Spiritual and religious imagery in dreams: A cross cultural analysis

Mohamed O. Salem[1], Teresa L. DeCicco[2], Mohamed A. Ragab[1], Said Yousif[1], Anthony Murkar[3], & Mamta Vaswani[1]

[1]University of the United Arab Emirates
[2]Trent University, Peterborough, Canada
[3]University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

Summary. The continuity hypothesis of dreaming suggests that waking day experiences are reflected in dream imagery; research suggests that some waking day experiences have a higher probability of being reflected in dreams than others (Schredl, 2006; Schredl & Hoffmann, 2003). In order to assess the degree to which religious or spiritual beliefs are incorporated from waking life into sleep mentation, a cross-cultural study was undertaken to compare the frequency of dream imagery between two different cultural settings (the United Arab Emirates, and Canada). Results suggested that the dreams from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) sample contained significantly more religious/spiritual imagery than the Canadian sample. The UAE student dreams also had more frequent incorporations of a wider variety of imagery categories. Results suggest that religious/spiritual beliefs and practices may have a large impact on dream content.

Keywords: Spiritual, religious, dreams, mood, UAE, Canadians, cross cultural

1. Introduction

Historically, the terms "religiosity" and "spirituality" were used interchangeably. A distinction between the two was not made because the concept of spirituality was ignored by the Western world (Westgate, 1996). Humanistic Psychology theorists have, however, made reference to spirituality as a separate concept; regardless, western societies have generally thought of spirituality as a concept under the domain of religion (Chandler, Holden and Kolander, 1992). Discussions of the concept of spirituality as a separate entity have included the drive to find meaning in life, self-actualization, and the cosmos (Westgate, 1996). Spirituality at its simplest can be thought of as experiences with a higher power, and religiosity as going further to include contexts for these experiences to occur (Salem, 2006a). Religion is also defined as "a set of behaviors, values, and attitudes that are based on previously established religious doctrine and institutionalized organization" (DeCicco, 2007b).

Spirituality is comprised of many dimensions, however, four very broad dimensions of spirituality are defined as: (1) meaning and purpose in life, (2) intrinsic values (personal belief systems and principles to live by), (3) transcendent beliefs and/or experiences (awareness of and appreciation for the vastness of the universe, a recognition of a dimension "beyond the natural and rational", an acceptance of the

universe's mystery, and an element of faith) and, (4) community and/or relationships (relationships with one's self, others, and God, as well as both a sense of selflessness/willingness to help others and an increased love that promotes working toward greater good; Westgate, 1996).

Both religiosity and spirituality can affect people's lives in very beneficial ways. For instance, religiosity has been found to be positively correlated with good mental health (Salem, 2006a). Religion also provides a sense of community, a sense of belonging, and support groups comprised of individuals that share the same beliefs, values and morals that can help people deal with the stresses of life (Salem, 2006a). Particularly, religion has been associated with good coping skills, lower rates of depression, higher reports of life satisfaction and happiness, lower rates of anxiety disorders, lower rates of suicide, lower rates of alcohol and drug abuse, higher self-esteem, higher rates of success in cognitive behavior therapy treatment (Salem, 2006a). Spirituality, on the other hand, has also been associated with the stimulation of certain areas of the brain (Salem, 2006b), and it has been suggested that there are certain genes in human DNA that are associated with achieving transcendent spiritual states (Salem, 2006b).

In relation to sleep state mentation (dreaming) and religiosity/spirituality, one dominant concept that might link these constructs is the continuity hypothesis of dreaming. The continuity hypothesis of dreaming was introduced by Calvin Hall in the early 1970s (Bell & Hall, 1971); this theory states that dreams are reflective of the dreamer's waking day (King & DeCicco, 2007).The continuity hypothesis is more than merely the idea that dreams are reflective of waking day experiences - instead, certain waking day experiences have a higher probability of being reflected in dreams than others (DeCicco & Higgins, 2009; DeCicco, Lyons, Pannier & Wright, 2010; Clarke, DeCicco, Navara, 2010; Schredl,

2006; Schredl & Hoffmann, 2003; Schinco & DeCicco, 2009). The waking day experiences that are reflected in dreams are dependent on the dreamer's pre-sleep situation, life events, daily activities, stress, social interactions and relationships, and mood (Schredl & Hofman, 2003). Other factors that influence dream content include the time in between the waking day experience and dreaming, emotional involvement, the type of waking day experience, the personality of the dreamer, and the time in between when the dreamer falls asleep and when the dream occurs (Schredl, 2006).

A study was conducted by Erlacher and Schredl (2010) to determine whether or not the amount of time spent playing sports or learning about sports theory had an effect on the frequency of sports related dreams in a large sample of elite German athletes. Erlacher and Schredl (2010) found that the athletes had more sports related dreams during periods of competition and during periods of intense training (i.e. when they were more heavily involved in sports in their waking day lives; Erlacher & Schredl, 2010).

A study conducted by King and DeCicco (2007) investigating the relationship between dream content and physical health, mood, and self construal also found that the dreamers' physical health, their mood, and self construal were all related to the content of their dreams, with physical health having the greatest influence. Research has also found that dreamers with negative moods (symptoms of depression and anxiety) have negatively toned dreams, and have dreams that include high occurrences of death, aggression, negative emotions, and general misfortune (King & DeCicco, 2007; Pessant & Zadra, 2006).

Nielsen et al. (2003) found that the most prevalent content of Canadian university students' dreams included being chased, falling, school, sexual experiences, and arriving late. The findings of this study provided additional support for the continuity hypothesis; it can be easy to imagine that a Canadian university student's waking day would involve school and sexual experiences. A study conducted by Dale and DeCicco (2011) further assessed the dream content of 39 Canadian male university students (using the Hall and Van de Castle content analysis coding system) and the relationship of that content to discovery using the Storytelling Method of dream interpretation (DeCicco, 2007). The Dale and DeCicco (2011) study found that the most prevalent content in the students' dreams included outdoor scenes, gender stereotypical masculine themes, occupation, aggression with other males, and positively toned emotions.

Review of the literature yielded only one prior publication examining religious/cultural differences in dream imagery between Christianity and Islam. In light of this, a cross cultural study was designed to compare the frequency of religious and spiritual content in sleep mentation between two different cultures in order to assess the degree to which religious and spiritual experiences and cognitions have continuity between the waking and sleeping states. Samples of dreams were compared between Psychology students from both a western society (Canada) and an eastern society (the United Arab Emirates).

It was thought that religiosity would differ between the two cultural settings. In eastern societies, dreams are highly considered by Islamic followers. Their importance has been emphasized in the Islamic Holy Scriptures. In Qur'an, there are 24 verses discussing dreams and dreaming, with full re-

counting of 7 dreams (Salem, 2010). A second source of Muslims' beliefs that dreams are avenues for receiving messages from God is the Hadith (a record of accounts provided by the Prophet Muhammad) which has an entire section related to dreams and dreaming (Salem, Ragab, & Razik, 2009). Dreams are generally thought of as either messages of good things to come, encouragement and guidance, or warnings of threats, danger or bad news (Salem, 2010). Many Islamic leaders have in fact made political decisions and ordered political action based on the dreams that they have had (Edgar, 2004). Some Muslims also use dreams to assist them in making personal decisions such as who to marry, choosing their educational path, or in making career choices (Sirriyeh, 2011).

According to Islamic dream theory, religious dream images are hierarchically classified and the extent of the images truth value is based on where the image lies in the hierarchy (Edgar, 2004). In addition, Islamic dream theory holds that there are three types of dreams, those inspired by God (spiritual dreams), those inspired by the devil, and those inspired by the earthly spirit of the dreamer (Edgar, 2004).Some classify the second category of dreams to be comprised of self-talk reflecting the dreamers concerns and thoughts, and the third category to be comprised of jumbled and bizarre dreams which have no significance (Salem, Ragab, & Razik, 2009; Salem, 2010).

Based on the high value placed on both dreams and religiosity/spirituality, it was thought that a sample of students from the United Arab Emirates (UAE; a dominantly Muslim society) would report higher levels of religious/spiritual imagery in dreams on average. In accordance with the continuity hypothesis of dreaming, it was therefore hypothesized that cultural expressions of spirituality and/or religiosity would be expressed more frequently in the dream content of students from the UAE versus students from Canada. It was predicted that when using content analysis to quantitatively assess dream content, the frequency of religious/ spiritual dream content would be significantly higher for the UAE sample than the Canadian sample.

2. Method

Each of the participants recorded one dream having occurred over the previous two weeks and submitted it to the researchers on a voluntary basis. The dreams were content analyzed using the following eleven categories of images of religiosity: religious activity, religious places, God, angels, afterlife, devil/satan, heaven, hell, prophets, religious figures, and other religious or spiritual imagery. For the first ten of these categories, only specific mentions of items pertaining to these categories were scored (i.e. for 'Angels' to be scored, the word angel would have had to have been mentioned in the dream report). For the final category (other religious or spiritual imagery), any religious or spiritual imagery that did not fit into the other ten categories was scored (e.g. religious objects such as crosses, menorahs, etc.). Each instance the images appeared in participants' dream report was recorded in order to give a quantitative value for each of the dream imagery categories. An independent samples t-test was then used to compare the total religious imagery in dreams (the sum of all imagery categories for each participant's dream) between the two samples. Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS® Statistics Software.
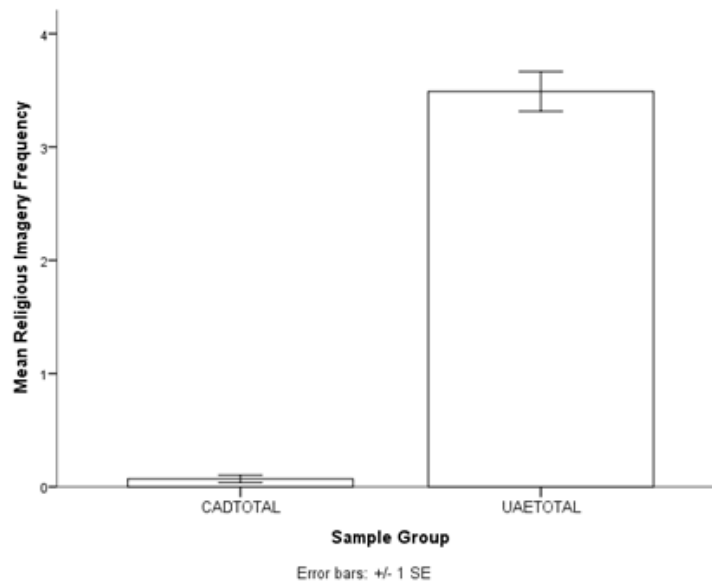
Figure 1. Comparison of total religious imagery between the Canadian (CADTOTAL) and UAE (UAETOTAL) sample groups.

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 100 female Canadian undergraduate university students (attending Trent University in Ontario, majoring in psychology), and 100 female United Arab Emirates undergraduate university students (attending the United Arab Emirates University in the UAE, majoring in psychology).

2.2. Results

The results of the independent samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between the UAE Students' dreams (M = 3.49, SD = 1.75) and the Canadian students' dreams (M = 0.07, SD = 0.33) in terms of total religious/spiritual imagery, $t(99)$ = -19.16, p < .001. The UAE sample had significantly more religious imagery in their dreams than the Canadian sample.

The most frequent imagery for Canadians was religious places (M = 0.05), while the most frequent imagery for the UAE sample was religious activity (Prayer, etc.; M = 0.67). Frequency for all other dream imagery categories was < 0.05 (or 5% of dreams) for the Canadian sample. The UAE dream sample contained frequencies greater than 0.20 (or 20% of dreams) for religious places, Satan, God, prophets, the afterlife, and religious figures (i.e. 20% of dreams contained these images).

3. Discussion

The results of the investigation suggested that the frequency of religiosity was significantly higher among students in the UAE than in Canada, and that this was reflected in dream imagery. Of the UAE participants, 98.2% reported considering themselves religious/spiritual. Within the Canadian sample, only 15% of participants considered themselves religious/spiritual. The results revealed that the UAE students had statistically significant more religious/spiritual imagery in their dreams than the Canadian.

In addition to this, the UAE sample had higher frequency of religious imagery across all eleven categories of mentation imagery. The most frequent imagery for Canadians was religious places (churches, etc.), while the most frequent imagery for the UAE sample was religious activity (Prayer, etc.). While the frequency of religious imagery was quite low (all mean frequencies below 5% of dreams) for all other categories in the Canadian sample, the UAE dreams contained significant levels of religious imagery in a number of other categories. These included religious places, Satan, God, prophets, the afterlife, and religious figures (all mean frequencies over 20% of dreams). The frequencies suggest that in a random sample of five dreams from the UAE students examined in this study, all of these categories would likely be mentioned at least once.

The findings of this study were in support of the hypothesis. These findings are also consistent with previous research on the continuity hypothesis of dream imagery (Schredl, 2001), adding further support to the idea that waking day experiences and cognitions are re-played during the sleeping state. Since religion is such an integral part of a highly religious person's life, it is evident that the dreams of any highly religious sample of participants (such as the UAE student sample) should contain significantly more images of religiosity than the dreams of a less religious sample (in accordance with the continuity hypothesis of dreaming). In this investigation the UAE students' dreams contained both significantly more religious/spiritual imagery overall, as well as a higher number of different categories of dream imagery which regularly appear in their dreams.

One other possible explanation for the UAE sample's high frequency of religiosity is that religion is extremely influential on the waking day experiences of Muslims and their dreams. The UAE student sample consisted mostly of Muslim participants, and dreams in turn are extremely influential on their waking day lives due to those religious beliefs. While it may be the case that continuity between waking-day cognitions about religion are reflected during sleep, it is also possible that the importance of the dream experience within any religious context plays a role (i.e. if examining a highly religious

sample that places significantly less emphasis on the importance of dreams than the Islamic faith does, it is possible that the frequency of incorporation of religious/spiritual images into dream content may not be as prevalent).

As a result of this, future research comparing images of religiosity and spirituality should use participants from more (and different) cultures. This could include a comparison of the dream content of Canadians and a different highly religious culture (non-Muslim), or a comparison of the dream content of two different highly religious cultures. In addition, while this cross-cultural study examined the differences in sleep mentation imagery, it did not account for the possible impacts of the changes to sleep architecture that normally accompany the aging process. While a student sample usually consists of younger participants, there are significant changes to the neural activity during sleep as people age (most notably the loss of Slow Wave Sleep, characterized by Delta brainwave activity). As a result of this, a comparative study of a similar sample should also be conducted to examine the impact of other factors (such as ontogenesis in relation to both religious beliefs and sleep architecture) which might have an impact on the incorporation of memory sources into sleep mentation. In addition, the present study examined only the dreams of female participants; future research should therefore also examine the dreams of male students in order to determine whether there are specific gender differences in terms of the frequency or quality of religious/spiritual images in dreams.

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