

DREAMS OF DEATH: MEXICAN-AMERICANS vs. ANGLO-AMERICANS*

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ABSTRACT. In order to test the hypothesis that Mexican-Americans have more death related concerns appearing in the reports of their dreams 65 Mexican-American (22 males and 43 females) and 243 Anglo-American (104 males and 139 females) university students were given a dream survey in which 12 death-related dreams were included in a 48-item questionnaire. More Mexican-Americans than Anglo-Americans reported having 8 of the 12 death-related dreams at the .05 or .01 level of significance.

RESUMEN. Para someter a prueba la hipótesis que los México-americanos manifiestan más ansiedades relacionadas con la muerte en reportes de sueños, se presentó un estudio de sueños, en el cual se incluían 12 sueños relacionados con la muerte en un cuestionario de 48 ítems, a 65 México-americanos (22 masculinos y 43 femeninos) y a 243 anglo-americanos (104 masculinos y 139 femeninos), todos estudiantes universitarios. Un mayor número de los México-americanos que de los anglo-americanos indicaron tener 8 de los 12 sueños relacionados con la muerte, al nivel de significación .05 o .01.

The cross-cultural study of dreams has been a topic of recurrent interest to social scientists. A common and fruitful working assumption made by students of culture and dreaming is that there is some relationship between the culture of the dreamer and the content of the dream (Eggen, 1958; and Bourguignon, 1972).

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the differences in the reported dream content of subjects from two different cultural groups within the United States. One is a group of Mexican-American university students and the other is a group of Anglo-American university students.

In his work with Mexican-Americans the senior author noted that Mexican-Americans reported dreams of death much more frequently than did Anglo-Americans. A review of related literature revealed tangential support for the proposition that death dreams are more frequent in Mexican-Americans. Burger (1968) and Zintz (1963) describe the Mexican-Americans as being more "fatalistic." In a study of social character in Mexico, Millan (1972) reported a fatalism, a fear of solitude and a fear of being abandoned as Mexican characteristics. All of these are congruent with an emphasis on death. However, it is from the literary work of Paz (1961) that we get the clearest exposition of the Mexican's fascination with death.

The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love. (Paz, 1961, pp. 57-58).

And indeed on the *Día de Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) Mexicans eat sugar candy skulls, decorate their homes with skeletons and eat bread which has been baked in the shape of bones.

METHOD

The Ss were 65 Mexican-American college students (22 males and 43 females) and 243 Anglo-American students (104 males and 139 females). The Ss were presented with a questionnaire which was headed by the question "Have you ever dreamed of . . .?" and was followed by a list of 48 dream topics. The longer list of dream topics was used to embed 12 dreams related to death. Six death-related dreams represented death in a clear and obvious manner: (1) dead people as though they were alive, (2) a relative or friend as dead, (3) seeing yourself as dead, (4) being hanged by the neck, (5) being buried alive, and (6) mortuaries and graveyards. Six other dream topics represented death in a symbolic manner: (1) losing a limb, (2) being smothered or unable to breathe, (3) lunatics or insane people, (4) teeth falling out or being pulled out, (5) being tied and unable to move, and (6) a creature part animal and part man.

The symbolic dream content areas have been useful in clinical practice. Also, being tied up or having one's teeth fall out has been associated with death since ancient times (Caillois, 1961). Losing one's ego through insanity or one's humanity through becoming part animal are themes in clinical material and in folklore. Being smothered closely parallels a frequently held view of death as having breath taken from one. The dreams about loss of breath, limbs or teeth are also *pars pro toto* symbols of losing all of one's body.

T tests were used to test the level of statistical significance of the differences between ethnic groups.

RESULTS

Table 1 lists the dreams having to do with death and the overall percentage of subjects in each group which reported having had a dream with death-related content. Mexican-Americans reported having more dreams about death-related content than did the Anglo-Americans. Of the 36 comparisons 20 resulted in significantly greater number of Mexican-American subjects reporting dreams relating to death.

TABLE 1

Percentage of *Ss* Who Reported Having Each Category of Death-related Dream
According to Sex and Ethnic Identification. N = 308

Dreams	Anglo American Males n = 104	Mexican American Males n = 22	Anglo American Females n = 139	Mexican American Females n = 43	Anglo American Total n = 243	Mexican American Total n = 65
1. losing a limb		27/23		11/21		19/22
2. relative or friend as dead		74/86		82/84		79/85
3. dead people as though they were alive		45/77**		48/74**		47/75**
4. being smothered or unable to breathe		55/59		45/63*		49/62*
5. lunatics or insane people		32/46		34/44		33/45*
6. teeth falling out		13/14		17/33*		15/26*
7. seeing yourself as dead		39/64*		35/56**		37/59**
8. being tied and unable to move		53/46		43/61*		47/55
9. being hanged by the neck		12/09		04/12		07/11
10. creatures part animal and part human		25/14		23/47**		24/35*
11. being buried alive		26/50*		22/40*		24/43**
12. mortuaries or graveyards		40/68**		29/65**		34/66**

* p < .05

** p < .01

Mexican-American females reported considerably more death dreams than Anglo-American women (8 out of the 12 comparisons were significant at the .05 or .01 level). On the other hand, Mexican-American men reported more death dreams than Anglo-American males to a statistically significant degree in only 4 of the 12 dream areas. These sex differences result from the fact that more Anglo-American males report dreams of death than do Anglo-American females and that fewer Mexican-American males report dreams of death than do Mexican-American females. Fewer Mexican-American males and more Anglo-American males report death-related dreams than do their female counterparts.

Anglo-American males reported having had an average of 23.9 of the dreams on the 48-item questionnaire and Mexican-American males reported an average 22.9 on the same questionnaire. Anglo-American women reported having an average of 22.2 of the dreams on the questionnaire and Mexican-American women reported 25.1 of the dreams on the list. The total Anglo-American average was 22.9 and the total Mexican-American average was 24.4. These differences do not approach significance.

DISCUSSION

These findings lend strong support for the hypothesis that Mexican-Americans are more concerned with the issue of death and that the concern reflects itself in dreams having to do with death. While not all of the comparisons resulted in statistically significant differences, a large number (8 out of 12) of them did.

The sex differences in the dream reports are difficult to understand. It is possible that Mexican-American females report more dreams of death than their male counterparts because the women are more likely candidates to carry the cultural influences of the Mexican-American subculture. The male is less bound to the home and required to meet and master the Anglo-American world more than is his female counterpart.

The data do support the specific hypothesis that Mexican-Americans are more concerned and involved with death than Anglo-Americans. There are other questions, however, which are left untouched. One such question is the degree to which the death concerns of the Mexican-Americans are similar in strength to the death concerns of Mexicans in Mexico. Also, we do not know to what degree the involvement with death is a Mexican phenomenon as Paz (1961) suggests or a part of a more pervasive system of values and beliefs found in any Hispanic country.

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FOOTNOTE

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