

# Significance of Dreams among United Arab Emirates University Students

Mohamed O Salem, Mohamed A Ragab & Said Y Abdel Razik

United Arab Emirates University

*Summary.* Dreams are highly considered in Islamic societies because of religious factors. The aim of this study is to examine dream experiences and attitudes in a sample of university students at the United Arab Emirates University. Descriptive cross-sectional epidemiological survey. A questionnaire was randomly distributed among students, and those who consented for the study filled the questionnaire in the academic year 2006 /2007. The sample included 350 student, 135 males and 215 females. About half of the male and the majority of the female students had an experience from themselves or from close relatives related to dreams that come true. Dreams were taken seriously by a substantive group of the study sample. It affected their personal life; changing their daily plans and taking decisions in their social life in response to some dreams. It is recommended that a curriculum of studying dreams from both scientific and religious aspects should be considered in the academic syllabus.

*Keywords:* Dreams; Significance of Dreams; Dream interpretation; University Students; UAE; Islamic Culture

## 1. Introduction

Dreams are highly considered in Islamic societies because of religious factors. Their importance has been emphasized in the Islamic Holy Scriptures (Qur'an and Hadith). Therefore, it might be useful to start with an overview of the main Islamic aspects of dreams. The Hadith is the collection of accounts given by the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and are gathered in Hadith books. In Hadith books these accounts are classified according to categories, and one of these categories is devoted to accounts related to dreams and dreaming. In contrast to the Qur'anic text, the prophetic Hadith is remarkably short. The Qur'an contains 114 chapters of varying length (called also Suras), the longest of which is Surat Al Baqara which is 6,427 words, in about 32 pages, whereas most Hadith come only in a few sentences or very short paragraphs.

Several passages of the Holy Qur'an contain discussions of dreams and dreaming, including description and comments on 7 dreams within 4 Suras. In Hadith, there are around 100 prophetic accounts referring to dreams and dreaming. According to these Islamic teachings, dreams are classified into three subtypes.

- The first group is called Ru'ya; meaning truthful dreams or visions, which are dreams of Divine origin and carry important messages: they are either glad tidings from God, or premonitions. The premonition or the warning dream is a message to the dreamer to warn him/her of some impending threat or danger in the near

future, or to prepare him/her for some bad news.

- The second group is called self-talk, which reflects the dreamer's concerns and preoccupation.
- The third group comprises the bizarre and jumbled dreams that are of no significance.
- According to Islamic teachings, truthful dreams are a human faculty that occur to believers and non-believers alike (Twaijry, 1992).

Tabir is the Muslim science of dream interpretation, that emerged very early in the history of Islam. Some Hadith describe the prophet's interpretations of particular images and symbols in the dreams of his followers, whilst other verses tell of his own dreams and his interpretations of them. Word associations was one of the prophetic advices in interpreting some dreams. From approximately the ninth century AD, Tabir materialized as a dynamic body of knowledge integrating Islamic faith with the classical heritage of the Greeks and Romans. It is interesting to note that Muslims insights and observations have many significant points of contact with the theories developed by Western psychologists over the past 150 years (Bulkeley, 2002).

According to the contemporary views in dreaming, the majority of dreams reflect psychological concerns and preoccupations, and serve other functions including mood regulation (Hartmann, 1996) and problem solving (Cartwright, 2008). However, modern dream research acknowledges that some category of dreams could also have some prophetic functions (Garwell, 1996; Hastings, 1977; Kahn, 2007).

One of the remarkable advances in modern dream research is the comprehensive Hall/Van de Castle System of Quantitative Dream Content Analysis (1966), and its update by Domhoff (1996). One of their interesting findings is the gender differences in the dream reports: men's dreams are dominated by male dream characters and contain more sexuality and physical aggression while women dream of males and females in equal proportions and show more aggression directed inwardly, themes of depression and seek help for coping with a problem are also more often

Corresponding address:

Dr. Mohamed Omar Salem, Department of Psychiatry,  
Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences, United Arab Emirates  
University, PO Box 17666, Al Ain, UAE  
Email: atf@alum.mit.edu

Submitted for publication: July 2008

Accepted for publication: September 2008

in women's dreams. Another finding was that the content of everyday dreams reflects the dreamer's waking states and concerns, which is known as the continuity hypothesis (Domhoff & Hall, 1996).

These gender differences in the various dream experiences have been confirmed in a number of recent studies. Dream recall in particular is actually one of the most studied variables in gender differences. Among these gender differences is the dream recall frequency; women appear to report dreams more often than men (Schredl, 2000a; Schredl & Piel, 2003). This gender differences were also demonstrated in a recent study by Schredl & Piel (2008) where it was found that women have more interest in dream interpretation than men. Interest in dream interpretation was considered as an indicator of interest in dreams in general. High recall of dreams can stimulate the interest in dreams, for example, by the occurrence of problem-solving dreams or other dreams arousing the curiosity of the dreamer (Schredl & Piel, 2008).

Do gender differences in dreams reflect gender differences in waking life? To answer this question Schredl et al. (1998) conducted a study, supplemented with meta-analysis comparisons. In this study, the gender differences reported by Hall/Van de Castle (mentioned before) were confirmed, and one of the interesting findings in this study was that women also report more positive emotions than men. To explain these gender differences in dreams, the Authors considered the continuity hypothesis of dreaming which posits that dreams are reflecting waking life. They postulated that, gender differences in dreams may be explained by gender differences in waking life, as aggression of males is present in most societies and women experience more depressive symptoms with a tendency to internalise her emotions, which can be considered as aggression directed inwardly and in dream content a similar pattern was found. These matching between differences in dreams and similar differences in waking life would support the continuity hypothesis.

Not only waking experiences can affect the content of dreams (continuity hypothesis), but also it was demonstrated that dreams can affect waking life in several ways, including the morning mood. Schredl and Doll (1998) found that negative dream emotions affect morning mood to a larger extent than positive dream emotions. To study the effect of dreams on waking life, Schredl (2000b) measured the dream effects on waking life by items including: something in the day reminds of your dream, déjà vu experiences, dreams that change the way of life, dreams that remind of the past, dreams that make sensitive to previously ignored aspects of reality, dreams that influence daytime mood, pre-cognitive dreams, seeking contact to a person dreamed of, dreams of a deceased person, dreams that help to solve a personal problem, dreams that give an artistic idea, dreams that trigger an action in waking life and talking about dreams. The most frequent type of effect was the influence on daytime mood and the items of spontaneous reminiscence. All items, except for the item 'dreams of a deceased person' correlated substantially with dream recall frequency. In this study, the gender differences found were almost completely explained by the difference in dream recall frequency.

Several dream studies on university students in other countries have already been conducted. Nielsen et al. (2003) examined the typical dreams of 1,348 Canadian university students and found the five most prevalent dream

themes for females: (1) being chased; (2) sexual experience; (3) falling; (4) school, teachers, studying; and (5) arriving late. For males, the five most prevalent dream themes were (1) sexual experiences; (2) being chased; (3) falling; (4) school, teachers, studying; and (5) arriving late.

In another study, Schredl, et al (2003) used content analysis with German students' dreams in order to examine dream characteristics. The authors found gender differences, such as men dreaming more about sex. Their findings also supported the continuity hypothesis of dreaming; since there was a direct relationship between waking life pattern of social contacts and the gender representation of dream characters. These findings were consistent with another study for dreams of female university students in Canada, using dream content analysis (DeCicco, 2007). Being chased, sexual experiences, falling, school, and arriving late were all found in the dreams of the last study. The only difference was that the frequency of sexual content was less in the dreams of this sample compared with the previous studies. No religious content was reported in all these studies

The aim of this work is to study the significance of dream experiences in a sample of United Arab Emirates University students, which is the only Governmental University in the United Arab Emirates. As this population is exclusively Muslim committed society; it is expected that people in this society (including university students) pay special attention to their dreams. Additionally, the study aims to study the students' attitudes towards their dreams; how they affect their personal lives; and how far is their decision-making influenced by them. Finally, to see if there was any gender differences in the results.

## 2. Method

This study was a descriptive cross-sectional epidemiological survey in the academic year 2006 /2007. The sample included 350 student, 135 males and 215 females, all from the Arabian Gulf region. The mean age of the sample was 21.4 years, and the majority were single (75.7%). A questionnaire detailing the needed information has been developed by the authors as the study instrument. A pilot analysis was undertaken on 20 students and then it was revised. We found the final form of the questionnaire useful and easy to apply without leaving too many ambiguities.

The questionnaire consists of socio-demographic items (age, gender and nationality) and items eliciting the effect of dreams on the different aspects of students' lives, using Yes/No-scale. One item inquired about the relation between dreams and waking life experiences in the recent past (continuation themes). Two items inquired about the effect of dreams on emotional life and whether there have been any changes in daily plans in response to a particular dream. One item inquired about decisions taken in social life in response to certain dreams. One item inquired about experiences with dreams that come true, and another item inquired about nightmares and repeated dreams with negative emotions. One item inquired about dreams with religious significance. In the last item and in others there was an option for the students to give more details or examples of dreams. The last item inquired about the interest of students in dream interpretation, and for those giving 'yes' answer, further 3 items using Yes/No-scale were used asking about their most preferred method for dream interpretation: personal effort / with the help of a book / or through consulting an expert.

This questionnaire was randomly distributed among the United Arab Emirates University students, and those who consented to the study filled the questionnaire.

The statistical analysis was done using SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, version 15.0) for Windows. Chi-squared test was used to assess the correlates for comparisons related to the variable of gender. The level  $P < 0.05$  was considered the cut-off value for statistical significance.

### 3. Results

The sample included 350 student, 135 males and 215 females. There were marked gender differences (some of which were statistically significant) in many aspects of the results.

#### 3.1. Continuation themes

67% of males and 79% of female students noticed a relation between their dreams and daily life events related to the recent past (the day or few days before the dream).

#### 3.2. Impact on emotional life/changes in daily plans

31% of male and 56% of female students ( $p < 0.001$ ) reported some dreams that made them worried or distressed as they thought that it could be warning of some impending danger or threat to themselves or their relatives. Indeed 16% of male and 25% of female students changed some daily plans in response to such dreams. Examples of these changes included cancellation of some travel plans, changing the means of transportation, or going to certain places.

#### 3.3. Impact on decision making

25% of male and 26% of female students made decisions in their social life in response to some dreams. Such decisions included important personal matters like marriage, buying an expensive product and other financial affairs.

#### 3.4. Dreams that come true

56% of the male and 72% of the female students ( $p < 0.003$ ) either had a personal experience or had close relatives who reported dreams that had come true.

#### 3.5. Religious themes

30% of male and 41% of female students ( $P < 0.034$ ) had dreams with religious themes. Such religious content included hearing certain verses of the Qur'an with some references to their personal affairs, or hinting to some options to their problems. Other reported religious themes included: angles, Jinn, Lailatu Al-Kader (One Valued Night in the month of Ramadan), and the afterlife.

*According to the Islamic teaching the main difference between angles and Jinn is that, Jinn are charged beings like humans, with believers and non believers. Jinn are charged invisible beings that were created before man. Iblis (Satan) is one of these creatures, and his animosity to humankind started when he refused to obey God and bow to the first created man (Adam). Iblis felt that he is superior to Man because he was created from fire but Adam is created from earthy components. When he was cursed for this, he asked God to permit him to live till the*

*Last Day. Allowed with that, he promised that he will make all ways for Adam and his children to be disobedient to God. Iblis with his Jinn followers are called Satans.*

#### 3.6. Nightmares

64% male and 70% female students reported getting some nightmares or recurring dreams with negative emotions on occasional basis.

#### 3.7. Interpretation of dreams

In relation to the interest in getting an interpretation to their dreams, 66% of female and 39% of male students ( $p < 0.001$ ) reported that they were keen to get an interpretation of their dreams regularly. Their means for this purpose was variable, including personal reflection (44% males and 38% females), with the help of a specialized book (47% males and 56% females) and consulting a scholar or any community figure who has a reputation for his/her ability to interpret dreams (35% males and 28% females).

### 4. Discussion

The importance of this study is that it is the first of its kind in this area of the world. Some results of our study seem to be consistent with the published studies in this subject area in many aspects. Several themes of dreams were related to the events of the previous day or few days before the dream, and reflected daily life preoccupations. This finding is consistent with the Continuity Hypothesis, and is in agreement with the studies of Schredl (2003) and Schredl, et al (2003). However, the dream themes in our study did include religious contents which was lacking in the other studies. This possibly reflects the cultural and religious impacts on dreams. Also, some gender differences were noticed in our study. Female students were keener than males to seek interpretation for their dreams, had more dreams with religious content and reported more precognitive dreams. This could be in part due to the observation that female students experience more precognitive dreams than males. This latter finding is consistent with other previous studies which indicated that females report more precognitive dreams than males (Hearne, 1984; Ryback et al, 1993).

Also, the emotional impact of some dreams was more on female students than in males, which is consistent with the findings of Schredl and Doll (1998).

In our study, dreams were taken seriously by a substantive number of students. It affected their personal life in several ways, ranging from changing their daily plans to the extent of making some decisions in their social life in response to some dreams. This impact of dreams on individual life has its roots from the cultural and religious background of the society. United Arab Emirates is one of the Gulf countries, and shares with the other Arab countries several cultural and religious grounds including the religion of Islam. According to Islamic teachings, some truthful dreams could have a revelatory value; hence, many students were keen to get some interpretation for their dreams. The effect of dreams on waking life has also been demonstrated by the study of Pagel and Vann (1992), who indicated that dreams affect waking behavior in their sample in several ways. In around 19% dreams affected decisions and in about 33% dreams affected waking life in general, women reported dream effects more often than men.

One of the gender differences in our study was that female students were more keen to get their dreams interpreted than males. This is consistent with the findings of the study of Schredl & Piel (2008) where it was found that women have more interest in dream interpretation than men.

As many of these dreams come in a symbolic form, students sought help for dream interpretation from a variety of sources including books. Perhaps the most famous of such books is that of Ibn Sirin. Ibn Sirin's name was reverently attached to dream interpretation manuals for many centuries after his death in 728 AD. Ibn Sirin's interpretive strategy relied heavily on people's intimate familiarity with the language, characters, and themes of the Qur'an. Perhaps of most interest to contemporary dream researchers is Ibn Sirin explicitly teaches that a given dream's meaning cannot be determined without reference to the personality characteristics of the dreamer. He considered that knowledge of the personality and life circumstances of the dreamer is essential to understand the meaning of dream symbols (Najaty, 1993).

So, it seems that the basic references to dreams and dreaming found in the Qur'an and Hadith are still influential in the modern Muslim world, reflecting the idea that Muslims generally regard dreaming highly. Hoffman's work (1997) on the role of visions on Egyptian university students and other contemporary Muslims indicates that for present-day Muslims religiously revelatory dreams are a widespread phenomenon. The material gathered by Hoffman offers striking evidence that dreams continue to play an important part in the religious lives of present-day, "modernized" Muslims. According to Hoffman, dreams provide Muslims with direct experiential confirmation for their faith, connecting them with divine powers and realities and reassuring them of the living presence of God in their lives.

However, relying on dreams could be problematic because it affects the decision making process. Dream interpretation is a presumptive exercise and many dreams can have different meanings to different people. For this reason it could be necessary to have an acceptable academic frame of reference for such a vital area of psychological and social life.

This provisional study demonstrates the powerful influence of religious faith and cultural history on people's dream experiences. Future research is recommended for more detailed dream content analysis; which could help offering better trans-cultural comparisons and understanding.

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