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## College of Liberal Arts

Department of Anthropology



# The Social Construction of Dreaming in College Culture

by Rachel Parr

May, 2017

*This essay, based on IRB-approved research, emerged from an assignment in ANTH875 (The Anthropology of Dreams and Dreaming) taught by Prof. Robin Sheriff in Fall 2016.*

## Introduction to Dream Culture

The purpose of an anthropological study is to attempt to understand the cultural behaviors and beliefs of a certain group of people. In the context of dream culture, a major emphasis has been placed on the significance given to dreaming and to the interpretive frameworks people bring to dreams (Price-Williams & Degarrod 1989). Many cultural groups, including indigenous peoples, have been studied in an attempt to understand who people turn to for help with interpreting their dreams, and the influences dreams may have on waking life. Dating as far back as the 1930's, anthropologists have taken special interest in dreaming, noting that it "appears to be a universal human phenomenon, but its significance varies markedly from one culture to another" (Watson 1981, 239). Watson, for example, noted that beliefs about dreaming among the Guajiro (and others of South America) revealed underlying assumptions about the "interrelationship between natural, human, and supernatural orders," (Watson 1981, 241), and thus, the culture's ontology. In another example of dream research, anthropologist Daniela M. Peluso studied a small Peruvian group, the Esa Eja, to gain knowledge on the significance of dreams in this culture. Similarly, this tribe uses dreams to "cross uncertain boundaries of self, community, and other," (Peluso 2004, 117); dream interpretations are used to give personal names, diagnose illnesses, and transfer knowledge among their people.

Peluso is not the only anthropologist to study the self-knowledge that is gained through dream interpretation. Michele Stephen studied the Mekeo in Papua New Guinea, a tribe that conceptualizes the "divided self"; individuals have a social-self that is made known to the public, and a private self. The research concluded that in this culture, dreaming "serves to put individuals in touch with aspects of the self usually denied conscious awareness" (Stephen 1996, 466). Though dreams are considered "intensely private" and are "rarely communicated" in the Mekeo culture, the "actions of the hidden self in the dream realm are believed to exert a powerful influence upon one's waking, conscious experience" (Stephen 1996, 469). Anthropologists have also examined dream cultures within traditional cultures undergoing rapid change. Maria Elisabeth Louw studied dream omens in Kyrgyzstan. Her research suggested that in this culture, people work together to interpret the omens presented in dreams, helping dreamers to negotiate uncertain futures.

In an effort to delve deeper into the culture surrounding dreams, anthropologists have also focused on dream-sharing. "To understand the culture and experiences of dreams," Price-Williams and Degarrod noted, "we need to know not just what people dream about, but how and what parts of their dreams they share" (Price-Williams & Degarrod 1989, 196). This idea shifts the focus away from the dream content, redirecting it towards those with whom the dreamer chooses to share their dreams.. In dream

research conducted closer to home, Jeanette Mageo collected 995 dreams in an extensive study of the dreams of college-aged students in the United States. She interpreted the dreams in terms of models, or “emotional schemas,” arguing that dreams “adapt cultural models to solve problems of waking life” (Mageo 2007, 388). Although Mageo has written about a large collection of the dreams of college students, she has failed to raise questions about their dream-sharing habits; she never asks if there is a “dream culture” at all in the United States, what students do with their dreams outside of her study, or if they ever choose to share their dreams with their peers. In an effort to explore Price-Williams and Degarrod’s ideas on dream-sharing in combination with Mageo’s focus on college students, I focused my attention on the ways in which people on a college campus choose to speak about their dreams. I will use the data collected in this project to argue that dream-sharing is used in college culture to negotiate relationships and conversations—which challenges the implicit assumption about dream-sharing that can be seen in the mainstream media.

## Dream-Sharing Among College Students

I did some background research about the implicit understandings regarding dream-sharing in United States culture. I found a skit done by Amy Schumer, a woman prominent in the public eye, who, as a comedian, tends to joke about things people can relate to. Her skit entitled, “Listen Alert,” is about a hotline that people call to share their “pointless” stories with an active, interested listener – with one disclaimer: “We will not listen to your dreams! We are not saints!” It was a simple statement in response to a woman explaining a dream scene, but it spoke great volumes about the assumptions we have about hearing another person’s dream. Next, I found a story done by “This American Life,” a very popular NPR radio show. The episode was titled, “The Seven Things You’re Not Supposed to Talk About.” It listed “dreams” as number five, and it showed the producer being convinced, after listening to a handful of dreams, that other people’s dreams are generally considered boring and that Americans tend to not really care to listen to others’ dreams (Koenig 2013). The two generalizations from these popular media outlets made it seem as though we do not like hear about another person’s dreams. Based on personal experiences during my four years on the campus, I questioned this assumption and designed a study about dream-sharing practices in the University of New Hampshire’s campus culture.

A key technique used by anthropologists when completing a study is immersion—I have been a member of campus culture for the past four years. My peers and I are direct receivers of the popular media culture, which I found to deprecate the value of dreams in our culture. Despite the deprecation, we still share dreams. From personal experience, I could recall many times I had heard my peers speaking of their dreams in casual conversation, so after gaining IRB approval, I conducted sixteen interviews with ten female and six male college-aged students. After gaining consent, a ten to 15-minute interview was done over Facetime or in person. All students who participated were aged 21 or 22 and within my personal network. Demographic questions were asked, beginning with age, major, social class, and relationship status, and conversation quickly moved on to the dream-sharing habits of those being interviewed. All those interviewed were white, middle class upperclassmen from New England[1]. I asked informants about how often they remember their dreams, who they talk to about their dreams, what would stop them from sharing dreams, and whether they noticed any notable differences in the ways males and females spoke of their dreams. I discovered that gender was, in fact, an important variable in the dream-sharing habits described by those interviewed, and that dream-sharing was more prominent in college culture than media had conveyed. In the following discussion, pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of my respondents.

Everyone who was interviewed claimed to remember their dreams at least a few times a week, some almost daily. A general pattern among females was that they will share a dream with their roommates or boyfriends (particularly if they wake up next to them). If a dream involves a close friend, they may text it to them in the morning when they wake up. One female, Alexandra, 21, noted that she would tell someone her dream if “she woke up with someone, or if people are around and the dream was noteworthy.” When I prompted her to elaborate what made a dream “noteworthy,” she mentioned that this meant anything

strange or out of the ordinary for “real life.” Another female, Anna, 22, stated that she was unlikely to share a dream with someone who was not in the dream unless, “something in conversation reminds her of it or if something completely bizarre happened in it. When asked who she shared her dreams with, a third female, Emily, 22, claimed that she “definitely talks about them. If something crazy happens, or if it has to do with something anyone can relate to in the conversation.” She also mentioned that she “doesn’t share personal dreams,” but if the dream scene was something funny that would make people laugh, she’d be more apt to talk about it. Samantha, 22, mentioned that when she wakes up with her boyfriend, she always shares her dreams with him, “especially if he did something to piss me off. I can hold a grudge all day about something he did in my dream, I get pretty ‘salty’ about it.” Of all ten females interviewed, they all had a similar response in that they were willing to share their dreams with those close to them whenever it “came up” in conversation, suggesting that sharing dreams was a conversation filler.

This conversation prompted me to question what would stop females from sharing their dreams with someone. Jade, 21, stated that she would not share a dream if she were “running around doing weird stuff all alone, because I’m pretty sure nobody really cares.” She hesitated and added, “I guess if I had sex with someone other than my boyfriend I’d keep that to myself, too.” I found others agreed with her last statement when Liz, 21, mentioned that she “wouldn’t tell anyone if I had a sex dream about them,” and Katie, 22, mentioned, “I wouldn’t want someone to think I wanted to have sex with them just because of a dream, so I would never share that.” Emily, who earlier mentioned her caution in sharing personal dreams, categorized dreams of a sexual nature as ones that should not be spoken of, and another female, Maggie, 21, broke out into laughter claiming, “Oh, you mean the dream I had about sleeping with my professor? Probably shouldn’t bring that one up. Ever.”

Another common theme mentioned among many of the females interviewed was that they would not share violent dreams; Jade for example, said, “if someone got murdered, I wouldn’t want people to think I thought that way,” while Anna also mentioned the “if something ‘kind of twisted’ like a rape or murder” occurred, she would stay quiet about it. Alexandra similarly stated that she would not share a dream in which she did something “aggressive and out of character,” and Maggie stated that anything considered “socially unacceptable” should not be talked about for fear that people would think they really felt that way. This statement prompted me to bring up my knowledge of indigenous people, who often interpret their dreams to help guide their waking life. Three females mentioned that they often Google the meaning of their dreams, while one stated that she “doesn’t want to know,” and another mentioned that she thinks dream symbols are “a bit ridiculous.” “It’s just a dream,” she added, “people need to stop thinking so much into it.” Alexandra mentioned that she is likely to Google, “What did my dream mean,” but would be unlikely to take the symbolism very seriously. Anna also mentioned that a common occurrence among her and her friends is to “search the internet for any interpretation of what our dreams mean about our subconscious minds.” It was a common theme that females believed their dreams could be linked to their “hidden” feelings, yet they were not necessarily inclined to follow through with efforts to interpret the dream. Hearing women mention any hint of emotions in association with dreams made me wonder about the differences that might be noted in the ways males and females interpret and therefore speak about their dreams.

When subjects were asked to compare male versus female dreaming-sharing habits, I received many of my favorite responses. Maggie paused, contemplating the question before responding, “I’m trying to picture a dude being like, “Yo, I had this dream...’ and I just can’t. I think it’s something only girls talk about.” Similarly, Liz noted, “I like... I can’t imagine a guy ever talking about it. Do they even dream?” She went on to elaborate, “maybe they just aren’t in tune with their emotions? Also, guys don’t really look for conversation fillers like we do, they just talk about sports and sex, I think.” Emily claimed, “I feel like guys think it’s feminine to talk about their dreams. I can’t think of one guy I’ve heard say, ‘oh my god I had this dream!’” She continued, “I will say, they use it as an ice breaker with a girl to say, ‘I had this dream about you,’ implying they were thinking about her without directly saying it.” Alexandra explained that she felt “girls talk about dreams way more, because girls talk so much that they’ll talk about the things nobody even cares about.” (This latter comment mirrored the media view that dreams are considered unimportant, but we do still talk about them). In another insightful response, Anna mentioned that she feels that “guys are less likely to share because girls are

way more willing to talk about their emotions and there's a huge correlation between your dreams and 'where your head is at emotionally.' The females concluded that they could not imagine males talking about their dreams for fear of appearing "too emotional." Many believed that men do not use as many "conversation fillers" as females do. After completing these interviews with women, I was intrigued to hear the male responses to my questions.

Males actually responded fairly similarly, stating that they would tell their close friends, roommates, and girlfriends their dreams. One male interviewee, Charlie, age 22, stated that he and his roommates regularly talk about their dreams over "hungover Sunday morning banter." He continued to explain that regardless of who was in the dream, he will tell his friends "if they're weird or funny enough because it's so crazy what the mind can do." I asked Charlie if he felt there was any motivation behind sharing his dreams and he stated, "I don't think anyone thinks into it like that, it's just kind of a conversation filler." Another male, Danny, 22, stated that he tells his dreams to his closest friend, whether it's funny or emotional, and usually only does so if he is with that friend and it comes up (even if the friend was not a character in the dream). Another interviewee, Steve, 22, mentioned that he will tell his dreams to his girlfriend if he wakes up next to her or if a close friend he is "hanging out with" was in his dream the night before. In correspondence to other males, Max, 22, said that he would tell his dreams to "anyone if it came up in conversation," and went on to explain that it's "not weird to talk about dreams because they're like, completely fake stories." Aside from one interviewee, Mike, 21, who claimed he would "send a long, detailed text explaining a 'crazy dream'" to a friend who appeared as a dream character, all males agreed that they are most likely to share "funny" or "crazy" dreams with their close friends if they were together in the morning, or if it came up casually in conversation. Mike also made an interesting comment about dream-sharing in United States culture, stating that it's "normal to talk about because nobody is afraid to do it, but at the same time nobody feels obligated to tell their dreams. It just happens."

Just as I had with women, I asked the men if they could think of any instances in which they would not share their dreams. Charlie mentioned that nothing would stop him from sharing a dream because, "it's not like someone could get mad at [him] for his dreams because [he] can't control them," though he did mention that, "if someone was likely to throw it back in [his] face I wouldn't tell them." Mike had a similar viewpoint, stating that if the dream was something that he "would be ashamed of," such as "showing up to work naked, or having sex with someone [he] shouldn't," then he would not share it. Danny noted that he only talks to one particular friend about dreams because, "he's the only person who won't think it's lame or call [him] weird," noting that while he does have many friends he considers close friends, he would feel judged sharing his dreams with most of them. Max stated that the only thing that would stop him from sharing a dream is if he "woke up crying," but then quickly assured me that this does not happen much. Drew, 22, mentioned that he never really talks about his dreams unless it "comes up." When I prompted him to explain what would make him unwilling to share dreams, he stated that if he was "embarrassed because [he] had a sex dream with someone, physically harmed someone, or just had an all-around 'bad vibe' with someone" in a dream, then he felt like it "wasn't worth talking about." Most male interviewees stated that while they generally found it "normal" to share dreams, they would keep to themselves dreams that would make them feel ashamed of their actions..

When asked to compare male and females dream-sharing habits, men were quick to comment on the differences. Steve felt that, "girls just make these crazy details up. I'm sorry, but there's no way you remember that you were wearing a red shirt." Charlie stated that, "guys have more 'messed up' dreams" and that "girls and guys don't really share dreams with each other unless they're dating." Following the gender stereotypes females had noted, Max felt that, "girls get way more in depth and look for some symbolic meaning," and Mike claimed that "females definitely over-embellish the details and say they remember more than they really do, just like they do about everything else in life." Danny made an interesting claim that, "girls are more willing to talk about their dreams because they're way more open with their emotions," and went on to explain that he thinks his dream scenarios directly mirror his life and current feelings. Finally, Drew made a statement that made him stand out from the general opinion I had been receiving, claiming that, "there's not a single difference. We're all just telling a funny story to keep conversation going."

## Phatic Communication

Although Drew was unique in his belief that men and women were alike in dream-sharing habits, his comment about “keeping the conversation going” was echoed by others. Male and female interviewees had both noted that dreams were used as “conversation fillers” or “small talk.” Females stated that they figured men did not talk about their dreams because their small talk focused on sports and sex, while males claimed that females over-embellished the details of dreams similarly to the way they do for other waking-life scenarios. Both genders noted that dreams were generally shared with same-sex friends unless a couple was involved because couples tend to have more time for small talk. Many comments were made by both parties suggesting that dreams did not “mean” anything, and that they are not shared in hopes of interpretation or emotional exploration, but simply to have “a funny story to tell.” These claims point to a concept studied by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who explored communicative patterns in human behavior in the early 1900’s. Malinowski coined the term “phatic communion” to account for the phenomenon of “small talk” noted by many interviewees in my study. Coupland, in a summary of Malinowski’s findings, explained this concept as “language used in free, aimless social intercourse,” stating that phatic communion is a “phrase of politeness [which] fulfills a function to which the meaning of its words are almost completely irrelevant” (Coupland 1992, 209). When explaining the motivation of this behavior, Coupland noted that Malinowski felt, “even though it may not serve any purpose of communicating ideas, phatic communion is functional in diffusing the threat of taciturnity,” claiming that humans have a natural susceptibility to feel uncomfortable or hostile in the silence of their peers (1992, 209).

Drawing on the work of John Laver, Coupland stated that phatic communication or small talk of the weather, health, or other obvious happenings was simply used in “establishing relationships and achieving transition” (1992, 212). Further, Coupland suggested that such utterances are used to “mitigate a possible sense of rejection and consolidate a relationship” (1992, 212). Thus, scholars generally agree that humans tend to use phatic communication, or what could be called “meaningless small talk” to create and maintain social relationships. In the context of the responses received by the interviewees, I would argue that dream-sharing functions as a form of phatic communication; college students often use dream narratives to help negotiate their relationships with their peers.

It should be noted that college culture cannot be extrapolated to American culture as a whole; often in college, “alone time” is hard to come by[2]. College culture is unique because the living situation allows individuals to spend so much of their time with their close friends, and find time to talk about anything and everything, so dreams often come up in small talk when relationships are that close. In response to the human condition of feeling threatened by silence, phatic communion in such a highly communicative population may easily lead to “dream talk.”

## Implications of Dream-Sharing Habits

My data gave rise to other interesting theories about the culture of the United States. Amy Schumer tops the list of “Funniest Women of 2016,” and a simple Google search lists “This American Life” as the most popular radio show on the air. These prominent media sources were noted earlier for airing episodes that belittled dream sharing, deeming it as something that is considered boring and often pointless in our society. However, the interviews with females and males alike showed that conversation often does lead to “dream talk.” Notably, females shared more of their dreams and searched for a deeper meaning of the dreams scenes, while men tended to disregard the importance of dreams while at the same time sharing them, at times, simply to get a laugh out of friends. The male tendency to disregard the significance of dreams mirrored that displayed in these popular media outlets, suggesting that their views of dreaming seem to be hegemonic. Women’s views of dreaming seem to be marginalized for now, although this might change in the future.

Before completing this study, it was easy to believe the stereotypes noted by Schumer and Keonig that Americans do not care to talk about dreams in our culture. However, once I got out there and actually started having conversations with people in their twenties who were direct, avid consumers of the type of media that belittled the dream culture, I realized that those implicit assumptions about dream-sharing were not necessarily correct. Though dreams do not play the same significant role seen in

many indigenous cultures, an anthropological approach can still be used to understand the cultural behaviors associated with dream-sharing on a college campus. The research here suggests that dream-sharing serves a function on college campuses. As young adults begin solidifying lifelong friendships and negotiating important relationships, dream-sharing is often used in phatic communication as a form of “small talk,” diffusing tensions and cementing intimacy. Though it may not have the same interpretive motivations as indigenous cultures, it could be said that dream-sharing similarly impacts waking life realities.

As suggested by anthropologists, dream-sharing and its contexts are socially significant. Men and women at the University of New Hampshire campus claimed to share their dreams with close friends and those who appeared as characters in their dreams, under the assumption that those are the only people who would care. Americans often search for instant gratification, listening only to stories that will in some way benefit them, disregarding anything that will not help them move forward as an individual. It can be said that in the college culture, dream-sharing may not directly benefit the listener, but the act of dream-sharing carries a message: dream tellers are making a statement to listeners about the intimacy of their relationship. This study suggests that while the dream cultures of indigenous peoples are very different from what is found in United States culture, dream-sharing among American college students is still worth studying. After exploring the different dream-sharing patterns on a college campus, it can be said that such patterns suggest that gender stereotyping and marginalization may be at work and that they may be related to popular media. Finally, there is a direct correlation with whom college students tell their dreams to and whom they allow to see their vulnerable, emotional, subconscious self.

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## Notes

[1] It should be noted that while the initial interviewees were asked about their social class, this question was quickly removed from all following interviews. Of the first five subjects questioned, every individual responded awkwardly and uncomfortably. While this detail alone speaks about the United States’ cultural discomfort in regards to social class, it was deemed an insignificant variable in this study as every individual could be confidently identified as white middle or upper middle class.

[2] A variable that was not accounted for before beginning this research, but upon analysis of the data may be useful in future research, is alone time versus time spent with others on a college campus. A qualitative analysis of time spent with peers (and phatic communication) may be found to have a correlation with dream-sharing behaviors.

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