

Emotional responses to dream sharing: A field study

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Summary. Despite their private nature, dreams are often shared with spouses, family, friends, and colleagues. Whereas different aspects of dream sharing like its associated motivations have been investigated, it has not yet been systematically studied how the listener reacts to a dream account, i.e., what emotional responses persons have while listening to dreams or what the dreamer experiences as other persons react to his or her dream telling. The sample of 85 participants received a questionnaire eliciting situations where they told another person a dream and situations where they heard a dream told by another person. Reactions to dream accounts are more positively than negatively toned and several times sharing the dream had a positive effect on the relationship between the dreamer and the listener. Negatively toned emotions experienced while listening to a dream should be followed up because this topic hasn't been studied yet. It would be desirable to use diaries to validate the findings of this retrospective approach and to study dream telling situations under controlled laboratory conditions, which also might include brain imagining.

Keywords: Dream sharing, emotional reaction

1. Introduction

Dreaming as defined as subjective experiencing while asleep is a very private experience and even the dreamer himself/herself has only access to those experiences if she or he can recall them after awakening (Schredl, 2008). Despite their private nature, dreams are often shared with spouses, family, friends, and colleagues (Ijams & Miller, 2000; Olsen, Schredl, & Carlsson, 2013; Schredl, 2009; Schredl, Buscher, Haaß, Scheuermann, & Uhrig, 2013; Vann & Alperstein, 2000). The reasons for dream sharing are manifold, ranging from entertainment (recounting funny dreams), the wish to better understand the dream, relief (especially in the case of nightmares), to increase relationship intimacy (Duffey, Wooten, Lamadue, & Comstock, 2004; Ijams & Miller, 2000; Olsen et al., 2013). Research focused on factors affecting dream sharing (e.g., negatively toned dreams are more likely to be shared than positive ones (Curci & Rime, 2008)) supports the idea that relief is a common motivation for dream sharing. The most obvious factor affecting how often dreams are shared is dream recall frequency (Herman & Shows, 1984; Pagel & Vann, 1993; Schredl, 2000). This is obvious because if you cannot remember a dream you cannot tell it to another person. In addition to dream recall frequency, the strongest factor affecting dream sharing frequency is gender, i.e., women tend to share dreams more often than men (Curci & Rime, 2008; Georgi, Schredl, Henley-Einion, & Blagrove, 2012; Szmigielska & Holda, 2007). The well-established gender difference in dream recall frequency (Schredl & Reinhard, 2008) cannot explain the

gender difference in dream sharing (Schredl, 2000; Schredl & Schawinski, 2010). A recent study indicates that the frequency of sharing emotional experiences of any sort might be responsible for the gender difference in dream sharing (Schredl, Kim, Labudek, Schädler, & Göritz, 2015). Other factors related to dream sharing frequency were positive attitude towards dreaming, nightmare frequency, extroversion and the thin boundary personality dimension (Schredl et al., 2015; Schredl & Schawinski, 2010). Whereas different aspects of dream sharing like the motivations of dream sharing have been investigated (see above), it has not yet been systematically studied how the listener reacts to dream accounts, i.e., what emotional responses the person has while listening to the dream or what the dreamer experiences as the other person reacts to his or her dream telling. The only exception is the study of Vann and Alperstein (2000) who asked about the listener's reactions as perceived by the dreamer: about 50% of the participants reported entertainment as the perceived reaction, about 15% received some feedback that the dream was seen as weird, and about 12% said that the listener was interested. A large group (21.8%) reported other, unspecified reactions to the dream accounts.

The present study was designed to elicit retrospectively situations in which the participant had told a dream to another person and how he or she perceived the reactions of this person and, secondly, what emotions she or he experienced while listening to another person's dream.

2. Method

2.1. Research instrument

The questions concerning socio-demographic data included age, gender, occupation, and relationship status. For eliciting dream frequency, a 7-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) was presented

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(Schredl, 2004). Eight-point scales were used for measuring nightmare frequency and dreaming sharing frequency (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). For the nightmare item, a definition for nightmares was based on the ICSD-3 (American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 2014): "Nightmares are dreams with strong negative emotions that result in awakening from the dreams. The dream plot can be recalled very vividly upon awakening."

Regarding dream sharing, the participants were asked whether they shared dreams with other persons in different categories (spouse, mother, father, siblings, relatives, friends, colleagues, fellow students, and/or therapists) at least once in their lifetime. In addition, they should state the person with whom they shared dreams most often.

One section was designed to elicit the last situation in which the participant told one of his/her own dreams to another person. Four categories were given for the time interval between the situation and the filling in of the questionnaire (within the last seven days, between 8 and 30 days, between 31 days and one year, longer than one year ago). The topic of the dream told was also elicited. These answers were categorized into positive topics (e.g., funny dream), negative dreams (e.g., plane crash), and neutral themes. Next, the person to whom the dream was told (see the above categories) and the closeness of the relationship to this person (five-point scale: 0 = not close to 4 = very close) were elicited. An open question was provided to give the participant the opportunity to describe their perceived reaction of the other person to the account of the dream. The brief statements were categorized (see results section). In addition, the participants were asked why they shared the dream and whether this particular dream sharing affected their relationship.

The last paragraph included items about the last remembered situation in which the participant was listening to the dream of another person. The similar items about the time interval, the topic of the dream, the person who told the dream and the closeness of the relation to this person were presented (see above). The next question measured the overall emotional intensity experienced while listening to the dream on a five-point scale (0 = not emotional at all to 4 = very emotional). A similar five-point format (0 = not at all to 4 = very intense) was presented for several different emotional qualities: joy, anxiety, striking as strange, grief, disgust, contempt, anger, jealousy, and astonishment. The participant was also asked what she or he thought the motive of the other person was in telling the dream and whether this dream telling had affected their relationship.

2.2. Procedure and Participants

Overall, 85 persons (61 women, 24 men) completed the questionnaire (one person did not complete the section about listening to the dream of another person). The mean age of the sample was 25.32 ± 12.34 years (range: 17 to 78 years). The participants were recruited on campus and from the social network of the authors. The participation was voluntary and unpaid but participants received sweets, e.g., a candy bar, for completing the questionnaire. Thirty-six of the participants were single and 49 lived in a stable partnership. The majority of the participants were students (N = 77),

most of them were psychology students (N = 58), and the other participants were employed or were retired.

Statistical procedures were carried out with the SAS 9.4 software package for Windows. Spearman Rank correlations were used for ordinal scales.

3. Results

The mean dream recall frequency was 4.11 ± 1.31, i.e., on average, the participants recalled about one dream per week. The nightmare frequency mean of 3.11 ± 1.56 indicates that nightmares were recalled about 2 to 4 times per year. On average, dreams were shared about 2 to 3 times per month (mean: 4.64 ± 1.31). The correlation between the dream sharing frequency and the dream recall frequency was significant (r = .585, p < .0001), also true of the correlation between nightmare frequency and dream sharing frequency (r = .404, p < .0001). Interestingly, the correlation coefficient was reduced and no longer significant if dream recall frequency was partialled out (r = .074, p = .5040). Persons living within a partnership shared dreams more often than singles (5.08 ± 1.99 vs. 4.03 ± 1.23, z = 3.7, p = .0002). The distribution of persons with whom one shared dreams at least once is as follows: friends 94.12%, mother 78.82%, spouse 76.47%, siblings 52.94%, fellow students 49.41%, father 47.06%, relatives 29.76%, colleagues 8.24%, children 5.88%, and therapist 3.53%. The percentage of the persons with whom the participants shared dreams most often is depicted in Table 1. Friends and spouses are most often specified in the total sample; as expected, singles shared dreams more often with friends whereas persons in relationship shared dreams most often with their partners.

All participants reported situations in which they shared one or more dreams with another person. The time intervals between the dream sharing and filling in the questionnaire were as follows: Last 7 days 37.65%, 8 to 30 days 35.29%, 31 days to one year 25.88%, and more than 1 year 1.18%. The persons whom the dream was told were friends (35), spouses (25), mother (8), siblings (8), relatives (2), parents (2), father (1), own child (1), and fellow student (1). The averaged closeness to the person was 3.64 ± 0.55, i.e., the relationship between the person who shared and the person who listened was always very close. For the 81 dream topics, the following classification was derived: Positively toned themes 23.46%, neutral themes 38.27%, and negatively toned themes 38.27%. The mean emotionality of the dream was 2.55 ± 1.12, i.e., some dreams were very emo-

Table 1. Percentage of persons with whom dreams were most often shared

Factors	Total sample (N = 76)	Singles (N = 32)	Persons in Relationship (N = 44)
Friends	40.79%	62.50%	35.48%
Spouse	35.53%	14.81%	52.27%
Mother	14.47%	9.38%	18.18%
Siblings	5.26%	6.25%	4.55%
Relatives	2.63%	6.25%	0.00%
Fellow students	1.32%	3.13%	0.00%

Table 2. Perceived reaction of the other person after she or he listened to the dream

Category	Percentage
Laughter/Amusement	34.67%
Sympathy	22.67%
Astonishment	12.00%
Positive reaction/relieved	9.33%
Shocked/concerned	9.33%
Neutral/no reaction	9.33%
Consolation/reassurance	2.67%

tional, others more mundane. The perceived reactions of the listener to the dream account are depicted in Table 2. Most often amusement and sympathy was perceived while negative reactions like being shocked occurred rarely. The motives for telling a dream (N = 81 valid answers) were “dream topic relevant for the interaction between the dreamer and the listener” (37.04%), “extraordinary dream” (29.63%), wish to understand the dream better (23.46%), and unspecified (9.88%). 17.86% of the participants (N = 84) stated that telling the dream had an effect on the relationship, in 92.31% a positive effect and in 7.69% a mixed effect.

For the situation regarding listening to the dream of another person the time intervals between dream sharing and filling in the questionnaire were as follows: less than 7 days 38.82%, 8 to 30 days 32.94%, 31 days to one year 24.71%, more than one year 2.35%, and never 1.18%. The persons who told dream were friends 46.99%, spouse 27.71%, mother 9.64%, siblings 6.02%, relatives 4.82%, own children 2.41%, and fellow students 2.41%. The mean relationship closeness was high (3.49 ± 0.67). The dream topics were more negatively toned (34.25%) than positively toned (20.55), 45.21% of the dreams were neutral. The mean intensity of emotions experienced while listening to the dream of the other person was 2.05 ± 1.26 . The emotions experienced while listening and their intensities are depicted in Table 3. Astonishment and joy were mentioned most often by

Table 3. Emotions and experience intensities while listening to the dream of another person

Emotion	Mentioned by	Mean intensity for persons who mentioned the emotion
Joy	62.82%	2.39 ± 0.95
Anxiety	33.33%	1.96 ± 1.06
Striking as strange	44.00%	2.09 ± 0.98
Grief	36.00%	1.96 ± 0.98
Disgust	18.92%	2.00 ± 1.18
Contempt	14.86%	1.73 ± 1.01
Anger	10.81%	2.13 ± 1.13
Jealousy	2.74%	1.50 ± 0.71
Astonishment	83.12%	2.34 ± 1.01

the participants. But emotions like anxiety, grief, and striking as strange were also experienced quite often whereas emotions like disgust, contempt, anger, and jealousy were rarely mentioned. The highest mean intensities of the reactions were highest for astonishment and joy, the lowest for jealousy. The assumed motives of the other person for telling the dream (N = 76 valid answers) were “dream topic relevant for the interaction between the dreamer and the listener” (31.58%), “extraordinary dream” (31.58%), wish to understand the dream better (30.26%), and neutral (6.58%). 18.52% of the participants (N = 81) stated that hearing the dream had an effect on their relationship with the person telling the dream and that this effect was positive.

4. Discussion

Overall, the findings indicate that dream sharing is common and can affect the relationship between the dreamer and the recipient, similar to results reported in the literature (Curci & Rime, 2008; Duffey et al., 2004; Ijams & Miller, 2000; Schredl & Schawinski, 2010; Vann & Alperstein, 2000). Moreover, this study first showed that a broad spectrum of emotions is experienced while listening to a dream and, on the other hand, the dreamer perceived different reactions of the listener to his/her dream account.

Compared to previous studies (Schredl & Schawinski, 2010), dream recall frequency was closely related to dream sharing frequency in the present study. On the other hand, nightmare frequency was not related to dream sharing frequency if dream recall frequency was statistically controlled – unlike the findings of Schredl and Schawinski (2010), implying that nightmares might be told more often – based on the motif of relief (Curci & Rime, 2008) – compared to neutral dreams. The analysis of the dream topics, however, revealed that there is a shift towards more negatively toned dreams which is in line with previous studies (Curci & Rime, 2008). The distribution of persons with whom dreams were shared – most likely close persons – is also in line with the literature (Ijams & Miller, 2000; Olsen et al., 2013; Vann & Alperstein, 2000). The difference between singles and non-singles regarding dream sharing frequency replicated the findings of Olsen et al. (2013), and persons within a partnership most likely report their dreams to their partners is also plausible (Olsen et al., 2013). To summarize, the results of the present study – although carried out with a relatively small sample size – are mainly in line with those of previous research in this particular field.

Regarding the perceived reactions of the listener, the distribution of the present study is comparable to the Vann and Alperstein (2000) study in that most of the reactions could be termed as laughter/amusement (termed as entertainment in the previous study). Most of the other reactions were also positive (sympathy, positive reaction/relieved, consolation/reassurance). A sizable number of participants reported a positive effect of the dream telling on the relationship between the dreamer and the listener, with one exception of a mixed effect. About ten percent of the dream accounts were accompanied by more negative reactions (shocked/concerned) and in about ten percent no particular reaction to the dream account was perceived. Overall, the dream telling situations in the field that were retrospectively reported showed a predominantly positive effect regarding the situation itself (positive feelings) and sometimes a positive effect on the relationship. Due to the small sample size, we did not attempt to perform subgroup analyses, e.g., regarding

the motives of dream sharing, dream type, or the person to whom the dream was told. But the findings clearly indicate that large-scaled studies might be promising. To avoid possible biases concerning retrospective recall, it might also be very advisable to use diaries for recording dream sharing episodes in the field.

The reactions of the participant to a specific dream account (cf. Table 3) also indicate that positive and more or less neutral emotions like astonishment, joy and striking as strange were reported most often and are also the most intense emotions. On the other hand – somewhat in contrast to the perceived reactions of the listener to one's own dream account (see Table 2) – the participants reported a variety of negative emotions in relation to hearing the dream report like grief, anxiety, disgust, contempt, anger, and jealousy. It would be very interesting to study whether these reactions are related to the dream content itself; for example, dreams depicting the listener in a negative way or dreams including sad topics that also concern the listener. One should keep in mind that the relationship between the person who shared the dream and the participant who listened was often very close. As these findings are new and have never studied, it would be very interesting to follow up this study. One option would be to study the subjective experiences in standardized condition, e.g., in a laboratory setting, but one has to keep in mind that the relational aspect is very important. I.e., it would be preferable to study couples, one spouse telling the dream and the other partner listening to dream. Even using fMRI paradigms would be very promising in order to specify how the reactions to hearing the dream are reflected in cerebral activation. Another topic not addressed by this study are the emotions experience during sharing the own dream; the emotional intensity while sharing could be compared with the emotional intensity while listening to a dream of a close person.

To summarize, reactions to dream accounts are more positively than negatively toned. Especially negatively toned emotions while listening to a dream should be followed up because they have yet to be studied. Due to the limited sample size of the present study, no subgroup analyses were performed, e.g., differentiating reactions for specific respondents or persons who tell the dream (spouse, friend etc.), regarding the closeness of the relationship of the dreamer and the listener and/or the dream topic. It would be desirable to use diaries to validate the findings of this retrospective approach and to study dream telling situations under controlled conditions in a laboratory setting, which also might include brain imagining. In addition, possible positive long-term effects of dream sharing can be investigated (Funkhouser, Cornu, Hirsbrunner, & Bahro, 2000).

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