The percentage of male and female dream characters in a long dream series

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Summary. Previous research based on many dream studies including children, adolescents, students, and adults in different cultures reported a "ubiquitous" sex difference in dreams: Whereas male dream characters are more prominent in men's dreams compared to female dream characters, women tend to dream equally often about males and females. The present findings of about 53% of male dream characters in a series of 3828 dreams recorded by a middle-aged male individual indicate that this gender difference might not be "ubiquitous" but depends on the pattern of waking-life social contacts. Studying the ratio of male and female dream characters might help to understand how social life is reflected in dreams.

Keywords: Dream series, male dream characters, female dream characters

1. Introduction

Hall and Domhoff (1963) and Hall (1984) reported a ubiquitous sex difference in dreams: Whereas male dream characters are more prominent in men's dreams compared to female dream characters, women tend to dream equally often about males and females. The average percentage of male dream characters across 35 data sets including overall more than 10,000 dream reports (children, adolescents, college students, adults) was 65% in men's dreams and 50% in women's dreams (Hall, 1984). One possible explanation for this preoccupations with males in males was the Freudian Oedipus complex, the father as rival for the love of the mother, whereas women blame their mother for not having a penis and turn to the father and thus have conflicting relationships with both sexes (Hall & Domhoff, 1963). Although Hall (1984) mentioned the explanation of Urbina and Grey (1975) that the gender ratio of dream characters might reflect the gender ratio of waking life relationships, the empirical evidence at that time point was rather weak; a woman spending their late lives in a retirement home for women dreamed less often about men (male percentage: 39%) compared to the time period when she was younger (male percentage: 53%) (Hall, 1984). Subsequent studies, however, provided more support for the line of thinking that is based on the continuity hypothesis of dreaming stating that dreams reflect waking-life (Schredl, 2003).

For example, Schredl and Jacob (1998) showed that within one male individual the male dream character percentage decreased from 63% to 51% within a 3 year period that included a transition from studying engineering (mostly male students) to studying psychology (mostly female students). Moreover, two studies (Paul & Schredl, 2012; Schredl, Loßnitzer, & Vetter, 1998) showed that the gender ratio of waking life contacts directly correlates with the percentage of male dream characters and, thus, supports the continuity hypothesis. Interestingly, Schredl (2001) found that the "ubiquitous" gender differences (more male dream characters in men's dreams, 61.4% in men's dreams vs. 48.3% in women's dreams) was only found in singles but not in students with stable partnerships (62.3% males in women's dreams vs. 48.7% males in men's dreams). This was corroborated in another data set (Schredl & Keller, 2008-2009). Lastly, two surveys based on non-student samples (Schredl & Keller, 2008-2009; Schredl, Paul, Lahl, & Göritz, 2010-2011) indicated that the percentage of male dream characters was higher in women compared to men, e.g. 59.2% (N = 2016 women) vs. 46.6% (N = 878 men) (Schredl et al., 2010-2011). That is, the findings indicate that the "ubiquitous" gender difference of men dreaming more often about men than women and women dreaming equally often about both genders might be limited to students not living is stable partnerships.

The present analysis focused on the percentage of male dream characters in a dream series of a middle-aged male individual. In a previous study (Schredl & Jacob, 1998) with the same dreamer, the male dream character percentage changed from 63% (100 dreams, 23 yrs. old) to 51% (100 dreams, 26 yrs. old) – possibly due to changed life circumstances (studying engineering which is male-dominated to studying psychology which is female-dominated). The research question was to determine how the percentage of male dream characters changed over time.

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. For the present analysis, 3828 dreams (recorded between Jan 24, 2006 and July 7, 2015) were included. In January 2006, the dreamer was 44 yrs. old. The nine-year time period included five partnerships with female partners: Nov 24, 2005 to

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Dec 23, 2007, Feb 10, 2008 to Sep 4, 2008, Jul 26, 2009 to Sep 12, 2009, May 25, 2010 to Sep 1, 2010, and Oct 31, 2011 to Apr 29, 2012. The mean dream length of all 3828 dreams was 149.44 ± 87.94 words.

2.2. Procedure

The dream reports were originally hand-written but were then typed and entered by the dreamer himself into a database (Alchera 3.72, created by Harry Bosma, www.mythwell.com). This database allows the assigning of key words to the dreams, a task that was also carried out by the dreamer. Each dream included in the analysis was coded by the dreamer while typing the dreams for the number of female and male characters; for the earlier recorded dreams this coding was not done. Similar to the coding instruction devised by Hall and Van de Castle (1966), same-sex group were counted as a single entity. Mixed groups were not included in the count. The male dream character percentage was calculated as the number of male dream characters for all dreams in a given time period divided by the sum of female and male dream characters of the same dreams.

The Alchera software also provides a word count for each dream report. Dream reports included only dream experience related words and all redundancies were excluded. The analysis unit was an individual dream report. The data were exported into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft) and the data analysis was carried out using the SAS 9.4 software package for Windows.

3. Results

Most dream reports included a male and/or female dream character, typically one to three (see Table 1). The maximum of female dream characters was seven within one dream; this occurred in three dreams. Within one dream eight male dream characters occurred (see Table 1). Male/female percent for all dreams was about 53%, with only small variations from year to year ranging from 49.46% to 55.04% (see Table 2). Male/female percent did not differ between partnerships and periods of being single (see Table 3).

4. Discussion

The present findings indicate that the percentage of male dream characters was very stable over 9 years, and did also not change from the previous analysis period which was almost 20 years earlier (Schredl & Jacob, 1998). The mean percentage of about 52% male dream characters in this dream series of a middle-aged male individual is not in line with the "ubiquitous" gender difference regarding the ratio of male and female dream characters.

Despite the large number of dream reports, it must be kept in mind that they are from only one participant and, thus, generalizability is limited. However, all single-case studies so far with 28 to 1,472 dream reports per individual (N = 17) showed that the male dream character percentage ranged between 60% and 72% in men's dreams (Domhoff, 1996; Hall, 1984), i.e., the present dreamer lies outside this range. On the other hand, the percentage of about 52% fits quite nicely with the figures reported by a representative study of 166 dream reports by men (51.8% ; Schredl & Keller, 2008-2009) and a most-recent dream study including 878 men (mean age: 40.1 yrs.) (46.6%; Schredl et al., 2010-2011). This indicates that the difference in the percentage of male dream characters might not be that ubiquitous for the lifespan but might be limited to children (Hall, 1984; Schredl et al., 2019) and single students (Hall, Domhoff, Blick, & Weesner, 1982; Hall & Van de Castle, 1966; Schredl, 2001).

Interestingly, the effect of the relationship status on the percentage of male dream characters found in a student sample could not be replicated in this dream series. I.e., the question remains what factors might be related to the percentage of male and female characters in dreams. Unfortunately, detailed information about the dreamer's social life has not been available. One might imagine that work environments might play a role, e.g., the differences in male/female percent while studying engineering versus studying psychology (Schredl & Jacob, 1998). Lortie-Lussier, Simond, Rinfret, and De Koninck (1992) reported that employed parents (men and women) dream more often about men (60.3%) compared to homemakers (55.5%). On the other hand, family and kinship might also play a role, for example, Barb Sanders whose dream series was analyzed by Domhoff (2003) has three daughters that occurred frequently in her dreams.

To summarize, the present findings indicate that the gender difference regarding percentage of male and female dream characters is not "ubiquitous" but might depend on waking life, i.e., this dream parameter might provide inter-

Table 1. Number of dreams with male and female dream characters (N = 3828 dreams)

Number of Females/ Males within the dream	Dreams with Females	Dreams with Males
0	1364	1244
1	1502	1462
2	679	707
3	207	298
4	57	83
5	14	22
6	2	8
7	3	3
8	0	1

Table 2. Male and female dream characters per year

Year	Dreams	Females	Males	Male percent
2006	160	151	149	49.67%
2007	280	253	303	54.50%
2008	507	455	557	55.04%
2009	381	360	417	53.67%
2010	405	383	406	51.46%
2011	435	433	481	52.63%
2012	387	411	449	52.21%
2013	417	468	517	52.49%
2014	511	556	593	51.61%
2015	345	342	417	54.94%
Total	3828	3812	4289	52.94%

Table 3. Male and female dream characters during relationships or single periods

Period	Dreams	Females	Males	Male percent
With partnership	969	884	1033	53.89%
Being single	2859	2928	3256	52.65%

esting clues how waking-life social contacts are reflected in dreams. Future research should collect data on the amount and intensity of social contacts with same-sex or opposite-sex individuals and relate this information with the ratio of male and female dream characters.

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