

# Family members in a long dream series

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**Summary.** Family members appear within dreams quite often, a finding that is in accordance with the continuity hypothesis of dreaming and the Social Simulation theory. Within a series of 2,025 dreams recorded over more than 30 years by a female dreamer, they were examined to determine how frequently family members occurred over time in her dreams. Overall, the findings indicate that family members were quite common in her dreams, with the mother appearing with the highest frequency. The frequency of the dreams with most family members decreased over time, supporting the hypothesis that childhood/adolescence experiences (closest family bonds) appear less often in dreams as the dreamer is getting older. The frequency of the dreams that included the mother decreased after her death, also supporting the continuity hypothesis of dreams. For testing the strengthening hypothesis of the Social Simulation Theory, it would be very interesting to study whether the frequency of dreams of a particular family member is associated with an increase in closeness over time.

**Keywords:** Dream series, family member dreams, deceased persons

## 1. Introduction

Social interactions are very common in dreams (Domhoff, 1996; Hall & Van de Castle, 1966; Schredl, 2018), especially with close persons like family members (Domhoff, 2003; Lortie-Lussier, Cote, & Vachon, 2000; Schweickert, 2007) or romantic partners (Schredl, Cadiñanos Echevarria, Saint Macary, & Weiss, 2020; Schredl & Wood, 2021; Selterman, Apetroaia, Riela, & Aron, 2014). Based on the mathematical model of the continuity hypothesis (Schredl, 2003), the high frequency of close persons in dreams is explained by the amount of time spent with the person in waking life (e.g., Schredl & Hofmann, 2003) and the high personal significance (e.g., Schredl et al., 2020). In addition, dreams seems to favor social interactions over cognitive activities (Hartmann, 2000). That is, it seems beneficial to specify the more general formulation of the continuity hypothesis stating that dreams reflect waking life factors (Hall & Nordby, 1972) like emotional intensity, etc. that affect the probability of incorporating waking-life experiences including thoughts, feelings etc. into dreams (Schredl, 2012). Interestingly, the Social Simulation Theory (Revonsuo, Tuominen, & Valli, 2015) that postulates the social simulations in dreams are helpful in increasing the probability of producing off-spring (evolutionary function) by strengthening the dreamer's most important social bonds from waking life also predict high prevalence rates of close persons like family members and partners in dreams. As social simulations are important for survival, they should occur more often in dreams than other activities. This is the so-called sociality bias (Revonsuo et al., 2015), which is similar to one of the factors of the math-

ematical model of the continuity hypothesis (Schredl, 2003). That is, despite the different backgrounds the continuity hypothesis (purely descriptive and not postulating a dream function) and the Social Simulation Theory (evolutionary function of dreaming) make the same prediction regarding the occurrence of close persons within dreams.

In a dream series of an adult male, the percentage of dreams with family members (mother, father, sister, brother) declined from young adulthood to middle age (time span of 24 years) (Schredl, 2013). This would also be in line with the mathematical model of the continuity hypothesis (Schredl, 2003) as the time interval between dream and waking-life experience is of importance (exponential decline) – keeping in mind that dreams not only reflect current waking life but also experiences of the dreamer's past, e.g., childhood/adolescence, time periods in which the family bonds were closest (living together). The findings that female students dream more often about their mother (16% to 20% (16% to 20%; Hall & Van de Castle, 1966; Schredl, 2013) than a middle-aged woman in her forties to fifties (7.7%; Barb Sanders; Domhoff, 2003) support this line of thinking.

The present study analyzed the frequency of family members within a dream series of 2,025 dreams recorded by a female dreamer over a period of thirty-one and a half years. The major aim of the study was to study the frequency of family members over time. Moreover, it was expected that dreams with the mother would decline in frequency after her death.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Dream diary

The participant kept an unstructured dream diary from the age of 38, beginning in 1990 through 2021. For the present analysis, all 2,025 dreams from that period were included.

### 2.2. Participant and procedure

The female participant dreamer lived at home until 1970, and then one year in a different household. Since 1971 she lives as a nun in a Benedictine convent in Germany. The

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Table 1. The family of the dreamer

Family member	Year(s)
Father	1908 to 1988
Mother	1921 to 2011
Brother 1	Born 1949
Dreamer	Born 1951
Brother 2	Born 1953
Sister	Born 1955

members of the core family are depicted in Table 1. Face-to-face contacts occurred about once a year, regular telephone calls since 1990. The dreamer describes her family bonds as close, closest with the father and the younger brother. The relationship with the sister was more complex, sometimes including arguments.

The dream reports were coded by the dreamer herself. Each dream was rated for the presence of one of the five family members. The analysis was carried out using the SAS 9.4 for Windows software package (SAS Institute, Cary, North Carolina, USA).

### 3. Results

Dreams including the mother occurred more often than dreams of the father (see Table 2). Interestingly, the mother of “Barb Sanders” was also the most frequent family member, but the frequency of father dreams was considerably lower in the current dream series. Regarding siblings, the dreamer dreamed most often about her sister, more than twice as often as about her brothers (see Table 2); whereas “Barb Sanders” dreamed more often about her favorite brother compared to her other two siblings.

The frequency of mother dreams declined from the first time interval (1990 to 2000) to the second time interval (2001 to 2011), and even declined further after the death of the mother (see Table 3). Whereas for the father and the older brother there was no substantial decline between the first time interval and the second, the sister and the younger brother appeared less often in dreams between 2006 and 2021 compared to dreams between 1990 and 2005 (see Table 4).

### 4. Discussion

Overall, the findings indicate that family members are – as expected and reported previously (Domhoff, 2003; Lortie-

Lussier et al., 2000; Schredl, 2013; Schweickert, 2007) – quite common in dreams, with the mother showing the highest frequency. The frequency of dreams with most family members decreased over time, supporting the hypothesis that childhood/adolescence experiences (closest family bonds) occur less often in dreams as the dreamer is aging. The frequency of the dreams that included the mother decreased after her death, supporting the continuity hypothesis of dreams.

From a methodological viewpoint, one has to take into account that the present findings are based on a single dreamer, thus, the generalizability is limited. However, the frequency of family members is comparable with another female dreamer reporting a long dream series (Domhoff, 2003); indicating the validity of the findings. The coding was carried out by the dreamer herself and not by external judges; however, previous research has indicated that identifying dream characters show typically very high interrater reliability (Schredl, Burchert, & Grabatin, 2004). That is, a possible bias due to the self-coding by the dreamer is likely to be very small.

In female students, the mother appears considerably more often in dreams compared to the father (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966; Schredl, 2013) – like with the current dreamer, whereas in male students father and mother appear equally often in their dreams, e.g., 16.2% mother dreams vs. 12.4% father dreams in females students and 7.8% mother dreams vs. 8.0% father dreams in male students (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966). Based on the mathematical model of the continuity hypothesis (Schredl, 2003), one might hypothesize that young women might spent more time with their mothers than with their fathers, the mother-daughter relationship might be more salient for the personal development of women compared to men, and/or conflicts and arguments between daughter and mothers might be more common than between daughters and their fathers. So far, empirical studies testing whether these relationship variables might explain this gender difference in father and mother dreams are lacking.

Based on the Strengthening Hypothesis within the framework of the Social Simulation Theory (Revonsuo et al., 2015), one would predict that frequent mother dreams, especially those with positive interactions with the mother, should strengthen the social bond between mother and daughter over time. One paradigm would be to study long dream series of different dreamers and test whether the frequency of mother dreams in a pre-defined time interval is correlated with an increase in closeness between the dreamer and his or her mother within this interval.

Table 2. Dreams of family members

Current dream series (N = 2,025 dreams)			“Barb Sanders” (N = 3,117 dreams) <sup>1</sup>		
Family member	Frequency	Percentage	Family member	Frequency	Percentage
Father	36	1.78%	Father	213	6.83%
Mother	160	7.90%	Mother	239	7.67%
Brother 1	57	2.81%	Favorite brother	97	3.11%
Brother 2	46	2.27%	Sister + other brother together	97	3.11%
Sister	125	6.17%			

<sup>1</sup>Domhoff (2003)

Table 3. Dreams of the mother

Year	Total number of dreams	Dreams with the mother
1990 to 2000	1175	10.30%
2001 to 2011	564	4.96%
2012 to 2021	286	2.45%

In a similar way, female students dream more about their sister(s) than their brother(s), whereas male students dream more often about their brother(s) than their sister(s) (Hall & Van de Castle, 1966; Schredl, 2013). Again, it would be interesting to study whether waking-life parameters like time spent together, closeness, and conflict frequency might explain these differences in dream content. Whereas “Barb Sanders” dreamed more often about her favorite brother compared to the other siblings, the current dreamer dreamed more often about her sister with whom she has a more conflict-laden relationship compared to her other siblings. This would reflect the emotional intensity factor of the continuity hypothesis model (Schredl, 2006).

Furthermore, the decrease of dreams with family members over time reported by Schredl (2013) could be largely confirmed within the present dream series (for the mother, the younger brother, and the sister). This could be described by the time factor (time interval between dream and waking-life experience, in this case, the intensive family bonds in childhood/adolescence) of the continuity hypothesis model that models an exponential decrease of incorporation over time (Schredl, 2003). Whether this finding can also be explained within the framework of the Social Simulation Theory (Tuominen, Revonsuo, & Valli, 2019) is an open question.

The frequency of mother dreams decreased over time and dropped again after her death. Based on the continuity hypothesis one would hypothesize that dreams of deceased persons reflect the memories and mourning process of the dreamer (cf. Black, Belicki, Piro, & Hughes, 2020) because no new direct waking-life experiences with this person is possible. Interestingly, it seems not that easy to explain dreams of deceased persons within the framework of the Social Simulation Theory as the strengthening of a waking-life social bond is no longer possible.

To summarize, the analysis of family members within this long dream series supports the continuity hypothesis model specifying several factors like time interval, emotional intensity of the waking-life experience and so on. However, future research should elicit in more sophisticated ways the actual and past status of the family bonds in larger samples in order to determine how strong these relationship factors are related to the frequency of family member dreams. In order to test the Strengthening Hypothesis of the Social

Table 4. Dreams of family members for two periods

Family member	1990 to 2005	2006 to 2021
Father	1.82%	1.66%
Brother 1	2.98%	2.28%
Brother 2	2.72%	0.83%
Sister	7.07%	3.31%
Number of dreams	1542	483

Simulation Theory, it would be very interesting to study the changes in closeness within the relationship over time and whether an increase in closeness is related to the frequency of dreaming about the person.

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