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The Adaptive Function of Fantasy: A Proposal From the Perspective of Control-Mastery Theory
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CITATION
The Adaptive Function of Fantasy: A Proposal From the Perspective of Control-Mastery Theory

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The aim of this paper is to show the evolution of the psychoanalytic conception of fantasy/phantasy from a psychic activity aimed at denying reality and/or fulfilling frustrated wishes to a tool useful for adapting to reality. We will then review some recent findings of empirical research on imagination and mental simulation showing how these activities, and mind wandering in general, is expression of the constant effort of the psyche to set and pursue adaptive goals, to elaborate and test plans, and to master and solve problems and traumas. Finally, we will show how these empirical data are consistent with the conception of fantasy proposed by the control-mastery theory (CMT; Gazzillo, 2016; Silberschatz, 2005; Weiss, 1993), an integrated cognitive-dynamic relational theory of psychic functioning, psychopathology, and psychotherapy developed and tested in the last 40 years by the San Francisco Psychotherapy Research Group.

Keywords: adaptation, fantasy, control-mastery theory

In this paper we refer to fantasy/phantasy1 as a pleasant situation that you enjoy thinking about but is unlikely to happen, or the activity of imagining things (Procter, 1995).

Classical psychoanalysis (Freud, 1908/1953; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973) regards fantasizing as a mental function aimed at fulfilling, often in disguised form, unconscious frustrated wishes, while recent empirical findings have started to consider fantasy as an evolutionary selected mental activity that promotes our adaptation to the environment (Klinger, Marchetti, & Koster, 2018).

After a brief historical overview of the psychoanalytic conceptualizations about fantasy/phantasy, we will point out the adaptive functions that can be carried out by fantasy according to recent empirical findings and to the theoretical and clinical assumptions of control-mastery theory (CMT; Gazzillo, 2016; Silberschatz, 2005; Weiss, 1986, 1993; Weiss, Sampson, & the Mount Zion Psychotherapy Research Group, 1986), an integrative, cognitive-dynamic relational theory developed by Joseph Weiss (1993) and empirically validated by the San Francisco Psychotherapy Research Group in the last 40 years.

A Brief Historical Overview About Fantasy

Following classical psychoanalysis, Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) defined phantasy as an “imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfillment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes” (p. 314). Sigmund Freud used the term fantasy/phantasy in different ways in different places, but he never fully discussed his thinking about this concept (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973; Spillius, 2001). In The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud, 1899/1958), Freud discussed the importance of daydreams, that he related to unconscious fantasies, without specifying similarities or differences between these two phenomena. Later, Freud (1908/1953) wrote that both night dreams and daydreams are wish fulfillments. In “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” Freud (1908/1953) connected fantasy to the experience of childhood play, through which the child creates an emotionally charged world distinct from reality. According to Freud, play in children is driven by the wish to become an adult and, since this desire has no reason to be disguised, and in his games the child imitates the adult world without shame. As children grow up, they will tend to inhibit the desire to play; but since they cannot abandon the pleasure experienced by engaging in that activity, they will replace playing with phantasy—play and phantasy are each the continuation of the other. “A happy person never phantasizes, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of the wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality” (Freud, 1908/1953, p. 146). According to Freud (1908/1953), the content of a phantasy varies depending on sex, age, character, and circumstances; but in principle, there are two macrocategories of fantasies: fantasies based on ambitious wishes (that predominate in

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1 We are aware of the distinction between the terms fantasy and phantasy proposed by the Kleinian literature. However, apart from when we will talk about Kleinian hypotheses, we will use these terms interchangeably in this paper.