

Typical Dreams: A Comparison of Dreams Across Cultures

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*But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;*

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

– William Butler Yeats, from *Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven* (1)



Have you ever wondered how the content of your dreams differs from that of your friends? How about the dreams of people raised in different countries and cultures? It is not always easy to compare dreams of distinct individuals because the content of dreams depends on our personal experiences. This is why dream researchers have developed standardized dream questionnaires in which common thematic elements are grouped together. These questionnaires can be translated into various languages and used to survey and scientifically analyze the content of dreams. Open-ended questions about dreams might elicit free form, subjective answers that are difficult to categorize and analyze. Therefore, standardized dream questionnaires ask study subjects, “Have you ever dreamed of ...” and provide research subjects with a list of defined dream themes such as being chased, flying, or falling.

Dream researchers can also modify the questionnaires to include additional questions about the frequency or intensity of each dream theme and specify the time frame that the study subjects should take into account. For example, instead of asking, “Have you ever dreamed of ...,” one can prompt subjects to focus on the dreams of the last month or the first memory of ever dreaming about a certain theme. Any such subjective assessment of one’s dreams with a questionnaire has its pitfalls. We routinely forget most of our dreams, and we tend to remember the dreams that are either the most vivid or frequent as well as the dreams that we may have discussed with friends or written down in a journal. The answers to dream

questionnaires may therefore be a reflection of our dream memory and not necessarily the actual frequency of prevalence of certain dream themes. Furthermore, standardized dream questionnaires are ideal for research purposes but may not capture the complex and subjective nature of dreams. Despite these pitfalls, research studies using dream questionnaires provide a fascinating insight into the dream world of large groups of people and identify commonalities or differences in the thematic content of dreams across cultures.

The researcher [Calvin Kai-Ching Yu from the Hong Kong Shue Yan University used a Chinese translation of a standardized dream questionnaire and surveyed 384 students](#) (2) at the University of Hong Kong (mostly psychology students, 69% female, 31% male, mean age 21). Here are the results:

Ten most prevalent dream themes in a sample of Chinese students according to Yu (2008):

1. Schools, teachers, studying (95%)
2. Being chased or pursued (92%)
3. Falling (87%)
4. Arriving too late, e.g., missing a train (81%)
5. Failing an examination (79%)
6. A person now alive as dead (75%)
7. Trying again and again to do something (74%)
8. Flying or soaring through the air (74%)
9. Being frozen with fright (71%)
10. Sexual experiences (70%)

The most prevalent theme was “schools, teachers, studying.” This means that 95% of the study subjects recalled having had dreams related to studying, school, or teachers at some point in their lives, whereas only 70% of the subjects recalled dreams about sexual experiences. The subjects were also asked to rank the frequency of the dreams on a 5-point scale (0 = never, 1 = seldom, 2 = sometimes, 3 = frequently, 4 = very frequently). For the most part, the most prevalent dreams were also the most frequent ones. Not only did nearly every subject recall dreams about schools, teachers, or studying, this theme also received an average frequency score of 2.3, indicating that for most individuals this was a recurrent dream theme – not a big surprise in university students. On the other hand, even though the majority of subjects (57%) recalled dreams of “being smothered, unable to breathe,” its average frequency rating was low (0.9), indicating that this was a rare (but probably rather memorable) dream.

How do the dreams of the Chinese students compare to their counterparts in other countries?

Michael Schredl and his colleagues [used a similar questionnaire to study the dreams of German university students](#) (3) (nearly all psychology students, 85% female, 15% male, mean age 24) with the following results:

Ten most prevalent dream themes in a sample of German students according to Schredl and colleagues (2004):

1. Schools, teachers, studying (89%)
2. Being chased or pursued (89%)
3. Sexual experiences (87%)
4. Falling (74%)
5. Arriving too late, e.g., missing a train (69%)
6. A person now alive as dead (68%)
7. Flying or soaring through the air (64%)
8. Failing an examination (61%)
9. Being on the verge of falling (57%)
10. Being frozen with fright (56%)

There is a remarkable overlap in the top ten lists of dream themes among Chinese and German students. Dreams about school and about being chased are the two most prevalent themes for Chinese and German students. One key difference is that dreams about sexual experiences are recalled more commonly among German students.

Tore Nielsen and his colleagues [administered a dream questionnaire to students at three Canadian universities](#) (4), thus obtaining data on an even larger study population (more than 1,000 students).

Ten most prevalent dream themes in a sample of Canadian students according to Nielsen and colleagues (2003):

1. Being chased or pursued (82%)
2. Sexual experiences (77%)
3. Falling (74%)
4. Schools, teachers, studying (67%)
5. Arriving too late, e.g., missing a train (60%)
6. Being on the verge of falling (58%)
7. Trying again and again to do something (54%)
8. A person now alive as dead (54%)
9. Flying or soaring through the air (48%)
10. Vividly sensing ... a presence in the room (48 %)

It is interesting that dreams about school or studying were the most common theme among Chinese and German students but do not even make the top-three list among Canadian students. This finding is perhaps also mirrored in the result that dreams about failing exams are comparatively common in Chinese and German students but are not found in the top-ten list among Canadian students.

At first glance, the dream content of German students seems to be somehow a hybrid between those of Chinese and Canadian students. Chinese and German students share a higher prevalence of academia-related dreams, whereas sexual dreams are among the most

prevalent dreams for both Canadians and Germans. However, I did notice an interesting aberrancy. Chinese and Canadian students dream about “trying again and again to do something” – a theme that is quite rare among German students. I have a simple explanation for this (possibly influenced by the fact that I am German): Germans get it right the first time, which is why they do not dream about repeatedly attempting the same task.

The strength of these three studies is that they used similar techniques to assess dream content and evaluated study subjects with very comparable backgrounds: Psychology students in their early twenties. This approach provides us with the unique opportunity to directly compare and contrast the dreams of people who were raised on three continents and immersed in distinct cultures and languages. However, this approach also comes with a major limitation. We cannot easily extrapolate these results to the general population. Dreams about studying and school may be common among students, but they are probably rare among subjects who are currently holding a full-time job or are retired. University students are an easily accessible study population, but they are not necessarily representative of the society they grow up in. Future studies that want to establish a more comprehensive cross-cultural comparison of dream content should probably attempt to enroll study subjects of varying ages, professions, educational, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Despite its limitation, the currently available data on dream content comparisons across countries does suggest one important message: People all over the world have similar dreams.

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