

# Dreaming about dreaming: Analysis of a long dream series

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*Summary.* The present study analyzed the frequency of “dreaming about dreaming” in a long dream series (N = 10,148 dreams) reported by a single participant. Overall, about 1.5% of the dreams of the series included references such as recording/telling a dream, recalling a dream, listening to a dream, a person dreams about the dreamer, dreams within the dream, dream interpretation within the dream, and talking about dreams in general. As the dreamer was engaged in these activities, the findings are in line with the continuity hypothesis. It would be very interesting to follow up this study by expanding it to larger samples, especially to other diligent dream journalists.

*Keywords:* Dream series, dreaming about dreaming, continuity hypothesis

## 1. Introduction

The continuity hypothesis of dreaming in its general form states that waking-life topics are reflected in dreams (Schredl, 2003). There is an ongoing discussion as to what aspects of waking life, e.g., experiences, concerns, thoughts, etc. are continuous with dreaming (Schredl, 2012). One line of research has shown that the time spent with certain kinds of waking activities like sports, reading, and music are directly related to the percentage of dreams that include the corresponding theme (Kern et al., 2014; Schredl & Erlacher, 2008; Schredl & Hofmann, 2003). It is also very interesting that the experience of participating in a sleep laboratory study with REM awakenings strongly affect dream content: About 20% of the dreams (N = 2464 dreams from various studies) included a direct reference to the laboratory setting, the electrodes or the experimenter (Schredl, 2008). Participating in a dream diary study affected dream content much less, only 0.8% of N = 264 diary dream included a reference to the experiment (Hall, 1967).

Talking about dreams (sharing dreams or listening to dreams of other persons) is a relatively frequent waking life activity (Bachner, Raffetseder, Walz, & Schredl, 2012; Olsen, Schredl, & Carlsson, 2013; Schredl, Berres, Klingauf, Schellhaas, & Göritz, 2014; Schredl, Buscher, Haaß, Scheuermann, & Uhrig, 2013; Schredl & Schawinski, 2010). In the study of Schredl et al. (2014), for example, about 80% of the sample (N = 2929) reported that they share dreams and about 10% of the sample did this once a week or more often. Even though dream recording is relatively rare in the general population (less than 20% of the respondents recorded at least one dream during their life time; Schredl et

al., 2014), there are dream journalists like Barb Sanders who have recorded a considerable number of dreams over the years (Domhoff, 2003). Based on the continuity hypothesis, one would expect that people who share dreams and/or record their dreams would dream about these activities. Two case reports of patients in psychoanalytic treatment included “dreams within dreams”, i.e., the first dreamer is telling a dream within a group therapy setting (Silber, 1983) and the second patient reported that she recounted a dream to her parents (Lipschitz, 1990). In psychoanalytic terms this phenomenon might be a special defense effort to increase the emotional distance between the events of the dream within the dream (Silber, 1983). To the knowledge of the author, however, there is no systematic research as to how frequent these dream-related activities are in dreams. The ‘dream within a dream’ expression was also used in the study of Krippner and Faith (2001) who analyzed 1666 dream reports from 6 different countries (USA, Brazil, Argentina, Japan, Ukraine, and Russia). Their definition focused on experiencing different states of consciousness with the dream or waking up within the dream only to learn that the dream is still going on (false awakening). The frequency of this dreams within dreams was very low – below 1% (Krippner & Faith, 2001). False awakenings are quite common in lucid dreamers (Buzzi, 2011); however the present study did not include this specific.

The prediction of the present study is that dreams of a person who regularly records his dreams and talks about dreams with others would dream about these dream-related activities.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participant and dream diary

The male participant kept an unstructured dream diary from the age of 22, beginning in September, 1984 through December 2011. For the present analysis, all 10,148 dreams from that period were included. The mean dream length was  $131.0 \pm 83.4$  words. During the recording period the dreamer attended several dream workshops and participated in two dream sharing groups.

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## 2.2. Participant and procedure

The dream reports were typed and entered into a database, Alchera 3.72, created by Harry Bosma ([www.mythwell.com](http://www.mythwell.com)). This database allows assigning key words to the dreams, a task carried out by the dreamer himself. Each dream was rated by the dreamer himself for the occurrence of dream-related activities like recording/telling a dream, recalling a dream, listening to a dream, a person dreams about the dreamer, dream interpretation within the dream, and talking about dreams in general. The dream examples given in the result section will illustrate what kinds of topics have been coded. For dream sharing and dream listening, the respondents or the person telling the dream was coded according to his/her relationship to the dreamer.

The Alchera software also provides a word count for each dream report. The analysis unit was a single dream report. The data were exported into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft) and data analysis was carried out using the SAS 9.4 software package for Windows.

## 3. Results

Overall, 1.75% of the dreams included some reference to dreaming. The distribution for each year is depicted in Figure 2. Even though there is some variation in the percentage of dream-related dreams over the years, there seems no clear-cut factor affecting the fluctuation, i.e., in years with a lot of dream recording the dream-related dreams were not more frequent. The frequency of the different topics is shown in Table 1. Recording and telling a dream was the most frequent topic, but also recalling a dream within the dream, listening to dreams of others, talking about dreams in general, and doing dream interpretation in the dreams were found in this dream series. In only one occurrence did the dreamer dream that another person told him in the dream that he has dreamed about him. In order to illustrate the findings, the following paragraphs present dream examples of the topics presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Topic “Dreaming about dreaming” in the dream series (N = 10,148)

Topic	Dreams	Percent
Recording/telling a dream	57	0.56%
Recalling a dream	29	0.29%
Listening to a dream	32	0.32%
A person dreams about the dreamer	1	0.01%
Dreams within the dream	24	0.24%
Dream interpretation	30	0.30%
Talking about dreams in general	35	0.34%

### 3.1. Recording/Telling a dream

The analysis indicated that 26 dreams included dream recording and in 31 dreams the dream ego was telling a dream to another person. Those were categorized as: strangers (N = 8), acquaintances (N = 6), dream group members (N = 4), romantic partner (N = 4), family (N = 4), friends (N = 3), and therapist (N = 2).

Dream example (recording): At the end of a longer dream, the dreamer is talking to a woman. “Suddenly, it comes to my mind that I want to record a dream (previous dream of the same night) and fetch my dream diary. I do not want to interrupt the conversation. Somebody told me that the dreams of the last night are recorded in chaotic order in the dream diary.”

Dream example (telling): “... I am leaving home in order to visit my girlfriend. It is dark and it is not very far away. I am sitting on a motor cycle or bike. I want to tell her a dream that I had recently. Within this dream I was naked and felt bloody good. Now I am also naked and somewhat alarmed even though it is dark and no one takes notice of me....”

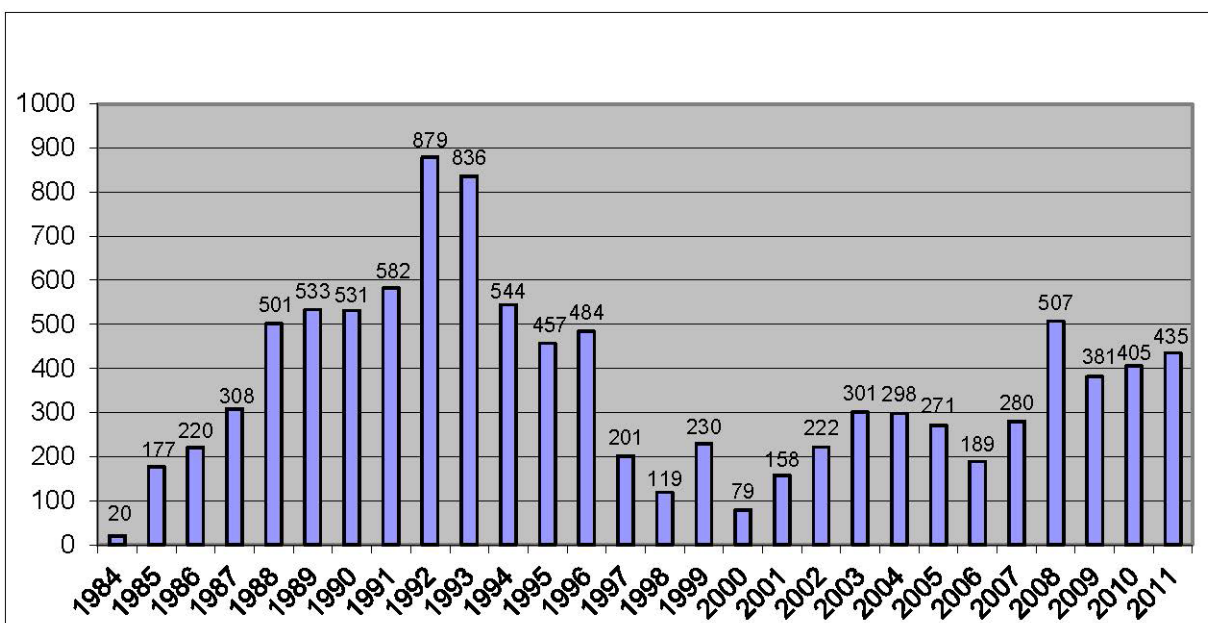


Figure 1. Number of dreams per year

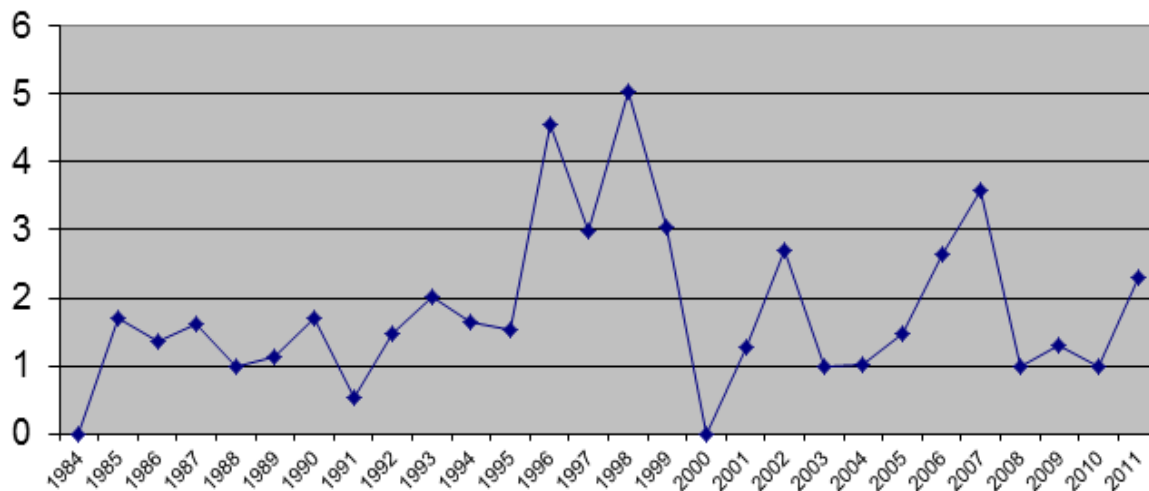


Figure 2. Percentage of dreams with dreaming as topic

### 3.2. Recalling a dream

This topic includes dreams in which the dream ego recalls a dream, not necessarily a dream that had been recalled in waking life.

Dream example: "I reverse out of a parking space. It is very narrow, the areaway and the street, too. In addition, I am driving much too fast and try to talk to myself to reduce speed. I know from other dreams that I have problems applying the brakes in order to slow down the car. This time I manage without scratching the car, although it is very narrow."

### 3.3. Listening to a dream

In dreams in which the dreamer is listening to dreams of other persons, dreams were told by strangers (N = 10), dream group members (N = 8), colleagues (N = 5), friends (N = 5), acquaintances (N = 3), and family (N = 3).

Dream example: "A close friend tells me that she dreamed we slept together and that in this night a war begun that also affected Germany. I also have dreamed of war..."

### 3.4. A person dreams about the dreamer

In the long dream series there was only one example in which someone else recounted a dream about the dreamer, a second-order dream-related dream: "Meeting in the workplace. My boss recounts that he had a dream about me, within a positive context. This incident is beneficial for my position in the work unit..."

### 3.5. Dreams within the dream

This category was included in the present study because it might reflect the thinking about dreams in the waking state. One dream was as follows: "My girlfriend and I are sitting on the sidewalk. As we are talking a young women is stepping over us because she does not want to walk on the street. For us, this is the sign to return home. I go ahead, around a building, then on a railway bridge. I wait for my girlfriend.... As we arrived at home, it becomes clear that our excursion was not real but a mutual dream..."

### 3.6. Dream interpretation

As the dreamer attended dream workshops and learned about interpreting and working with dreams, it was expected that this waking activity also showed up in his dreams. The following two dreams illustrate the act of dream interpretation within a dream.

Dream example: "I am walking the school ground and enter my old school using the entrance in the rear part of the building. I see two or three old school mates, but I am aware that it was a long time ago when I went to school. I also hear voices of some teachers (not so popular ones). A Xerox machine is in the back of the art classroom. I am astonished because in every other classroom there is a teacher. I am thinking about the meaning of the photocopying machine and become aware that this is a dream. Of course, the machine represents my being very uncreative in art classes at school..."

Dream example: "I am at some kind of gas station. Many people are around, a lot of things are happening. The persons are familiar. After some action has occurred, the dream is re-winding to the same starting position but this time a huge tank is exploding. Everyone is running around like crazy. I think that the danger itself is not that serious. I also think that the dream should demonstrate that similar situations can develop in completely different directions, depending on external influencing factors."

### 3.7. Talking about dreams in general

This category included dreams in which not a particular dream was told but the dreamer was talking with others about more general aspects of dreaming.

Dream example: "I am in a huge park. The weather is fine. Shortly, some kind of dream train will pass that supplies terrific dreams with important meanings. I talk about that with someone. This time it should be one-word dreams. I am somewhat agitated because I want desperately to dream but there is a slim chance of failure, if I don't fall asleep..."

#### 4. Discussion

The present findings indicate that dream-related waking-life activities like talking about dreams, listening to dreams, thinking about meanings are also reflected in dreams. In contrast to studies about dream sharing in waking life (Olsen et al., 2013), within the dream the dreamer shared his dreams quite often with strangers and not very close persons; in waking life, dreams are most often shared with romantic partners, friends and family. This might reflect the dreamers attending dream seminars and dream groups in which dreams were shared with strangers.

As this is the first study looking at frequencies of dream-related topic in dreams and its limitation of analyzing the dreams of one dreamer, it would be very interesting to study this topic in larger samples of the general population, and especially in diligent dream journalists. In order to do quantitative analysis, the amount of dream-related waking activity like time spent with recording dreams per day, frequency of dream sharing, and the amount of time spent with dream interpretation should be elicited. Detailed information about time periods with more intense dream-related activities during waking was not available for the dreamer of this series, e.g., periods with more or less activities might be reflected in the fluctuation of the percentage of dreams with dream-related activities. Studying dream-related activities in dreams will add to knowledge about how waking life (e.g., what kinds of waking-life activities) is reflected in dreams.

Another interesting line of research could address the question whether these recalled dreams of the dreamer where actual dreams the dreamer had previously in the same night or even older dreams. Paul Tholey included remembering previous dreams, especially lucid dreams in his definition of "Klartraum" (Tholey & Utecht, 1987) but the present study did not check whether recounted or recalled dreams have been "real" dreams. This cross-check with previous dreams would be especially interesting in long-term journalists whether the remembered dreams are "confabulation" or previously dreamed dreams.

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