

Dream Recall and Political Ideology: Results of a Demographic Survey

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This report presents findings from a survey of 2992 demographically diverse American adults who answered questions about dream recall and questions about their political views. Participants who described themselves as “liberal” or “progressive” (n = 802) were compared to people who described themselves as “conservative” or “very conservative” (n = 1335). Previous studies have suggested that political liberals tend to have higher dream recall than political conservatives. The results of the present survey provide new evidence in support of this hypothesis. On all 11 questions asked about different types of dream recall, people on the left reported higher frequencies than people on the right. The same pattern was found when the two groups were divided by gender: Liberal males reported consistently higher dream recall than conservative males, as did liberal females compared to conservative females. These findings indicate that political ideology is at least one of the cultural factors influencing dream recall frequencies among American adults.

Keywords: Dream recall, nightmares, political ideology, liberals, conservatives

This brief report presents the findings of a survey of 2992 demographically diverse American adults who answered questions about their dream recall and questions about their political views. Cultural factors like political ideology are rarely employed as variables in quantitative dream research. Most researchers have understandably focused on psychological factors (e.g., Hall & Nordby, 1972; Schredl, 1999; Strauch & Meier, 1996; Hartmann, 1998; Revonsuo, 2000). Yet for many decades, anthropologists, ethnographers, and historians have argued that dreaming experience is thoroughly intertwined with cultural influences of language, morality, religion, and political power structures (Eggan, 1952; Tedlock, 1987; Von Grunebaum & Callois, 1966; Levin, 2008; Sobel, 2000; Foucault, 1993; Shulman & Stroumsa, 1999; Edgar, 1995; Gregor, 2001; and Mageo, 2003).

The present report offers a new means of testing this cultural claim by statistically analyzing a large collection of survey data to identify possible connections between people’s political views and their frequencies of dream recall. Previous studies addressing this specific question in a contemporary American context

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(Bulkeley, 2006, 2008) have suggested the hypothesis that political liberals tend to have higher dream recall than political conservatives. The findings reported here provide new evidence in support of this hypothesis.

METHOD

Study results were taken from a Zogby Interactive survey of 2,992 American adults who answered a series of questions about their sleep and dream patterns in May 2010. The participants were randomly chosen from a panel of approximately 500,000 people available for online opinion research who were originally contacted by Zogby during a random-digit dialing telephone survey (response rate information was not available). An online panel of participants is, by definition, skewed toward people who are computer-literate and likely to be more educated and affluent.¹ Public opinion researchers continue to debate the advantages and disadvantages of online surveys as compared with traditional telephone surveys. According to a March 2010 report conducted by the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the key issue in assessing the scientific value of an online poll is whether participants are recruited using a probability-based sampling method. If not, the results cannot be considered statistically representative of a broader population. Zogby's method satisfies this requirement.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were asked the following question: "How would you describe your political ideology?" The six answer options available were progressive, liberal, moderate, libertarian, conservative, and very conservative. For my purposes in this report, responses from moderates ($n = 537$) and libertarians ($n = 262$) were set aside, focusing on a comparison of responses from progressives ($n = 382$) and liberals ($n = 420$) versus conservatives ($n = 879$) and very conservatives ($n = 456$). The two groups on each side of the political spectrum were then combined into two larger groups, labeled here as Liberals ($n = 802$) and Conservatives ($n = 1335$). Gender information was also gathered, and is included in the tables below.

Participants in each group answered 11 questions about their dream recall. The Appendix presents the wording of these questions.

The first three questions were drawn from (Schredl's (2007) research and the other eight are patterned after the Typical Dreams Questionnaire used by Nielsen et al. (2003) in their study of the typical dreams of Canadian University students. It can be argued that these typical dream questions do not account for frequency or intensity. A "yes" response could mean that the dream has

¹ Other unusual aspects of this data set include a high proportion of males, older people, conservatives, libertarians, 2008 election voters, people with a college degree, and people with a high annual income. However, the sample also includes large numbers of females, liberals, low-income people, and so forth, enough to make legitimate statistical comparisons and to identify possible patterns and correlations.

Table 1. Comparing Liberals and Conservatives on Questions of Dream Recall

Question	Political ideology				p
	Liberal*		Conservative*		
	n	%	n	%	
Dream recall					
Almost every morning	86	10.7	100	7.5	
Several times a week	217	27.1	290	21.7	
About once a week	139	17.3	240	18.0	
Two or three times a month	144	18.0	227	17.0	
Less than once a month	171	21.3	365	27.3	
Never	29	3.6	73	5.5	
Not sure	16	2.0	40	3.0	
Often	586	73.1	857	64.2	<.000**
Rarely	200	24.9	438	32.8	<.000**
Nightmare recall					
Almost every morning	12	1.5	13	1.0	
Several times a week	22	2.7	39	2.9	
About once a week	62	7.7	59	4.4	
Two or three times a month	110	13.7	92	6.9	
Less than once a month	430	53.6	728	54.5	
Never	134	16.7	344	25.8	
Not sure	32	4.0	60	4.5	
Often	206	25.7	203	15.2	<.000**
Rarely	564	70.3	1072	80.3	<.000**
Talking with others					
Almost every morning	13	1.6	8	0.6	
Several times a week	37	4.6	43	3.2	
About once a week	67	8.4	69	5.2	
Two or three times a month	107	13.3	102	7.6	
Less than once a month	378	47.1	613	45.9	
Never	179	22.3	460	34.5	
Not sure	21	2.6	40	3.0	
Often	224	27.9	222	16.6	<.000**
Rarely	557	69.5	1073	80.4	<.000**
Just like waking life					
Yes	521	65.0	754	56.5	<.000**
No	200	24.9	422	31.6	.001**
Not sure	81	10.1	159	11.9	
Chasing					
Yes	489	61.0	627	47.0	<.000**
No	263	32.8	634	47.5	<.000**
Not sure	50	6.2	74	5.5	
Visitation					
Yes	415	51.7	529	39.6	<.000**
No	339	42.3	733	54.9	<.000**
Not sure	48	6.0	73	5.5	
Sexual					
Yes	610	76.1	774	58.0	<.000**
No	144	18.0	455	34.1	<.000**
Not sure	48	6.0	106	7.9	
Falling					
Yes	443	55.2	588	44.0	<.000**
No	305	38.0	688	51.5	<.000**
Not sure	54	6.7	59	4.4	
Flying					
Yes	402	50.1	540	40.4	<.000**
No	343	42.8	733	54.9	<.000**

(table continues)

Table 1. (continued)

Question	Political ideology				<i>p</i>
	Liberal*		Conservative*		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Not sure	57	7.1	62	4.6	
Awareness					
Yes	546	68.1	760	56.9	<.000**
No	178	22.2	412	30.9	<.000**
Not sure	78	9.7	163	12.2	
Control					
Yes	297	37.0	374	28.0	<.000**
No	360	44.9	746	55.9	<.000**
Not sure	125	15.6	215	16.1	

* Liberal *n* = 802. Conservative *n* = 1335. ** *p* < .001.

happened only once in the person's entire life or that it happens nightly. That concern is legitimate, and thus the results presented here should be regarded cautiously, as indicating the minimum occurrence of these types of dreams. Another concern is that these questions allow for confabulated memories influenced by social desirability. People may answer yes or no if they believe that answer is what a normal person in their society should give, whether they have actually experienced that kind of dream themselves. Such a possibility should be taken seriously, although most forms of opinion research are limited in a similar way by the difficulty of verifying subjective self-reports and eliminating external influences. The approach I have taken has been to gather a large number of reports from a demographically diverse group of people and to analyze them in terms of clear and easily identified patterns in the data. This method assumes that such broad, empirically based patterns are honest and accurate reflections of people's actual dream experiences.

All of the raw data, along with a complete set of participants' responses, are available at the website of the Sleep and Dream Database (SDDb), a digital archive and search engine designed to facilitate scientific dream research (<http://sleepanddreamdatabase.org>).

RESULTS

Table 1 provides the responses of Liberals and Conservatives to the 11 questions about dream recall. Tables 2 and 3 compare the Liberal and Conservative responses to the same questions in terms of gender groups. (The total counts for the four gender groups in Tables 2 and 3 add up to a smaller number than for the two groups in Table 1 because some participants, 3 Liberals, 8 Conservatives, did not provide answers to the gender question.) To calculate statistical significance, responses to the first three questions were aggregated into two responses: "Often" (Almost every morning, Several times a week, About once a week, Two or three times a month) and "Rarely" (Less than once a month, Never).

Table 2. Comparing Liberal and Conservative Males on Questions of Dream Recall

Question	Liberal male*		Conservative male*		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Dream recall					
Almost every morning	35	8.7	59	6.3	
Several times a week	115	28.5	207	22.0	
About once a week	74	18.4	178	18.9	
Two or three times a month	69	17.1	169	18.0	
Less than once a month	85	21.1	251	26.7	
Never	17	4.2	46	4.9	
Not sure	8	2.0	31	3.3	
Often	293	72.7	613	65.1	.006***
Rarely	102	25.3	297	31.6	.019**
Nightmare recall					
Almost every morning	3	0.7	7	0.7	
Several times a week	11	2.7	27	2.9	
About once a week	32	7.9	45	4.8	
Two or three times a month	64	15.9	55	5.8	
Less than once a month	201	49.9	507	53.9	
Never	77	19.1	260	27.6	
Not sure	15	3.7	40	4.3	
Often	110	27.3	134	14.2	<.000***
Rarely	278	69.0	767	81.5	<.000***
Talking with others					
Almost every morning	4	1.0	6	0.6	
Several times a week	20	5.0	24	2.6	
About once a week	27	6.7	47	5.0	
Two or three times a month	51	12.7	65	6.9	
Less than once a month	191	47.4	429	45.6	
Never	98	24.3	343	36.5	
Not sure	12	3.0	27	2.9	
Often	102	25.3	142	15.1	<.000***
Rarely	289	71.7	772	82.0	<.000***
Just like waking life					
Yes	259	64.3	534	56.7	.009***
No	100	24.8	290	30.8	<.000***
Not sure	44	10.9	117	12.4	
Chasing					
Yes	248	61.6	410	43.6	<.000***
No	134	33.3	475	50.5	<.000***
Not sure	21	5.2	56	5.6	
Visitation					
Yes	184	45.7	317	33.7	<.000***
No	189	46.9	567	60.3	<.000***
Not sure	30	7.4	57	6.1	
Sexual					
Yes	333	82.6	592	62.9	<.000***
No	44	10.9	277	29.4	<.000***
Not sure	16	4.0	72	7.7	
Falling					
Yes	214	53.1	380	40.4	<.000***
No	163	40.4	522	55.5	<.000***
Not sure	26	6.5	39	4.1	
Flying					
Yes	211	52.4	372	39.5	<.000***
No	164	40.7	521	55.4	<.000***
Not sure	28	6.9	48	5.1	

(table continues)

Table 2. (continued)

Question	Liberal male*		Conservative male*		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Awareness					
Yes	260	64.5	522	55.5	.002***
No	103	25.6	304	32.3	.013**
Not sure	40	9.9	115	12.2	
Control					
Yes	143	35.5	263	27.9	.006***
No	192	47.6	521	55.4	.009***
Not sure	68	16.9	157	16.7	

* Liberal male $n = 403$; Conservative male $n = 941$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

People to the left of the American political spectrum responded yes to questions about dream recall more frequently than people on the right did, at statistically significant levels. When grouped by gender, liberal males responded yes to questions about dream recall more frequently than conservative males did, and the same held true for liberal females as compared to conservative females. Not all differences for the females were statistically significant, however.

This response pattern is consistent with the findings of earlier studies on dream content and political ideology in which liberals appeared as slightly worse sleepers and more expansive dreamers and conservatives appeared as slightly better sleepers and relatively minimal dreamers. As in previous studies, the results here indicate that the difference is not absolute. Some liberals reported very low dream recall while some conservatives reported very high dream recall. Nonetheless, a general trend emerges clearly from the data, a trend that persists across genders.

Observing a correlation is not the same as explaining a causal relationship. These results do not point to any particular reason why there might be a connection between a person's political views and his or her frequency of dream recall. The results do indicate that political ideology is at least one of the cultural factors influencing the patterns of people's dream recall. Whatever other factors may be involved, people's political views seem to have a tangible impact on their frequency of dream recall, inclining them to be more or less likely to report various kinds of dream experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study provides new evidence to support the hypothesis that political liberals tend to have higher dream recall than political conservatives. The results justify more attention to cultural influences, along with psychological and physiological factors, in the study of dreaming. Anthropologists and historians have long argued that more research is needed on the cultural dynamics of dreaming. The present study shows how the quantitative analysis of demographic survey data may contribute to expanding the methodological range of empirical dream research.

Table 3. Comparing Liberal and Conservative Females on Questions of Dream Recall

	Liberal female*		Conservative female*		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Dream recall					
Almost every morning	51	12.9	40	10.4	
Several times a week	101	25.5	81	21.0	
About once a week	65	16.4	61	15.8	
Two or three times a month	74	18.7	57	14.8	
Less than once a month	86	21.7	112	29.0	
Never	12	3.0	26	6.7	
Not sure	7	1.8	9	2.3	
Often	291	73.5	239	61.9	<.000***
Rarely	98	24.7	138	35.8	.001***
Nightmare recall					
Almost every morning	9	2.3	6	1.6	
Several times a week	11	2.8	12	3.1	
About once a week	30	7.6	14	3.6	
Two or three times a month	45	11.4	36	9.3	
Less than once a month	228	57.6	220	57.0	
Never	57	14.4	79	20.5	
Not sure	16	4.0	19	4.9	
Often	95	24.0	68	17.6	.027**
Rarely	285	72.0	299	77.5	.076
Talking with others					
Almost every morning	9	2.3	2	0.5	
Several times a week	17	4.3	18	4.7	
About once a week	39	9.8	21	5.4	
Two or three times a month	55	13.9	37	9.6	
Less than once a month	187	47.2	182	47.2	
Never	81	20.5	113	29.3	
Not sure	8	2.0	13	3.4	
Often	120	30.3	78	20.2	.001***
Rarely	268	67.7	295	76.4	.007***
Just like waking life					
Yes	261	65.9	218	56.5	.007***
No	99	25.0	128	33.2	.011**
Not sure	36	9.1	40	10.4	
Chasing					
Yes	240	60.6	214	55.4	.141
No	129	32.6	155	40.2	.006***
Not sure	27	6.8	17	4.4	
Visitation					
Yes	230	58.1	206	53.4	.186
No	159	40.2	164	42.5	.514
Not sure	17	4.3	16	4.1	
Sexual					
Yes	276	69.7	179	46.4	<.000***
No	89	22.5	174	45.1	<.000***
Not sure	31	7.8	33	8.5	
Falling					
Yes	228	57.6	204	52.8	.177
No	141	35.6	163	42.2	.058
Not sure	27	6.8	19	4.9	
Flying					
Yes	190	48.0	164	42.5	.122
No	178	44.9	208	53.9	.012**
Not sure	28	7.1	14	3.6	

(table continues)

Table 3. (continued)

	Liberal female*		Conservative female*		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Awareness					
Yes	284	71.7	237	61.4	.002***
No	75	18.9	104	26.9	.008***
Not sure	37	9.3	45	11.7	
Control					
Yes	154	38.9	110	28.5	.002***
No	166	41.9	219	56.7	<.000***
Not sure	76	19.2	57	14.8	

* Liberal female $n = 396$; Conservative female $n = 386$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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APPENDIX

Questions About Different Types of Dream Recall

1. How often do you wake up remembering a dream? (Available answers: Almost every morning, Several times a week, About once a week, Two or three times a month, Less than once a month, Never, Not sure)

2. How often do you wake up remembering a nightmare or a very upsetting dream? (Available answers: same as above)

3. How often do you talk with your family or friends about your dreams? (Available answers: same as above)

Please tell us if you have experienced any of the following in your dreams: (Available answers: Yes, No, Not sure)

4. Being in a situation exactly like your regular waking life

5. Being chased or attacked

6. A person who is dead appearing alive

7. Sexual feelings or experiences

8. Falling

9. Flying or floating in the air

10. Being aware you are dreaming

11. Being able to control a dream