

Cognitive Psychology and Dream Research: Historical, Conceptual, and Epistemological Considerations

Robert E. Haskell

University of New England

Historical, conceptual, methodological, and epistemological factors in the development of dream research are outlined and discussed, along with four stages of dream research. Issues evolving from the analysis are examined in relation to cognitive psychology and the philosophy of science, among them disciplinary boundary problems, reductionistic approaches, the importance of dreams and dreaming as cognitive data, the concept of levels of analysis, cognitive operations, and meaning in dreams. Implications for future research are discussed.

The study of dreams and dreaming¹ is an area of research that seems either to stimulate almost boundless, yet imaginative, theories regarding the meaning and function of dreaming; or conversely, it stimulates an equally boundless and irrational skepticism, denying any meaning or function to dreaming whatsoever. On the one hand, there are those who believe certain dreams are evidence that they fly off to Jupiter and Mars in the middle of the night without physically leaving their beds, becoming kind of disembodied astronauts, as it were; and on the other hand, there are those who believe dreaming to be simply the result of the spontaneous and random firing of subcortical neurons, a kind of Fourth-of-July nocturnal fireworks of the mind.

Toward which one of these poles the evidence appears to gravitate depends upon what empirical, methodological, theoretical, and epistemological canons

Requests for reprints should be sent to Robert E. Haskell, Ph.D., University of New England, 11 Hills Beach Road, Biddeford, Maine 04005.

¹Before embarking further, it is important to generally define some main terms. "Dream" refers to content analysis and interpretive schemas. "Dreaming" is used here to refer to the *processes* of dreaming such as physiological events, and to *structural* aspects not directly related to meaning or interpretive schemas. The term "dream research" is used here to include both of the above terms. "Dream psychology" is used to include the work of any discipline whose research is psychological in nature and pertinent to dream research. The term "cognitive psychology" as used here is not restricted to a discipline within psychology, but as a *problem area* that can be approached from an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspective. Finally, the term "research" is defined as the investigation of phenomena by means of a systematic and controlling methodology.