

14 Dreams & Experiments Marking Doc

Trainee Name: John Dray

Marker Name:

Dream or Experiment? Dream

	Requirements	Pass / Refer
1	Give an accurate account of the clinical work with a clear rationale for the intervention	
2	Identify and follow the stages of the dream work / experiment appropriately according to your modality	
3	Evidence ethical considerations including contracting for the work and appropriate grading of the intervention	
4	Demonstrate an understanding of the significance of such interventions from a field perspective according to your modality	
5	Reflect on the work giving an evaluation of its effectiveness. Indicate what you might do differently in a similar clinical situation	
6	Include references and bibliography (Harvard style)	

Marker Comments

Marker Signature:

Date:

Introduction

This is my write-up of a Gestalt-informed dream-work session conducted in a fishbowl training context and observed by a tutor. A colleague acting as client brought a dream from two nights previously, and I facilitated a brief experiential exploration while peers observed.

While I am training as an integrative psychotherapist, I integrate aspects of Gestalt psychotherapy into my practice. Over the course of the past year, I have been involved in a Swansea group of therapists that meets every month/six weeks. The theme for the past year has been the analysis of dreams. This has been led by Dr Laura Roklicer, whose PhD examined the impact of lucid and liminal dreaming in the process of creative writing (Roklicer, 2025), and much of the work we engaged in was influenced by Gestalt principles. In turn, the scheme for analysing dreams offered through WPI was also based on Gestalt, influenced by the work of Joyce & Sills (2018, ch 15) which is based on the principles set out in Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman (1951/1972).

I find work on dreams particularly sensitive, as the client is allowing me in to the very private world of their unconscious. In Gestalt terms, I would suggest that the field of the room gets extended with the field of the dreamscape into which both dreamer and therapist bring their subjective fields, forming a richer intersubjective field than that in therapy that deals with the 'here and now' – it has the 'here and now' and the dreamscape. I would further suggest that work on intersubjective dreamscape allows the client to experiment with the field in ways that might be too concrete to work with in the 'here and now'. Perhaps a better way of saying that is that it brings information from the unconscious that adds to or changes the conscious narrative of the individual. Such a powerful force for change potentially makes the client particularly vulnerable. So, having a dream worked on in the presence of all ones colleagues is by its very nature exposing. Similarly, working in front of a group of colleagues is exposing to the therapist. I find it encourages a spirit of 'performance' in me, which, over the years of

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training, I am learning to let go of. I put this back to a time when, full of nerves, I had to go on with performance in musical examinations. In those days I tried to suppress the nerves and sometimes that resulted in me being paralysed with fear and unable to play. In my work as a clergyman, I often had to preach. I learned, through hundreds of repetitions, to put on a 'professional' persona/mask. In the therapeutic context I am there as me, and only unmasked can I be sensitive to the subtleties of the intersubjective field. When in a context that feels like an examination, I am trying to 'be' fully with the client. In this case, what I found helped immensely was setting the angle of both my chair and the chair of the client away from the group of peers. In that way I could be wholly with my client. With the initial field conditions set, we were able to begin. Another aspect of the therapeutic conditions is that a fishbowl is akin to a brief therapy or a single therapeutic session. The style of therapy that I typically engage in is much longer term and has the opportunity to build up a relationship Erskine (2015). Hill & Knox (2010) suggest that one of the issues they have with judging the effectiveness of work involving dreams is that the research is normally carried out in the context of brief therapies.

At this stage I found that I had a number of conflicting emotions. I was excited to be working with a dream, I was wanting to honour the experience of the client, I was feeling a need to perform in front of the group, I was nervous about 'getting it right' for an assessment. I realised that my excitement would not be helpful if it became figural to the client immediately. Noticing this, and my activation state (Dana & Porges, 2018), allowed me a few moments to take a deep breath, exhale and ground myself before embarking on the client work.

Contracting, Ethics and Field

Although I mention ethical considerations through this piece, I feel it important to stress the importance of contracting. In this field, it is particularly important to ensure that there are clear contracts between client and therapist. I say this both because of the sensitive nature

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of the work and that this work is performed in front of colleagues, addressed above. Dream-work is experimental and can easily open up subjects deeply. Clear contracting is important to enable the client to feel able to stop or slow down the work if they have opened up painful subjects too quickly (Joyce & Sills, 2018), (Polster & Polster, 1974). This, in turn, raises the importance of grading as an ethical consideration in this work. I find it important to carefully grade the experiment to ensure the safety of the client. When volunteering for the work both the client and I were aware that a dream was likely to be the subject of the session. Even so, I found it important to exercise creative indifference – the client was free to bring another matter to the session. In the appendix to this work I have an approximate, contemporaneous transcript of the session. I will refer to it by putting the reference in square brackets, e.g. [c-5] would be the fifth interaction of the client. That transcript has had any names removed. It gives a broad outline of five stages of the process in line with Joyce & Sills (2018, ch 15). Often 'C' refers to the client and 'T' refers to the therapist.

Working with the Client

The conversation was initiated by the client notice something about the field [c-1]. There was a particular noise. I felt it important to both acknowledge the noise and check with the client whether it would impinge on the session [t-1]. This felt like a risk to me. While it felt important to indicate my shared awareness of the field with the client, I wondered if this was going to be the start of the theme of the session. Would this lead us away from the dream? However, I held my anxiety in check and followed the direction of the client. The client mused that the sound may stop. I felt it important not to definitively shut this down, so ended with ambiguity. 'Eventually.' I said.

From a field perspective, the work did not take place simply between "therapist" and "client". The dream, the training group, the tutor, the time boundary, the noise outside the room, my wish to perform, and the client's awareness of being observed were all part of the

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therapeutic situation. Acknowledging the noise tested whether the environmental interruption would affect the client's capacity to continue. It also established that we did not need to pretend the room was not there. Gestalt field theory encourages attention to the total situation rather than an isolated intrapsychic event (Brownell, 2010; G. M. Yontef, 1993).

The client then stated that they wanted to bring a dream from two days prior [c-3]. Hill & Knox (2010) suggest that a recent dream is more likely to bring about helpful therapeutic change. I felt some relief that I had not had to bring up the topic of the dream, but the client had raised the topic. When I asked, 'Are you comfortable to bring your dream?' [t-3], I was signalling that the client had agency to accept or decline this form of exploration. This and the client's response, [c-4], confirmed the contract to work on a dream. However, in navigating the dream there were to be many options for adjustments to the contract, e.g. which part of the dream we were going to work on.

The intervention also needed to be graded. I was not working with this person in an ongoing therapeutic relationship; this was a single training session, with no opportunity to continue the work in subsequent appointments. The brevity of the format gave the work intensity, but also limited how far it could ethically go. Single-session work can be meaningful, but the frame needs to be explicit and contained (Dryden, 2018). In Gestalt terms, experiment is not something done to the client; it is co-created, responsive and reversible (Joyce & Sills, 2018; Polster & Polster, 1974; G. Yontef & Schulz, 2016). My aim was therefore to support enough depth for the dream to become alive, but not to open more than the client and the context could hold.

Entering the Dream

Having contracted to work with the dream, I invited the client to tell it in the first person and present tense [t-4]. My rationale was to support immediacy rather than retrospective narration. In Gestalt dream work, telling the dream as "I" and "now" helps bring the dream

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from memory into present experience. This links the dreamscape to the 'here and now'. It allows figure and ground to emerge in the room, and it gives both client and therapist material to work with phenomenologically rather than symbolically (Joyce & Sills, 2018; Perls et al., 1951/1972). I was aware that this invitation was already an intervention rather than a neutral request. It shaped how the client contacted the dream, and therefore required attention to pace and consent.

The client described three scenes: a strange landscape with a house on a spit of land in a lake; a bright landscape involving driving and lakes; and a beach that felt familiar and real somewhere [c-5 to c-10]. I noticed my own impulse to become more active. The dream felt still and spacious rather than dramatic, and I had some anxiety about whether I was "doing enough". In retrospect, this was a useful moment of learning. The paradoxical theory of change suggests that change arises not from forcing the client to become different, but from fuller contact with what is (Beisser, 1970). If I had pushed for drama, I might have lost the quiet quality of the client's experience. Staying with the dream's stillness allowed the work to deepen on its own terms.

I then asked where the energy was in the dream [t-11, t-12]. This was my attempt to move from narrative summary into Gestalt experiment. The client identified the house as more significant than the beach or driving scene [c-13], while also speaking about water as important: "Water is like coming home for me" [c-17]. This became a key opening. I heard water not merely as a dream object but as a possible figure carrying affect, bodily memory and self-regulation. The client associated water with swimming, cold water, relief and reset [c-16 to c-18]. This gave an opportunity to experiment with the water rather than asking for a cognitive interpretation of what water "meant".

Experiment and Dialogue

I invited the client to “speak from the point of view of the water” [t-18]. I framed this as “something strange”, partly to acknowledge the unusualness of the invitation and partly to leave room for refusal. The client accepted: “I am a deep pool of water. Crystal clear, dark, enclosed by land, very still, no movement” [c-19]. This seemed to mark a shift from describing the dream to inhabiting it. The image became embodied and relational. As water, the client could see land, the house and the dream-self with the daughter, but also felt distance, stillness and enclosure [c-20 to c-27].

My interventions here were mixed. Some were useful, such as asking what could be seen or felt [t-19], because they supported phenomenological exploration. Others were more leading. When I said “Ripply?” [t-20], the client corrected me: “Not ripply — very still” [c-21]. This was a helpful reminder that my associations were not the client’s experience. At the same time, I was hoping that the client would correct my comment to reflect their actual perception of the water. The correction returned us to the client’s phenomenology. In future, I might try to ask more open questions at such moments, for example, “What is the quality of the water?” or “What is the water like?” rather than offering my own image. This would better support the Gestalt emphasis on awareness rather than therapist-led interpretation (Finlay, 2011; G. M. Yontef, 1993).

I then wondered whether another part of the dream might enter into dialogue [t-28]. The client was unsure [c-29, c-30], so I gave indicated that we could move on [t-30]. This felt important ethically. A Gestalt experiment should be an invitation, not a demand for compliance. However, I then asked, “What would the house like to say?” [t-31]. On reflection, this phrasing was imperfect. It would have been more consistent with the earlier method to say, “Would you be willing to speak as the house?” or “What is it like to be the house?” My

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actual wording risked locating the house as an object to be interpreted rather than an aspect of the dream to be inhabited.

Despite this, the client entered the house image vividly: “I am very open. No walls — light, open, welcoming” [c-32]. They described the house as made for family, excitement and purpose [c-33 to c-35]. I reflected a sense of excitement and purpose [t-33], and the client responded positively. The house then became linked with simplicity and the possibility of not having to do so much: “There I am a structure that won’t change” [c-36]. This seemed clinically significant. The water had been still, enclosed and deep; the house was open, welcoming and stable. Both images appeared to carry a longing for constancy.

The client then began to integrate this themselves. When I asked whether the house was similar to the water [t-37], the client said yes, and later reflected that the figures seemed to be “one concept” or representations of things that do not change [c-39]. I responded by naming the contrast between dynamic scenes and the “solid, perpetual, unchanging nature” of the figures [t-39]. This was one of the stronger moments in my work, because I was not imposing a symbolic interpretation from outside. I was gathering what had emerged from the client’s own exploration and offering it back as a tentative pattern.

Ending and Evaluation

Near the ending, the client asked how long was left [c-40], and I said there was one minute [t-40]. The client then arrived at the statement: “To be who I am is alien” [c-41]. I experienced this as an existential condensation of the work rather than a conclusion I had led them towards. The phrase suggested that the dream had opened a question about selfhood, adaptation and belonging. I was struck by the delicacy of this moment. In a longer therapy, or ongoing therapy, I would have wanted to stay with it, but within a twenty-minute training session the ethical task was to recognise its significance without opening more than could safely be held.

Reflections from Colleagues

One reflection, from more than one colleague, was that the session had seemed to go on very long. The tutor was able to assure them that the session had lasted exactly 20 minutes. The tutor further suggested that this time-distortion is a common effect in working with dreams. However, there was a general feeling that I could have an indication of the time boundary before [t-40], when the client asked for it [c-40]. On this, I felt that the session had a natural shape that felt as if it was beginning to reach an ending and that to mention the time-boundary might have landed as a 'hurry up and end now' injunction. As it was, the client was able to reach an existential statement, 'To be who I am is alien' [c-41].

As noted in the introduction, this is a challenge of 'single session therapy'. There could be a lot to unpack from the client's statement, that could fill many subsequent sessions. Similarly, the client expressed a wish that there had been more time to explore the house in the dream. I, too, would have loved to explore this more. The effectiveness of the session therefore lay less in resolution than in contact: something important became figural, was spoken, and could potentially be carried into further reflection. This seems consistent with a Gestalt understanding of experiment. The aim was not to solve the dream but to support awareness, contact and possible integration (G. Yontef & Schulz, 2016; Zinker, 1978).

I was pleased with the client's reflection that this 'felt like real therapy'. That felt unforced and validating of the experience. I am struck by the difference between my client's dreams and my own. It was a privilege to be allowed into the dreamscape of another and share the exploration of their private world.

Conclusion

This dream-work session taught me that Gestalt experiment can be powerful precisely when it is not over-forced. The dream did not need to be decoded by me. It needed enough safety,

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curiosity and structure for the client to enter it and discover what became figural. The fishbowl context made the work more exposed for both client and therapist, but it also clarified the importance of field awareness. The observing group, the time boundary, the noise outside, my own wish to perform, and the client's willingness to risk the dream were all part of the work.

What I most value about the session is that the client's own language emerged: "To be who I am is alien." I could not have invented that for them, and I do not think it would have been therapeutically useful if I had tried. My task was to support the conditions in which such a statement could appear, while holding enough ethical restraint not to open more than the frame could contain. In that sense, the session was both successful and unfinished. It was a brief contact with something alive in the dream, not a completed interpretation.

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Appendix - Approx Transcript

These notes are contemporaneous and are more terse than the actual dialogue. They do not give a wholly accurate record of the interactions, but are an attempt to broadly remember the interventions. For this reason, they may not be identical to the interventions as recorded in the rest of this work. The “Analysis” column is there to map the session to the Gestalt dreamwork structure that I am using, not to provide a full analysis.

Speaker	Text	Analysis
C-1	I can hear the noise outside	
T-1	Me too - will it impinge?	
C-2	May stop	
T-2	Eventually	
C-3	Dream 2 nights ago	
T-3	Comfortable to bring it?	Contracting that it is OK to do dream work
C-4	Yes	
T-4	Tell it from “I” and in present would be lovely	Stage 1 of Gestalt analysis - tell from ‘I’ in the present.
C-5	3 Elements to it. 1st part, I’m in strange landscape with (youngest daughter). There is a spit of land in lake. House on the spit. We walk around. New family house.	
T-5	Sounds exciting (this is in	

Speaker	Text	Analysis
	response to seeing what T perceives as excitement on the C's face)	
C-6	I recognise home "Sylvania families" house - 1 room. Tiny. Everything we need. Bedrooms like pods. Excited about body of water and can swim every morning.	
T-6	Pod/house/lake (reflecting back to the client what T has heard)	
C-7	Part 2 - same landscape. Around ____ and with (second daughter). In Australia, Sunny, bright, driving, lakes.	
T-7	Different lakes	
C-8	Bodies of water	
T-8	Wondering what doing in lovely scenery	
C-9	Flying down road. Sunny level - Part 3. End up on a beach - familiar. Need to find it in real life.	
T-9	What makes it perfect?	

Speaker	Text	Analysis
C-10	White sand, no wind, blue sea. Promise of something. Dream self know it's real somewhere.	
T-10	Sounds like happy moments of (peace?)What are you doing there?	
C-11	Nothing. Its the promise/potential	
T-11	So, 3 scenes. Where is the energy?	Stage 2 - identifying where the energy is for the client.
C-12	A lot of water (which one??)	
T-12	Where's the energy? Beach, house?	
C-13	The house. Beach and driving just a moment.	
T-13	Walking with daughter, was that....	
C-14	Walking down, enclosed pool.	
T-14	Water important to you?	
C-15	Yes, a figure	
T-15	What does it mean to you?	
C-16	I like water, swimming, cold water.	

Speaker	Text	Analysis
T-16	Sounds like a perfect home	
C-17	Water is like coming home for me. When travelling, days without. Relief even. for a (bucked??)Reset.	
T-17	...	
C-18	Resets nervous system. Immerse	
T-18	Could do something strange and speak from the (point of view of the) water.	Stage 3 - speak from a part with a lot of energy. Check in with C that this is OK
C-19	Give it a go. I am a deep pool of water. Crystal clear, dark, enclosed by land, very still, no movement.	
T-19	What can you see/feel?	
C-20	I can see land all around me. Trapped by land. Sensations of...	
T-20	Ripply?	
C-21	NoT ripply – very still.	
T-21	You mentioned depth	
C-22	Very still, very cold	
T-22	Can you see other characters?	

Speaker	Text	Analysis
C-23	Yes, can see C and daughter. House is a flimsy, simple structure. Not there for very long.	
T-23	New build. How do you feel towards it?	
C-24	Um... neutral.	
T-24	How about seeing C in the distance.	
C-25	I can tell they're excited.	
T-25	What's the response?	
C-26	Distance from them. Not much to do with me.	
T-26	What else can you see?	
C-27	The sky. Not much.	
T-27	I am struck by the sense of solidity and depth	
C-28	Less solidity. Stillness - me as water.	
T-28	Is there another part you'd like to dialogue with?	Stage 4 - encourage a dialogue between objects in the dream.
C-29	As water?	
T-29	or as another part	

Speaker	Text	Analysis
C-30	Don't know really	
T-30	We can move onto something else.	
C-31	Interesting maybe to talk as the house.	
T-31	What would the house like to say?	T immersing in the process and not saying 'what would you like to say as the house'.
C-32	I am very open. No walls - light, open, welcoming	
T-32	Who can you see?	Might have been better to ask 'what...'
C-33	C + daughter. Forward party. More coming, excited. What I am made for.	In reviewing this wondering how closely the C is identifying with the house.
T-33	I am feeling real excitement - a sense of purpose	
C-34	Yes, it's going to be fun	
T-34	Having a family?	
C-35	Yes, simple, I have everything they need.	
T-35	Simplicity - what feelings?	
C-36	Idea that maybe I don't have to do so much. There I am a	My sense that the C is identifying with the house is

Speaker	Text	Analysis
	structure that won't change.	strengthened
T-36	It is home?	
C-37	Yes it is/I am house	
T-37	Similar to water?	
C-38	Yes, similar to theme this (??)	
T-38	Is this a longing?	
C-39	Interested to not all the figures. All one concept/representations of things that don't change.	
T-39	Dynamic scenes, but solid, perpetual, unchanging nature of them.Brings up things for me, what about you?	
C-40	There hasn't been. How long (left to session)?	
T-40	1 minute	Perhaps could have given client more guidance on this earlier.
C-41	From a young age - and an accessible concept to be who I am. Move about, optimise, manipulate. To be who I am is alien	Stage 5 - this is close to an existential statement.