The “Dissociative” Origins of Impactful Dreams in the Aftermath of Loss and Trauma

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Dream Types

- Dreaming
  - Mundane Dreams
  - Existential Dreams
  - Nightmares
  - Transcendent Dreams
Overview

- Impactful Dream types
  - Existential dreams, Nightmares, and Transcendent dreams

- Design summary for three studies of:
  - The effects of loss and trauma on Existential Dreams

- Replicated results
  - The “dissociative” distress of traumatic loss as the source of Existential Dreams

- Conclusions and implications
Transcendent Dreams: Feature Profile

- Emotions and feelings: ecstasy
- Motives, concerns: magical success
- Movement style: vigorous activity
- Success/failure: goal achievement
- Sensory phenomena: extraordinary light
- Dream transitions: shifts in perspective
- Dream endings: intense affect
Nightmares: Feature Profile

- Emotions and feelings: fear
- Motives, concerns: harm avoidance
- Movement style: vigorous activity
- Success/failure: lack of goal achievement
- Sensory phenomena: auditory anomalies
- Dream transitions: physical metamorphoses
- Dream endings: intense affect
Existential Dreams: Feature Profile

- Emotions and feelings: sadness
- Motives, concerns: separation
- Movement style: ineffectuality (fatigue)
- Success/failure: lack of goal achievement
- Sensory phenomena: light/dark contrast
- Dream transitions: affective shifts
- Dream endings: intense affect
Existential Dreams: Rating Profile

- Emotions and feelings: “sad,” “downhearted”
- Motives, concerns: “My dream involved separation, rejection, or loss”
- Movement style: “I felt tired, weak, or unable to move”
- Success/failure: “I was successful in attaining my goals” (false)
- Sensory phenomena: “My dream involved vivid contrasts between light and darkness”
- Dream transitions: “I experienced the spontaneous emergence of clear and distinct feelings or emotions”
- Dream endings: “I felt like crying—or I actually cried”
Study 1: Procedures

- 681 young adults
  - Described their most “significant” dream from the preceding month on a questionnaire with:
    - Items to assess dream type
    - Items to assess dream carry-over effects
  - Completed the Grief Experience Questionnaire (Jacobs et al., 1986)
    - Items to assess (depression, lethargy, numbness) and (sadness, yearning, dissociation)
    - With additional items to assess loss history
Study 2: Procedures

- 158 young adults
  - Monitored their dreams for a period of up to one month and described the first dream they had that was as impactful as their most impactful dream during the preceding month
    - Items to assess dream type
    - Items to assess dream carry-over effects
  - Completed the Loss/Trauma Questionnaire (LTQ; Eng, Kuiken, Temme, & Sharma, 2005)
    - Items to assess (depression, agitation, numbness) and (sadness, vivid reminiscences, amnesia)
    - Items to assess loss and trauma histories
Study 3: Procedures

- 255 young adults
  - Monitored their dreams for a period of up to one month and described the first dream they had that was as impactful as their most impactful dream during the preceding month
    - Items to assess dream type
    - Items to assess dream carry-over effects
  - Completed the Loss/Trauma Questionnaire (LTQ; Eng, Kuiken, Temme, & Sharma, 2006)
    - Items to assess (depression, agitation, numbness) and (sadness, vivid reminiscences, amnesia); and
    - Items to assess loss, trauma, and traumatic loss histories
Results I: Dissociative Distress During Bereavement

- **Amnestic Angst**: Interactive combination of:
  - Soft sadness (melancholy)
  - Vivid reminiscences
  - Mnemonic absences

- **Depressive Derealization**: Interactive combination of:
  - Anhedonic depression
  - Agitated longing
  - Numbness/denial
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Results I: Dissociative Distress During Bereavement

- Study 1: Amnestic Angst ($p < .001$) and Depressive Derealization ($p < .001$) were elevated 0-3 years after loss
- Study 2: Amnestic Angst ($p = .024$), but not Depressive Derealization, was elevated 0-2 years after loss
- Study 3: Amnestic Angst ($p = .005$) and Depressive Derealization ($p = .007$) were elevated 0-2 years after traumatic loss

Summary: Amnestic Angst and Depressive Derealization occur during bereavement, especially following traumatic loss
Results II: Existential Dreams During Bereavement

- Study 1: A 6-item index of Existential Dream characteristics was elevated 0-3 years after loss ($p < .001$)
- Study 2: A 9-item index of Existential Dream characteristics was elevated 0-2 years after loss ($p = .042$)
- Study 3: A 9-item index of Existential Dream characteristics was elevated 0-2 years after traumatic loss ($p = .053$)

Summary: Existential Dreaming is more likely to occur during bereavement, perhaps especially following traumatic loss.
Results III: Existential Dreams with Sublime Disquietude

- Self-Perceptual Depth:
  - “…I felt sensitive to aspects of my life that I usually ignore”

- Inexpressible Realizations:
  - “…what I began to understand could not be put into words”

- Discord:
  - “…something in my experience seemed irreversibly ruined”

Sublime Disquietude = (Self-perceptual Depth) * (Inexpressible Realizations) * (Discord)
Results III: Existential Dreams with Sublime Disquietude

- Study 1: Existential Dreaming with post-awakening Self-perceptual Depth was elevated during 0-3 years after loss ($p < .001$)
- Study 2: Existential Dreaming with post-awakening Sublime Disquietude was elevated during 0-2 years after loss ($p = .027$)
- Study 3: Existential Dreaming with post-awakening Sublime Disquietude was elevated during 0-2 years after traumatic loss ($p = .043$)

Summary: Existential Dreaming (with post-awaking “depth”) is more likely to occur during bereavement, especially after traumatic loss.
Results IV: Predicting Impactful Existential Dreams

- **Study 1:** Amnestic Angst predicted Existential Dreams with Self-perceptual Depth ($r = .28; p < .001$)
- **Study 2:** Amnestic Angst predicted Existential Dreaming with Sublime Disquietude ($r = .40; p < .001$)
- **Study 3:** Amnestic Angst predicted Existential Dreaming with Sublime Disquietude ($r = .27; p < .001$)

Summary: Amnestic Angst distinctively predicts Existential Dreams with aesthetic “depth” during bereavement, especially after traumatic loss.
Conclusions and Implications

- Bereavement is accompanied by increases in Existential Dreams—with post-awakening “self-perceptual” and “aesthetic” effects.
- Amnestic Angst, but not Depressive Derealization, predicts Existential Dreams—and their post-awakening aftereffects.
- Needed: Psychometric efforts to
  - Differentiate these two forms of “dissociative” distress; and
  - Distinguish both from fully metaphoric imaginative involvement.
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