

Dream Recall and Content as a Function of Defensiveness

Deirdre Barrett

Harvard Medical School

Freud's theories about repression and defense grew to maturity alongside those about dreams. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he wrote, "The forgetting of dreams depends far more upon resistance than upon the fact, stressed by the authorities, that the waking and sleeping states are alien to each other" (p. 559). Repression as a prime cause of the forgetting of dream content continues to be an evident fact in the eyes of psychodynamic clinicians but the repression hypothesis of dream forgetting has not been regarded as having much merit by researchers. Singer and Schonbar and Domhoff and Gerson did find a mild relationship between dream forgetting and the Welsh R. Scale, the latter measuring repression. However, Wallach and Bone, Nelson, and McAllister failed to find any significant relationship between dream recall and the "reversal" scale of the Defense Measuring Instrument (DMI). This scale is designed to measure repression and denial, and thus this finding is opposite those predicted by Freud's repression theory. In a major recent review of the causes of dream forgetting Cohen concludes the repression hypothesis should be discarded.

There are a number of reasons owing to various methodological shortcomings to believe the repression hypothesis has been prematurely rejected. First, the "repression" measures employed have not always matched Freud's use of the term. Also studies have usually examined dream recall by subjects' estimates which have been shown to be unreliable compared to dream diaries.

The purpose of the present study was to explore again the relationship between repression and dream recall while taking into account the problems noted above, and to explore the role of other defenses closely linked to the concept of repression.

Method

Subjects, 88 male and female undergraduate students, were predominantly sophomores (70%).

In order to measure defensiveness, Welsh's second factor scale R was employed along with the Repression scale of the Marshall Personality Measure, with the latter thought to be truer to Freud's original conceptualization of repression.

Subjects were asked to keep home dream diaries, and four measures of dream recall were derived from these. First, the number of days on which a dream was recalled was obtained along with the actual number of dreams. The total length-in-words of each subjects' dream reports was also counted. Finally, a mean length score was calculated for each subject by dividing total length by the number of dreams.

Results

Though not consistently, the repression measures did correlate with some of the dream recall measures. With the exception of a separate scale comprised of items pertaining to dream experiences, the Welsh R was uncorrelated with any of the dream recall measures.

The relationship of the Marshall Repression scale with the dream measure was somewhat more systematic but still limited to extremely low magnitude correlations. Marshall Repression scores correlated negatively with the length of dream reports from long-term memory for the total sample as well as for females, but not for males. With respect to the diary dream recall, only in the third week did The Marshall Repression Scale correlate significantly with the length of dream reports after steadily increasing from week one to week three. The correlations of the Marshall Repression measure with the number of days and dreams recalled were in the predicted direction and exhibited a similarly increasing pattern over the course of the study but failed to reach significance in any case.

Discussion

The results of the study represent support for the hypothesis that repression accounts for at least some instances of dream forgetting. These findings are generally consistent with earlier findings of low magnitude significant negative correlations between dream recall and measures of repression and indicate that as repression measures become truer to Freud's original concept, this effect is becoming more readily detectable.