

An investigation among dreams with sexual imagery, romantic jealousy and relationship satisfaction

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Summary. The present study was the first to explore dreams with sexual imagery in relation to the following waking day characteristics: infidelity (partner cheating or the target cheating), relationship satisfaction, romantic jealousy, and intimacy. Questionnaires were completed by 98 female undergraduate students. As expected, significant correlations were found with those who reported having a partner cheat on them with cognitive, emotional, and behavioural jealousy, and, dream infidelity. Findings also reveal that people who scored high in romantic jealousy also had dream imagery of infidelity and dream meaning (discovery) associated with infidelity. Dream infidelity was also associated with low relationship intimacy in waking day. Findings imply that The Storytelling Method of Dream Interpretation is useful for linking the interpretation of sex dreams to relevant waking day romantic relationship issues. Research implications and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: sex dreams, infidelity, romantic jealousy

1. Introduction

The fundamental importance for understanding one's dreams is to recognize their importance for revealing meaningful links in one's own waking day life (Pesant & Zadra, 2004). One of the most important functions of dreams or dream interpretation is that problems in waking day romantic relationships are unconsciously represented in the dreaming mind and thus, people dream about various aspects of their relationships (Pesant & Zadra, 2004). Dreams can reflect and reveal solutions to intimate relationship issues, satisfying relationship experiences, and unsatisfying relationship experiences (Pesant & Zadra, 2004). Research findings have revealed that dreams can reflect relationship status and stability (Schredl, 2001). Given past findings, this study was undertaken to begin the investigation of dreams in relation to waking day romantic relationships, romantic jealousy, and relationship satisfaction. This is the first study to explore these variables.

1.1. Romantic Relationship Issues

Establishing a satisfying romantic relationship is often an important aspect of life for most people. A romantic relationship can be defined as high intimacy and passion two people experience together frequently (Miller, Perlman, & Brehm, 2007). Most intimate relationships also require strong commitment (Miller et al., 2007) where strong commitment is defined as the act of two people continuously

thinking and acting in ways to excite the other (Arriaga, Slaughterbeck, Capezza & Hmurovic, 2007). Relationship threats can also pose a problem for couples. Romantic jealousy is a specific threat that many people may experience in the course of their relationships (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Miller et al., 2007). Jealousy can be defined as when one partner knows there is an imagined or actual outside threat toward the relationship (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007). An actual threat triggering jealousy can be sexual infidelity, and there are many reasons why infidelity can occur including; sexual boredom, emotional disengagement, and overall dissatisfaction with the relationship (Miller et al., 2007). Research has also shown that romantic jealousy can decrease relationship satisfaction levels and can cause disturbing consequences (Miller et al., 2007).

Sexual endeavors must be satisfying in order for the relationship to last (Miller et al., 2007). Sprecher (2002) found that sexual satisfaction is strongly connected to relationship commitment, intimacy, and stability. Couples who report high levels of emotional satisfaction usually report a desirable and pleasing sexual relationship (Sprecher, 2002). Other researchers note that when sexual satisfaction changes so does the relationship. To explain this further, if the relationship quality is low there tends to be low levels of sexual satisfaction, and vice versa. If there is high perceived relationship quality than high levels of sexual satisfaction are reported (Byers, 2005). Also, waking day sexual behaviour can offer clues to how satisfied partners are in their relationships. Given the continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Schredl, 2001) all waking day aspects of sexuality should appear in dream images.

1.2. Relationships and Dream Imagery

Research has found that sex dreams are usually connected to different relationship types, for example, past or current romantic relationships (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009).

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A study by Schredl (2001) investigated the dream content differences between those in a relationship versus those who were not in a relationship. Results showed that those who were in stable relationships often dreamt of their partner. Also, negative dream imagery, such as lack of personal contact with others was shown with those who were not in a stable relationship (Schredl, 2001). Research on relationships and dream imagery is unfortunately scarce, but the research that has been conducted to date implies the importance of working with dreams to discover meaning in waking life relationships. For examples see: (DeCicco, 2009; DeCicco & Higgins, 2009; Duffey, Wooten, Lumadue, Comstock, 2004).

1.3. Dreams with Sexual Imagery

Earlier writings from Freud suggested that wish fulfillment is often shown in sexual dreams (Hall, 1966; Van de Castle, 1994). More recent research has found that approximately 8% of everyday dreaming, for both men and women, include sexual dream imagery (Zadra, 2007). Results also show that common sexual dream imagery listed from highest to lowest included kissing, sexual intercourse, sexual embrace, genital contact, hand and body stimulation, oral sex, masturbation, and anal intercourse (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009; Schredl, Desch, Ramey & Spachman, 2008). Other research has shown sexual intercourse is the most common sexual dream content followed by kissing (Zadra, 2007). Orgasms however, were rarely experienced in sex dreams (DeCicco et al., 2008). Sexual dreaming appears to happen often with university students with approximately 36% of people reporting a sex dream once a week, 17% reporting 2-5 times in a week, while approximately 5% report having less than one sex dream in a year (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009). In summary, sex dreams are common, considered to be typical dreams, and can ultimately reflect important waking day relationships (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009; Schredl et al., 2008; Zadra, 2007).

The purpose of the current study is to extend previous research that has found a connection among waking day romantic relationships, dream content, and the meaning of dreams using the The Story Telling Method of Dream Interpretation (DeCicco, 2007b; King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009). This research will further findings by examining dreams with sexual content and dream meaning in relation to; romantic jealousy, romantic intimacy, waking day sexual behaviors, and overall relationship satisfaction.

The following hypotheses were tested: 1) People who report sexual imagery in their dreams with their current partner as the target will be more satisfied in their waking day relationships (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009). Furthermore, the meanings derived from their dreams will be about their current relationship, in a positive way (e.g. my boyfriend and I are getting along so well right now) (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009); 2) People who have dreams with romantic jealousy will be low in relationship intimacy (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009). They will also report the meaning of their dreams to be about their current relationship in a negative way (e.g. My boyfriend and I fight a lot). The next three hypotheses are exploratory, as there are no previous studies in the area of romantic jealousy and dreaming. These hypotheses do, however, follow the continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Schredl & Hofmann, 2003); 3) People who dream that their current partner is sexually cheating with another individual will have low waking day intimacy and high ro-

mantic jealousy; 4) People who score highly on romantic jealousy in their waking day life and those who have been exposed to sexual infidelity, will have more dream content with romantic jealousy. Also, their dream meaning will be associated with infidelity; 5) People who report lower relationship satisfaction in waking day will have more sexual dreams of themselves with someone other than their current partner as the target.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 98 female undergraduate students recruited from Trent University, Canada. Participants were from all university year levels from first year to fifth. The mean age of the participants was 23.25 years (SD = 6.26). With regard to ethnicity, 89 (90.82%) were Caucasian, 5 (5.01%) were Black, African or Caribbean, 2 (2.05%) were Asian, 1 (1.02%) were Hispanic, Latino or South American, and 1 (1.02%) reported as "other". Eighty-four (85.71%) participants indicated their sexual orientation to be exclusively heterosexual, 10 (10.20%) were largely heterosexual with incidental homosexual behaviour, 2 (2.05%) were largely heterosexual with more incidental homosexual behaviour, 1 (1.02%) was bisexual, and 1 (1.02%) was largely homosexual with incidental heterosexual behaviour.

Sixty participants (61.22%) reported their current relationship status as in a serious or committed relationship, while 14 (14.28%) were single, 12 (12.24%) were casually dating one or more people, 11 (11.22%) were married, and 1 (1.02%) responded to "other" as common law. In regards to whether they have ever experienced a partner cheating on them, 61 (62.24%) reported they did experience their partner cheating on them, and 37 (37.75%) said no. With respect to the participant having ever cheated on a partner, 66 (67.35%) responded no, and 32 (32.65%) indicated yes to this particular experience.

2.2. Materials

A demographics sheet was distributed to specifically assess age, sex, ethnicity, relationship status, sexual orientation, and education level. Additionally, participants were also asked to indicate whether or not they had cheated on a partner or if a partner had cheated on them, and to specify how long ago for each occurrence.

2.2.1 Dream Interpretation

The dream interpretation method used in the current study was The Storytelling Method (DeCicco, 2009; DeCicco, 2007b). This interpretation technique is a self-guided interpretation method. The method can be used with novice dream workers who are not familiar with dream therapy techniques because it is user-friendly and brief (DeCicco, 2009; DeCicco et al., 2008), therefore, appropriate for use in this study.

2.2.2 Relationship Intimacy

Relationship intimacy was assessed with the Miller Social Intimacy Scale (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982). Seventeen questions assessing relationship intimacy in a current romantic relationship will be administered. Respondents are required

to answer on a 10 point scale, with 1 = very rarely and 10 = almost always. (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982).

2.2.3 Perceived Relationship Quality Component (PRQC) Inventory

Romantic relationship satisfaction was assessed with the Perceived Relationship Quality Component (PRQC) Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson & Thomas, 2008). This measure consists of 18 items that assess relationship quality. Participants answer using a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = “not at all” to 7 = “extremely”). This measure covers 6 basic categories including: relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion and love.

2.2.4 Romantic Jealousy

Romantic jealousy was measured using The Multidimensional Jealousy scale (Pfeiffer & Wong, 1989). This measure consists of 24 items is divided into 3 sections of eight questions. These separate constructs use 8 questions each to measure cognitive, emotional and behavioural jealousy. Respondents would answer items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = never, to 7 = all the time.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited from various psychology classes and were informed verbally of the purpose of the study. They were given a consent form and a questionnaire package. Contact information and office hours were given to participants should they have any questions or concerns. It was highlighted that they had a right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants were informed if they were not currently dating or in a relationship they did not have to complete the MSIS and the PRQC scales, but to respond to the MJS. They were also asked to record on the TSM worksheets one dream with sexual imagery that they had in the past week. Participants were given an envelope to enclose their consent form and questionnaires to ensure privacy and confidentiality. To ensure privacy, all consent forms were removed from the submitted envelopes before reading and analyzing the sex dreams.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics of Dream Reports

The dream reports appeared consistent with previous research (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009). In terms of the specific variables being investigated for this study, 4 of the dreams had direct images of infidelity, 3 dreamt of their current romantic partner, and 12 of a past romantic partner. Ten dreams reported experiencing a positive sexual experience, 20 reported an enjoyable/pleasurable emotion while 8 reported happiness associated with the sexual imagery. In terms of reporting negative sexual experiences, 3 reported rape, 2 reported forced sex, 11 reported emotions of sadness/unhappiness, 9 reported anger associated with the imagery, 13 reported emotions of fear/apprehension, and 2 reported emotions of feeling hurt.

Of the 98 participants, 11 were over 30 years of age while the range of the women’s ages was 18-49 years. The average number of words in the dreams appear similar to other

studies (King, DeCicco & Humphreys, 2009) with a mean of 125.2 words. Furthermore, the means and standard deviations of the scales used in the study are reported in Table 1.

3.2. Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses 1. The prediction that people who had sexual imagery in their dreams with their current romantic partner as the dream target would be more satisfied in their waking day relationships was not supported. The dreamer’s current romantic partner (TCRP) reported in dreams did not correlate with the perceived relationship satisfaction total score in waking day life (PRST) $r = .02$ ($p > .05$). Also, non-significant correlations were found between current romantic partner (TCRP) and dream discovery showing and explaining the relationship in a positive way (DDPP) $r = .13$ ($p > .05$), or by explaining the current relationship or partner in their dreams (DDR/P) $r = .17$ ($p > .05$).

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 2 predicted that those who have romantic jealousy in their dreams (EJ) would have low waking day relationship intimacy was not confirmed with both Intimacy Scales, including the frequency of intimate contacts (MICT) and the intensity of intimate relations (MIRT). Also, the hypothesis predicted that dream discovery would be correlated with their current relationship in a negative way (DDNU) and this was not supported, $r = .01$ ($p > .05$). However, the dream discovery variable of infidelity was significantly correlated with jealousy in dreams (EJ) $r = .40$ ($p < .05$). This implies that people who have a dream theme

Table 2: The Means and Standard Deviations of the Measures for Females

Measure	Mean	SD
MSISICT (Intimate Contacts Total)	45.91	4.15
MSISIRT (Intimate Relations Total)	96.43	12.74
PRQRST (Perceived Relationship Satisfaction Total)	17.61	3.18
PRQCT (Perceived Relationship Commitment Total)	19.06	2.46
PRQIT (Perceived Relationship Intimacy Total)	18.21	2.96
PRQTT (Perceived Relationship Trust Total)	18.11	2.78
PRQPT (Perceived Relationship Passion Total)	16.43	3.47
PRQLT (Perceived Relationship Love Total)	19.33	2.21
MJSCT (Cognitive Jealousy Total)	15.17	5.41
MJSET (Emotional Jealousy Total)	30.85	5.91
MJSBT (Behavioural Jealousy Total)	14.95	4.81

of romantic jealousy will discover something about waking day infidelity with TSM.

Hypothesis 3. The prediction stated that those who report infidelity dream content (DMIF) will have low relationship intimacy scores (MICT and MIRT) and high romantic jealousy. Significant correlations were found with two jealousy total scales (MJCT) $r = .21$ ($p < .05$), and (MJST) $r = .23$ ($p < .05$). Additionally, perceived waking day relationship trust (PRTT) was included in order to examine if romantic relationship trust was significantly related to any of the intimacy and jealousy measures. Those who reported high relationship trust showed significant low levels of cognitive jealousy $r = -.34$ ($p < .05$), behavioural jealousy $r = -.27$ ($p < .05$), and total jealousy $r = -.23$ ($p < .05$).

Hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 4 stated that those who report high scores on romantic jealousy (MJSCT, MJSET, MJSBT, and MJST) including those who have been exposed to infidelity (PC and CP) will have more dream content of infidelity (DMIF) and jealousy (EJ). Further, they will have dream meaning of infidelity (DDI) from the dream. This was partially supported as results show that those who report jealousy in their dreams (EJ) also report infidelity dream content (DMIF), $r = .41$ ($p < .05$). Furthermore, those who had experienced a partner cheat on them (PC) correlated with their sex dream discovery being about infidelity (DDI), $r = .18$ ($p < .05$). Hypothesis 5. The prediction that those who report low relationship satisfaction (PRST) in waking day will have more dreams of someone else (TO) as their sexual target, other than their current partner, was not supported, $r = .11$ ($p > .05$).

4. Discussion

4.1. Dream Content and Dream Discovery Categories

The purpose of the present study was to extend previous research on dreams with sexual imagery (Schredl et al., 2008; King, Decicco & Humphreys, 2009) and to extend findings by beginning the investigation of the relationships among romantic jealousy, romantic intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and sex dreams. Significant correlations were found in conjunction with hypothesis 3 regarding the prediction that reports of infidelity in dream content would be related to low intimacy and high jealousy in waking day. Those who reported having an experience of a romantic partner cheat on them in their waking day reported high rates of cognitive jealousy and a total jealousy score including cognitive, emotional and behavioural jealousy. Furthermore, the dream imagery of infidelity appears to be an important image for individuals experiencing waking day jealousy in romantic relationships.

An additional important finding was that those who trusted their current romantic partner were relatively low in cognitive, behavioural, and total jealousy scores, and, reported a high frequency of intimate contacts. These findings suggest that there is a possible link among waking day romantic relationships, intimacy, satisfaction, and romantic jealousy. Results also suggest that if infidelity was experienced in waking day then people may become weary of the same experience happening to them again, ultimately leading them to be jealous. Previous research suggests that these relationships may not be fully based on commitment because committed relationships are found to express a small amount of jealousy (Aylor & Dainton, 2007). Also, previous

research has acknowledged the fact that having romantic jealousy can decrease relationship satisfaction (Miller et al., 2007).

Trust is an essential component to have in a romantic relationship because it is related to having a satisfying amount of intimacy and low rates of jealousy (Miller et al., 2007). Previous research shows that those who have high intimacy levels and sexual excitation will be more committed and satisfied with each other in their relationship (Tunariu & Reavey, 2007), which could be an explanation for the low levels of jealousy. Interestingly, previous research found that those who had low levels of intimate contacts experienced an unstable relationship (Schredl, 2001) and the current research shows that high trust was related to higher levels of intimate contacts. The findings from this study extend previous findings and suggest that research investigating intimate contact, trust and relationship stability is warranted.

4.2. Dream Content and Waking Life Variables

An important finding in the study was that those who did feel jealous in their dreams also had a dream scene of infidelity. Furthermore, those who had a partner cheat on them in waking day life were most likely to dream about infidelity. These results suggest that once an individual has experienced the negative effects associated with infidelity it creates a preoccupation in the unconscious dreaming mind. It is interesting to note that those who reported to be the cheaters themselves did not report cognitive, emotional or behavioural jealousy. Additionally, those who were very jealous overall, especially behaviourally, reported more infidelity in dream content.

These results suggest that dream content categories such as infidelity and jealousy do reflect the current state of the relationship (Pessant & Zadra, 2004) as commitment and satisfaction may be low (Aylor & Dainton, 2007). Also, these results could also be displaying a reflection of their waking day life behaviours (Wolman, 1979), for example, dreams of infidelity or jealousy could be reflecting that jealousy is a profound part of the personality (Pessant & Zadra, 2004). Alternatively, they could be responding to an actual waking day infidelity threat with a current romantic partner. Both of these show support for the continuity hypothesis (Schredl & Hofmann, 2003) and suggest that further research with respect to sex dreams and various relationship aspects is warranted.

4.3. General Conclusions, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

This study gives support to previous research in that using an effective dream therapy tool can lead to insight, understanding, and meaning for the dreamer with respect to their romantic relationships (DeCicco & Higgins, 2009). Furthermore, since dream sharing in couples' therapy has been found to be useful and to enhance relationship intimacy, this certainly warrants further research (Duffey et al., 2004). The results of the current study have revealed a new area of research in relation to the experience of a sexual dream. However, it is important to note several limitations of this study. One limitation is that there were only females examined. Previous research has shown that males and females differ with respect to sex dreams (King, DeCicco, & Humphreys, 2009; Zadra, 2007) and therefore, this study should be repeated with a male sample. Furthermore, Leit-

enberg and Henning (1995) reported that men and women have different sexual preferences, which could also affect the results pertaining to relationships, sexual satisfaction, and dreams.

Although previous research has shown that sex dreams are a common theme in most university students (DeCicco, 2008; Nielson et al., 2003; Schredl et al., 2004; 2008), the present study should be extended to other sample populations. For example, older participants (e.g. thirty years of age and older) could have different results. Older participants may report more experience in romantic relationships or sex, which may affect both dreams and discovery.

From this research, other avenues of investigation could include the examination of differences in jealousy and experiences between males and females because previous research acknowledges a difference (Aylor & Dainton, 2001). Future research should also examine body shame in people's waking life to their sexual pleasure displayed in their dreams to see if there is a connection. Past research has identified that body shame was linked to low sexual satisfaction, orgasm, arousability, and pleasure (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007). This construct of interest was also found to relate to intimacy and jealousy (Aylor & Dainton, 2001; Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007). Future studies with many new variables are warranted.

This research was the first to investigate dreams, relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and jealousy and has found many new and applicable findings. Particularly, these findings can be used in therapy with individuals that experience constant relationship difficulties due to decreased satisfaction and intimacy. Research on relationships and dream imagery is unfortunately scarce, but the present research shows the importance of working with dreams to discover meaning and insight in relation to waking life relationships. Research has demonstrated that dreams are important in all aspects of life (DeCicco, 2009; Hill, 1996; Van de Castle, 1994) and in particular, the present study has highlighted the importance of studying dreams and dream interpretation in terms of romantic relationships and relevant waking day issues.

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