MEDUMNITE, RECHERCHE PSYCHIQUE, DISSOCIATION,
ET LES POUVOIRS DE L’ESPRIT SUBCONSCIENT

RESUME : Depuis le XIXe siècle, de nombreux psychiatres et psychologues ont considéré la médumnité comme une forme de l’esprit subconscient. Toutefois, certains psychologues ont repoussé cette théorie avec une vue différente. Des individus tels que Théodore Flournoy, Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Morelli, et d’autres ont également montré que des phénomènes semblables à ceux de la médiumnité peuvent être observés dans le monde actuel, en particulier dans les contextes de détresse ou de graves problèmes de santé psychique.

Les psychologues de la fin du XIXe siècle et du début du XXe siècle ont exprimé une opinion différente. Des individus tels que Théodore Flournoy, Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Morelli, et d’autres ont montré que des phénomènes semblables à ceux de la médiumnité peuvent être observés dans le monde actuel, en particulier dans les contextes de détresse ou de graves problèmes de santé psychique.

Une histoire complète de la dissociation et de l’esprit subconscient ne peut faire l’impasse sur ce corpus.

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PRECOCITIVE DREAMING: INVESTIGATING ANOMALOUS COGNITION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

BY CAROLINE WATT

ABSTRACT: This online dream precognition study examined variables, both psychological and parapsychological, that have been proposed to contribute to precognitive dream experiences. 50 participants each contributed 4 trials, where the task was to dream about a video clip that they would later view. Independent judges were used to score the correspondence between dreams and the target video. No support was found for the hypothesis that individuals who are intolerant of ambiguity would report greater correspondence between their dreams and subsequently viewed target video clips. A relationship was found between the participants’ prior confidence in their dreams and actual perceived similarity between the target and dreams; however, there was no relationship between perceived similarity and judges’ actual hit rates or similarity ratings. The test of the precognition hypothesis obtained above-chance scoring (32% hit rate) on the planned direct hits measure. Obvious methodological artifacts are ruled out, and the discussion concludes with an exploration of whether the judges’ ratings also support the dream precognition hypothesis.

Keywords: precognitive dreaming, precognition, precognitive dream experiences, ambiguity tolerance

Surveys of the general population show that reports of psi-related experiences such as apparent clairvoyance, telepathy, and precognition are common throughout the world. For example, a 1987 survey published by the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center canvassed nearly 1,500 adult Americans, of whom 67% claimed psi-related experiences (Greeley, 1987). Precognition—seemingly knowing about an event that has yet to take place—was reported by approximately one third of respondents in a recent survey of 1,000 British (Pescely & Halligan, 2012).

Dreams seem to play a particularly important role in precognitive experiences. A review of the various surveys of spontaneous GESP experiences concludes that, if only precognitive cases are considered, around 50% involve dreams, with a further 10% involving “borderland” states (Van de Castle, 1977). Therefore, the vast majority of spontaneous precognitive experiences involve dreams or sleep-related states. Death is a predominant theme in precognitive dreams, followed by accident and injury; participants are predominantly female (e.g., Green, 1960; Saltmarsh, 1934), although reporting bias may account for both of these trends.

When considering possible explanations for spontaneous paranormal experiences, researchers often either consider a paranormal interpretation, or one of several possible psychological explanations, although these are not mutually exclusive categories. Researchers tend to turn to controlled laboratory settings to test the psi hypothesis. Only a minority of laboratory dream ESP studies have investigated precognition, which is perhaps odd given the prevalence with which spontaneous dream precognition experiences are reported. Controlled laboratory studies of dream ESP took off from 1962, after psychiatrist Montague Ullman established a dream laboratory at the Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York (Krippner, 1993; Ullman, 1983). Thirteen formal dream ESP studies (11 telepathy, 2 precognition) were conducted at the lab between 1970 and 1978, the majority of which obtained medium to large positive effect sizes (Sherwood & Rose, 2003). A review of the 21 post-Maimonides dream ESP studies identified that, for the majority of them, the researchers’ confidence had moved from the relatively expensive and time-consuming sleep laboratory to participants’ own homes (Sherwood & Rose, 2003). The studies had a modest combined effect size (r = .14)—significantly less than for the Maimonides studies, but still regarded as “successful” by Sherwood and Rose, who expressed the hope that further dream research would be “re-awakened.”

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2011 Conference of the Society for Psychological Research in Edinburgh, September 3–5.
Tuning to possible psychological factors underlying paranormal experiences, Blackmore and Moore (1994) proposed that paranormal believers and disbelievers might have different cognitive styles. They tested this hypothesis by presenting participants with ambiguous pictures and found that believers guessed the identity of the picture more often than did disbelievers, a finding they attributed to a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, in a subsequent study, participants were more likely to guess the identity of the picture if they were encouraged to believe it was present, which suggests that the original result was due to a cognitive bias rather than a true effect of belief.

Frenkel-Brunswik, Frenkel (1949), Thurstone and Thurstone (1998) explored the relation between ambiguity and belief formation. Using a yes-no paradigm, they found that participants who were instructed to believe in the presence of an ambiguous stimulus were more likely to guess correctly than those who were instructed to disbelieve it. This finding suggests that processing ambiguity can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where beliefs influence perception and vice versa.

The present paper describes a study that further investigates the relationship between belief and perceptual processing. Participants were presented with a series of ambiguous images and were asked to rate their confidence in their perception. The results showed that participants who were instructed to believe in the presence of an ambiguous stimulus were more likely to correctly identify the stimulus than those who were instructed to disbelieve it. This finding supports the hypothesis that processing ambiguity can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where beliefs influence perception and vice versa.

**Questionnaire 1: Initial questionnaire**

- **Age and sex.**
- **Frequency of dream recall:**
  - How often have you recalled your dreams recently (in the past several months)?
  - Frequency options: never, less than once a month, about once a month, two or three times a month, about once a week, several times a week, and almost every morning.
  - Scale was developed by Schredl (2004), who reports a high test-retest reliability over approximately 70 to 90%, r = .85. Scores could range from 0 to 6, with higher scores denoting more frequent dream recall.

**Questionnaire 2: Dream summary form**

- **Participants’ weekly dream report:**
  - Please rate the following 5 dreams in terms of their vividness, coherence, and overall experience.
words) of your remembered dreams over the past 5 days. Include not only descriptions of main content and themes that emerged in your dreams, but details such as emotional tone and the impact of the dream. You do not need to write anything that you would find embarrassing or that would make you uncomfortable to write. Please don’t provide any personally identifying details.

2. Confidence rating: “Please rate how confident you are that your dreams over the past 5 days will relate to the target video clip that you will be sent.” Response options were “not at all confident,” “not very confident,” “somewhat confident,” “very confident,” and “completely confident.” Scores could range from 1-5, with higher ratings denoting higher confidence. Participants were also asked to explain why they chose their particular confidence rating.

**Questionnaire 3: Similarity Rating Form.** After participants had been sent a link to their target video, they were asked to “indicate how much similarity you feel there is between your submitted dream summary for this week and your target video clip for this week.” Please bear in mind that just dream content, but associated themes and emotions. Participants typed in a number between 1 and 100, where 1 = no similarity and 100 = complete similarity.

**Target Pool**

The stimulus pool consisted of 68 short (around 1 min) video clips divided into 17 target pools of four orthogonal videos, each uploaded to YouTube. The target clips were digitized from a pool used in KPU ganzfeld-ESP research that had obtained positive psi results (e.g., Dalston, 1997; Morris, Dalston, Delanyo, & Watt, 1995). The pool included scenes from films, nature documentaries, and music videos. There had originally been 18 target pools (i.e., 72 video clips), but one was withdrawn prior to the commencement of the study after a copyright query was raised by YouTube.

**Random Number Generator**

For random selection of the target pools and targets, a RNG function from the website RANDOM.ORG was used. It generates numbers based on atmospheric noise and is therefore a true random source. It is more appropriate for a precognition study than a pseudo-random source, because it rules out the possibility of clairvoyance.

**Procedure**

The initial questionnaire, along with the two forms, was published online using the Google Forms service. Participants could therefore complete the online questionnaire and forms after being sent the appropriate URL. The target pool was uploaded to a YouTube channel and marked as unlisted, so that targets were accessible only via a particular URL.

The experimenters and judges took part in pilot trials to refine and test the protocol. The results of the pilot trials are not included in this report. The study consisted of 200 trials (preplanned as four trials each from 50 participants). For security reasons, the target for any one trial was randomly selected and sent to participants only after the independent blind judge had submitted his rating of the four randomly chosen target pool videos against the dream summary for that trial. Therefore, there could be no leakage of target information, either from the randomiser to the judges or from the participants to the judges.

Each participant was assigned by MV to one of the two judges and was sent a hyperlink to the initial questionnaire. Participants had no contact with the judge, nor were they aware of the judges’ identity; likewise, the judges were unaware of the participants’ identities. After completing and submitting the initial questionnaire, the judges were informed that their 5-day dream collection period had commenced. On the fifth night they were sent an email informing them that the dream collection period was about to end and that their first dream summary was due the next morning. They were also sent a hyperlink to the dream summary form. Upon receiving the dream summary from a participant, MV randomly selected a target pool for that participant (1 of the 17) and sent the anonymous dream report along with the URLs of the target pool videos to the judge. Within each target pool, the number of the clip determined the position in which its URL would be presented to the independent judges. So, for target pool 1, clip 1-1 would be first in the list of four URLs, clip 1-2 second, 1-3 third, and 1-4 fourth. Judges could (and did) review the four clips in whatever order they chose, and could (and did) view the clips more than once during the judging process for any particular trial.

The judges were instructed to provide a percentage rating of the similarity between each of the four videos in a given target pool and the contents of the dream summary, as well as a ranking of the videos based on these ratings (rank 1 = greatest similarity, rank 4 = least similarity). No tied ratings were permitted, and a hit was defined as a rank of 1 corresponding to the designated target. They subsequently emailed their judgements to MV in an attached file. MV then, without viewing the judgements, randomly selected a target video from the given pool and sent its URL to the participant via email. The participants were also instructed to follow a hyperlink to the dream summary rating form upon viewing the target videos.

Two to 3 days after receiving the participants’ similarity rating, MV informed the participants by email that the second dream collection period was commencing and the procedure repeated itself. Altogether, for each participant, four trials were conducted over approximately a 4-week period. Throughout the study, the participants were thanked for their involvement and indirectly encouraged to continue. Participants who failed to submit either of the forms were sent a gentle reminder to do so.

At the conclusion of the study, as soon as data had been checked and analyses had been completed, participants were sent a short summary of the overall study results. They were not informed of the outcome of their judge’s ratings while the study was underway.

**Results**

A total of 99 volunteers were sent the link to the initial questionnaire. Twenty-two of them did not return a completed questionnaire so did not proceed with the study. Recruitment continued until 50 participants (20 males, 30 females; mean age 42.8, range 21-82 years, SD = 14.41) had completed four trials each. Twenty-one others dropped out of the study before completing four trials; 6 completed four trials after the pre-planned N of 50 participants had been reached. Data for these 27 participants are not included in this report. Prior to analysis, the scoring of the questionnaire measures was independently checked for possible errors, as was the recording of the study’s psi results (both the judges’ ratings and rankings, and the subsequent assignment of each trial as a hit or miss).

**Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 shows M, SD, N and range of scores on the principal questionnaire measures.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 1 Descriptive Statistics</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dream Recall Frequency (0-6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Precognitive Dreams Belief (0-2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Price Precogn. Dream Experience (0-5)</td>
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<td>Ambiguity Tolerance (0-20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Confidence Rating (1-5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Similarity Rating (1-100)</td>
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</table>

Note. N = 50 in all cases.
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Dream recall. A large proportion of participants (50%) reported that they recalled their dreams several times a week, followed by almost every morning (28%), about once a week (10%), or every three times a month (5%), once a month (2%), and less than once a month (2%). As participants needed to be able to remember their dreams to successfully participate in the study, it was reassuring that the majority (88%) remembered their dreams at least once per week.

Precognitive dream belief. Having been asked to use Bender’s (1966) criteria for evidentiality, most participants (66%) expressed a belief that individuals could have precognitive dreams, 26% were unsure, and 8% did not believe in precognitive dreams. Thus, the sample was skewed towards individuals believing in precognitive dreams. Because there were so few disbelievers in the sample (4 out of 50), no attempt was made to compare disbelievers and believers on the other study measures.

Precognitive dream experience. Twenty-eight percent of participants indicated that they had never had a precognitive dream experience (again, as defined by Bender’s criteria), 26% less than once a year, 14% about once in 6 months, 12% about once per month, and 4% about once a week. Thus, the majority of participants (72%) reported having had at least one precognitive dream experience that would be considered evidential.

Confidence ratings. Participants were not particularly confident that their dream summaries would relate to the future target video (mean rating 2.04 on a scale from 1–5). Participants who gave low confidence ratings reported that they did so either because they did not believe in dream precognition, or because their own precognitive dreams were more personal and they did not think their dream would relate to a randomly selected target video.

Similarity ratings. Following feedback about the target video identity, participants’ similarity ratings suggested that they saw little similarity between their dream summaries and the target videos (mean rating 15.15 on a 1–100 scale).

Main Analyses

Dream precognition (Hypothesis 1). Direct hits analysis was planned (rather than, for instance, summation of binary hits where rankings or ratings in the top half = binary hit and in the bottom half = binary miss, or z-score based on judges’ ratings), firstly because Child’s (1982) meta-analysis of Maimomides dream-ESP studies used direct-hits outcome criteria for comparison between studies, and secondly because participants only viewed the target videos so it was predicted that any precognitive dream content would focus on these videos. As it turns out, the decision to base analyses on hits rather than ratings did not disadvantage the psi hypothesis: Judges’ ratings of the targets and decoys did not show elevated ratings for the target video clips relative to decoy clips, Mann-Whitney U = 56073.5, p = .16, two-tailed. Sixty-four hits were obtained out of 200 trials, giving a 32% hit rate. Using an exact binomial test, this result is significant, z = 2.21, p = .015, one-tailed, ES (z/√N) = .016. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Ambiguity tolerance and similarity ratings (Hypothesis 2). The Mean AT score was 11.02, range = 3–17, SD = 3.57. Contrary to expectation, there was no significant relationship between AT and participants’ mean similarity ratings; indeed, the correlation was in the direction opposite to that predicted, r(48) = .156, p = .27, two-tailed. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Exploratory Analyses

Independent judges. There was little difference between the hit rates obtained by the two judges (Judge 1, 26 hits out of 84 trials, 31.0%; Judge 2, 38 hits out of 116 trials, 32.8%), as confirmed by an independent groups t test comparing the judges’ mean number of hits per participant, t(48) = 0.32, p = .75, two-tailed. Prior dream recall, precognitive experience, confidence and similarity ratings. Older participants tended to report having had more precognitive experiences than younger participants, r(48) = .29, p = .04, two-tailed. Also, as one might expect, there was a significant tendency for participants reporting greater numbers of prior precognitive experiences to give higher ratings of confidence that their dream reports would contain material relating to the future target video, r(48) = .32, p = .02, two-tailed. However, as these two relationships were not predicted, and as several correlations were calculated for the psychological variables (see Table 2), it would be wise to regard them as only tentative, in need of replication.

Table 2

<table>
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<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>-.04</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.19</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.16</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Hits</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Confidence</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.41**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Similarity</td>
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Note. N = 50 in all cases.

*p < .05. **p < .01. All two-tailed.

After receiving feedback of the target video’s identity and giving it a rating for similarity to their previously submitted dream report, participants who had previously given higher confidence ratings tended also to give higher similarity ratings, r(18) = .41, p = .003, two-tailed. However, there was little relationship between these ratings and actual psi performance: The correlation between confidence ratings and hit rate was slightly negative r(48) = -.14, p = .34, two-tailed, and there was no correlation between hit rate and similarity ratings r(48) = .03, p = .86, two-tailed.

Self-reported prior dream recall did not significantly correlate with precognitive dream experience, confidence ratings, similarity ratings, or hit rate. Ambiguity Tolerance also did not correlate with any of these variables. Table 2 gives the full matrix of correlations for the variables reported here.

I also explored whether the participants may have given higher similarity ratings to the target clips than the judges, perhaps because the participants were better able to recognize their own dream content in the targets than the judges were. Although participants’ mean ratings were slightly higher than those of the judges, this was primarily attributable to a small number of “outlier” similarity ratings above the mid-point of the scale. The vast majority of ratings by judges and participants were strongly skewed towards the bottom end of the 100-point scale (judges’ median rating 4.5, SD = 12.35; participants’ median rating = 5.6, SD = 21.67); a weak but significant correlation was also found between judges’ and participants’ similarity ratings, r(198) = .14, p = .04, two-tailed.

Discussion

The majority of individuals who took part in this study reported that they believed in precognitive dreaming, had experienced an evidential (according to Bender’s criteria) precognitive dream personally at least once in their lifetime, and were able to recall their dreams at least once per week. So, on the face of it, this sample would seem to be appropriate for a dream precognition study.

The study hypotheses explored two types of explanation for precognitive dream experiences: psychological and paranormal. For the first type, it has been proposed that individuals who are low in tolerance for ambiguity (AT) will be most likely to report that they have spontaneous precognitive dream experiences. The rationale for this prediction, from Blackmore and Moore (1994), is that these individuals will be more inclined to prematurely judge that there are "matches" between their dreams and subsequent events. This hypothesis was tested by correlating AT with the similarity ratings that participants gave to their dream summaries, having received feedback about the target identity. However, the data did not support the prediction of a negative correlation between AT and similarity ratings. A possible explanation of this null finding, other than the nonexistence of the hypothesized relationship,
These five points demonstrate that the study design precludes the most obvious methodological flaws that might lead to spuriously significant results. Finally, one must consider whether this study’s significant hitting may reasonably be attributed to precognitive dreaming on the part of the study participants, or whether some as yet unexplained alternative form of psi or undetected methodological artifact may be at work.

Is a Precognitive Dreaming Interpretation Supported by the Study Data?

The precognitive dreaming hypothesis requires that judges detect a greater degree of similarity between the participants’ dreams and the designated target video clips, compared to decoy clips. If this were the case, then one would expect to see three things in the study data. First, one would expect the target clip to be given the highest ranking to a greater than chance extent. The study design prespecified direct hits (based on ranks) as the outcome measure, and a significant outcome was indeed found. This supports the precognitive dreaming hypothesis. Second, one would expect judges’ ratings for clips designated as the target to be greater than for clips designated as decoys. This would indicate that judges detected greater similarity between dreams and targets than between dreams and decoys. Third, there should be a difference in target versus decoy ratings for hit trials compared to miss trials, because in the hit trials judges presumably select the target because it is more similar to the dream thanation than the decoy clips. Further exploratory analyses of judges’ ratings that address the latter two questions will now be presented.

Analysis of judges’ ratings. The Results section provides a justification for the decision to analyze ranks rather than rating scores (1–100). It also shows that there was no significant difference between the ratings of targets and decoys. However, it could be argued in line with the psi hypothesis that this result could be expected. Even if there was indeed a communication anomaly, there is no reason to expect all targets to be rated as more similar than decoys; only hits should be particularly salient to judges, due to there being a noticeable similarity between the participant’s dream report and the target content. This reasoning, however, is problematic because, by definition, targets have the highest ratings in hit trials. Instead, one can explore the difference between the rating of the videos ranked 1 for hit trials and miss trials. If the salience hypothesis is true, there should be a difference. However, in the present study, there was no such difference; in fact, the difference, T = 412.5, p = .56. Taking this one step further, it could be argued that it is not the ratings per se that should differ. After all, it is quite possible that salience matters only in the context of other videos in the pool. If all of them are equally similar to the dream, then there is no particular salience for the target, and hence any hits are due to chance. On the other hand, the argument goes, hits obtained due to psi should be characterized by the target standing out from amongst the other video clips in the pool. If this is true, a comparison of the ratio of the rating for the video ranked 1 to the mean rating of the videos ranked 2–4 (Rank 1 / mean(Rank 2 - 4)) between hit and miss trials should reveal a difference. But again, the analysis did not yield significant results, U = 431.85, p = .47. The analyses reported above suggest that there was nothing qualitatively special about the hits compared to the misses.

In conclusion, on the preplanned direct hits measure, the study outcome is consistent with a precognitive dreaming interpretation. However, on the exploratory analyses of ratings, there was no significant difference between the judges’ ratings of targets and decoys. Furthermore the ratings for targets that scored a hit were on average no more similar to the dream reports than the ratings for those that did not, whichever way one looks. These two observations are inconsistent with an interpretation in terms of precognitive dreaming, and may indicate the presence of nonspecific factors. However at best they can only tentatively qualify the planned outcome measure because (a) they are post hoc, and (b) they may simply indicate that ratings are a less reliable indicator of psi than rankings, for instance because, although they can offer a more fine-grained measure, they may also be more susceptible to extraneous “noisy” influences. As is always the case when a significant outcome is reported in a study using an original method to test the psi hypothesis, this study’s findings could be due to chance or an undetected artifact and should therefore be regarded as tentative pending replication.

References

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