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DREAMS OF THE DYING*

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the dream themes of fourteen terminally ill cancer patients. The dreams were scored according to a standardized questionnaire, and the frequencies of the dream themes were compared to a group of forty-two aged persons. The results indicated that death and aggression occurred significantly more often in the dreams of the dying. Death themes also frequently appeared as a projection upon other dream characters. It is hypothesized that the projection reflects the dreamers' unresolved attitudes and feelings about their death experience.

Interest in the psychological states of the dying has increased greatly in recent years. Few studies, however, have dealt with the dreams of the dying and those that have usually involved the analysis of one individual's dreams. Norton analyzed a series of dream fragments of a thirty-two year old woman dying of breast cancer [1]. The dreams were gathered within three and a half months of her death. Norton noted that the dreams were usually reported with sadness and that they contained themes of physical activity. Norton interpreted these themes as the wish to be well and active, and she claimed that the dreams illustrated the patient's regression to the wish-fulfillment dreams of a child.

Greenberg and Blank analyzed a series of dreams of a fifty year old man terminally ill with cancer of the colon [2]. The dreams were gathered from seven months to approximately one week before his death. The emotional content of the dreams seemed to contain primarily negative themes such as feelings of being disturbed, frightened, and desperate. The authors noted an

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unambivalent, nonpathological wish to die in the dreams. They also claimed that there was an unconscious recognition of death which began early in the onset of the illness despite the patient's strong conscious denial of the seriousness of his illness.

The purpose of the present study was twofold:

1. to analyze the psychological themes in the dreams of dying patients, and
2. to compare the frequency of these themes to those of a healthy, elderly sample.

It was hypothesized that the dreams of the dying would contain more references to death than the elderly sample, and that the dreams of the dying would contain more negative or depressive themes.

A potential criticism of the present study is the appropriateness of the elderly control group. The elderly sample was chosen because it was theorized that similar to the dying sample, the elderly are phenomenologically faced with death. However, an age-matched control group would have controlled cohort effects and other confounding factors presented by the elderly sample more adequately. Because of the limitations of the use of the elderly as a control group, caution should be urged in the generalizability of the present findings.

METHOD

Participants

Fourteen terminally ill cancer patients served as participants. There were eleven females and three males who ranged in age from twenty-eight to eighty-eight at the time of their death with a median age of 46.5 years old. Twelve of the fourteen patients had at least a high school education. Two had tenth grade educations and three had college degrees. The interval between their dreams and death ranged from one month to sixty-five months with a median interval of 36.5 months. A total of thirty-seven dreams were analyzed. The number of dreams per patient ranged from one to eleven with a mean of 2.6 dreams per patient. The patients' written records of their dreams were gathered by their personal physicians.

The control group consisted of forty-two aged people. There were twenty-seven females and eleven males who ranged in age from sixty-one to ninety-one with a median age of seventy-four years old. They were recruited from day activity centers for the aged and from an active retirement nursing center. The aged group's written records of their dreams were gathered by undergraduate students. A total of ninety-seven dreams were analyzed. The number of dreams per person ranged from one to fifteen with a mean of 2.3 dreams per person.

Dream Questionnaire

The dreams were analyzed according to a standardized dream questionnaire [3] which was derived from five previously published dream questionnaires [4-8]. The questionnaire contained nineteen different thematic categories including characters, emotions, and activities. The scoring of the dreams was performed independently by two undergraduate students who had no prior knowledge of the hypotheses in the study. The interscorer reliability of the questionnaire was approximately 89 percent. Disagreements generally were problems of omission rather than of interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, death related themes occurred significantly more often in the dreams of the dying than in the aged control group ($\chi^2 (1) = 4.18, p < .02$). In the dying group, 64 percent (9 of 14) of the participants' dreams contained death related themes while 33 percent (14 of 42) of aged participants' dreams contained death themes.

It is interesting to note that only one respondent dreamt of personal overt death. The other participants projected death upon other characters in the dream. The following are examples of the death themes:

A forty-two year old woman thirty-four months before her death:

Charleston (sic) Heston. He was there, but it didn't look like him, he looked so old and thin and so pathetic. I felt so sorry for him though he said that he didn't mind dying but he wasn't ready yet. He had so much to live for.

A twenty-seven year old woman twelve months before her death:

I went to an outside all-night movie and I was standing in the middle of the street when this car pulled up and dumped out a young pregnant dead woman. . . . I ran over when it was over and I was looking at me on the floor but the girl didn't look like me.

A thirty-four year old man forty-one months before his death:

I dreamt of a funeral and in the funeral was a little girl going to be buried. In her coffin I couldn't get to her so I tried to open it to see who it was and it was one of my daughters. Little Antonette. She was lying on her side and the lid was falling in the coffin. . . . I went to fix the lid. . . . I kept on doing things that would upset the coffin. I felt like a criminal that didn't belong there.

In two of these examples the dreamer searches to determine the identity of the dead person in the dream. It is possible that this search may reflect the dreamer's continued questioning and unresolved feelings about whether he or she is really dying.

In order to determine whether the nine dying participants who had death related themes differed from the five dying participants who did not have death related themes, a *t*-test was performed upon the mean interval between their dreams and death. The mean interval for the nine participants was 37.4 months and the mean interval for the five participants was 20.6 months, however, the difference between the means was not statistically significant ($t(10) = 1.68$, $p > .10$).

The hypothesis that the emotional content of the dreams of the dying would be predominantly negative received qualified support. In the dreams of the dying, negative emotions such as fear and loneliness did occur at approximately three times the frequency of positive emotions such as love and happiness. However, negative emotional themes also occurred at approximately two and one-half times the frequency of positive emotions in the dreams of the aged control group.

The dreams of the dying did contain significantly more emotional content regardless of theme than the dreams of the aged ($\chi^2(1) = 5.36$, $p < .05$). In the dying group 79 percent (11 of 14) of the participants' dreams contained emotional themes while only 43 percent (18 of 42) of the aged participants' dreams contained emotional themes. One explanation of this difference could be that the dying experience heightens the emotional content in dreams. As the dreamer is confronted with a major psychological issue such as dying, it seems possible that the result might be an increase in emotionality in dreams. A second explanation (perhaps concurrent) of the difference might be that the normal aging process reduces emotionality in dreams. Support for this explanation comes from Brenneis who found that the dreams of older women appeared to narrow in focus [9], and that there was an estrangement from previous wide-ranging interests and psychological investments.

A prominent activity theme in the dreams of the dying was aggression, and it occurred significantly more often in the dreams of the dying than in the aged group ($\chi^2(1) = 4.20$, $p < .05$). Aggressive themes occurred in 50 percent (7 of 14) of the dying participants' dreams, while only 21 percent (9 of 42) of the aged participants' dreams contained aggressive themes. The object of the aggression usually involved other dream characters, although the dreamer was directly involved in the aggressive activities in about one-third of the examples.

It should be noted, however, that aggressive dream themes are common throughout the human age span. In fact, it appears that aggressive themes may be most prominent in adolescence and then decrease in frequency later in life [10]. The finding in the present study that aged people have fewer aggressive themes is also consistent with Brenneis' study. He found a dampening of instinctual pressure in the dreams of older women especially in terms of aggressive activities.

Although it appears that aggression is not unique to the dreams of the dying, aggression may still serve as an ego-defense for dealing with death. It is

hypothesized that when the dreamer is the object of the aggression, the dreamer might be comparing the dying experience to an act of aggression which is committed against the dreamer. When the dreamer is the source of the aggression, it is possible that the person is displacing aggressive feelings created by dying onto other characters or objects in the dream. This hypothesis is also consistent with previous theories that anger or rage serves as a distinct stage that humans go through in their experience of dying [11].

The dream characters in the dying group included family members and friends at about five times the frequency of nonfamily members and/or strangers. In the aged group family members and friends occurred at about the same frequency of nonfamily members and/or strangers. An analysis of the participants who predominantly dreamt of either family and friends or of nonfamily and/or strangers revealed that the dying group's dream characters did involve family and friends significantly more than the aged group ($\chi^2 (1) = 5.11, p < .05$). In the dying group, ten of the fourteen (71%) participants' dreams predominantly dealt with family or friends, while in the aged group only eight of forty-two (19%) participants' dreams contained family or friends. This finding again is consistent with the Greenberg and Blank study where their patient dreamt of family or friends in four of the seven dreams. It is interesting to point out, however, that their patient had no close family ties.

Brenneis noted that the dreams of older women depicted a dichotomized population of dream characters of either relatives or strangers. It may be that the dying experience also affects the dream characters such that the concern over close family relationships is strongly enhanced in the dreams. An example of this concern with family members occurred in the following dream of a thirty-seven year old woman thirty-six months before her death:

I came home and found that my daughter, Bonnie, had left me. She had even left me a note saying goodbye. It was a leaving of permanence, like I'd never see her again. . . . It was a bad shock.

In this example, the dreamer may have projected her feelings about dying and leaving onto her daughter because she sees the daughter as abandoning her. This supports the idea that projection is a commonly used ego defense in the dreams.

The theme of pregnancy, babies, and children occurred significantly more often in the dreams of the dying than in the aged group ($\chi^2 (1) = 20.37, p < .001$). In the dying group 64 percent (9 of 14) of the dying participants' dreams contained this theme, while only 7 percent (3 of 42) of the aged participants' dreams contained this theme. One possible explanation is that the dying participants were considerably younger than the aged participants, and considerably closer to child-bearing and child-rearing age. However, the mean age of the dying group was 49.9 years, which is relatively close to the mean age of the older women in Brenneis' study ($\bar{X} = 56.8$ years old). A most vivid example of

the pregnancy theme occurred in one of the older members of the dying group, a sixty-three year old woman (one month before her death):

I was in the hospital and had three babies, all three were girls. I wish two could have been boys. I was proud of them. I fetch them home, and showed them to everybody. They crawled around on the floor and said, "I want to go home."

Another example of this theme occurred in the following dream of a forty-eight year old woman (one month before her death):

I saw a woman who was very happy. The dream took place in a department store. The woman had on a lovely dress and shoes. She was carrying a baby in her arms. She loved the baby very much. When I woke up I felt very happy and safe. As I was writing down the dream this fear started all over again.

Hall suggested that the principal conflict of one's later years was a struggle between life and death [11]. In an investigation of the dreams of the elderly, Hall saw evidence for this conflict in the contrast of the dream concepts of rejuvenation and disintegration. He claimed older persons' dreams attempted to blend this longing for life and rejuvenation with the desire for death and release. In the present study, it seems possible that the high frequency of pregnancy, babies, and children may reflect the heightening of the longing for life and rejuvenation theme for dying participants. Although the aged participants had significantly fewer pregnancy, babies, and children themes, it must be noted that they were also significantly older ($\bar{X} = 75.1$) than the participants cited by Hall ($\bar{X} = 55.8$).

Barad, Altshuler, and Goldfarb also noted the theme of rebirth and rejuvenation in the dreams of the elderly [12]. They inferred the presence of the theme not only from children in the dreams but also from young animals. When the theme of rebirth or rejuvenation was expanded to include animals as well as children then the frequency of the theme was substantially enhanced in both groups. Again, the theme was significantly higher in the dying group ($\chi^2 (1) = 11.57, p < .001$); 86 percent (12 of 14) of the dying participants' dreams contained the rebirth theme, and 33 percent (14 of 42) of the aged participants' dreams contained this theme.

Barad and his colleagues also noted that the major dream theme of the elderly was a loss of resources. They defined this category as one in which the dreamer was represented as weakened, lost, unable to complete some action, or threatened by a loss of control over self or environment. In the present study, according to this definition, lost resources occurred at a significantly greater rate in the dreams of the dying than in the dreams of the aged ($\chi^2 (1) = 8.59, p < .01$). Of the dying participants, 86 percent (12 of 14) dreamt of the theme of lost resources, while 40 percent (17 of 42) of the aged had the theme. These findings appear to support the Barad et al. hypothesis that a loss of resources

is the most prominent dream theme in the elderly. It appears, however, that the theme is clearly not unique to the elderly since it occurred at over twice the elderly's rate in the dying sample.

Finally, it does appear that a prominent dream theme of the dying is death. When the death theme occurred in a dream, it was usually projected on to some other dream character. This may reflect the dreamers' continued questioning and unresolved feelings about the reality of their own deaths. A preliminary developmental study of dreaming suggests that death themes are prominent from adolescence to senescence, however, the frequency of occurrence of the death theme may be heightened in the dreams of the dying [10]. It may also be possible that the dreams of the dying reveal an unconscious recognition of death regardless of the person's conscious recognition level of illness, and the dreams may serve to integrate a person's conscious and unconscious feelings about death.

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