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## **When dreams come true**

People interpret dreams in ways that affect their waking lives, especially when those dreams support pre-existing beliefs

By Bruce Bower

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Dreams don't just bubble up at night and then evaporate like morning dew once the sun rises. What you dream shapes what you think about your upcoming plans and your closest confidants, especially if nighttime reveries fit with what's already convenient to believe, a new report finds.

In an effort to understand whether people take their dreams seriously, Carey Morewedge of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and Michael Norton of Harvard University surveyed 149 college students attending universities in India, South Korea or the United States about theories of dream function.

People across cultures often assume that dreams contain hidden truths, much as Sigmund Freud posited more than a century ago, Morewedge and Norton report in the February *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. In fact, many individuals consider dreams to provide more meaningful information regarding daily affairs than comparable waking thoughts do, the two psychologists conclude.

Ideas that dreams come from the brain's random output or are essential for daily problem-solving or for weeding out the routine clutter in one's mind appeal to a minority of people, the scientists say.

In a series of experiments, the researchers also probed interpretations of various real and imagined dreams in a national sample of 270 people surveyed online, 656 commuters and pedestrians interviewed in Boston and Cambridge, Mass., and 60 college students.

"Our results suggest that the dreams most likely to affect our daily lives and relationships are the dreams that accord with our existing beliefs and desires," Morewedge says.

In one experiment, participants reported feeling closer to a personal friend after imagining a dream in which their friend defended them, versus imagining a dream in which that friend betrayed them. In considering actual past dreams about friends, volunteers deemed especially meaningful those dreams that had portrayed their friends positively. Dreams of disliked individuals were rated as particularly

meaningful if those dreams showed them in a negative light.

"This is very good evidence that dreamed-of actions can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy," comments psychologist Mark Blagrove of Swansea University in Wales. So a person who dreams about a loyal friend may then act in ways that encourage the friend to behave as in the dream.

A further experiment found that imagined dreams about communications from God were regarded as more meaningful by religious believers than agnostics. Still, agnostics said they would see more meaning in a dream of God commanding them to do something enjoyable, such as traveling the world, rather than unpleasant, such as working in a leper colony for a year.

Highly negative dreams about death and injury also carry a lot of meaning, the researchers note. In one of their experiments, participants reported being equally reluctant to fly after imaging a dream about a plane crash or learning of an actual plane crash. Volunteers who believed that dreams contain hidden truths reported a particularly pronounced aversion to flying after having imagined a dream about a plane crash.

People regard thoughts that seem to "come from nowhere," such as dreams and daydreams, as more meaningful than thoughts with a presumed external cause, Morewedge proposes. People tend to think these unbidden thoughts have been generated for some internal reason related to one's actual intentions or attitudes, in his view.

Still, the results don't explain why cultures around the world regard dreams as highly meaningful, remarks psychologist G. William Domhoff of the University of California, Santa Cruz. In his studies, he finds that dreams are experienced as real while they happen because they frequently simulate waking ideas and concerns. In some cases, a dream seems so real to dreamers that they can't shake the suspicion that it really happened.

In the late 19th century, anthropologist Edward Tylor argued that the spirit world partly had its origins in such dreams. "For most cultures, dreams are the soul wandering at night, or other souls visiting us," Domhoff says.

Further research needs to examine whether people sometimes experience genuine insights into waking life from dreams, thus encouraging a belief that dreams contain hidden meanings, Blagrove adds.

#### **SUGGESTED READING :**

Dream reports collected by psychologists at the University of California, Santa Cruz:

#### **CITATIONS & REFERENCES :**

Morewedge, C., and M. Norton, "When Dreaming Is Believing: The

(Motivated) Interpretation of Dreams," February 2009, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, vol. 96, no. 2, p. 249-264, doi:10.1037/a0013264.