

Examining dream content and meaning of dreams with English and Italian versions of the storytelling method of dream interpretation

Teresa L. DeCicco¹, Donatella Donati² and Mauro Pini³

¹ Trent University, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

² Private Practitioner, Piombino, Italy

³ Department of Addictions (UF Ser.T.) ASL 6 Livorno, Italy

Summary. This study extended previous research by comparing dream content and discovery passages from the dreams of Canadian and Italian patients who were undergoing psychodynamically-oriented psychotherapy. Thirty Italians and 30 Canadians (17 males and 13 females) completed The Storytelling Method of Dream Interpretation in either Italian or English. Dream and discovery content was analyzed via the Hall and Van de Castle method and then compared between the two groups, and, between genders. Results support previous findings and provide new insight into the differences in both dreams and discovery between the two groups. Results also support the hypothesis that The Storytelling Method is useful and appropriate for use in therapy with both Canadians and Italians in the English and Italian language.

Keywords: TSM, dream therapy, Italians, Canadians

1. Introduction

The meaning and discovery ascribed to a dream via dream interpretation has had some attention in the past literature (Freud; 1900; Jung, 1965) but empirically, this has been the focus of more recent work (DeCicco, 2009; Hill, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979). Previous research has found that the meaning and discovery ascribed to dreams can aid in the process of insight (Pesant & Zadra, 2004), can provide a means to explore emotions (Goelitz, 2001), and be a venue for self-exploration (Hill, 1996; 2003). Dream meaning can also help decrease psychological distress (Crook & Hill, 2003; Pesant & Zadra, 2004), help with feelings of isolation, lack of support, life transition issues, and provide effective coping strategies (DeCicco, 2009; 2007; 2007a; Hill, 2003; 1996). More specifically, dream interpretation has been found to be helpful in the recovery of alcohol addiction (DeCicco & Higgins, 2009; Fiss, 1980) for coping with cancer (Cannici, Malcolm & Peek, 1983; Davidson, Feldman-Stewart, Brennenstuhl & Ram, 2007; Davidson, MacLean, Brundage & Schulze, 2002; DeCicco, Lyons, Pannier & Wright, 2010; Ward, Beck, Roscoe, 1961), with romantic relationship issues (Clarke, DeCicco & Navara, 2009).

Several dream interpretation techniques have been designed and tested for use in clinical and applied practice. For example, The Ullman Method (Ullman & Zimmerman,

1979), The Hill Method (Hill, 1996), The 2-A Method (DeCicco, 2009) and The Storytelling Method (DeCicco, 2007), to name a few. The Storytelling Method of Dream Interpretation (DeCicco, 2007) is a brief method based on waking day experiences, associations, metaphors and cognitions, which allow the dreamer to link dream images to meaningful waking day events (See Appendix A). The method is conducted with worksheets that allow the dreamer to record a dream and follow a protocol that leads from dream imagery to associations, associations to a new narrative passage, and the passage to meaning and discovery. The worksheets have been used with students (DeCicco, 2007), soldiers (Dale & DeCicco, 2011), patients (DeCicco, 2009; DeCicco & Higgins, 2009), community dwelling adults (DeCicco, 2007) and with both males (Dale & DeCicco, 2011) and females (DeCicco, 2007). The method has been repeatedly proven to be useful for discovery and insight from one's dreams (DeCicco, 2009; DeCicco, 2007; DeCicco & Higgins, 2009; Clarke, DeCicco & Navara, 2010). The method was initially designed and tested in English (DeCicco, 2007) and was then translated and tested in an Italian version (DeCicco, 2010; DeCicco, Donati & Pini, 2009) (See Appendix B). Though dream imagery and the interpretation of dreams have been a major focus of study the examination of these across cultures has had little to no attention. A recent study examining nightmares and coping between Asians and Caucasians is one of the rare studies of this nature (Picchioni & Hicks, 2009), and one of the first studies to report a difference in nightmares between these ethnic groups. Interestingly, the finding was unexpected and was revealed through routine analyses that were not intentionally examining cultural differences. After a thorough literature review, few studies comparing dreams between cultures were found and no studies comparing discovery or meaning of dreams between cultures were found to date.

Corresponding address:

Dr. Teresa L. DeCicco: Trent University, Thornton Campus, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. L1H 7K4. Phone: 905 914-1538. Email: teresadecicco@trentu.ca

Submitted for publication: December 2011

Accepted for publication: March 2012

The current research was undertaken in order to extend previous research comparing dreams and discovery between two cultural groups, namely Canadians and Italians. Since dream research with Italians and Canadians, and, between Italians and Canadians has begun (Barcaro & Rizzi, 2010; DeCicco, 2010; DeCicco, Donati & Pini, 2009; Zanasi, DeCicco, Dale, Musolino & Wright, 2011; Schinco & DeCicco, 2010; DeCicco, Dale, Longo, Testoni, & Wright, 2010; Zanasi, DePersis, Caporali, & Siracusano, 2005; Zanasi, Pecorella, Chiaramonte, Niolu, & Siracusano, 2008) and significant findings were revealed, these two groups were chosen for comparison for this study and as a protocol for cross-cultural dream research. The following hypotheses were tested:

1) Based on previous research (Zanasi, et al., 2011; Picchioni & Hicks, 2009), several dream categories will be correlated with discovery categories for both Italians and Canadians, for both genders. For example, dream content of Total Emotions will correlate with discovery of Family for Italian females while dream content of Total Emotions will correlate with discovery of Romantic Relationships for Canadian females

2) Given that previous studies have found differences in dream content between cultural groups and between gender (Zanasi, et al, 2011; Schinco & DeCicco, 2010) it is expected that Canadian women will significantly differ from Italian women in both dream content and discovery categories. Similarly, Canadian men will differ significantly from Italian men in both dream content and discovery.

3) TSM has been found to be useful with several populations (DeCicco, 2010; 2009; DeCicco, 2007a; DeCicco & Higgins, 2009) in that discovery was obtained more than 80% of the time (DeCicco, 2007) and, discovery was relevant for dreamers. That is, discovery was directly linked to waking day issues in meaningful ways. For example, recovering alcoholics found discovery related to sobriety and alcohol recovery (DeCicco & Higgins, 2009). Breast cancer patients found meaning in cancer and cancer treatment (DeCicco, Lyons, Pannier & Wright, 2010). Therefore, it is expected that TSM will be a valuable tool for relevant discovery when used in therapy for both English speaking and Italian speaking clients.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Thirty Italian-speaking therapy patients (17 males and 13 females) (mean age=49, SD=9.77) in Italy participated in the study. An age and gender matched sample of 30 Canadian English-speaking therapy patients in Canada also participated (17 males and 13 females) (mean age= 51, SD=10.01). Patients were undergoing psychodynamically-oriented psychotherapy and only individuals with life adjustment, family, or relationship issues were included in the study. Patients who had been previously diagnosed with psychopathology or were currently suffering from mental illness were not included.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1 Demographics

A demographic of age and gender was collected for each participant.

2.2.2 The Storytelling Method of Dream Interpretation (DeCicco, 2007a)

The Storytelling Method of Dream Interpretation Worksheet (DeCicco, 2007) was provided to each participant and participants completed the worksheet for one of their own dreams which occurred in the past week. The Worksheet has been found to significantly lead to discovery for one's own dream (DeCicco, 2007). The English Version of TSM (DeCicco, 2009) was given to the Canadian participants and the Italian Version (DeCicco, 2010; & DeCicco, Donati & Pini, 2009) was given to the Italian participants.

2.2.3 Content Analysis

Following previous research, dreams and the discovery passages (DeCicco, 2007) were analyzed using the Hall and Van de Castle (1966) system of Content Analysis. Content Analysis is a scoring system for dream content used to identify the frequency of a large variety of dream and discovery images, figures, actions, emotions, and conflicts. Content Analysis has been deemed reliable and valid by multiple studies (Krippner & Weinholt, 2002).

Statistica 6.0 was used for all statistical analyses. All dream reports and discovery passages were scored for frequency by the Hall and Van de Castle guidelines for content analysis. That is, each occurrence of a dream theme or discovery theme was marked, counted, and summed, culminating in totals for each category across all dreams (DeCicco, 2007). Inter-rater reliability was tested between raters and found to be greater than .90. Following previous research (Domhoff, 2000) only dreams with a word count between 50 and 300 were included in the study. When examining word count between the two samples, there was no significant difference between the dreams.

2.3. Procedure

Participants attending private therapy sessions were asked to participate in dream therapy with TSM as part of their therapy program if deemed appropriate. If they agreed, they were asked to volunteer one dream and interpretation that was completed using TSM worksheet in Italian or English (See Appendixes A and B). The dream was chosen at random from the participant's dream journal. The Italian sample was collected first in Italy and then an age and gender-matched sample was collected in Canada, following the same protocol of data collection.

2.3.1 Results

A comparison of word count for the dreams was first conducted in order to determine if the two samples differed and it was found that the samples did not significantly differ in average number of words with a t-test (Mean for the Italian sample=166.80 words, SD=97.93, Mean for the Canadian sample=160.10 words, SD=92.00). It was found that the dreams were slightly longer than dreams collected for research purposes but this is expected since they are therapy participants. It is likely that the participants wanted to work harder at the process than the general public or university students.

In terms of dream content, the following major categories were compared between the two samples: Total Characters (Including familiar, unfamiliar, family and strangers), Total Emotions (Including anger, happy, fear, sadness and happi-

Table 1. Correlations among Dream Categories and Discovery Categories For The Italian Male Sample.

Dream Content	Romantic Relationship	Family	Future	Trauma	Death	Stress	Health	Sad/ Depressed
Characters	.42	.14	-.22	.07	.07	.10	.39	.04
Emotions	.44	.62	-.05	.28	.45	.06	.36	-.16
Misfortune	-.34	-.42	-.34	-.22	.33	-.02	.13	-.15
Good Fortune	-.15	.18	.31	-.13	-.13	.66	-.17	.05
Colour	.06	-.18	-.29	-.15	-.15	.12	.10	.15
Aggression	.21	-.11	-.12	-.09	-.09	-.14	-.12	-.17
Positive Outcome	-.15	.18	.31	-.13	-.13	.66	-.17	.05

Note: Bold denotes $p < .05$

ness), Misfortunes, Good Fortunes, Colour, Aggression, and Positive Dream Outcome.

Discovery passages for both Canadians and Italians were scrutinized for major themes and the following categories were then content analyzed across both data sets: Romantic Relationships, Family, Future, Trauma, Death, Stress, Health and Sadness/Depression.

Hypothesis 1 stated that several dream categories would be correlated with discovery categories for both Italians and Canadians. This was confirmed for Italian males (See Table 1) and Canadian males (See Table 2). Italian males that were high in the dream content of Total Emotions were also high in discovery about Family ($r = .62, p < .05$). Also, Males who reported high dream content of Good Fortune and a Positive Dream Outcome were also high in discovery about Stress ($r = .66, p < .05$ for both). Canadian males who reported a high number of Dream Characters were also high in a discovery about their Health ($r = .57, p < .05$) and Stress ($r = .58, p < .05$). Canadian males who reported a high dream content of Misfortunes also reported a discovery about Trauma ($r = .57, p < .05$). Furthermore, Canadian males who reported high Positive Dream Outcome also reported less discovery about Trauma ($r = -.49, p < .05$).

Interestingly, the Italian females had only one significant correlation between a dream category and a discovery category; Italian Females who reported high Total Emotions in their dreams also reported discovery about Trauma ($r = .77, p < .05$). The Canadian women did not have any significant

correlations between their dream categories and their discovery categories.

Hypothesis 2 was partially supported in that Italian women differed significantly from Canadian women in terms of the dream category of Positive Dream Outcome. The Canadian women were significantly higher than the Italian women for this category (Mean Italians = .15 (SD = .37), Mean Canadians = 2.00 (SD = .71), $t = 8.31, p < .0001$). In terms of discovery categories, Italian women were significantly higher in discovery about Romantic Relationships (Mean Italians = 1.46 (SD = 1.05), Mean Canadians = .23 (SD = .44), $t = 3.90, p < .001$) and Family (Mean Italians = .77 (SD = .83), Mean Canadians = .01 (SD = .001), $t = 3.33, p < .01$).

It was also hypothesized that Canadian men would differ significantly from Italian men in both dream content and discovery categories. This was supported only for the discovery category of Romantic Relationships. The Italian males were significantly higher in discovery of Romantic Relationships than Canadian males (Mean Italians = 1.0 (SD = 1.22), Mean Canadians = .29 (SD = .50), $t = 2.22, p < .05$). However, there were significant differences in dream content for the males across 4 of the 6 categories (See Table 3).

Hypothesis 3 stated that since TSM has been found to be useful with several populations (Clarke, Decicco, Navara, 2010; DeCicco, 2009; 2007; DeCicco & Higgins, 2009) in that discovery was relevant and directly linked to waking day issues, it was expected that TSM would be a valuable tool for relevant discovery when used in therapy for both

Table 2. Correlations among Dream Categories and Discovery Categories For The Canadian Male Sample

Dream Content	Romantic Relationship	Family	Future	Trauma	Death	Stress	Health	Sad/ Depressed
Characters	.24	.01	.38	.35	.38	.58	.57	-.12
Emotions	-.12	-.02	-.13	.17	-.13	-.22	-.15	-.24
Misfortune	-.09	.29	-.13	.57	.18	.17	.20	-.45
Good Fortune	.00	.01	.00	.02	.01	.01	.20	.00
Colour	-.04	-.22	-.11	-.11	-.02	-.18	-.22	.06
Aggression	-.04	-.32	-.20	.11	-.17	-.07	.01	-.30
Positive Outcome	.10	.16	.03	-.49	-.20	-.08	-.23	-.01

Note: Bold denotes $p < .05$

Table 3. Significant Differences Between Italian Males and Canadian Males for Dream Categories.

	Italian Males		Canadian Males		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Characters						n.s.
Total Emotions						n.s.
Misfortunes	1.29	1.00	.47	.51	2.34	<.05
Good fortunes						n.s.
Colour	.82	.81	.24	.16	2.46	<.01
Aggression	.06	.24	.65	.38	2.27	<.01
Positive Outcome	.11	.33	2.29	.69	11.77	<.001

English speaking and Italian speaking patients. It was found that all participants in the English speaking sample reported discovery and all but 1 of the Italian speaking participants reported discovery. The dream that was chosen for the study did not report discovery and since only 1 dream per participant was chosen, another dream from this participant was not included. All participants were in therapy for life adjustment, relationship, or family issues and most participants reported discovery about these topics. In fact, 70% of the Italian participants reported discovery about a romantic relationship and 34% reported discovery about a family matter. For the Canadian sample, 34% reported discovery about a romantic relationship and 30% for discovery about family. For example, discovery about one’s spouse (e.g. “My husband and I need to work on our differences”) or about family (e.g. “I am so worried about my daughter and the choices she is making”) were clearly evident when using TSM for both samples.

3. Discussion

All of the hypotheses were supported in this study either entirely or partially, and provided important implications. Italian males with dream content of Total Emotions had discovery about family. This is particularly important since this was a core issue for participants in therapy. Also, Italian males who were high in Good Fortune and Positive Outcome in dream imagery had discovery about Stress. The participants in this study were in therapy to help them deal with family-oriented issues and stress-related waking day issues. It appears that the dream therapy helped specifically with these waking day problems. Previous research has shown that dream therapy can help with in the process of insight (Pesant & Zadra, 2004), can provide a means to explore emotions (Goelitz, 2001), and can also help decrease psychological distress (Crook & Hill, 2003; Pesant & Zadra, 2004). Furthermore, dream therapy can help with feelings of isolation, lack of support, life transition issues, and provide effective coping strategies (DeCicco, 2009; 2007; 2007a; Hill, 2003; 1996). It appears that TSM for Italian male participants found this to be so.

Similarly, Italian females who were high in Total Emotions in dreams had discovery about waking day trauma. This finding implies that participants are using TSM to connect their dream emotions to important waking day issues around events that may be linked to their emotions. Previous

research has found dream therapy to be a venue for self-exploration (Hill, 1996; 2003) and therefore may be helpful for Italian females. Further research is certainly warranted with respect to waking day emotions, dream emotions, and waking day trauma. Interestingly, Canadian females did not reveal this pattern but further inquiry is certainly warranted since a connection between dreams and discovery has been found in Canadian females who were not in therapy and used the Ullman Method of Dream Interpretation (DeCicco, 2007a).

Canadian males, on the other hand, had several important connections among dream imagery and discovery. Males who had higher incidences of Characters reported discovery about Stress and Health. It appears that both Canadian males and Italian males are using their dream images and TSM to examine waking day issues causing stress. Canadian males who had higher levels of Misfortune and less Positive Outcomes in dreams reported discovery about waking day Trauma. Italian males high in Misfortunes and Positive Outcomes reported discovery about Stress. These findings imply that both sets of males interpret these dream images in ways that are important for connecting to waking day life, namely, stress and trauma. These findings are also consistent with previous research on the dreams and discoveries of males (Dale & DeCicco, 2011).

In terms of dream content, only Positive Outcome was significantly higher for Canadian females as compared to Italian females. This finding is consistent with previous findings which also found surprisingly few differences in dream content between Italian and Canadian females (DeCicco, Zanasi, Musolino & Wright, 2009). The current study is also consistent with previous findings for dream content in males that found more differences in the dreams of Canadian males as compared to Italian males (Zanasi et al., 2011). Further research is necessary to determine how and why those differences occur between cultures and also between genders.

Previous findings that explored the dreams and discovery passages of Canadians and Italians found the greatest differences to lie in the discovery categories (Zanasi et al., 2011). Interestingly, though the dream content between the two groups does not appear to differ by many categories, the way participants interpret the dream images differs significantly. Italian males differed from Canadian males in terms of discovery about romantic relationships. Similarly, Italian females differed from Canadian females in discovery

about both romantic and family relations. Given that both groups were in therapy for relational issues, this finding is very important and since it has been found that dream therapy can be helpful in terms of romantic relationships, this is particularly useful in terms of clinical and applied practice (Clarke, DeCicco, Navara, 2010).

In terms of gaining meaning from dreams, TSM appears to be useful for both samples since all but 1 participant reported discovery. Furthermore, discovery was relevant and important for both groups but especially important in terms of romantic and family relations for the Italian sample. For example, the Italian participants have more discoveries relating to such things as the health of their children, the concern over adult children getting jobs, and concerns over a spouse. Canadians on the other hand had discoveries specifically related to the dreamer such as concern over one's own health, one's own career, and specific waking day issues that involved the dreamer. One explanation is that Italians as a culture may be more relationally oriented than Canadians, who have been found to be more oriented toward the self (DeCicco & Stroink, 2007). Since Hill (1996) found dream therapy to be a venue for self-exploration, the findings with Canadian females appears to be important. Cultural differences in self-reference, however, are certainly an important component of self-reference and this should be examined in future studies involving culture and relationships.

Another interesting finding is that the males differed in dream content in terms of colour where Italian males had significantly more colour reported in their dreams. A famous proverb in Italy is that: "Italy is the land of saints, poets and sailors" so perhaps this creative attitude is being reflected in dreams. Also, this research is consistent with previous studies examining Italians and Canadians in that there are differences in the dreams with respect to cultural-relevant imagery as measured by content analysis of discovery passages. For example, Italian males reported soccer imagery whereas Canadian males reported hockey imagery. The Italian dreams also had imagery of the sea, ancient buildings, and castles. The Canadian dreams did not contain any of this imagery but did have reports of Tim Horton's which is a popular coffee chain in Canada. Cultural-relevant imagery is certainly a very important function of dream imagery and should be the focus of future dream research with any culture.

One limitation of the study is the relatively small sample size, even though this is not a convenience sample, a future study should increase the sample size for both males and females. Also, the participants were in therapy but were not formally screened for mental illness. Waking day measures of psychopathology should be employed in order to rule-out this variable. Also, other variables such as socio-economic status or education level could be factors and should be included in the demographics for future studies. Future directions for dreams and dreaming should certainly include an investigation of dream imagery and discovery with respect to values and coping strategies between cultures. A closer examination of gender differences (e.g. Krippner & Weinhold, 2002) within a culture and between cultures will certainly shed light onto many important aspects of dreaming and the meaning that is derived from dreams.

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Appendix A

The Storytelling Method of Dream Interpretation (DeCicco, 2006)

Instructions:

1. Write your dream in the space below, in as much detail as possible. Write in consecutive sentences, as you recall the dream. Write on the back of the page if necessary. For long dreams, do the worksheet for each dream scene.

*e.g. I saw my mother in the garden.
 She was wearing a red dress.
 She was smiling to herself.*

2. Go back to your dream on the previous page and underline the most important or “salient” word or phrase for you, in each sentence.

*e.g. I saw my mother in the **garden**.
 She was wearing a **red dress**.
 She was **smiling** to herself.*

3. (a) Write the underlined words in the order that they appear in the dream, in Section A below:

	Section A	Section B
<i>e.g.</i>	<i>garden</i>	
	<i>red dress</i>	
	<i>smiling</i>	

3. (b) Go back to the table on page 2 and put down in Section B, the first word that comes to mind for you, for each word in Section A.

<i>e.g. Section A</i>		<i>Section B</i>
<i>garden</i>	<i>.....</i>	<i>flowers growing</i>
<i>red dress</i>	<i>.....</i>	<i>vibrant</i>
<i>smiling</i>	<i>.....</i>	<i>sad</i>

4. Take the words in Section B and write a short and simple story with the words. Keep the words **in the order that they appear** in the list. The story should make sense to you.

e.g. The flowers growing in my garden are vibrant but I am very sad.

5. Answer the following questions:

- a) Does this story have meaning for you? Explain.
- b) Does this story relate to your waking life in some way? Explain.
- c) Does this story relate to any **specific events** in your waking life?
- d) Did this analysis give you any clear insight? ___ yes ___ no
- e) If yes, write about the insight and how it relates to your life.

Appendix B

The Storytelling Method of Dream Interpretation-Italian Version (DeCicco & Donati, 2008)

Instructions:

1. Racconta il tuo sogno nello spazio sotto, il più dettagliatamente possibile , scrivendo tante brevi frasi successive separate da un punto . Se lo spazio non è sufficiente, scrivi sul retro della pagina . Scrivi come tu ricordi il tuo sogno e possibilmente con buona calligrafia.

Per esempio :

Ho cercato a lungo il parcheggio della macchina.

Sono sceso e mi sono incamminato.

Sulla destra c'era un bar con studenti che prendevano il caffè.

2. Per ognuna delle frasi del racconto che hai appena scritto sottolinea una o più parole (quelle che ti sembrano più significative).

Per esempio:

*Ho cercato a lungo il parcheggio della **macchina**.*

*Sono sceso e mi sono **incamminato**.*

*Sulla destra c'era un **bar** con studenti che prendevano il **caffè**.*

3. (a) Riporta le parole sottolineate una sotto l'altra :

Per esempio:

macchina

incamminato

bar

caffè

3. (b) A destra di ciascuna parola scrivi la prima cosa che ti viene in mente.

Per esempio:

Macchina Viaggio

Incamminato Fatica

Bar Riposo

Caffè Piacevole

4. Con le parole che sono a destra scrivi una storia corta e semplice. Mantieni le parole nell'ordine in cui sono . La storia dovrebbe avere senso per te . Per esempio :

*QUESTO VIAGGIO COMPORTA FATICA ,
MA IO STO PENSANDO AD UNA SOSTA PIACEVOLE.*

5. Rispondi a queste domande:

a) Ha questa storia significato per te ? Chiariscilo.

b) Può questa storia essere in rapporto con la tua vita da sveglio in qualche modo ? Chiariscilo.

c) Può questa storia essere collegata a qualche avvenimento nella tua vita reale ?

d) Questa analisi ti ha fatto capire qualcosa di più? ____ si ____ no

e) Se si , scrivi per favore cosa hai capito e come questo si rapporta con la tua vita.