

Decoding Dreams: Psychoanalytic and Jungian Perspectives

Harshaa Goel

Student, Step by Step School, Noida

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Abstract

Dream interpretation has been a subject of fascination in psychology, with two major frameworks—Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Jung's analytical psychology—continuing to influence clinical and academic approaches. This study examines quantitative data collected from participants and includes a follow up interview with a few of them. To gain a deeper understanding of dreams I have applied both Freudian and Jungian views. Freud's view frames dreams as disguised fulfillments of repressed desires, transformed through mechanisms such as displacement, condensation, and symbolization. Carl Jung viewed dreams as vital messages from the unconscious, offering insights into personal growth and individuation. He believed dreams are not merely about repressed desires but rather serve a compensatory function, balancing conscious attitudes and revealing hidden aspects of the self. Thematic analysis revealed recurrent motifs: pursuit and escape, transformation, unfamiliar encounters with known figures, encounters with unknown figures, and symbolic locations. The findings suggest that dreams can simultaneously operate on personal and archetypal levels, offering richer meaning when interpreted through both frameworks. Clinical implications of an integrated approach to dream work are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Dreams occupy a unique space in psychological theory—they offer a window into the unconscious mind, potentially revealing hidden desires, unresolved emotions, and even provide insights into problem-solving. Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, two renowned figures of early depth psychology, approached dreams from distinct but overlapping perspectives. Sigmund Freud defined dreams as a "royal road to the unconscious," believing they provide access to repressed wishes and desires. He differentiated between the manifest content, the literal dream narrative, and the latent content, the hidden symbolic meaning, which he believed reflected unconscious thoughts and desires. Jung viewed dreams as vital messages from the unconscious mind, offering insights into personal and universal truths. He saw dreams as a bridge between the conscious and unconscious, revealing hidden aspects of the psyche and guiding individuals towards psychological wholeness.

This research seeks to apply both frameworks to a set of real-world dream accounts, exploring the interplay between individual repression and collective symbolism. The study aims to answer:

1. What recurrent themes appear in participants' dreams?
2. How do Freud's and Jung's interpretations converge or diverge for each theme?
3. What insights can an integrated approach offer for contemporary clinical practice?

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Freud's Theory of Dreams

Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) revolutionized the understanding of dreams in psychology by positioning them as meaningful psychological phenomena rather than random mental images. He proposed that every dream is a wish fulfillment, and could provide valuable insight into an individual's unconscious desires and conflicts. This stems from the operation of the dream-work, which transforms unacceptable latent content into tolerable manifest content through several mechanisms.

In Freudian theory, condensation is a key concept referring to the process where multiple latent dream thoughts or ideas are combined into a single element of the manifested dream. For example, a dream figure may possess the face of one person and the mannerisms of another, compressing multiple associations into a single representation. Displacement shifts emotional intensity from a significant idea or person to something less threatening, often producing dream narratives that feel emotionally disproportionate to their events. Symbolization converts abstract or taboo content into visual metaphors, a process that can render the latent meaning nearly unrecognizable without interpretive work. Finally, secondary revision organizes the dream narrative into a coherent sequence, smoothing over illogical transitions for the purpose of recall.

For Freud, dreams draw on the dreamer's personal life history and unresolved psychic tensions. He acknowledged that not all dreams are immediately transparent in their wish-fulfillment function, but maintained that even anxiety dreams and nightmares could be traced to disguised desires, often rooted in childhood experience.

2.2 Jung's Analytical Psychology and Dreams

Jung, though initially aligned with Freud, diverged fundamentally in his approach. In *Man and His Symbols* (1964) and other works, he emphasized that dreams are natural, spontaneous expressions of the unconscious mind, unfiltered by a censoring mechanism. Whereas Freud often sought to reveal what the dream concealed, Jung aimed to understand what the dream revealed.

Central to Jung's theory is the distinction between the personal unconscious—containing forgotten experiences and repressed material—and the collective unconscious, which holds the archetypes: universal, primordial patterns of imagery and behavior. Archetypes appear in myths, folklore, and religious imagery across cultures and historical eras. They include figures such as the Shadow (representing the darker, unacknowledged aspects of the personality), the Anima (inner feminine image in a man), the Animus (inner masculine image in a woman), the Hero, and the Wise Old Man.

In Jung's framework, dreams often serve a compensatory function, balancing the conscious attitude. For example, a person with an overly rational self-image may dream of irrational, chaotic events as a corrective message from the unconscious. Jung also viewed dreams as guiding the individual through individuation—the lifelong process of integrating conscious and unconscious aspects of the self toward psychological wholeness.

2.3 Convergences and Divergences

Despite their theoretical differences, Freud and Jung agreed on some fundamentals; Dreams are meaningful, not random, Dreams draw on both recent experiences and deeper unconscious material, Symbolism is central to dream interpretation, though its purpose is debated.

Their divergence is most evident in their understanding of symbolism. For Freud, symbols are disguises, protecting the dreamer from recognizing repressed wishes too directly. For Jung, symbols are the best possible expressions for unconscious content, chosen not to conceal but to communicate.

2.4 Contemporary Perspectives and Integrations

Modern dream research integrates aspects of both approaches. Neurocognitive models, such as the activation-synthesis theory (Hobson & McCarley, 1977), initially argued that dreams are meaningless byproducts of brain activity during REM sleep. However, later research has increasingly recognized that dream content reflects the dreamer's concerns, emotions, and problem-solving processes (Domhoff, 2018).

In therapeutic contexts, Hill's (2004) three-stage model—exploration, insight, and action—draws from both Freud and Jung. The exploration stage allows clients to describe and elaborate on dream content without premature interpretation, echoing Jung's emphasis on respecting the dream's imagery. The insight stage can incorporate Freudian analysis of personal history and repression alongside Jungian archetypal interpretation. The action stage supports behavioral or attitudinal change informed by dream insights.

Empirical studies have shown that dream work in therapy can reduce distress, enhance self-understanding, and support emotional processing (Pesant & Zadra, 2004). These outcomes suggest that dreams serve functions consistent with both Freud's and Jung's theories—addressing unresolved personal material while also connecting the dreamer to broader symbolic patterns.

The theoretical landscape of dream interpretation is enriched by the interplay between Freud's focus on repressed personal wishes and Jung's emphasis on universal symbolic patterns. In clinical and research settings, integrating these perspectives allows for a more holistic approach. The present study builds on this integration, applying both frameworks to qualitative data to examine how personal and collective dimensions manifest in actual dream narratives.

3. Method

3.1 Participants-

Twelve adult participants (ages 15–58) were recruited through convenience sampling to participate in semi-structured interviews about their dreams. All participants were anonymized and given non-identifiable codes (e.g., Participant A, Participant B). Gender, occupation, and cultural background were recorded but are not linked to specific dream narratives to preserve confidentiality. While the sample was relatively small, it represented a range of life stages and backgrounds, providing diversity in dream content and themes.

3.2 Data Collection-

Participants were interviewed individually in a quiet, private setting. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Interviews were guided by a standardized dream-report form that included:

1. Full dream narrative: Participants were encouraged to recount the dream in as much detail as possible, using present-tense description to enhance recall.
2. Emotional tone: Participants described the emotions felt during the dream, noting any shifts across different scenes.
3. Sensory detail: Participants were prompted to recall visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory sensations.

4. Psychoanalysis: Participants reflected on whether the dream content related to events, thoughts, or feelings from waking life.

Dreams were recorded and summarised into this document.

3.3 Data Analysis-

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines:

- Phase 1: Familiarization – Repeated reading of transcripts to gain an overview of the material.
- Phase 2: Generating initial codes – Line-by-line coding of dream content, emotional tones, and symbolic elements.
- Phase 3: Searching for themes – Grouping codes into broader thematic categories.
- Phase 4: Reviewing themes – Ensuring themes accurately reflected the dataset and removing redundancies.
- Phase 5: Defining and naming themes – Distilling the essence of each theme for clear interpretation.
- Phase 6: Writing up – Integrating quotes, theoretical interpretation, and thematic descriptions.

Each dream was analyzed twice—first using Freudian principles (distinguishing manifest and latent content, identifying dream-work mechanisms) and then using Jungian principles (identifying archetypes, compensatory functions, and collective symbolism). Interpretations were compared for points of convergence and divergence.

4. Results

4.1 Qualitative Data

The interviews provide valuable insight into how individuals personally perceive and interpret their dreams, revealing common patterns in emotions, symbolism, and the impact dreams have on daily life. There's interviews were formally analysed through Jungian and Freudian views:

1: Pursuit and Escape

Participant C: "I was running down an endless corridor, chased by a dark shadow. No matter how fast I went, it stayed right behind me. When I stopped it swallowed me whole."

Freud: The shadow is a displacement of real-life anxiety—possibly a socially unacceptable emotion—onto a vague, faceless threat.

Jung: The shadow is likely a direct manifestation of the Shadow archetype, an unintegrated part of the dreamer's psyche that demands confrontation.

2: Transformation and Flight

Participant F: "I jumped from a cliff, but instead of falling, I became a bird and soared over the ocean."

Freud: Represents wish fulfillment for escape and autonomy, disguised in fantastical imagery to bypass conscious resistance.

Jung: Birds symbolize transcendence; the transformation indicates movement toward individuation and liberation from ego constraints.

3: The Unknown Other

Participant H: “A woman I had never met stood in my kitchen, cooking. She seemed familiar but I couldn’t place her.”

Freud: The composite figure may merge features of multiple real-life women, masking the dreamer’s unacknowledged relational or sexual wishes.

Jung: Likely an Anima figure—representing the inner feminine principle—appearing in a domestic scene to suggest emotional nourishment or integration.

Theme 4: Symbolic Locations

Recurring environments appeared across participants, with notable frequency of forests, oceans, and houses.

Freud: These locations may be disguised representations of formative places or emotionally charged settings from the dreamer’s past.

Jung: The forest represents the unknown aspects of the self, the ocean symbolizes the collective unconscious, and the house serves as a metaphor for the psyche’s structure, with rooms indicating different layers of personality.

4.2 Quantitative data

The survey results reveal that dreams are not random or meaningless, but instead reflect deeper layers of the unconscious—supporting both Freud’s idea of repressed wishes and Jung’s belief in symbolic messages. These are the analysis of each question as per the Freudian and Jungian theory.

1. How often do you remember your dreams?

75% stated that they remember their dreams occasionally.

Freud: Dreams are often repressed because they contain unacceptable wishes → explains why they are forgotten easily.

Jung: Dreams are messages from the unconscious; if not remembered, it means the ego resists what the unconscious is trying to show.

2. Which of these emotions do you most commonly feel in your dream?

66.6% people chose Fear, anxiety, and confusion

Freud: These emotions come from unresolved conflicts or repressed desires surfacing symbolically in dreams.

Jung: Negative emotions often signal the presence of the shadow archetype—hidden traits or unresolved issues the psyche is urging the dreamer to confront.

3. Have you experienced nightmares recently? If yes, which explanation best matches how you see your nightmares?

58.3% said nightmares express hidden fears or repressed wishes.

Freud: Direct support—nightmares are unconscious wishes disguised as disturbing imagery.

Jung: Nightmares are not just repressed wishes but warnings from the unconscious, trying to bring balance by confronting the dreamer with uncomfortable truths.

4. How do people in real life behave in your dreams?

58.3%: People act differently than in real life.

Freud: This is displacement—real emotions toward someone get redirected and distorted in the dream.

Jung: People may represent archetypes (e.g., mother = nurturing or destructive mother archetype). Strange behavior signals symbolic roles, not literal people.

5. Have you ever dreamed of events in your childhood?

This question had mixed responses (equal spread between often, occasionally, rarely, never).

Freud: Childhood is crucial—dreams often revive repressed childhood experiences (infantile wishes).

Jung: Childhood dreams can reveal the child archetype, symbolizing innocence, vulnerability, or new beginnings.

6. Have you experienced recurring dreams?

- 66.7% have recurring dreams (exact or with variations).
- Freud: Recurrence means unresolved conflict or desire is still active in the unconscious.
- Jung: Recurrence means that our psyche is insisting on integration of a shadow or archetypal issue until our problems are resolved.

7. Which types of dream images appear most often to you?

The most common ones were unfamiliar people/places (33.3%), then familiar daily things (25%), flying/chasing (16.7%).

Freud: Unfamiliar figures are disguised wish-fulfillments or composites of real people. Flying/chasing = disguised sexual/aggressive drives.

Jung: Unfamiliar people are projections of archetypes (Shadow, Anima/Animus). Flying or chasing = transformation symbols or hero's journey motifs.

8. Do you think dreams can mean something?

100% said yes or maybe.

Freud: Yes, all dreams have meaning—mainly wish-fulfillment.

Jung: Dreams always have meaning, often symbolic, sometimes prophetic.

9. After dreaming do you reflect on what it might mean?

41.7% of people said that they reflect sometimes or rarely.

Freud: People avoid reflecting because the meaning might reveal unacceptable truths.

Jung: Lack of reflection = missed opportunity for self-growth and individuation.

10. Have you ever had a dream that changed you, your behaviour, your perception, etc

66.7% said no.

Freud: Dreams relieve unconscious pressure but rarely change conscious life.

Jung: Certain powerful symbolic dreams can be transformative, guiding individuation (but most participants here did not experience that).

11. If you had to choose, which interpretation feels most accurate for your dreams?

33.3% said dreams reflect current worries.

29% said they reveal hidden fears/wishes.

25% said messages from the unconscious.

Only 8.3% said they make no sense.

Freud: Supports his theory—dreams mirror repressed desires and current life stressors.

Jung: Supports his view too—dreams as unconscious messages filled with archetypal meaning.

5. Overall Interpretation

Freud's Lens: The data supports Freud strongly → most participants experience negative, anxiety-driven dreams, often recurring, and linked to hidden fears/wishes. Forgetting and distortion also fit repression and displacement.

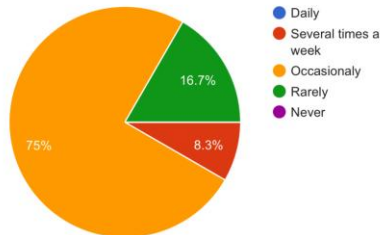
Jung's Lens: The presence of symbols, unfamiliar figures, archetypal themes (chasing, flying, strange houses, family conflicts) shows Jung's view—dreams as symbolic guides toward self-awareness. Together, the results show that dreams are both psychological outlets for repressed conflicts (Freud) and symbolic messages from the unconscious (Jung).

These attached photos are the summary of the form released

1. How often do you remember your dreams?

12 responses

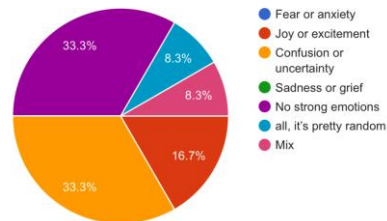
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2. Which of these emotions do you most commonly feel in your dreams?

12 responses

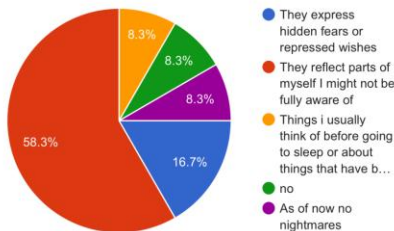
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3. Have you experienced nightmares recently? If yes, which explanation best matches how you see your nightmares?

12 responses

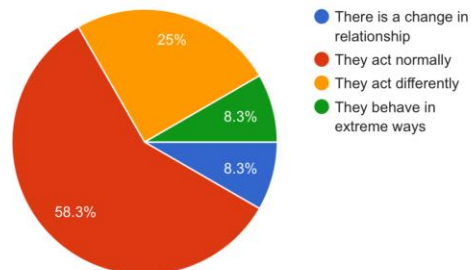
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4. How do people in real life behave in your dreams?

12 responses

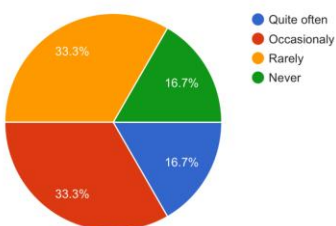
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5. Have you ever dreamed of events in your childhood?

12 responses

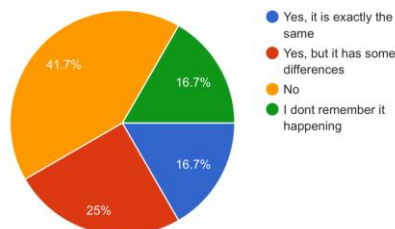
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6. Have you experienced recurring dreams?

12 responses

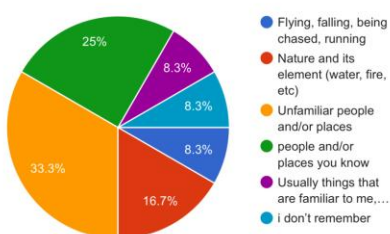
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7. Which types of dream images appear most often to you?

12 responses

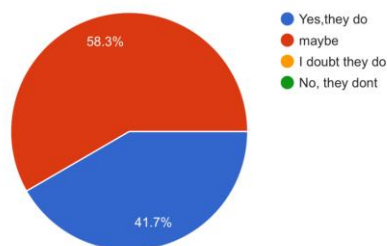
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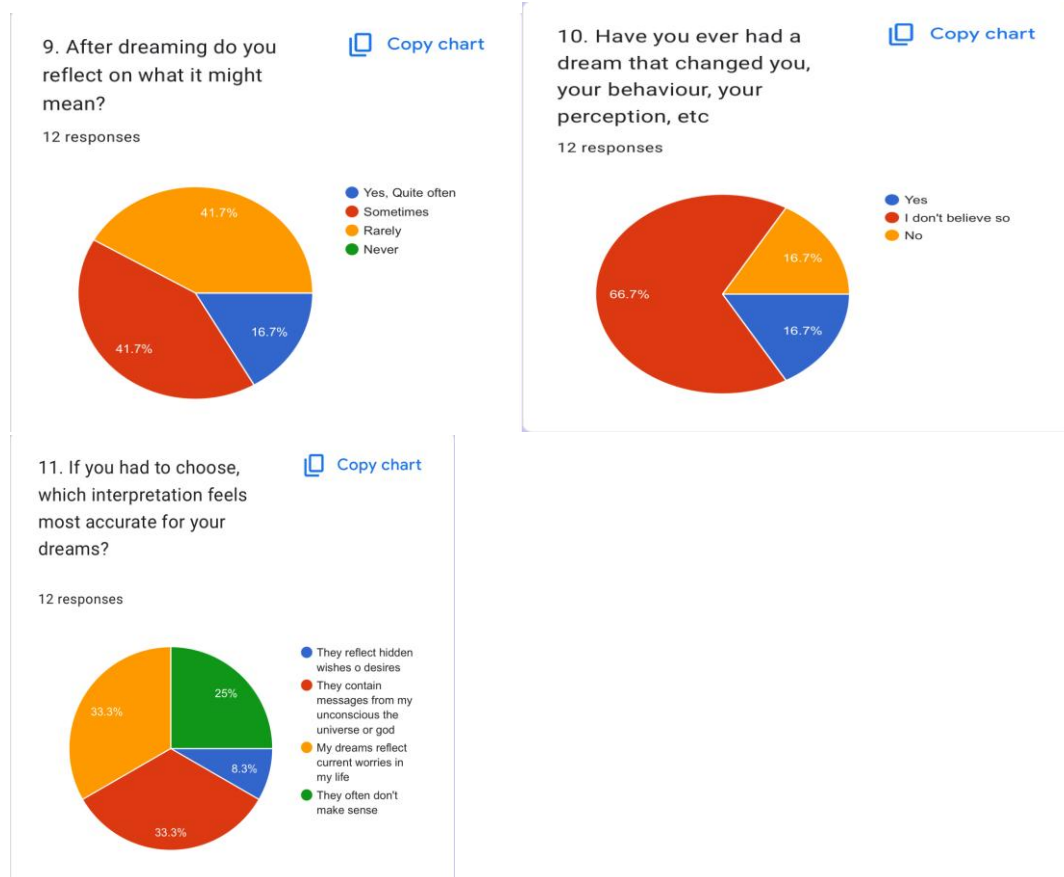


8. Do you think dreams can mean something?

12 responses

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6. Discussion

The analysis of participants' dream narratives through both Freudian and Jungian lenses yielded a multifaceted understanding of how dreams can be simultaneously personal and universal in meaning. Qualitative thematic analysis identified recurring motifs such as pursuit and escape, transformation, encounters with unknown figures, and symbolic locations. The quantitative survey data provide context and prevalence for these patterns, adding another dimension to interpretation.

In pursuit and escape dreams, Freud's interpretation emphasized the repression of specific fears or desires, suggesting the dream-work had transformed threatening latent content into an acceptable but still emotionally charged manifest image. This interpretation is supported by survey findings showing that 58.3% of participants perceived nightmares as expressions of hidden fears or repressed wishes. Jung's reading reframed these scenarios as confrontations with the Shadow archetype—an unacknowledged part of the self seeking integration—mirrored in the 16.7% who described nightmares as reflecting aspects of themselves they were not fully aware of.

Transformation and flight dreams, such as Participant F's metamorphosis into a bird, were interpreted by Freud as wish fulfillments—fantastical representations of a desire for freedom from constraints. Jung saw them as archetypal symbols of transcendence and individuation, reflecting the Self's movement toward psychological wholeness. Quantitative data lend weight to this interpretation, as 33.3% of participants reported dream imagery involving nature elements such as air, water, or landscapes—elements Jung frequently linked to archetypal transformation.

Dreams involving the unknown other also revealed the two frameworks' distinct emphases. Freud explained such figures as composites of known people that mask relational or erotic wishes. Jung interpreted them as manifestations of the Anima or Animus archetypes. The 25% of participants who reported frequent dreams of unfamiliar people or places supports the relevance of this symbolic category across dreamers.

Recurring symbolic locations—forests, oceans, and houses—were also significant. Freud might connect these to formative or emotionally charged personal memories, while Jung would see them as archetypal spaces: the forest as the unknown, the ocean as the collective unconscious, and the house as the psyche's structure. Quantitatively, the fact that 41.7% of participants had recurring dreams (16.7% identical, 25% with some variations) suggests that these settings may serve as stable symbolic stages for ongoing unconscious processes.

Finally, the survey data revealed a strong openness to interpretive work: 58.3% believe dreams have meaning, and 83.4% at least sometimes reflect on dream significance. This aligns with both Freud's and Jung's positions that dreams warrant serious psychological inquiry and suggests that, in clinical practice, clients are generally receptive to exploring their dreams through either lens.

7. Theoretical Implications

These findings suggest that Freud's and Jung's theories are not mutually exclusive but can be layered to create a more complete understanding of dream material. Freud's framework excels at uncovering the idiosyncratic, biographical dimensions of dream symbolism, connecting dream images to the dreamer's personal history, repressed material, and immediate emotional conflicts. Jung's framework complements this by situating those same images within a broader symbolic and cultural context, identifying recurring motifs that may resonate with human experience across time and place.

This dual approach challenges the reductionist view that dreams must be either entirely personal or entirely universal in meaning. Instead, the evidence from this study supports the proposition that dreams operate on multiple levels at once—addressing individual psychological needs while also drawing from shared symbolic structures.

8. Clinical Implications

The combination of narrative and survey data reinforces the potential benefits of an integrated Freudian–Jungian approach to dream work in therapy. Freud's framework aligns closely with the 58.3% of participants who saw nightmares as hidden fears or repressed wishes, providing a ready-made entry point for uncovering unresolved emotional material. Jung's model resonates with the 16.7% who interpreted nightmares as reflections of unacknowledged parts of the self, allowing therapists to frame such imagery in terms of archetypal integration. The prevalence of nature-based imagery (33.3%) and dreams involving unfamiliar people or places (25%) highlights opportunities to explore archetypal motifs in therapy. These symbols can connect clients' individual narratives to universal themes, fostering a sense of continuity between personal struggles and collective human experience. Meanwhile, Freud's focus on recurring dream content—experienced by 41.7% of participants—can help track the resolution of conflicts or persistent anxieties over time. That 83.4% of participants sometimes or often reflect on dream meaning suggests a high baseline readiness for therapeutic engagement with dream material. Therapists can capitalize on this receptivity by offering interpretive flexibility, moving between personal-history analysis and symbolic/archetypal exploration based on client preference and therapeutic goals.

9. Clinical Relevance

In a therapeutic setting, such integration offers flexibility and depth. A therapist can use Freudian techniques to help a client trace a dream's imagery back to formative experiences and repressed emotional states, thereby facilitating emotional processing. Concurrently, the therapist can draw on Jungian concepts to encourage clients to engage with symbolic meanings that transcend their personal biography, potentially fostering a sense of connection to broader human narratives and life stages.

This integrative approach also has the advantage of adaptability: clients with a strong interest in personal history may prefer the Freudian emphasis, while those drawn to myth, symbolism, or spirituality may resonate more with Jungian archetypes. In either case, the therapist can select interpretive strategies that align with the client's worldview and therapeutic goals, without being restricted to one theoretical framework.

10. Contribution to Dream Research

The study contributes to the ongoing dialogue in dream research regarding the function and meaning of dreams. It supports the view that dreams are not meaningless byproducts of brain activity, as early neurocognitive theories like Hobson and McCarley's (1977) activation-synthesis hypothesis proposed, but rather meaningful constructions that can be understood through multiple interpretive layers. Moreover, it highlights the value of qualitative, content-based analysis in preserving the richness of dream material—something that purely quantitative measures often miss.

11. Limitations

While the integration of qualitative and quantitative data enriches the analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size of 12 participants is small, limiting statistical generalizability; percentages should be interpreted descriptively. Furthermore, 75% of participants reported remembering dreams only occasionally, meaning that the dreams captured in this study may overrepresent highly vivid or emotionally intense experiences. This selective recall could bias results toward dreams with stronger affective content, such as the 33.3% that involved fear/anxiety or the 33.3% that involved joy/excitement.

Both the Freudian and Jungian interpretations are inevitably shaped by the researcher's theoretical lens. While participants' own interpretations—e.g., 58.3% viewing nightmares as repressed fears—were incorporated into the analysis, these self-reports are also subjective and may be influenced by popular ideas about dreams. Additionally, the survey format, while useful for quantifying trends, did not capture the depth of narrative detail available in the interviews, and the combination of self-reported dream logs and retrospective accounts introduces potential memory distortion.

12. Conclusion

This study, combining qualitative thematic analysis with quantitative survey data, demonstrates that dreams are multidimensional phenomena that benefit from both Freudian and Jungian interpretation. The qualitative narratives revealed symbolic patterns—pursuit, transformation, unfamiliar figures, and archetypal locations—while the quantitative results established their prevalence and linked them to participants' self-reported interpretations and beliefs.

The finding that 58.3% of participants view nightmares as expressions of hidden fears strongly supports Freud's theory of latent content and repression, while the 16.7% who saw them as reflections of unacknowledged aspects of the self align with Jung's concept of the Shadow. The high frequency of nature imagery (33.3%), unfamiliar settings (25%), and recurring dreams (41.7%) underscores the applicability of archetypal analysis.

These combined results indicate that dreams are not merely random neurological events but carry layered meanings, addressing both personal psychological history and universal symbolic structures. The fact that 58.3% believe dreams have meaning and 83.4% reflect on them suggests that most people are not only open to but actively engaged in the interpretive process—making dream analysis a viable and potentially valuable clinical tool.

Future research should expand sample size and diversity, use longitudinal tracking to monitor recurring themes, and explore how clients respond to integrated Freudian–Jungian dream interpretation in therapy. The present study affirms that by honoring both the personal and the collective dimensions of dream imagery, we can move closer to a comprehensive understanding of one of the most enduring mysteries of the human mind.

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