Reminiscences of love: Former romantic partners in dreams

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Summary. The present study analyzed the frequency of romantic partners in a long dream series (N = 10,952 dreams) during the relationship periods and long after the break-ups. During the relationship periods with different partners, about 6% to 23% of the dreams included the partner. During 2013 when the dreamer was single, 3.37% of the dreams included a former partner. The most important factor related to the frequency of the former partner in dreams was the percentage of partner dreams during the relationship, possibly reflecting relationship closeness. Future research can expand these findings and investigating factors affecting the frequency of former partners in dreams like relationship quality, quality of the break-up, keeping contact, etc.

Keywords: Dream series, romantic partner, continuity hypothesis

1. Introduction

Social interactions in dreams, such as friendly, aggressive, and sexual interactions, are very important dream ingredients (Domhoff, 1996; Hall & Van de Castle, 1966). In fact, these are so common that it was proposed recently that one dream function may be the training of social skills (Revonsuo, Tuominen, & Valli, 2015). From an evolutionary viewpoint, social bonding and social support have been crucial for the survival of mankind (Revonsuo et al., 2015). Based on the continuity hypothesis of dreaming, which says emotionally salient waking life experiences show up in subsequent dreams (Schredl, 2003), one would expect that very close persons like the romantic partner can often be found in dreams. In students with stable relationships the partner is present in about 20% to 25% of the dreams (Schredl, 2001; Selterman, Apetroaia, & Waters, 2012; Selterman & Drigotas, 2009). In singles, being in a partnership within the dream occurs only in 6.0% of the dreams (Schredl, 2001), clearly indicating that spending much time with a close person is reflected in dreams of this person. Supporting this notion, Schredl and Hofmann (2003) found a positive correlation of r = .349 between the amount of time spent with the partner in waking and the frequency of partner dreams. Moreover, Selterman et al. (2012) reported that feeling safe in a partnership is also reflected in more secure base script related dream content such as support seeking, support availability, and distress relief in dreams of the romantic partner.

One very interesting question is how often a former romantic partner occurs in dreams after the relationship has ended. In a sample of 425 students reporting 1612 dreams (Mathes & Schredl, 2014) 17.12% of the dreams included the partner of the dreamer and 4.78% included an ex-partner (unpublished analysis); however, the relationship status of the participants was not elicited in this sample. In a single dream series, the former romantic partner appeared in about 2% to 5% of the dreams years after their break-up (Schredl & Reinhard, 2012). Similarly, in the long dream series of "Barb Sanders" (pseudonym), her ex-husband (they were married for 10 years and had three daughters) was present in about 5% of the dreams even 20 years after the divorce (Domhoff, 2003). Moreover, the characteristics of their relationship ("Barb Sanders" described her ex-husband as just wanting sex and insensitive to her needs for tenderness) were also reflected in her dreams: he wanted to have sex and she pulled away. Comparing 227 partner dreams while the dreamer was in relationship, with 289 partner dreams after they were separated, the major difference was that mutual activities, doing something together were much more common in partner dreams during the relationship period (Schredl, 2011) whereas the frequency of erotic dream content was comparable (about 20% of the partner dreams). To summarize, the romantic partner is not only present in dreams during the relationship period but also after separation; empirical research in this area, though, is very scarce. The present analysis of a long dream series was undertaken to study how often former romantic partners occur in dreams even long after separation. As the dreamer has had several relationships over the years, it was investigated whether there are factors such as frequency of partner dreams during the relationship, relationship duration, and the time interval between the dream and separation, that influenced the frequency of the appearance of the particular romantic partner in the person's dreams. Moreover, the interactions between dreamer and former partner within the dreams were studied.
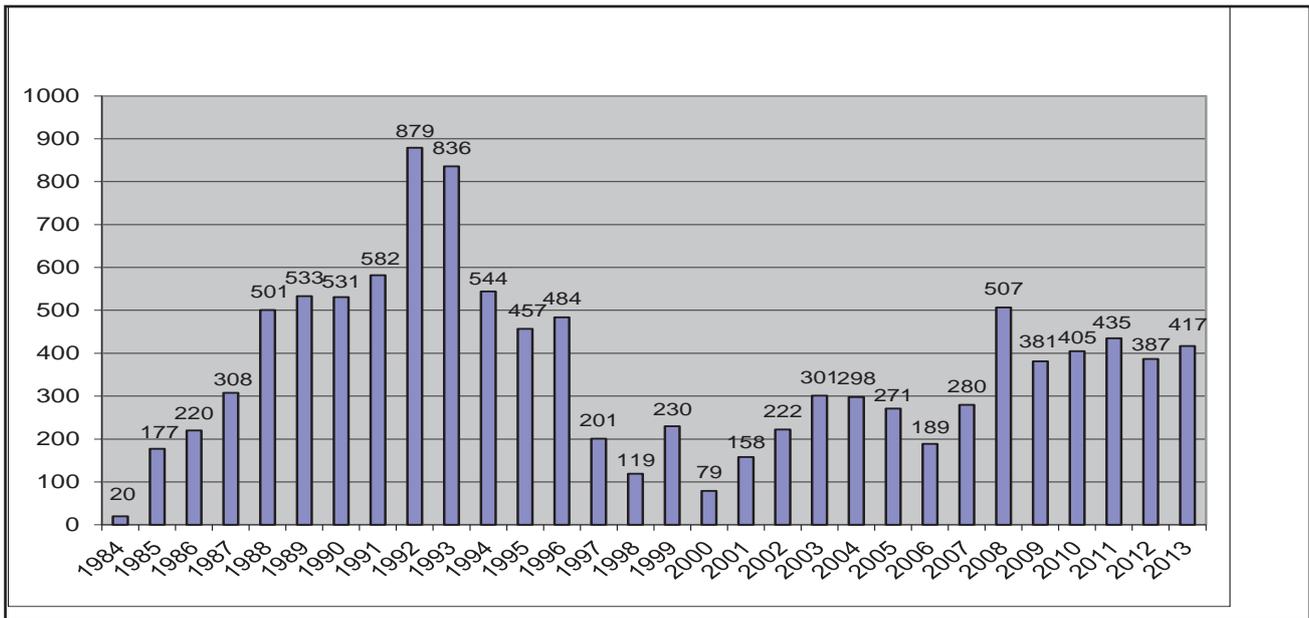
Figure 1. Number of dreams per year

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 2013. During this time period, he recorded 10,952 dreams. The mean dream length was 132.22 ± 84.23 words. The distribution of dreams per year is depicted in Figure 1. The relationship history of the dreamer is depicted in Table 1. Three relationship periods were with the same partner (P3) whom the dreamer considered his "true love". With P3 (in the second period) and with P4, the dreamer was living with the person. Relationship was defined as going steady; women which whom the dreamer fell in love but did not go steady and brief sexual encounters were not included. After P9 the dreamer was single, i.e., also during 2013.

During 2013, the dreamer met P3 unexpectedly during a conference (brief greeting). P3 broke off the contact com-pletely after the last separation in 2005. In addition, the dreamer saw P4 several times in the course of the year 2013 (attending the same meditation group) without much personal sharing. With P6, the dreamer had several meetings during 2013 as part of their ongoing non-romantic friendship.

2.2. Procedure

The dream reports were originally hand-written and were later typed and entered into a database, Alchera 3.72, created by Harry Bosma (www.mythwell.com) by the dreamer himself. This database allows assigning key words to the dreams, also a task carried out by the dreamer himself. Each dream was coded by the dreamer himself for the occurrence of the partner within the dream. In addition, the activities with the partner and the emotional quality of the interaction (positive, neutral, negative) were coded. Lastly, it was coded as to whether or not the dreamer was within the dream in relationship with his ex-partner – only if the information was explicitly stated.

The Alchera software also provides a word count for each dream report. Dream reports did not include redundancies or words not related to the dream experience itself. 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. To analyze the single binary time series with gaps (mornings without dream recall), an autoregressive Generalized Linear Mixed Model (AR-GLMM) with a logit link and serial correlation according to Klingenberg (2008) was applied using the GLIMMIX procedure with a power covariance structure.

3. Results

During a relationship period, between 6.41% and 22.69% of the dreams included the romantic partner (see Table 1). The averaged percentage for P3, which was used for subsequent analysis, was 19.20% based on a total of 1073

Table 1. Romantic partnerships and Partner dreams during the relationship

Partner	Year	Duration	Dreams	Partner dreams
P1	Feb, 1984 to Oct 20, 1986	2 yrs. 9 m	370	16.76%
P2	Jan 17, 1988 to Mar 16, 1988	2 m	78	6.41%
P3-1	Aug 6, 1988 to May 2, 1989	9 m	354	16.10%
P3-2	Oct 1, 1989 to Jul 31, 1990	10 m	401	22.69%
P4	Sep 19, 1993 to Jul 31, 2003	9 yrs. 11 m	2828	11.56%
P3-3	Dec 26, 2003 to Feb 17, 2005	1 yr. 2 m	318	18.24%
P5	Nov 24, 2005 to Dec 23, 2007	2 yrs. 1 m	485	8.25%
P6	Feb 10, 2008 to Sep 4, 2008	7 m	262	8.02%
P7	Jul 26, 2009 to Sep 12, 2009	2 m	28	10.71%
P8	May 25, 2010 to Sep 1, 2010	3 m	108	7.41%
P9	Oct 31, 2011 to Apr 29, 2012	6 m	140	12.86%

Table 2. Comparisons of partner dream frequencies between relationship periods with different partners

Partner	P3 t =	P3 p =	P4 t =	P4 p =	P5 t =	P5 p =	P6 t =	P6 p =	P8 t =	P8 p =	P9 t =	P9 p =
P1	1.2	.2975	2.7	.0073	3.3	.0012	2.9	.0038	1.8	.1332	1.1	.2882
P3			6.1	<.0001	5.5	<.0001	4.5	<.0001	2.9	.0037	2.0	.0488
P4					1.9	.0580	1.8	.0700	0.9	.3461	-0.4	.6186
P5							0.4	.7090	0.0	.9896	-1.4	.1547
P6									-0.3	.7885	-1.5	.1310
P8											-1.1	.2877

Analyzing the single binary time series with gaps according to the algorithm of Klingenberg (2008)

dreams. Interestingly, the relationship duration correlated with the frequency of partner dreams (r = .600, p = .0876, N = 9, Spearman Rank correlation). Using the algorithm of Klingenberg (2008), 21 comparisons were carried out (the three relationship periods of P3 were condensed and the relationship periods of P2 and P7 were dropped due to small sample size and statistical power). Whereas the percentage of partner dreams were comparable between P1 and P3, the partner dream frequencies of these two relationship periods were significantly higher compared to P4, P5, P6, P8, and P9 (only the comparisons between P1 and P8, P9 did not reach significance; see Table 2). The partner dream frequencies between the relationship periods with P4, P5, P6, P8 and P9 were comparable (see Table 2).

Overall, 3.37% (N = 45) of the dreams recorded in 2013 included at least one former partner. The frequencies of the particular partners are depicted in Table 3. P3 and P4 occurred most often whereas the other former partners were quite rare. Interestingly, there was a significant correlation between the partner dream percentage during relationship (see Table 1) and the frequency of the respective partner in the 2013 dreams (see Table 3): r = .698, p = .0365, N = 9. I.e., the more often the dreamer dreamed about his partner while being in relationship the more often this partner occurred in the 2013 dreams. Also, the relationship duration was correlated with the frequency of the partner appearing in the 2013 dreams (r = .587, p = .0963, N = 9) whereas the time interval between breaking up and 2013 was not related to the frequency of dreams in 2013 including this partner (r = .060, p = .8790, N = 9).

Due to small sample sizes, the dreams of the former partner P3 were compared with the dreams of all other partners (see Table 4). On a descriptive level one can observe that the dreamer is more often reunited with P3 in the dream compared with other former partners, and he experienced pleasant feelings towards P3 more often (see dream examples 1, 4). On the other hand, the state of being not in relationship within the dream is more common in the other former partners (compared to P3), e.g., talking about a new partner in dream example 2. The only negatively toned dreams (N = 2) featured P3 who ignored the dreamer in the dream (see dream example 3).

Examples of former partner dreams

Example 1: "I am in a huge apartment. It is morning, but not too early, maybe one or two other persons are present. I am reunited with P3, for the fourth time. I am thinking about whether or not it will work out [imagining that it will work out was associated with pleasant feelings]. Then I am thinking that the worst thing that can happen would be that it will not work out, so I stop worrying and became more calm."

Example 2: „….Then I ask her (P4) how she is. She talks about A., her partner who crafts furniture in a pub for scientists run by an acquaintance. … It seems to do her good to talk about her partner."

Table 3. Ex-partner dreams during 2013

	Year 2013 (N = 417 dreams)	
Partner	Frequency	Percent
P1	2	0.48%
P2	0	0.00%
P3	27	6.47%
P4	10	2.40%
P5	1	0.24%
P6	3	0.72%
P7	2	0.48%
P8	1	0.24%
P9	2	0.48%

Table 4. Ex-partner dreams during 2013

Partner dream content	P3 (N = 27 dreams) N =	P3 (N = 27 dreams) Perc.	All others (N = 21 dreams) N =	All others (N = 21 dreams) Perc.
Being in relationship with partner in the dream	10	37.04%	2	9.52%
Being separated within the dream	2	7.41%	7	33.33%
Positive emotion of the dreamer towards partner	20	74.08%	7	33.33%
Neutral	5	18.52%	14	66.67%
Negative emotion of the dreamer towards partner	2	7.41%	0	0.00%
Erotic behavior	17	62.96%	5	23.81%

Example 3: "… Then I am flying again, it is a city, largely uninhabited. But I see P3 and greet her in a friendly manner. But she turns away; that hurts. I was hoping that she responded positively and greet me back.

Example 4: "I am lying in a big bed with P3. We feel close and want to have sex. P3 puts several condoms on the bed beside her. My penis is erect and I put on a condom. I am astonished about the stable erection and am excited about having sex. The big room is probably part of P3's apartment."

4. Discussion

The present findings indicate that romantic partners are present in dreams during the relationship but also after considerably long time periods following break-ups. The frequency of partner dreams during relationships varies significantly; one factor was the relationship duration. The frequency of ex-partner dreams was related to the frequency of partner dreams during the relationship period (also with relationship duration) but not with the time interval between break-up and the occurrence of the dreams.

The major methodological point to be considered is the fact that the analysis is based on only one male participant. Therefore, the present study can be used as hypotheses-generating endeavor for larger empirical studies on that topic since possible influencing factors regarding the frequency of former partners in dreams have been identified. Moreover, the study is naturalistic, e.g., the dreamer had contacts to some former partners during 2013, which might have affected the results. One the other hand, the dreamer did not specifically focus on recording dreams about his partners, so there was not a bias regarding dream recording.

In line with previous research (Schredl, 2001; Selterman et al., 2012; Selterman & Drigotas, 2009), the romantic partner occurs quite often in dreams during the relationship period. Interestingly, the percentage of partner dreams varied considerably and was related to relationship duration. I.e., it would be very interesting to conduct larger surveys and study what factors affect partner dream frequencies, e.g., partnership quality and/or relationship duration.

The frequency of former romantic partners in dreams also seems to vary considerably. In the present study, the true love of the dreamer was very prominent in his dreams even after 8 years of having no contact (except for the very brief meeting). Interestingly, the interval between the waking life event (partnership) and subsequent dreams, which have been shown to relate to the frequency of the dream elements (Botman & Crovitz, 1989; Strauch & Meier, 1996), did not affect former partner dream frequency but how often the partner occurred in dreams during the relationship was of importance; possibly reflecting the closeness between the dreamer and the particular partner.

The content of the former partner dreams also seems to reflect the emotional involvement of the dreamer, sometimes he is back in the relationship or beginning a new one with all the positive emotions he experienced in the relationship. Selterman, Apetroaia, Riela, and Aron (2014) showed that intimacy in waking was related to more positive affect towards the partner in the dream, i.e., this carries over to former partner dreams. The dream series of "Barb Sanders" (Domhoff, 2003) indicates that negative emotions (uncaring relationship) also reflects in the emotional reaction to the

partner in dreams (sometimes nightmarish), even though there was a gradual decrease of aggressive interactions with the ex-husband over subsequent years.

To summarize, dreams reflect current partnerships but also former romantic relationships. Based on the findings of this single-case study, future research should investigate the following factors that might affect the frequency of former partners in dreams: (1) relationship quality (including the partner dream frequency during the relationship), (2) the emotional quality of the break-up (painful, etc.), (3) whether the former partners kept some form of contact, caring for their children, and/or remaining friends, (4) whether the person has a new romantic relationship, and (5) mental health in general since Cartwright, Agargun, Kirkby, and Friedman (2006) have shown that the quality of dreams about the ex-husband depends on the mental health (depressed vs. non-depressed) of the divorced woman. In addition, Selterman et al. (2014) showed that dreams of the partner can affect subsequent emotions towards the partner, i.e., dreams are affected by the partnership but can also affect the partnership.

Acknowledgements

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