

# Helpful components involved in the cognitive-experiential model of dream work

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**Abstract** The purpose of the study was to examine the helpful components involved in the Hill's cognitive-experiential dream work model. Participants were 27 volunteer clients from colleges and universities in northern and central parts of Taiwan. Each of the clients received 1–2 sessions of dream interpretations. The cognitive-experiential dream work model was applied to these clients by three therapists. The processes of the dream work were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data, which included a total of 38 sessions for the 27 clients, were analyzed by the Consensus Qualitative Research (CQR) approach to examine the helpful components of the dream work. The results indicated that the general and typical helpful components involved in the process of dream interpretation included four domains: waking-life association, parts of self exploration, gaining insight, and action ideas.

**Keywords** Consensus Qualitative Research ·  
Dream interpretation/dream work · Helpful events

## Helpful components in cognitive-experiential model of dream work

The current study examined helpful components involved in dream work based on the cognitive-experiential dream work model proposed by Hill (1996, 2004). We chose Hill's model because it has a clear process and uses concise techniques. It also has drawn more attention in empirical studies than other dream models (see review in Hill and Goates 2004). Many of the studies have found that using Hill's method of dream interpretation led to insight and self-understanding (Cogar and Hill 1992; Diemer et al. 1996; Falk and Hill 1995; Hill et al. 1993). Other studies also suggest that there are positive outcomes for dream work, at least in laboratory-based studies with volunteer clients (Hill and Goates 2004). We believe that those positive outcomes are related to important components in the process of dream work.

It is believed that the helping skills or components occurred during the process of dream work contribute to the outcome of the dream work. For example, in Wonnell and Hill's (2005) study they described components used in action stage and found that client's implementation of action was associated with client's involvement and difficulty with the action plan. In this study, we intend to explore the helpful components occurred in the process of dream work. Mintz et al. (1973) mentioned that there were three distinct viewpoints for psychological therapy: the client's, the therapist's, and that of a detached observer. In the current study, we examined the types of helpful components from the observers' perspective. We chose to examine the helpful components in the process of dream session from the observers' perspective also because clients' perspective might be different from the professional's opinions regarding the counseling process (Parker et al.

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1986). Parker, Brown, and Blignault examined the coping behaviors of 43 psychiatric patients. They noted that behaviors that patients may judge to be generally helpful or unhelpful were not always demonstrated by empirically based and/or longitudinal studies. In addition, we also agreed that the viewpoint from the Mental Health professionals might be different from that of general practitioners (El-Nimr et al. 2004). Therefore, in the current study, we examined the helpful components from the third party's viewpoint.

#### Cognitive-experiential dream work model

Cognitive-experiential dream work model includes three stages: exploration, insight, and action (Hill 2004). In the exploration stage, the dreamer tells the dream in a third person present tense. The therapist then helps the dreamer to go through the four steps, description, re-experiencing, associations, and waking life triggers to explore the meaning of the dream images. In the insight stage, the therapist helps the client construct the meaning of the dream in terms of waking life, inner dynamics, or existential/spiritual concerns. In the action stage, the therapist asks the client to change the dream and then to apply these changes to his/her waking life. The dreamer can also continue the dream to think about what she/he would like to happen. The therapist can also help the client to ritual the dream or to title the dream to empower the client and to solve his/her target problems. This model was believed to be effective from the client's viewpoint (Hill and Goates 2004; Tien et al. 2006).

Previous studies asked clients to indicate the most and the least helpful aspects of the dream sessions (Hill et al. 1997a, 2000, 2003; Tien et al. 2006). In the study conducted by Hill et al. (1997a), 364 undergraduate participants reported at least 6 categories of helpful components in dream work: association of the dream images, links of dream to waking life, experiencing feelings or catharsis, gaining insight or meaning, ideas for change, and gaining another person's input or perspective about dream. In addition to these six main categories of helpful components, other helpful components have included feeling reassured, gaining a more positive attitude about dream, and learning a structure for working with dream. About 10 years later, Tien et al. (2006) investigated the college students' attitude toward dream work. They found that dream interpretation was appealing to nearly one-third (30.8%) of the participants, which were 574 college students in Taiwan. Furthermore, 30 volunteer clients in that study further attended dream sessions and expressed gaining benefits from the dream interpretation. In the Feedback Questionnaire completed by the participants 2 weeks after the dream work, all of the volunteer clients

reported at least one most helpful component. New meaning gained from the dream interpretation was the most frequently mentioned component (59%). Waking-life links, understanding, insight gains, and ideas for change in waking life were also identified as helpful components. The current study further examined the helpful components of dream work for Taiwanese college students with a more systemic and rigorous approach. We analyzed the whole process of the dream work by examining the verbatim transcripts. We also believed that a more detailed analysis through the CQR method from the perspectives of the observers would lead to a more accurate and informative outcome for us to understand the helpful components of dream work.

The application of the cognitive-experiential dream work model for patient with recent loss was tested by Hill et al. (2000). The participants included 14 distressed clients with troubling dreams and recent loss of a significant other. The treatment was a brief structured therapy focused on either dreams or losses. Results indicated that the clients in both conditions were satisfied with the therapy, their impact of the loss was lessened, they gained new insights about themselves, and they had made changes. However, the participants in the dream condition gave the process of the therapy a higher rating, became more involved in the therapeutic process more quickly, gained more understanding of their dreams, viewed the structure of the therapy more positively, and kept fewer secrets from their therapists than the clients in the loss condition. They also conducted a consensus qualitative research to analyze the data obtained from the follow-up interviews. Ten domains of categories emerged as the useful components of the therapy: image/issues explored, awareness/insight achieved, types of action discussed, disclosure/nondisclosure, facilitative aspects, non-facilitative aspects, satisfaction with therapy, dream-related outcome, and non-dream-related outcome.

In addition to the research on dream-focused versus loss-focused therapy described above, effects of different approaches of dream work were also compared. Hill et al. (2003) compared three different approaches of dream work: computer-assisted, therapist empathy, and therapist empathy + input (providing interpretations and action ideas) dream sessions. They invited 94 undergraduates to participate in one of the three types of dream sessions. The results of the post-session outcome indicated that both therapist conditions were significantly higher than the computer-assisted condition. However, no difference was found between the two therapist conditions. For the quality of action ideas, the results indicated that the participants in the empathy condition had significantly better action ideas than did the participants in either the computer-assisted or the empathy + input conditions. They concluded that the

therapist empathy + input condition was rated higher than the therapist empathy condition, which in turns was rated higher than the computer-assisted condition. In addition, the proportions of the most and the least liked aspects of the three approaches were also reported. Participants in all conditions expressed that they liked gaining awareness/insight, associations, and the approach to working with dreams. Participants in both therapist conditions liked their therapists. Participants in the empathy condition liked waking life links. Other aspects reported included catharsis and receiving objective perspectives.

In Taiwan, using Hill's dream model, a study found that college students' attitude toward dream became even more positive after receiving the dream session, even though the participants' initial attitudes toward dreams did not influence perceived gains from dream sessions (Tien et al. 2006). For these Taiwanese students, they could still gain from the dream session even though their attitudes toward dream were not as positive as their counterpart before the dream sessions. For Asian Americans, Hill et al. (2007) reported that the clients were generally satisfied with the dream sessions, rated the therapeutic alliance high, gained insight into their dreams, and acquired ideas on how to change their lives by participating in the dream work.

#### Types of helpful components in psychotherapy

Helpful components in psychotherapy are critical issues that concern researchers and practitioners in both clinical and counseling settings (Elliott 1985; Llewelyn 1988). Elliott (1985) classified helpful and unhelpful components in brief counseling. He proposed two clusters of helpful components: *Task* versus *Interpersonal* clusters. Within the cluster of *Task*, new perspective, problem solution, clarification of problem, and focusing attention are the four major subcategories of helpful components. Understanding, client involvement, reassurance, and personal contact are the four subcategories of helpful components under the *Interpersonal* cluster.

Helpful components occurred during therapy were investigated by Llewelyn (1988) in British clinical settings. They compared the impact of helpful and hindering events perceived by 40 adult clients. The significant events were reported by the clients during and at the end of each period. Results indicated that the most common helpful impact were "Problem Solution" and "Awareness." "Reassurance" and "Personal Contact" were additional impacts which were frequently reported by the clients. Llewelyn (1988) further compared client and therapist views regarding significant events occurred during psychotherapy. The participants were 40 therapist-client pairs. After each therapy session, she asked the client and the therapist

to record their respective views concerning helpful and unhelpful components took place during that specific session. The results of therapeutic impact content analysis with the 399 sessions revealed 1,076 events. During therapy, the types of helpful components most frequently reported by the clients were reassurance/relief and problem solution. However, insight gained by the clients was the component most frequently reported by the therapists. The results suggested that different aspects of the therapeutic process may have a different degree of salience for therapists versus clients. The therapists emphasized the cognitive and affective "Insight" which they assumed that the clients had developed through therapy. As such, they focused on insight more than any other categories of helpful component. The clients, on the other hand, were more interested in gaining a solution to their problems and feeling better. In addition, other categories of helpful components perceived by both the clients and the therapists included: Clarification, awareness, involvement, understanding, reassurance, and personal contact.

Therapists' and patients' perceptions of helpful components were also compared by Caskey et al. (1984). They investigated the overall levels of agreement and the correlates of client-therapist agreement in 16 pairs of clients and therapists. The results showed that the client-therapist response-by-response ratings of therapist intention were positively associated with four of the six intention variables: explaining client, gathering information, reassuring client, and using self. Therapist experience did not predict client-therapist agreement. In other words, the client and the therapist did not see the therapy process in a similar way.

#### Purpose of the present study

Recently, Hill et al. (2007) indicated that evidence has pointed to the three-stage dream model as being effective in terms of client's evaluations of sessions, insight gained into the discussed dream, and gains in action ideas related to the discussed dream, there are still many unknowns about how the model works. Given this background, the purpose of the current study was to examine the content of helpful components involved in Hill's dream work model from the judge's comprehensive viewpoint. We analyzed the process of dream work by using the CQR method to extract helpful components that make dream work effective. It is possible that clients and therapists might have different perspectives regarding the helpful components occurred in therapy. In our study, we analyzed the verbatim transcripts of the participants and the therapists to examine the content of helpful components involved in dream work from a more objective viewpoint.

To be more specific, we focused on helpful components emerged from the different stages of the dream work: exploration, insight, and action stages. We want to examine what happened in the dream session, what were helpful components from the judges' perspective, what types of insights they gain and what types of action ideas they obtained from the dream sessions. The specific research questions were: (1) What are the major types of helpful components involved in Hill's cognitive-experiential dream work? (2) What are the content of the helpful components emerged from the different stages of dream work? To answer these two questions, we applied the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR; Hill et al. 1997b, 2005) to help identify helpful components in dream work. This approach was selected because it was recognized as a systematic, rigorous method for obtaining thick descriptions of participants' phenomenological experiences.

## Method

### Participants

The volunteer dreamers were 27 college students (3 males and 24 females) recruited in Taipei and Taichung areas in Taiwan. The sample's age ranged from 21 to 28 ( $M = 22.15$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ). They came from five different colleges and majored in 11 different academic fields (Sociology, Chinese Literature, English Literature, Counseling and Guidance, Special Education, Civil Engineer, Economics, Law, Human Development, Art, and Geography).

### Research team

The research team consisted of three therapists, ranging in age from 29 to 42 years ( $M = 34.33$ ,  $SD = 6.81$ ), all females. Two of them were graduate students enrolled in counseling psychology programs and the third was an experienced therapist. The experienced therapist had a humanistic/psychodynamic psychotherapy orientation and was teaching dream study course at a graduate program in counseling psychology. The other two therapists were trained by the experienced therapist for the current study using Hill's (1997b, 2004) cognitive-experiential dream model. Both graduate students' theoretical orientations were also humanistic/psychodynamic approach. Years of counseling experience of the three counselors prior to this study ranged from 5 to 17 years ( $M = 10.33$ ,  $SD = 6.11$ ). In addition to dream sessions, the research team also served as judges and auditor to complete the qualitative data analysis.

### Procedures for collecting data

#### *Participant recruitment*

The participants were 27 college students recruited from five universities/colleges in Taiwan. They participated in a previous quantitative dream study focusing on dream attitude (Tien et al. 2006) and expressed willingness to continue their participation in the current study. The previous study included 574 participants. They were asked if they would be willing to work on at least 1 session of dream work after they filled out the "Dream Attitude Questionnaire." A research assistant later contacted those who expressed willingness to participate in the subsequent study and set up time with these individuals for conducting dream interviews. Finally, there were 30 volunteer clients invited to participate in the dream sessions. One client's data was omitted because the interpretation was not properly audio-taped and could not be transcribed. Two participants attended 6 sessions because their dreams were quite long. We dropped the two participants' data because the process and the outcome with 6 sessions seemed different from those with 1 or 2 sessions. Finally, there were 38 sessions for the 27 participants. The senior therapist conducted 9 sessions and the other two therapists conducted 14 and 15 sessions, respectively. All the sessions were conducted within a 4-month period.

#### *Therapist training*

Therapists were trained by the senior therapist. Since both junior therapists were familiar with Hill's three-stage cognitive-experiential dream work model, the training session focused specifically on the techniques applied in dream work. They studied the first three chapters of Hill's (2004) dream book before the training session. At the beginning of the training session, the trainer spent 1 h to present the model. She then spent another 1.5 h demonstrating the techniques used in the dream work model with a practice client. The two junior therapist trainees then practiced the techniques with another volunteer client using the model. The whole training session lasted for 4 h. During the training session, the trainer provided a one-sheet outline of the three stage dream work model which listed steps in each stage.

#### *Dream sessions*

Each of the volunteer clients received 1–2 sessions depending on the length of the dream and the seriousness of the target problem. Finally, 11 participants received 2 sessions of dream interpretation and 16 participants received 1 session. During the dream session, the client

was asked to retell the dream in first person, present tense. The chosen images were then interpreted based on the four steps: (1) description, (2) re-experiencing, (3) association, and (4) waking life triggers. In the insight stage, therapist worked with the client collaboratively to construct an interpretation in terms of one or more of the following levels: waking life concern, inner dynamics, or spiritual/existential concern. After that, they worked on the action stage, either changing the dream or continuing the dream, and then translated the changes to waking life.

### *Transcripts*

All dream sessions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The last three dreamers were assigned lower-cased *a*, *b*, and *c* (We finally deleted participants A's and C's data because they received 6 sessions). All the participants were sent a copy of their own transcript and a draft of verbatim analysis containing domains and descriptions associated with the dream images. They were asked to check and correct the verbatim transcript and descriptions. We then trained the raters to analyze the content of all dream sessions. The qualitative data for analysis in the current study were verbatim transcripts of the 38 dream sessions.

### *Procedures for analyzing data*

The data were analyzed using the CQR method (Hill et al. 1997b, 2005). Essential to this method is arriving at a consensus about the meaning and classification of the data. It involves three central steps: developing domains, core ideas coding, and cross-analysis (Hill et al. 2005). At the beginning of data analysis, i.e., domain development, the research team created a “start list” (Miles and Huberman 1994) about the domains for data classification. Core ideas were then applied to abstract the transcribed data within domains. Finally, the research team applied cross analysis to construct common themes across participants. As far as the composition of the research team, we used the set team instead of the rotating team (Hill et al. 2005) because we do not have enough colleagues familiar with the CQR method. The research team, consisting of one professor and two graduate students in doctoral program, completed the data analysis.

### *Developing domains*

At the beginning of the data analysis, a “start list” (Miles and Huberman 1994) of domains was initially developed by the research team, also the authors of the present study, through intensive discussion about the stages of the cognitive-experiential dream work. Literature related to helpful components was also discussed. The research team

randomly reviewed several copies of the transcripts and tried to understand the helpful components involved in Hill's dream work model. Since the three stages of dream work were exploration, insight, and action, the research team decided to examine helpful components within each of the three stages. After we reviewed several transcripts, we developed the initial domains of helpful components for dream work. These domains were: (a) waking-life association/exploration; (b) self exploration and/or personal traits exploration; (c) gaining insight; and (d) action idea discussion. Two domains were included in exploration stage because this stage demanded much more time than the other two stages.

### *Coding of core ideas*

After we reviewed several transcripts and decided on the final domains, the two judges independently assigned meaningful units from each transcript to each of the domains one case at a time. The judges also listed images of dreams and their meanings and/or dynamics of interview conversations under each domain. After the two judges finished the independent work for several transcripts, they collaboratively assigned the core ideas to the domains until they arrived at a consensus. The auditor, i.e., the senior in the research team, then read their coding, provided feedback, and discussed it with the two judges. More particularly, they examined how individual core idea might be represented in more than one domain and then determined the better domain for that specific core idea. For example, the core idea related to “early recollection” was classified as insight domain if we found that the early recollection helped the dreamer find a new way to realize their current behavioral patterns. According to Hill et al. (1992), insight is the experience that “The client expresses an understanding of something about him/herself and can articulate patterns or reasons for behaviors, thoughts, or feelings (pp. 548–549).” In the process of analysis, those early childhood experiences related to personal inner dynamics were coded in insight domain. Some specific examples were experiences related to conflicts from childhood, which was a part of the inner dynamics level of helping the dreamer gaining insight (Hill 2004).

When the process of core ideas coding was completed for the entire set of transcripts by the two judges, the auditor reviewed the transcripts and the coded domains. However, the auditor found that little adjustments were needed. The only adjustment was about the two judges' discrepant opinions about dreamers' childhood family experiences. The core ideas related to family relationship were coded under the domain of “Exploration/Waking-life exploration”, while the core ideas related to personal inner dynamic through insights were modified and coded under

the domain of “Gaining insight.” After the coding of the core ideas was completed, cross analysis continued.

### Cross-analysis

After the core idea coding was completed, the auditor and two judges then worked together to develop categories by using one dreamer’s transcript. The main work was to group similar ideas under the same domain into categories. It means that categories are clusters of core ideas under each domain. For example, the categories (a) discovery of personal behavioral patterns, (b) personal relationship with stressors, (c) Early childhood recollection, and (d) spiritual-existential concerns were the four categories that emerged for the Domain “Gaining insight.” The process of cross-analysis was conducted by the two judges and the auditor together. We read the core ideas and the descriptions across the 27 dreamers and created a frequency table of those categories/core ideas independent of each other. We then reviewed together nearly all the transcripts and discussed how those core ideas and categories applied across different dreamers. We finally discussed and reached consensus about the frequency table. During the process of consensus discussion, some modifications were made regarding the core ideas under certain categories. For example, the core idea “Anxious” was originally under the category of personal traits. We changed it to “Existential ultimate concerns” after extensive discussion. However, there were still some categories and core ideas that were not modified after discussion, for example, “Personal relationship with stressors” and “Stress coping behavior.” We thought they were different in terms of an individual’s personal awareness and/or responses to the sources of stress.

### Stability check

One purpose of stability check was to verify if the existing categories were adequate to represent the collected qualitative data. Actually when we analyzed the last few cases, we found that those categories were quite stable (i.e., no new categories emerged). It means that the categories of helpful components regarding dream work could reach “saturation” in our analysis.

## Results

The results for each of the domains were presented in Table 1. It was organized according to the stages of dream work. Under each domain we designated categories as either general, typical, or variant according to the frequency in each of the categories (Hill et al. 1997a, b, 2005). The categories were considered “general” if they applied to all

**Table 1** Summary of domains, categories, and subcategories from the cross-analysis of the participants perceiving therapeutic factors from the dream work ( $N = 27$ )

Domain/category/subcategory	Frequency
<i>Waking-life association/exploration</i>	
Family exploration and reenactment	Typical
Parent/child relationship exploration	Typical
Sibling relationship exploration	Typical
Interpersonal relationship exploration	Typical
Peer relationship	Typical
Personal roles in the relationship	Variant
Same-/hetero-gender relationship	Variant
Work relationship	Variant
<i>Self-exploration</i>	
Personal traits/personality	Typical
Role conflict/balance	Variant
Lack of control/destined	Variant
Lack of confidence	Variant
Lack of sense of secure	Variant
Fear of authority	Variant
Covetous/greedy	Variant
Emotional awareness/Catharsis	Typical
Integration about self-knowledge	Typical
Attachment style exploration/separate anxious	Variant
Personal values/beliefs	Variant
<i>Types of insight gained</i>	
Discovery of personal behavioral patterns	Typical
Stress coping behavior	Typical
Always delaying	Variant
Self-control	Variant
Helplessness	Variant
Indecisiveness	Variant
Personal relationship with stressors	Typical
Early childhood recollection	Typical
Spiritual-existential concerns	Typical
Meaning of life	Variant
Fear of death	Variant
Anxious	Variant
Loneliness/isolation	Variant
Issue of responsibility	Variant
<i>Action ideas</i>	
Changing the dream	Typical
Being empowered to take action	Variant
Cognitive change/reframing/positive self-talk	Variant
Balance between family- and self-expectation	Variant
Continuing the dream	Variant
Positive ending for the dream content	Variant
Titling the dream	Typical
Installation of hope for action	Variant
Positive attitude toward self	Variant
Positive attitude toward future	Variant

or all but one of the participants (26–27 cases), “typical” if they applied to at least half of the participants (between 14 and 25 cases), and “variant” if they applied to less than half of the participants (3–13 cases). The categories in which there were only 1 or 2 cases were not included in the table.

#### Waking-life relationship exploration

##### *Family relationship exploration*

Under the domain of “waking-life exploration,” two typical categories of helpful components emerged: “family relationship exploration” and “interpersonal relationship exploration.” Under the category of family relationship, parental and sibling relationships were typical. Participant *V* dreamed of being chased repeatedly. The stress of being chased in the dream was related to the stress from his family relationship in his waking life. She said,

I remember that my father drank and yelled at me at midnight while I was in my sleep. That was when I was about 6 years old. My mother, on the other hand, loved gambling. I am the only son in my family. I knew they loved me but I felt confused and depressed about their behaviors toward me.

Sibling relationship was also an important relationship issue for most participants. Dreamer *H* reflected a lot of early relationship with her cousins and siblings from the dream image of grandmother’s death. Her grandmother was actually still alive in her waking life. An exploration of early experiences with siblings, including relationship with cousins and nephews helped her to examine her own projection in her waking-life interpersonal relationship. She mentioned that,

My grandparents were really nice toward my brother and me. I even believed that my brother was spoiled by them. However, my brother did not perform well in school. He did not even cry when my grandfather died. My cousins were also not very sad about my grandfather’s death. I wondered why. Why am I the only grandkid that was sad about his passing. I thought grandpa loved all of us. Maybe I am the only girl that was mature enough to understand his love towards us. I am not sure. However, to think in this way, I can then bear with my brother’s and my cousins’ immature attitudes. I think this experience also caused me to tolerate about interpersonal conflicts.

##### *Interpersonal relationship exploration*

Retrospection of interpersonal relationship was another typical category of helpful components in the process of

dream interpretation. More than two-thirds of dreamers in our study talked about interpersonal relationship through different images in different dreams. Subcategories under interpersonal relationship were: “peer relationship”, “gender relationship”, “work relationship”, and “personal roles in the relationship.” Participant *I* dreamed of being with her friends but got lost while following them. She found herself always the follower in her peer relationship. However, she also found that she was afraid of being too close to others in her interpersonal relationships. Keeping a safe distance with others also influenced her intimate but ambiguous relationship with her boyfriend. Participant *I* mentioned,

I dreamed of getting lost while I was following my friends. It was in a woods.... It seemed that I should not be a follower any more. I always felt comfortable being a follower in my peer relationship. However, it struck me that I need to create my own way. I should have my own opinions in leading my own career.

Participant *c* dreamed of a ghost in her boyfriend’s house. In the process of the dream interpretation, she described herself as a rescuer in the real life, even though in her dream she needed others to rescue her. Also, she did not want to be controlled by others in the interpersonal relationship. She was clear about her role in the relationship but was unclear whether it was good for her to play the role. She even thought how to play the role of an individual who ask others for help in the future work relationship. She mentioned,

I used to play the role of a helper. People always asked me for help, both at home and at school. But I seldom ask for help from others. I think I am quite independent. However, in the dream, I asked for help. I think I need to learn how to ask for help in my real life.

#### Self exploration

##### *Personal traits/personality*

Personal traits/personality was a typical category. There were several subtypes: role conflict/balance, lack of control/destined, lack of confidence, lack of sense of secure, fear of authority, and covetous/greedy. All participants had the opportunity to explore their personal traits during the process of dream work. For example, the participant *S* dreamed of flying in a personal jet. Her association with this image was about her self confidence (one of the sub-categories) because she performed well in a variety of competitions she participated in. Her personal trait was assertive but introverted. She said,

I have a repeated dream image of flying, sometimes in a jet and sometimes just flying. In the dream, I asked myself to be relaxed so that I could fly. And I really flew after I relaxed in the dream.” “In the dream of flying in a jet, there were 6 persons in 6 separate jets. We flew together. Not all people can fly in a personal jet. We were all excellent pilots selected from excellent training groups.” “I think I should be quite confident in my performances in a variety of groups.

#### *Emotional awareness/Catharsis*

“Emotional awareness” was a typical helpful component in dream work. During the dream work, some dreamers become aware that it was difficult for them to express negative feelings in their daily life. Some of the dreamers expressed that it was so helpful to have a chance to talk about the negative feelings during the dream work, a form of emotional catharsis. For example, participant *P* mentioned that,

In the dream, my boyfriend wrote a letter to another girl and I was very angry.” “Actually, I love my boyfriend and he loves me, too. I am not sure why I dreamed of his writing a letter to a girl. Maybe I don’t feel secure about his love towards me. We quarreled a lot. He got bad temper and was so irritable. But I always forgive him after the quarrel. I think it’s my fault to cause him angry.” “I am willing to put up with his bad temper because I need his love. But I feel so conflicted....

Participant *P* then cried and we continued with her childhood experiences associated with satisfying others’ needs and forget her own personal rights. In additions, there were also dreamers who mentioned that they became angry easily in certain situations. Emotional awareness during the dream work increased their self-understanding. They usually suppressed their emotions or needs during the waking time. In the dream, those suppressed emotions came out as images in their dreams. Through the dream work, they had the chance to express those emotions they dared not or felt difficult to express in their waking life. Thus, dream work increased their emotional awareness.

#### *Integration about self-knowledge*

As far as the category “integration about self-knowledge”, more than half of the dreamers mentioned that the dream work helped them understand and integrate aspects of themselves. It was surprising to them that the dream work could draw so many materials from their life. They felt quite positive about the opportunity to integrate what they

learned about the self. For example participant *M* dreamed of being in an elevator with his nephew and several other girls. The elevator stopped at the 16th floor and then suddenly dropped down to the basement. She said,

The sudden falling, to me, means uncontrollable. There are too many stuff that I need to work on day and night.” “I don’t like this life pattern, kind of busy and aimless.” “I hope that I could slow down my pace and get everything done. But it’s not easy. I need to learn how to say no, how to decide what’s important for me. I can not do everything perfectly.” “I know that I am the kind of person willing to take challenge. But I hope everything is under my control.” “I need to think more about my future, my career goal. I also need to know more about my personal strengths and create my future based on those strengths.

#### *Attachment style exploration*

The category “attachment style exploration” was applied to variant clients. Although the degree of helpfulness varied across the participants, the exploration of dream images did increase the clients’ self-understanding through attachment style. Dreamer *N* felt conflicted about her relationship with her family members. She got lost in a family trip in the dream. Her attachment style, as reflected and discussed during the dream work, seemed to be avoidance/conflict. She oscillated between self independence and reliance on her parents. She said,

The new environment made me feel uncontrollable. I need somebody to protect me. Usually it’s my mother.” “Although she always censures me when I get confused, she still helps me solve my problem. I think I can accept those censures because I do need her help.” “I know my interpersonal relationship was kind of similar to the relationship I have with my mother. Kind of being censured by them. But I also expect some help from them. I think I need to be more independent. But reliance on others made me feel so comfortable.

#### *Personal values exploration*

“Personal values exploration” applied for eight dreamers. For most of the cases, the personal values explored through dream work were found to be related to their interpersonal communication style. For example, dreamer *D* valued friendship a lot, so she unconsciously gave up her own opinions and listened to others opinions in order to keep a good relationship with friends. Dreamer *D* mentioned,



My mother forced me to learn whatever my sister learned when I was a kid although I did not like it. It seems that I could not have my own opinions. I needed to do whatever my mother asked me to do.” “The cute doll in the dream seemed to be the ‘me’ admired by others. I like to be admired by others. Actually I think I can not accept being rejected by others.” “Maybe I valued my interpersonal relationship too much that I unconsciously gave up my own opinions. I need to explore more about what I value in addition to my friendship.

#### Types of insight gained

##### *Discovery of personal behavioral pattern*

Through the technique of interpretation, the client found similar behavioral themes running through different events occurred at different life stages. In our study, we found several variant subtypes under the subcategory of personal behavioral pattern: stress coping behavior, always delaying, self-control, helplessness, and indecisiveness. For example, dreamer “a” had repeated dream image of snakes. Sometimes there was only one snake in the dream but most of the time many snakes appeared from different directions. She interpreted it as having many stressors related to midterms, papers, and program or community activities. Her pattern was “always delaying” those works but being controlled by the deadlines. Participant *a* said,

I always feel frustrated near the end of the semester. I even wonder if I have to postpone for one more year to graduate. I can not tolerate the stress I am facing. I think the snake in the dream is definitely kind of symbolic of my stress. I repeatedly dreamed of snakes but I did not know that it might be representing the stress I face.

##### *Personal relationships with stressors*

Many of the dreamers mentioned being stressed in their waking life. However, only a few participants talked about their actual stressors. Their relationships with life stressors were usually influenced unconsciously by their coping style. Typically in our study, the participants felt more comfortable if they could identify the stressors but keep a safe distance from them. They knew how to say “hold on” to the stressors. For example, dreamer *a* said,

I always say ‘yes’ to my friends when they ask for help from me. I couldn’t help but accept their invitation to do something together. I ended up doing things I did not want to do.” “But I still need to complete certain tasks before certain deadlines.

Through the dream work, participant *a* acquired the insight about her typical approach toward the stressor. Then she tried to slow down and to cope more effectively with the stressor. She learned how to appropriately refuse tasks that she did not want to engage in.

##### *Early childhood recollection*

“Early childhood recollection” was another typical category of helpful components under the domain of gaining insight. Participant *W* dreamed of being isolated in the battlefield. She sensed that the feeling of loneliness came from her feeling of being rejected by others when she was a child, because she cried a lot. The early childhood recollection helped her reframe those experiences and learned to be relaxed and connect with others gradually. She mentioned,

I dreamed of being in the battlefield and nobody was willing to help me. This image caused me to associate the feeling of being lonely when I was a child.” “My brothers always left me alone. Both my parents were kind of busy and I always felt being rejected.... I just thought that I was a poor girl and I cried a lot. It wasn’t until I was in high school I sensed that people did not like me. Yes, I think that is because I cried easily. I always felt being isolated. People did not know how to treat me when I cried.” “How can I expect them to know my loneliness?” “Yes, I should do something to allow them to understand me. I should express more about myself so that people can get connected with me.

##### *Spiritual-existential concerns*

In the insight stage of dream interpretation, “spiritual–existential concerns” was one of the important levels for insight gaining. There were several subtypes under the category of spiritual–existential concerns: meaning of life, fear of death, anxious, loneliness/isolation, and issue of responsibility. Participant *K*, for example, mentioned in the dream session that image of death made her think about the “meaning of life.” She was trying to reach a balance between her own aspirations and her parents’ expectations in terms of her career/future planning. The meaning of life for her seemed to mean keeping a balance among her various roles in life and creating spaces for her spiritual life. She said,

In the dream, my sister and I were together. Someone was chasing and wanted to kill us. I asked my sister to run.” “It seems that death was approaching us. I was so scared and woke up.” “The dream let me speculate

about the meaning of life. I have so many responsibilities, taking care of my sister, finishing my study and earning money for the family. However, I should have my own life. But what is my own life?

Participant *c* also dreamed of her friend's death. She believed that life is beyond one's control because all people are destined to die. Prior to the dream work she was often anxious about death. In the waking life, dying was linked to friend's leaving abroad for advanced study. However, in her deep consciousness, she was anxious about the meaninglessness of friendship. She was so anxious about lost and disappearance associated with friendship and her close relationship with family members. During the dream work, she realized and stated,

Yes, it is beyond my control, but so what? I don't have to get anything from the friendship. I enjoy the relationship with good friends and I believe that friendship is a kind of eternal relationship. That is enough and I won't ask for more.

#### Action ideas

##### *Changing the dream*

Changing the dream during the dream work in our study was mainly asking the dreamer change the dream in fantasy. The purpose was to formulate ideas about changes the client might make in his or her waking life (Hill et al. 2007). When being asked to change the dream, dreamer *X* mentioned that she would like to have more "brightness" in her dream. She wanted the dream to become brighter so that she would not kill her mother in the dream. To connect the change to her waking life, *X* mentioned that the light in the bright room would help her become clear about her relationship with her mother. In fact, she was confused not only about her relationship with her mom, but also with family members in general. She hoped that the bright light would help her to see more clearly about her relationships. She said,

If I can change the dream, I would like to have much more brightness in the room. So that I can see clearly my relationship with my mother and won't kill her."  
"I know even if I killed her in the dream, it would be the bad part of the relationship that would be killed. I still have the responsibility of being a daughter. I can try to renew our good relationship.

##### *Continuing the dream*

In our study, eight dreamers tried to continue their dreams with positive endings. For example, dreamer *J* mentioned

that if the dream continued, the sunshine in the morning would appear and her scary feeling would disappear. To connect this positive ending to her daily life, she believed that the stress will always pass if she could concentrate on doing what she was supposed to do. She said,

I was running along the railway in the midnight, by myself. No matter how fast I ran, I couldn't reach the end. Actually, I didn't know where I was going. Suddenly, it became darker and darker. I was so tired and so scared." "If the dream continued, I know, the morning will come definitely. The sunshine in the morning would expel the darkness and I would not be so scared. Actually, I could try to enjoy the running.

##### *Titling the dream*

In our study, titling the dream was judged as a typical helpful component in dream work. It included three variant factors: installation of hope for action, positive attitude toward self, and positive attitude toward future. For example, dreamer *F* dreamed of mice repeatedly for many years and titled her dream "Enlightenment." She understood that the mice became a symbol of stress in her life when she was in high school which she hated. However, the dream work helped her to be clear about her negative feeling toward her high school years. To title the dream, she used "enlightenment" to represent that her understanding of those negative feelings and her desire to have a new start for her future.

## Discussion

The current study identified helpful components within four domains: waking life relationship exploration, self-exploration, types of insight gained, and action ideas. For each domain, we found categories and core ideas of helpful components from a more systematic viewpoint. The findings regarding helpful components were much more comprehensive comparing to Tien et al.'s (2006) study. It is true that clients and therapists might have different views regarding the helpful components occurred in therapy (Llewelyn 1988). However, we believe that the quality of the helpful components seeing by client and therapist might be similar, even though they describe those components differently, with different descriptions. For example, "New meaning" referred by clients might mean "insight" to the therapists.

Comparing to the taxonomy of helpful components developed by Elliott (1985), our findings coincide with his framework in terms of the following categories: "New perspective", "Awareness", and "Understanding." Feeling

understood and discovering something new about oneself (i.e., empathy and insight) are perhaps the two most commonly recognized helpful components in therapy. In our study, these two helpful components emerged in both the exploration and the insight stages. For insight, Baumann and Hill (2008) indicated that interpretations, disclosures of insight, and probes for insight are effective ways of eliciting client insight. Similarly, our study found that varieties of insight gained were part of important components helpful for dream interpretation.

Furthermore, we found that the clients' emotional awareness and cognitive process were both typical components for problem change. We agreed with Yalom (1995) that the therapy is a dual process consisted of having an emotional experience and analyzing it. In Hill's model of dream work, emotional expression and cognitive understanding are two important process elements. Before the dreamers obtain insights, they first need sufficient self-exploration through the dream image association. In our study, emotional awareness occurred in both the exploration and the insight stages and was identified by the therapists. Cognitive component then appeared in the insight stage. We agreed with González de Chávez et al. (2000) that cognitive process is important to therapeutic change. To provide clients the opportunity to gain insight, thorough exploration, acceptance, and containment about dreamer's emotion are necessary.

Interpersonal relationship exploration was also one of the typical components of dream work in our study. For the college students in our study, family problems and interpersonal problems were important issues emerged in the dream work. In family, the problems they faced were not only limited to their relationships with parents or siblings. Their relationships with cousins, nephews, aunts, uncles, and/or grandparents during their early childhood also greatly influenced their personal development. Hill et al. (2007) asserted that it is important to explore the relationship between the interpersonal content of dreams and its effects on the process and outcome of dream work. We found that for college students in Taiwan dream analysis elicited dreams with considerable interpersonal contents. Interpersonal themes, including their early interaction with the whole family, are important concerns for these students to enable them to re-experience and create insights for future interaction with life and/or work partners.

In contrast to Hill et al. (2008), our study found that interpersonal relationship was an important component in dream interpretation. Of the 21 activities during the dream work endorsed by therapists, both interpersonal relationship and relationship with therapist were important and endorsed by the therapist as important activities in dream work. Even earlier, Popp et al. (1998), Popp et al. (1990) and Stein et al. (2003) applied the core conflictual

relationship theme (CCRT) method (Luborsky and Crits-Christoph 1990, 1998) and found that dreams presented in therapy were filled with interpersonal content. In our study, we also found that interpersonal relationship was one of the important components that were helpful for college students in Taiwan to further explore or understand selves.

As far as the techniques in action stage, we found that the process of titling the dream would empower the dreamers. With the dream being entitled, the dreamer became appreciate the dream, remembered the meaning of the dream, understood the dream's connections to their target problems, and became hopeful for positive future changes in their waking life.

In the current study, we specifically explored the content of helpful components occurred in individual dream work. The results showed that dream work is appropriate for Chinese participants, especially for those who feel uncomfortable seeking clinical help or telling personal problems to professional helpers. Telling a dream to someone seems easier than telling a personal problem at the earlier sessions of the counseling process. In a study with Asian Americans as volunteer dreamers, it was found that volunteer clients with lower Asian values evaluated low therapist input sessions more positively. On the other hand, volunteer clients with higher Asian values evaluated high input sessions more positively (Hill et al. 2007). In our study, we found client involvement to be a general helpful component for effective dream work. For Chinese people, who are usually conservative in self-expression, dream work might be appropriate for self-exploration and problem solving.

#### Methodological limitations

One limitation of the present study is that we did not control for the effect of client characteristics and/or therapist-client working alliance in dream work. Hill et al. (2007) mentioned that the relationship, client involvement, and therapist adherence and competence were all factors that enabled the client to engage in the tasks of dream work. However, the qualitative method in our study was unable to extract those factors. Future studies were needed. Case study would be an appropriate way to examine effects of those factors.

The second limitation of the current study is that we did not provide a contrast or control group for comparing helpful components perceived by individuals from different cultural backgrounds. For Chinese, asking for professional counseling help is not as common as people in the Western society. Bringing a dream to counseling session would seem like a good reason for client to come for counseling. The process of dream interpretation would have been eye-opening and the outcome would have been interesting. However, our study did not provide a contrast

group for testing the effect of dream work. Neither did we provide comparisons between different ethnic groups. Future studies need to be conducted to examine the cultural difference.

#### Implications/Recommendations for future studies

The mechanism of change related to factors such as dreamer characteristics, working alliance, and techniques adopted by the therapists across the three stages needs further study. The specific interactions among these helpful components of dream work also need further investigation. In addition to the interaction effects, we also believe that therapist variables would be important factors to examine in future study. Not all therapists are familiar with dream work. We suspect that there would be more characteristics regarding client and therapist that are associated with the quality of the therapeutic alliances and dream work outcome. Further exploration of these characteristics in future research is recommended.

With regard to the method applied, we examined the helpful components by reviewing the process of dream work from the observer's viewpoint. However, clients and therapists might have different views regarding the helpful components occurred in therapy (Llewelyn 1988). Hill et al. (2007) indicated that clients, therapists, and judges might have different perspectives on the process and outcome of dream work. We need to further explore the impact of consistent versus discrepant perspectives between client and therapist and their impact on the outcome of dream work. For example, a client might be more interested in problem solution while the therapist might be more interested in the etiology of the problem and how it might be transformed through acquiring insights. For future studies, we strongly recommend follow-up interviews and analysis of the helpful components from the dreamer's viewpoints. We also recommend conducting Interpersonal Process Recall with therapists to examine what happens in the therapy process and what contribute to therapeutic change. Furthermore, future research should compare this treatment with other models to assess the unique contribution of Hill's dream work model.

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