

Animals in a long dream series

Michael Schredl

Central Institute of Mental Health, Medical Faculty Mannheim/Heidelberg University, Germany

Summary. In adults, between 5% to about 10% of the dreams include animals; however, studies analyzing specifically the interaction between the animal and the dreamer are quite rare. Two recent studies indicate that animal dreams might not be as negative as previously thought. The present study is based on a series of 2,004 dreams of a female dreamer. Overall, animals were present in about 11% of them. In almost 50% of the dreams, there was no direct interaction between dreamer and animal, i.e., the dreamer just saw the animal. Negative interactions (annoying, threatening, being bitten, fighting) slightly outweigh positive interactions (caring for the animal, playing with the animal). For the dreamer, several animal dreams have been interpreted as metaphors for her current waking-life status, e.g., caring for herself, so it would be interesting to carry out large-scaled diary studies linking waking life, e.g., emotional status, and animal dreams.

Keywords: Dream series, animal dreams, metaphor

1. Introduction

Already in the Bible animal dreams were mentioned, for example, the well-known dream of the seven fat and the seven gaunt cows of the Pharaoh (Genesis, 41) which was interpreted by Joseph. Interestingly, what cows might represent was not interpreted but the animals' behavior (one group eating up the other) was linked to waking life (seven years of drought).

In adults, between 5% to about 10% of the dreams include animals (Domhoff, 1996; Strauch & Meier, 1992, 1996; Van de Castle, 1983), whereas animals occur in up to 50% of children's dreams (Foulkes, 1982; Van de Castle, 1983). A simple explanation for this difference is that children are exposed to animal themes in media (children's stories, cartoons etc.) more often than adults but also are more likely to play with toy animals (Garfield, 1984). Similarly, adult animal activists reported many more animal dreams (38.4%) compared to adult samples (Lewis, 2008), reflecting the fact that animals are important for them in waking life. "Cat percent" (ratio of cat dreams in relation to the sum of cat and dog dreams) ranged between 60% and 72% for "cat lovers" (persons who own and/or like cats) and, thus, was higher compared to 45% for the female norms and 15% for the male norms (Domhoff, 2003). Dog owners more-over dreamed much more often about dogs compared to individuals who never had a dog (Schredl, Bailer, Weigel, & Welt, 2020). In addition, persons with negative experiences with dogs in their waking life (often in childhood) reported a higher percentage of dreams with threatening dogs (Schredl et al., 2020). In sum, the findings regarding the frequency of animal dreams are in line with the continuity hypothesis

formulated by Hall and Nordby (1972), reflecting waking-life experiences (overt behavior) and thoughts, feelings, and fantasies (covert behavior) in relation to animals encountered in waking (or animals in media).

Research regarding the interaction between dream animal and dreamer research is relatively scarce. Domhoff (1996) reported that aggressive interactions between dreamer and animal occur in about 35% of all animal contacts whereas friendly interaction with animals only occurred in every tenth animal encounter. In a sample of 100 dreams provided by art students who also illustrated the dream with digital images, 22 dreams included animals and 17 of these 22 animal dreams (77.3%) included fear (Kunzendorf & Veatch, 2013). The example of a recurrent dream "All of a sudden, a swarm of bees approaches my window and finds their way inside. They then covered my mouth and did not allow me to breathe until I was suffocated. Then I died/woke up." illustrates how impressive negative animal dreams can be (Kunzendorf & Veatch, 2013).

Animal activists who care for the well-being of animals have more friendly interactions than aggressions in their animal dreams (Lewis, 2008). In a single-case study of 8,400 dreams, in about 60% of the dreams were no direct contact between the dreamer and the animal (dreamer just sees the animal), and positive interactions like caring for the animal and playing with the animal were as frequent as negative interactions like being bitten, threatened, annoyed by the animal (Schredl, 2013). In a second study of 2,716 most recent dreams reported by children, adolescents, and adults, "negative" interactions (being chased, animal is threatening, animal bites, fighting the animal, being killed, animal is annoying) slightly outweigh the "positive" interactions (caring for the animal, riding the animal, playing with the animal, animal is helpful) (35.79% vs. 30.53%) (Schredl & Blagrove, 2021). These findings are not in line with the previous findings of mostly aggressive dreamer-animal interactions (Despert, 1949; Domhoff, 1996; Schredl & Pallmer, 1998; Van de Castle, 1983) but highlight the broad variety of interaction types between dreamer and dream animals.

The present study analyzed the frequency of animal dreams within a dream series of 2,004 dreams recorded by a dreamer over a period of thirty-one years. The major aim of the study was to take a closer look at the types of inter-

Corresponding address:

Michael Schredl, Sleep laboratory, Central Institute of Mental Health, PO Box 12 21 20, 68072 Mannheim, Germany.
Email: Michael.Schredl@zi-mannheim.de

Submitted for publication: March 2021

Accepted for publication: March 2021

DOI: 10.11588/ijodr.2021.1.79436

action between the dreamer and the dream animals, i.e., whether there is a balance of negative and positive interactions.

2. Method

2.1. Dream diary

The participant kept an unstructured dream diary from the age of 38, beginning in 1990 through 2020. For the present analysis, all 2,004 dreams from that period were included (see Table 1).

2.2. Participant and procedure

The female participant lives in a Benedictine convent in Germany since she was 18 years old. As a child, she owned a

canary. At the age of ten, a dachshund wanted to bite her, but only bit the stockings. The dreamer is afraid of large dogs and also of wolves that live in the forest area near the convent. Within the convent, there are two cats, squirrels and other animals in the garden. In the nearby forest the dreamer occasionally saw dogs walked by their owners and also boars, deer, and foxes.

The dream reports were coded by the dreamer herself. Each dream was rated for the presence of different animal species (see Table 2). Multiple occurrences of the same species within a dream, e.g., several cats, were coded in the same way as single occurrences. In some cases, the dreamer could not identify the animal; this was coded separately ("Animal (not specified)"). For comparing the present data with other data sets, animal species were grouped into eleven categories: cat, dog, horse, birds (eagle, duck, owl, goose, chicken, chick, parrot, peacock, penguin, bird not specified), rodents (beaver, squirrel, hamster, rabbit, mouse, guinea pig, rat, dormouse), predators (bear, lion, big cat, weasel, wolf), insects/snails (ants, bee, fly, stag beetle, insects not specified, lice, caterpillar, butterfly, scorpion, spider, slugs, worm), reptiles (lizard, frog, crocodile, reptiles not specified, turtle, snake), water animals (dolphin, fish, shark, octopus, crab, seal, whale), farm animals/native species (donkey, hedgehog, cattle, sheep, pig, game animals, goat, fox), and exotic animals (ape, elephant, giraffe, camel, kangaroo, hippopotamus, duckbill platypus, skunk, raccoon).

Next, the type of interaction between the dreamer and the animal was specified according to the following groupings: "Seeing/No direct contact", "Caring for the animal", "Animal is threatening", "Playing with the animal", "Killing/Hurting the animal", "Animal bites", "Fighting with the animal", and "Animal is annoying". The emotional tone was determined as follows: predominantly positive, predominantly negative, or neutral if there was not sufficient information about the dreamer's emotions or the dreamer did not experience specific emotions. In one case (lion), two different types of interactions between animal and dreamer within the same dream were coded. Then, it was coded as to whether there was something bizarre with the animal within the dream, e.g., bigger than in waking life or the animal talks, etc. The analysis was carried out using the SAS 9.4 for Windows software package.

3. Results

Overall, animals were present in 224 dreams (about 11% of the total dream series; see Table 1). Over the 31-year time span, there is a marked variation of animal dream percentages per year, ranging from 0.00% to 25.00%.

The frequencies of the full range of animal species are depicted in Table 2. Dogs were found most often, followed by horses, birds, and lions. As stated above, the animal species were grouped into eleven categories (see Table 3). In addition to the frequency, the rank orders within each data set are included in Table 3. Even though there are similarities between the four data sets (present dream series, male dream series, German students, American students), e.g., dogs are common whereas exotic animals are quite rare in dreams; there are also distinct differences between the present dream series and the other three data sets. First, cats are very rare, whereas predators were more frequent (see ranked order). That is, cat percent (cat dreams in relation to the sum of cat and dog dreams) is low: 9.84% compared to the dream series of Schredl (2013) with 54.5%; and

Table 1. Animal dreams in the dream series (N = 2,004)

Year	Dreams	Dreams with animal(s)	Percentage of animal dreams
1990	47	5	10.64%
1991	9	0	0.00%
1992	99	12	12.12%
1993	103	12	11.65%
1994	149	14	9.40%
1995	152	21	13.82%
1996	104	9	8.65%
1997	140	19	13.57%
1998	88	22	25.00%
1999	142	16	11.27%
2000	142	20	14.08%
2001	104	20	19.23%
2002	70	10	14.29%
2003	58	5	8.62%
2004	91	8	8.79%
2005	44	1	2.27%
2006	61	5	8.20%
2007	41	4	9.76%
2008	32	1	3.13%
2009	32	2	6.25%
2010	16	1	6.25%
2011	15	2	13.33%
2012	28	2	7.14%
2013	41	2	4.88%
2014	34	2	5.88%
2015	36	4	11.11%
2016	26	1	3.85%
2017	30	0	0.00%
2018	23	1	4.35%
2019	15	1	6.67%
2020	32	2	6.25%
Total	2004	224	11.18%

Table 2. Animal species in the dream series (N = 266)

Species	Frequency	Species	Frequency
Dog	53	Ant	3
Horse	27	Fly	3
Bird (not otherwise categorized)	22	Deer	3
Lion	13	Monkey	2
Animal (not specified)	11	Dolphin	2
Spider	10	Squirrel	2
Fish	9	Lizard	2
Snake	9	Elephant	2
Bear	8	Donkey	2
Cat	6	Frog	2
Bat	5	Grasshopper	2
Mouse	5	Seal	2
Rat	5	Turtle	2
Sheep	5	Pig	2
Cow	4	Wasp	2
Tiger	4	Boar	2
Wolf	4	Worm	2

(N = 1: Oyster, leech, buffalo, cobra, flamingo, fox, shark, hornet, bumblebee, hyena, tadpole, beetle, kangaroo, chick, leopard, dragon-fly, mole, moth, peacock, rat/beaver, caterpillar, reindeer, bovine, redbfish, jackal, spiny animal, bull, stork, goat)

32% in the German student sample and 29% in the American student sample (see frequencies presented in Table 3).

In Table 4, the types of contact with the animal(s) in the dream are listed. Interestingly, most often there is no direct contact with the animal. Negative interactions (annoying, threatening, being bitten, fighting) outweigh positive interactions (caring for the animal, playing with the animal) with

28.57% compared to 21.80%. In 92 cases the interaction between the dreamer and the animal included explicitly mentioned negative emotions and, in 82 cases, explicitly mentioned positive emotions. As expected, the negative contacts often went along with negative emotions, whereas playing with the animal was often mentioned as positive (see Table 4). The animals most often associated with negative interactions are dogs, horses, and lions (see Table 4). Dogs, horses, and birds were most often mentioned in the category of positive interactions. In 18 dreams, something bizarre was associated with the animal, e.g., metamorphoses of animals into humans (N = 5), metamorphoses of one animal species into another (N = 4), animal was talking (N = 2), animal was unusually small (N = 2), and a lion with a blue mane.

Dream example (Transformation)

“In a school class. It’s probably a lesson about lizards. The teacher has a dark lizard in her hand and is now giving it to me. Although I don’t really like to touch animals like that, I take it in my hand. Suddenly I see to my amazement that the animal not only changes its color, but also its shape. Now it’s a little green frog and then other figures that I don’t remember.”

Dream example (Animal talks)

“My mother, sister and niece and I are about to sit on a sled pulled by a dog. It’s already dark and the dog jumps restlessly back and forth along the sled. Strangely enough, I’m not afraid of the dog because it just belongs to us. Now I suddenly hear the dog say that he is so restless because he is not used to pulling the sled so late. Normally, he’s always at home and sleeps when it’s dark...”

Dream example (Talking and transformation)

“A horse is standing in front of the house (strange surroundings). All of a sudden I hear it say to me: “I’m thirsty!”

Table 3. Animal groups in two dream series and two student dream samples

Species	Current dream series (N = 2,004 dreams)		Dream series (Schredl, 2013) (N = 8,420 dreams)		German student sample (N = 1,612 dreams) ¹		American student sample (N = 4,000 dreams) ²	
	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
Dog	53	1	108	2	51	1	66	1
Predators	31	2	38	9	14	8	23	8.5
Insects/Slugs	28	3	69	4	27	2	23	8.5
Horse	27	4	47	8	24	3.5	59	2
Birds	26	5	53	7	18	7	41	4
Farm animals/native species	23	6	54	6	10	10	31	5
Rodents	19	7	73	3	18	6	18	10
Reptiles	17	8.5	56	5	11	9	29	6
Water animals	17	8.5	36	11	20	5	44	3
Exotic animals	6	10.5	37	10	5	11	7	11
Cat	6	10.5	129	1	24	3.5	27	7

¹Dream reports of 425 students (Schredl, 2013), ²Dream reports of 801 students (Van de Castle, 1983)

Table 4. Type of contact with animals (N = 266 interactions in 224 dreams)

Type of Contact	Frequency	Percentage	Negative Emotion	Positive Emotion	Maximum of Top 5 Animals
Seeing/No direct contact	125	46.99%	20.00%	30.40%	Dog (17), bird (12), horse (9), animal (not specified) (9), fish (8)
Animal is annoying	60	22.56%	78.33%	6.67%	Dog (19), lion (5), spider (5), bear (4), mouse (3)
Playing with the animal	37	13.91%	5.41%	67.57%	Dog (8), horse (7), bat (3), cat (2), sheep (2)
Caring for the animal	21	7.89%	23.81%	66.67%	Bird (5), dog (4), horse (4)
Animal is threatening	12	4.51%	41.67%	0.00%	Horse (4), Dog (3), lion (2)
Killing/Hurting the animal	7	2.63%	71.43%	14.29%	Fish (1), cat (1), snake (1), spider (1), hornet (1)
Animal bites	2	0.75%	100.00%	0.00%	Dog (2)
Fighting with the animal	2	0.75%	50.00%	0.00%	Horse (1), snake (1)

When I listened in disbelief, it said again: "I'm thirsty!" I walk quickly to fetch water with the horse pail. When I come back with the full bucket, the horse has gone into the house; I saw the tail end as it disappears into the first room on the right. The others say they couldn't hold it, not even the rider. I follow quickly with the water, because I have to bring it water because the others don't believe me that he asked for water and spoke correctly. When I come into the house, the others tell me that it has disappeared into that room on the right, where I just saw it go. When I opened the door cautiously, because I don't know whether it was raging because of thirst, there was not a horse in the room, but a woman. The horse has turned into a woman!"

4. Discussion

Overall, animals were found in about 11% of the dreams – within the range of findings in a large adult samples of 7.5% to 13.51% (Schredl & Blagrove, 2021; Van de Castle, 1983). The most common animal is a dog – again in line with previous literature (Domhoff, 1996; Van de Castle, 1983). Similar to the findings of Schredl (2013) and Schredl and Blagrove (2021), the dreamer didn't interact with the animal in most cases, and the interactions in the remaining dreams were positively- and negatively-toned almost equally often, i.e., previous findings that animal-human interactions are predominantly negative (Despert, 1949; Domhoff, 1996; Schredl & Pallmer, 1998; Van de Castle, 1983) are not corroborated.

From a methodological viewpoint, the present findings are based on a single dreamer, that is, the generalizability is limited. However, the frequency of animals and the distribution of the animal interaction categories are roughly comparable with previous findings (Schredl, 2013; Schredl & Blagrove, 2021); indicating the validity of the findings. Another issue concerns the coding procedure that was carried out by the dreamer herself; however, previous research indicated that this type of scale (scoring for absence or presence of dream elements) show typically high interrater reliability indices (Schredl, Burchert, & Grabatin, 2004). That is, a possible bias due to the self-coding by the dreamer is likely to be minimal. The advantage of using a long dream series of a single dreamer was that it was possible to ask the dreamer about her own thoughts about her dreams (see below).

Although animal dreams are more common in children compared to adults (Schredl & Blagrove, 2021; Van de Cas-

tle, 1983), a marked proportion of dreams (about 10%) include animals. This percentage is even higher for dog owners (about 19% of their dreams feature dogs). I.e., the first explanation for animal dreams is that they reflect the close relationship between dreamer and animals in waking life. So far, it is not known whether listening to animal stories, watching nature documentations, or films with animated animals (carried out within an experimental study) increase the frequency of animal dreams. Consuming media with animal references might explain why children dream more about animals than adults do. The dreamer was working with her dreams in a Jungian way (Hannah, 2006; Hillman, 1982). One thought regarding the relatively high frequency of lions – compared to the other dream samples – was that she was encouraged by others to be brave like a lion (and be worried). The dreamer described her relationship with cats as more distant, e.g., thinking where the cat may have been and, thus, not likely to pat a cat. For her, cats are more mythical creatures, e.g., as they were in ancient Egypt. In the second dream example, the dreamer interpreted the dog within the dream as a representation for her current waking-life situation, as she tended to work too hard, which is not good for her health. In a similar way, the horse that needed water within the dream and then transformed into a woman, was experienced as a powerful dream, highlighting the importance of self-compassion, i.e., caring for herself. Another topic of dreams that include metaphors for the current status of the waking-ego are vehicle-trouble dreams (Zwick, 2020). One could argue that these metaphors reflect continuity of emotions between waking life and dreaming (Hartmann, 2011), in addition to the thematic continuity (Schredl, 2003), e.g., the dog owners dreaming about their dogs. This might be an explanation for so-called discontinuous dream elements (a talking dog, a metamorphosis of an animal into a human; see dream examples), as these elements are perfectly compatible with the continuity of emotions, e.g. fear in bizarre elevator dreams (Schredl, 2020).

To summarize, the analysis of this long dream series indicates that animal dreams play a significant role in dreams of adults, not only reflecting waking-life interactions with animals but may have a deeper meaning, the animal and its behavior towards the dreamer as a metaphor for current waking-life issues of the dreamer. It would be very interesting to carry out large-scaled diary studies linking waking life, e.g., emotional status, and animal dreams (type of animal, type of interaction between dreamer and animal) in order to

study a possible metaphorical relationship between dreams and waking in a more detailed way.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank dreamer for providing her dreams and the associated codings.

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Drawing provided by a friend of the dreamer