

“Breaking the law” in dreams: Analysis of a long dream series

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Summary. Nightmares in which the dreamer performs a criminal act and is terrified of being punished have been reported in the literature. Systematic studies of “breaking the law” within dreams, however, are still lacking. Within a long dream series of $N = 11,808$ dreams, 0.80% of the dreams included some criminal activity often associated with the fear of being arrested; rarely with the feeling of remorse. Studying this dream type offers an opportunity to shed light on the options concerning how dreams might be related to waking-life: thematic continuity, e.g., being dishonest in waking-life and being dishonest in dreams; emotional continuity, e.g., the fear of being found out in the dreams is related to waking-life worries about possible negative evaluations by others; and/or metaphorical continuity, “killing” as a metaphor for ending relationships. Thus, this pilot study provided hypotheses for more in-depth analyses of larger dream samples.

Keywords: Dream content, nightmares, criminal acts, continuity hypothesis

1. Introduction

Nightmares are defined as extremely dysphoric and well-remembered dreams that usually involve threats to survival, security, or physical integrity (American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 2014), i.e., typically the dreamer is the victim. Also, in unselected dreams, misfortunes outweigh good fortunes (35% vs. 6%) (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966) and the dreamer is more often the victim to aggression than being the aggressor (Hall & Domhoff, 1963). On the other hand, systematic research into dreams with the main theme being the aggressiveness of the dreamer is scarce. Mathes et al. (2018) studied so-called offender nightmares in which the dreamer was aggressive, and even killed a dream character; this type of dream was related to waking-life aggression. Similarly, individuals reporting that they had dreams about killing someone are slightly more aggressive – measured with the hostility subscale of the Symptom-Checklist SCL-90-R – compared to individuals without such dreams (Schredl & Mathes, 2014). Even though killing someone is aggressive, there is a big difference if the main motivation was self-defense, i.e., a reaction to a threat, compared to dreams in which the dreamer was deliberately acting against the law, i.e., robbing a bank or killing someone in cold blood. Schredl and Göritz (2018) analyzed 1,216 most recent nightmares and found that 1% were characterized by aggressive acts the dreamer carried out. Examples are: “I killed my mother. Interestingly, the problem wasn’t the murder itself, but the handling, the “disposal” of the corpse.”, “I killed a stranger and buried him in the forest and then was terrified

that the body might be discovered.”, and “I pushed an annoying gypsy child into a dark outlet that led into the depths. Then I waited and watched a crocodile move towards the child and snap shut. Actually, I was satisfied with it, albeit with very little scruples.” Systematic studies in dreams in general about the frequency and type of criminal behavior carried out by the dreamer were not carried out. Interestingly, dreams of convicts relatively rarely include criminal acts (Sanctis, 1901; Selling, 1932; Sienkiewicz-Hippler, 2002); except for sexual offenders who dreamed relatively often of criminal sex activities (Goldhirsh, 1961). However, these few studies have to be viewed with caution as inmates might not report crime-related dreams openly because this might affect their detention conditions.

The present analysis of a long dream series ($N = 11,808$ dreams) aimed at studying the frequency and type of criminal activities in a “normal” dreamer and, thus, providing pilot data for more in-depth analyses of larger dream samples.

2. Method

2.1. Participant and dream diary

The male participant started to keep an unstructured dream diary from the age of 22, with the first dream recorded on 5 September, 1984. For the present analysis, all 11,808 dreams recorded between the first dream and July 7, 2015 (current status of digitalized and coded dreams) were included. The mean length of the dreams was 135.95 ± 85.36 words. The dreamer never got into conflict with the law; in his childhood he nicked stickers a few times (less than a Euro worth) in a shop. As an adolescent he stole a book from the school library and, in young adulthood, he dismantled and took a traffic sign. Otherwise, the dreamer has acted in accordance with the law.

2.2. Procedure

Dream reports were originally hand-written but were then typed and entered into a database (Alchera 3.72, created by Harry Bosma, www.mythwell.com) by the dreamer him-

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self. This database allows the assigning of keywords to the dreams, a task that was also carried out by the dreamer. Each dream was coded by the dreamer while typing the dreams for the occurrence of criminal activities. In a second step, the dreamer classified dreams with criminal activities according to the severity (minor, e.g., minor thefts, major, e.g., bank robbery, stealing a car, and murder; including a category of unspecified criminal acts), whether the criminal act was actually carried out or in the planning stage, occurrence of anxiety (e.g., of being arrested), occurrence of guilt feelings, and the outcome (not clear/open ending, being arrested, being saved, or the criminal act was resolved). Two other aspects that are specific for dreams were also coded, first, the dreamer felt he was part of the person who committed the crime but not fully himself, and secondly, the dreamer realized within the dream that the criminal act hadn't really happened but was a realistic fantasy in the first part of the dream.

The Alchera software provides a word count for each dream report. Reports included only dream experience-related words and all redundancies, e.g. repetitions that occurred in writing down the dream in the morning, were excluded. The analysis unit was an individual dream report. The data were exported into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft) and the descriptive data analysis was carried out using the SAS 9.4 software package for Windows (Cary, North Carolina, USA).

3. Results

Overall, 0.80% of the dreams included some form of criminal activity. The average word count of these 95 dreams was 190.24 ± 129.09 words. More than half of the crimes were major (see Table 1). In 14 dreams, the dreamer was planning to perform a criminal act but did not carry it out (see dream examples section). Within 17 dreams, the criminal act was performed by another person but the dreamer strongly felt with that person or, at some point of the dream, was this person (see dream examples section). The dreamer was an accomplice in 11 dreams. The most common emotion was anxiety/fear of being arrested or even killed by the police. The dreamer rarely felt remorse regarding his criminal actions.

Table 1. Characteristics of the dreams with criminal activities (N = 95)

| Characteristics | N = | Percent |
|---|-----|---------|
| Type of crime | | |
| Minor (thefts) | 26 | 27.37% |
| Major (bank robbery, jewels, large sums of money, expensive cars) | 50 | 52.63% |
| Murder | 15 | 15.79% |
| Unspecified | 4 | 4.21% |
| Planned vs. committed crime | | |
| Planned | 14 | 14.74% |
| Committed | 81 | 85.26% |
| Alter ego (dreamer is feeling with the criminal, being part of) | 17 | 17.89% |
| Dreamer as an accomplice of the criminal | 11 | 11.58% |
| Anxiety | 57 | 60.00% |
| Guilt feelings | 12 | 12.63% |

Table 2. Outcome of the dreams with committed criminal activities (N = 81)

| Outcome | N = | Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----|---------|
| Open end/not resolved | 48 | 59.26% |
| Arrested | 4 | 4.94% |
| Save | 22 | 27.16% |
| Crime was fantasy within the dream | 4 | 4.94% |
| Resolved/crime undone | 5 | 6.17% |

Interestingly, the dreams with committed crimes – despite often including the fear of being arrested – rarely include the experience of being caught; it is more common that the ending is ambiguous (see Table 2). In a quarter of the dreams the dreamer is let off and not punished for committing the crime. In the dream examples section is a dream with the theme that the dreamer thought he committed a crime but later recognized that it was a fantasy or dream. Overall, this dream type occurred four times. Lastly, there is a small group of dreams that are resolved, i.e., the dreamer put back what he stole.

Dream examples

Minor crime

"I go to a fine Chinese restaurant in a ship on the river to steal a Menu. It's well filled, I have to go far in and discover one last Menu that I put under my jacket that I'm wearing. At first I can't get one hand out of the jacket, which makes me look suspicious, but then it works. Near the exit, guests sit on the ground and eat a lot of raw fish. An elderly woman offers me strudel. I decline with thanks, but say that this is from my home country. The old lady is very nice and wants to know if I'm from Vienna. I say that I live in Germany, but my parents are from Vienna. It's nice to chat with her."

Major crime

"There are four of us in a car with \$800,000 in a bag in the trunk, a bank robbery, or something like that. There is a lot of police around; we are in a city. We are standing in front of a house near the river. A woman engages us or me in a conversation. She wants to know what we're doing here. I say that we want to deliver something. Would she be able to testify against me later? I suggest that we split the money and split up because then we are less noticeable. The police don't know who did it ..."

Murder

"I'm in a big old house. We, a whole group of people, hid there because the police wanted us. We may have committed robberies and murders. Although we are in secret passages of the house, we are discovered. I manage to escape, but only by abandoning the others. Police are patrolling all over town, it seems impossible to escape. I take the tram a few stops. I think I will be caught. The main reason I escaped was because of the fear that the police would storm the building without giving us the opportunity to surrender, which I would have done anyway."

Planned crime

"I am traveling in a bus and sit or stand directly behind the driver. An old friend of mine could be the driver. We're talking about a burglary (quite dangerous) that we planned and are now canceling. He wants to know why I'm doing this. I say it's the thrill I need because I don't have a partner. Later I come to the conclusion that I no longer need to commit crimes and want to distance myself from this activity."

Being an accomplice

"I'm with a woman in a garden behind a house. She's in the laundry room and steals laundry that she puts in a bag; I'm here by chance and ask her if it's worth it. She only replies that the older, rich women can cope with it. My reply is that the risk of being discovered is very high, e.g. one can easily be seen (it is broad daylight) and there is a young woman on the neighboring property. The woman stealing the laundry doesn't seem to mind that either. I am quite shocked when I see that the lady of the house is sleeping on a deck chair in the garden. The woman stealing the laundry stays cool and says something loud to me; we're going into the house, the lady of the house is up now. I'm looking for the exit. First, I open the door to a posh bathroom, then the front door. I am quite happy to be outside. Stealing is not for me."

Alter ego (dreamer is feeling with the criminal, being part of)

"I see Robert Redford break into a highly secured vault; he has keys that he throws into a small roundel that turns. It's an elaborate plan, with 2 accomplices. When he got to the counter, he smashed glass with his hand to get the money. It's only 4-5 flat bundles, but the big bills are worth a lot. Then he goes back, with the elevator upstairs. The chamber was very deep underground. There are many tourists. The original plan was to give the money to someone else, but then it doesn't seem necessary, they both get past the guards without being checked. One man of the security guards, a boss type, is also part of the gang. Outside in front of the building my mother speaks to me (us), she wants something from me. That doesn't suit us (I'm Robert Redford now), we want to move on."

Crime was fantasy within the dream

"After a performance (comedy) I pack up my shoes, there are about 20 pairs. I am amazed that I get a lot of them in my backpack and only have to pack a few in another bag. There are other people there, but no direct contact. Then I think about killing an old friend, cutting her neck from behind with a large razor blade. I think that I can never be happy again and that it is better to face myself. But the more I want to imagine this horrible act or want to bring it back to my memory, the more faded the memory becomes until I realize that I didn't do it, but that it was a fantasy or a dream. I'm relieved and I'm talking to someone who has a large razor blade in his hand. There is still a strange feeling that I could have used it."

Guilt feeling

"... Then the woman raids a kiosk because she is desperate because of hunger. We are almost at the end of our

journey. I'm taking some money from the cashbox because my companion says she needs some money. Only later do I think that I could have given her some money of my own. The kiosk owner is not very rich and therefore the loss is painful for her..."

Crime dream with interpretation of the crime within the dream

"I stand in a kind of phone booth and pack up my things. There are some bags and also my backpack. I put some shrunken heads of women I killed in my backpack. In between I am very worried that I will have to go to jail for this and that my life will be ruined. There are books in the other pockets. But at some point I realize that I didn't do it at all, the act was of a symbolic nature. Somehow I carry dead feelings for ex-girlfriends around with me."

4. Discussion

The findings of this single-case study based on a long dream series indicate that criminal behavior in dreams is rare but, in 0.80%, the dreamer was deliberately breaking the legal laws of our society. The interesting question is how these dreams are related to the waking-life of the dreamer as they do not reflect actual waking-life experience (the minor thefts carried out in the youth of the dreamer didn't show up in his dream series).

The percentage of dreams with criminal activities is very small; interestingly, the frequency of killing someone in the dream (motivation, however, was not elicited) is comparable 0.93% in a sample of diary dreams reported by psychology students (Mathes & Schredl, 2014) and 0.83% in most recent dreams in a population-based sample (Mathes et al., 2014). As these dreams are discontinuous to waking-life – at least for this dreamer – it would be very interesting to study the frequency of this dream type in larger samples.

Focusing on dream emotions, the frequent occurrence of anxiety/fear associated with breaking the law – see also the dream examples of Schredl and Göritz (2018) reported in the introduction – is more continuous with waking life, i.e., most people committing a crime might experience the fear of getting caught. Interestingly, the feeling of remorse regarding the dream actions is relatively rare; a finding that has also been reported for convicts (Sanctis, 1901; Selling, 1932; Sienkiewicz-Hippler, 2002). It would be very interesting to study whether the frequency of criminal dreams is related to waking-life personality, like killing someone in the dream is related to aggression (Schredl & Mathes, 2014). Studying the relationship between the 'Honesty-Humility' dimension of the HEXACO personality model (Lee & Ashton, 2008) and dream content might be a promising approach.

On the other hand, the dreams including criminal activities also showed very dream-specific features, e.g., dreamer is feeling with the criminal, is part of the criminal, or transforms into the criminal (see the Robert Redford example above). This fits nicely with the concept of the shadow in Jungian psychology (Hoss, 2019), i.e., the criminal act in relation with the anxiety of being found out might represent aspects of one's persona that are not liked and tucked away so nobody can see them (Jacobi, 1971). The Jungian concept of shadow also observed "killing" of a dream character by the dream self as an attempt to metaphorically "kill off" or suppress an undesired side of one's personality (Hoss, 2019). The last dream example with the shrunken heads even of-

fers an interpretation of this dream type, which would fit within the framework of emotional continuity (Hartmann, 2011), i.e., the dream “killed” (left) his girlfriends, but still carries unresolved issues/feeling with him. So, one could speculate if performing a criminal act in the dream which is very likely associated with the fear of being punished is an exaggeration of a waking-life behavior that one would like to hide from other people because of negative evaluations. That is, that emotions occurring in dreams are linked to waking-life emotions.

Studying the topic of “breaking the law” in dreams offered an opportunity to shed light on the options concerning how dreams can be related to waking-life: thematic continuity, e.g., being aggressive in waking-life and being aggressive in dreams (cf. Schredl & Mathes, 2014), emotional continuity, e.g., the fear about possible negative evaluations by others, or metaphorical continuity, “killing” as metaphor for ending relationships. It would be very interesting to study dreams with behavior that is outside the law in larger dream samples.

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