

Cognitive Dimensions of Dream Formation in Repetitive Nightmares of Refugees

Zack Cernovsky* and Harry T. Hunt

**St Thomas Psychiatric Hospital,
Brock University*

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, attempt 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 mnemonic 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. The mixture of past and present produces incongruous or incoherent dream images. Another Czechoslovakian refugee, also now living in Switzerland, dreamt about being again in his hometown and dating his ex-girlfriend, happy, and drinking wine. But then she suddenly confronted him about his being dressed in a Swiss Army uniform: with surprise and much anxiety he realized this was true and that he would therefore soon be arrested. Both of them ran to hide in a pedestrian underpass in a more quiet part of the city.

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

- Boss, M. (1957). Analysis of dreams. Rider, London.
- Cernovsky, Z. Z. (1987). Refugee's repetitive nightmares. Journal of Clinical Psychology, in press.
- Cohen, D. (1979). Sleep and dreaming: Origins, mature, and functions, Pergamon Press, Oxford.
- Foulkes, D. (1985). Dreaming: A cognitive psychological analysis. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Freud, S. (19(X)). The interpretation of dreams, New York, Avon, 1965.
- Hartmann, E. (1984). The nightmare: The psychology and biology of terrifying dreams. Basic Books, Inc., New York.

- Hunt, H. (1982). Forms of dreaming. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 54, 559-633,
- Hunt, H. (1986). Discussant: Empirical and theoretical analysis of the psychological content of lucid dreams. Lucidity Letter, 5, 1, 197-203.
- Hunt, H. (1989). The Multiplicity of dreams. Yale University Press: New Haven, CT.
- Moffitt, A., & Hoffman, R. (1987). On the single-mindedness of dream psychology. In J. Gackenbach (Ed.), Sleep and dreams: A sourcebook (pp. 145-186). New York: Garland.
- Ogilvie, R., Hunt, H., Tyson, P., Lucesau, M., & Jeakins, D. (1982). Lucid dreaming and alpha activity: A preliminary report. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 55, 795-808.
- Pinter, E. (1969). Wohlstandsfluechtlinge. Eine sozialpsychiatrische Studien an ungarischen Fluechtlingen in der Schweiz. Karger Verlag, Basel and New York.
- Rechtschaffen, A. (1978). The single-mindedness of dreams. Sleep, 1, 97-109.
- Zimmermann, E. (1958). Eingliederungsprobleme ungarischer intellektueller Fluechtlinge. Schule fuer Sozialarbeit, Zuerich (unpublished thesis).

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for helpful comments by Kate Ruzycki and Kathryn Belicki.