

The Dynamics of Self-Understanding in Middle Adulthood Through Dream Analysis

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to explore the process of self-understanding in middle adulthood through dream experiences from the perspective of analytical psychology.

Research Methodology: This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design involving three Indonesian adults in middle adulthood who had experienced psychologically significant dreams and were able to reflect on their meanings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and written dream narratives and analysed using interpretative thematic analysis within the framework of analytical psychology.

Results: The findings indicate that dream experiences contribute to an integrative process of self-understanding, including awareness of internal conflicts, the integration of rational and intuitive aspects, and a deeper understanding of interpersonal dynamics. Dreams also function as a reflective medium that facilitate emotional processing and psychological integration.

Conclusions: Dream analysis may support the development of self-understanding by enabling individuals to access unconscious psychological dynamics and reflect more deeply on their subjective experiences. Limitations: This study was limited to a small number of participants and focused on subjective interpretations of dream experiences within a specific culture and psychological context.

Contributions: This study extends the application of analytical psychology by demonstrating that dream analysis serves not only as a method of symbolic interpretation but also as a reflective process that facilitates self-understanding and psychological integration during middle adulthood.

Keywords: *Analytical Psychology, Dream Analysis, Middle Adulthood, Qualitative Research, Self-Understanding*

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1. Introduction

Dreams are psychological phenomena experienced by nearly everyone; however, their meanings are not always consciously understood. In everyday life, dreams are often regarded as random experiences without significant meaning. From the perspective of analytical psychology, dreams are understood as symbolic representations of an individual's psychological dynamics originating from the unconscious ([Jung, 1964](#)). Furthermore, dreams function as a medium of communication between the conscious and unconscious through symbolic forms ([Jung, 1968](#)).

Empirical and clinical evidence has increasingly supported Jung perspective by showing that dreams are meaningfully related to the dreamer's psychological condition, emotional concerns, and waking-life experiences ([Roesler, 2025](#)). Rather than representing random mental activity, dream content may metaphorically express emotional significant interpersonal experiences and unresolved psychological concerns, highlighting the continuity between dreaming and waking psychological functioning ([Wang & Feng, 2024](#)).

Despite continuing advances in sleep and dream science, understanding the functions of dreaming remains an important scientific challenge, highlighting the continuing relevance of investigating dreams as meaningful psychological phenomena ([Cunningham, 2023](#)). Qualitative research has likewise shown that dreams are experienced as personally meaningful phenomena closely connected to waking life, with their interpretation emerging through individuals' subjective reflections and sociocultural contexts rather than through fixed symbolic meanings ([Gulay & Uysal, 2024](#)). Similarly, dream interpretation has been conceptualized as a process of subjective meaning-making rather than the identification of fixed symbolic meanings ([Malinowski, 2016](#)).

In addition, the psychoanalytic perspective views dreams as expressions of psychological experiences that cannot be fully articulated at the conscious level ([Freud, 2010](#)). Modern psychological research indicates that dreams play a role in emotional regulation and reflection on life experiences ([Cartwright, 2010](#)). Through this process, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of their psychological dynamics ([Malinowski, 2016](#)). Beyond dream research itself, contemporary psychology has increasingly emphasized reflective processes that support emotional regulation, psychological well-being, and personal growth. While considerable attention has been given to approaches such as mindfulness, narrative reflection, and emotional awareness, dream experiences remain relatively underexplored as naturally occurring reflective processes. Recent empirical studies suggest that dreams may contribute to emotional memory processing, mood regulation, and adaptive psychological functioning, highlighting their potential relevance for understanding human psychological development ([Scarpelli et al., 2019](#); [Zhang et al., 2024](#)).

Self-understanding is an important aspect of individual development, particularly in middle adulthood, which is characterized by reflection on life experiences ([Erikson, 1982](#)). However, not all aspects of self can be directly accessed through conscious awareness. Many emotional experiences, internal conflicts, and past experiences remain within the unconscious and continue to influence the way individuals think, feel, and behave. In this context, dreams may serve as a means of accessing and understanding these hidden aspects. Rather than functioning merely as symbolic experiences, dreams may provide opportunities for individuals to reflect on unresolved emotional concerns and integrate unconscious psychological processes into conscious self-understanding.

Research on dreams within the framework of analytical psychology has been widely conducted; however, most studies have focused primarily on symbolic interpretation or the general meaning of dreams. Meanwhile, studies specifically examining the relationship between dream experiences and the process of self-understanding, particularly in middle adulthood, remain limited. Therefore, rather than positioning dreams as predictive phenomena, this study conceptualizes them as reflective experiences that facilitate awareness, emotional integration, and personal meaning-making. Accordingly, this study contributes to contemporary analytical psychology by extending the understanding of dream analysis beyond symbolic interpretation toward its role as a reflective process supporting self-understanding.

2. Literature Review

Dreams have long been studied as significant psychological phenomena within various theoretical frameworks. In analytical psychology, dreams are understood as symbolic expressions of the unconscious that reflect the dynamic interaction between conscious and unconscious processes ([Jung, 1964](#)). Rather than being random or meaningless, dreams function as a medium through which unconscious material becomes accessible to conscious awareness ([Jung, 1968](#)). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud viewed dreams as expressions of repressed desires and unresolved psychological

tensions that cannot be fully articulated in waking life ([Freud, 2010](#)). Although differing in interpretation, both perspectives emphasize the importance of dreams as pathways toward understanding deeper psychological processes.

In contemporary psychology, dreams are also examined in relation to cognitive and emotional processes. Research suggests that dreams play a role in emotional regulation and memory processing, enabling individuals to reorganize and integrate their experiences ([Cartwright, 2010](#)). [Similarly, Malinowski and Horton \(2014\)](#) argue that dreams contribute to emotional processing by facilitating reflection on waking-life concerns. Although these theoretical perspectives differ in explaining the origin and function of dreams, they consistently suggest that dream experiences provide meaningful psychological information that extends beyond random cognitive activity.

Recent research has further demonstrated that dream content is often derived from both recent and remote autobiographical memories, suggesting that dreams contribute to the integration and reorganization of personal experiences across time ([Vallat et al., 2021](#)). Contemporary studies suggest that dreams play an active role in emotional regulation and emotional memory processing. Dream experiences may help individuals reorganize emotional experiences and integrate autobiographical memories into meaningful psychological narratives ([Scarpelli et al., 2019](#); [Zhang et al., 2024](#)). Recent narrative research has likewise shown that dreams provide a context for emotional elaboration, enabling individuals to organize and process emotionally significant experiences through symbolic narratives ([Mariani et al., 2021](#)). This supports the perspective that dream experiences may facilitate reflective processes through which individuals construct personal meaning and develop deeper self-understanding.

Recent mixed-method research has likewise shown that dream experiences reflect ongoing psychological functioning and emotionally significant waking-life events, supporting the view that dreams provide meaningful material for psychological reflection and personal meaning-making ([Margherita et al., 2023](#)). Self-understanding is a critical aspect of psychological development, particularly in middle adulthood, which is characterized by reflection on life experiences and the search for meaning ([Erikson, 1982](#)). The ability to understand oneself becomes essential in navigating these complexities and achieving psychological well-being.

However, not all aspects of the self are accessible through conscious awareness. Many emotional experiences, internal conflicts, and past events remain within the unconscious and continue to influence behaviour and decision-making. In this context, dreams can serve as reflective medium that enable individuals to access and explore these hidden aspects. Dream reflection may also enhance self-awareness and emotional understanding by helping individuals recognize unresolved emotional tensions ([Malinowski & Horton, 2014](#)). Dream reflection may also contribute to self-awareness by helping individuals recognize unresolved emotional tensions and unconscious psychological patterns influencing their daily lives ([Siclari et al., 2020](#)). Contemporary dream research also suggests that dream content frequently reflects emotionally significant waking-life experiences and autobiographical memories ([Vallat et al., 2021](#)).

Previous studies on dreams within analytical psychology have largely focused on the interpretation of symbols and archetypes ([Cirlot, 2020](#)). While these studies provide valuable insights into the symbolic structure of dreams, they often emphasize symbolic meaning rather than the process through which individuals engage with and understand those meanings. While these approaches have substantially advanced the understanding of dream symbolism, they provide relatively limited explanation regarding how individuals actively construct self-understanding through reflective engagement with dream experiences.

Recent approaches to dream analysis have increasingly emphasized the importance of understanding dream symbols within the personal context of the dreamer rather than relying solely on universal symbolic meanings. Dream interpretation is therefore viewed as a process of identifying recurring motifs, psychological themes, and patterns that contribute to personal meaning-making and

self-understanding ([Jenni & Roesler, 2024](#)). This perspective is further supported by qualitative research showing that individuals primarily understand their dreams by relating them to personally meaningful waking-life experiences rather than relying on predetermined symbolic interpretations ([Malinowski, 2016](#)). Recent qualitative research has further emphasized that the meaning of dreams emerges through individual's subjective reflection on their personal experiences rather than through fixed symbolic interpretations. This perspective highlights dream interpretation as a process of personal meaning-making closely connected to self-understanding ([Robinson & Vasile, 2023](#)).

Dream exploration has also been associated with the development of personal insight and self-understanding, particularly when individuals actively engage in the interpretation and reflection of dream experiences ([Hill, 2004](#)). Research has further suggested that discussing and reflecting upon dream experiences may enhance empathy, personal insight, and psychological understanding, supporting the role of dreams as meaningful reflective experiences ([Blagrove et al., 2021](#)). Collectively, these studies suggest that the psychological value of dreams lies not only in their symbolic content but also in the reflective processes through which individuals derive personal meaning from dream experiences.

Therefore, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the role of dreams as reflective processes that facilitate self-understanding, particularly in middle adulthood. While previous studies have primarily emphasized symbolic interpretation, emotional regulation, or cognitive function of dreams, the present study positions dream analysis as a reflective psychological process through which individuals construct self-understanding by integrating unconscious experiences with conscious awareness. Accordingly, this study extends existing knowledge by emphasizing the experiential and meaning-making dimensions of dream analysis within the framework of analytical psychology.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the process of self-understanding through dream experiences in depth. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study focuses on the exploration of subjective meanings emerging from individual experiences, which cannot be adequately measured quantitatively. In this context, the study does not aim to test hypotheses, but rather to understand the phenomenon interpretatively, particularly regarding how individuals make meaning of their inner experiences.

The study adopted a phenomenological design because it emphasized participants' lived experiences and reflective interpretation of dreams. Through this approach, the research sought to understand how dream experiences contributed to psychological reflection, emotional awareness, and the development of self-understanding in middle adulthood. This methodological orientation is also consistent with recent qualitative dream research emphasizing that subjective dialogue and personal meaning-making provide valuable insights into dream experiences that cannot be fully captured through quantitative coding alone ([Bontempo e Silva et al., 2023](#)).

3.2 Unit of Analysis/Aspects Investigated

This study focused on the process of self-understanding emerging through dream experiences. The unit of analysis consisted of symbolic narratives, emotional reactions, interpersonal dynamics, and subjective meaning-making processes expressed by participants during interviews and written dream narratives. The analysis particularly emphasized how participants interpreted dream symbols in relation to their psychological experiences, internal conflicts, and life reflections.

In addition, the analysis emphasized the process through which dream experiences facilitated self-understanding, including awareness of unconscious conflicts, emotional integration decision-making processes, and relational dynamics. Dream symbols were therefore not interpreted as universal meanings, but as subjective psychological expressions closely related to each participant's personal experiences and reflective processes.

3.3 Participants

The participants in this study consisted of three individuals in middle adulthood who had memorable and psychologically significant dream experiences. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research focus and their ability to provide rich reflective narratives regarding their dream experiences. The participant criteria included the individuals within the middle adulthood age range, the individuals who had experienced significant dreams, and the individuals capable of expressing their experiences narratively. The participants consisted of three Indonesian adults in middle adulthood (aged 50-60 years) who had experienced psychologically significant dreams and were able to reflect on and articulate the personal meanings of those experiences. Although the participants differed in their life backgrounds and personal experiences, all met the inclusion criteria and demonstrated the capacity for reflective narrative required for phenomenological inquiry.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling from seven documented dream cases previously collected by the researcher. Three participants were included in this study because they met the inclusion criteria, namely being in middle adulthood, having experienced psychologically significant dreams, and being able to provide rich reflective narratives relevant to the research focus. Participants consisted of two women and one man in middle adulthood. All participants provided informed consent for the use of their anonymized narratives for research and publication. The participants were selected because their dream experiences contained symbolic, emotional, and relational dimensions relevant to the exploration of self-understanding. The selection of three participants was considered appropriate for phenomenological inquiry because each case provided rich and detailed reflective narratives that enabled an in-depth exploration of lived experiences. Data collection was concluded when sufficient information power had been achieved, as the narratives consistently addressed the research objectives and no substantially new psychological themes emerged across the selected cases.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews focused on the exploration of dream experiences, emotional responses, and participants' reflections on the meaning of their dreams. In addition, data were obtained from written dream narratives, enabling reflective analysis of symbolic content and subjective experiences appearing in the dreams. The use of dream narratives as qualitative data is consistent with contemporary dream research, which recognizes dream reports as valuable sources for examining emotional experiences, cognitive processes, and the continuity between dream content and waking-life concerns through systematic content analysis ([Fogli et al., 2020](#)).

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using an interpretative thematic approach. The process began with a close reading of the dream narratives, in which the researcher carefully examined each narrative to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context of the participants' experiences. Next, major symbols appearing in the dreams were identified as representations of the individuals' psychological dynamics. These symbols and their associated meanings were then categorized into themes related to self-understanding. Subsequently, the identified symbols were interpreted within the framework of analytical psychology to explore the meanings embedded in the dreams. Finally, a cross-case analysis was conducted by comparing the interpretations across all cases to identify common patterns in the process of self-understanding.

3.6 Trustworthiness of Data

The trustworthiness of the data was maintained through several qualitative validation strategies. First, theoretical triangulation was applied by interpreting the findings through the framework of analytical psychology while also considering contemporary perspectives on emotional processing and self-understanding. Second, reflective interpretation was conducted continuously throughout the analytical process to maintain consistency between participants' narratives, symbolic meanings, and psychological interpretations. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the interview data and dream

narratives to ensure contextual understanding and interpretative coherence. Throughout the interpretative process, the researcher maintained a reflective stance by continuously examining personal assumptions and ensuring that symbolic interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives and contextual meanings. In addition, peer discussion was conducted to reduce subjective bias and strengthen the credibility of the interpretations. Detailed narrative presentation and interpretative transparency were also applied to support the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Prior to participation, all participants received information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of their anonymized data for research and publication. To protect participants' privacy, all identifying information was removed, and pseudonyms were used throughout the study ([Roesler, 2023](#)).

4. Results and Discussions

The analysis was conducted on dream narratives derived from individual experiences obtained through interviews and documented in written form ([Deciana, 2024](#)). From the available data, this study focused on three main cases representing dominant patterns of self-understanding emerging through dream experiences. The findings indicate that self-understanding emerging through dreams can be categorized into three major dimensions: reflections of life meaning, integration in decision-making, and emotional and relational dynamics. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants, the major dream symbols identified in each case, and the dominant psychological themes emerging from their dream experiences.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants, major dream symbols, and dominant psychological themes

Participant	Age Range	Gender	Main Dream Symbols	Dominant Psychological Theme
Participant 1	Middle adulthood	Female	House, villa, and key symbolism	Awareness of internal conflict and shadow integration
Participant 2	Middle adulthood	Female	Key patterns and wise old woman	Integration of logic, intuition, and wisdom
Participant 3	Middle adulthood	Male	Journey, workplace, and female figures	Emotional conflict, anima-shadow integration, and life direction

As shown in Table 1, each participant exhibited distinct dream symbols and psychological themes, reflecting the uniqueness of their personal experiences and psychological conditions. Despite these differences, all three cases demonstrated a common reflective process through which dream experiences facilitated deeper self-understanding. The dreams served as symbolic representations of unresolved emotions, personal conflicts, and meaningful life experiences, allowing participants to interpret their internal psychological states. These findings suggest that dreams can function as an important medium for self-reflection and psychological insight. The following sections present a detailed thematic analysis of each case to illustrate how these dimensions of self-understanding emerged through participants' dream narratives.

4.1 Self-Understanding through Reflection on Life Meaning and Relationship with the Environment

In the first case, the dream portrayed an individual staying in a villa with her two children. The villa was described as transparent and dominated by the colour white, symbolizing an ideal, harmonious, and conflict-free life. However, within this situation, the individual realized that she was unprepared because she lacked important personal belongings. This prompted her to return home, only to discover that she could not enter because the key had been left inside. Symbolically, this situation reflects difficulty in accessing the self fully and authentically.

The appearance of a house assistant who helped the participant retrieve the key became an important turning point in the dream. During the interview, the participant explained that the dream made her realize she had long prioritized maintaining a positive outward appearance while avoiding unpleasant emotional realities and internal conflicts. She described the dream as revealing aspects of herself that had previously remained outside her conscious awareness.

This was reflected in the participant's statement:

"I realized that all this time, I cared more about maintaining my outward appearance and tended to deny the negative things happening in my life. The dream seemed to reveal the things I had been ignoring." (Participant 1).

The interview suggests that the participant interpreted the dream in relation to her own psychological experiences, particularly by recognizing internal conflicts that had previously remained outside conscious awareness. Her description of the dream further suggests that the inability to enter her own house may represent difficulties in accessing aspects of herself that had long been avoided or remained outside conscious awareness. Within the framework of analytical psychology, this pattern is consistent with Jung's concept of the shadow, which refers to denied or unacknowledged aspects of the personality (Jung, 1968). Recognizing these previously neglected aspects enabled the participant to develop deeper self-understanding.

In this case, self-understanding developed through the participant's growing awareness of her tendency to avoid conflict, as well as the need to become more honest and transparent with herself. This process required courage to acknowledge and integrate aspects of the self that had previously been suppressed. Thus, the participant's reflection on the dream may represent the early stages of individuation, in which previously unrecognized aspects of the self begin to be acknowledged and gradually integrated into conscious awareness (Jung, 1968). Overall, this case illustrates how personal reflection on dream experiences enabled previously unrecognized psychological dynamics to become accessible to conscious awareness.

4.2 Self-Understanding through the Integration of Cognition, Intuition, and Wisdom

In the second case, the dream portrayed an individual in a space resembling a place of worship, characterized by a calm and reflective atmosphere. Within the dream, the individual repeatedly attached keyhole-shaped paper patterns onto a floor that already contained similar patterns. The key emerged as the central element in this dream. Based on the participant's reflection, it came to represent her search for deeper understanding and her effort to make sense of important life experiences. The repetitive activity of attaching the key patterns symbolized the gradual process of organizing and understanding life experiences.

An elderly woman also appeared in the dream, informing the individual about colour changes occurring in the attached papers. During the interview, the participant described the elderly woman as a calm and reassuring presence who encouraged her to reflect more deeply on important life decisions. Within the framework of analytical psychology, this figure may be understood as resembling the *wise old woman archetype*, representing wisdom and inner guidance during the reflective process (Jung, 1968). Likewise, the changing colours may be understood as representing multiple possibilities and perspectives that required careful consideration when interpreting important life situations.

This reflection was directly expressed in the participant's statement:

"I feel as though I have found the key to understanding my life journey, including my relationship with my husband and my children. I realize that I need to be brave and firm in using logic, intuition, and wisdom in making decisions, while considering the possible consequences." (Participant 2)

Unlike the first case, this dream prompted the participant to reconsider significant aspects of her life, especially her relationships with her husband and children and the way she approached important decisions. The self-understanding emerging from this experience also resulted in observable changes

in her daily life. The participant described becoming more independent, expressing herself more authentically, and showing greater courage in making decisions that had previously been avoided. She also became more willing to confront interpersonal dynamics within her marital relationship and to face important transitions that she had previously postponed.

These behavioural changes suggest that the participant gradually integrated different ways of understanding and responding to life experiences rather than relying solely on rational thinking. Within the framework of analytical psychology, this process may be associated with the integration of the *animus* archetype, which represents rationality and logical thinking, together with the wise old woman archetype, which represents intuition and inner wisdom. The integration of these psychological functions enabled the participant to develop greater balance in responding to personal and interpersonal challenges.

The self-understanding emerging in this case relates to the participant's awareness of the importance of balancing multiple internal resources. Rather than relying exclusively on rational thinking, she became increasingly open to intuition and inner wisdom when making important decisions. Thus, the participant's reflection on the dream illustrates an integrative process of self-understanding, in which cognitive, emotional, and intuitive dimensions gradually became more balanced. These findings suggest that dreams may not only reflect life experiences, but also facilitate the integration of multiple psychological functions within the individual ([Stein, 1998](#)).

4.3 Self-Understanding through the Integration of Anima and Shadow in Relational Dynamics and Career Stagnation

In the third case, the dream portrayed an individual travelling toward the workplace, which symbolically represented direction and purpose in life. However, instead of reaching the intended destination, the individual became distracted by encounters with female figures from the past. The journey toward the workplace may be understood as reflecting the participant's search for direction and purpose in life, particularly in relation to career and personal development. The appearance of female figures from the past suggested unresolved emotional experiences that continued to influence the participant's present life. The participant's reflection suggests that these recurring female figures represented emotionally significant relationships that had not yet been fully processed.

This reflection was expressed in the participant's statement:

"I realized that all this time, I only showed the positive side of myself and avoided acknowledging the negative aspects within me. I also had not truly processed the wounds and experiences from my past, and I now understand that this has affected my courage to commit and move forward into new relationships. I also see that this condition has influenced my professional life, where I struggle to determine direction and maintain stability after my divorce." (Participant 3)

The case illustrates how unresolved emotional experiences gradually became central to the participant's understanding of himself, influencing both relational patterns and career development. The recurring female figures may be understood as representing emotionally significant relationships that had not yet been fully integrated. Within the framework of analytical psychology, these figures may be interpreted as expressions of the anima archetype, which represents emotional experiences, relational dynamics, and affective patterns that influence psychological functioning ([Jung, 1964](#)).

The participant further recognized that he had consistently avoided confronting painful emotional experiences and tended to maintain a positive self-image despite unresolved internal conflicts. This reflection suggests difficulty in recognizing aspects of himself that had remained outside conscious awareness. Within analytical psychology, this pattern is consistent with Jung's concept of the shadow, referring to denied or unacknowledged aspects of personality that continue to influence thoughts, emotions, and behaviour outside conscious awareness ([Jung, 1968](#)).

Collectively, these reflections suggest that unresolved emotional experiences and previously unacknowledged aspects of the self, influenced both relational functioning and career development.

Rather than functioning independently, the emotional dynamics represented by the anima and the denied aspects represented by the shadow appeared to reinforce one another, contributing to uncertainty in interpersonal relationships and difficulties establishing a stable life direction ([Vallat et al., 2021](#)).

This case demonstrates that self-understanding emerged through the participant's growing awareness of how unresolved emotional experiences continued to influence his relationships, career decisions, and overall life direction. Through reflection on the dream, the participant recognized the psychological connections between past emotional experiences, previously denied aspects of the self, and present behavioural patterns. From the perspective of analytical psychology, this process reflects the gradual integration of the anima and the shadow, fostering greater psychological awareness and a clearer sense of direction in both relational and professional life ([Jung, 1964](#)). These findings suggest that dream experiences can facilitate awareness of unconscious psychological patterns, thereby supporting deeper self-understanding and personal development.

To facilitate understanding of the findings, Figure 1 presents the conceptual process through which dream experiences contribute to self-understanding. The model summarizes the major stages identified across the three cases, beginning with dream experiences and culminating in deeper self-understanding through reflection and psychological integration.

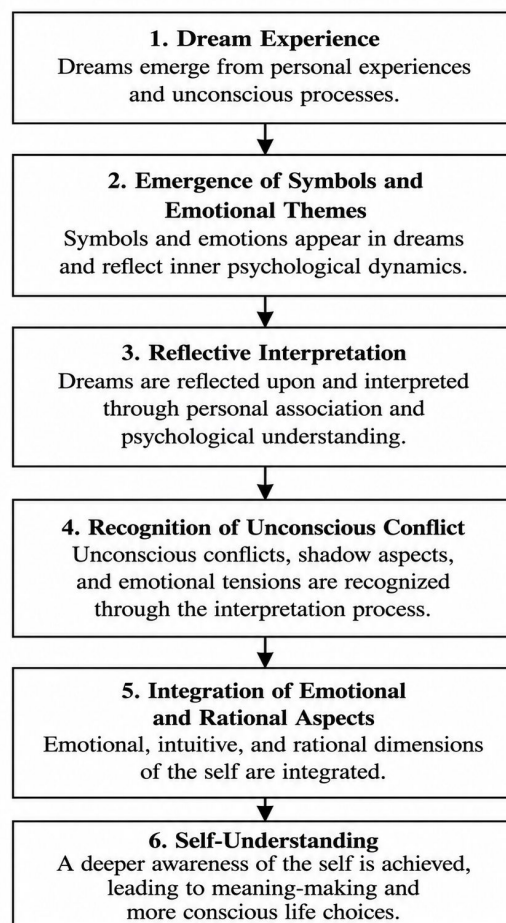


Figure 1. The process of self-understanding through dream interpretation from an analytical psychology perspective.

Figure 1 illustrates the process through which dream experiences contribute to self-understanding. Through reflective interpretation, individuals gradually recognize unconscious conflicts and integrate emotional and rational aspects of the self, leading to deeper self-understanding and more conscious life choices.

4.4 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that dream experiences contribute to the process of self-understanding by enabling individuals to access psychological aspects that are not fully recognized in conscious awareness. Through symbolic representations appearing in dreams, individuals are able to reflect on internal conflicts, emotional experiences, interpersonal dynamics, and life direction. Social relationships and emotionally significant life experiences also influence the ways individuals construct meaning from their dreams and develop self-understanding ([Gulay & Uysal, 2024](#); [Robinson & Vasile, 2023](#)).

From the perspective of analytical psychology, dreams function not merely as symbolic products of the unconscious, but also as reflective medium that facilitate the integration of various psychological dimensions within the individual ([Jung, 1964](#)). The process of interpreting dream experiences allows individuals to recognize hidden emotional patterns and gradually develop a more comprehensive understanding of themselves. The discussion in this section is organized based on the major themes emerging from the three cases, namely reflection on self-image and *shadow* integration, the integration of rationality and intuition, and the interaction between emotional dynamics and unconscious conflicts in shaping life direction and interpersonal relationships.

4.4.1 Reflection on Self-Image and Shadow Integration

In the first case, the dream reflected a conflict between the ideal self-image maintained by the individual and the actual psychological condition experienced internally. The image of the villa, which appeared beautiful, transparent, and harmonious, symbolized the idealized version of life that the individual attempted to preserve outwardly. However, the individual's unpreparedness within the dream suggested an internal discrepancy between external appearance and psychological reality.

According to analytical psychology, this condition may be understood as a compensatory process in which the unconscious attempts to balance an overly controlled conscious attitude ([Jung, 1964](#)). The dream therefore functioned as a corrective psychological mechanism, revealing aspects of the self that had been neglected or denied. The symbol of the house in the dream represented not merely a physical structure, but the psychological structure of the self. The inability to enter the house symbolized the individual's difficulty in accessing deeper layers of the psyche. This reflected limitations in achieving authentic self-reflection and emotional honesty.

Furthermore, the appearance of the helper figure who assisted the individual in accessing the house may be interpreted as a manifestation of the *shadow*, representing aspects of the self that had long been suppressed or ignored ([Jung, 1968](#)). Interestingly, the *shadow* in this dream did not emerge as a threatening figure, but rather as a source of assistance. This suggests that the denied aspects of the self may also possess constructive potential in the process of psychological growth.

The participant's reflection revealed that she had long prioritized maintaining external appearances while avoiding acknowledgement of painful emotional realities. In this context, the dream facilitated awareness regarding the discrepancy between the idealized self-image and the actual emotional condition experienced internally. These findings indicate that self-understanding does not emerge solely through recognition of positive attributes, but also through the willingness to confront emotional pain, internal conflict, and denied aspects of the self. The process of integrating the *shadow*, therefore, became an important step toward achieving greater psychological authenticity. In real life, this condition was reflected in the individual's tendency to avoid conflict and suppress emotional experiences for prolonged periods. Although these strategies initially functioned as forms of psychological protection, over time, they contributed to emotional exhaustion and difficulties in maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships.

Thus, the process of individuation in this case involved the gradual integration of conscious and unconscious dimensions of the self. The dream functioned as a reflective medium that enabled the individual to begin recognizing aspects of herself that had previously remained outside conscious awareness. These findings reinforce the perspective that dreams may promote reflective awareness of

self-understanding by revealing hidden emotional dynamics and encouraging individuals to engage in deeper psychological reflection. Previous studies have similarly shown that dream experiences may facilitate emotional reflection and psychological adaptation by encouraging individuals to engage with emotionally significant waking-life experiences ([Scarpelli et al., 2019](#); [Malinowski, 2016](#)).

4.4.2 *Integration of Rationality, Intuition, and Inner Wisdom*

In the second case, the dream reflected a more active and structured process of self-understanding. The repetitive act of attaching keyhole-shaped patterns symbolized the individual's attempt to gradually organize and understand life experiences that previously felt fragmented or unclear. This process demonstrates that self-understanding is not formed instantly but develops through continuous reflection and reinterpretation of lived experiences. In this context, the dream functioned as a symbolic psychological space that allowed the individual to reorganize internal experiences into a more meaningful structure.

The symbol of the key represented not only access to understanding but also the possibility of opening new perspectives within life. The dream suggested that the individual was entering a deeper stage of reflection concerning identity, relationships, and future direction. The appearance of *the wise old woman archetype* reflected the emergence of inner wisdom that guided the reflective process ([Jung, 1968](#)). This figure symbolized psychological maturity and intuitive understanding developed through life experiences. Additionally, the changing colours within the dream reflected the dynamic nature of meaning-making. The dream suggested that life experiences cannot always be understood from a single perspective, but require openness toward multiple interpretations and emotional possibilities.

The participant's reflection demonstrated that the dream contributed significantly to her ability to make decisions more courageously and authentically. Through the process of dream analysis, the individual gradually became more willing to express herself honestly, take independent actions, and confront life changes that had previously been avoided. This transformation suggests that dream experiences may contribute not only to psychological awareness but also to concrete behavioural changes. The integration between rational thinking, intuition, and emotional wisdom enabled the individual to approach life situations with greater balance and confidence.

Viewed through the lens of analytical psychology, this process may be associated with the integration of the *animus* and *the wise old woman archetype*. The *animus* represents rationality, assertiveness, and the capacity for structured thinking, while *the wise old woman* reflects intuitive wisdom and psychological balance. Furthermore, the findings indicate that self-understanding involves the ability to integrate different psychological functions rather than relying solely on logic or emotion independently. The dream, therefore, functioned as a reflective medium through which the individual could recognize and balance various internal dimensions of the self.

Thus, this case demonstrates that dreams may provide opportunities for psychological integration by helping individuals develop greater awareness of their internal resources, emotional needs, and decision-making processes. In addition, contemporary dream research suggests that reflective engagement with dream experiences may strengthen autobiographical meaning-making and emotional integration processes in adulthood ([Wamsley & Stickgold, 2019](#)).

4.4.3 *Emotional Conflict, Shadow Integration, and Life Direction*

The third case demonstrated a more complex process of self-understanding involving unresolved emotional experiences, unconscious conflicts, and difficulties in determining life direction. Unlike the previous cases, the dream in this case revealed not only interpersonal struggles, but also the impact of unresolved psychological dynamics on the individual's sense of purpose and professional stability.

The journey toward the workplace symbolized movement toward personal goals, structure, and future direction. However, the repeated distractions caused by encounters with female figures from the past suggested that unresolved emotional experiences continued to interfere with the individual's ability to progress psychologically and practically. Within analytical psychology, these female figures may be understood as manifestations of the *anima*, representing emotional and relational dimensions within

the male psyche ([Jung, 1964](#)). This interpretation suggests that the dream reflects an internal struggle between the pursuit of conscious aspirations and the unconscious need to reconcile unresolved emotional aspects of the self.

The strong presence of the *anima* indicated that the individual remained emotionally attached to unresolved past experiences. These emotional dynamics appeared to dominate the individual's psychological functioning, making it difficult to establish clarity, stability, and commitment in both interpersonal relationships and professional life. At the same time, the findings revealed the significant role of the shadow. The participant tended to maintain a positive external image while suppressing emotional pain, disappointment, insecurity, and unresolved internal conflicts. According to Jungian theory, the shadow consists of denied aspects of the self that remain outside conscious awareness but continue to influence behaviour and psychological functioning ([Jung, 1968](#)). The suppression of these aspects contributed to emotional stagnation and avoidance patterns. Although the individual appeared socially active and eager to support others, this external activity did not translate into concrete action or meaningful personal progress. In this context, helping others functioned partly as a defense mechanism that diverted attention away from unresolved internal issues.

The findings also suggest that unresolved emotional conflicts may significantly affect career development and life direction. The participant recognized that emotional instability and unresolved past experiences contributed to indecisiveness, lack of execution, and difficulty maintaining professional consistency after the divorce experience. This demonstrates that self-understanding involves not only emotional awareness, but also the ability to confront denied aspects of the self honestly. Without confronting the shadow, individuals may continue repeating maladaptive emotional and behavioural patterns that inhibit psychological growth.

Emotional experiences that are not consciously processed may continue to influence emotional regulation, interpersonal functioning, and psychological well-being over time ([Sicliari et al., 2020](#)). In this context, dream reflection may provide opportunities for individuals to recognize and gradually integrate unresolved emotional experiences. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary dream research, suggesting that dreams often reflect ongoing emotional concerns and may support adaptive psychological processes by facilitating awareness of unresolved conflicts and personal challenges ([Gazzillo et al., 2020](#)).

Furthermore, the dream functioned as a reflective medium in which unconscious conflicts could emerge symbolically and become available for conscious reflection. Through dream analysis, the participant gradually recognized the connection between unresolved emotional experiences and present difficulties in relationships, career development, and personal direction. In this context, the process of individuation required not only emotional reflection but also the integration of denied aspects of the self into conscious awareness. The integration of the *anima* and *shadow* became essential for developing greater psychological balance and a clearer sense of direction in life. Thus, the findings in this case reinforce the understanding that dreams may function as reflective medium that reveal unconscious emotional dynamics influencing both interpersonal relationships and broader life functioning. The process of interpreting dreams, therefore, becomes an important pathway toward deeper self-understanding and psychological integration ([Rieger, Costanza, Kubiszewski, & Dugdale, 2023](#)).

4.4.4 Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the three cases demonstrate that self-understanding through dreams involves an integrative psychological process connecting conscious awareness with unconscious dynamics. Dreams do not merely reflect psychological conditions symbolically, but also facilitate reflection, emotional processing, and the gradual integration of various aspects of the self. The findings suggest that self-understanding developed through dream experiences as a gradual and integrative process encompassing awareness of internal conflict, the reconciliation of emotional and rational dimensions, and a deeper appreciation of interpersonal relationships. These dimensions appeared differently in each case, reflecting the subjective and contextual nature of dream experiences.

In the first case, self-understanding emerged through confrontation with avoided emotional realities and the integration of the *shadow*. In the second case, dreams facilitated the integration of rationality, intuition, and inner wisdom, contributing to increased independence and psychological balance. Meanwhile, the third case highlighted the relationship between unresolved emotional experiences (*anima*), *shadow* dynamics, and difficulties in determining life direction and professional stability.

These findings support the perspective that dreams may function as reflective medium that help individuals recognize psychological patterns that are difficult to access through conscious reflection alone. This interpretation is consistent with qualitative dream research suggesting that dreams are experienced as personally meaningful phenomena whose significance emerges through subjective reflection and the individual's sociocultural context ([Gulay & Uysal, 2024](#)). It is also consistent with contemporary perspectives emphasizing the role of reflection and emotional processing in psychological well-being ([Malinowski & Horton, 2014](#)). In addition, the findings reinforce Jung view that dreams serve as communication between conscious and unconscious processes ([Jung, 1968](#)).

However, this study emphasizes that the importance of dream analysis lies not in discovering fixed symbolic meanings, but in understanding how individuals construct meaning from dream experiences within the context of their own lives. Although the present study was not conducted as a longitudinal psychotherapy outcome study, its findings are consistent with empirical psychoanalytic research indicating that systematic changes in dream narratives may reflect changes in unconscious mental functioning over time ([Fischmann et al., 2021](#)). Therefore, self-understanding through dreams can be understood as a dynamic and ongoing process involving emotional reflection, symbolic interpretation, and psychological integration. Dreams become meaningful not because they provide universal answers, but because they facilitate deeper awareness of inner psychological experiences. Recent dream studies also indicate that reflective awareness during dream experiences may contribute to emotional processing, psychological insight, and deeper self-understanding ([Konkoly et al., 2021](#)).

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that dreams may be understood as reflective experiences that facilitate the development of self-understanding during middle adulthood. Through the interpretation of dream narratives, participants became more aware of unresolved emotional experiences, unconscious psychological patterns, and relational dynamics that had previously remained outside conscious awareness. Rather than occurring as an immediate insight, self-understanding developed gradually through ongoing reflection on personally meaningful dream experiences.

The findings contribute to analytical psychology by extending the understanding of dream analysis beyond the interpretation of symbolic content. Rather than emphasizing universal symbolic meanings, this study highlights dream analysis as a reflective psychological process through which individuals actively construct personal meanings, integrate unconscious experiences, and develop deeper self-understanding. This perspective complements contemporary dream research by emphasizing the experiential and meaning-making dimensions of dream interpretation.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that dream reflection may serve as a valuable resource for psychological counselling, self-reflection, and personal development. By encouraging individuals to explore the personal meanings embedded in dream experiences, dream analysis may facilitate emotional awareness, psychological integration, and more conscious decision-making. Overall, this study suggests that dreams are not merely reflections of psychological conditions but may function as meaningful reflective experiences that support ongoing psychological growth. Self-understanding through dreams is therefore best understood as a dynamic process involving continuous interaction between conscious awareness, unconscious psychological dynamics, and personal meaning-making.

5.2 Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the findings were interpreted primarily through the perspective of analytical psychology, particularly Jungian concepts. Theoretical triangulation was limited due to the relatively small number of contemporary psychological theories and empirical studies specifically addressing dream analysis and self-understanding. As a result, alternative interpretations from other psychological perspectives were not explored extensively. Second, the study focused on participants' reflections at a particular point in time and did not examine how self-understanding may develop through ongoing reflection and life experiences. Therefore, the findings should be understood within the context of the participants' subjective experiences and the theoretical framework employed in this study.

5.3 Suggestions and Directions for Future Research

Future studies are encouraged to involve a larger and more diverse sample in order to explore variations in dream experiences and self-understanding across different age groups, cultural backgrounds, and life circumstances. Researchers may also consider employing longitudinal designs to examine how dream experiences contribute to self-understanding over time. In addition, future research could integrate alternative theoretical perspectives, such as narrative psychology, existential psychology, or cognitive approaches to dreaming, to provide broader insights into the relationship between dream experiences and self-understanding. Further studies may also investigate the potential role of dream reflection as a tool for personal development, psychological well-being, and therapeutic intervention.

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Author Contributions

ED conceptualized the study, conducted the investigation, managed the project administration, prepared the original draft, developed the visualizations, and acquired funding. SMN supervised the research process, performed data curation, formal analysis, and validation, and contributed to the review and editing of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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