

Dreaming about wearing glasses: Analyzing a long dream series of a short-sighted person

Michael Schredl

Central Institute of Mental Health, Mannheim, Germany

Summary. Since the continuity hypothesis of dreaming states that waking life is reflected in dreams, one would expect that something a dreamer has contact with every day would also show up quite frequently in his or her dreams. In order to test this hypothesis, the frequency of glasses appearing within a dream series of 7,747 dreams of a short-sighted person was analyzed. Glasses dreams are quite rare (0.96%). This indicates that novelty and thinking about something are important factors regarding the continuity between waking and dreaming. As some glasses dreams (putting on glasses, cleaning glasses) reflect waking life relatively directly, it would be very interesting to study the meaning of those glasses dreams (e.g., another person breaks the glasses of the dreamer) that are not congruent with the waking life of the dreamer.

Keywords: Dream content; continuity hypothesis; dream series; glasses

1. Introduction

The term “continuity hypothesis” was first used in dream research by Hall and Nordby (1972). According to their definition, the continuity may be between dreams and covert behavior (thoughts, feelings, fantasies) and overt behavior (“acting out”). Empirical research has found evidence for both modes; for example, the amount of time spent with sports during the day was related to the percentage of sports dreams (Schredl & Erlacher, 2008) or the time spent with sexual fantasies during the day was related to the number of erotic dreams (Schredl, Desch, Römig, & Spachmann, 2009). Research in this field focused on identifying factors which might have an effect on the continuity between waking and dreaming (Schredl, 2003) such as personality variables or the kind of activities, e.g. reading, writing, arithmetic are under-represented in dreams compared to social activities (Hartmann, 2000; Schredl & Hofmann, 2003). Another factor is the emotional intensity of the waking life experience (Schredl, 2006). A factor which might play a role but has not been studied systematically is the novelty of the waking life experience; novel stimuli (objects, persons) might have a higher chance of being integrated into subsequent dreams compared to articles of daily use or well-known persons.

The studies investigating the relationship between dreaming and breathing patterns might illustrate the possible effect of this factor. Experimental studies have reported relationships between breathing pauses and dream content, (Hobson, Goldfrank, & Snyder, 1965) and also Boerner (1855), who induced nightmares by blocking the nose and mouth of the sleeper with a cloth, whereas the dream content of sleep apnea patients, who experience regular breathing pauses,

is quite unaffected by the resulting physiological processes (Schredl & Schmitt, 2009; Schredl et al., 2006). These findings may reflect the differences in novelty of the stimulus for the sleeper.

The present study analyzed the frequency of glasses within a dream series of 7,747 dreams recorded over a period of seventeen years. The dreamer is short-sighted and wore his glasses every day, clearly an article of daily use. In addition to frequency, the glasses dreams were categorized according to the context where the dreamer’s glasses were mentioned in order to study whether these contexts reflect the waking-life use of his glasses.

2. Method

2.1. Dream diary

The participant has kept an unstructured dream diary since the age of 22, starting in September, 1984. For the present analysis, 7,747 dreams – recorded till April, 2005 – were included. Mean dream length was 129.1 ± 83.2 words..

2.2. Participant and procedure

The male participant is short-sighted and has had to wear glasses since the age of 8 years. As the myopia was moderate, starting with -3.5 diopters at the beginning and attaining about -6.0 diopters in his young adulthood, he has to wear his glasses all the time. The dream reports were typed and entered into a database (Alchera 3.72, created by Harry Bosma, www.mythwell.com). This database allows the assignment of key words to the dreams, a task carried out by the dreamer himself; i.e., the reference to glasses was rated for all dreams. In a second step, each glasses dream was put into one of the following categories: blurred vision as a result of not wearing glasses, broken glasses, another person broke his glasses, glasses are dirty, putting on his glasses, looking for a new pair of glasses, losing or searching for his glasses, repairing his glasses, and other topics. The Alchera software also provides a word count for each dream report. The analysis unit was a single dream report. The data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft)

Corresponding address:

Prof. Dr. Michael Schredl, Sleep laboratory, Central Institute of Mental Health, PO Box 122120, 68072 Mannheim, Germany.
Email: Michael.Schredl@zi-mannheim.de

Submitted for publication: March 2012

Accepted for publication: April 2012

and data analysis was carried out with the SAS 9.2 for Windows software package.

3. Results

Overall, eighty-one dreams included references to glasses. Eight dreams were excluded because the dream report included references to glasses of other dream characters; i.e., within 73 dreams (0.94%) the dreamer's glasses were mentioned. Mean dream length of these dreams was 192.9 ± 100.8 words. The distribution of the dream contexts in which the glasses are mentioned is depicted in Table 1. The most common themes were that the glasses are broken, blurred vision due to seeing without glasses and putting on glasses, for example after sleeping. The "Other topics" category included dreams with watching without an appropriate pair of protective glasses, seeing perfectly well without glasses, the glasses do not fit, throwing broken glasses at somebody, and being cautious regarding the glasses while playing with children.

4. Dream examples

"I am planning to demonstrate something in a gymnasium, a tennis court. The small peg holding the earpiece of my glasses has fallen to the ground. First, it seems easy to find. I have heard it but it may have rolled quite a distance because the ground is clean" (Category: Glasses are broken)

"Outdoors, casual meetings with people, nice weather. We (several students) are talking. Suddenly I have the impression that something is wrong with my glasses. I take them off. The glasses begin to deform, the glass start dripping. Eventually I realize that it is not real. I tell the other persons about it and my anxiety ceased....." (Category: Glasses are broken)

".....I am thinking about the possibility of flying. I try to concentrate and it actually works. I fly over a roof top, a little bit afraid of the height, but safely land on a patio. Inside a window I see several persons in a huge office but I cannot see them clearly because I do not wear my glasses. I float into the room, approaching an attractive

woman who is sitting on a writing desk. I start caressing her; the sexual excitement is increasing in both of us. It feels good." (Category: Blurred vision without glasses)

"I am at home in my bedroom. I am getting up and put on my glasses. It feels cold around the eye brows because the glasses are touching them. First, I am thinking that these are my old glasses with circular lenses but I am not sure when I take them off....." (Category: Putting on glasses)

"Quarreling with a man. He takes my glasses and bends them. I insist that he stop because I need my glasses. He hands them over to me and I bend them properly but the right earpiece is still somewhat loose....." (Category: Another person is breaking his glasses)

"I want to go into a music club. It is Thursday evening, about 10 pm. As I walk inside, not much is going on. There is no music and only several people are standing around talking. A boy talks to his chubby girlfriend. It feels a little bit like being in a living room. The stereo is on a chest of drawers. From another room downstairs I can hear music. After a brief period of time, the music starts and people are dancing. I am cleaning my fogged glasses and want to dance myself...." (Category: Glasses are dirty)

5. Discussion

As expected, the percentage of glasses dreams was very low (0.94%), even though the dreamer used them every day of his waking life. This low figure confirms the previous findings of Hall and Van de Castle (1966) who reported that 0.9% of the students' dreams ($N = 1000$) included references to eye glasses. In a second step, the contents of this dream sample which are available on Dreambank.net, were studied. Of the original 9 references only 7 could be retrieved; of these glasses dreams 4 referred to the glasses of other dream characters and just 3 dreams included references to the dreamer's glasses (cleaning them, losing them, or broken). Unfortunately, there is no data available as to how many of these students actually wore glasses. This low incidence of glasses dreams clearly support the hypothesis that time spent thinking about something is an important factor contributing to the probability of its being incorporated into dreams; as explicit thinking about wearing glasses is presumably very rare. On the other hand, the dreamer's partner, for example, was present in 20% of the dreams while being in relationship (Schredl, 2011), clearly indicating that in social interactions, thinking is an important factor contributing to the continuity of waking and dreaming. To study the possible effect of novelty, it would be very interesting to elicit dreams from persons who were just beginning to wear glasses – comparable to studying persons learning a new language (De Koninck, Christ, Rinfret, & Proulx, 1988).

The most common waking activities associated with glasses are putting them on and dirty ones (see dream examples of putting on the glasses after sleep or cleaning fogged glasses after entering a warm room from outside), so the frequency of these glasses dreams seem to reflect waking life directly. Interestingly, the topic of broken glasses is the most common theme, clearly reflecting an overrepresentation because it occurred very rarely in the dreamer's waking life, especially when compared to putting on glasses

Table 1: Topics of glasses dreams ($N = 73$ dreams)

Dream category	Frequency
Glasses are broken	15
Blurred vision without glasses	14
Putting on glasses	11
Another person is breaking his glasses	9
Glasses are dirty	7
Losing or searching for his glasses	6
Looking for a new pair of glasses	4
Repairing his glasses	2
Other topics	5

or cleaning dirty glasses. The most plausible explanation for this overrepresentation is the emotional intensity of these waking experiences because the dreamer was quite helpless without his glasses due to his moderate myopia. This is in line with other studies indicating that emotionally intense waking-life experiences are more likely to be incorporated into subsequent dreams (Schredl, 2006).

The dreams including blurred vision, due to the fact the dreamer is not wearing glasses, are not simple to evaluate because blurred vision is quite a common experience for the dreamer during waking (the dreamer wears no glasses, for example, while swimming). The dream example, however, indicates that the situation with no glasses does not match waking-life situations in which the dreamer wears no glasses, (going to the bathroom or swimming).

The category that is most incongruous with waking life, however, includes the dream theme that other persons are breaking the dreamer's glasses. He has never experienced this in his waking life. One might speculate about a metaphorical connection, linking the loss of his glasses to helplessness, neediness and so on. It is not easy to investigate such a relationship empirically. Ideally, detailed diaries of emotions experienced during the day and dream diaries of persons with glasses would be needed. The basic idea that emotions are continuous with waking life, even if explicit dream themes are not, have been supported by research (cf. Schredl & Reinhard, 2009-2010).

To summarize, glasses dreams are quite rare – even in a series of a dreamer who wears glasses every day. This indicates that novelty and thinking about something are important factors regarding the continuity between waking and dreaming. An interesting topic would be to study how known characters are perceived in dreams if they were wearing glasses during waking-life regularly. As some glasses dreams reflect waking life relatively directly, it would be very interesting to study the meaning of those glasses dreams that are not congruous to the waking life of the dreamer.

References

- Boerner, J. (1855). *Das Alpdrücken: Seine Begründung und Verhütung*. Würzburg: Carl Joseph Becker.
- De Koninck, J., Christ, G., Rinfret, N., & Proulx, G. (1988). Dreams during language learning: When and how is the new language integrated. *Psychiatric Journal of the University of Ottawa*, 13, 72-74.
- Hall, C. S., & Nordby, V. J. (1972). *The individual and his dreams*. New York: New American Library.
- Hall, C. S., & Van de Castle, R. L. (1966). *The content analysis of dreams*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Hartmann, E. (2000). We do not dream of the 3 R's: implications for the nature of dream mentation. *Dreaming*, 10, 103-110.
- Hobson, J. A., Goldfrank, F., & Snyder, F. (1965). Respiration and mental activity in sleep. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 3, 79-90.
- Schredl, M. (2003). Continuity between waking and dreaming: a proposal for a mathematical model. *Sleep and Hypnosis*, 5, 38-52.
- Schredl, M. (2006). Factors affecting the continuity between waking and dreaming: emotional intensity and emotional tone of the waking-life event. *Sleep and Hypnosis*, 8, 1-5.
- Schredl, M. (2011). Dreams of a romantic partner in a dream series: Comparing relationship periods with periods of being separated. *International Journal of Dream Research*, 4, 127-131.
- Schredl, M., Desch, S., Röming, F., & Spachmann, A. (2009). Erotic dreams and their relationship to waking-life sexuality. *Sexologies*, 18, 38-43.
- Schredl, M., & Erlacher, D. (2008). Relationship between waking sport activities, reading and dream content in sport and psychology students. *Journal of Psychology*, 142, 267-275.
- Schredl, M., & Hofmann, F. (2003). Continuity between waking activities and dream activities. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 12, 298-308.
- Schredl, M., & Reinhard, I. (2009-2010). The continuity between waking mood and dream emotions: Direct and second-order effects. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 29, 271-282.
- Schredl, M., & Schmitt, J. (2009). Dream recall frequency and nightmare frequency in patients with sleep disordered breathing. *Somnologie*, 13, 12-17.
- Schredl, M., Schmitt, J., Hein, G., Schmoll, T., Eller, S., & Haaf, J. (2006). Nightmares and oxygen desaturations: is sleep apnea related to heightened nightmare frequency? *Sleep and Breathing*, 10, 203-209.