Cognitive Dimensions of Dream Formation in Repetitive Nightmares of Refugees

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Refugees from the Soviet controlled area of Central Europe often report repetitive
nightmares in which they find themselves in their native country, wish to escape again,
try to or plan to escape, and experience various dysphoric emotions, mainly fear of
not being able to re-escape (Pinter, 1969; Zimmermann, 1958). Cernovsky’s (1986)
interviews with 100 Czechoslovakian refugees in Switzerland indicated that (1) about
56% report the above nightmares, and (2) the nightmares cannot be labeled as post-
traumatic because they do not closely resemble the manner in which the refugees actually
left their native country.

Thus we find dramatic nightmare scenes of attempting to cross the border crawling over
mine fields or hiding under a railroad car, etc., whereas most persons interviewed by
Cernovsky (1986) escaped in a more peaceful manner. They were able to obtain valid
passports with a police permit for travel abroad in the short lived period of relative
freedom in 1967-1969, traveled out during that time as “tourists”, and have never
returned. How such dreams might occur and their relation to more typical nightmares is
what we wish to address here.

Of course from Hartmann’s (1984) research on nightmare sufferers we could suggest that
refugees suffering these dreams may well have thin psychological boundaries, but that
does not explain their unusual form. The nightmare content may be interpreted, from the
Freudian perspective, as motivated by grief and a regressive wish to return to familiar
settings of childhood (avoid the stress of adaptation to foreign life patterns and language
of the host country). From the Jungian viewpoint, the nightmare has a function of a
warning not to yield, in waking thoughts, to an impulsive nostalgic desire to return
“home” (The hero’s escape from the devouring mother). Existential interpretations (Boss,
1957) might suggest that even though, in the waking life, the refugee was physically
successful in crossing the border to the free section of Europe, much of the inner life has
been formed in Czechoslovakia (e.g., values, mistrust of authority figures, expectations
about the behavior of significant others): in the inner life, the refugee is only partly living
in the free world and still attempts to complete the transition. Such interpretations seem
complementary rather than mutually exclusive, but none of them necessarily entail
nightmares of oneself back in one’s homeland and physically trying to escape in ways
totally unrelated to the original trauma.

A cognitive psychological analysis of certain general dimensions of dream formation and
their special interaction in refugees might account for these nightmares. Cognitive
approaches to dreaming vary from Foulkes’ (1985) application of the current cognitive
science of language and memory to the more organismic-holistic cognitive tradition
(Hunt, 1982). Here we focus on the dimensions of imagery and self reflectiveness.
First, there is the widely researched tendency (Cohen, 1979) of dreams to center on both
the recent and distant past—especially as primed by “unfinished business”. It stands to reason that with their forced departures leaving behind so much unresolved, and constant daily reminders of their transitional status, refugees would dream themselves back in their homeland.

This brings us to a second dimension of dream formation—that reflexivity or self-reflectiveness inherent to all human symbolic activity (Hunt, 1982). While it is true that dreams are relatively “single-minded” (Rechtschaffen, 1978) and narrowed to the dreaming. It ranges from brief conceptual reflection on the ongoing dream (whether adequate or confused and contrived in the manner that Freud (1900) termed “secondary revision”) to the dream’s potential to fully recognize and reconstitute itself in the form of lucid dreaming (knowing one is dreaming while the dream continues, often with the potential for dream control) (Hunt, 1986). Along these lines, Moffitt et al (1986) has used Rossi’s scale of stages of self-awareness as an empirical measure of a self-reflectiveness continuum ending in lucidity, and Hunt (see Ogilvie et al, 1982) developed a prelucidity scale (rating emotionality, vividness, presence of sensory detail, any reference to sleep, dreaming, or waking in the dream, conceptual and mnemic clarity, and feelings of strangeness) which statistically distinguished laboratory dreams of subjects trying to develop lucidity from a control group of well-motivated laboratory recallers.

If the dimension of self-reflectiveness (awareness of one’s overall context) develops within refugee dreams of the past, but falls short of lucidity, the result would be this special type of nightmare: The pressure towards the past provides familiar scenes from Czechoslovakia, frequently in the context of interacting with parents or childhood friends. Then a modicum of self-reflectiveness would lead to panic and attempts to cope with this new situation: “I am a refugee who now lives in Switzerland. If I am now in Czechoslovakia, then (1) I might be recognized, arrested, and mistreated, therefore I should hide and attempt to escape again, and (2) escape would be almost impossible because the border is extremely well guarded (parallel series of barbed wire fences, mine fields, dense net of armed patrols with dogs, machine gun towers, etc.) and travel permission or faked documents are practically impossible to obtain.”

For example, a 21 year old Czech refugee, a student, reported he dreamt about being back in his home country, meeting his friends, chatting with them, and then suddenly realizing with much anxiety that this must be dangerous because he now lives (as a refugee) in Switzerland and therefore would not be allowed to leave Czechoslovakia again. With terror, he brooded about possibilities of re-escaping the country and woke up in anxiety.

Dream reports collected by Cernovsky (1986) in his interviews with Czechoslovakian refugees in Switzerland included spontaneous accounts of experiences of lucidity in the
dream. A re-analysis of the data for the present article showed that 8 refugees described their dream (of being again in Czechoslovakia) as semilucid or lucid: 3 clearly stated being aware, while dreaming, that it was only a dream and 5 others were aware that their dream experience could not be reality (mostly because they recalled, still while dreaming, that they were, in reality, in Switzerland). This awareness at least partly helped to resolve dream anxiety. In 3 of the 8 cases the increase in dream lucidity occurred at a sufficiently early stage of the dream to prevent the development of a nightmare. This post hoc analysis is reported to stimulate further research. Only spontaneous reports of the incidence of lucidity were available: the interview schedule in future studies should incorporate detailed questions about the degree of lucidity and its fluctuations within the dream. Methodological problems in investigating the impact of lucidity on repetitive nightmares include semantic ambiguities. Laymen are not trained to clearly verbalize subjective experiences of lucidity in dreams. In Cernovsky’s study, the refugees described intermittent lucidity in various ways, such as gradually or suddenly “realizing, during the dream, that I was in Switzerland and not in Czechoslovakia” or “dreaming, in the dream, that it was only a dream”.

Our cognitive approach makes this special class of non post-traumatic nightmares akin to “examination dreams”. The tendency to redream past trauma would easily elicit dream situations that feature examinations. Yet self-reflectiveness short of lucidity would entail an awareness that no such examination could now occur. The resultant fusion would be the unpleasant sense that one has forgotten the scheduled room, or subject matter, or that the test questions are nonsensical, etc.

Still, such examination dreams are as ultimately innocuous as refugee nightmares are wrenching and personally disorienting. If our cognitive approach is correct, methods for the training of lucid dreaming should be especially effective for this type of refugee nightmare--because that would further articulate the very dimension of dream formation which on a less developed level has created the crisis in the first place. Full lucidity would then leave the sufferer with a non chimerical dream of nostalgia and realistic sadness. One subject, becoming suddenly aware that he was actually dreaming, “regretted it, but at the same time was content that it was so”.

References

content of lucid dreams. Lucidity Letter, 5, 1, 197-203.

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