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Dream content of Canadian males from adolescence to old age: An exploration of ontogenetic patterns

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ABSTRACT

The present study was a first look at the ontogenetic pattern of dream content across the lifespan for men. The participants included 50 Canadian men in each of 5 age groups, from adolescence to old age including 12–17, 18–24, 25–39, 40–64, and 65–85. The last age group included 31 participants, totaling 231 males. One dream per participant was scored by two independent judges using content analysis. Trend analysis was used to determine the lifespan-developmental pattern of the dream content categories. Results demonstrated a predominance of aggressive dream imagery in the adolescent age group in line with social-developmental research. These patterns of dream imagery reflect the waking developmental patterns as proposed by social theories and recognized features of aging. Limitations and suggestions for future research, including the examining of the developmental pattern of gender differences across the lifespan, are discussed.

1. Introduction

In modern scientific dream research there have been a host of hypotheses and theories addressing either dream formation (the sources of dream content) and/or dream function, and debates on their nature and their empirical support are ongoing (De Koninck, 2012; Domhoff, 2011; Hobson, Pace-Schott, & Stickgold, 2000; Malinowski & Horton, 2011; Schredl, 2012; Solms, 2000). One of the major theories addressing the question of dream content is the Continuity Hypothesis which states that dreams reflect waking experiences (Hall & Nordby, 1972). For example, this can be seen in the form of waking day events, desires and concerns, differences between populations, fears, or relationships (Schredl & Hofmann, 2003). Regarding the dream function, the Mastery Hypothesis (for example, Breger, 1967) proposes that dreams allow the solving of contemporary problems including emotional processing. The Compensatory Theory, first proposed by Jung (1933), postulates that dreams compensate for conscious mental states and personality traits neglected during wakefulness (Dallett, 1973). Recent formulations of the theories mentioned are reviewed by De Koninck (2012).

Amongst the more recent theories, the Threat Simulation Theory focuses more on waking events and states that dreaming serves the function of simulating threatening situations in order to improve threat-avoidance skills (Revonsuo, 2000). The more recent Social Simulation Theory, proposed by Revonsuo, Tuominen, and Valli (2015), posits that dreaming is a simulation mechanism specialized in practicing and improving social and interaction skills. However, since none of the theories mentioned specifically address the patterns of the development of dream content with age, only speculations can be formulated. For example, according to the Continuity Hypothesis, changes in waking experience and cognition with age would be

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transformed and integrated into the dream content. For the time being, research has attempted to explore the evolution of dreams with age comparing different age groups. Recently, we examined the developmental or ontogenetic pattern in the dream content of women from adolescence to old age (Dale, Lortie-Lussier, & De Koninck, 2015). We are now attempting to use the same framework to examine the dreams of men.

1.1. Dream research with males

Dream literature has largely focused on studying women's dreams due to males reporting dreams less frequently, compared to women (Schredl, Nürnberg, & Weiler, 1996; Schredl, Sahin, & Schäfer, 1998). Areas of investigation with male participants have been predominantly related to gender differences in dream content (Domhoff, 1996; Domhoff & Schneider, 2008; Hall, Domhoff, Blick, & Weesner, 1982; Hall & Van de Castle, 1966; Krippner & Rubenstein, 1990; Krippner & Weinhold, 2002; Schredl, Ciric, Bishop, Gölitz, & Buschtöns, 2003; Schredl & Piel, 2003) with aggression as the major distinction (Domhoff & Schneider, 2008; Krippner & Weinhold, 2001, 2002; Schredl & Piel, 2005). Compared to females, male university students had more negative attitudes towards dreams, lower dream recall frequency (Schredl & Piel, 2003; Schredl & Reinhard, 2008) and shorter and less detailed dream reports (Spanos, Stam, Radtke, & Nightingale, 1980; Wolcott & Strapp, 2002). Additionally, males believed less in the ability of dreams to influence behaviour (Szmigielska & Holda, 2007) and in dream control (Boerger, 2009). Other areas of investigation with males include the impact of family and occupational roles (Lortie-Lussier, Simond, Rinfret, & De Koninck, 1992), veterans and PTSD (Esposito, Benitez, Barza, & Mellman, 1999; Schreuder, Kleijn, & Rooijmans, 2000), combat arms soldiers and dream interpretations (Dale & DeCicco, 2013; Dale, DeCicco, & Miller, 2013; Dale, DeCicco, Miller, & Tavakoli, 2015), expectant fathers (Zayas, 1988), and males in small, preliterate societies (Domhoff, 1996). The present study will focus on the main dream categories of the Hall and Van de Castle (1966) system including characters, activities, interactions, and emotions in Canadian males in order to make general comparisons to developmental trends and research on aging.

1.2. Characters

Currently, research examining age differences (for example, comparing adolescents to adults) in the dreams of males is understudied, especially in relation to dream characters. The transition from childhood to adolescence involves cognitive maturation and developmental changes in dreaming including more complex narratives (Foulkes, 1982). Longitudinal investigations analyzed REM dreams with adolescents at three age levels 9–11, 11–13, and 13–15 and observed an increase in female characters in joint sex peer groups for the REM and home dreams for boys (Strauch, 2005; Strauch & Lederbogen, 1999). However, there have not been any documented age differences in the number of total dream characters for males after young adulthood. Stability in the number of dream characters was found in Waterman's (1991) study with males between 45 and 80 years old and also for both the home and REM dreams in an exclusively male sample between 27 and 64 years old (Zepelin, 1980). Therefore, the number of dream characters does not seem to be affected by the aging process after young adulthood, unlike other categories.

1.3. Activities

Currently, investigations of age related changes in dream activities are inconclusive. Support for a decline in dream activities with age in early life was noted by Dale, Wong, and De Koninck (2014) who reported more total activities in adolescent dreams compared to young adults for Canadians, collapsing genders. Interestingly, studies have demonstrated that activities in dreams persist into old age, as was observed in the dreams of a group of non-institutionalized elderly persons with an average age of 69 (Altshuler, Barad, & Goldfarb, 1963). The elderly participants who were leading active and self-sufficient lives reported both elaborate and active dreams relating to daily events. An ontogenetic increase in dream activities has been documented in studies with exclusively women (Brenneis, 1975; Lortie-Lussier, Côté, & Vachon, 2000). However, an evolutional gender difference emerges for this category, as dream activities are documented to remain stable for males as was reported in a study with exclusively American males by Zepelin (1980) and with Dutch participants by Waterman (1991).

1.4. Interactions

Based upon Hall and Van de Castle' (1966) scoring system, interactions in the study of content of dreams consists of three different kinds: aggressive, friendly, and sexual. Research demonstrates a decline in aggressive dream interactions, occurring early in life. For example, preadolescents (10–11) have a higher percentage of dreams with physical aggression and are more often the victims (Saline, 1999; Strauch & Lederbogen, 1999) compared to adolescents (Crugnola, Magglioni, Caprin, Martini, & Giudici, 2008). Additionally, preadolescents have a high aggression per characters (A/C) index which decreases in adolescence and again in young adulthood (Avila-White, Schneider, & Domhoff, 1999). Furthermore, Hall and Domhoff (1963) noted a decrease in aggression after the age of 30 (Domhoff, 1996). Subsequently, Waterman (1991) reported that in a Dutch sample this decline occured later, after the age of 45. Zepelin (1980) also observed a decrease in aggression for both REM and home dreams for 58 American males ranging from 27 to 64 years old. However, Kramer, Winget, and Whitman (1971) observed less aggression in 35–49 year olds in a study of four age groups from young adulthood to old age (21–34, 35–49, 50–64, and 65 and over).