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What have you been dreaming about during the pandemic?



UFRGS' researchers investigate what Health and Education Professionals have been dreaming about in this period of social distancing

By Marian Socal Barradas

Anyone who is or has been under psychotherapy — especially the psychoanalytic-oriented one — knows that dreams can be a rich source for analysis and discussion during sessions. They often show us some impressions and perceptions that our consciousness, for several different reasons, cannot process or recognize. In addition to personal issues, aspects of society and of the times we are living in can also appear in our dreams.

Based on that premise, researchers from the [Post-graduate Program in Psychoanalysis: Clinic and Culture](#), from UFRGS, designed a project that investigates what Health and Education Professionals have been dreaming about during this new COVID-19 pandemic. The study has been under development in three states, in partnership with the University of São Paulo (USP), and the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). At UFRGS, the work is coordinated by professors [Rose Gurski](#) and [Cláudia Perrone](#), from the [Research Center for Psychoanalysis, Education, and Culture \(NUPPEC\)](#).

The researchers point out that, for psychoanalysis, an individual is self-constituted at the intersection between individual and social psychology; in this sense, the unconscious, that instance "responsible" for our dreams, is not isolated from the historical and social context in which we live. Therefore, dreams are a kind of "radar" that manages to apprehend what we do not say or do not elaborate on in our social experience.

For this very reason, similar studies have been developed in other parts of the world and in other times: one of the inspirations for this research is Charlotte Bradt's book *The Third Reich of Dreams*. In the work, the German journalist discloses the dreams of 300 of her fellow-citizens between 1933, the year Hitler took power in Germany, and 1939, the year of the Second World War outbreak. Another inspiration is the research by psychotherapist Martha Crawford, who collects reports of dreams US citizens claim to have had about Donald Trump. "With these samples, we can see that the social and political struggle is fought not only in the public arena but also in the most intimate space of each individual," they explained.

The researchers stated that NUPPEC has been trying, for some years now, to take psychoanalysis beyond the consulting rooms, inserting it in community outreach programs, thus connecting the university with society. They noticed that there were two groups which had their mental health particularly weakened by the current pandemic: Health Professionals, because they have been working on the front line, and being exposed to the virus, and Educators from different levels of education, for finding themselves forced to create new ways of teaching remotely, often in an "improvised" way.

The researchers work with the notion of research-intervention, what mean that the subjects who participate in the study can, when narrating their dreams, elaborate on an attempt to create some meaning for what is happening. "It is possible to trigger the collective imagination in search of interpretations and, at the same time, minimally help those who are participating," stated the research coordinators from Rio Grande do Sul.

First perception

The project was scheduled to have finished the stage of collecting dream reports by the end of June 2020. In this first moment, the researchers have been gathering online to discuss the material and texts chosen for the theoretical background. It has been already possible, however, to draw some perceptions: "Among the reports we have already collected, there are dream records in which the subjects are visibly affected by images of death, destruction and by the very fear of falling ill due to the virus". Another aspect that has surfaced is how open people are to share experience : so far, 400 people with interest in participating in the research have made contact, and more than 160 have sent dream reports — most participants are female.

Observations such as "I don't normally remember my dreams, but lately I can do," and "I liked writing about my dreams, I made associations that I hadn't done before" have appeared frequently in the reports received so far. The two UFRGS' professors point out that participants seem to be more aware of this dimension, either because they are dreaming more, or because they remember more their dreams. "It is as if they have been creating another way of giving accounts of their dreams, as if that relationship could extend into associations that go beyond the usual moment of waking up after a dream, feeling momentarily awkward, and going on with life," Perrone and Gurski explained. "On the other hand, the participants' reports also suggest that the very opportunity of being allowed to talk about their dreams with another person can somehow relieve this awkwardness that they sometimes cause," they added.

How to take part

Health or Education Professionals who seek to participate in the research may write to the email oniropolitica@gmail.com and follow further instructions. In addition to reports, participants can also talk about associations they make between their dreams and thoughts or prior experiences, for example. Reports can be made in writing or audio format.

Partnership research

This study involves professors, and both undergraduate and graduate students from three Brazilian universities: UFRGS, USP, and UFMG. In São Paulo, professors Christian Dunker and Miriam Debieux Rosa, from USP's Institute of Psychology, coordinate the project; in Minas Gerais, the coordination is under the lead of professor Gilson Iannini, from the Graduate Program in Psychology at UFMG.

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