

Dreams and dream work of older adults in transition: A review of the literature

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Summary. Older adults face unique life transitions related to retirement from paid work, relocation of residence to higher levels of care, and bereavement/end-of-life. Research exploring dream content and dream work for older adults can facilitate understanding about their unconscious experiences and emotions, can promote greater understanding about their mental health needs, and support dream work methods that enhance well-being for older adults in transition. Although studies in this area are minimal, there is more research about the transitions of bereavement and death for older adults as compared to research in the areas of retirement and relocation of residence for older adults. Dream research of the bereaved indicate the importance of dreams to facilitate the grieving process and to maintain a sense of connection with deceased loved ones. Studies about end-of-life dreams share common themes related to taking a journey and a sense of deceased loved ones waiting nearby. These studies also highlight dream content that expands across the entirety of life and may prompt reflection of unresolved issues. Implications for scholars and practitioners include research methods that promote continued rigor in the field and empirically based guidelines when providing dream work services to older adults in transition.

Keywords: Older adult dreams; dream work; retirement; bereavement; death

1. Introduction

While scholars have focused on dreams throughout the lifespan, there are a lack of studies specifically centered on the dream content and dream work of older adults during the critical life transitions unique to this stage of life. Studies suggest that life transitions for older adults can prompt challenging symptoms, such as depression and anxiety. Therefore, research investigating the dreams of older adults during these transitions can provide insight about their unconscious experiences and has the potential to promote greater understanding about their mental health needs (Scarpelli et al., 2019). Research in this area is also critical in supporting the development and implementation of dream work methods that can enhance well-being during times of transition for older adults.

This literature review examines dream research focused on older adults throughout the life transitions most often found in the literature: (1) retirement from paid employment, (2) relocation of residence to higher level of care, and (3) bereavement/end-of-life (Kaplan & Berkman, 2016; Seedsman, 2021; Vrkljan et al., 2018). The purpose of this review is to identify what has been learned from the research and to address the implications for scholars and practitioners in this area. This review addresses implications for dream research with a focus on topics in need of examination and research methods that can enhance this line of inquiry. Impli-

cations for practitioners who work with older adults will also be identified, with a focus on empirically based dream work guidelines that may promote well-being for older adults in transition.

Research included in this literature review is from peer-reviewed journals and books, and spans numerous disciplines, such as nursing, social work, psychiatry, and hospice/palliative care. The aim was to include research within the past ten years, but when there was a scarcity of research about a given subject, studies outside of this timeframe were included. The term older adults is used throughout this review and includes individuals approximately 60 years and older. The term dream work is used to describe support services that incorporate discussion about dream content and/or dream interpretation in individual or group settings.

2. Dream Research focused on Life Transitions for Older Adults

2.1. Retirement from Paid Employment

Retirement is one of the first transitions that older adults face as they enter this stage of life (Kaplan & Berkman, 2016) and is identified as a significant transition for older adults in the literature (Seedsman, 2021; Vrkljan et al., 2018). However, research in this area is limited. For the purpose of this literature review, one study was found focused on the dreams of older adults transitioning through retirement. Concerns for older adults that may arise during retirement can relate to finances, daily life structure, and identity outside of a paid profession (Osborne, 2012). However, due to the limited number of studies in this area, little is known about how older adults are processing these experiences in their dreams or about their mental health during this time.

Funkhouser and colleagues (2008) investigated dream telling and intra-psycho boundaries for 102 Swiss older adults transitioning to retirement. Participants ranged in age from

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59 to 65 years old. They completed questionnaires three months before retirement, again at the time of retirement, and six months following retirement. Results indicated a general thickening of participants' intra-psychoic boundaries over the nine-month period of the study, with women having more of an increase in thickness over this time as compared to men participants.

To fully understand these results, it is imperative to understand the difference between thin and thick intra-psychoic boundaries, which was a main concept guiding this study. According to the research, individuals with thin boundaries have less boundaries between emotions and thoughts. Additionally, thin boundaries appear to be the only personality measure clearly associated with dream recall frequency. Individuals who measure with thin boundaries, tend to have increased dream recall as compared to individuals who measure with thick boundaries (Hartman & Kundzendorf, 2007). Thick boundaries align with individuals who have more of a separation between thoughts and feelings and have a clear sense between dream and wake states. In this study, Funkhouser and team (2008) used Hartmann's Boundary Questionnaire to measure thin and thick boundaries. The fact that their participants boundaries thickened over the nine-month research period prompts questions about how the transition of retirement may influence intra-psychoic boundaries, particularly for women. Also, thickened boundaries might suggest that older adult retirees are more actively separating between thoughts and emotions, which could potentially impact their life perceptions and experiences. This study was part of a larger research project and therefore the dream content data was not reported in this article.

In relation to dream recall, Funkhouser and colleagues (2008) found that participants experienced thickening of boundaries during the retirement process, which is related to a potential in decreased dream recall. In a review of research focused on dream recall and disturbing dreams, Scarpelli et al. (2019) also found that older adults' ability to recall dreams decreases as they age. Yet, Giambra, Jung, and Grodsky (1996) examined dream recall for men and women ranging in age from 17 to 92 years old. They found that there was a slight increase in dream retention peaking at age 68 for both sexes. These conflicting findings indicate that dream recall for older adults is not clear. Additional research is needed in this area to fully understand intra-psychoic boundaries, dream recall, and the retirement transition for older adults.

In relation to dream work, research indicates that educational workshops and courses about aging and retirement may have positive impact for older adults in retirement transition (e.g., decreased physiological symptoms of stress, increased marriage satisfaction) (Vrkljan et al., 2018). Dream work may also fit within this category in helping older adults adjust. However, in this review of the literature no studies addressing dream work during retirement for older adults were found.

2.2. Relocation of Residence to Higher Level of Care

Relocation of residence to higher levels of care can be a jolting experience for older adults, especially for those who may not have made the choice for themselves (Vrkljan et al., 2018). Yet, of the three most significant transitions for older adults covered in this review, it is the least studied. Furthermore, mental health support has been identified as a useful strategy to support older adults moving to assisted

living or nursing home communities and therefore traditional counseling has been the main focus of most scholarship (Mueller, Van Puymbroeck, Crowe, & Davis, 2021; Vrkljan et al., 2018). There is a dearth in the literature regarding dream content and dream work for older adults during their relocation of residence.

2.3. Bereavement

According to the research, dreams play a significant role in the bereavement process for older adults. In addition to helping bereaved older adults process trauma related to the death of a loved one, data suggests that dreams about the deceased may help the bereaved maintain a connection to their loved ones (Black, Belicki, Piro, & Hughes, 2021; Owczarski, 2021).

Black, Belicki, Piro, and Hughes (2021) assessed the post-dream reactions of individuals who had dreams about recently deceased loved ones. Their goal was to determine if they perceived their dreams as comforting or distressing. The research team focused on three types of dream functions: processing trauma related to the loss, continuing bonds (e.g., an active attempt to maintain attachment with the deceased) and regulating emotions. Their sample included 216 individuals whose romantic partner or spouse had died in the past six months to two years. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 68 years old, with a mean age of 33.45. Their findings suggest that dreams about deceased loved ones passively reflected dreamers' waking state, while also helping them process their grief. In other words, participants who indicated positive relationship with the deceased (i.e., waking state), also reported more comforting dreams about the deceased. Similarly, Owczarski (2021) conducted an in-depth case study focused on a woman's dreams about her deceased mother over a year long period. These dreams seemed to promote healing for the woman as Owczarski (2021) explained "all the dreams, even those full of bad emotions, had a kind of therapeutic effect as they simply allowed her to meet her mother again." (p. 34). These findings contribute to understanding dreams during the bereavement process, but were not specifically focused on older adults.

Wright and colleagues (2014) investigated the prevalence, content, and subjective meaning as described by bereaved dreamers. Their study included 278 participants who had been caregivers for a recently deceased loved one. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 98 years old. The mean age of respondents was 63.37 years old. Fifty-eight percent of the sample reported dreaming about deceased loved ones. Dream content often centered around positive past experiences. Wright et al. (2014) described additional dream content themes:

Other prominent categories included the deceased free of illness (n = 65), memories of the deceased's illness or time of death (n = 56), the deceased in the afterlife appearing comfortable and at peace (n = 43), and the deceased communicating a message (n = 41). (p.134)

Participants described their dreams as pleasant or as both pleasant and disturbing. Few participants reported only having disturbing dreams of the deceased. Most respondents also reported that their dreams about the deceased contributed emotionally to their bereavement process. For instance, some participants reported that their dreams

helped them accept the death of their loved ones, while others reported that their dreams caused them to miss their loved ones more. Because their participant mean age was 63.37 years old, these findings provide more insight about the bereavement experience for older adults.

Overall, the dream research discussed in this section highlights the communicative nature of dreams during the bereavement process. Older adults seem to attain comforting messages from their loved ones and may feel continued connection when they dream about the deceased (Wright et al., 2014). Although research suggests that some dreams may be emotionally challenging or even disturbing, evidence indicates that dreams during the bereavement process may have healing potential (Owczarski, 2021). To facilitate this healing potential, continued research in this area is needed to increase understanding and development of mental health support during the bereavement process for older adults.

2.4. End-of-Life

Dream research overall has not always been valued or taken seriously due to its connection to the fluid, metaphorical, spiritual, and/or mythical (Mallon, 2000; Von Franz, 1996). However, regardless of older adults' spiritual or mythical beliefs, studies suggest that end-of-life dreams may help prepare older adults for the process of dying (Mallon, 2000; Nosek et al., 2015). Researchers in this area have focused on dreams in sleep state and visions in waking state and refer to these as end-of-life dreams and visions (ELDV). Most studies focus on both dreams and visions and therefore the research presented in this section will include ELDV. In their ELDV research, Bulkeley and Bulkley (2005) found that ELDV revolved around three main metaphorical themes: (1) death as a journey, (2) encountering guides (e.g., already deceased loved ones) that emerge to help dreamers along this journey, and (3) obstacles often aligned with unresolved conflicts. Much of the ELDV research reveals dream content that aligns with Bulkeley's and Bulkley's findings as well.

In a study by Nosek and colleagues (2015), 66 hospice patients participated in interviews and surveys about their dreams. The mean age of participants was 75.05. Of the 66 participants, 57 reported at least one ELDV. Themes within ELDVs included: (1) sensing a comforting presence near them, (2) preparing to go, (3) watching or engaging with the dead, (4) loved ones waiting for them, (5) distressing experiences, and (6) unfinished business. The first four ELDV themes often included participants' loved ones (e.g., siblings, parents, grandparents, friends, etc) and participants primarily described these ELDV as welcoming and comforting. Conversely, within the last two themes, participants described these ELDV as distressing and reminiscent of previous trauma and/or unfinished business. For example, within the theme distressing experiences, ELDV were related to past traumatic events (e.g., childhood abuse) or difficult relationships. Within the theme, unfinished business, ELDV included participants' concerns about not being able to finish important responsibilities, such as caring for their children. While the majority of their findings align with the literature that indicate the ELDV are comforting and connected to a peaceful death (Mallon, 2000), additional research is needed about distressing ELDV.

Depner and colleagues (2020) collected ELDV of 55 hospice home care patients, ranging in age from 61 to 101 years old. These patients participated in weekly visits in which

the researchers asked open-ended questions about participants' ELDV. While their findings aligned with previous research, they also found a diverse array of dream topics, more expansive as compared to other studies in this area. For example, participants noted the presence of deceased loved ones, like previous research, but also noted the presence of babies and children in their dreams, which is rarely found in similar studies. Additionally, dream topics were more varied and included perceptions about disease progression, existential distress, and life review. Depner and team (2020) also studied the "affective experience and reflection" (p. 106) of ELDV in which participants described their dreams with positive, negative, neutral, and complex emotional reactions. Complex emotional reactions incorporated dreamers' ELDV that contained multiple or conflicting emotional reactions. As part of their reflections, participants also reported trying to make sense of their dreams. For instance, they reported that they were "working things out" in their ELDV or coming to terms with end-of-life (Depner et al., 2020, p. 107).

In his book, *Death is but a Dream: Finding Hope and Meaning at Life's End*, Kerr (2020) interviewed over 1,400 patients/participants of all ages nearing end-of-life about their ELDV. His research team met with participants daily. They found that ELDV about deceased loved ones increased as participants neared death. Like participants in Bulkeley's and Bulkley's, (2005) study, more than one-third of their participants identified travel as a common theme in their ELDV. Many participants indicated that their ELDV were distinct from their typical dreams and were more vivid and realistic. To provide insight about the distinctiveness of dreams versus visions, the research team found that 45 percent of pre-death experiences occurred during sleep state, 16 percent during wake state, and over 39 percent happened in both states. This finding highlights the unique and fluid nature of dreams and visions at end-of-life.

There are numerous common themes in the studies presented in this section. For example, findings indicate a common ELDV theme of getting ready to take a journey (Bulkeley & Bulkley, 2005; Kerr 2020; Nosek et al., 2015) and a theme of life review (Depner et al., 2020). While some ELDV centered on previous trauma, other ELDV helped older adult participants process their unfinished business (Bulkeley & Bulkley, 2005; Depner et al., 2020; Kerr, 2020). These findings provide a comprehensive picture of dream content and can significantly impact the dream work resources developed for older adults at end-of-life. Yet, it is important to note that many of these studies include older adults, but are not specifically focused on older adults.

However, for the purpose of this literature review, which focuses on more current research, no studies about dream work specifically with older adults at end-of-life were found. Similarly, in Vrkljan and colleague's (2018) systematic review of quantitative research about mental health services for older adults in bereavement, they found that many resources included counseling or psychoeducation for older adults. Yet, they did not report specific dream work programming for older adults in bereavement or at end-of-life. In an overview of research related to older adults' dreams, Funkhouser Hirsbrunner, Cornu, and Bahro (1999) underscore the importance of therapy and dream work for older adults at end-of-life:

There has been a tendency to neglect psychodynamic work with older people because of some therapists' be-

liefs that not much can be achieved. However, this review provides ample evidence that such therapy is possible. Information about the dreams of the dying may also indicate ways for work with this group to be taken forward. (p. 17)

3. Implications for Dream Research about Older Adults in Transition

Studies related to retirement and relocation of residence transitions are needed. Research suggests that men struggle with lack of purpose in retirement and mortality rates for men are higher as compared to women upon relocation of residence (Dale et al., 2001; Kim & Moen, 2002). Dream research can provide insight about the unconscious emotions and experiences of men during these transitions and/or help increase awareness about the differences between older adult women and men from the unique perspective of their dream content.

Regarding cross-discipline research, studies indicate that older adults at end-of-life are more likely to report their ELDV to nurses as compared to other health care providers (Brayne, Lovelace, & Fenwick, 2008). Therefore, including nurses in research conducted in counseling, psychology, social work, and other relevant professions, can significantly impact understanding about the ELDV of older adults for practitioners across disciplines. As a result, more wide-ranging support services for older adults focused on dream work could be developed at various levels of care.

Dream Research Methods

The scholars that have focused on dream research of older adults have helped establish this line of inquiry by using rigorous qualitative and quantitative research methods. In this section, Structural Dream Analysis and mixed method research approaches will be reviewed.

Structural Dream Analysis is a qualitative research method in which the conclusions are independent of the interpreter, as Roesler (2020) explains,

Structural Dream Analysis (SDA) was developed as a method to investigate dreams from a structuralist point of view. The assumption is that the meaning of a dream consists not so much in it containing certain symbols or elements but more in the relationship between the elements and in the course of action which the dream takes, i.e. its structure. (p. 47)

Within this framework, dream interpreters analyze dream data without any information about the dreamer. Dreams are viewed as narratives and therefore, analytical tools based in narratology are used to interpret their meaning. For example, coding of narrative structure, which relates to the course of action a dream takes, can be explored by examining how a dream starts and ends. Dream interpreters may also indicate the role the dreamer takes in the dream (e.g., active or passive). For instance, dreamers may take a passive role when they report that they were watching the dream, as if watching a movie, rather than engaging in the dream. Dream interpreters also explore the dreamers' relation to other dream characters (Roesler, 2018). Structural Dream Analysis incorporates using a manual with a systematic series of interpretive steps, to help unify the process for all dream interpreters.

Black, Belicki, Piro, & Hughes (2021) investigated dreams during bereavement and while they did analyze dream content, they also focused on participants' post-dream reactions. Black, Belicki, Piro, & Hughes (2021) explained, "There is preliminary evidence for a similar disjunction between dream and post-dream reactions with dreams of the deceased." (p. 530). To investigate this potential disjunction, they asked participants about their perceptions of their dreams both during their dreams and after they awoke. They then compared this data to the dream content data and participants' results on various quantitative scales (e.g., Inventory of Traumatic Grief, Impact of Event Scale-Revised, Continuing Bonds Scale, etc).

Other researchers have also implemented mixed method approaches in dream research. For instance, Funkhouser and colleagues (2008) used a series of quantitative measures in their investigation of intra-psycho boundaries of older adults transitioning through retirement. However, they also followed up weekly with the trial and control groups to attain qualitative data by asking participants about their sleep quality, dream recall, and dream content. This strategy was used in Kerr's (2020) study as well in which the researchers used quantitative questionnaires so that hospice patients could rate frequency and degree of realism of their ELDV. Kerr's research team then followed up with qualitative data collection, by conducting daily semi-structured interviews about the quantitative responses.

4. Implications for Dream Work with Older Adults in Transition

Dream work is often used in counseling, social work, and medical fields (i.e., hospice, palliative care, oncology, etc.) and can include various techniques. For instance, individual counseling, or therapy, can incorporate discussions and interpretations of dreams. Dreams can also be discussed or interpreted in group settings. There are also other rarer forms of dream work, such as dream incubation, in which individuals ask for guidance from their dreams to answer questions or solve dilemmas (Mallon, 2000). Dream work methods may be grounded in psychoanalytic theory, in shamanistic practices, or may be influenced by theorists, such as Jung or Gestalt (Goelitz, 2007).

While there is minimal research about dream work with older adults in transition, general dream work with older adults has been documented. For example, in a study by Wadensten (2009), Jungian based dream coaching was used with a group of 22 older adults in Sweden to help promote participants' self-growth. Older adult participants in this study described the dream work experience as meaningful. They appreciated the opportunity to discuss their dreams and to hear about the dreams of others. Additionally, some participants noted increased dream recall during participation in dream coaching, with a decrease in dream recall after the group ended. It is important to note that participants identified this type of dream work as a good activity for older adults, particularly in coping with the transition from working life to retirement.

Empirical Guidelines for Dream Work with Older Adults

In a study of hospice palliative care volunteers, Claxton-Oldfield, Gallant, and Claxton-Oldfield (2020), conducted a pilot study in which they measured the impact of a training model

for hospice health care volunteers. Initial findings suggest a positive impact on volunteers' knowledge and ability to talk about ELDV with those at end-of-life and with the healthcare providers serving them. These studies emphasize the need for empirically based dream work guidelines that can support practitioners. Although continued research is needed to explore the types of dream work provided and the impact they may have on older adults in transition, several empirically based guidelines exist that range from more general to more in-depth approaches to dream work.

In their pilot study, Claxton-Oldfield and team (2022) developed a training model largely based on Holden's (2019) recommendations for healthcare providers when responding to near-death experiences. Their training was 45 minutes and provided an ELDV definition, ELDV examples, and impact of ELDV on individuals at end-of-life. They also listed "dos" and "don'ts" to provide specific examples of application (Claxton-Oldfield, Hicks, & Claxton-Oldfield, 2022, p. 80). Similarly, Wadensten and Carlsson (2003) created an empirically based set of guidelines for the care of older adults based on Tornstam's (2005, 2011) Gerotranscendence Theory. Gerotranscendence Theory contains numerous dimensions that promote positive development for older adults, regardless of external perceptions about aging (Tornstam, 2005, 2011). Wadensten's and Carlsson's (2003) seven guidelines align specifically with these Gerotranscendence dimensions and incorporate strategies, such as honoring alternative perceptions of time, supporting conversations about death, and facilitating quiet spaces for older adults. Wadensten and Carlsson also recommended facilitating conversation topics that support personal growth, such as asking older adults about their dreams and exploring the meaning of their dreams with them.

Related specifically to in-depth dream work, Hess (2004) integrated the Tasks of Mourning Model with Hill's (1996) Cognitive-Experiential Model of Dream Interpretation Model, which includes three stages: (1) exploration of dream symbols, (2) insights based on connecting these symbols to waking thoughts and emotions, and (3) action based on the dream interpretation. As indicated in the final stage, action is a key characteristic of this model and prompts older adults to act on what they learn from their dreams. This model may be particularly relevant in helping older adults find ways to take action during transition to retirement and relocation of residence. Moreover, when possible, practitioners can use this model to help older adults take action addressing unfinished business as they near end-of-life, with the aim of promoting a more peaceful death (Mazzarino-Willett, 2010; Nosek et al., 2015).

In Wadensten's (2009) study about older adults' experiences of dream work, a dream coaching model was used. This is a model based on Jungian Psychology and incorporates non-directive small groups in which participants share their dreams. Although it is rooted in a non-directive approach, it prompts in-depth dream discussions and requires specific training. For instance, the group leaders, or dream coaches, are trained at Jungian Institutes and learn how to process their own dreams and the dreams of others. They are also trained to facilitate groups in a non-controlling manner. In the actual dream coaching experience, the dream coach and group participants may ask questions about different characters and scenes in the dreams brought up during the group session, but neither the dream coach nor the group members offer dream interpretations (Wadensten, 2009).

Ultimately, older adults who may not have been open to dream work in the past, may be more open to it as they approach challenging transitions related to retirement, relocation, bereavement and end-of-life (Goelitz, 2001a, 2001b). Participation in dream work may also increase their ability to access mental health resources without the stigma associated with counseling or therapy (Wadensten, 2009). Therefore, the development and use of these guidelines and models can facilitate theoretically grounded strategies to support the mental health and well-being of older adults in transition.

5. Conclusion

This literature review covered dream studies about older adults experiencing transitions related to retirement from paid work, relocation of residence to higher levels of care, and bereavement/end-of-life. Of these three transitions for older adults, bereavement and end-of-life were the most studied in dream research. Yet, evidence indicates that retirement and relocation of residence are extremely challenging for older adults, especially for men (Scarpelli et al., 2019). Empirical based guidelines and models for dream work were also reviewed, which highlight encouraging findings. Older adults participating in the dream work programs described their experiences as meaningful and the practitioners who offered the programs reported increased competency in their work with older adults (Claxton-Oldfield, Gallant, & Claxton-Oldfield, 2020; Wadensten, 2009). Ultimately, to enhance mental health resources and well-being for older adults, research about retirement, relocation of residence, and empirical dream work guidelines is needed.

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