

Sex Dreams & Waking Sexual Activity: Is There a Connection?



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Abstract

The empirical research on sex dreams has yet to include waking sexual behaviour in their analyses. The present study is an exploratory study of sex dreams and waking sexual behaviour. Paper and pencil questionnaires were completed by 161 undergraduate students at a Canadian university. The results indicate that sex dreams occur frequently and are often rated positively. The sexual activity that frequently occurred in their sex dreams was similar to the sexual behaviours participants frequently performed in their waking lives. However, the level of detail and frequency of sex dreams were not significantly related to sexual behaviour or orgasms. Scores on a measure of sexual fantasy and daydreaming were, however, significantly related to sexual behaviour and orgasm. The results indicate the importance of including waking sexual behaviour when considering the nature of sexual dreams. Future directions of study are suggested.

Introduction

The literature on dreams and dreaming has theorized extensively about sexual dreams over the years. It is often suggested that our sexual dreams are influenced by the things we see, hear and read about, as well as the sexual behaviour we take part in (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). Previous research has found that sexual dreams are one of the most common types of dreams experienced by both women and men (Nielsen et al., 2003), and several theorists have claimed that sex dreams may be the key to understanding sexual desire, fantasies and sexual problems. However, to this date empirical research has not yet determined whether or not sexual dream content actually relates to waking day activity. The current study is an exploratory analysis assessing sexual dream content and how it relates to waking day sexual behaviour.

Method

Participants were 161 undergraduate students who volunteered to take part in the current study. Participants wrote a description of their most recent sexual dream and then analysed it using the Storytelling Method (DeCicco, 2006). Participants then completed a series of paper and pencil questionnaires. The questionnaires were as follows:

- Sexual Dream Survey/Storytelling Method (DeCicco, 2006)
- Demographics
- Sexual Dream Characteristics
- Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998)
- The Index of Sexual Fantasy (Hurlbert & Apt, 1993)
- Sexual Daydreaming Scale (Giambra, 1977)
- Sexual Behaviour Scale

Dreams were analysed using the Van de Castle method of analysis (see Hall & Van de Castle, 1966).

Demographics

- Sex: 117 females (73%); 44 males (27%)
- Age: mean age = 20.6 years (SD = 4.12); age range = 17 – 50 years
- Sexual Orientation: 96.3% heterosexual; 3.1% homosexual; 0.6% bisexual
- Relationship Status: 52.2% committed; 47.8% not committed
- Education: 64% 1st year; 5% 2nd year; 16.8% 3rd year; 12.4% 4th year

Results

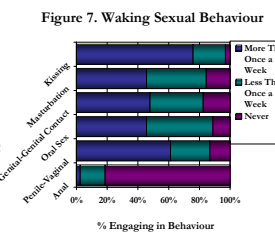
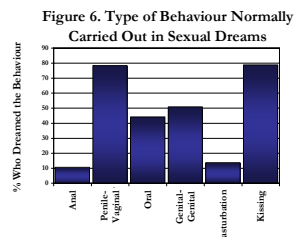
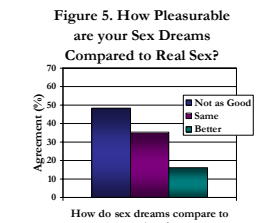
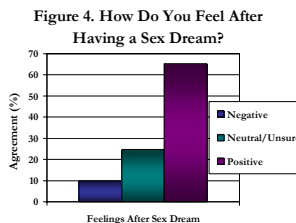
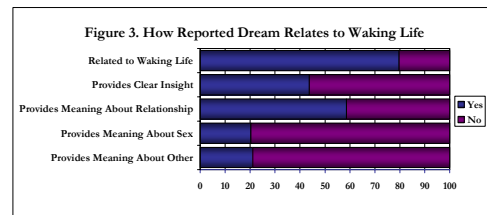
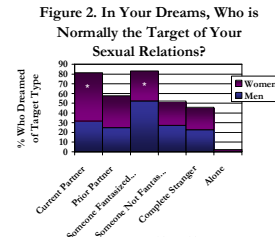
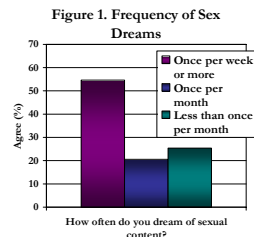


Table 1. Correlations of Quantitative Study Measures

	a	b	c	d	e	f
a. Dream Frequency	1.00					
b. Dream Detail	.23	1.00				
c. Fantasy	.21	.13	1.00			
d. Daydreaming	.28	.22	.47	1.00		
e. Sexual Behaviour	.00	-.04	.28	.06	1.00	
f. Sexual Orgasm	.11	.04	.40	.29	.65	1.00

Correlations marked in red are significant at p < .05

Discussion / Conclusions

Our dreams give us a venue to explore our sexuality free from worry about our appearance, performance or judgement from others. In our sex dreams there is no need for sexual negotiation with a partner, and therefore we may engage in sexual behaviour when we may not have such ready sexual access in waking life. The preliminary results of the present study shed some light on the largely unexplored experience of sexual dreaming. Sexual dreaming was quite common amongst our sample, with the majority of students having such a dream at least once a week. In addition, sexual dreaming was generally viewed as a positive experience. In fact, only a small minority viewed these dreams as negative, and over half of our sample rated their dreams as being as pleasurable as real sex or better!

Students' sexual dreams, despite being an individual, private experience, were largely social in nature. Almost every student dreamed of engaging in sexual behaviour with at least one other person. However, there were gender differences in who was chosen as a sexual partner. Men were more likely to dream about a friend, family member, teacher, employer or acquaintance that they had previously fantasized about, while women were more likely to dream about their current sexual or romantic partners.

Interestingly, the sexual behaviours carried out in their dreams mirrored their behaviour in their waking sex lives. Although a large majority of students had engaged in all but anal sex at some point, students engaged in kissing and penile-vaginal sex most frequently, which are the two behaviours most frequently dreamt about. It is also interesting to note that while students engaged in masturbation quite regularly, they rarely dreamt about this behaviour. This further indicates that sexual dreaming is a social event.

Although the individual sexual behaviours in participants' dreams and waking life shared very similar frequencies, this study cannot determine why this is the case. It is possible that students are acting out their sexual dreams with their sexual partner. It is also possible that their dreams are a reflection of their waking sexual activity. However, making direct comparisons between waking and dream behaviour must be done with caution, as different questions were used to obtain this data. Future studies should assess these behaviours so that more direct comparisons can be made. In addition, future studies should include less mainstream sexual acts, such as S&M or public sex, to determine whether these behaviours exist to a greater extent in our dreams than in waking life.

It appears that sexual fantasy and daydreaming are more closely related to our waking sexual behaviour than our sexual dreams. However, those who had greater levels of dream detail and frequency showed higher levels of comfort with their fantasies and daydreams. This suggests that fantasy and dreaming are both integral to our sexual lives, and future studies need to determine how these two sexual elements relate to one another.

Key References

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