but as a clearing through which the analysis may continue. Knowledge recedes, and the analyst accepts this limit in advance. The analyst is far from being a subject who "knows it all", and this appears to present the same challenge to the analysand: being able to wait and allowing the dream to float, at least temporarily. However, there is a point at which the dream is exhausted, although some aspects may remain open. Maya presents this as an interplay between closing and returning to the dream, reflecting Giraldo's (2020) open ending. Thus, there is an opening, but still an end.

Extract 17:

"This [not interpreting dreams], being able to hold on to them and see them as fruit, let's say, like a tree that ripens and when it's time to be cut, it will be cut. But we shouldn't let it be cut earlier. Then it will be a raw fruit that will do us no good. Nor should we let it rot and fall. And to go wasted" (Kaleb - Psychodynamic Psychotherapist)

Kaleb compares the inexplicable dream to fruit on a tree. If the fruit is unripe, it is not yet time to pick it; however, it should not be allowed to rot and fall away. For Kaleb, time therefore plays an important role in interpretation. An early or hasty interpretation may confuse or even harm the analysand. At the same time, Kaleb suggests that everything will eventually be interpreted because the fruit should not rot and be wasted. Thus, although the analyst can be patient and wait for the appropriate moment, patience reaches its limit when confronted with the natural process through which ripe fruit eventually falls and decays. Similarly, a dream may float, but it cannot simply fall and disappear on its own.

Subtheme 2: The "long-term" floating of the uninterpretable dream

Extract 18:

"Neither for the clients nor for us [it is easy to break the habit of interpreting], I think.... The point is to be able to stay with it [the dream], even if it's incomprehensible at the moment you see it. And not to try to make sense of it prematurely. I often say that it doesn't matter if we don't see it clearly. It doesn't matter, let's just keep it with us this way" (Marina - Daseinsanalyst)

Marina underscores the difficulty that both clients and analysts experience in avoiding the trap of interpretation. In the inexplicable, she recognises the potential to bear what cannot be articulated, understood, or made sense of. This unknown place may remain unknown indefinitely because Marina does not specify how long the dream may be retained without interpretation. Thus, the dream may float for as long as necessary. As in life, not all things or aspects of dreams can be revealed and comprehended. What remains concealed may continue to rest as it is.

Extract 19:

"She says [the patient]: What do you think about the dream? [her dream includes her analyst and her being angry with him]"

Me: What do you think I could say?

Her: That it is positive. That it is positive, and I am just skeptical

Me: What is perceived as negative, the skepticism, shows as if it is not allowed to exist

Her: And the dream? You haven't told me yet

Me: It's not the dream that bothers you, but the fact that you interpreted it that way. That perhaps there really is a distrust between us that shouldn't exist and shouldn't be spoken of. Basically, you're asking

me if I also interpret the dream that way, i.e. as you said, negatively. You see how many things need to be prepared, resolved, before we can turn to the dream

Her: And now that we know this?

Me: It's not enough to know it, we first need to resolve some of these things, and then perhaps the time will come for the dream" (Kevin - Daseinsanalyst)

Kevin recalls a conversation with one of his patients to reflect on what precedes any dream interpretation. The patient seeks the analyst's agreement with her interpretation and, in a sense, asks him to interpret the dream in the same way. Kevin, however, steps back, allows the dream to remain itself, and illuminates her preconceptions about it. What stands out is his emphasis on how many matters must first be resolved before dream analysis or interpretation can occur. Even then, the time for the dream may never arrive. The patient must first clarify herself, move away from what others think or believe, and cease seeking meaning through others. Only then, perhaps, may the time for the dream arrive. After all, the dream is not limited to its narrative (Γεμεντζής, 2009) and is free to float. How long it floats depends neither on the analyst nor on the dream, but on how long the patient can tolerate the dream's mystery without trying to interpret it as a puzzle to be solved rather than viewing it as an opening to be attended to (Cohn, 1997). This process may continue indefinitely.

4. Discussion

The analysis above reflects how analysts from three psychotherapeutic approaches view dreams, dream interpretation, and dream analysis. The first theme addresses what a dream is and comprises two subthemes. In the first subtheme, the dream is depicted as lived experience, reflecting a phenomenological perspective without adopting a specific theory. Here, dreams do not differ from waking experience because, in both states, human beings fulfil one and the same existence (Boss, 1957). The only difference is that existence in dreams is freer than waking existence because dreams cannot be fabricated or deliberately produced, thereby opening alternative horizons of meaning (Szummer & Almási, 2022). The definitions arising in this subtheme are either open and do not confine the dream within a theoretical construct, or are absent altogether, reflecting Γεμεντζής's (2009) view that no dream exists on its own because dream and dreamer are one. Thus, this subtheme investigates the presence rather than the definition of the dream. The need to define the dream would serve the world of the "they" (*Das man*), who constitute public opinion by providing relief, covering everything, and making everything familiar and accessible (Heidegger, 1962). In this case, the "they" would be the scientific community, which requires a definition in order to submit with relief to "natural determinism", whereas this subtheme disregards the scientific worldview and returns things to their enigmatic continuity (Γεμεντζής, 2009). This turn from science towards inquiry constitutes the criterion that distinguishes ontology (the inquiry into Being) from metaphysics (the science of beings as such) (Heidegger, 1962). Therefore, this subtheme moves beyond science and illuminates ontological difference.

In the second subtheme, the dream appears as a construct based on firm theoretical foundations, although no theoretical foundation can be regarded as entirely stable because theories vary. Lacanian and Freudian concepts and theories emerge in this subtheme. The dream is considered the "royal road to the unconscious" (Freud, 1900/2010). Here, dream and waking states are fundamentally different because the dream is the gateway to the unconscious (Freud, 1900/2010), whereas the waking state represents consciousness. Thus, the dream is presented as ciphered truth (Miller, 2014–2015) requiring the methodical deciphering of its enciphering (Castanet, 2020). Because, for Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language (Manzi, 2015), it becomes the task of the waking state to conceptualise the disconnected elements of the dream and eventually gather and knot them with the Symbolic and the Imaginary (Westcombe, 2020). Consequently, the dream can be brought into consciousness and articulated in language through a process of unravelling the tangle. As a firm theoretical construct, the dream forms a capsule with multiple levels (conscious/unconscious, dream/waking state, surface/depth, Symbolic/Imaginary/Real, etc.). Combined Lacanian and Freudian concepts constitute a theoretical spectrum within which every dream follows a symbolic path that encodes unresolved conflicts, anxieties, and repressed desires (Dhumal, 2023). A practitioner trained within this spectrum may be unable to view dreams differently or even deviate slightly from the basic theoretical construct. Theories belonging to science and metaphysics develop techniques and closed constructs to overcome the failure to master the fundamental problem of Being, resulting in the "oblivion" of ontological difference (Gandellini, 2018). Thus, adherence to theory results in the predominance of the ontic, which refers to what a particular being can do or

does (Itohowo& Otto, 2024). In the case of dreams, analyst and analysand remain at an ontic level by seeking to see, define, decipher, and articulate the dream.

The second theme focuses on the tail of the dream, namely that to which the dream is chained. In the first subtheme, the dream is chained both to significant others and to the past. Repressed waking experiences from the past form dreams; thus, the waking state takes precedence over the dreaming state, and the past takes precedence over the present or future. The sole objective of the dream is to reveal unconscious desire, as Freud (1900/2010) claims. However, this unconscious desire is always associated with significant others or the Big Other. Participants' words reflect Δημητριάδης's (2013) view that the function of dreams is always associated with the enigma of desire and the jouissance of the Other, and that the dream attempts to answer this enigma through the encoding of metaphorical and metonymic formations. The world of the dream cannot stand alone but signifies unconscious desire, which in turn signifies significant others and the past. Nothing can be forgotten, and the dream cannot remain inconceivable and unimaginable (Γεμεντζής, 2009). In the other subtheme, the dream appears unleashed from its tail. Following Husserl's (2000) injunction to return "back to the things themselves", the dream disregards the customary objectifying, capsule-like representations of a subject, psyche, ego, or consciousness and, instead of distinguishing between surface and depth, attempts to establish ever-widening contexts (Cohn, 1997). Any effort to associate the dream with something would submit to mainstream thought, which seeks to explain why dreams are incomprehensible, foreign, and unrecognisable, thereby producing a blind gaze towards dreams as dreams (Γεμεντζής, 2009). The dream reflects the dreamer's world without further specification of temporality or waking and dreaming states. Therefore, dreams confront human beings with their being-in-the-world as it matters to them (Jaenicke, 1996), or, as Boss (1977) argues, dreams, together with the waking state, reveal existence as an 'ecstatic' opening. The dream is free to float across temporality and the dreamer's world, or even to remain a deeper mystery, as Binswanger (2024) suggests.

The third theme concerns the analyst's role in dream interpretation. The first subtheme views the analyst as a facilitator of the revelation of what is hidden. As Freud (1900/2010) suggests, dream interpretation focuses solely on latent content, and any interpretation should therefore arise from this realm. The theoretical distinction between latent and manifest content emerges to guide dream analysis and interpretation. Deciphering latent content reveals unconscious desire. Unconscious desire lies at the heart of human existence because, through desire, a person identifies themselves as a human being and, by articulating desire, brings it into existence (Bonar, 2019). However, this existence remains distant from the dream itself. The focus shifts away from the dream, falls into the deep well of the unconscious, and is lost. Consequently, every Freudian or Lacanian interpretation is made within the context of the unconscious. In these approaches, dream analysis therefore constitutes a methodical deciphering of the dream's enciphering, which fulfils a desire, interprets that desire, and unveils itself (Castanet, 2020). Again, this subtheme emphasises the significance of a specific theory because every dream interpretation must follow the path of the unconscious. Human existence, however, is not limited to the narrow confines of the laws of the unconscious (Binswanger, 2024). This interpretative effort appears to force the dream into a theory. Perhaps, however, a dream resembles a portrait that does not resemble us and that we are called upon to change and resemble (Γεμεντζής, 2009), rather than the reverse. The second subtheme focuses on the analyst as an indicator of openness. Here, the dream is not interpreted, and the analyst does not need to search for anything "behind" it or rely on symbols and associations (Kruger, 1982). Instead, dreams are explicated, creating a space in which therapist and client share a common world of meanings and expressions (Kruger, 1982). Because dream existence is freer than waking existence (Szummer & Almási, 2022), the explication of dreams also permits freedom in waking existence by opening new, uncharted paths and alternative horizons. Because interpretation belongs to the waking state whereas mystery prevails in dreams (Γεμεντζής, 2009), the central task is for the analysand to remain within this mystery, which brings an as-yet-unassimilated abundance of potential (Γεμεντζής, 2009).

The fourth theme views interpretation as a calling. This calling invites the analysand to become free from the shackles of prejudice (Γεμεντζής, 2009). Liberation from presumptions, constructs, attitudes, and general truths constitutes a leap from the ontic to the ontological dimension. Therefore, although a dream discloses a person's current concerns (Langdrige, 2006), the primary issue in dreaming is not the concrete source of concern itself, but its existential dimension (Jaenicke, 2008). By allowing the dream to speak for itself, as Boss proposes (Holzhey-Kunz, 2014), the analyst remains empty-handed; yet the emptier their hands are, the more open they are to what occurs in the analysis (Γεμεντζής, 2009). Interpretation arises from the analyst's poetic stance (Laurent, 2019), which constitutes a calling either for the analysis to continue or even for the analysand to lie on

the couch so that the journey towards liberation can begin. Whatever form the calling takes, its significance lies in opening new horizons that both analyst and analysand are invited to explore.

The final theme focuses on the uninterpretable dream. In the first subtheme, the uninterpretable dream floats temporarily within the analytic context. A dream that is not interpreted is neither viewed as “the navel of the dream”, as Freud indicates (Cornu, 2020), nor taken to mean that the patient encounters “the hard rock of castration” (Rousselle, 2021); instead, it is viewed as a clearing, a desert in which everything is expected, or a space in which a person stands alone (Rousselle, 2021). This floating quality is represented as an interplay between closure and return, reflecting Giraldo’s (2020) open ending. Hasty interpretation should be avoided, and adequate time should be allowed for the dream to develop, but not so much that it is permitted to wither and fall away on its own. Thus, although an opening remains, the ending is predetermined because an interpretation eventually emerges. At some point, the analyst engages in inauthentic caretaking, thereby taking from the Other (Heidegger, 1962) the dream’s natural course towards oblivion. This interpretation, as leaping-in, could be understood as “a half-saying” (Lacan, 2006) because the Real emerges as a void beyond language that resists symbolisation and represents what cannot be fully captured, thereby intruding upon reality (Dhumal, 2023). However, it cannot amount to “saying nothing at all”. Thus, there is still an ending despite the opening, reflecting the “short-term” floating of the uninterpretable dream. In the next subtheme, the uninterpretable dream may float indefinitely; the dream itself may disappear or, as Γεμενετζής (2009) suggests, calm down once freed from the shackles of prejudice and then disappear. The primary objective is not to assign meaning to the dream but to sharpen the gaze so that it can discern the difference between what can be questioned and articulated and what exceeds the reach of questions and words and therefore remains incomprehensible (Γεμενετζής, 2009). In this case, a coercive interpretation by either analysand or analyst would itself be incomprehensible. Here, the dream may grow or even fall away on its own. The broader meaning is that the analysand may do likewise: float with the uninterpretable dream in uncharted seas and keep it as a mystery that opens a view in which everything is illuminated by the distinctive light of an unknown place (Γεμενετζής, 2009). The analyst’s stance reflects authentic caregiving (leaping-ahead), which helps others to clarify themselves, assume their own responsibilities and burdens, and become free within their care (Heidegger, 1962). The dream is not limited to its narrative (Γεμενετζής, 2009), nor is it a puzzle awaiting resolution, even in the future. Instead, it is viewed as an opening that calls for attention (Cohn, 1997), revealing the potential of renouncing the dream itself, which, as Heidegger suggests, discloses the inexhaustible power of simplicity (Γεμενετζής, 2009).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present analysis highlights two fundamentally different orientations towards dreams within psychotherapeutic discourse. On the one hand, dreams are approached as theoretical constructs requiring interpretation through established psychoanalytic frameworks, positioning the analyst as the person who deciphers latent meanings and integrates the dream into a structured understanding of the unconscious. On the other hand, a phenomenological–existential stance invites a different attitude that suspends theoretical certainties and allows the dream to appear as a lived phenomenon that discloses aspects of existence without necessarily requiring interpretation. Within this orientation, the analyst’s role shifts from deciphering hidden content to cultivating openness towards the dream as it unfolds, even when it remains ambiguous or ultimately uninterpretable. Such a stance foregrounds the ontological dimension of dreaming, emphasising the dream not as a puzzle to be solved but as an event that may illuminate the dreamer’s being-in-the-world. Consequently, dream analysis may be understood not merely as an interpretative technique but as a relational and existential encounter that invites both analyst and analysand to remain attentive to the horizons of meaning that dreams may open, including those that resist articulation.

6. Limitations

This study involved five experienced psychotherapists from three selected analytic traditions; therefore, the findings may not be transferable to other therapeutic orientations or clinical contexts. The analysis relied on participants’ self-reported experiences and the researcher’s interpretative engagement with their accounts. Client perspectives, session-level observations, and treatment outcomes were not examined. Broader and more diverse samples, together with comparative clinical data, would strengthen future investigation.

Consent and Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Mediterranean College, Athens, Greece. All participants received written information about the purpose and procedures of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study without consequence.

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Declaration of AI Use

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Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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