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On life and dreams

We process our waking hours while sleeping, study suggests.



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Dreams can offer rich insights into the human psyche and have long been used to help people understand and deal with major or traumatic life events.

Now, European researchers have applied automated analysis to thousands of dream reports and say their findings reinforce a theory that dreams continue our waking hours.

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through which we can observe our lives from a special perspective.”

They found, for example, that a war veteran’s dreams are dominated by negative emotions and aggression years after his traumatic experiences, and a teenager dreamt more about sex as she approached adulthood.

Reflecting their real lives, women tended to be friendlier and less aggressive in their dreams than men, and people in the US experienced more aggression in the 1960s, which corresponded with official crime statistics.

Analysis of blind people’s dreams offered some intriguing insights, according to Aiello. “More surprisingly,” he says, “blind people’s dreams feature more imaginary characters, suggesting that our sensory sphere influences the content of our dreams.”

Modern dream analysis, based on inventories compiled manually by psychologists in clinical populations, has supported the hypothesis that waking life continues in our dreams, and the researchers say they have now confirmed this on an unprecedented level in a general population.

Aiello, first author Alessandro Fogli from the Università degli studi di Roma Tre, Italy, and Daniele Quercia used Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to analyse the text from 24,000 English dream reports from [Dreambank](#), the largest public dream repository.

These reports were scored using a well-established dream scale that captures different dimensions such as emotions, characters and their interactions, and compared with output from manually compiled inventories on a small set of dreams.

The study adds analysis of dream reports, “natural language expressions of a very intimate part of our psyche,” to applications of NLP, a tool that Aiello says is becoming increasingly sophisticated at capturing psychosocial aspects of language which may reflect or influence our psychological wellbeing.

This opens up further avenues for dream exploration, he adds, and his team plans to integrate it with a mobile app to help people record their dreams more easily. He hopes it will encourage more people to share their dreams to projects like Dreambank.

“As more dream data [are] shared, dream analysis experts will be not only able to provide feedback on the wellbeing of individuals but also to learn the psychopathological state of the whole society in relation to collective events,” he says.

“This has been already done in the past in relation to some significant events like 9/11 but, thanks to the partial automation of the dream analysis process, this could be done more systematically in

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Natalie Parletta is a freelance science writer based in Adelaide and an adjunct senior research fellow with the University of South Australia.

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