

## *Chapter 11*

# **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DREAMS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study of gender similarities and differences in dream content has proven to be a dangerous mine field for dream researchers. It turns out there are as many similarities as there are differences in the dreams of American men and women; while some of the differences are small, they seem to fit into a general pattern. To the degree that there are somewhat larger differences, they are similar to differences that are found in waking life in terms of concerns, interests, the content of autobiographical memories, and behavioral tendencies. This general finding fits with a cognitive theory of dreams, which claims dream content is “continuous” with waking thought and behavior.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The study of gender similarities and differences in dream content has proven to be a dangerous mine field for dream researchers. Even if the results are meant only to provide a normative basis for comparisons with dream journals from individual men and women, or with dream reports from men and women in other cultures, they have the potential to stir up all the tensions that inevitably accompany any discussion of gender in a world where gender discrimination—and conflicts between men and women on many personal issues—are pervasive.

It is, therefore, necessary to proceed with great caution. There are caveats and methodological problems that must be presented along the way, such as the point that we are talking about differences in degree, not in kind, to the extent that there are differences. It is also important to note at the outset that there are variations in gender patterns from culture to culture as well as major individual differences in the dream journals of both men and women, which also temper any large generalizations.

My main focus in this chapter is on the dreams of American men and women, because very little is known about gender patterns in other societies. However, comparisons will be

made with findings from other societies whenever possible. Although the findings in these cross-cultural studies are not as comprehensive, they do show there are both similarities and differences with the American results. In the future, repeated studies of gender similarities and differences in many countries could make an important contribution to developing a better theory of the meaning of dreams.

## **NORMATIVE FINDINGS WITH THE HALL AND VAN DE CASTLE CODING SYSTEM**

The most systematic empirical findings on gender and dream content come from a comprehensive system for studying dream content developed by Calvin S. Hall and Robert Van de Castle (1966). There are ten general categories in the Hall/Van de Castle system, most of which are divided into two or more subcategories. The most frequently used categories concern characters, social interactions, misfortunes and good fortunes, activities, emotions, and settings. The categories rest on the “nominal” level of measurement, which means there is a simple counting of frequencies for the content categories, such as “men” or “women,” or “indoor” or “outdoor” setting.

The findings in terms of the empirical categories of the Hall/Van de Castle system are most useful and readily understood when they are conveyed in an array of percentages and ratios, called “indicators,” which will be introduced shortly. Such indicators are also the best way to deal with a number of difficult methodological issues that are often overlooked in the study of dreams, such as the need for a control for the differing lengths of dream reports. In addition, percentages and ratios lend themselves to the form of statistical analysis — nonparametric statistics — that is most appropriate for data from nominal categories. The failure of some dream researchers to take these methodological problems seriously has led to most of the misunderstandings and disagreements concerning gender similarities and differences in dream content (Domhoff, 1996, Chapter 3; 1999; 2003, Chapter 2).

The Hall and Van de Castle normative findings are based on 500 dream reports from 100 men and 500 dreams reports from 100 women, which were collected from predominantly white middle-class students at Case Western Reserve University and Baldwin-Wallace College in Cleveland, Ohio, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In considering these results, it is important to keep in mind that they were replicated with 340 dreams from 69 women and 263 dreams from 53 men collected at the University of Richmond in 1979, an outcome that was not anticipated by the investigators (Hall, Domhoff, Blick, & Weesner, 1982). Further unexpected support for the stability of the normative findings came in two separate investigations of women's dreams by female dream researchers in the 1980s. Tonay (1990-1991) collected and coded 500 dreams from 100 women at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1980s, finding very few differences from the original norms. About the same time, Dudley and Fungaroli (1987) and Dudley and Swank (1990) collected two different samples at Salem College, an all-women's college in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, again finding very few differences from the earlier norms. Finally, the women's norms were replicated once again in the 1990s in the study of 100 Most Recent Dreams that were collected at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and coded by Tonay (Domhoff, 1996, p. 67).

Before presenting these findings with young adults, we note that the dream content of older Euro-American American adults seems very similar to that of the young adults on whom the norms are based (Hall & Domhoff, 1963; 1964; Kramer, Winget, & Whitman, 1971; Zepelin, 1980; 1981). The one exception may be a decline in aggression and negative emotions, on which the findings are mixed (Brenneis, 1975; Howe & Blick, 1983). This conclusion is supported by the fact that the dreams of adults who have kept individual dream journals for many years do not show very many changes; they are far more consistent than they are different, even for those in their 70s (Domhoff, 1996, 2003; Lortie-Lussier, Cote, & Vachon, 2000).

We begin with some of the similarities between men and women in the Hall and Van de Castle normative study. If we ask what percentage of dreams from men and women have at least one of several negative elements included in the Hall/Van de Castle system, such as aggression, misfortune, failure, and negative emotion (anger, apprehension, confusion, and sadness), then men and women are similar, in that 80% of men's dreams and 77% of women's have at least one of these negative elements. Turning to the positive aspects of dream content, such as friendly interactions, good fortune, success, and happiness, 53% of dreams for both men and women in the normative sample have at least one of those elements. Men and women also have an equal number of dreams in which food or eating is mentioned—about 17%.

Both men and women are more often victims than aggressors in the aggressive interactions in their dreams, and they face the same attackers, namely, men who are not known to them (“male strangers”) and animals. On a more positive note, both men and women are equally likely to befriend another character in their dreams.

The tendency for American dreams to feature “negative” events is not atypical. In a wide range of cross-cultural studies, there is more aggression than friendliness and more misfortune than good fortune, and dreamers of both genders are more often the victims than the aggressors in aggressive interactions (Domhoff, 1996, Chapter 6).

American men and women mention about the same number of activities occurring in their dreams, such as talking, walking, looking, listening, and thinking. These activities are very similar except that there are slightly more physical activities in men's dreams than in women's (27% vs. 20%) and slightly more talking in women's (26% vs. 22%). Similarly, American men and women have roughly the same number of objects appearing in their dreams, such as houses, trees, cars, streets, household items, money, and parts of the body. Among the few differences are the fact that men are a little more likely to include implements like tools and weapons, whereas women are more likely to include clothing and household articles. Unfortunately, there has been a paucity of cross-cultural studies on activities and objects, an exception being the case of Japan, where the findings were almost identical to those for the United States (Yamanaka, Morita, & Matsumoto, 1982).

In addition to the similarities, there are also some differences between the dreams of American men and women. They begin with the characters that appear in dreams. First, there is a slight tendency for women to have more characters in their dreams, 2.8 vs. 2.4, but this difference has to be tempered by the fact that women's dream reports tend to be about 8% longer than men's on average. This fact makes it more likely that dream elements of all kinds will occur with greater frequency in women's dreams, so corrections have to be made for that fact. Second, there is a gender difference in how often men and women include male and female characters in their dreams: men dream twice as often about other men as they do about

women (67% vs. 33%), and women dream equally about both sexes (48% men, 52% women). This is the largest difference found between American men and women. The magnitude of the difference is determined by “*h*,” a statistic for “effect size” that is useful with percentage comparisons (Domhoff, 1996, Appendix D). The effect size of .38 for this comparison is a large magnitude for studies of dream content.

This gender difference in the “male/female percentage” has been found at all ages in many different cultures, including Argentina, Switzerland, and many small traditional cultures studied in the past by cultural anthropologists (Domhoff, 1996, Chapter 6; Hall, 1984; Strauch, 2003; Strauch & Lederbogen, 1999; Tartz & Krippner, 2008). However, it is not a “universal” difference that is invariably found in every group. In fact, the dreams of African-American male college students at a community college in Chicago in the late 1960s showed a male/female percentage of 53/47, which was very similar to the male/female percentage of the African-American women in the study (Domhoff, 1996, p. 75). Nor was the difference found in studies of Mexican and Peruvian teenagers and young adults, where the men tended to dream equally of men and women, and the women dreamed more frequently of men (Domhoff, 1996, p. 106). It also was absent in a study of German college students, in which the male/female percent was 56/44 for women and 58/42 for men (Schredl, Petra, Bishop, Golitz, & Buschtons, 2003).

It should be stressed that this unexpected general finding on the male/female percent is a “discovery” that is a product of the coding system. There is no immediately obvious reason for this difference. However, if we assume that dreams reflect people’s concerns, then we would say that men in many societies are more concerned about other men than they are about women, whereas women are equally concerned about both men and women. We can then look to other findings on gender differences to see why this might be the case.

Another gender difference relating to characters is that women more often dream of characters who are familiar to them than do men—family members, friends, and famous people. In Table 1 this difference is displayed in terms of the “familiarity percentage,” which is determined by dividing the number of familiar characters by the total number of familiar and unfamiliar characters. The effect size of .26 for this comparison is of moderate magnitude for studies of dream content. This difference is found in most cross-cultural studies (Domhoff, 1996, Chapter 6).

**Table 1. Gender Differences in Familiarity Percent**

	Male Dreamers	Female Dreamers
Familiar characters	501 (45%)	796 (58%)
Unfamiliar characters	607 (55%)	567 (42%)

Effect size (*h*) = .26; significance level (*p*) = .0001.

If we ask why there is a gender difference in familiarity percent, we may have the start of an answer from findings on unfamiliar males and females. American men dream more often of unfamiliar males than do women (28% vs. 15%), but men and women dream equally about

"familiar males" (25% vs. 23%). Conversely, women dream more often of familiar females than men do, 29% vs. 16%, but women and men dream about equally of unfamiliar females, 11% for women and 10% for men. In short, these comparisons tell us that the difference on familiarity percent is created by the presence of more "unfamiliar males" in male dreams and more "familiar females" in female dreams.

These results take on further meaning, and perhaps provide a clue to the greater percentage of unknown males in men's dreams, when we turn to the social interactions that men and women have with the characters in their dreams. At a very general level, the dreams of American men and women are similar in that about the same percentage of their dreams have at least one aggressive interaction, defined as a deliberate or intentional feeling or act on the part of one character meant to harm or annoy another character (47% for men, 44% for women). This broad definition thus includes angry thoughts or hostility toward another character as well as threats or physically aggressive acts. Men and woman also have about the same percentage of dreams with at least one friendly interaction, defined as a purposeful act involving support, help, kindness, gift giving, or any other type of friendly act toward another character (38% for men, 42% for women).

Beyond this general point, the plot begins to thicken. First, there are gender differences in the patterns of aggressive interactions with male and female characters. Men are more often aggressive with other men and are most often friendly with women characters, whereas women have about the same rate of aggressive and friendly interactions with both male and female characters. In addition, there is a higher "rate" of aggressions per character in men's dreams (called the A/C ratio). When we control for the fact that there are slightly more characters in women's dreams by dividing the total number of aggressions by the total number of characters, the A/C ratio is .34 for men and .24 for women. On the other hand, men and women have the same rate of friendliness per character, .21 for men and .22 for women.

The patterns of aggressive and friendly interactions with specific types of characters in dreams take us one step further. We make this comparison by determining the aggression/friendliness percentage with each character, which is calculated by dividing the total number of aggressions with that character by the total number of aggressions plus friendly interactions with that character. A percentage over 50% means that the dreamer has more aggressive than friendly interactions with that character, and a percentage under 50% means that the dreamer has more friendly than aggressive interactions with that character. We can go one step further and define "enemies" as characters with an A/F of 60% or greater and "friends" as characters with an A/F of 40% or lower.

As Table 2 reveals, unknown males are the most dangerous human characters in the dreams of both men and women, but the percentage is especially high for men, 72%, suggesting that men's higher male/female percentage may relate to their concern about aggressive interactions with men they do not know. In contrast, as Table 2 also shows, men have more friendly than aggressive interactions with women whether they are known or not. Male strangers are their enemies, and women, whether known or not, are their friends.

**Table 2. Gender Differences in A/F with Different Characters (%)**

	Male Dreamers	Female Dreamers
Dreamer with known men	51	40
Dreamer with unknown men	72	63
Dreamer with known women	36	52
Dreamer with unknown women	40	43

Effect size ( $h$ ) = .26; significance level ( $p$ ) = .0001.

For women, known men are friends in their dreams, with an A/F% of 40%. On the other hand, they have about an equal number of friendly and aggressive interactions with the women they know. Surprisingly, they have less aggression with women they do not know, as reflected in an A/F of 43%.

Thus, if we combine the findings on the male/female percentages with those on patterns of aggressive and friendly interactions, we can suggest that conflicts with other men lead men to have a higher percentage of men than women in their dreams, whereas women have about an equal number of men and women in their dreams because they have concerns about both unknown men and familiar women. Whether these hypotheses are right or wrong, they show how the pattern of gender similarities and differences in dreams can be used by future researchers to develop a better theory of dream meaning.

Aggression as a key difference between the dreams of American men and women becomes more apparent when it is noted that a far greater number of the aggressions in men's dreams are physical in nature. If we divide physical aggressions by the total number of aggressions, the men's physical aggression percent is 50 as compared to 34% for women, an effect size of .33. Women's aggressive dreams, on the other hand, are twice as likely as men's to involve rejections and exclusions, 36% vs. 18% ( $h=.41$ ).

To the degree that information is available, these gender differences on aggression are very widespread cross-culturally. For example, the men's dreams from Mexico, Peru, and Argentina had more aggression than the women's dreams; men and women in those three countries also had more of their aggressive interactions with male characters than female characters. In some countries, such as the Netherlands and Switzerland, the rates of aggression are much lower than in the United States, but the same gender differences are present. In small traditional societies, the rates of physical aggression are much higher than in the United States or Europe, in good part because of attacks by animals; sometimes the difference between men and women on physical aggression percentage therefore disappears (Domhoff, 1996, Chapter 6).

We turn now to other, less dramatic differences in the dreams of men and women. Contrary to cultural stereotypes about dreams, they do not often involve sexuality, not even so much as a romantic hug or kiss. Only 12% of the American men's dreams and 4% of the women's dreams had at least one sexual interaction, and the figures are equally low in the few cross-cultural studies that mention sexuality at all. In one study of American women in the late 1980s, the percentage of dreams with at least one sexual scene reached 8%, double the normative figure (Dudley & Swank, 1990). Since the studies are few and the differences are small, it is best not to make very much of them.

There are more mentions of emotions in women's dream reports, an average of .84 per dream, as compared to an average of .56 for men. However, it is worth noting that the percentage of negative emotions (anger, apprehension, sadness, and confusion) is 80% for both men and women. Finally, there are some differences in the settings in the dreams of American men and women. The men are more likely to be in outdoor settings than women (52% vs. 39%,  $h=.26$ ) and more likely to be in unfamiliar settings (39% vs. 22%,  $h=.38$ ). For a look at all the normative findings on men's and women's dreams, see Table 3 and Figure 1, which present the same information.

**Table 3. Female Norms vs. Male Norms on Various Hall/Van de Castle Content Indicators**

	Male Norms	Female Norms	<i>h</i> (F vs. M)
<b><i>Characters</i></b>			
Male/Female %	68%	48%	-.41
Familiarity %	45%	58%	+.27
Friends %	31%	37%	+.12
Family %	12%	20%	+.22
Dead & Imaginary %	00%	01%	+.10
Animal %	06%	04%	-.08
<b><i>Social Interaction Percents</i></b>			
Aggression/Friendliness %	59%	51%	-.16
Befriender %	50%	49%	-.03
Aggressor %	39%	34%	-.12
Physical Aggression %	50%	34%	-.34
<b><i>Social Interaction Ratios</i></b>			
A/C Index	.34	.23	-.26
F/C Index	.21	.21	+.00
S/C Index	.06	.01	-.12
<b><i>Settings</i></b>			
Indoor Setting %	49%	61%	+.25
Familiar Setting %	61%	77%	+.34
<b><i>Self-Concept Percents</i></b>			
Self-Negativity %	65%	66%	+.03
Bodily Misfortunes %	30%	34%	+.09
Negative Emotions %	81%	80%	-.01
D-involved Success %	50%	43%	-.14
Torso/Anatomy %	31%	21%	-.24
<b><i>Dreams with at Least One:</i></b>			
Aggression	47%	44%	-.07
Friendliness	38%	41%	+.06
Sexuality	12%	03%	-.32
Misfortune	36%	33%	-.07
Good Fortune	07%	06%	-.04
Success	15%	07%	-.28
Failure	16%	09%	-.22
Striving	27%	15%	-.31

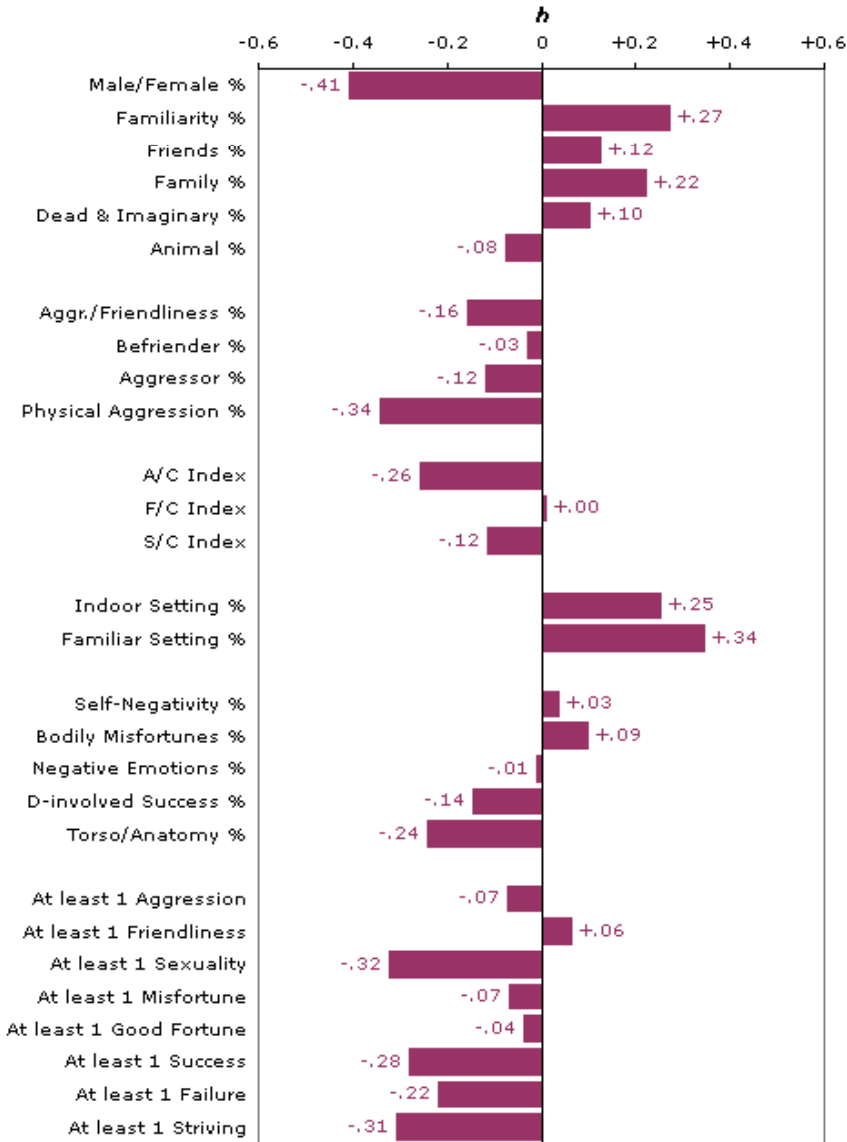


Figure 1. h-profile of Female Norms vs. Male Norms.

## DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

What are we to make of these gender similarities and differences? At the most general level, the findings are supportive of the idea that there is “continuity” between the content of dreams and waking life, because they are in many ways what we might expect based on what is known about the autobiographical memories, interests, and living situations of men and women in waking life. As reflected in their dreams, men and women have many interests, fears and emotional preoccupations in common, such as fear of unknown males and many

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kinds of animals, and both men and women suffer equally from anger, apprehension, sadness, and confusion.

At the same time, the differences in dreams relate to differences in waking life. First, there are similarities to findings with reports of autobiographical memories. For example, in a study of 37 men and 37 women ages 45-60 in Poland who were asked to write down their three most vivid memories, the women wrote longer accounts, included more people, used more emotion words, and provided more descriptive details (Niedzwienska, 2003). All four of these differences were found in the dream reports of American men and women.

Second, it is not surprising that women would dream more of indoor settings or household items than men do, due to their greater family responsibilities and greater likelihood of working in an indoor setting. Nor is it surprising that they would include more descriptions of clothing. Third, the findings on a higher rate of aggressive interactions in men's dreams, particularly those that involve physical aggression, are consistent with one of the few gender differences found in studies in many different societies. It is also noteworthy that boys show more physical aggression than girls, but that girls engage in "social aggression"—exclusion, rejection, and criticism—more frequently than do boys. It may even be that girls in early adolescence in the United States are especially sensitive to social aggressions (Underwood, 2003). Men's higher aggression with unknown males and animals also is consistent with waking life. At the same time, the fact that the amount of aggression is lower in some societies and higher in others, and that the gender differences on aggression sometimes decline or disappear, shows that the amount of aggression in dreams is probably closely related to cultural differences.

In closing, it must be stressed that future studies of gender similarities and differences in a wider range of countries would be very useful in developing a better theory of dream meaning. Specifically, in-depth studies of large samples of college students' dream reports that are collected every few years in the same universities might be helpful in developing a better understanding of how the relationship between cultural and personal conceptions manifests itself in dreams. Such samples also could be used to look in more detail at the social interactions with specific type of characters—e.g., unknown men, known women—that appear in the dreams of both men and women.

In suggesting that college students could be the focus of a sustained research program concerned with the development of a better theory of dreams, I am not arguing primarily from their accessibility to researchers. Other factors are more important, starting with the fact that the general similarities of college students' dreams in the United States and other industrialized societies provides an excellent baseline for future studies, a baseline that is lacking with teenagers and older adults. I also believe that college students have two important cognitive qualities that are a function of their age and situation. They are open to sharing their inner experiences because of their own desire for knowledge, and they are eager to contribute to the development of knowledge. Both of these qualities make college men and women ideal participants in the kinds of studies that are now needed in the field of dream research. For researchers with a limited budget, this is an ideal research endeavor, especially if they have access to the large number of students who take an introductory psychology course each year.

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