

Dream Bibliophile: Books

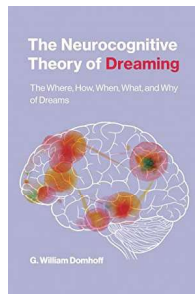
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G. William Domhoff

The Neurocognitive Theory of Dreaming: The Where, How, When, What, and Why of Dreams

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022

G. William Domhoff is a force of nature. *The Neurocognitive Theory of Dreaming* represents the latest book from an indefatigable researcher who has been doing innovative and highly influential work in the study of dreams for more than half a century. One might have said of any of his last several books, this is it, this is his *summa*, the crowning work of his career. And then he goes on to surpass that text and write something new. All of this is happening in his secondary field of expertise; his primary scholarly domain is sociology, with a focus on power structures in the United States. Dream research is essentially Domhoff's side-hustle.



And what an amazing hustle it has been. The subtitle of the book highlights Domhoff's early training as a journalist, where he learned to write clear, fact-based, declarative prose focused on answering these questions—where, how, when, what, and why. He applies that straightforward analytic approach to the study of dreams, developing what he calls a neurocognitive accounting of the nature of dreaming. In constructing this theory he relies on several different fields of research, which he weaves together into a coherent whole. The findings of contemporary neuroscience are foundational for Domhoff, enabling him to offer suggestions about the neural substrate that supports dreaming.

However, he does not cede all authority to neurology. Crucial to Domhoff's approach is the inclusion of the “cognitive” dimension of how our minds work and how their basic capacities emerge over time (mind-wandering and embodied simulation play big roles in his model). The inclusion of cognition is crucial because this justifies bringing people's dream experiences into the analysis. Domhoff argues that dream reports are legitimate forms of scientific evidence that can reveal important cognitive aspects of dreaming, aspects that a purely brain-based approach would miss. He puts special emphasis on the dreams of children and adolescents as reflecting the innate developmental trajectory of the neural and cognitive structures necessary for the occurrence of dreaming.

Domhoff's involvement in the IASD has a long history, too. He provided essential help in hosting and organizing several of the earliest conferences held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he taught since the mid 1960s. Over the years Domhoff has attended and given presentations at numerous IASD gatherings, where versions of the ideas in this book have been shared and audience-tested. He has often said to IASD members that he is probably more interested in

them than they are in him—he has always been curious to hear about people's actual dreams, which help him refine his theoretical ideas, ideas that are not always supportive of popular ways of working with dreams. Ideas, in fact, that might launch him into intellectual combat in any number of directions. To be on the receiving end of one of his sharp, detailed and unsparing critiques (I speak from personal experience) is both memorable and ultimately enlightening. In *The Neurocognitive Theory of Dreaming*, Domhoff focuses his firepower on Freudian dream theory and the Activation-Synthesis theory of J. Allan Hobson. For readers who feel no special attachment to either theory, this may feel like a popcorn moment to enjoy Domhoff's pugilistic take-down of the grand authorities of twentieth-century dream research.

Be careful, though. The same evidence that he uses to critique Freudian and Activation-Synthesis models can also be applied to Jung, Perls, and most of the humanistic and transpersonal methods guiding the work of many IASD members. In this light, the most challenging argument of Domhoff's book is his claim that dreams have no function. He grants that people can *use* dreams for a variety of valuable goals, but he insists there is no intrinsic function to dreaming—no problem-solving, no emotional regulation, no information processing, no spiritual revelation, none of that. In his view, there is no compelling evidence that dreams have any adaptive purpose.

Perhaps this is a liberating idea. Perhaps it's better if we take responsibility for our conscious intentions in using our dreams rather than pretending those intentions have arisen from the mysterious depths of the unconscious. What are we losing if we adopt this pragmatic idea, other than our ideological blinders? (This is where Domhoff's dream research seems closest to the materialist tenor of his sociological work.)

If you find yourself already objecting to this line of thought, I suggest that is an excellent reason to read *The Neurocognitive Theory of Dreaming*. You may disagree with Domhoff now, indeed you may always disagree with him, but if you read this book you will surely come away much better informed, more self-reflective, and more focused in your disagreement.