

## Children Talking about Dreams and Mind

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### Abstract

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. In contrast to the abundance of current research on children's understanding of beliefs, little is known about their conceptions of dreams. That is, 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. Children of 4 to 5-year-old children seemed to believe that dreams are "real". These young children can be influenced by magical notions of "cause and effect" and believe that talking about a dream could make it happen. Children from 5 to 6-years-old showed a transition stage where dreams and imagination are considered "mental events" and they don't exist in the outside reality. Older children from 7 to 8-years-old were clearly capable of distinguishing dreams and cognitive processes in general from reality or exterior events.

**Keywords:** *Children's Conceptions; Dreams; Imagination; Mind*

### Introduction

Children's dreams have been of increasing interest, especially after the works conducted by Piaget [1] Foulkes during the '60s and '70s [2,3]. 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 [4-6]. 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 [1].

In order to investigate these aspects of knowledge about dreams, we examined children's concepts about dreams and other cognitive processes such as mental images and imagination. The issue is how children explain and understand dreams among other cognitive processes that are not directly visible. That is, many child's activities can be link to mental notions as Piaget lucidly showed in his studies about the development of mass, time, space, seriation, among many other notions. Dreams, however, are more elusive and they can be recorded only after children had awoken.

After briefly summarizing the Cartesian-inspired view of mental states, as inner causes, and related views of what the learning of public language labels for mental state concepts involves, we cast doubt on the core assumptions and central tenets behind such views. This, in turn, leads to the claim that the development of children's understanding of dreams and imagination is facilitated by engaging in conversations consisting of demonstrations of appropriate ways to talk about such mental phenomenon [7,8]. The general claim, that we

subscribe, is that young children struggle with and typically fail to grasp knowledge of what older children (above 5-year-old) do understand: that people have mental processes, such as dreams or imagination, that represent or misrepresent the world. More importantly, human activities derives from a person's representation of the world rather than from objective reality directly [9]. In the current research we focus on children's understanding of dreams. We also compare children's understanding of imagination with their understanding of beliefs or knowledge of dreams in general.

In contrast to the abundance of current research on children's understanding of beliefs [10,11], little is known about their conceptions of dreams. Ekstein maintains [12] that sometimes is problematic to know when young children can distinguish dreams from imagination, fantasy, daydreams, or play. Piaget [1] 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 [13,14] proposed 5 years of age as the limit of credibility of children's dreams. Woolley and Wellman [15] 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.

Young children possess a good knowledge about mind in general. By age 4, they can distinguish between real and mental events, and then soon learn about dreams and mental activities such as imagination. A central Piagetian claim was that children begin development by being cognitively egocentric [16]. 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 discriminating their 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 [15,17,18]. 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.

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 recognizable characterization 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 [19].

Over the last five years, we have conducted a program of research exploring dream's content in young children [6,20], however, we never try to study children's own ideas about dreams or imagination. In this research, precisely, we were focused on children's notions

about dreams and imagination. Unlike the characteristically controlled situations 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 dreams, imagination and mind. Many developmental psychologists, mainly Kohlberg [21] have been arguing that children should first understand that dreams are unreal, then that they are private, and finally, that they are located internal to the person. Somehow, our previous study supported this hypothesis [22] and although we expected the results to be in line with this prediction, we were also interested in corroborating the "invariant sequence" proposed by Kohlberg.

### Method

#### Participants

There were eight male children between the ages of four and eight years old. All of them were enrolled in a private school in Mexico City. Three children were 4 to 6 years old and five were 6 to 8 years old.

#### Procedure

Parents were contacted initially for describing the study details. After getting parents approval, children's educators were also contacted for explaining study aims and procedure. All the children belonged to middle class families, with both parents holding a degree in higher education.

We began this study in January but the sanitary emergency hit us in mid-March so we couldn't continue working with the children in person. For three months once a week in-depth interviews were conducted at the school or their homes. Later, in mid-March through mid-May, interviews were conducted by Zoom.

To begin with, children were asked a series of questions concerning their dreams and how well they understood the reality, location, privacy, origin and controllability of their dreams, among other cognitive phenomenon such as imagination or mind.

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 [16] 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 [16,23], 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 toward several more specific topics:

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 and Shepherd [24] system.

### Results and Discussion

As expected, young children (4 to 5) showed difficulties to differentiate dream content from reality, that is, events "internally located" from external reality. They tend to think that oneiric actions and scenarios were real and that they occurred "somewhere". That is, young children implicitly admit the existence of two realities: one for dreams and one for external reality. In one extraordinary example of precocious lucid dreaming, one child dreamed that he was inside a toy store so he hugged his toys trying to wake up with them. This child clearly admits the existence of different realities that, nonetheless, can be connected somehow. In a previous study [6], we found that dreams of 4 to 6-year-old children seem to be slices of life not yet fully elaborated. We also found that they can be influenced by magical notions of "cause and effect" and believe that talking about a dream could make it happen. Interestingly, talking about their dreams can help children distinguish their inner experiences and feelings from objective reality.

Children 6 to 7 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. 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 [6]. The increasingly richness of dreams at this age range help to better understand dreams and imagination nature. We found that children 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.

Eight years old kids clearly differentiate dreams or imagination as inner events that are not located in external reality and, therefore, they are private. Older children considered that dreams, imagination and mind are located in their heads, "is something that happened in the interior of my head". By the time children were 8 years old of age, they understood that dreams are believed to be unreal and private. From 7 years of age, mind and imagination are considered also private but real, they are conceived of as something happening inside the head.

### Conclusion

We observed an order in the construction of notions related to dreams, imagination and mind in general. In a first phase, children between from 4 to 5-years-old consider dreams to be real and they have difficulty to differentiating oneiric reality from material reality. Around the ages of 5 to 6 or 7, children go through a phase where they recognize that dreams, imagination, and mind are private and personal events. Finally, at age 8, children are able to recognize the nature of dreams and mental processes in general as private and subjective events.

This research has one main limitation. The order aforementioned seems to corroborate what Kohlberg sustains; however, many anthropological studies have shown evidence that this may not be true in other cultures. Those studies showed that there is not an invariant sequence in the development of children's notions about dreams or imagination. Shweder and LeVine [25] sustain that from an anthropological perspective the existence of an invariant order is apparent because rejects as minimal influence the cultural determinants on either the nature of conceptual interpretations at any point in a sequence, or overall direction of their movement. Mageo has also carried out several investigations that question the existence of a universal order on how children acquire their notions about dreams and other mental events [26,27-29].

Although our main goal was not to test the existence of an invariant order, we found that our results supports Kohlberg's claims. It's important to point out that our participants were children from urban and an educated environment. Considering that Mexico encompasses many ethnic groups, it would be very interesting-and necessary-to study other cultural groups to find out how they develop notions such as dreams, imagination and mind.

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