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Children's Notions about Dreams

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ABSTRACT: *Children as young as 4 to 8 years old have dreams, as reported in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of REM awakenings in sleep laboratories. Dreams along with other cognitive processes grow in complexity to near adult patterns as cognitive ability increases, in the early teens. However, the number of children studied regarding their ideas about dreams has been limited with the notable exception of the systematic observations conducted by Piaget. There is not much information about the ideas of children themselves about dreams, imagination among other cognitive processes not directly observable. We conducted free in-depth interviews with eight middle class children (4 to 8 years old) about topics such as what dreams, imagination and mind are, where they come from, can dreams or imagination be seen, can other people see your dreams, et cetera. Results show that children 7 to 8 years old report twice as many dreams as younger children and their role in dreams becomes more active.Although only preliminary results are presented, results show how children's conceptions about private processes are not static but evolved with age in predictable sequences.*

Keywords*: Children's Notions, Private Processes, Dreams, Cognitive Development.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Young children possess an abundance knowledge about cognitive processes. Unobservable phenomenon's such as dreams, for example, can be described in many ways by children. In effect, children's dreams have been of increasing interest, especially after the works conducted by Piaget (1962) Foulkes during the '60s and '70s (Foulkes, 1967, 1979). Dreams are a natural part of the sleep cycle, and they occur regularly in people of all ages. Children as young as 4 to 8 years old have dreams, as reported in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of REM awakenings in sleep laboratories. Dreams grow in complexity to near adult patterns as cognitive ability increases, in the early teens. (Foulkes, 1999; Sándor, Szakadat, Kertész & Bódizs, 2015; Medina Liberty, 2017). However, the number of children studied regarding their ideas about dreams has been limited with the notable exception of the systematic observations conducted by Piaget (1962).

Longitudinal developmental laboratory studies concluded that preschoolers' dreams usually depict static images about mostly animals and body states of the dreamer, but they lack the active representation of the self, human characters, social interactions, dream emotions and motion imagery (Foulkes, 1982). Due to methodological arguments, these results became the reference points in the literature of developmental dream research, in spite of the significantly different results of numerous recent and relevant studies using home or extra-laboratory settings.

Ekstein sustains (1981) that sometimes is problematic to know when young children can distinguish dreams from imagination, fantasy, daydreams, or play. Piaget (1983) described three stages in children's understanding of their dreams. According to Piaget, in the first stage, when they are 5 or 6 years old, they experience dreams as coming from outside of themselves and remaining external. The second stage, between 7 and 8 years of age, children believe that dreams arise in themselves but are external to themselves. Children feel dreams have something to do with their thoughts, but dreams appear as things occurring in their bedrooms or in front of their heads. In the third stage, between 8 and 9 years of age, children experience dreams as internal and of internal origin, as part of their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

Children may be able to tell parents or others about their dreams and know the difference between their dreams and fantasy at about 4 or 5 years of age. Foulkes and his associates (Foulkes, 1978; Foulkes et al., 1990) proposed 5 years of age as the limit of credibility of children's dreams. Woolley and Wellman (1992) tested the ability of 3- and 4-year-old children to distinguish dreams from reality. In their study, 32 children (17 girls and 15 boys) in a preschool program were told stories about children who dreamed about an object, played with an object, or looked at photographs of an object. In response to questions, all of the children judged dreams to be different from physical objects or photographs. But many of the 3-year-old and a few of the 4-year-old children believed that dreams are directly shared by more than one person.

As with so many other areas of cognitive development, the history of this one mainly begins with Piaget (Shantz, 1983). A central Piagetian claim was that children begin development by being cognitively

egocentric (Flavell, 1992). By this, Piaget meant that they initially do not know that there are such things as conceptual, perceptual, and emotional perspectives or points of view. As a result, they naturally cannot be aware that they themselves have such perspectives vis-a` -vis external objects and events, or that others do, or that their own perspective may not be the same as those of others, or that they may be unwittingly reporting their own perspectives when asked to report another person's. Piaget also considered as egocentric children who have some awareness that perspectives exist but who are not skilled at discriminatingtheir own from another person's. Piaget and his colleagues used egocentrism and other concepts to interpret their developmental studies of a wide variety of social-cognitive topics: Perceptual perspective-taking; egocentric communication; the misattribution of mental characteristics to physical objects (animism) and physical characteristics to mental events (realism); and understanding of thoughts, dreams, intentions, and morality. Research on these and related topics still continues, although usually not from a Piagetian theoretical perspective (e.g., Fabricius et al., 1989; Woolley &Wellman, 1992; Tafreshi & Racine, 2015). There is a widespread agreement today that young children are not as egocentric as Piaget believed them to be, but also that perspective-taking abilities and related psychological knowledge do show marked increases with age, much as he said they did. Those of us trying to peer into the ontogenesis of knowledge about the mind are standing on Piaget's shoulders.

A second trend in the study of children's ideas about mental processes is still very much in motion and is the primary concern of this paper. It is commonly referred to as theory-of-mind research. Before about 1983, most investigators of children's knowledge about the mental world would probably classify their work as either metacognitive or in the general Piagetian tradition. Today most would say they are doing one or another kind of theory-of-mind research. They would likely use that label as a shorthand, easily recognizablecharacterization of the general line of work they are in even if they were not convinced, as some are not, that children acquire theories of mind rather than just knowledge and skills concerning it. Since the mid-1980s, theory-of-mind research has been one of the liveliest, most productive research areas in all of developmental psychology. I predict that it will continue to be so for some time to come.

Most theory-of-mind studies have investigated children's initial knowledge about our most basic mental states—desires, percepts, beliefs, knowledge, thoughts, intentions, feelings, and so on. Researchers in this tradition attempt to determine what children of different ages know about the existence and behavior of these various states, and also what they know about how mental states are causally linked to perceptual inputs, to behavior, and to other mental states. For example, do young children understand what it means to know something, or do they realize that unsatisfied desires typically cause negative feelings and renewed behavioral efforts to satisfy these desires? In contrast, students of metacognitive development have usually focused more on task-related mental activities—often, on what one should do with one's mind in trying to solve some problem or task. These metacognitive activities include strategies for making cognitive progress on various tasks and problems—on memory or comprehension tasks, for example— and also attempts to monitor that progress. Much of the metacognition studied is therefore problem-centered and goal oriented; one could think of it as a kind of ''applied theory-of-mind'' (Flavell, 2000).

Unlike the characteristically controlledsituations of the theory-of-mind studies, we adopted a qualitative perspective to explore young children's ideas about dreams and other cognitive processes not observable directly such as imagination and mind.

II. METHOD

Participants

Participants were eight male preschool children (4 to 8 years old) from a private kindergarten in Mexico City. Three children were 4 to 6 years old and 5 were 6 to 8 years old.

Procedure

An initial interview with parents, the children and their educators at the kindergarten were carried out, where they were informed about the details and schedule of the study.All the children were from middle class, educated environment with both parents holding a degree in higher education.

For three months once a week in-depth interviews were conducted at the school and their homes.

Children were interviewed to determine how well they understood the reality, location, privacy, origin, and controllability of their dreams, imagination, and mental activity.

Along with many developmental psychologists, mainly Kohlberg (1969), the hypotheses were addressed in this study argued that children should first understand that dreams are unreal, then that they are private, and finally, that they are located internal to the person. Since our sample was a middle-class child,we expected them to conform to this prediction.

The personal dreams of children were expected to be harder for them to understand that the dreams of story characters. Woolley & Wellman (1992) found that when preschoolers interpreted the dreams of another person in a story context, that they were much more adept at understanding the nature of the dreams than in past

research investigating children interpreting their dreams e.g., Piaget (1929) and Laurendeau & Pinard (1962).
Finally, we believed that dream understanding would be related to children's developing theory of mind, i.e., understanding appearance vs. reality and egocentricity.

Children who had difficulty understanding the difference between appearance and reality (Flavell, 1986) were expected to have difficulty understanding the non-real nature of dreams. Children who performed poorly on perspective-taking tasks, i.e., who assumed that others see things the same way that they see them (Flavell, Everett, Croft, & Flavell, 1981), were expected to have difficulties understanding the private nature of dreams.

Although we sustained open and free conversations with the children beginning with some general questions (i.e., When you are sleeping do you have dreams?), we tried to orient conversations towardseveralmore specifictopics:

1) Do you know what a dream is?
2) Do you know where dreams come from?
3) What is imagination?
4) What is the mind?
5) What are dreams made of?
6) Can you see yourself while you are dreaming?
7) Can dreams/mind/imagination be seen?
8) Can other people see your dreams?
9) Why do you think that you/we dream?

These themes just constituted a general guide because we kept the conversations open to children's interests. Depending on the reactions or attitudes of the children, we introduced new questions or inquiries whenever necessary or we made clarifications when emerged doubts or confusions.

After transcribing conversations to a written report, we did a content analysis according to our questions categories combined with the Foulkes & Shepherd (1971) system.

III. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics indicated that as children aged, they became more likely to judge dreams as not real, private, internal psychological occurrences. Imagination and mind are considered also private but real, "it is something you do" was the more common answer.

Children 7 to 8 years old report twice as many dreams as younger children and their role in dreams becomes more active. Members of their family acting in familiar ways appear in dreams that have more of a storyline. Dreams of 4 to 6-year-old children seem to be slices of life not yet fully elaborated. Young children can be influenced by magical notions of "cause and effect" and believe that talking about a dream could make it happen. Talking about their dreams can help children distinguish their inner experiences and feelings from objective reality.

The content of children's dreams in their elementary school years, ages 6 to 8, differs from younger children's bare static figures in several ways. Their dreams have action, a storyline, and a large number of main characters. Authority figures play an important role in their lives. Police, bus drivers, and parents (their own as well as their friends') may enter dreams and may be represented in dreams as kings, queens, or as characters of "Harry Potter" and television shows.

In general, all children considered that imagination and mind are located in their heads, "is something that happened in the interior of my head". By the time children were 7 years old of age, they understood that dreams are believed to be unreal and private. From 6 years of age, mind, and imagination are considered also private but real, they are conceived of as something happening inside the head.

Although these are preliminary results of ongoing research, results show how children's conceptions about private processes are not static but evolved with age.

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