

Dreams of the deceased: Can themes be reliably coded?

Joshua Black¹, Teresa DeCicco², Corrine Seeley³, Anthony Murkar⁴,
Jade Black⁵, & Patrick Fox²

¹Brock University, ²Trent University, ³Queen's University, ⁴University of Ottawa, ⁵University of Ontario Institute of Technology

Summary. The main goal of the current study was to determine the reliability of Garfield's (1996) dream themes of the deceased in a larger sample of dream data. A total of 76 dreams were collected and scored by two judges to determine inter-rater reliability. It was found that Garfield's (1996) dream themes as a whole were not reliable. However, based on her previous work and others, eight new dream themes of the deceased were developed. It was found that these themes had acceptable inter-rater reliability. This research is a necessary step forward in dreams in bereavement research.

Keywords: Dream themes, grief, bereavement, dreams of the deceased

1. Introduction

When investigating research that has been done in the area of dreams in bereavement, there is limited research on exploring dreams of the deceased. In samples of the bereaved, around 50-80% report dreaming at least once about the deceased (Klugman, 2006; Silverman & Nickman, 1996; Wright, Kerr, Doroszczuk, Kuszczak, Hang, & Luczkiewicz, 2013). Dreams of the deceased can be a source of comfort, as well as discomfort, through the grief process (Black, 2014; Garfield, 1996, 1997; Ryan, 2006; Wright et al., 2013). Additionally, there have been common dream themes that have been identified when the deceased is present in the dream. There is great range in the number of common dream themes reported in the literature; Garfield (1996) formed 11, whereas Barrett (1991-1992) formed four and Hinton et al. (2013) formed three (with subthemes for each). Furthermore, theme definitions are widely variable as well, despite housing similar dream content (e.g., the deceased communicating a message of comfort). Additionally, it is regularly found that many dreams of the deceased are not mutually exclusive and fit into several themes (Garfield, 1996). Despite this, Hinton et al. (2013) did not report if the dreams that they coded were mutually exclusive or not. These inconsistencies often result in difficulty replicating findings, and hinder the accuracy and generalizability of the literature.

Beyond the differences in common themes reported by researchers, many categories have not been correctly tested for inter-rater reliability. For example, the research by Barrett (1991-1992), Domhoff (2015), and Garfield (1996) do not state any comments on inter-rater reliability. The research by Hinton et al. (2013) gives some details surround-

ing the inter-rater reliability. Hinton et al. (2013) reports an overall agreement rate of 96% (6 dreams not in agreement), but does not report the reliability of each dream theme. This is needed as all discrepancies could have come from one theme, which would make that theme unreliable (for example, the Daily Pot Pot theme only had three dreams). There have been two studies that investigated inter-rater reliability amongst dream themes for some of the dream themes reported above (Belicki et al., 2003; Black, Murkar, & Black, 2014). Belicki et al. (2003) investigated the reliability of the dream themes of Garfield's (1996) and Barrett's (1991-1992) within a widower's 16 year dream diary (106 dreams). They determined that many dream themes could not be reliably scored between at least two judges. In 2014, Black et al. investigated Garfield's (1996) dream themes in a two and a half year dream diary of a woman who lost her father. They found high inter-rater reliability between the two judges for Garfield's (1996) dream themes. Reasons for this may have been due to the fact that there were only three of the 11 dream themes present, the individual's grief was not complicated (which may have made the dreams easier to code), and there were only nine dreams in total (whereas Belicki et al. had 106 dreams to code). Overall, the reliability of Garfield's (1996) dream categories remains inconclusive. The main goal of the current study is to determine the reliability of Garfield's (1996) dream themes in a larger sample of dream data.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 76 bereaved participants (63 female) completed the study. The sample mean age was 51.09 (SD = 15.00) with four participants not reporting their age. Participants had an ethnicity of 93.4% Caucasian, 2.6% African American, 1.3% South Asian, 1.3% Hispanic, and 1.3% Other. Religious affiliation was 72.4% Christian, 19.7% None, 1.3% Buddhism, 1.3% Hindu, and 5.3% Other. Highest level of education achieved was 11.8% high school, 27.6% College, 27.6% University, 30.3% Post Graduate, and 2.6% Other.

Corresponding address:

Joshua Black (PhD Student), Brock University, 1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, L2S 3A1
Email: Josh.black2@brocku.ca

Submitted for publication: February 2016

Accepted for publication: October 2016

2.2. Materials

Demographics. The demographics sheet included information about the participants' age, gender, education, and dreaming behaviour and attitudes about dreams of the deceased.

Most memorable dream. This sheet asked for the participant's most memorable dream that had the deceased loved one as a character and to explain why it was memorable.

Dream themes. The 11 dream themes by Garfield (1996) to be analyzed were: 1) Alive-Again, 2) Dying-Again, 3) Saying-Goodbye, 4) Taking-a-Journey, 5) Approval-Disapproval, 6) Telephone-Call, 7) Young-Well-Again, 8) Advice-Comfort-Gift, 9) Passionate-Encounter, 10) Deadly-Invitation, and 11) Daily-Activity (see Table 1). These dream themes were not all mutually exclusive, as one dream may have several dream themes present.

2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited through poster advertisements at several bereavement organizations. All forms, including the consent form, were filled out electronically through email communication and participants were given an anonymous code for confidentiality purposes. A debriefing form was sent to participants after the entire study was complete. Once the dreams were collected, all the dreams were placed in a word document for judges to score. Only dream scenes where the deceased was present were scored. Two judges (third and fourth author) were given a theme definition sheet that described each of Garfield's (1996) dream themes. It was stated that Garfield's (1996) dreams were not mutually exclusive and both judges scored the dreams independently. Since the dream themes were not mutually exclusive, the inter-rater agreement method was used as it seemed most appropriate. The method was used for each dream overall. All themes needed to be identical in each dream among both judges for agreement to be coded as the same.

3. Results - First Part

When investigating dream attitudes it was found that 67.1% stated that dreams of the deceased helped them believe more in an afterlife, 68.4% stated that some of the dreams of the deceased were visitations, and 70.9% stated dreams of the deceased helped them feel more connected with the deceased. Additionally, it was found that Garfield's (1996) dream themes had a reliability of 48.7% (37 out of 76 dreams had all the same themes scored), which was very low and unacceptable as Multon (2010) states at least 70% is needed. This low level of reliability supports the findings of Belicki et al. (2003). The most likely cause for the poor reliability is that the definitions of the themes are not well-defined enough. This can confuse coders when the themes themselves are closely related to each other (e.g., Advice-Comfort-Gift and Passionate-Encounter).

4. Further Analysis

After close inspection of the dreams it appears that the 11 categories of Garfield's themes were not well-defined enough for the judges. In order to develop clear and concise dream theme definitions, the first author reviewed previous studies conducted by Barrett (1991-1992), Belicki et al. (2003), Domhoff (2015), Garfield (1996), and Hinton et al. (2013) and the dreams collected in this study. The first

Table 1. Garfield's (1996) Dream Themes of the Deceased

| Theme | Definitions |
|----------------------------|---|
| Alive Again Dream | The deceased appears alive and the dreamer is surprised to see them alive. The death is commonly explained away as a mistake. During the dream, the survivor may or may not realize that the person is actually dead. |
| Dying Again Dream | The deceased is once more suffering the symptoms that caused death, either as they were in actuality, greatly exaggerated, or profoundly distorted. |
| Saying Goodbye Dream | The deceased appears and takes leave of the survivor. This category of dream often includes physical contact, the exchange of loving feelings, and an affectionate goodbye. |
| Taking-a-Journey Dream | The deceased is taking a trip on a train, bus, airplane, or ship. Travel by car usually falls into the category of daily-activity dreams, unless the trip aspect is emphasized. Occasionally it is the survivor who is setting out on a journey. |
| Approval-Disapproval Dream | The deceased is depicted as severely criticizing the survivor. In contrasting form, the deceased is appears to strongly approve of the survivor. |
| Telephone-Call Dream | The deceased telephones the survivor or is already speaking to him or her on the phone. The survivor may also telephone the deceased. |
| Young-Well-Again Dream | The deceased appears in an image that reflects the way he or she looked or acted when young or healthy. Clothing is often described as flowing, hair shining, and face radiant. Infirmities caused by illness or injury have vanished. |
| Advice-Comfort-Gift Dream | The survivor receives a message from the deceased, one of comfort, such as, "don't worry, I'm fine" or advice, such as not to sell the house, or a "gift" such as an inheritance, a message about where to find something that has been hidden, and so forth. Rarely, the survivor offers advice, comfort, or gifts to the deceased. This category of dream often has a high emotional charge and is described as exceptionally vivid or "real". These dreams can have the intensity of a visitation. |
| Passionate-Encounter Dream | The survivor dreams of a romantic or passionate encounter with the deceased, who is usually a former spouse or lover. |
| Deadly-Invitation Dream | The deceased appears to reach out and draw the survivor toward death. |
| Daily-Activity Dream | The deceased is seen performing his or her routine activities, such as shopping, fishing, driving a car, or cooking. There is no unusual emotional charge, but a pleasant feeling may prevail. The deceased may simply be present. |

and sixth author discussed and formed new definitions. Then the first and third author coded the different dreams independently (with the new definitions) and discussed any issues with the definitions before the definitions were finalized. Eight common dream themes are suggested: 1) Rationalization, 2) Dead, Dying, or Ill, 3) Discomfort, 4) Comfort, 5) Healthy and Happy 6) Help-Crossing-Over, 7) Separation, and 8) Other (see Table 2). The first seven dream themes are not mutually exclusive. The last theme "Other" is mutually exclusive as it is for dreams that have not been coded for any of the seven themes. It was noted on the definition sheet that the deceased is usually physically present in the dream, but they may sometimes use a device to speak to the dreamer. A device may be a telephone, cellphone, computer, or another person (such as a medium).

Rationalization was chosen as a theme because it encompasses Garfield's (1996) Alive-Again and Barrett's (1991-1992) Back-to-Life themes. Both themes have the deceased rationalizing to the dreamer why they are there.

Also, this theme relates to Belicki et al. (2003) theme of Knows Deceased Is Dead. The definition for “Rationalization” is the dreamer may look for and/or receive rationalization from the deceased on how they are alive. The deceased may help the dreamer understand and comment on why they are alive (e.g., the death is explained as a mistake or they have come back), with or without the dreamer asking. Additionally, the dreamer may not receive a rationalization from the deceased when asked (e.g., no answer is given), or the dreamer tells the deceased to go away because they are dead (cannot rationalize their appearance).

Dead, Dying, or Ill was chosen as it expands Garfield’s (1996) Dying-Again definition to include them being either ill or dead the entire dream, in addition to them dying again. It also was expanded to encompass Hinton et al. (2013) theme of Trauma-reliving dreams, Domhoff’s (2015) Illness and Death themes, and Belicki et al. (2003) theme of Re-enactment. Therefore, the definition for “Dead, Dying, or Ill” is the deceased may be dead in the dream, may die in the dream, or may be suffering from physical symptoms in the dream. Sometimes, the deceased is not seen suffering, but the dreamer may have a feeling that the deceased is ill and needs help.

Discomfort was chosen as it separates Garfield’s (1996) Approval-Disapproval theme and expands on it. The definition for “Discomfort” is the deceased performs actions or words of discomfort. Actions of discomfort could include physical attempts to harm or gestures of disapproval. Words of discomfort could include criticism, demands, or disapproval.

Comfort was chosen as it collapses the different categories of Garfield’s (1996)

Saying-Goodbye, Advice-Comfort-Gift, Passionate-Encounter, and separates the Approval from Approval-Disapproval theme. Additionally, this category relates to Barrett’s (1991-1992) Advice, State-of-Death, and Leave-Taking themes, Domhoff’s (2015) Reassurance theme, and Dreams with Sexuality, Belicki et al.’s (2003) Reunion and Reminiscence themes, as well as Hinton et al. (2013) theme of Simple Visitation. The definition for “Comfort” is the deceased performs actions or words of comfort. Actions of comfort could include a wave, hug, or kiss. Words of comfort could include telling them they are OK, they love them, forgive them, give their approval, or are happy.

Healthy and Happy was chosen based on Garfield’s (1996) Young-Well-Again theme and expands on it. The deceased appearing younger was removed because the deceased have been shown to increase in age in dreams (e.g., a deceased child ages as he would have in waking life). The definition for “Healthy and Happy” is the dreamer comments on the well-being of the deceased or implies it through the deceased actions (e.g., smiling or laughing). The dreamer may describe the deceased as being healthy (e.g., infirmities caused by illness or injury having disappeared or can perform actions not able to when ill) and/or happy (e.g., smiling or laughing). It is possible for the deceased to look younger or older than they did when they passed, but this does not imply health. The deceased commenting that they are OK or happy does not justify this category; that would be comfort.

Separation was chosen based on Garfield’s (1996) Taking-A-Journey theme and Belicki et al.’s (2003) Separation, and Moving On theme. Both themes have the common element of separation in that the dreamer and deceased are

Table 2. Garfield’s Revised Themes of Dreams of the Deceased

| Theme | Definitions |
|---------------------|--|
| Rationalization | The dreamer may look for and/or receive rationalization from the deceased on how they are alive. The deceased may help the dreamer understand and comment on why they are alive (e.g., the death is explained as a mistake or they have come back), with or without the dreamer asking. Additionally, the dreamer may not receive a rationalization from the deceased when asked (e.g., no answer is given), or the dreamer tells the deceased to go away because they are dead (cannot rationalize their appearance). |
| Dead, Dying, or ill | The deceased may be dead in the dream, may die in the dream, or may be suffering from physical symptoms in the dream. Sometimes, the deceased is not seen suffering, but the dreamer may have a feeling that the deceased is ill and needs help. |
| Discomfort | The deceased performs actions or words of discomfort. Actions of discomfort could include physical attempts to harm or gestures of disapproval. Words of discomfort could include criticism, demands, or disapproval. |
| Comfort | The deceased performs actions or words of comfort. Actions of comfort could include a wave, hug, or kiss. Words of comfort could include telling them they are OK, they love them, forgive them, give their approval, or are happy. |
| Healthy and Happy | The dreamer comments on the well-being of the deceased or implies it through the deceased actions (e.g., smiling or laughing). The dreamer may describe the deceased as being healthy (e.g., infirmities caused by illness or injury having disappeared or can perform actions not able to when ill) and/or happy (e.g., smiling or laughing). It is possible for the deceased to look younger or older than they did when they passed, but this does not imply health. The deceased commenting that they are OK or happy does not justify this category; that would be comfort. |
| Separation | The dreamer and the deceased are separated or get separated in the dream. Separation may be due to an obstacle (e.g., fence) between them, or the deceased themselves not wanting them to be close (e.g., dreamer is not allowed). Additionally, they could also separate from each other by leaving or disappearing (either slowly or suddenly). It may also be that separation was discussed (e.g., I have to go), but the action was not fully carried out yet. |
| Help-Crossing-Over | The dreamer provides actions (e.g., putting hand on a body to release the soul) or words (e.g., it’s safe to move on) to the deceased to help the soul successfully cross-over (either to or from the afterlife). Additionally, the deceased may ask for assistance in crossing-over (e.g., perform a certain ritual in waking life). |
| Other | Dreams that do not fit into any category. |

Note. The deceased is usually physically present in the dream, but they may sometimes use a device to speak to the dreamer. A device may be a telephone, cellphone, computer, or another person (such as a medium). Scoring for dreams themes should only investigate the dream content and not the dreamers reported emotions while awake.

separate/separating either by choice or by location circumstances. This definition for “Separation” is the dreamer and the deceased are separated or get separated in the dream. Separation may be due to an obstacle (e.g., fence) between them, or the deceased themselves not wanting them to be close (e.g., dreamer is not allowed). Additionally, they could also separate from each other by leaving or disappearing (either slowly or suddenly). It may also be that separation was discussed (e.g., I have to go), but the action was not fully carried out by the end of the dream.

Help-Crossing-Over relates to Garfield’s (1996) Comfort theme as it states in rare circumstances the dreamer can

help the deceased. It also encompasses aspects of Hinton et al.'s (2013) subtheme of Dire Spiritual-State Visitation, which is when the soul is asking the dreamer for assistance to help them cross-over to Earth (to reincarnate). The definition for "Help-Crossing-Over" is the dreamer provides actions (e.g., putting hand on a body to release the soul) or words (e.g., it's safe to move on) to the deceased to help the soul successfully crossover (either to or from the afterlife). Additionally, the deceased may ask for assistance in crossing-over (e.g., perform a certain ritual in waking life).

5. Methods - Second Part

Two judges (first and fifth author) independently coded each dream in order to determine the inter-rater reliability. The same procedure was used as when scoring Garfield's (1996) dream themes. Since the new dream themes were not mutually exclusive, the inter-rater agreement method was used as it again seemed most appropriate. The method was used for each dream overall. All themes needed to be identical for each dream among both judges for agreement to be coded as the same.

6. Results - Second Part

It was found that the new dream themes had a reliability of 90.8% (69 out of the 76 dreams had all themes coded the same), which is considered high inter-rater reliability (Multon, 2010). Investigating the 69 agreements, it was found that 62.3% had only one theme coded, 27.5% had two themes coded, 8.6% had three themes coded, and 1.4% had four themes coded per dream. This gives insights into how many of these dream themes are not mutually exclusive. Of the seven dreams that did not have agreement between the judges, one dream was coded completely differently (no agreements), five dreams had one theme in agreement and one theme that was different (not coded), and one dream had one theme in agreement and two themes that were different (not coded). Differences appeared to be mainly in the themes of Comfort and Healthy and Happy. After reflection in the disagreements between the two judges, it was found that the errors were mainly human error (definition oversight) and not a problem with the theme definitions.

Percentage agreements for each specific theme were 100% for Rationalization, 100% for Dead, Dying, or Ill, 100% for Discomfort, 94.7% for Comfort, 96.1% for Healthy and Happy, 100% for Help-Crossing-Over, 98.7% for Separation, and 98.7% for Other. Belicki et al. (2003) states that since most themes are judged to be absent when coding, it is fairly easy to have high agreement for specific themes. They recommend a more conservative approach when investigating specific themes, where one calculates the percentage agreement on only those dreams where at least one judge coded the category to be present (Belicki et al., 2003). Conservative percentage agreements for each category were 100% (8/8) for Rationalization, 100% (8/8) for Dead, Dying, or Ill, 100% (3/3) for Discomfort, 90.5% (38/42) for Comfort, 88.5% (23/26) for Healthy and Happy, 100% (3/3) for Help-Crossing-Over, 95.5% (21/22) for Separation, and 87.5% (7/8) for Other.

7. Discussion

Dreams in bereavement research has mainly focused on dream themes that incorporate the deceased. The major

issue however, is researchers rarely report testing the inter-rater reliability of themes. Garfield's (1996) dream themes were investigated in past research with mixed findings on reliable coding (Belicki et al., 2003; Black et al., 2014). This research supports the Belicki et al. (2003) conclusion that Garfield's (1996) themes cannot be reliably coded. Furthermore, we developed new and clear dream theme definitions that encompass many aspects common amongst dream themes, which show acceptable inter-rater reliability. Since many of the dream themes do relate to Garfield's (1996) original work, we are titling these new themes Garfield's Revised Dream Themes. Further testing needs to be performed on these themes to determine if these themes are truly reliable, as the dreams themselves were used to help define the categories. A new dataset of dreams of the deceased and additional coders will strengthen the claim that these themes are indeed reliable. Future research should explore this to provide more consistency among researchers when exploring dreams of the deceased. Additionally, having reliable themes will assist researchers to better understand the function of these dreams. For example, it can help researchers better investigate how the themes relate with other measures, such as grief intensity. This will have practical implications for bereavement clinicians in their work with the bereaved.

Another limitation of the study is that the questionnaire asked for the most memorable dream. By asking for the most memorable dream, it can be assumed that the dreams collected did not have every type of dream. Participants would have selected dreams that impacted them in some way, over dreams where the deceased may have just been present in the background of the dream. Future research should investigate dream diaries as a way to capture all types of themes, not just the most memorable. Another limitation is that there were only 76 dreams in this study. As more dreams are gathered new themes may be revealed or the definitions may be expanded upon, in order to incorporate related imagery. Lastly, the entire sample was adults. It has been shown that children also report dreaming of the deceased (Adam & Hyde, 2008; Silverman & Nickman, 1996). Future research should explore if these dream themes can be seen in children's dreams of the deceased and if any new themes become present. Overall, this study adds to the limited research on dreaming of the deceased and hopefully promotes further research in the area. As research increases on this topic, it will give bereavement clinicians more reason to inquire about these types of dreams with their clients. This at the very least will help normalize the experience of dreaming of the deceased in the grieving process for the bereaved.

References

- Adams, K., & Hyde, B. (2008). Children's grief dreams and the theory of spiritual intelligence. *Dreaming*, 18(1), 58-67.
- Barrett, D. (1991-1992). Through a glass darkly: Images of the dead in dreams. *Omega*, 24(2), 97-108.
- Belicki, K., Gulko, N., Ruzycski, K., & Aristotle, J. (2003). Sixteen years of dreams following spousal bereavement. *Omega*, 47(2), 93-106.
- Black, J. (2014). *Dreams in Bereavement: Examining themes, content, and meaning of dreams that contain imagery of the deceased* (Master's thesis). Trent University, Peterborough.

- Black, J., Murkar, A., & Black, J. (2014). Examining the healing process through dreams in bereavement. *Sleep and Hypnosis*, 16(1-2), 10-17.
- Domhoff, G. W. (2015). Dreaming as embodied simulation: A widower's dreams of his deceased wife. *Dreaming*, 25(3), 232-256.
- Garfield, P. (1996). Dreams in bereavement. In D. Barrett (Ed.), *Trauma and dreams* (pp. 186-211). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Garfield, P. (1997). *The dream messenger: How dreams of the departed bring healing gifts*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Hinton, D. E., Field, N. P., Nickerson, A., Bryant, R. A., & Simon, N. (2013). Dreams of the dead among Cambodian refugees: Frequency, phenomenology, and relationship to complicated grief and posttraumatic stress disorder. *Death Studies*, 37(8), 750-767.
- Klugman, C. M. (2006). Dead men talking: Evidence of post death contact and continuing bonds. *OMEGA*, 53(3), 249-262.
- Multon, K. D. (2010). Interrater reliability. In N. J. Salkind (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Research Design* (pp. 627-629). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ryan, D. A. (2006). *Dreams about the dead: Glimpses of grief*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc.
- Silverman, P. R., & Nickman, S. L. (1996). Children's construction of their dead parents. In D. Klass, P. R. Silverman, & S. L. Nickman (Eds.), *Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief* (pp. 73-86). Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.
- Wright, S. T., Kerr, C. W., Doroszczuk, N. M., Kuszczak, S. M., Hang, P. C., & Luczkiewicz, D. L. (2013). The impact of dreams of the deceased on bereavement: A survey of hospice caregivers. *American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Medicine*, 31(2), 132-138.