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Frequency of dealing with dreams within a professional context and sizes of dreamer networks: An online survey

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Abstract

Previous research has indicated that dreams are often shared, most frequently within the intimate social networks of the dreamers. The present online survey was completed by 1808 participants (1110 women, 698 men) with a mean age 45.64 ± 15.33 years. About 24% of the participants reported that they had dealt with dreams within professional contexts, and about 50% of the participants reporting that they know at least one person who is regularly engaged in dream topics. Overall, the findings indicate that most dream sharing takes place in private settings, e.g., partnerships, but this study is the first to show that at least some of the dream sharing also occurs within professional contexts. To expand the findings of this exploratory study it would be interesting to investigate the nature and context of dream sharing within professional contexts more deeply.

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1. Introduction

Dreaming is defined as subjective experiencing that occurs during sleep (Schredl, 2018) and, thus, dreaming is a very private process. Nevertheless, dreams – if remembered – are shared quite often (Curci & Rime, 2008; Olsen et al., 2013; Schredl & Bulkeley, 2019; Schredl et al., 2016). Most frequently, the dreams are shared with close persons like the partners, friends, parents, siblings, and relatives (Curci & Rime, 2008; Olsen et al., 2013; Schredl et al., 2015a, 2015b; Vann & Alperstein, 2000). A small percentage (0.4% to 3.5%) of the participants reported that they also brought dreams to a therapist (Olsen et al., 2013; Schredl et al., 2015b; Vann & Alperstein, 2000), i.e., dreams are discussed with a professional. On the flipside, dream sharing within therapy has a long tradition since Sigmund Freud's "Die Traumdeutung" (Freud,

1900/1991), not only in psychoanalytic treatment but also in other therapeutic schools like Gestalt therapy, client-centered therapy, and cognitive-behavioral therapy (Pesant & Zadra, 2004). Surveys (Crook & Hill, 2003; Keller et al., 1995; Schredl et al., 2000) indicated that most psychotherapists report that they work with dreams at least from time to time. In addition to working with dreams in professional settings, a so-called grassroots dreamwork movement (Hillman, 1990) started in the 1970ties with authors like Ann Faraday (Faraday, 1976), Patricia Garfield (Garfield, 1974), and Gayle Delaney (Delaney, 1979) suggesting that working with dreams can be done in small groups without professional guidance. However, there are no surveys about the number of individuals engaging in this kind of dreamwork. In some cultures dream sharing is part of everyday-life (Domhoff, 1985; Hoss et al., 2019). Dream sharing within psychotherapy has often positive effects (Hill & Knox, 2010), and dream sharing showed also beneficial effects outside the therapeutic setting, e.g., enhancing marital intimacy (Duffey et al., 2004), strengthening the social bond between dream sharing person and listener (Schredl et al., 2015b), and state empathy (Blagrove et al., 2019).

Although, there is some indication that psychotherapists work with their own dreams (Crook & Hill, 2003; Schredl et al., 2000), data regarding how often therapists share their dream with others are not available. Similar, surveys of how often non-psychotherapists deal with dreams within professional contexts and what factors are related to this type of dream engagement are lacking. Moreover, the dream sharing studies (see above) indicate that dreams are shared within social networks, probably because a person is available to listen but it is not known whether dreamers are acquainted with persons who engage in dream topics on a regular basis.

The present study addressed the question of how often are persons dealing with dreams in professional contexts and whether they know other persons who are regularly sharing dreams (e.g., in a dreamer network). On an exploratory level, we studied whether socio-demographic variables, dream recall, attitude towards dreams, and sex roles were related to these two variables (dealing with dreams within professional contexts and size of the dreamer network). The variables associated with dream sharing frequency itself have been already analyzed in Schredl et al. (2015c). We expected that persons with a larger dreamer network share their dreams more often.

2. Method

2.1 Research instruments

Dream frequency was elicited with a seven-point scale (coded as 0 = never, 1 = less than once a month, 2 = about once a month, 3 = about 2 to 3 times a month, 4 = about once a week, 5 = several times a week, 6 = almost every morning). Retest reliability for a mean interval of 55 days was high: r = .85 (Schredl, 2004). For the item "How often did you tell your dreams to others in the last few months?" the same seven categories were presented. Attitude towards

dreams were measured by a ten-item scale developed by Schredl et al. (2002); the scale's internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .905) and retest reliability for a four-week interval (r = .73) were high. The items followed a five-point Likert format ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = total agreement. Example items are: "I like dreaming.", "A person who reflects about her/his dreams learns a lot about herself/himself." or "I would like to know more about dreams." The average across the 10 items were used in the analysis with high values expressing positive attitudes towards dreams. To assess frequency of dealing with dreams in a professional context, a nine-point rating scale was presented ("How often do you deal with dream topics for work or study reasons?" 0 = never, 1 = less than once a year, 2 = about once a year, 3 = about 2 to 4 times a year, 4 = about once a month, 5 = about 2 to 3 times a month, 6 = about once a week, and 7 = several times a week, and 8 = almost every day). How many persons within your social network are engaged in dream topics on a regular basis? This includes that the people deal with the topic for work or study reasons as well as privately. The following categories were presented: None, one to two persons, three to five persons, five to ten persons, and more than ten persons.

The questionnaire measuring gender stereotypes (GTS+; "Skalen zur Erfassung der Geschlechtstypizität) is based mainly on the items of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) and sex role orientation was measured along two dimensions: expressivity (formerly described as femininity) and instrumentality (formerly described as masculinity) (Altstötter-Gleich, 2004). For each dimension, eight four-point items with the answering categories 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often', and 'almost always' were presented. Examples for the expressivity scale are: "Typically I am empathic." or "Typically I am sensitive." Items for the instrumentality scale are: "Typically I am assertive." or "Typically I am self-confident." The eight items – coded from 1 = rarely to 4 = almost always – were averaged for each scale. The reliabilities of the scales are high (Cronbach's alpha =.79 [expressivity] and Cronbach's alpha = .83 [instrumentality]) and the construct validity was demonstrated by confirmatory factor analyses (Altstötter-Gleich, 2004).

2.2 Procedure and Participants

Overall, 1808 persons (1110 women, 698 men) completed the online survey between April 5, 2013 and April 14, 2013. The mean age of the sample was 45.64 ± 15.33 years (range: 14 to 91 years). The majority of the participants (70.58%) reported living in a stable partnership. The level of education was distributed as follows: 21 persons (1.16%) had not graduated from school, 225 (12.44%) had 9 yrs. of education, 535 (29.59%) had 10 yrs. of education, 504 (27.88%) completed their A-levels, 480 (26.55%) had graduated from university, and 43 (2.38%) had a doctoral degree.

The link for the study was sent to members of the online panel (www.wisopanel.net). The email included a general reference to the topic of "Dreams" but did not refer to the specific aspect of

dream sharing within a professional context. Within this panel about 10,000 persons with an interest in online studies and with heterogenic demographic backgrounds are registered. For some surveys, prizes or money are offered for study participation, but this study was completely voluntary and unpaid.

Statistical procedures were carried out with the SAS 9.4 software package for Windows. Ordinal regressions (cumulative logit analyses) were used for analyzing the effect of different predictors on dream network size and dream sharing frequency. Effect sizes were computed, based on Chi-Square values according to Cohen (1988).

3. Results

The distributions of the dream recall frequency scale and the dream sharing scale are depicted in Table 1. The sample included about 57% high dream recallers (once a week or more often) and only 5% of the participants stated that they never recalled dreams. Also, a considerable percentage (about 22%) shared their dreams often, but the majority (about 60%) shared their dreams rarely or never (see Table 1).

Table 1. Dream recall frequency and dream sharing frequency (N = 1808)

Category	Dream recall frequency	Dream sharing frequency
Almost every morning	10.51%	1.22%
Several times a week	26.33%	7.58%
About once a week	20.02%	12.94%
About 2 to 3 times a month	14.82%	12.22%
About once a month	9.18%	6.58%
Less than once a month	13.83%	36.17%
Never	5.31%	23.29%

About 25% of the participants have dealt with dreams within a professional context (work or study), but only 2.5% do this on a regular basis (once a week or more often; see Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of dealing professionally with dreams (N = 1808)

Category	Frequency	Percent
Almost every day	11	0.61%
Several times a week	15	0.83%
About once a week	22	1.22%
two or three times a month	45	2.49%
About once a month	37	2.05%
About two or four times a year	93	5.14%
About once a year	51	2.82%
Less than once a year	164	9.07%
Never	1370	75.77%

Almost 50% of the participants reported that at least one person in their professional and/or social network is dealing with dreams regularly (see Table 3).

Table 3. Knowing persons who regularly engage in dream topics professionally and/or privately (N = 1808)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
More than ten persons	5	0.28%
Five to ten persons	9	0.50%
Three to five persons	127	7.02%
One to two persons	742	41.04%
None	925	51.16%

In less than 1% there is a larger network of persons engaging intensely in dream topics. Frequency of dealing with dream within professional contexts was correlated with the number of persons who engage regularly in dreams: $r = .225$, $p < .0001$, $N = 1808$.

The average of the attitude towards dreams scale was 3.56 ± 0.84; indicating a positive attitude on average as the scale midpoint is 3. Cronbach's alpha for the ten items scale was $r = .912$. The means of the gender stereotypes questionnaire (GTS+) were as follows: 2.78 ± 0.53 (Expressivity) and 2.56 ± 0.57 (Instrumentality). For both scales, the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was high: $r = .832$ (Expressivity) and $r = .853$ (Instrumentality).

The frequency of dealing with dreams within professional contexts was related to younger age, higher education, being single, higher dream recall, more positive attitude towards dreaming, and Instrumentality; however, effect sizes were small (see Table 4).

Table 4. Ordinal regression analysis for frequency of dealing with dreams professionally

Variable	SE	χ^2	*p*	*Effect size*
Age	-.0992	9.6	.0019	0.146
Gender	.0096	0.1	.7662	0.015
Education	.1090	12.1	.0005	0.164
Stable partnership (Yes/no)	-.0660	4.9	.0272	0.104
Dream recall frequency	.0925	8.0	.0048	0.133
Attitude towards dreams	.0835	6.0	.0146	0.115
Expressivity	-.0036	0.0	.9124	0.005
Instrumentality	.0740	5.7	.0167	0.113

SE = Standardized estimates, $R^2 = .0356$

The number of persons dealing with dreams in the professional and/or social network of the participant is most strongly related to the attitude towards dreams scale but also to dream recall frequency and Instrumentality (see Table 5). Socio-demographic variables and Expressivity were not related to dream network size.

Table 5. Ordinal regression analysis for dream network size

Variable	SE	χ^2	*p*	*Effect size*
Age	.0002	0.0	.9936	0.001
Gender	.0069	0.1	.8001	0.015
Education	.0071	0.1	.7848	0.015
Stable partnership (yes/no)	.0149	0.3	.5680	0.026
Dream recall frequency	.0647	5.6	.0176	0.112
Attitude towards dreams	.2586	77.1	< .0001	0.422
Expressivity	-.0120	0.2	.6639	0.021
Instrumentality	.1047	15.7	< .0001	0.187

SE = Standardized estimates, R^2 = .0808

The ordinal regression depicted in Table 6 indicated that several factors contribute independently to inter-individual differences in dream sharing frequency.

Table 6. Ordinal regression analysis for dream sharing frequency

Variable	SE	χ^2	*p*	*Effect size*
Age	-.1286	25.6	< .0001	0.240
Gender	.0494	3.7	.0541	0.091
Education	.0529	4.7	.0307	0.102
Stable partnership (yes/no)	.2196	76.2	< .0001	0.420
Dream recall frequency	.5794	401.0	< .0001	1.068
Attitude towards dreams	.0950	12.3	.0005	0.166
Frequency of dealing professionally with dreams	.0667	7.3	.0069	0.127
Dreamer network size	.1771	47.7	< .0001	0.329
Expressivity	.1379	27.9	< .0001	0.250
Instrumentality	-.0275	1.2	.2681	0.052

SE = Standardized estimates, R^2 = .3781

The factor most strongly associated with dream sharing frequency was dream recall frequency. Dream sharing decreases with age; the gender difference was only marginally significant. In addition, higher education (very small effect size) was also associated with dream sharing. Interestingly, there was a quite strong effect of being in a partnership and dream sharing frequency but also the dreamer network size and the frequency of dealing professionally with dreams was related to dream sharing. Lastly, persons with high expressivity scores are more likely to share dreams.

4. Discussion

Overall, the present findings indicate that about one quarter of the participants had dealt with dreams within professional contexts, and about one half of the participants knew at least one person who is engaged in dream topics regularly. For both variables, attitude towards dreams, dream recall frequency, and instrumentality were influential. The regression analysis for dream sharing frequency indicated that dreams are not only being shared in private networks but also in professional contexts.

The major methodological issue is concerning the sample characteristics; although the sample is diverse regarding age range, dream recall, and education and, thus, allow accurate analysis of possible associations of these variables with the variables of interest, the proportion of persons with high dream recall (once a week or more often) is much higher (about 57%) when compared to representative samples (about 23%) (Schredl et al., 2014; Schredl, 2008, 2013). Even though the study information given in the email invitation included a reference to dreaming it has to be noticed that the range of dream recall is still preserved, even though the low dream recallers are under-represented. As frequency of dealing with dreams within professional contexts and the size of the network of persons engaged in dream topics regularly are related to dream recall frequency, one would expect lower percentages for representative samples. Also, the higher education levels of these samples compared to education levels in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018) could have biased the figures. However, as dream recall frequency and education still encompassed the total possible range, the regression analytic findings should not be affected by the sample selection. Unfortunately, profession was not elicited in this survey. The small effect of education on the frequency of dealing with dreams professionally might indicate that some participants had been psychotherapists as practicing psychotherapy in Germany requires a University degree and additional post-graduate training. One the other hand, the effect was relatively small (effect size = 0.164) also indicating that dream sharing also takes place outside the psychotherapy setting (because if not the effect of education should be much stronger). Regarding the dream network question, we did not specify the term "on a regular basis", i.e., whether this is once a week or once a month. This uncertainty can be met with a more precise formulated question in future studies.

About a quarter of the participants stated that they had dealt with dreams professionally; as mentioned above in the representative sample, that figure might be lower, possibly about two to three times. Nevertheless, this indicates that more studies in the field would be desirable. About 2.5% of the participants dealt with dreams quite frequently (once a week or more often) – very likely being psychotherapists (Crook & Hill, 2003; Keller et al., 1995; Schredl et al., 2000) or of a similar profession. As stated above, profession was not elicited in this survey but doing so would be recommended for future studies. Although the effect sizes were relatively small, many variables were related to the frequency of dealing with dreams within professional contexts. The relationship with dream recall frequency and attitude towards dreams seems plausible as persons who are paying attention to their own dream might talk more often about dreams in a professional context, e.g., asking patients about their dreams (Schredl et al., 2000). On the other hand, the professional interest in dreams might improve dream recall as the person might be interested in his or her own dreams, e.g., writing a master thesis about dreams (Rizzolo, 1922). Instrumentality includes such characteristics as being assertive, self-confident, and capable of making decisions (Altstötter-Gleich, 2004) and, thus, is likely to related to professional topics. The relationship to education is also easily explained as several professions in the social sector, e.g., psychotherapist, physician, social worker, require university degrees. Lastly, the negative age effect might reflect simple retirement – not engaged in professional work any longer – as the age range of the sample is large (up to 91 yrs. of age).

Almost 50% of the participants knew at least one person who is engaging in dream topics regularly within professional and/or private contexts. Even though, the number might be lower in a representative sample, this indicates that a considerable percentage of the general population is dealing with dreams quite frequently. Large groups of persons who deal with dreams in a professional or private context regularly (more than five) are known to less than 1% of the participants; again, this group might consist of psychotherapists and/or other social occupations. Once more, positive attitude towards dreams and dream recall frequency is related to the number of dream-interested persons; it seems plausible that persons with a high interest in dreams seek out other persons who are regularly engaging in dream topics. Again, instrumentality is related as the persons who regularly deal with dreams could also belong to the professional network of the participant (see correlation between frequency of dealing with dreams within professional contexts and number of persons who engage in dream topics regularly).

A variety of factors contributes independently to the inter-individual differences in dream sharing frequency. The largest effect size was found for dream recall frequency – a relationship that has been reported previously (Schredl & Bulkeley, 2019; Schredl & Schawinski, 2010). The explanation seems trivial as one cannot share any dreams if no dreams are recalled. Within this

context the association between dream sharing frequency and attitude towards dreams also fits. Interestingly, the second largest effect was found for being in a stable partnership (see also: Schredl & Bulkeley, 2019) which seems also plausible as the partner is one of the persons dreams are most often shared with (Curci & Rime, 2008; Olsen et al., 2013; Schredl et al., 2015b), i.e., it looks like most of the dream sharing is taking place within the most intimate social networks. The number of persons who are engaged in dream topics regularly is also related to dream sharing frequency. Taken together with the association between dream sharing frequency and frequency of dealing with dreams within professional contexts, this indicates that dreams are also shared within a professional context, e.g., psychotherapy, supervision as part of practicing psychotherapy, counselling or other social interactions with professionals. This would be an excellent venue to explore professional dream sharing practices more deeply. Expressivity was related to dream sharing frequency; a finding which is also plausible as persons with high Expressivity scores also tend to share personal experiences (not dream-related) more often (Schredl et al., 2015c). Interestingly, Schredl et al. (2015c) were able to demonstrate that including expressivity into the regression analysis reduces the frequently reported gender difference (Georgi et al., 2012; Schredl et al., 2014; Schredl & Schawinski, 2010) considerably, i.e., the gender difference in dream sharing is partly explained by higher expressivity scores in women (Schredl et al., 2015c). The small but significant effect of education has been reported previously (Schredl & Bulkeley, 2019); it would be very interesting to learn how education might contribute to sharing dreams more often. Lastly, age was negatively related with dream sharing frequency, i.e., older persons share their dreams less frequently than younger persons. The question as to whether this is an effect of declining dream sharing with age or a cohort effect (different generations might have different attitudes towards dream sharing) cannot be answered, since longitudinal studies looking at changes in dream sharing frequency within persons across a longer time interval do not yet exist.

To summarize, the findings indicate that most dream sharing is taking place in private settings, e.g., partnerships, but this study is the first to show that at least some of the dream sharing also occurs within professional contexts (presumably mainly non-psychotherapeutic contexts as we hypothesize that only a small proportion of the sample are psychotherapists; it's a relatively rare occupation within the German work force) and so complements the research done on dream sharing within psychotherapy (Hill & Knox, 2010). To expand the findings of this exploratory study it would be interesting to investigate the nature and context of professional dream sharing within specific professions, e.g., nursing care, teaching, coaching, more deeply.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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