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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Nightmare resolution: Where to begin, where to end? A commentary on “The mechanisms of action underlying the efficacy of psychological nightmare treatments: A systematic review and thematic analysis of discussed hypotheses”

In “The mechanisms of action underlying the efficacy of psychological nightmare treatments: A systematic review and thematic analysis of discussed hypotheses” [1] Andréanne Rousseau and Geneviève Belleville address the problem of how to analyze the variations with which researchers and practitioners attribute success to their methodologies in nightmare resolution. Clearly all of these approaches work to some extent, the question is whether some key method can be identified. By painstakingly examining many papers in detail, 64 in all, they arrived at six possible mechanisms of action (MA). Insightful as it is, I think the approach fails to produce a satisfactory conclusion. It fails in part because the authors apply a level of abstraction to the problem which is ultimately unproductive. Additionally, the question of how the nightmare ends is highly relevant but has not yet been adequately considered.

If we begin with a definition of a nightmare, I think we can see some different possibilities from the confusion the authors illuminate.

A nightmare can be defined as “a very disturbing dream that awakens the sleeper” [2]. Any mechanism of action must necessarily engender a favorable alternative outcome to this situation. We can note that a nightmare halts the dream and directly awakens the dreamer. Some researchers emphasize the extreme negative emotion. We can note that this emotion occurs within a context: There is a dream subject who exits a quite specifically intolerable situation. Other researchers have emphasized the need, in the nightmare resolution process, to achieve “mastery” (which the authors perceptively compare to social psychology’s “self-efficacy”). Every aspect of the situation (i.e. not only emotion) is available as a means to achieve mastery. Rousseau and Belleville suggest that the term mastery is vague as it fails to specify the object of mastery (see also [3]) and they list possible objects to which they believe mastery could be applied. They regard this as a fatal flaw. Yet it is clear that mastery of the nightmare situation itself is the key mastery issue. Furthermore, it is unreasonable to fault mastery for its supposed lack of context and to not notice the same blemish with an emotional explanation. It does not make sense to arbitrarily privilege emotion and speculate that emotion then causes mastery.

These considerations are grounded in the specific meaning of a nightmare – something the authors omit. I suspect there is not

nearly the confusion that appears when they are presented out of context. The authors do acknowledge a problem, “These mechanisms could be interrelated ... and the six categories could hardly be dissociated from one another” [1 p. 128] but they go no further and later ignore their own caveat.

Let me offer another reason why we are not at all ready to assign MAs: If the nightmare defines a point at which dreaming becomes problematic, what defines its endpoint? This is a pertinent question for MAs and the authors allude to it in their critique of Germain’s analysis of “New Dreams” [1 p. 123]. It is generally assumed that the subject themselves declares the end of the nightmare. But the nightmare as a problem originated during dream life and its ending likewise requires an examination of dream life. A major question is therefore: What happens instead of the nightmare? The dreamer may, for example, cease to remember their dreams – a perfectly adequate solution. Perhaps the subject matter of the nightmare disappears and the dreamer goes on to other themes. It may also be that the subject matter of the nightmare remains and develops: Much of our dream life is dominated by just a few themes. There are most certainly other ending types to be documented.

The task of completing the nightmare cycle by incorporating these “non-nightmares” is daunting. Even so, nightmare resolution should be considered *in its totality*. It is particularly a problem for MAs when declarations or symptomatic improvements substitute for the action at the end of the nightmare. We have then abandoned relevant information and, if I understand the authors correctly, the final measurement of the putative MA.

The primary problem with the analysis is that it unreasonably demotes mastery to a state of “confusion”. Emotional resolution then emerges unchallenged to dovetail with a current theoretical explanation. An appraisal of the divergence between research and theory would have been preferable.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2019.01.005>.

References

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David Jenkins
Berkeley, CA, USA
E-mail address: davidj@dreamreplay.com.

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