Perceiving facial features on dream personages: A quantitative survey

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The NDE OBE Research Project

Summary. ***Background***: There is a dearth in dream research on some of the specifics about seeing or not seeing facial features during dreams with some unanswered questions, including how this might vary among individual dreamers in both occurrence and frequency. ***Aims***: To determine if and to what degree seeing or not seeing facial features varies among individual dreamers and if demographic factors such as biological sex and age are statistically significant. ***Method***: A survey was conducted asking adult dreamers in the United States if they saw facial features on dream personages using a multi-choice question with a single-select endorsement of always, usually, sometimes, rarely, or never. ***Results***: Based on responses from 291 participants, it was found that differences in occurrence and frequency do exist among dreamers, but that most of them (74.9%) sometimes see facial features in their dreams and sometimes do not. Furthermore, there were not any statistical significant differences found among dreamers in regards to demographic variables such as biological sex or age. ***Limitations***: The results of this study are based on responses of adults in the United States, so it cannot necessarily be generalized to either children or to people living in other areas of the world. ***Conclusion***: These findings have value for dream research in general and beg the question as to why there are such variances among different individual dreamers. Further research is recommended..

Keywords: Dreams, facial features, faces, adults, quantitative survey

1. Introduction

Dreams are generally understood as an experience of thoughts, images, sensations, emotions, and/or activities in an individual's mind that occur in association with various stages or periods of sleep. During many dreams, different types of characters are often perceived and/or encountered, but some people have reported not being able to see facial features on those dream characters. Although Seigneur (2022) suggested that "our dreams are typically not vivid enough to distinguish the individual facial or body features that would be required to get a precise image of a dream person," Goldberger (1995) asserted that even facial expressions can sometimes be seen on dream personages, stressing the importance of such in psychoanalysis, writing, "facial expressions in dreams can be extremely useful for the analysis of the superego" (p. 591). In addition, Nielsen et al. (2003) found that 23.5% of typical Canadian university students reported having seen the face of a dream personage close up at some point in their past dreams.

Kahn et al. (2000), who analyzed 320 dream reports recorded upon awakening from 33 adult subjects (13 male, 20 female) of various ages enrolled in a university extension course, aptly pointed out that individual facial features are in fact sometimes clearly visible—allowing for recognition in such cases—and at other times they are not. However, the results in that study were reported in a collective manner for 320 dream reports by the 33 adult subjects, but possible quantitative differences between each of those individual subjects related to the frequency of seeing or not seeing facial features during their individual overall dream life was not explored. Nevertheless, it was found that when dream characters were recognized, 45% of those were identified by facial recognition.

Interestingly, Siclari et al. (2017) correlated activity in the fusiform area with faces in dreams, and suggested that dream experiences can consist of many different forms from perceptual experiences to mere thought, and from simple images to temporally unfolding narratives. This might perhaps be relevant to seeing and not seeing facial features. In fact, they reported that "the location of high-frequency EEG activity during dreams correlates with specific dream contents, such as thoughts, perceptions, faces, spatial setting, movement, and speech" (p. 2, italics mine).

This same type of issue of sometimes seeing facial features and other times not seeing them has also been found to occur during perceived out-of-body experiences (OBEs)—in which people have the impression of being out of or away from their physical body. During such phenomena, experients sometimes encounter presumed entities or spiritual beings, and many times report not being able to see facial features because such features are blurry, distorted, shadowed, covered, concealed, etc. King (2024) reported that this occurred in at least 43.3% of the 30 accounts with such personages that he examined in one phase of his research and 35.5% of the 31 accounts with such personages that he examined in a later phase of his research (pp. 37–38). Fenwick and Fenwick (1995) also reported some occurrences of not seeing facial features on presumed personages during near-death experiences (NDEs) (pp. 203–204), which are generally associated with an OBE during life-threatening or near-death conditions. This can also take place in a similar manner during laboratory-induced syncope when perceived

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visionary personages are seen by the subjects (Lempert et al., 1994).

Overall, I realized that determining to what degree the occurrence and prevalence of seeing and not seeing facial features in dreams might quantitatively vary among different people was still needed. Because of my interest in the similarity of this particular feature as possibly also relevant to OBEs and NDEs, I felt it was important to explore this further. I also recognized that such a study would add to the existing dream research literature on this particular topic of seeing or not seeing facial features in dreams. So I decided to conduct a quantitative survey on the matter with a sufficient amount of participants.

Based on former research regarding facial features in dreams discussed above, the primary hypothesis of this study was that there would be differences between people with some seeing facial features in dreams and others not seeing them. Many other aspects of dreams have been known to vary with both gender and/or age, such as dream recall and/or dream saliency with gender or age (Cohen, 1979; Giambra et al., 1996; Nielsen, 2012), dream themes based on gender (Nielsen et al., 2003), the prevalence of dream reports and the perception of dream characters with gender (Winget et al., 1972), the types of dream characters with age (Maggiolini et al., 2020), and reports of dreaming in color with age (König et al., 2017; Okada et al., 2011). Because of many known differences associated with dreaming, such as some of those just mentioned, possible variances among genders and age groups in regards to seeing facial features were also explored. Based on the previous research of Nielsen et al. (2003) that did not find any significant difference between genders in having seen faces on dream characters close up, there was an additional hypothesis that there would not be any significant difference in this present study either. However, there was also a third hypothesis that there might be a statistical difference of reporting facial features based on age due to factors such as the known reduction of both dream recall and dream saliency that has sometimes been positively associated with age increase and the different types of characters associated with age variance. This paper is a report on those findings.

2. Methods and Materials

I choose to research the issue of perceiving facial features in dreams by conducting a survey in April 2024 through SurveyMonkey.com that consisted of adult participants in the United States. Although this was an anonymous survey in which the names, contact information, and specific identifiable information of the survey participants were unknown to me, I still included an informed statement that let them know that their responses were going to be used and published in research papers. It focused on quantitatively examining if and how often different adults see facial features in their dreams. It included the following single-select multiple choice question with six optional answers based on the categories identified in the qualitative survey:

When you dream, do you see the facial features of the people in those dreams?

1. Always.
2. Usually
3. Sometimes
4. Rarely
5. Never
6. Other [this last option included an open-ended text box]

These results were then analyzed further to see if there was a significant difference between biological men and women. A Pearson's chi-square test was conducted using a p value of ≤ .05 to demonstrate significance. The data was also analyzed in the same manner to discover if there was a significance difference among age groups that consisted of 18 to 29, 30 to 44, 45 to 60, and above 60.

3. Results

There were 295 adults (135 male, 160 female) living in the United States who responded to the survey with 291 of those responses applicable to this study, with the results provided below in Table 1.

There were also four responses of "Other" that included the following comments: (1) "Don't dream"; (2) "Don't Know! Never thought about it"; (3) "I honestly don't know, I don't generally remember dreams very well if at all"; and (4) "Usually I will see my husband, mom and dad. Once in a while my grandparents and other close family members who have passed away." These were removed from the total because they could not be attributed to any of the options, including the last comment that was too vague and unclear.

After these initial findings, I then divided the 291 cases into two groups consisting of biological males and biological females as in Table 2. A Pearson's chi-square test was conducted to analyze any differences and the result was not significant, X^2 (4, N = 291) = 0.46, p = .97.

I next divided the 291 cases into four different age groups as in Table 3. A Pearson's chi-square test was conducted to analyze any differences among these four age groups and the result was not significant, X^2 (12, N = 291) = 15.82, p = .20.

Table 1. Frequency of seeing facial features in dreams (N = 291).

Frequency	Participants
Always	59 (20.3%)
Usually	80 (27.5%)
Sometimes	119 (40.9%)
Rarely	19 (6.5%)
Never	14 (4.8%)

Table 2. Frequency of seeing facial features in dreams by biological sex.

Frequency	Male N = 133	Female N = 158
Always	26	33
Usually	36	44
Sometimes	57	62
Rarely	8	11
Never	6	8

Table 3. Frequency of seeing facial features in dreams by age.

Frequency	Age 18-29 N = 51	Age 30-44 N = 97	Age 45-60 N = 84	Over 60 N = 59
Always	9	19	18	13
Usually	14	36	13	17
Sometimes	20	35	43	21
Rarely	6	3	6	4
Never	2	4	4	4

4. Discussion

One of the important findings of this study was that most people (74.9%) reported both seeing facial features and not seeing facial features of perceived personages during dreams with about one-fifth of the participants (20.3%) claiming that they always see the facial features and only a small number of people (4.8%) reporting that they never see facial features. Although the prevalence of seeing facial features and not seeing them during dreams is not the same for all individuals, both occur in the dreaming life of most people, supporting the initial hypothesis of this research.

Another salient finding of this research is that the Pearson's chi-square tests conducted in regards to the demographic variables of both biological sex and age were not significant. This suggests that such demographic variables do not play a part in whether an individual sees facial features always, usually, sometimes, rarely, or never. These findings support the second hypothesis of this study that there would not be any statistical difference in regards to gender and align with the findings of Nielsen et al. (2003) who discovered that there was no significant quantitative difference among typical male and female Canadian university students in their study who reported having seen the face of a dream personage at a very close distance. However, the third hypothesis of this research that suggested there might be a difference associated with age in the reporting of facial features was not supported by the findings.

With so many people (95.5%) claiming that they see facial features in dreams, it is difficult to assert that this does not occur. As Kahn et al. (2000) found, "Subjects sometimes state that they have clearly and unmistakably recognized their dream characters by their face or other appearance" (p. 324). In fact, I can attest to this in my own normal non-lucid dreams that I have been studying carefully for a number of years now, for there are certainly occasions when I see those faces most vividly and clearly, usually in regards to both male and female strangers, but more rarely for those whom I know closely even though I dream about them quite often. However, I would personally fall into the "sometimes" category.

5. Limitations

The limitations related to this particular study need to be recognized, including that the manner in which the respondents were recruited may have reduced the quality of the sample as an accurate representation of the general population; in particular, the respondents were given a small payment by SurveyMonkey for their response, which might reduce data validity. In addition, the results of this study are based on responses of participants who were adults in the United States, so it cannot necessarily be generalized to either children or to people living in other areas of the world. Because this study was not focused on resolving the dilemma on why people might see or not see facial features, there was no direct inquiry into problems with dream recall, although the "other" option was available. However, two of the participant's endorsement of the "Other" option in their response to the survey question indicated that they did not know if they see facial features when they dream. It is, of course, possible, that some of the others might be uncertain as well despite having made a specific choice, so this should also be considered as a limitation.

6. Conclusion

This research began with a recognized necessity to determine if seeing and not seeing facial features on personages in dreams quantitatively varied among different dreamers in regards to occurrence and prevalence. It discovered through a survey based on 291 applicable responses that such was in fact the case. Although the occurrence and frequency of seeing facial features varies among different dreamers, there does not seem to be any correlation of such with demographic variables such as biological sex or age—at least for adults in the United States. This study also found that most dreamers within the United States experience both seeing facial features and not seeing facial features in their dreams.

Although the topic of faces in dreams has not been studied extensively and we do not fully understand yet why some individuals see facial features and other people do not, what is known about the reported variance in the perception of color in dreams might have some bearing by conveying the complexities and issues involved in these types of matters. For example, a positive attitude towards creativity and the reporting style were both considered as significant when spontaneously mentioning colors in dream reports and it was also suggested that a mention of mixed colors and color words without specification in those reports may possibly have been due to difficulty in remembering the actual colors seen (Schredl, 2008). In addition, König et al. (2017) found a significant negative correlation between dream recall frequency and attitude toward dreams (not interested in them) with no recall of color perception in dreams.

Another study found that imagery preferences and imagery skills were related to reported dream color and more frequent colored dreaming, respectively (Murzyn, 2012). Furthermore, based on content analysis of dream reports, Hoss (2010) specifically suggested that recalled dream colors were related to both neurological mechanisms involved in the perception of color and psychological factors such as emotional response to color. Although dreaming in color is outside the scope of this present study, it is only briefly mentioned here to provide the reader with an idea of the difficulty involved in understanding the many variables possibly involved in the responses of seeing or not seeing facial features in dreams, showing the necessity of much additional research.

These findings from this present study on perceiving facial features in dreams have value for dream research in general and beg the question as to why there is such a variation among different dreamers. One recommended area of future research is to focus more on when such facial features

are seen and/or to determine why this occurs. Perhaps it is not too far off to suggest it might be relevant to threatening content in regards to dreams (Revonsuo & Valli, 2000; Valli & Revonsuo, 2009), suggesting that there may at times be a need to recognize threats from strangers, find ideal mating opportunities, and identify important social relations for survival of the human organism that possibly manifest even in dreams. As Abbas and Samson (2023) have pointed out, "Evolutionary theories suggest that dreams function as a world simulator of events that maximizes our ability to surmount social and threat-related challenges critical to survivorship and reproduction."

Another possibility for future research that was outside the scope of this particular study is to analyze dream recall frequency as a variable with dreamer reports of seeing facial features to determine if there is a correlation. In addition, diary studies recording the dream content for seeing faces in dreams would be an excellent approach, minimizing recall bias in which it might be difficult in hindsight with the passing of time for many people to remember whether a face was seen or not. This might help resolve the possible dilemma as to whether people sometimes really do not see facial features or if instead they simply do not remember seeing them. There is also the interesting factor that the occurrence of not seeing facial features also sometimes occurs during perceived OBEs when encountering presumed personages, so additional research in comparing this factor between these two alternate phases of consciousness might be telling as it relates to the brain and its processes.

Data Availability

The data used for this study was limited to the information provided in this research and is included in the above tables.

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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