

**What is the experience of vivid dreaming and its impact on the dreamer's life? A phenomenological inquiry**  
**Leslie, R.P.**

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**What is the experience of vivid dreaming and its impact on the dreamer's life? A phenomenological inquiry**

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DCPsych

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Submitted to the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and Middlesex University Psychology Department in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Existential Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy

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## Statement of Authorship

This dissertation is written by Ricky Leslie and has ethical clearance from the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University for the Degree of Doctorate in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy. This work is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, and has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree. The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

## Abstract:

Dreams that are impactful continue to hold significance throughout a dreamer's life, shaping their perceptions, emotions, and behaviours. Psychological research has been challenged by methodological difficulties owing to the fact that dreams can only be studied through first-person accounts. Building upon the work of Pagel & Vann (1992), Kuiken & Sikora (1993), and Olsen, Schredl, and Carlsson (2020), this study, grounded in existential-phenomenological philosophy, aims to deepen our understanding of how vivid dreamers are affected upon awakening. Through structured existential analysis (SEA) with eleven purposefully selected participants aged between 22 and 45, their profound dreams were explored, revealing three temporal themes (*Dreaming as Being, Awakening to Being, and Living with the Dream*) and nineteen subthemes that encompassed personal, social, physical, and spiritual dimensions. Notably, the study uncovered novel findings related to transformative encounters within their dreams, significantly altering the participants' perceptions of themselves, others, and their relationship to their dreams. The participants' psychological journeys and existential concerns, including freedom and responsibility, isolation and connectedness, death and embodiment, and meaning and meaninglessness, emerged as key themes. Unexpected novel themes, '*Accumulating Insight*', '*Replaying Dreams: Assembling Meaning from Experiences*', and '*Coping Mechanisms in the Dream's Wake: The Compulsion to Move Forward*', illustrated their sense of immersion and engagement with dream content, leading to experiences of complex emotions such as shame, guilt, and anger. Moreover, the study revealed the transformative potential of vivid dreams in the participants' lives, providing them with insights that led to overcoming struggles, personal growth, and the development of strong relationships from the insights of their dreams. These novel findings offer valuable implications for counselling psychologists, suggesting that vivid dreams can be valuable tools to explore dreamers' profound lived experiences facing existential realities. By addressing existential concerns and exploring opportunities for personal growth, vivid dreams can have an ongoing impact by enhancing individuals' self-understanding and well-being, as well as psychotherapy and academic training for counselling psychologists.

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## DREAM POEM

"Hold Fast Your Dreams":

Hold fast your dreams! Within your heart Keep one still, secret spot Where dreams may go, And,  
sheltered so, May thrive and grow Where doubt and fear are not.

O keep a place apart, Within your heart, For little dreams to go!

Think still of lovely things that are not true. Let wish and magic work at will in you. Be sometimes blind  
to sorrow. Make believe! Forget the calm that lies In disillusioned eyes. Though we all know that we  
must die, Yet you and I May walk like gods and be Even now at home in immortality. We see so many  
ugly things— Deceits and wrongs, wrongs, and quarrellings; We know, alas! we know How quickly fade  
The color in the west, The bloom upon the flower, The bloom upon the breast And youth's blind hour.

Yet keep within your heart A place apart Where little dreams may go, May thrive and grow. Hold fast—  
hold fast your dreams!

by Ezenwa-Ohaeto (Nigerian poet, literary critic, and scholar 1958 -2005)

## ***Introduction***

The present study aims to increase the understanding of vivid dreams by exploring the lived experiences of eleven participants. The research question guiding this study is: *What is the experience of vivid dreams and their impact on the dreamer's life? A phenomenological study.*

The topic was chosen to contribute to the growing body of literature, which at the time of writing required further attention as very little research has examined the impact of dreaming on waking life. In addition, this study was chosen to facilitate answers to this question from an existential-phenomenological counselling psychology perspective to support clients in making sense of their experiences to develop their personal growth and well-being (Frankl et al., 2021; Scarpelli, 2022a). While there has been research on impactful dreams using quantitative methods, there is a lack of qualitative studies that explore different perspectives on the experience of dreaming and its impact. The lack of specificity concerning the circumstances of those who experience impactful dreams is a missed opportunity for counselling psychologists, clinicians, and academic institutions (Hoffman & Lewis, 2014; King, Bulkeley, Welt, 2011; Pesant, Zadra, 2004; Crook & Hill, 2003; Fox, Weathers, 2004; Hill et al., 2008; Schredl et al., 2000; Keller et al., 1995; Freeman & White 2002). Hoffman & Lewis (2014) emphasised the need for dream education across academic levels, reflecting growing academic recognition. Throughout history, cultures have passed on dream beliefs and practices through educational channels; they filtered into our literature- Dostoevski and Shakespeare, including family, religious leaders, beliefs, and healers, influencing dreams' frequency and content (Robbins, 2018). This cross-cultural phenomenon emphasises the universal nature of dream education in human societies. Engaging with diverse methods on how people teach dreams is essential. Surprisingly, the Western academic context rarely discusses these practices (King, Bulkeley, Welt, 2011). While scepticism about dream value coexists with personal fascination, dreams remain intricate, diverse, and multifaceted. The study of dreams spans arts, humanities, and sciences, demanding interdisciplinary perspectives for comprehensive understanding and dream education advancement. Moreover, this is surprising as many individuals typically experience dreams, a significant part of sleep. Dreams experiences can be reported at any stage during sleep and throughout the life span (Foulkes, 1962; Funkhouser & Schredl, 2010; Nardorff et al., 2014). Dream researchers estimate that we spend 230,000 hours or one-third (26 years) of our lives asleep during our lifetime (Dal Sacco, 2022). We spend at least six years dreaming, with most people dreaming every night for 2 hours, notably approximately between 70% to 90% of the time (Belicki, 1992; Schredl et al., 2007); dreamers report having a dream upon a sudden awakening in REM sleep, with more dreams being reported by dreamers who keep regular dream journals, or spend time recalling dreams. (Foulkes, 1962; Schredl, 2018; Hoel, 2021; Solms, 2002; Rechtschaffen, 1963).

Dreaming is a subjective experience that cannot be solely studied through physiological methods. Quantitative research has focused more on classifying dreams (Kuiken & Sikora, 1993; Busink & Kuiken, 1996; Kuiken et al., 2006; Lee & Kuiken, 2015), nightmares (Belicki, 1992; Blagrove et al., 2004; Kothe & Pietrowsky, 2001; Nielsen & Levin, 2007) and their effects on stress (Martínez, Miró, & Arriaza, 2005; Roberts & Heard, 2009), and mood (Kramar, 2007; Cartwright, 2010; Schredl, 2010, 2020; Scarpelli, 2019; Schredl & Reinhard, 2010; Barbeau et al., 2022). Researchers have been intrigued by the formation of dreams and empirical support for the presence of continuity between waking life and dream content to objectively understand the physiological and neurological correlations of dreaming's function (Domhoff, 2003; Hobson, 2009; Nir, Tononi, 2010; Scarpeilli et al., 2021). However, there is a need to understand “whether dream content has any bearing on development and/or adaption to waking consciousness, whether it helps the dreamer to mature in a psychological sense and whether the content contains new information which is useful in psychotherapy” (Hoss, 2011, p.81; Cartwright, 1996). Therein lies a mismatch of intention as there has been a concerted effort in dream research to connect dreaming to brain activity (Schwartz & Maquet, 2001), quantitative measures of dream content (Hall & van de Castle, 1966), but seldom address how the dreamers' experience affects their ability to adapt to experiences from their dreams in their lives.

It is widely acknowledged amongst researchers that dreams are essential to human existence, contributing to learning (Stickgold et al., 2001; Fogel et al., 2018; Ruch & Henke, 2020), relationship health (Selterman et al., 2012), physical health (King & DeCicco, 2007; Erlacher, Schredl, Stumbrys, 2020), immunity (Besedovsky, Lange, Born, 2012; Besedovsky, Lange, Haack, 2019), psychological well-being (Deslaurier, 2013, p.512), and decision-making (Morewedge & Norton, 2009). Some argue that dreams are mere byproducts of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep without inherent value (Hobson & McCarley, 1977; Meddis, 1997; Flanagan, 2000). However, evidence suggests that dreaming is homeostatically regulated, indicating that it serves some critical function beyond mere epiphenomenalism (Hoel, 2021). This tension between dreams as functionally meaningful and epiphenomenal raises crucial philosophical and empirical questions. For instance, epiphenomenalism, which posits that conscious experiences, including dreams, are mere byproducts of brain activity without causal significance, parallels the concept of biological vestigiality (Polger & Flanagan, 2003). Vestigial structures, such as the appendix or wisdom teeth, are remnants of evolutionary adaptations that once served a function but are now considered biologically redundant. If dreams are likened to vestigial structures, they might be regarded as evolutionary artefacts—residues of cognitive processes that no longer carry intrinsic functions (Doyle, 2008). However, this analogy fails to account for why dreams are subject to homeostatic regulation—a system in which the brain compensates for REM sleep



deprivation through increased intensity or frequency of subsequent dreaming episodes, known as the "dream rebound effect" (Bryant, Wyzenbeek, Weinstein, 2011; Malinoski et al., 2019; Nir & Tononi, 2010). The fact that dreams are tightly regulated by such mechanisms suggests that they may play a critical role in emotional or cognitive processing, contradicting the idea that they are mere evolutionary leftovers.

This broader discussion links to the ongoing exploration of the "hard problem of consciousness" (Chalmers, 1995), which seeks to explain why and how physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experiences—such as colours, tastes, emotions, and the very experience of being conscious. While the soft problem of consciousness concerns how brain mechanisms correspond to mental states and can be addressed through empirical research, the hard problem remains elusive: how do these physical processes generate subjective, qualitative experiences? First-person, subjective experiences—such as those occurring in dreams—resist reduction to third-person, objective methods. While vital for understanding brain mechanisms during sleep, empirical research cannot fully explain the personal, lived quality of a dream, much less the emotions or meanings that emerge from it. In addressing this gap, Joseph Levine's (1983) concept of the "explanatory gap" becomes relevant. Even if we can pinpoint neural correlates of consciousness or identify the brain activity associated with dreaming, this does not explain why certain neural states give rise to specific subjective experiences.

Dreaming exemplifies this issue: knowing the neural activity of REM sleep does not explain why a dream feels vivid or surreal. Similarly, Thomas Nagel's (1974) famous question—"What is it like to be a bat?"—highlights the limitations of understanding subjective experiences from an objective viewpoint. We may understand the mechanics of REM sleep, but we cannot fully comprehend what it feels like to be inside a dream. This philosophical tension has practical implications. If dreams were merely epiphenomenal, devoid of meaning or purpose, they would not hold the psychological significance that decades of therapeutic work have shown (Leonard & Dawson, 2018). Sigmund Freud (1910) famously posited that dreams have psychological meaning, serving as a window into the unconscious mind. More contemporary researchers have extended this view, suggesting that dreams contribute to self-transformation (Barrett, 2001; Dresleur, 2012; Kuiken, 2015).

The precise neural circuitry involved in generating sensory experiences during REM sleep allows the mind to simulate perceptual experiences without engaging the body (Eagleman, 2020), further undermining the notion that dreams are epiphenomenal. If dreams were simply incidental byproducts, their complexity and the intricacies of their regulation would be difficult to explain. Dreams are both biologically regulated and phenomenologically rich, which supports the view that they are not just

evolutionary artefacts but may serve essential roles in psychological and physiological processes (Solms, 2002). This aligns with research suggesting that dreams facilitate emotional processing, memory consolidation, and even decision-making (Morewedge & Norton, 2009). The very existence of lucid dreaming—where individuals are aware of and can sometimes control their dreams—challenges the notion that dreams are merely passive epiphenomena, further suggesting that they engage active cognitive processes. Dreaming, as Boss (1977, p.1) asserts, is "as old as man himself." It can be thought of as an altered state of phenomenal consciousness (Block, 1995; Chalmers, 1997; Cohen & Dennett, 2011) experienced during sleep. Dreams offer a perceptual world composed of representational and symbolic material (Kuiken, 2022, p.4), allowing for the exploration of the mind's internal landscape. Researchers such as Foulkes (1993) and Nielsen (2010) have demonstrated that even though dreamers are disengaged from their external environment, they still actively process endogenous stimuli, further illustrating the complexity of dream states. Our understanding of what dreams are and why we dream has evolved significantly over the past century (Harris, 2009). While early interpretations of dreams, like Freud's, focused on their psychological meaning, recent advances in neuroscience have added new layers to this understanding. Dream researchers continue to seek answers to the central question of how and why specific physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experiences during sleep. Windt (2021, p.6) notes that conscious experience is an 'umbrella term' encompassing sensations, thoughts, and emotions during dreaming. However, bridging the gap between objective descriptions of brain activity and subjective experiences remains a significant challenge. In this context, it is essential to acknowledge that while empirical methods—such as neuroimaging or behavioural studies—are invaluable, they are insufficient to capture human experience's subjective nature fully. Although such methods have provided insights into the correlates of consciousness, they cannot explain the rich phenomenology of dreams. Dreaming continues to resist reductionist approaches, suggesting that the subjective, qualitative aspects of conscious experience—what it feels like to dream—remain outside the reach of third-person, objective explanations alone (Rosen, 2013). Moreover, while reductionist and eliminativist perspectives argue that consciousness and dreams can be explained entirely through physical processes, they fall short of addressing the lived, subjective quality of these experiences. For example, epiphenomenalism, which proposes that dreams are biologically irrelevant byproducts of brain activity, struggles to account for the emotional and psychological depth that dreams frequently possess. Dreaming cannot simply be discarded as vestigial; rather, it serves a meaningful role in the mind's attempts to integrate experience, resolve emotional conflicts, or even foster psychological growth (Cartwright, 2010; Kramer, 2010; Bergquist, 2022). Mysterianism, the view that consciousness may be beyond human understanding, also deserves consideration (De Garo, 2009; Rowland, 2007). Philosophers like Colin McGinn (2016) argue that our

cognitive limitations may prevent us from solving the hard problem. Yet, dream research occupies a unique space, pushing us to embrace the mystery of consciousness while seeking new ways to engage with it. Phenomenology provides a method for exploring these questions, even if definitive answers remain elusive. The phenomenological approach offers a different lens through which to study dreams, emphasising the first-person experience of dreaming. While empirical research can help tackle the soft problem of consciousness—linking neural activity to cognitive functions—phenomenology tackles the hard problem by investigating the rich, subjective experience of being in a dream. Integrating objective data and subjective lived experience, this dual approach holds the greatest potential for advancing our understanding of dreams and consciousness.

While scientific research has shed light on various aspects of dreaming, such as the role of brain regions in dream generation and the connection between dreaming and memory consolidation, the fundamental question of why we dream and what gives rise to the rich tapestry of dream experiences remains unanswered. This gap in understanding aligns with the idea that dreams and dreaming, with their elusive and enigmatic nature, represent a frontier in consciousness research. In light of quantitative research challenges, qualitative research is uniquely positioned to take account of highly private and elusive experiences occurring within the realm of sleep and its complex relations within the existential world of dreamers as no other methods are currently capable. (Fabjan, 2023; Mageo, 2021; Schredl, 2018, Windt, 2015). As dreaming is a near-universal experience, one might think the impact of dreams in our lives would have been explored more extensively through empirical methods despite occupying a role across academic fields, including art, athletics, literary writings, and scientific discoveries (Barrett, 2001) and most of all the whole spectrum of human experience (Dreslaurier, 2012; Marks, 1995). However, despite the eroded interest in their meaning, cultural relevance, and focus on realist assumptions (Tedlock, 1987; Krippner & Dillard, 1988). Some researchers view vivid dreams that impact individuals' lives as important (King & DeCicco, 2009; Morewedge & Norton, 2009). Many people in the contemporary world believe the content of their dreams can be a source of knowledge and growth (Harris, 2009, p.1). We may ask, in what sense is dreaming meaningful and authentic to people? (Laughlin, 2013, p.1). Several dream models and therapeutic modalities postulate that individuals can gain knowledge and that the insights can have profound life impacts (Freud, 1910; Jung, 1964; Hill, 2004). Individuals unaware of dreams as a source of knowledge and those who dismiss this notion miss out on the potential benefits that dreamwork can bring to their lives. Dream researchers have pointed out that dreaming and waking are based on the

same lived world processes; the main difference is dreaming does not have to adapt to input from the senses (Schredl, 2018; Revonsuo, 2009). In this view, dreaming is richer and more varied because of the lack of external constraints. Other researchers view dreaming as a separate phenomenon and advocate treating it in its own right (Boss, 1977; Knudson, 2006).

The experience of dreams through sleep can often be compelling and may lead to epiphanies that can transform our lives. For example, one of the best-known famous dreams that were important and impactful, which led to important discoveries, is Kekule's dream of snakes catching their tails in their mouths, which led to his discovery of the ring structure of the benzene molecule (Barrett, 1993; Kekule, 1858; Rocke, 2015). Likewise, Elias Howe dreamed of natives boiling him in a massive pot while they danced around him with spears that had holes through their points—a dream that led him to his design of the sewing machine (McKnight, 1951; Gregory, 2006). In their book, *Dreamworking* (1988), Krippner and Dillard have identified dreams as a frequently fertile source of intellectual creativity. Descartes' unified theory of philosophy and mathematics emerged from a complex dream of evil spirits, fiery, and a dictionary (Hatfield, 2014). In recent years, dream studies, numerous case studies, and anecdotal reports have emerged supporting the beneficial use of dreams and precognitive imagery to treat cancer disease, improve sports performance, and enhance creativity (Krippner & Dillard, 1988; LaBerge, Levitan, & Dement, 1986; Gabel, 1999; Barrett, 2001; Glaskin, 2011; Stumbrys & Erlacher, 2016; Bruce, 2020) displaying human being 'optimal functioning' (Freeth, 2010). Recent developments across academic fields have led dream studies to involve a multidisciplinary approach to research from cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, and psychology (Barcaro, 2010). Thus, recent scientific interest in objective measures of the dreaming process indicates that a link between our nocturnal experiences and their impact on waking remains unclear and related to the participant's life (Conte, 2021). These observations were pointed out by Otaiku (2022) and Walker and van der Helm (2009). They further suggested sleep and dream dysfunctions are prevalent in psychological and neurological disorders and impact general well-being (Walker, 2009; Walk & van der Helm, 2009).

However, there remains a gap in dream studies from the participant's perspective, as they alone witness their dreams. The exceptional list of dreams above illustrates the creative power of dreaming; however, further tension exists between introspective data from reports and objective information from laboratory studies, which has been overstated (Schwartz & Maquet, 2002). They can provide representative and reliable dream material if their sampling conditions are carefully defined (Windt, 2015). To this frontier, this qualitative study attempts to understand the psychological experience of dreaming's impact. Dream psychologists are puzzled as to why specific dreams arise at a given time in a person's life (Bulkeley et al., 2005; Knudson, 2006; Kuiken, 2015). Many individuals will experience defining dreams so profoundly that it will significantly impact their existence, which can alter

the direction of their lives. Most of the time, these moments of insight usually occur without intention. One of these moments might be a vivid dream that impacts an individual and has ongoing significance. Although it would be great to know what critical functions dreams serve and where they come from, reports collected from laboratory settings do not adequately reflect the broader spectrum of dreams and their impacted potentialities. The purpose of this current study is to explore dreams and that, regardless of where this phenomenon originates and why we humans have them, we all do indeed experience dreams, and for that sole reason, we need to honour them. We need to address the structural features of experience and of things as experienced. Dream researcher statistics mentioned above, the magnitude of books recently published for personal growth, and a near-universal human experience demonstrate that dreams and their potential to be a source of knowledge for human growth through understanding their effects are worthy of further research attention, in particular, qualitative research which aims to make sense of an individual's experience of the dreams impact upon waking could offer greater understanding for those affected by their dream experiences. This research aimed to develop extant literature and understand how the dreamer feels that their experience (s) of vivid dream (s) has affected their lives. While qualitative research has been said to lack the generalisability of quantitative methodologies (Willig, 2013), my research objectives are to shed light on participants' a) understanding of their experience of dreaming, b) how the participant makes sense of the experience, and c) their understanding of the process of dealing with the impact of the dream on their life from an existential-phenomenological perspective (theoretical orientation will be discussed below), which can inform clinical practice as such a limited understanding of impactful dreaming has seriously hampered experimental investigations (Ruby, 2011) and potentially formed the basis of further qualitative and quantitative research in the future.

## **Theoretical Orientation**

Existential philosophy, characterised by its emphasis on the subjective experience of human existence, provides a rich and nuanced theoretical framework for understanding the intricacies of dreams. Proponents of existential philosophy, including influential figures such as Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and van Deurzen, have delved into questions of human consciousness, perception, and lived experiences, shedding light on how dreams contribute to the existential fabric of individuals' lives. Central to this theoretical orientation is the concept of phenomenology, a philosophical approach that places great importance on exploring first-person experiences. By adopting a phenomenological enquiry, I aim to delve into the depths of vivid dreams and uncover their profound meaning and significance within the context of the dreamer's existence. Dreams are viewed as more

than mere nighttime occurrences within the existential framework. They are considered reflections of the dreamer's subjective reality, shaped by their personal history, beliefs, and cultural context. By closely examining the vivid dreams experienced by individuals, we seek to understand how these dreams intersect with their overall life experiences and how they may influence their perceptions, emotions, and actions in waking life.

Chapter One lays the foundation for our study by exploring the history of dreaming and delving into relevant philosophical literature, specifically focusing on the existential perspective. I also review qualitative and quantitative scientific research on dreams and the significance of different dream types in contemporary psychotherapy. Chapter two encompasses the ontological and epistemological stance, critically evaluating various qualitative research methodologies such as narrative analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I compare their strengths and limitations with the chosen methodology and make a case for employing van Deurzen's (2014) structured existential analysis (SEA) as the preferred phenomenological approach. This methodology allows me to illuminate the profound impact of vivid dreams on individuals upon waking, capturing their rich and nuanced accounts.

In chapter three, I conduct in-depth interviews and apply SEA to explore the dreamers' subjective experiences. By delving into the imagery, emotions, and narratives within their dreams, I examine how these dreams impact their personal growth, self-awareness, and existential journey. The analysis revolves around key themes from the structured existential analysis of the participants' interviews. Through the lens of SEA's four worlds analysis and heuristic devices, I aim to highlight the struggles, triumphs, and personal growth experienced by the dreamers, providing a deeper understanding of the impact of their vivid dreams. In the final chapter, I contrast the findings with existing literature to illustrate their clinical relevance and broader significance in dream research, counselling psychology, and clinical practice. By conducting this research, I seek to deepen the understanding of vivid dreams as profound and meaningful aspects of human existence, opening up new avenues for exploration and potential applications in counselling psychology and training institutions.

## Reflexivity

My critical engagement with these issues, drawing from existential-phenomenological insights, seeks to bridge this divide by focusing on the lived experience of dreaming as a primary mode of inquiry. From an existential perspective, dreams are not merely cognitive artefacts or biological functions; they represent encounters with existential givens, including themes of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). This lens emphasises the subjective and situated nature of dreaming, focusing on the dreamer's being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962). In this view, the dream is not just a byproduct of brain activity but a meaning-making process deeply intertwined with the dreamer's personal existence, psychological states, and life context. Phenomenology, too, offers a valuable methodology to explore the depth of dream experiences, attending to the immediacy of the dream without reducing it to neurobiological processes alone. As Husserl (1931) asserts, phenomenological inquiry requires *bracketing*—setting aside preconceptions to focus on the way things are given in experience - "to the things themselves" (zu den sache selbst). By applying this method to dreams, we can examine the structures of consciousness and explore how dreams reveal subjective truths about the dreamer's existential situation. For Husserl, consciousness is always consciousness of something—a directedness toward an object—and in the case of dreams, this intentionality reveals the dreamer's engagement with their inner world. The dream experience, in Husserlian terms, becomes a lived phenomenon that speaks to the individual's existential condition (Husserl, 1931).

Building on this, Heidegger's ontology offers more profound insight into the nature of dreaming through his concept of *Being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1962). For Heidegger, human existence (or *Dasein*) is fundamentally situated in the world, embedded in relationships, tasks, and meanings that shape one's experience. Dreaming, from an ontological perspective, can be seen as a mode of *Being*—a way in which *Dasein* discloses itself through the dream's symbolic and representational material. Dreams, then, are not just subjective events but reveal how one is situated within the world and how one relates to existential concerns such as anxiety, finitude, and authenticity. In this sense, Heidegger's ontology highlights how dreams can bring forth hidden aspects of existence that may not be fully acknowledged during waking life. Dreams become a space where *Dasein* confronts its possibilities, often unmediated by the distractions of everyday existence, allowing for a more direct engagement with existential issues.

Merleau-Ponty's (1962) philosophy further enriches this discussion by emphasising the embodied nature of consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, perception and experience are always grounded in the body, which serves as the subject's means of engaging with the world. Through this lens, dreams are not purely mental phenomena but embodied experiences that involve the dreamer's *lived body*. In the

dream state, the body may be at rest, but the *corporeal schema*—the way we experience and orient ourselves in space—remains active. Dreams, then, are shaped by our embodied history and sensory experiences, as Merleau-Ponty notes that all perception is rooted in the body's interaction with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The dreamer's movements, emotions, and sensations within the dream reflect the embodied nature of their consciousness, pointing to the continuity between waking and dreaming life.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *flesh*—the intertwining of subject and world—suggests that dreaming may blur the boundaries between the self and the external world, creating a space where the dreamer is both a participant and observer (Evans & Lawlor, 2000). Dreams offer a field of experience where the usual distinctions between subject and object, inside and outside, dissolve, reflecting Merleau-Ponty's idea that we are always intertwined with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). This relational and embodied approach counters reductionist views that treat dreams as mere epiphenomena by emphasising how dreaming engages the full depth of our bodily, sensory, and existential being.

By incorporating these phenomenological perspectives, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of dreams as integral to human existence—not merely as cognitive or neurobiological events but as profound ontological and embodied phenomena. Through the combined insights of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, we can approach dreams as revealing layers of being that are intertwined with our lived, embodied, and situated existence. This phenomenological approach offers a richer, more nuanced understanding of dreams, not as incidental byproducts of brain processes but as essential expressions of our *Being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1962).



## Terminology of Vivid Dreams

This section provides a glossary to familiarise readers with the terms used throughout this thesis. The definition section addresses the challenge of defining dreaming in research studies.

**Lucid Dream:** Awareness of dreams while dreaming

**Vivid Dreams:** A vivid dream is one that feels so real, relating to nine senses (visual, auditory, gustatory (taste), Olfactory (smell), Cutaneous (touch or sense of pressure perception), Thermoception (temperature), Nociception (Pain), Equilibrioception (Vestibular sense of balance related to cavities containing fluid in the inner ear), and proprioception (Kinesthetic perception of body awareness).

**Impactful Dreams:** Ongoing significance that may prompt or influence a decision or behaviour

**Excessive Dreams:** dreams that are excessively abundant or intense.

**Latent Content:** The underlying meaning behind the symbols in a dream.

**REM:** Rapid Eye Movement

**NREM:** Non-Rapid Eye Movement.

**Subjunctive State:** relating to or denoting a mood of verbs expressing what is imagined or possible.

**Manifest Content:** The literal story and symbols of a dream.

**Valence:** The positive or negative tone of dream narrative.

**Existential Realities/ Concerns:** Universally accepted fundamental aspects inherent in human existence, shaping our understanding and experiences, including time, space, death, meaning and meaninglessness, isolation and freedom and responsibility

**Representation:** Reproduction and transformation of waking cognitions, emotions and experiences into dream images

**Presentation:** Generative potential of significant and bizarre image possibly leading to new knowledge

## Definition of Dreams

In dream research, there is a lack of consensus regarding its definition. The International Association for the Study of Dreams and the American Academy of Sleep Medicine have acknowledged this, stating that there is no single definition for dreams and no clear distinction between dreaming and other psychological processes (Zadra & Domhoff, 2011, p.585). The elusive nature of dreams remains, and understanding their purpose has been challenging for researchers, with definitions continually evolving. However, recent insights have shed light on the characteristics of dreams based on individuals' experiences upon waking. These experiences include intense sensory perceptions, vivid imagery, strong emotions, detailed recall, reflection, and potential impact on waking life. Kramer (2010) proposed that definitions of dreams have three essential features: a connection to sleep or awakened states, recall, and content, while Schredl (2018) defined dreams as a series of thoughts, images, and sensations that occur during sleep and are reported upon awakening. Malinowski & Horton (2020) view dreaming as 'recollecting mental content from sleep' (p.1). These definitions recognise that dreams are perceived as real and can resemble waking experiences in their fragmented, thought-like nature, sensory elements, and emotional content (Windt, 2015; Schredl, 2018).

These definitions raise several questions for qualitative research about whether these broadly inclusive or restrictive descriptions are helpful in our understanding of dreams (Schredl, 2018). Further, research studies examining vivid dreams' ongoing impact follow two definitions: Jung (1964) and Kuiken (1995). Jung's concept of 'Big Dreams', borrowed from the "Elgonyi tribes of central Africa", distinguishes them from ordinary dreams by their significance (Adams, 2010, p.106). These dreams we carry throughout our lives are called "big" dreams. According to Carl Jung, they can serve as enduring spiritual milestones, even if their meaning remains elusive (Jung, 1946, p. 117). Jung eloquently described these dreams as the "richest jewel in the treasure house of psychic experience" (Jung, 1948, p. 290). Their profound impact has the potential to etch them into our memories, leaving a lasting

impression (Adams, 2010). Depending on their approach or theoretical positioning, these definitions may hold value for researchers. This study followed the definitions of Kuiken and Sikora (1993) and Kuiken (1995), with the additional clarification that dream accounts were taken in home settings. Impactful dreams are “dreams that continue to present revelatory influences on the participant's psychological development, emotions and actions even after awakening” (p.131). Kuiken's (1995) definition allows me to include all reported experiences, irrespective of their magnitude; as Martin (1992) suggests, “ .. *there is no such thing as a small dream, only small dream perspectives*” (p.37). However, the limited research studies on impactful dreams align with Kuiken's (1995) definition without any challenge or alteration. Kramer (2010) highlighted methodological challenges in dream research, particularly in measuring dreams directly, leading to validity concerns. The accuracy of dream reports in representing actual dreams remains unclear. (see Windt and methodology).

The quest for objectivity poses a significant methodological hurdle for scientific researchers' attempts to demonstrate subjective experiences as objective knowledge, as objective (Kadriin 2006, p.10). Since there are no valid means by which dreams can be sampled, dream researchers have been tasked with answering, ‘How can we be sure that the remembered dream upon awakening is a recollection of the actual experiences during sleep.’ Are dreams qualitatively different throughout the spectrum of our consciousness? Thus, in this existential-phenomenological study, the inherent privacy of dreams and their origin within the psychological architecture of the individual's mind provides sufficient validity in accepting their dream accounts. This study recognises the value of exploring the profound insights that dreams can offer, shedding light on the intricate workings of the human mind and its existential dimensions.

# ***Chapter One***

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I investigate the literature surrounding impactful dreams (here on called vivid dreams), with a particular focus on vivid dreams and their influence on the waking state. Given the extensive body of research on dreams across disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, and psychotherapy, it was necessary to develop a targeted approach for selecting the most relevant studies. This required careful discernment to prioritise studies that explored the dream-to-waking cycle instead of the more common waking-to-dreaming research. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were thus guided by the central research question: how do vivid dreams affect individuals after waking?

Since the interest of this study was specifically focused on the impact of vivid dreams after waking, the literature review concentrated on three main areas: a) Dreams in history, which allows us to understand the broader context in which dream theories developed over time. This historical perspective sheds light on how various cultures and eras interpreted dreams and how these interpretations shaped psychotherapeutic practices and theoretical developments. b) Philosophical and psychological theories, with an emphasis on scientific research and its approaches to the form and content of dreams. This involved exploring a spectrum of interdisciplinary perspectives, from classical psychoanalysis and key debates in the philosophy of dreams to more recent emotional and evolutionary perspectives and neuro-cognitive psychological models, highlighting how different schools of thought approach dreams' relationship to waking life. c) Therapeutic practices of dreamwork within the field of counselling psychology. This section focused on how clients and therapists collaboratively interpret the meaning of dreams and how these interpretations impact the client's self-awareness, emotional processing, and personal growth.

The process of identifying relevant articles required a comprehensive and detailed approach, as titles alone were often not explicit in distinguishing between these two cycles. Many studies explored how waking life influences dream content (the waking-to-dreaming cycle) rather than how dreams affect the dreamer's waking life (the dreaming-to-waking cycle). To discern this distinction, I had to engage deeply and systematically with each article, reading beyond abstracts to understand the focus of the study fully. This often meant reading entire papers to confirm whether they explored the impact of dreams on the waking state, as studies explicitly discussing the dream-to-waking cycle were less common.

Furthermore, discerning between different theoretical models and hypotheses and exploring the dream-to-waking cycle was key to this process. I focused on adaptation or post-experiential growth models, such as the continuity hypothesis and the threat simulation theory, which offer different frameworks for understanding the relationship between dreams and waking life. The continuity hypothesis (see page 74) suggests that dreams reflect ongoing waking life concerns, positing a continuous integration of waking thoughts and experiences into dreams and the seamless transfer of dream experiences into the waking narrative.

By contrast, the threat simulation theory (see Revonsuo, p.77), rooted in evolutionary psychology, proposes that dreams—particularly those involving threatening or stressful scenarios—serve an adaptive function by allowing individuals to simulate and rehearse potential threats in a safe, dream-based environment. In the context of vivid and impactful dreams, threat simulation theory emphasises how specific dreams may provoke heightened emotional responses, leading to significant psychological effects upon waking. Dreams involving rehearsed threats may prepare the dreamer for real-world challenges, influencing their emotional and behavioural responses in waking life. For this research, the theory's relevance lies in how it accounts for the enduring impact of such dreams, particularly when dreamers awaken with heightened awareness, preparedness, or emotional resonance.

The inclusion criteria were further refined by focusing on key studies and authors, particularly the works of Kuiken & Sikora (1993), Pagel (1992), and Schredl (2010, 2020), which have been influential in exploring impactful dreams. However, the literature review was not limited to these studies due to the relative scarcity of research directly addressing the dream-to-waking cycle. Exploring other relevant studies and books across different subjects and journals and the most up-to-date research was essential to fully understanding impactful dreams. This also involved scanning reference lists of key articles for additional sources, an important step in expanding the search beyond the initial keyword-based selection.

The literature search was conducted using multiple academic and student databases, including Google Scholar, PsychInfo, ProQuest, JSTOR, and the *International Journal of Dream Research* (IJODR), alongside peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams* (IASD). Due to the limited availability of certain articles, I also utilised paid access through ProQuest and other subscription services to ensure the inclusion of comprehensive and up-to-date research. To expand the search beyond the initial keyword-based results, I systematically reviewed books, magazines, and reference lists of key articles to discover additional relevant studies that might not have surfaced through the primary search terms.

To ensure a thorough search, I employed a variety of synonyms and related terms to capture the concept of impactful dreams. Keywords such as "impactful dreams," "big dreams," "highly memorable dreams," "significant dreams," "vivid dreams," "influence of dreams on waking," "dream-related behaviour," and "the effects of dreams on waking life" were used in different combinations. By varying the search terms, I was able to capture a broader range of studies, including those that may not have explicitly used the term "impactful dreams" but were nonetheless relevant to the dream-to-waking cycle.

The exclusion criteria were also clear: studies that focused on the waking-to-dreaming cycle were omitted, as they did not align with the focus of this research on the post-waking impact of dreams.

The waking-to-dream cycle, which examines how waking life events and concerns influence dream content, is more commonly studied and often seeks to understand the functional aspects of dreams. While these studies offer valuable insights into dream generation and function, they were not relevant to this research, which is concerned with how dreams' experience and emotional resonance influence individuals once they wake up. Thus, articles focusing on the causal factors of dream content were excluded in favour of those that explored the experience of dreams and their lasting effects after waking.

Moreover, the approach taken in the literature review involved a critical comparison of qualitative and quantitative studies on impactful dreams. Qualitative literature, often rich in narrative detail and subjective experiences, provides insights into how individuals perceive and interpret their vivid dreams, shedding light on the emotional and psychological dimensions of these experiences. In contrast, quantitative studies offered empirical data, allowing for the analysis of trends and patterns regarding the effects of dreams on waking life across larger populations. However, grappling with the tension between these two paradigms was an ongoing challenge throughout the review process. This tension stemmed from my aim to integrate empirical quantitative research with experiential qualitative research, all within a qualitative framework guided by existential phenomenology. I sought to honour the richness of subjective experiences while also grounding my findings in empirical evidence, a balance necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between vivid dreams and their post-waking impact.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that dreams have often been marginalised in research, particularly when the focus is on their functional or causal aspects rather than their experiential qualities. This marginalisation poses a challenge to fully understanding the significance of dreams in psychological and therapeutic contexts. In this review, I aimed to address this gap by intentionally integrating both qualitative and quantitative perspectives to provide a more holistic view of the phenomenon of impactful dreams to balance out the over-credibility to quantitative research. By

doing so, I hoped to elevate the role of dreams in research, recognising their profound influence on waking life and emotional processing.

The challenge of navigating this vast and diverse body of literature was not merely technical; it also involved a deep engagement with the subjective nature of dream experiences. As I sifted through the studies, I had to constantly evaluate the extent to which each article captured the lived experience of dreams and their post-waking influence. This subjective engagement was critical, as the phenomenon of impactful dreams is not easily quantifiable. It required a balance between empirical rigour and sensitivity to the personal and emotional dimensions of dreaming, particularly how dreams resonate with individuals after they wake up. This reflective process also highlighted the complexities of studying dreams, where the boundaries between subjective experience, psychological theories, and therapeutic practice often intersect in intricate ways.

Through their interpretation, dreams that have impacted an individual or culture have been observed for millennia. The profound impact has been investigated through several cultural and spiritual perspectives (Bulkeley, 2002; Nell, 2012) and psychological (Aizenstat, 2011; Montangero, 2009; Schredl, 2003). Contemporary psychology's interest in dreams was sparked by discovering the link between the dream's manifest content and supposed underlying tensions or complexes in individuals' psyches. Notable examples were Freud's dream about Irma, the dream content of depressed patients for Beck's (Beck & Hurvich, 1959; Beck & Ward, 1961), and what might be revealed about an individual's life development for Jung (Freud, 1910; Jung, 1974), and meaningful existence for Boss (1972). The scientific and rigorous interest in dreams is a recent development (Arkin et al., 1978; Ellman, Antrobus, 1991). Bulkeley (2004) suggested that researchers' ability to understand the available data better depends on how well dream researchers make sense of their respective projects, their application in therapeutic approaches, and how dream content corresponds to waking life. The interest in individuals' beliefs and the importance of their dreams' impact remains. This study



considered it essential to explore how dreams have been studied from various perspectives to understand their ongoing significance better.

### **Review of the History of Dreaming**

This section briefly overviews various forms of dreaming prevalent in several cultures. Understanding different approaches to dreaming in cultures that take it seriously can help re-frame our understanding and locate the current qualitative approach within a historical context. The section will cover dreams in Egypt, Greece, China, and Biblical accounts.

#### ***Ancient Egypt and Dream Interpretation***

The ancient Egyptians, dating back thousands of years, attached great importance to dreams and sleep, as reflected in their culture and hieroglyphic writings. Dreams were deeply embedded in society's religious and cultural fabric, considered not merely psychological phenomena but a means of divine communication. Egyptians believed that dreams transcended the boundaries of space and time, carrying hidden messages or instructions from the gods (Varadi, 2019; Ahmed, 2020; Shupak, 2020). Among their practices, temple priests played a crucial role in interpreting dreams to extract valuable information for decision-making in daily life (Harris, 2009). Specialised sleeping facilities, often constructed in temples, facilitated communication with the gods through dreams (Hughes, 2000).

The Ramesside Dream Book, found in Chester Beatty III (rt. 1-11; Szpakowska, 2006), illustrates how dreams served as oracles through which gods communicated, influencing actions such as curing illnesses, making political decisions, and determining sacred temple locations. The Papyrus Chester Beatty I, dating back to the 19th dynasty, further demonstrates the intricate ways Egyptians viewed dreams as messages from the gods, foretelling events, and influencing actions. Individuals

experiencing such dreams were highly esteemed, and seen as conduits for divine revelations (Szpakowska, 2003, p. 20).

The Egyptians believed dreams could reveal both personal and societal truths. Pharaohs, in particular, were often considered to have direct access to divine wisdom through dreams. For instance, in the biblical narrative, Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream as a warning of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, leading to Egypt's strategic preparations. This example emphasises the belief that dreams could influence decisions of great importance, not only on an individual level but also at societal and national levels.

Unlike contemporary Western views of dreams as personal, internally generated phenomena, the ancient Egyptians perceived dreams as external communications beyond the dreamer's control (Szpakowska, 2003, p. 20). This externalised understanding of dreams contrasts significantly with Freudian and Jungian theories, which interpret dreams as reflective of the unconscious mind. Freud viewed dreams as wish fulfilments, originating in repressed desires, while Jung emphasised archetypal content arising from the collective unconscious (Youvan, 2024). Both theories prioritise the personal or collective unconscious, focusing on the dreamer's internal world. *However, the Egyptian externalised framework underscores the role of socio-religious beliefs, suggesting that cultural context profoundly shapes how dreams are experienced and interpreted (Reiber, 2012).*

From a phenomenological perspective, dreams in Egypt were seen as ontological—not just visions or mental images but profound experiences that shaped the lived reality of individuals. The interpretation of dreams was a way to access deeper layers of existence, aligning with Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world. Dreams provided insights into existence, offering ways to reconcile inner turmoil or align oneself with divine will. The existential significance of dreams was closely linked to Ma'at, the principle of order, balance, and justice. *This alignment reflects a phenomenological engagement with existential meaning, as dreams became tools for understanding one's role within a broader cosmic order.* Dreams revealing imbalances or dangers were interpreted as warnings, urging

the dreamer to restore harmony in their life or society. *This parallels modern existential concerns, where the interplay between individual authenticity and societal values remains central.*

The cultural framing of dreams often imbued them with positive meanings, evoking profound emotional resonance. Szpakowska (2010) and Gosden (2020) suggest that the Egyptians incorporated recalled dreams into a cultural framework linking them to daily activities and religious beliefs. This resonates with modern theories of vivid or impactful dreams, which emphasise their emotional intensity and post-waking influence. *While Freud and Jung focus on the intrapsychic processes of vivid dreams, Egyptian practices highlight their potential for collective transformation, offering a model that transcends individualistic interpretations (Reiber, 2012; Youvan, 2024).*

The Egyptian emphasis on dreams as sources of external guidance raises questions about how cultural contexts shape the meaning and perceived impact of dreams. For contemporary counselling psychology, this perspective challenges the traditional psychoanalytic view of dreams as products of the unconscious mind. It invites a broader exploration of how dreams function as existential or spiritual messages in certain cultures, emphasising that their impact may not always be rooted in unconscious material but could be deeply embedded in cultural, existential, and spiritual beliefs (Dobson, 2022). *This perspective urges therapists to integrate culturally sensitive approaches when exploring clients' dream experiences, particularly those informed by spiritual traditions.*

Exploring the cultural and spiritual significance of dreams in Egypt can deepen our understanding of how dreams have historically functioned as a means of meaning-making and self-realisation. These insights continue to resonate today, particularly within existential-phenomenological frameworks, where dreams are not only viewed as symbolic or subconscious expressions but as gateways to understanding the self in relation to universal truths. The spiritual and existential dimensions emphasised in Egyptian interpretations provide valuable perspectives, inviting contemporary dream research to consider the broader cultural, emotional, and existential meanings of dreams.

*By synthesising ancient Egyptian practices with modern phenomenological and existential approaches, contemporary psychology can enrich its understanding of dreams as both personal and collective phenomena. Such integration may illuminate how clients draw upon cultural and spiritual narratives to find meaning, fostering therapeutic methods that honour the multidimensional nature of dream experiences.*

## **Dreams in Ancient Greek Culture: A Bridge Between Divine and Psychological Dimensions**

In ancient Greek culture, dreams occupied a complex and dynamic role, serving as vehicles for divine revelation, personal insight, and practical guidance. This multifaceted understanding reflects a cultural tapestry woven from mythological, philosophical, and medical traditions, providing rich insights into the human psyche. By examining these traditions through a critical lens, we can uncover parallels with, and divergences from, modern psychological theories, particularly those of Freud and Jung, as well as existential and phenomenological approaches to dreamwork (Dobson, 2022; Reiber, 2012; Youvan, 2024).

### **Divine Revelation and Early Greek Dream Theory**

Dreams in early Greek culture were often perceived as divine messages, reflecting a deeply ingrained belief in their revelatory and healing nature. The Homeric epics, such as the Iliad and Odyssey, depict dreams as direct communications from the gods, shaping personal fate and societal decisions. These dreams functioned as portals between the mortal and divine realms, embodying a collective worldview that integrated life's spiritual, existential, and practical dimensions (Meier, 1966). Physicians initiated into the cult of Asklepios, the god of healing, institutionalised this belief by employing dreams diagnostically and therapeutically. Hippocratic treatises, such as *On Regimen IV*, distinguished between dreams sent by gods and those originating from the soul, using them to identify internal conditions influenced by diet, exercise, and humoral balance (Askitopoulou, 2015). In this context, the soul was conceptualised as an internal homunculus, manifesting problems through dreams. This view aligns with Freud's later proposition that dreams reveal latent content, though Freud's focus on repressed desires represents a departure from the Greeks' holistic integration of bodily, spiritual, and cultural elements. Greek dream theory's diagnostic use of dreams parallels contemporary therapeutic applications but with greater emphasis on the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit.

## The Philosophical Evolution of Dreams

Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Heraclitus began to challenge the mystical interpretation of dreams, advocating for a more psychological perspective. Aristotle's *'On Dreams'* posits that dreams are reflections of waking experiences, particularly desires and emotions. This marked a foundational shift from divine to psychological interpretations, aligning with later Western views of the psyche as the source of dreams (Varadi, 2019). Artemidorus of Daldis's *Oneirocritica* (2-3 CE) further advanced this transition by systematising dream interpretation. His classification methods influenced Freud's approach to decoding latent content and symbolic meanings (Thonemann & Hammond, 2020). However, Freud's emphasis on unconscious drives and repressed material significantly differs from Artemidorus's inclusion of cultural and spiritual contexts. This raises a critical question: does psychoanalysis's focus on the individual psyche overlook the broader existential and cultural dimensions of dreaming? In contrast, Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, with its archetypes and myths, resonates more closely with ancient Greek interpretations, particularly their symbolic richness. Jung's archetypal framework emphasises the idea that dreams can reveal universal themes, bridging the personal and collective dimensions (Reiber, 2012). Yet, even Jung's theories lack the existential depth found in Greek thought, which often viewed dreams as tools for navigating moral dilemmas and achieving emotional catharsis.

## Dreams as Emotional and Existential Tools

Greek tragedies, such as those of Sophocles, illustrate the therapeutic function of dreams, portraying them as vehicles for emotional catharsis. This aligns with contemporary theories that emphasise the role of dreams in emotional regulation and psychological integration. Neurobiological models, such as Hobson and McCarley's (1977) activation-synthesis theory, propose that dreams help process emotional experiences and consolidate memories. These insights echo Aristotle's view of dreams as reflections of waking life, suggesting a continuity between ancient and modern understandings of the emotional and cognitive functions of dreaming (Redfield, 2014). However, Greek dream theory extends beyond emotional regulation to existential inquiry. Plato's *Republic* portrays dreams as expressions of the soul's desires, offering moral lessons and insights into one's being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962; Redfield, 2014). This perspective aligns with existential-phenomenological approaches, which view dreams as encounters with the self, revealing deeper truths about identity, purpose, and meaning. Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world and Sartre's emphasis on authenticity resonate with Greek interpretations of dreams as opportunities for self-discovery and existential reflection.

## Cultural and Therapeutic Implications

The shift in Greek thought from divine to psychological interpretations highlights the evolving understanding of dreams as personal and collective phenomena. This duality challenges modern psychological theories, often prioritising the individual psyche over cultural and existential dimensions. For instance, Freud's theory of dreams as wish fulfilment internalises the prophetic aspects of ancient dream theory but neglects their collective and spiritual significance. Similarly, Jung's emphasis on archetypes captures the symbolic richness of dreams but underrepresents their existential import (Slochower, 1948; Youvan, 2024). In therapeutic settings, particularly when working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is essential to adopt an integrative approach that acknowledges the multidimensional functions of dreams. Dreams may serve not only as psychological phenomena but also as spiritual or existential messages, reflecting the client's cultural and philosophical worldview (Redfield, 2014); van Deurzen, 2010). This perspective encourages counselling psychologists to move beyond reductionist interpretations, fostering a deeper engagement with the cultural, spiritual, and existential dimensions of dreaming.

## Ancient China and Dream Interpretation

Dreams and oneiromancy have held significant importance in traditional Chinese divinatory practices throughout their cultural history, where they were believed to serve as a means of communication from the numinous realm during sleep (Chan, 2017; Yu, 2022). This perspective positions dreams as intermediaries between the human and divine, functioning as a bridge to access cosmic truths and ancestral guidance. One well-known passage from the *Inner Chapter* of the *Zhuangzi*, titled *Discussion on Making All Things Equal*, explores the philosophical contemplation of whether one is dreaming of being a butterfly or if they are a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi (Chan, 2017; Hamm, 2020; Radpour, 2017; Yu, 2022). This paradox challenges dualistic thinking and invites reflection on the fluid boundaries between waking and dreaming states. Its implications extend beyond metaphysics, resonating with existential questions of selfhood and reality (Langdridge, 2006). For instance, while Jung viewed dreams as expressions of the unconscious, facilitating integration between the conscious and unconscious realms, the Zhuangzi metaphor opens a more radical, non-

linear understanding of identity and perception, positioning dreams within an ontological framework, and questioning the very essence of reality (Hinton, 2014). This contrasts with Jung's psychoanalytic focus, offering an Eastern existential alternative transcending fixed notions of the self. Doing so expands the philosophical dialogue on how identity and perception are negotiated across states of consciousness.

The roots of dream interpretation in China can be traced back to the Zhou Dynasty, focusing on royal succession and structuring events in the sixth century BCE (Szpakowska, 2020). Dreams during this era were not merely symbolic but were deeply intertwined with societal structures and political authority, reinforcing cosmic and hierarchical order (Ong, 1981; Hong, 2022). Jung's archetypal theory, which posits that dreams are conduits of collective wisdom, echoes this view but diverges in its emphasis on personal transformation rather than communal or cosmological alignment. For instance, while Jung might interpret a king's dream as a manifestation of unresolved internal conflicts or archetypal motifs, the Zhou Dynasty perspective positions the dream as a literal transmission of divine will, emphasising the communal and political over the psychological and individualistic.

Chinese beliefs held that two types of souls influenced dreams, with one soul leaving the body to explore the dream realm while the other remained within the dreamer (Bulkeley, 2008). This dual-soul framework provides a fascinating spiritual and metaphysical lens on dreams, emphasising their otherworldly and transcendental qualities. By contrast, Medard Boss's existential perspective on dreams situates them firmly within the dreamer's lived experience, viewing dreams as reflections of *being-in-the-world* (Boss, 1953). Where the Chinese tradition envisions dreams as the soul's journey beyond physical confines, Boss emphasises their capacity to reveal existential truths about the dreamer's relationship with time, space, and others. This divergence emphasises broader differences between spiritual dualism and existential phenomenology, inviting critical reflection on how these frameworks might complement or challenge one another in understanding the nature of dreaming.

Dreams, especially those of the king, were highly regarded in Chinese culture. It was believed that such dreams conveyed authoritative messages from ancestors, carrying divine credibility without objections (Bulkeley, 2008). This notion of unquestioned divine authority contrasts sharply with Jung's focus on the symbolic and transformative nature of dreams. While Jungian analysis invites the dreamer to interpret and integrate unconscious material into conscious awareness actively, the Chinese emphasis on ancestral and cosmic guidance highlights dreams' more externalised and prescriptive function (Ong, 1981). Chinese thought's hierarchical and communal orientation presents a potential critique of Jung's individual-centric approach, suggesting that dreams can serve broader societal and cosmological purposes beyond the psyche's individuation process.

This belief is reflected in ancient texts like the *Huangdi Neijing*, also known as *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine*, which formulated a philosophy of life that emphasised harmony with the natural order of the universe (Curran, 2008). Dreams in this context were not merely psychological or spiritual phenomena but were deeply integrated into a holistic worldview, serving as diagnostic and prescriptive tools for maintaining health and balance. This integration aligns partially with Boss's existential focus on authenticity and alignment with being, though it differs in its explicit focus on external, natural laws. Boss would likely critique this emphasis on cosmic determinism, arguing instead for the subjective, lived experience of the dreamer as central to constructing meaning. This comparison raises broader questions about universal or culturally contingent dream interpretations and whether they can accommodate individual and collective dimensions of existence.

Dream interpretation and healing practices were performed by skilled individuals known as *Tai pu* or *wu*, who specialised in divination and other forms of healing. The balance of yin and yang forces, representing negative and positive energies, determined the presence of health and illness. Chinese clinicians identified 37 dream features that aided in diagnosing pathologies, such as flying experiences in dreams indicating excessive qi, which would require herbal remedies to restore balance in the body (Yu, 2016). This structured, symptom-based approach highlights the role of dreams in physical and



energetic health, reflecting a pragmatic and integrative view of mind-body harmony. In contrast, Jung's approach prioritises psychological growth, interpreting dreams as symbolic narratives of internal conflicts and archetypal forces. The Chinese emphasis on somatic and energetic dimensions challenges the Western psychological monopoly on dream interpretation, suggesting that dreams may function simultaneously on multiple levels—physical, psychological, and spiritual (Harris, 2009). This raises critical questions for counselling psychology: Can dream analysis accommodate diverse cultural paradigms integrating somatic health? And how might these paradigms expand current therapeutic practices?

In Chinese culture, dreams were distinct from ancient Egyptian and Greek perspectives, representing signals from universal powers beyond human understanding. Dreams guide individuals in balancing their lives and moving forward with their life functions (Curran, 2008). This guidance-oriented perspective aligns more closely with Boss's existential view, where dreams are seen as reflections of the dreamer's engagement with being and the world. However, Boss's framework emphasises the subjective, interpretative process, contrasting with the Chinese view of dreams as authoritative, external forces shaping life decisions. These differing paradigms challenge counselling psychologists to navigate the tension between honouring culturally embedded understandings of dreams and fostering individual autonomy in therapeutic practice. Moreover, by integrating the existential and collective dimensions of dream interpretation, counselling psychology could develop a more inclusive framework that respects both the personal and communal dimensions of dreaming.

### **The Bible and Dream Interpretation**

In biblical times, dreams were regarded as divinely inspired experiences, often conveying messages from God, offering prophecies, or guiding individuals in their spiritual journey. The Bible includes numerous accounts of dreams that shape the spiritual narratives of both the old and new testaments. These dreams were believed to serve as a direct form of communication between the

divine and humans, offering insight, warnings, or guidance. This ancient view aligns with modern interpretations of dreams as meaning-making experiences that transcend mere unconscious processing, often containing symbolic significance or spiritual relevance (Youvan, 2024).

In the Old Testament, dreams were considered a form of divine revelation. Figures such as Joseph, Daniel, and King Solomon experienced dreams that were key to their life decisions or understanding of God's will. Joseph's dream of ruling over his brothers (Genesis 37:5-11) and Pharaoh's dreams interpreted by Joseph (Genesis 41) are notable examples of how dreams were seen as instruments for revealing future events or divine plans. In these biblical accounts, dreams are not seen as reflections of personal unconscious desires but as messages from a higher power, signalling guidance or warnings about spiritual or moral paths. This perspective contrasts with Freud's psychoanalytic model, where dreams primarily reflect repressed unconscious desires or conflicts from the individual's past. However, the symbolic nature of biblical dreams parallels Jung's archetypal symbolism, where dreams are seen as conveying profound universal messages or themes that resonate with the dreamer's psychological and spiritual state.

In the New Testament, dreams continued to play a significant role in the spiritual guidance of figures such as Joseph (the husband of Mary), who was directed by a divine dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). This view of dreams as spiritual messages emphasises their role in providing guidance and facilitating moral decisions, suggesting a more existential-phenomenological approach to dreams, where dreams serve as crucial aspects of life choices, existential dilemmas, and meaning-making processes. Dreams in this context offer individuals the opportunity to confront their spiritual crisis or receive divine insight into their life's path.

Biblical dreams also serve to guide moral conduct. Solomon's dream in 1 Kings 3:5-14, where God offered him wisdom in exchange for asking for anything, reflects the role of dreams as a form of spiritual testing, moral decision-making, and the development of virtue. This connection between dreams and ethical behaviour resonates with Confucian views of dreams as reflections of moral alignment and

guidance toward virtuous living. Dreams are not simply personal psychological phenomena but are intertwined with broader themes of moral conduct, divine purpose, and the relationship between the human and the divine.

In terms of modern neurobiological theories, the activation-synthesis hypothesis (Hobson & McCarley, 1977) posits that dreams arise from random neural activity during sleep. This view contrasts with the biblical understanding of dreams as divinely inspired messages. However, there is room for integration: modern theories recognise that dreams may serve a regulatory function in maintaining psychological and emotional balance. This concept could be interpreted in biblical contexts as dreams promoting spiritual harmony or guidance toward personal growth. From a cognitive perspective, dreams can be seen as reflections of an individual's waking thoughts, experiences, and unresolved emotional conflicts. This aligns with the biblical idea that dreams offer insight into the dreamer's inner world, though, in the biblical worldview, these dreams are perceived as messages that transcend the individual's unconscious mind and have divine significance. This distinction highlights a difference between biblical and modern scientific interpretations, where psychological theories focus on personal processes, and the biblical view sees dreams as a spiritual communication that shapes moral and existential choices.

Jung's concept of archetypes and universal symbols also resonates with biblical dream interpretations, particularly regarding the symbolic meanings of dreams in the Bible. For example, dreams in the Bible often feature universal symbols—such as kings, animals, and divine beings—that convey overarching, archetypal messages about the human experience. These symbols transcend individual psychological conflicts and touch on collective human themes, such as redemption, wisdom, and moral decisions, aligning with Jung's belief that dreams can reveal aspects of the collective unconscious.

In modern existential-phenomenological theory, dreams are seen as integral to the self's search for meaning, authenticity, and self-actualisation. The biblical approach to dreams aligns with this understanding, as dreams in the Bible often present existential dilemmas—such as choices between

good and evil, or the pursuit of divine will versus personal desires—that force individuals to engage with their moral existence and spiritual growth. These dreams are not merely symbolic representations of personal unconscious content but serve as tools for confronting life's existential challenges and understanding one's place in the universe. While the biblical interpretation of dreams focuses on their divine origin and spiritual significance, modern dream theories have provided rich frameworks for understanding the psychological and physiological aspects of dreaming. Whether viewed through the lens of neurobiology, cognitive psychology, or existential philosophy, dreams in the Bible provide valuable insight into the human experience—a perspective that modern dream research continues to explore through different methodologies and interpretations.

### ***Psychological Dream Theories***

This section provides an overview of significant dream theorists who contributed considerably to the contemporary understanding of dreams, as their concepts have profoundly influenced the direction of research and therapeutic practice that can still be seen today. In particular, the depth psychological approaches of Freud and Jung and the existential-phenomenological approach of Boss contributed significantly to the study of dreams. A brief overview of the philosophy of dreaming will follow this.

#### ***Sigmund Freud: Royal Road to the Unconscious***

Sigmund Freud's dream theory, which asserts that dreams are the "royal road to the unconscious" (Freud, 1900), has had a profound influence on the field of psychology, particularly psychoanalysis (Dobson, 2022; Reiber, 2012). Freud believed that dreams serve as a form of wish fulfilment, revealing repressed desires, often of a sexual or aggressive nature, and that their analysis could uncover hidden unconscious conflicts (Freud, 1900). His contributions to the understanding of the unconscious mind, repression, and the mechanisms of defence remain foundational in psychoanalysis.

However, his dream theory faces significant critique when examined in the context of modern dream research, especially in comparison to cognitive, neurobiological, and existential-phenomenological models (Boss, 1967; Domhoff, 2003; Solms, 2002).

In terms of validity in modern dream research, Freud's theory has been increasingly challenged. Cognitive and neurobiological perspectives emphasise that dreams are not merely the expression of repressed wishes but may instead serve important functions such as memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and problem-solving (Walker, 2017). Neuroscientific research suggests that dreams arise from the activation of various brain regions during REM sleep, particularly those involved in emotional processing, rather than from unconscious conflict and repressed desires. Freud's focus on wish fulfilment as the primary function of dreams has been criticised for overemphasising a specific, narrow function while neglecting other adaptive functions of dreams, such as integrating recent experiences and processing emotional content (Kramer, 2010; Schredl, 2010). While Freud's theory remains historically significant, modern research tends to view it as overly deterministic and overly reliant on a psychoanalytic framework that lacks empirical support (Domhoff, 2003).

Moreover, Freud's method of dream interpretation, based on uncovering latent content through the analysis of manifest content and symbolic representations, has been criticised for being too subjective and lacking in scientific rigour. The interpretative nature of Freud's theory often relies on the therapist's projections and subjective interpretations, which are difficult to validate or replicate in a controlled, scientific setting. In contrast, modern cognitive neuroscience has moved toward more objective measures, such as neuroimaging studies, to understand the neural correlates of dreams, providing more empirical data about the function and structure of dreams (Domhoff, 2003; Ruby, 2020; Siclari, 2017).

Comparing Freud's approach with modern cognitive and neurobiological theories of dreaming, Freud's emphasis on unconscious drives is increasingly seen as reductionist. Contemporary theories

often emphasise the emotional and cognitive functions of dreaming. For instance, the continuity hypothesis in dream research suggests that dreams are a continuation of waking thoughts and experiences rather than repressed desires manifesting symbolically (Hall, 1953; Schredl, 2010). This approach aligns more with cognitive and neurobiological models, which highlight how dreams reflect emotional regulation and problem-solving rather than being the result of unconscious conflicts, as Freud proposed. Cognitive models also highlight the active role of the individual in shaping dream content based on their daily experiences and current psychological states, while Freud's model emphasises more deterministic, unconscious forces at play.

Freud's theory is also at odds with existential-phenomenological perspectives, which view dreams as reflections of the dreamer's lived experience and their existential concerns, rather than repressed desires or instinctual drives. Existential-phenomenological theories focus on the meaning of dreams within the context of the dreamer's subjective experience and personal growth, emphasising themes like identity, freedom, and anxiety, rather than focusing on unconscious wish fulfilment (van Deurzen, 2010). This contrasts sharply with Freud's drive-based model, which focuses on uncovering hidden meanings related to repressed desires, often neglecting the broader existential and emotional functions that contemporary theories of dreams emphasise.

From the perspective of my own theoretical framework, which integrates existential-phenomenological themes with cognitive-behavioural approaches, Freud's dream theory conflicts in several ways. I view dreams as more subjective, multifaceted phenomena that arise from the dreamer's lived experiences, cognitive states, and emotional needs, rather than as simple expressions of unconscious repressed wishes. This perspective contrasts with Freud's deterministic model, where dreams are primarily seen as manifestations of deep-seated, unconscious desires. Furthermore, my existential-phenomenological approach emphasises the role of dreams in addressing existential concerns and personal meaning-making, which contrasts with Freud's focus on psychoanalytic explanations rooted in early childhood development and sexual conflicts.

Freud's theory, however, still offers valuable insights in some therapeutic contexts, particularly for clients dealing with unresolved trauma or unconscious conflicts. His method of uncovering hidden meanings and exploring unconscious processes can be helpful in certain therapeutic settings, especially when dealing with issues of repression, shame, and guilt. However, in modern dream research and practice, Freud's model has become increasingly less relevant as research has moved toward more empirically grounded, neurobiological, and cognitive explanations of dreaming. Freud's focus on wish fulfilment also overlooks dreams' adaptive and integrative functions, such as their role in processing emotional experiences and integrating new information.

In conclusion, Freud's dream theory remains foundational in psychoanalysis and has historical value in shaping how we think about the unconscious. However, its validity in the context of modern dream research is limited, especially when compared to cognitive and neurobiological models that emphasise the adaptive functions of dreams. Freud's approach conflicts with contemporary existential-phenomenological perspectives, which focus more on the subjective experience of the dreamer and the role of dreams in personal growth. While Freud's contributions are still relevant in certain psychodynamic therapeutic contexts, they have been largely overshadowed by more contemporary, empirically supported models of dream research that emphasise emotional regulation, memory consolidation, and cognitive processing.

### ***Carl Jung Dreams: Towards Individuation.***

Carl Jung's dream theory, rooted in psychoanalysis, offers a distinctive perspective on human consciousness, highlighting the relationship between the ego, the superordinate self, and the collective unconscious (Jung, 1928; 1936). Jung's contributions remain influential, particularly in psychoanalytic and existential-phenomenological traditions, but their validity and applicability in modern dream research invite both critical engagement and integration with more contemporary perspectives.

In modern dream research, Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and archetypes is seen as problematic, particularly in light of neurobiological and cognitive models. While Jung's concept of archetypes as universal symbols may resonate with some individuals' lived experiences, it lacks empirical support and fails to meet the criteria of testability within modern scientific frameworks. Neurobiological and cognitive models of dreaming emphasise that dreams arise from neural activity, emotional processing, and memory consolidation rather than from an unconscious, archetypal repository. These models explain dreams as processes that serve adaptive functions, such as emotional regulation, problem-solving, and memory integration, which contrasts with Jung's more metaphysical interpretation of dreams as symbolic messages from the unconscious (Jung, 1946). Therefore, Jung's theories are increasingly viewed as speculative and difficult to validate in the context of contemporary research, especially compared to more empirically grounded cognitive and neurobiological frameworks (Domhoff, 2000).

Furthermore, Jung's distinction between "little" and "big" dreams, where the former represent everyday thoughts, and the latter contain profound, archetypal significance (Jung, 1966), reflects his belief in a hierarchy of dream importance. This distinction may undermine the importance of seemingly mundane dreams, which, from a cognitive perspective, are equally significant in revealing emotional or psychological states. The categorisation of dreams as either mundane or deeply meaningful risks oversimplifying the complexity of dream content, which can be nuanced and context-dependent. Contemporary theories in cognitive neuroscience would argue that all dreams, regardless of their perceived profundity, have meaningful functions, including emotional regulation, information processing, and the integration of personal experiences.

Jung's focus on the collective unconscious has also been critiqued for its lack of empirical substantiation. In contrast to cognitive-behavioural approaches that emphasise personal experience and emotional processing, Jung's archetypes and collective unconscious suggest that dreams are rooted in a shared, universal psychological structure (Jung, 1974). This universalism can be limiting, as



it often overlooks the role of individual experience and cultural differences in shaping dream content. For example, modern cognitive theories would assert that dream content is influenced by specific emotional experiences, memories, and cognitive processes, which may differ significantly across individuals and cultures. Jung's collective unconscious, which seeks to identify common symbols across humanity, fails to account for the vast variability in personal and cultural experiences—something that contemporary neurobiological and cognitive models emphasise as crucial (Jung, 1964).

Comparing Jung's theories to existential-phenomenological approaches, we find some common ground, particularly in the emphasis on personal growth, individuation, and the integration of the unconscious. Existential-phenomenological traditions—particularly the work of theorists like Emmy van Deurzen (2010) and Merleau-Ponty (1962)—share Jung's interest in the transformative potential of dreams in self-understanding and personal development. However, Jung's reliance on archetypal symbols can seem too prescriptive and rigid from an existential-phenomenological perspective, which places greater emphasis on the lived experience of the individual. The phenomenological approach would be more focused on the subjective experience of the dreamer, exploring how dreams reflect the dreamer's specific existential dilemmas rather than searching for archetypal symbols that could be interpreted universally. This divergence represents a key tension between Jung's symbolic interpretation of dreams and the existential-phenomenological emphasis on individual meaning-making and contextualised experience.

In terms of practical applicability, Jung's approach to dream analysis, with its focus on uncovering archetypal meaning, remains valuable in therapeutic settings, especially for clients seeking symbolic interpretations or who resonate with the idea of a transpersonal self. However, modern cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), particularly in its application to dreams related to trauma or anxiety, emphasises more concrete, symptom-focused interventions, often with less reliance on symbolic interpretation (Skrzypińska & Szmigielska 2018). This reflects a broader shift in

psychotherapy, where approaches like CBT prioritise addressing the emotional and cognitive processing of dreams, rather than interpreting them through a symbolic or archetypal lens.

Finally, Jung's ideas conflict with my own existential-phenomenological framework, particularly when considering his focus on archetypes and universal symbols. In contrast, my approach is more grounded in the idea that dreams reflect subjective, lived experiences and existential struggles that are context-dependent and personal, rather than governed by an overarching, transpersonal unconscious. Jung's theories seem less congruent with an existential-phenomenological perspective, which would view dreams not as symbols to be interpreted through an archetypal lens, but rather as expressions of the dreamer's unique personal experience of being-in-the-world.

Jung's dream theory continues to provide a rich and meaningful framework for some psychotherapists, particularly those working in the psychoanalytic or spiritual domains, but its lack of empirical validation and integration with modern cognitive and neurobiological models presents challenges in adopting it as a comprehensive theory for understanding the function of dreams. In contrast, approaches that emphasise the emotional regulation and memory consolidation functions of dreams offer more empirically grounded explanations that are better supported by contemporary research in neuroscience.

### ***Medard Boss Daseinanalysis of dreams***

Medard Boss (1903-1990) was a Swiss psychiatrist and influential figure in existential psychotherapy (Morgan, 1998). He is best known for his work on Daseinanalysis, a term he coined to describe his unique approach to understanding human existence and its relation to mental health (Boss, 1963). Boss's contributions to psychotherapy have significantly impacted the understanding and treatment of psychological disorders, particularly in existential and phenomenological psychiatry (Boss, 1979). However, his work has been critiqued for being somewhat idealistic, particularly in its conception of Dasein as a universal experience of 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1962). While Daseinanalysis

offers an insightful framework for understanding existential struggles, it may overlook the complexities of individual lived experiences and fail to fully engage with the diversity of human experience, especially across different cultural or socio-economic contexts. Boss's work has also been critiqued for being overly reliant on philosophical abstractions, making it difficult to apply in more practical, clinically grounded settings (Craig, 1988;1993).

In terms of modern dream research, Boss's ideas, especially his focus on existential themes like freedom, meaning, and anxiety, still hold relevance. However, they may need to be integrated with more contemporary frameworks that include cognitive and neurobiological perspectives on dreaming. While Boss's Dasein and focus on the lived experience offer an invaluable phenomenological lens, his theories lack empirical support and fail to incorporate a newer understanding of the neural and cognitive processes involved in dreaming. Cognitive models of dreaming, for example, suggest that dreams are closely tied to memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and problem-solving (Leonard, Lawson, 2009). These insights conflict with Boss's approach, which focuses heavily on existential and personal meaning without adequately addressing the neurological and psychological processes involved in dreaming. Furthermore, neurobiological theories of dreaming (e.g., Hobson's activation-synthesis model) suggest that dreams may not necessarily have intrinsic meaning but arise from the brain's attempt to make sense of random neural activity. This stands in contrast to Boss's belief in dreams as a crucial vehicle for exploring and reconciling existential concerns.

Boss was heavily influenced by the works of Martin Heidegger, the renowned German philosopher (Boss, 1993). Heidegger's existential philosophy, emphasising the fundamental questions of human existence, resonated deeply with Boss and served as a cornerstone of his theoretical framework (Boss, 1963). While the integration of Heidegger's philosophy into psychotherapy is an important innovation, it could be critiqued for presenting existential themes as universal and inevitable dilemmas without sufficiently accounting for the ways in which specific lived experiences or socio-cultural factors shape individual existential concerns. Furthermore, Heidegger's philosophy has been

critiqued for its abstractness and focus on personal experience, which may not always be applicable in addressing collective or social issues, such as systemic oppression or inequalities. At the core of Boss's approach is the concept of Dasein, a term borrowed from Heidegger's philosophy that refers to the fundamental mode of human existence (Boss, 1963). Dasein represents the subjective experience of being-in-the-world, encompassing one's thoughts, emotions, relationships, and lived experiences. While the focus on Dasein offers a comprehensive view of the individual's experience, it may not always provide enough practical tools for addressing the immediate, concrete challenges faced by clients in therapy. Boss believed that mental health and well-being are intimately tied to an individual's authentic engagement with their own Dasein. This view, however, could be critiqued for idealising 'authenticity' as a therapeutic goal, which might be unrealistic or even harmful for clients who face significant emotional distress or psychological barriers to achieving such authenticity (Kolb, 1981). In some cases, the focus on achieving an 'authentic' self may exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or failure for those who feel they cannot meet this ideal.

Boss proposed that psychological disturbances arise when an individual becomes alienated from their authentic self and loses touch with their Dasein (Whitehead, 2021). This notion of alienation could be critiqued for neglecting the ways in which external factors such as trauma, social inequality, or economic hardship can contribute to psychological distress. By focusing primarily on the internal experience of alienation, Boss's approach risks minimising the influence of external forces on mental health and well-being. This is a particularly important critique when considering modern dream research, where external factors such as trauma are understood to play a significant role in shaping the content and emotional tone of dreams. He emphasised the importance of understanding each person's unique life story, personal history, and cultural context to grasp their existential challenges. This is a crucial contribution; however, it might benefit from a more robust incorporation of social and cultural contexts, which may be overlooked in the individualistic framework of Daseinanalysis. Moreover, Boss's model might be seen as overly centred on the individual's subjective experience, which may not fully

address the relational and systemic dynamics contributing to psychological problems.

Unlike Freud and Jung, who focused primarily on intrapsychic dynamics and the unconscious, Boss's approach explored existential themes such as freedom, meaning, anxiety, and death (Boss, 1963). While the focus on existential themes offers valuable insights, it could be critiqued for failing to provide adequate strategies for individuals struggling with more immediate psychological symptoms or mental health disorders. Boss's existential framework, although profound, may not always be sufficient for addressing acute psychological crises, particularly in clients with more severe disorders. He believed that addressing these existential concerns was essential for facilitating personal growth, self-discovery, and the resolution of psychological difficulties. However, the abstract nature of existential concerns may not resonate with all clients, particularly those in crisis, who may require more concrete therapeutic interventions. Moreover, in relation to dream research, cognitive-behavioural approaches or neurobiological theories might provide more direct interventions for individuals struggling with recurrent nightmares or trauma-related dreams, which Boss's existential framework may not directly address. Through the process of Daseinanalysis, individuals are encouraged to confront the existential dilemmas they face and find new ways of relating to their own existence. Boss (1977) also emphasised the therapeutic relationship as a crucial factor in healing (Whitehead, 2021). This emphasis on the therapeutic relationship is vital, yet it can be critiqued for idealising the therapist's role. Boss viewed the therapist as an empathic companion accompanying the individual on their existential journey, offering support, understanding, and guidance. While this is an essential aspect of therapy, the approach may fail to address the power dynamics inherent in the therapist-client relationship. The therapeutic encounter should not only provide support, but also critically examine the dynamics at play, including the therapist's potential biases or assumptions that may influence the process.

Boss believed the therapeutic relationship should be characterised by authenticity, respect, and a deep commitment to the client's well-being. While this view is important, it could be critiqued for lacking attention to the complexities of transference and countertransference, which play significant

roles in the therapeutic process (Freud, 1910). The therapeutic encounter becomes a space where individuals can explore their existential concerns, gain insights into their Dasein, and work towards a more authentic and fulfilling way of being. However, it could be argued that the ideal of 'authenticity' risks becoming a prescriptive, rather than descriptive, goal, which may unintentionally invalidate the experiences of clients who are struggling to integrate their authentic selves in a complex world (van Deurzen, 2010). The legacy of Medard Boss extends beyond his theoretical contributions (Morgan, 1998). He was instrumental in establishing the field of phenomenological psychiatry and played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between philosophy and psychotherapy. While his contributions to phenomenological psychiatry are commendable, it is important to note that the practical applications of his work may be difficult to operationalise in modern psychotherapy. His teachings and writings have inspired generations of psychotherapists, psychologists, and philosophers, shaping how they understand and approach mental health. Nevertheless, the lack of empirical research supporting Daseinanalysis raises questions about its broader applicability and effectiveness in diverse clinical settings.

Medard Boss's work in Daseinanalysis and his integration of existential philosophy into psychotherapy have significantly contributed to psychiatry (Boss, 1963). His existential approach to psychotherapy, while rich and insightful, is not without limitations. It may struggle to provide adequate tools for addressing the emotional and psychological needs of clients in crisis or those facing significant external challenges. Boss's approach offers a rich and holistic framework for understanding and addressing psychological difficulties by exploring existential themes, understanding one's unique life story, and the importance of the therapeutic relationship. However, its abstract nature may not universally apply to all clients, particularly those requiring more structured or practical approaches. His legacy continues to influence and inspire (Boss, 1993). Nonetheless, further empirical research is needed to substantiate the clinical effectiveness of Daseinanalysis, particularly in diverse and complex clinical settings.

## ***Dreams and Philosophy***

In the 20th century, empirical research on dreams increased after the discovery of REM sleep by Aserinsky and Kleitman (1953; 1955) and Dement and Kleitman (1957a; 1957b). However, the philosophy of dreams has been neglected, resulting in a 'severely underdeveloped area of study' (Sutton, 2009, p.524). Philosophers' views on dreams vary, with some considering them imaginative rather than perceptual, while others perceive them as hallucinatory or akin to virtual reality (Rosen, 2012; Windt, 2015). This section briefly overviews key philosophical perspectives important to this study.

### ***Descartes Dreaming Doubt***

Descartes, often regarded as the father of modern philosophy, challenged the Aristotelian understanding of dreaming by proposing that dreams are purely products of the mind rather than reflections of an external reality (Gregoric & Fink, 2022). Descartes's epistemological concerns led him to introduce the "dreaming doubt" in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), questioning the reliability of our sensory experiences during both waking and sleeping states. Descartes contended that while waking experiences are derived from sensory interactions with the external world, dreams occur without this sensory input, making them fundamentally disconnected from reality (Descartes, 1984; Windt, 2015; Garber, 1992). This radical separation between the mind's internal representations and external reality introduces a key epistemological issue regarding the nature of perception, which is central to ongoing debates in philosophy of mind and consciousness studies.

Descartes' dualistic stance—arguing for the independence of mind and body—has been foundational for later philosophical discussions, including those on dreams. In particular, his distinction between vivid and ordinary dreams suggests a continuum between experiences that feel intensely real and those that are more fragmented and incoherent. However, modern research into dreams complicates Descartes' binary distinction between vivid and ordinary dreams, as neurocognitive

theories of dreaming—such as those proposed by Hobson and McCarley (1977)—suggest that all dreams, regardless of vividness, arise from similar neural processes during REM sleep. This contrasts with Descartes' view that dreams are produced purely by the mind without sensory input. While Descartes' framework raises important questions about the reliability of perception, it overlooks the increasing body of evidence suggesting that dreams are not only cognitive constructs but also involve complex sensory and emotional processing rooted in brain activity.

Moreover, Descartes' famous "dreaming doubt" question—"How can I know that I am not now dreaming?"—poses a profound challenge to the epistemology of dreaming. However, this perspective can be critiqued from a contemporary existential-phenomenological lens. Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1945) emphasise the embodied nature of experience, proposing that both waking and dreaming states are inseparable from the lived body and its engagement with the world. In contrast to Descartes' mind-body dualism, phenomenologists argue that subjective experience cannot be reduced solely to mental representations or sensory inputs but must also account for the embodied and situated nature of perception. This critique suggests that Descartes' framework of mind-body separation may not fully capture the rich complexity of human experience, especially in the realm of dreaming, which is deeply influenced by the embodied and relational dimensions of existence.

Furthermore, the "dreaming doubt" raises questions about the nature of reality itself, which aligns with contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind. Chalmers (1996), for example, discusses the "hard problem" of consciousness, questioning how subjective experiences—such as the feeling of dreaming—can emerge from physical processes in the brain (see p.15). Descartes' radical scepticism can thus be situated within the broader issue of how we can reconcile subjective, conscious experiences with the material world, a question that remains central to modern discussions of consciousness, dreaming, and reality. However, Descartes' narrow focus on the mind as the generator of dreams does not engage with contemporary understandings of dreams as phenomena that are deeply intertwined with the physical and social realities of the dreamer. Thus, while his contributions



laid the groundwork for critical inquiry into the nature of perception and reality, they may require significant revision in light of more recent developments in cognitive science, phenomenology, and neurobiology (Windt, 2015).

In sum, Descartes' theory of dreams serves as a foundation for understanding the epistemological questions surrounding dreams and reality. However, his dualistic model, which separates the mind from the body and external world, has been challenged by modern theories that emphasise the embodied, neurological, and socio-cultural dimensions of dreams. A more integrated approach that considers the cognitive processes underlying dreams and their existential, embodied, and socio-cultural significance is necessary to fully understand dreams. This would not only align with contemporary philosophy but also with current trends in dream research, which explore the intersection of the subjective and objective realms.

### ***Norman Malcolm's Dream Verificationism***

Norman Malcolm (1959) offers a critical stance against the "Received view" of dreams as conscious experiences occurring during sleep. He argues that this perspective, endorsed by influential figures like Descartes and Freud, is flawed and rests on unchallenged assumptions. Malcolm's criteria for identifying dream reports include their reliance on the primary concept of dreaming, their classification as untruthful accounts, and their conflation of dream content with waking life experiences (Pear, 1961). His critique raises fundamental questions about the nature of consciousness during sleep, particularly by disputing the notion that dreams involve conscious experiences with a defined temporal duration (Malcolm, 1956). Malcolm's work is significant for its epistemological rigour, questioning the reliability of subjective dream reports and challenging the boundaries between waking and dreaming consciousness. However, modern advancements in neuroscience and sleep studies complicate and, in some ways, refute his assertions.

Malcolm's rejection of conscious experience during sleep hinges on a verificationist criterion for

determining wakefulness and sleep, which has since been undermined by empirical evidence. His reliance on outdated methodologies overlooks the neurological basis of REM sleep, during which vivid and hallucinatory dreams are most commonly reported (Aserinsky & Kleitman, 1953). Modern neuroscience demonstrates that specific brain regions, such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, are active during REM sleep, correlating with vivid emotional and visual dream content (Hobson, Stickgold, & Pace-Schott, 2000). Thus, Malcolm's philosophical critique, while valuable for questioning foundational assumptions about dreams, does not adequately account for the empirical findings that support the existence of complex cognitive and emotional activity during sleep. Dennett (1976) and Ayer (1960) provide robust counterarguments to Malcolm's claims. Dennett critiques Malcolm's verificationist view as overly rigid, pointing out that it excludes the possibility of overlapping states of wakefulness and dreaming. This critique aligns with contemporary cognitive and phenomenological perspectives, which suggest that consciousness during sleep is fluid and multifaceted, rather than binary (Windt, 2015). Ayer extends the critique by highlighting Malcolm's scepticism as a necessary counterbalance to unsubstantiated claims, particularly those of Freud, about the interpretative value of dream reports. However, both Dennett and Ayer retain elements of the "Received view" by acknowledging that dreams, even if unverifiable in the moment, constitute meaningful subjective experiences. This perspective is supported by phenomenological research, which emphasises the lived, embodied experience of dreaming as integral to understanding human consciousness. Malcolm's insistence on the unreliability of dream reports invites deeper exploration into the methodological challenges of studying subjective experiences. By casting doubt on the veridicality of dream reports, Malcolm emphasises the importance of distinguishing between phenomenological descriptions of dreams and their neurological or psychological correlates. In my research, I integrate this critical perspective by emphasising the methodological rigour required in dream studies, particularly when interpreting first-person accounts. For instance, phenomenological approaches offer tools for bracketing subjective biases, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the dream-to-waking cycle. This aligns

with Malcolm's critique but also expands upon it by incorporating empirical data to validate subjective dream experiences.

Additionally, Malcolm's view that dreams do not involve conscious awareness challenges existential and phenomenological frameworks, which regard dreaming as a mode of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Phenomenologists argue that dreams reflect the embodied and relational aspects of existence, even during sleep (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Morley, 1999; van Deurzen, 2002). By contrast, Malcolm's stance can be seen as reductive, overlooking how dreams may serve as a medium for exploring existential concerns, such as freedom, meaning, and mortality. My research seeks to bridge this gap by applying existential-phenomenological insights to examine how dreams reveal aspects of the self and its engagement with the world, offering a richer framework for understanding the interplay between waking and dreaming states.

In conclusion, Malcolm's critique of the "Received view" challenges assumptions about the nature of dreaming and raises important epistemological questions about consciousness during sleep. However, his verificationist stance is limited in scope, failing to account for advancements in neuroscience and the insights of phenomenology. By critically engaging with Malcolm's work, my research highlights the need for an integrative approach that combines philosophical inquiry with empirical evidence to deepen our understanding of the dreaming mind and its relevance to broader questions of consciousness and existence.

### ***Daniel Dennett's Dream Cassette Theory***

*Dennett (1976) critiques the "Received view" of dreams through the lens of an "intentional theory of mind," offering an innovative framework for understanding dream experiences (Dennett, 1976; 2017; Walsh, 2010). He proposes three key components of dreaming: the composition process, the presentation of the dream to the experiencing mind, and the recording of the dream in memory for potential recall. These components underpin Dennett's Cassette Theory, which posits that dreams are*

*narratives formed during sleep and "replayed" upon waking, akin to playing a pre-recorded cassette (Dennett, 1976; Rosen, 2013). This metaphorical framework challenges traditional assumptions about the continuity and real-time experience of dreaming, offering a fresh perspective on the relationship between sleep and consciousness. Dennett's model provides a conceptual shift that emphasises the constructed nature of dreams rather than assuming they unfold in real time, aligning with empirical findings on the reconstructive nature of memory (Dennett, 1976).*

*Dennett's insights expand upon the Cassette Theory by addressing dream composition's sensory and cognitive elements, proposing that dreams involve sensations, thoughts, and impressions in both conscious and unconscious states (Rosen, 2013). This aligns with earlier theorists such as Descartes, who identified dreams as mental constructs, and Freud, who explored dreams' psychological significance (Rosen, 2013). However, Dennett's framework departs from these predecessors by focusing on the intentional processes underlying dream generation. Unlike Freud's emphasis on latent content, Dennett situates dreams within the broader context of mental architecture, highlighting how cognitive systems encode and reconstruct dream narratives. This intentionalist approach bridges philosophical inquiry and cognitive neuroscience, providing a cross-disciplinary perspective on dreaming.*

*In practical terms, Dennett's emphasis on post-hoc reconstruction challenges counselling psychologists to rethink their engagement with client-reported dream content. While traditional dreamwork may focus on the immediacy of lived experiences, Dennett highlights the reconstructive role of memory, suggesting that dream narratives are shaped by waking cognitive processes (Dennett, 2017). For therapists, this raises questions about the reliability of dream accounts and how to balance Dennett's memory-driven model with existential or phenomenological approaches that foreground subjective authenticity.*

*Dennett also engages critically with Malcolm's scepticism about the veracity of dream reports. Drawing on Malcolm's insights, Dennett critiques the implicit assumptions underlying dream research,*

*such as the unexamined belief that dream narratives are faithfully recalled experiences (Tranguillo, 2014). Instead, Dennett emphasises the role of memory in shaping dream recollection, suggesting that what we recall as dreams may be reconstructions influenced by waking cognitive processes (Dennett, 2017). This critique aligns with phenomenological approaches that view dreams not as fixed phenomena but as dynamic, context-dependent experiences reconstructed in the act of remembering (Schredl, 2020; Windt, 2015). This epistemological critique is particularly relevant for counselling psychologists who rely on subjective dream narratives to explore meaning. By acknowledging the reconstructive nature of dreams, therapists can approach dreamwork with a reflective stance, considering both the content of the dream and the process of its recollection.*

*The Cassette Theory also intersects with discussions about vivid dreams and their impact on waking life. Dennett acknowledges that vivid dreams, characterised by rich sensory details and emotional intensity, can leave lasting impressions on individuals, influencing creativity, personal growth, and therapeutic outcomes (Rosen, 2013). While this aligns with broader existential and phenomenological perspectives on the transformative potential of dreams, Dennett's framework uniquely situates these experiences within a memory-driven architecture. For example, counselling psychologists may explore how vivid dreams influence clients' waking anxieties or aspirations, while also considering how these dream experiences are reconstructed and interpreted in therapy.*

*This raises compelling questions about the agency of dreamers in interpreting their experiences, suggesting that the subjective significance of vivid dreams emerges not solely from the dream content but also from the act of narrative reconstruction upon waking. My research builds on this by exploring how dreamers' existential concerns and waking contexts shape their interpretations, emphasising the dialogical nature of meaning-making in dreamwork.*

*While Dennett's contributions provide valuable insights, they have limitations. The Cassette Theory, for example, downplays the immediacy of lived dream experiences, focusing instead on the post-hoc construction of narratives. This contrasts with phenomenological approaches, which emphasise the in*

*situ experience of dreaming as a mode of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1945).*

*From a counselling psychology perspective, this raises the tension between Dennett's cognitive stance and therapeutic approaches that prioritise dreams' embodied, here-and-now experience. My work critically engages with this tension, integrating Dennett's reconstructive framework with existential-phenomenological insights to offer a more holistic understanding of dreams as both lived experiences and narrative reconstructions. Furthermore, we can more critically evaluate Dennett's memory-driven framework by exploring alternative models, such as Jung's symbolic interpretations or Hobson's activation-synthesis theory. For instance, Hobson's focus on neurobiological processes provides an empirical counterpoint, while Jung's approach highlights the archetypal and transformative aspects of dreams often central to counselling psychology practice.*

*In conclusion, Dennett's intentionalist approach and the Cassette Theory provide a thought-provoking challenge to traditional views of dreaming, emphasising the reconstructive and memory-driven nature of dream narratives. While this framework is invaluable for understanding the cognitive mechanisms of dreaming, my research expands its scope by integrating phenomenological and existential perspectives, situating dreams within the broader context of human meaning-making and consciousness. This interdisciplinary engagement emphasises the complexity of dreaming, offering new pathways for philosophical and empirical inquiry while informing therapeutic practice.*

### **Jennifer Windt's transparency view on dream research**

Windt's theory of dreaming, rooted in the intersection of philosophy and cognitive neuroscience, emphasises dreaming as an active, dynamic construction of simulated realities rather than a passive playback of memories (Windt, 2013; Windt & Metzinger, 2007). Her work challenges Dennett's Cassette Theory by proposing that dreams are generative processes shaped by emotions, beliefs, and personal experiences. This framing not only highlights the creative and embodied nature of dreams but also aligns with the continuity hypothesis, which posits that waking and dreaming states

share significant cognitive and perceptual processes (Hall & Norby, 1972; Domhoff, 2006; Schredl, 2002; Windt & Noreika, 2011). My contribution builds on this framework by introducing existential perspectives to the discussion of dream generation. While Windt's work emphasises emotional and cognitive processes, I argue that dreams also function as dialogues with existential concerns—such as identity, mortality, and meaning-making—transcending the purely neurocognitive focus. This existential dimension highlights the transformative potential of dreams and their capacity to surface unresolved dilemmas that influence waking life.

Central to Windt's framework is the 'Transparency view', which counters scepticism from Malcolm and other anti-experience theorists by arguing that dream reports, when properly contextualised, can serve as reliable, albeit interpretive, sources of insight (Windt, 2013). She emphasises the methodological conditions necessary to establish this reliability, acknowledging the interpretive nature of dream narratives while advocating for rigorous epistemic practices to enhance their trustworthiness (Cartwright, 2010). My research expands Windt's 'Transparency view' by integrating reflective and phenomenological practices, such as member-checking and collaborative interpretation, to validate dream reports (Ichikawa, 2018). Additionally, I explore how existential concerns—such as anxiety, freedom, and authenticity—shape the interpretive process. This extension provides a more holistic approach that aligns methodological rigour with the subjective, lived experience central to counselling psychology.

Windt's emphasis on methodological rigour is contrasted with Rosen's Narrative Fabrication thesis, which critiques dream reports as potentially constructed or embellished (Rosen, 2013). Rosen acknowledges that lucid dreams or ideal reporting conditions can minimise these fabrications, offering a practical countermeasure to scepticism. My research bridges these perspectives by combining Windt's focus on epistemic transparency with Rosen's concerns about narrative construction. I propose an enhanced framework for dream analysis that treats dream reports as co-constructed narratives, shaped both by the dreamer's lived experience and by cultural, therapeutic, or existential frameworks

influencing their interpretation. This approach ensures that dream analysis remains rigorous without dismissing the rich, interpretive qualities of dream narratives.

Windt's theory also highlights dreaming as an adaptive phenomenon, serving functions such as memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and self-awareness (Windt, 2013; Windt & Metzinger, 2007). However, this functionalist perspective risks underestimating the significance of non-adaptive or disruptive dreams, such as recurring nightmares or existentially unsettling themes. I critique this limitation by arguing that dreams do not always serve adaptive functions. Instead, they can reflect existential struggles or disruptions—surfacing themes of uncertainty, loss, or the absurd—that challenge waking assumptions and provoke meaningful reflection (van Deurzen, 2010). By framing dreaming as a dialogue with the subconscious, I propose a more expansive view that captures both constructive and disruptive dimensions of dreams, enriching their relevance for therapeutic practice.

Moreover, Windt's engagement with the continuity hypothesis invites further exploration of the overlap between waking and dreaming cognition. While this hypothesis is supported by empirical research, it does not fully account for the unique phenomenological qualities of dreaming that distinguish it from waking states (Schredl, 2002; Domhoff, 2006). I extend this critique by emphasising both continuities and discontinuities between waking and dreaming consciousness. For example, I argue that dreams often involve symbolic exaggeration or abstraction of waking concerns, suggesting generative processes that may involve distinct mechanisms of metaphorisation and amplification. This insight challenges the reductive elements of the continuity hypothesis, urging a more nuanced exploration of dreaming as a unique state of consciousness.

Windt's methodological contributions also emphasise the interpretative potential of dream reports, positioning them as valuable resources for understanding psychological and existential concerns (Windt, 2013). My research builds on this by integrating existential-phenomenological approaches, framing dreams as reflective of broader existential contexts—such as identity, mortality, freedom, and emotional resilience. By bridging Windt's empirical rigour with the interpretive depth of



existential analysis, I contribute a framework that situates dreams as multifaceted, simultaneously cognitive, emotional, and existential phenomena. This integration is particularly relevant for counselling psychologists, as it highlights the therapeutic value of dreams in exploring clients' lived experiences and meaning-making processes.

### ***Contemporary Dream Research***

Psychological dream research is a developing field that seeks to understand the functions and impacts of dreaming on waking life. Exploring dream theories is essential in providing a foundation for studying and interpreting dream-related phenomena. In the following section, we will delve into vivid dreams.

### ***Stages of sleep and dream***

Sleep is a fundamental and essential biological process involving reduced activity and altered consciousness (Kahn & Hobson, 2005; Grandner, 2017; Cirelli & Tononi, 2008; Carskadon & Dement, 2011). Extensive research has focused on understanding the nature of sleep, its underlying mechanisms, and its functions (Wagner et al., 2004; Hobson, 2005; Born et al., 2006; Cirelli & Tononi, 2008). It is a universal need, occupying a significant portion of our lives, and influences various biological and psychological processes (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke [NINDS], n.d.; van Cauter et al., 2008; Grandner, 2017; Walker, 2017). Sleep consists of multiple stages, as identified by Dement and Kleitman (1953, 1957). There are two primary stages: rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep, further divided into four stages (Rechtschaffen & Kales, 1968). NREM sleep includes Stage 1, the transition to sleep, and Stage 2, with sleep spindles and K-complexes. Stages 3 and 4 are called slow-wave sleep (SWS) or deep sleep, characterised by synchronised delta brainwaves (Rechtschaffen & Kales, 1968). REM sleep, associated with vivid dreaming, exhibits heightened brain activity (Hobson & McCarley, 1977). The

activation-synthesis hypothesis suggests that dreaming arises from the brain's interpretation of random neural activity during REM sleep. Solms (1997) conducted a clinico-anatomical study and found evidence of specific brain regions and psychological processes linked to dreaming, indicating its impact on waking consciousness and cognition.

### ***Sleeping and Dreaming***

Sleeping and dreaming are experienced phenomenologically (Grandner, 2017) and influenced by cultural, environmental, psychological, social, and biological factors (Breger, 1967; Solms, 2000; Revonsuo, 2000; Nir, Tononi, 2010; Grandner, 2017). Sleep researchers have illustrated a clear functional value of improved waking performance that can be attributed to when an individual has sufficient sleep (Pagel, 2001; Walker, 2017). For dreaming, most of the roles that have been hypothesised are psychological rather than physiological. However, dream researchers continue to debate the dream function and argue as if dreams serve one particular function (Stewart & Koulack, 1993; Hobson & McCarley, 1977; Domhoff, 1996; Hartmann, 2000; Kramer, 2007; Cartwright; Revonsuo, 2000; Hobson, 2009; Wamsley & Stickgold, 2010; Bogzaran & Deslauriers, 2012; Tuominen & Valli, 2015). The most well-known function of dreaming is to resolve emotional conflicts. Recent neurophysiological and neuroimaging studies show evidence of activated reward and emotional networks during sleep (Braun et al., 1997; Maquet et al., 1996; Solms, 2000). These activations are associated with emotional processing, memory consolidation, and reprocessing memories (Stickgold, 2005; Walker & Stickgold, 2004). Sleep is suggested to promote adaptive emotional and cognitive responses in waking life, such as emotional balance, social cognition, and performance improvement (Agargun & Cartwright, 2003; Scarpelli, 2019). Domhoff (1993) considered dreaming as a symbolic attempt to solve problems. Pagel (2001) suggested that the proposed functions will likely occupy a role in creative processes, an essential function for human survival, that positions dreaming equally essential to sleep. While a considerable amount of research has speculated about the nature of

dreams, no one dream function theory has come forth as sufficient (Knudson, 2001; Kuiken, 1996). The physiological effects of sleep and dreaming can be observed; however, the psychological importance can be revealed in the context of the dreamer's life through the dream interpretation discussed in the previous sections.

### ***Dream Recall Frequency (DRF)***

Dream researchers conducting studies into the experience of dreams are reminded that what we may access is not so much the entirety of the dream, as the accounts or portion of the dream that the dreamer chooses to communicate may be influenced in a particular social context and medium. Dream researchers accept that rapid eye movement (REM) dreaming is qualitatively different from non-rapid eye movement (NREM), so the recalled content of both REM and NREM dreams may differ upon awakening. According to Schredl (2004), each person spends approximately 20% of total sleep in the REM stage every night. Dream production rates are very high if sleepers are awakened from REM sleep: 70% to 90% of awakenings produce some dream report (Stickgold et al., 1994; Nielsen, 2004; Schredl et al., 2007). Some individuals almost do not recall any dream during the awakening stage, whereas others could relate detailed descriptions of the nightly encounters nearly every morning (Foulkes, 1962). There are inter-individual differences regarding dream recall frequency between people and intra-individual fluctuations within a subject (Schredl, 2004; Wyk et al., 2019). Houran & Lange (1998) and Watt et al. (2014) postulated that the frequency of dream recall triggers the emergence of precognitive dreams -fore-knowledge of future events – (Kiritsis, 2020; Wargo, 2021). According to Schredl, Pallmer & Montasser (1996), the influencing factors are categorised into two broad groups: state and trait factors. Trait factors are considered stable over time and include cognitive functioning, creativity, and personality dimensions. Socio-demographic variables, including gender, age, and habitual sleep, could also be considered trait factors influencing dream recall rates (Schredl, 2004).

In contrast, state factors are construed as short-term acting variables, including nocturnal awakenings, major life events, and pre-sleep mood (Schredl, 2004). However, distinguishing trait and state factors is complex and cannot be achieved exclusively. Drawing a clear line between low and high-frequency dream recall could be challenging, creating assumptions and subjective conclusions.

The challenges presented by methodological challenges and inconsistent results in dream research have generated much interest in dreams to understand their mechanisms and impact on waking life. The growing interest in dreams seeks to allay the belief that all dreams occur during REM sleep.

### **Function of dreams**

The literature on the functionality of dreams spans a broad spectrum of theoretical perspectives, with no clear consensus (Staunton, 2001). Freud's (1900) conceptualisation of dreams as the "royal road to the unconscious" (p.608) remains foundational, emphasising wish-fulfilment as a mechanism that reveals unconscious desires. This perspective maintains a privileged position in psychology and psychotherapy (Ullman, 2001; Mazzoni, 1999; Solms, 1997). In contrast, epiphenomenal views, such as those proposed by Crick and Mitchison (1983) and Hobson and McCarley (1977), argue that dreams lack functional value, serving as mere by-products of neurological processes (Givrad, 2016). However, alternative theories emphasise the adaptive roles of dreams in memory consolidation, emotional processing, and personal growth (Kramer, 1993; Cartwright, 2010; Revonsuo, 2000). For instance, Revonsuo's Threat Simulation Theory argues that dreaming rehearses survival strategies, while other researchers highlight creative problem-solving and trauma simulation (Barrett, 2001; Mellman, 1995). Staunton (2001) proposed that REM sleep supports personal identity by constructing a 'being there' setting, enabling the preservation of self-continuity during prolonged unconscious states. This aligns with Windt's (2013) 'Transparency view', which emphasises the interpretative significance of dreams as subjective phenomena tied to the dreamer's lived experience.

By linking Staunton's identity-focused framework with Windt's methodological rigour, I propose an integrative approach to exploring how dreams preserve and reflect the dreamer's sense of self through narrative coherence.

Kuiken (1996) and Knudson (2006) further challenge the notion of dreams as epiphenomena, arguing that the uniform impact of dreams on waking life points to their functional significance. Hartmann's (1998) Central image theory similarly highlights shared qualities between waking and dreaming consciousness, suggesting that dreams serve as a continuum of consciousness (Eldredge et al., 2016). While these theories effectively demonstrate the interconnectedness of waking and dreaming states, they often fail to address how specific developmental experiences shape dream content and function. My research builds on these ideas by exploring how dreams not only reflect but actively process developmental and existential themes, such as identity, authenticity, and emotional resilience (van Deurzen, 2010; Kuiken, 2024; Rosen, 2013). This focus adds depth to existing theories by emphasising the biographical specificity of dream phenomena, which is often overlooked in existing research. Arguments against the functionality of dreams, as proposed by some epiphenomenalists, raise an intriguing paradox: if dreaming has no function, it would represent a rare instance of a psychological experience without purpose (Pagel, 2008/10, p.139). This critique gains traction when juxtaposed with emergentist perspectives (Paris, 2017; Rosen, 2012), which argue that mental activity, including dreaming, possesses irreducible properties that resist reductive explanations. These perspectives challenge traditional models by highlighting the diversity and complexity of dream phenomena, which encompass bizarre and rational elements alike. By incorporating existential-phenomenological insights, I argue that the richness of dreams lies in their capacity to transcend reductive frameworks, offering profound reflections on the human condition (Schweitzer & Knudson, 2014). This approach extends Rosen's and Paris's critiques by framing dreams as integrative phenomena that reconcile the bizarre with the meaningful, thereby bridging cognitive processes with existential concerns. Furthermore, a more nuanced understanding of how these critiques align with or

diverge from existing cognitive neuroscience theories (e.g., Hobson, 2009) could further enhance the discussion.

Dement's (1960) question—whether humans could function normally without dreaming—remains relevant in light of contemporary REM sleep deprivation research. Naiman (2017) identifies a “silent epidemic of REM sleep loss,” linking it to broader health concerns. Scholars like Walker (2009) and Mallon (2000) emphasise the critical relationship between dreaming, sleep patterns, and physical and mental well-being. While Naiman's and Walker's work primarily focuses on the physiological consequences of REM sleep deprivation, my research extends these findings by examining how reduced dream engagement may impact existential well-being. Specifically, I propose that diminished dream recall or exploration may limit individuals' ability to process unresolved concerns or achieve narrative coherence, thus impairing overall psychological resilience. This aligns with recent research by Cartwright (2010), which suggests that disrupted dreaming could compromise emotional regulation and coping mechanisms, impacting mental health outcomes. Moreover, integrating developmental psychology into the existing literature on dream functionality allows for a more thorough understanding of how early life experiences, trauma, and identity development may shape not only the content but also the function of dreams (Hartmann, 2008). For example, dreams may serve different functions in individuals depending on their stage of development, including the processing of identity formation, attachment dynamics, or trauma resolution (Maggiolini et al., 2020). This perspective challenges the one-size-fits-all model found in many cognitive theories of dreaming and emphasises the need for a more individualised, biographical approach.

### **Psychological Dream Models**

After examining the various factors associated with sleep and dreaming, dream recall, and dream function, the focus now shifts to a discussion of prominent theories that seek to explain the purpose and function of dreams, particularly concerning vivid dreams and their influence on waking.

The following section will explore four key theories relevant to understanding dreams' impact on individuals' lives.

### **Dream as emotional processing**

The idea that intense emotional experiences can have long-lasting effects on behaviour and continue to influence individuals is not new and has attracted the attention of researchers studying the impact of 'emotional processing' in vivid dreaming (Kozak & Foa, 1986; Rachman, 1980; Cartwright, 1991; Murkar & De Koninck, 2018). Emotional experiences are generally thought to be processed and integrated, allowing subsequent behaviours and experiences to occur without disruption (Rachman, 1979). However, when emotional processing is inadequate, unresolved emotions may manifest subtly or overtly. Levin and Nielsen (2009) and others (Malinoski, Carr, & Edwards, 2019; Tousignant et al., 2022) suggest that persistent intrusive emotional activity throughout the dreaming-waking cycle clearly indicates insufficient emotional processing.

While this perspective is compelling, it assumes a linear relationship between emotional processing and dream content, which is oversimplified. In my view, emotional processing through dreams cannot be solely viewed as a passive assimilation of emotion, but rather a dynamic negotiation of meaning in the face of existential concerns. The theories discussed above would benefit from a deeper exploration of the psychological mechanisms involved in this integration, beyond mere content analysis, to include the role of self-awareness and existential reflection.

Malinowski et al. (2014, 2017, 2019) and Rachman (1979) propose that emotional experiences that are not yet fully processed appear in dreams, where they are transformed and incorporated into memory systems. This suggests that when individuals dream of suppressed or unwanted thoughts, their emotional response to these thoughts may improve (Eichenlaub et al., 2018). Malinowski's (2019) study investigated emotional valence and its relationship to dream rebound, finding that unpleasant thoughts were more likely to experience "dream rebound." However, the study could benefit from a qualitative approach, as the focus on quantitative measures overlooks the complexities of personal narrative and

emotional experience. The lack of qualitative depth limits our understanding of the subjective experience of emotional processing through dreams, which could provide valuable insights into individual differences, coping mechanisms, and the real-world therapeutic benefits of dreams. Scarpelli et al. (2019) support Eichenlaub et al. (2018) and Levin and Nielsen's (2009) claim that REM sleep plays a crucial role in emotional processing, linking dreaming to memory consolidation. Their review highlights brain activity during REM sleep that mirrors emotional processing during wakefulness, aligning with the continuity hypothesis. However, Scarpelli et al.'s (2019) review suffers from a lack of a clear operational definition of "dream experiences" (DE), which weakens the interpretability and applicability of their findings. The ambiguity surrounding DEs leads to inconsistent interpretations across studies. A more rigorous definition, with attention to the subjective and phenomenological aspects of dream experiences, would provide a more robust foundation for understanding their role in emotional processing.

Additionally, the reliance on PubMed queries and literature summaries in Scarpelli et al.'s (2019) review overlooks the importance of lived experience and cultural variations in dream interpretation. This omission fails to account for the diverse ways that dreams are understood and processed across different cultural contexts, potentially limiting the generalisability of their conclusions. A broader methodological approach that integrates cultural and personal factors would enrich our understanding of how dreams function in emotional processing, acknowledging the diversity of meaning-making in the dream experience.

Fireman, Levin, and Pope (2014) examined the differences between bad dreams and nightmares, finding that nightmares involved more immediate and unarticulated emotional responses, including fear, aggression, and death. This aligns with the emotional processing theory, suggesting that nightmares reflect failures in emotion regulation. However, their study did not address how the emotional narrative in nightmares differs from that of bad dreams, and the classification of dreams based on waking criteria is an indirect measure of intensity (Zadra, Pilon, & Donderi, 2006). While Fireman et al.'s study



supports the notion of nightmares as disruptions in emotional regulation, their methodology oversimplifies the emotional narratives involved. Dreams should be studied as complex emotional constructs, where the intensity and quality of emotional expression are crucial in understanding the role of dreaming in emotional processing. Additionally, the study's reliance on a college student sample limits its generalisability to a broader demographic.

Similarly, Malinowski et al. (2019) explored dream rebound, finding that suppressed negative thoughts were more likely to rebound in dreams. This supports the emotional processing theory, suggesting that dreams act as an emotional outlet. However, this finding does not fully account for the cognitive and emotional intricacies involved in suppression and rebound. The role of conscious awareness and coping strategies during wakefulness is often neglected, which may influence dream rebound and emotional processing. A more holistic approach that includes individual differences in emotional regulation strategies would provide a clearer picture of the interaction between conscious control and unconscious processing.

Nielsen and Stenstrom (2005) examined how memories of experiences are integrated and possibly modified during dreaming, proposing that dreams simulate waking life. While they emphasised the emotional processing that occurs during dreaming, the link between memory consolidation and dreaming remains unclear. Their assertion that dreams merely simulate waking life oversimplifies the function of dreams, which are not simply replicas of waking experiences but transformative, integrative processes that allow for reflection and existential processing. The vague conceptualisation of "memory sources" in dreams highlights the need for more empirical research focused on the precise mechanisms through which memories are processed and transformed during dreams. The subjective nature of memory recall introduces potential biases, and the study fails to address the limitations of self-reported data, such as the impact of memory distortion on dream content.

### ***Continuity Hypothesis.***

The Continuity Hypothesis (CH) suggests that the content of dreams is typically continuous with waking concerns at a thematic level, linking dream content to real-life experiences and behaviours (Hall & van der Castle, 1966; Hall & Norby, 1972; Domhoff, 2003; Schredl, 2011). For instance, dreaming of being an aggressor may increase aggression in waking life, suggesting that dreams reflect or influence waking behaviours (Mathes & Pietrowsky, 2022). Erdelyi critiques Domhoff's advocacy for the CH and challenges the attribution of this idea to Bell & Hall (1971), arguing that the continuity between dream life and waking life stems from Freud's influence on Hall. The claim that CH is a direct inheritance from Freud is highly contested by Erdelyi (2017), calling attention to the intellectual origins of the theory.

While the continuity hypothesis is widely regarded as influential, its over-reliance on direct, simplistic links between dreams and waking behaviour can be problematic. This approach risks reducing the richness of the dreaming experience to a mere mirror of waking life (Domhoff, 2017; Schredl & Hoffman, 2003). It fails to account for the possibility that dreams may also act as a form of existential processing, where waking-life concerns are reshaped and reinterpreted rather than simply mirrored (van Deurzen, 2002). Furthermore, the theory often neglects the symbolic and metaphorical qualities inherent in dreams, which cannot always be directly equated with waking experiences. A broader, more nuanced framework for understanding the relationship between waking life and dreams is necessary.

Critics of CH highlight its experiential distortion, vagueness, and lack of specificity in explaining both dream content and the causal relationship between waking and dreaming (Domhoff, 2017; Revonsuo et al., 2015). Proponents of CH are also criticised for offering post hoc explanations when dream contents do not align with the theory (Barrett & McNamara, 2012; McNamara et al., 2014). Hobson (2009) posits a discontinuity hypothesis, arguing that dreams primarily influence waking

consciousness rather than simply replicating waking experiences. He contends that dreams act as a synthesis and predictor of waking consciousness, processing actual and potential scenarios.

Hobson's discontinuity of dreams presents an important shift by emphasising the active role of dreams in shaping waking life, suggesting that dreams are not mere reflections of reality but rather cognitive processes that facilitate adaptive responses to life (Hoss, 2011; Blagrove, 2011). While this view offers an intriguing perspective on the function of dreams, it overlooks the deeper subjective and existential components of dreaming (van Deurzen, 2010). Dreams may not simply be predictive simulations, but also represent existential tensions, conflicts, and unresolved emotions. Hobson's suggestions would benefit from incorporating the symbolic and emotional depth of dreams, emphasising how these processes help individuals grapple with psychological and existential dilemmas rather than just anticipating waking life.

Schredl et al. (2010) investigated the continuity of emotional effects on waking life by recording participants' emotional valence following dreams. The study found that a dream's emotional intensity affected the waking mood of participants throughout the day. However, Schredl's study has limitations regarding representativeness, small sample sizes, and a lack of statistical control, making it difficult to generalise the findings. These methodological limitations also highlight a broader issue in continuity research: the oversimplification of operationalising the link between dream emotion and waking life. This approach risks ignoring the complexity of individual emotional regulation strategies and coping mechanisms (Cartwright, 2010). Moreover, the lack of control for confounding variables further diminishes the robustness of their conclusions. Future studies would benefit from employing more diverse samples and controlling for factors such as personality traits, coping mechanisms, and emotional regulation strategies, which all play a role in how dreams influence waking emotional states (Hobson & Schredl, 2011).

**Further Methodological Considerations:** A critical analysis of the methodological flaws in Schredl's study, as well as in the broader research on continuity, would benefit from examining issues

such as retrospective bias, the influence of cultural context, and the reliance on self-reporting, which may obscure true connections between dreams and waking life (Kahn, 2017). The potential for dream recall biases should also be considered, as individuals may remember or prioritise certain dreams based on emotional intensity, which does not always reflect their full range of unconscious processing.

Domhoff (2017) argues that the tenets of CH have been distorted by attempts to relate dreams and waking-life experiences and types of experience. He adapted the CH to the neurocognitive theory, noting that the central aspect of dream content depends on the intensity of personal concern. Schredl and Hofmann (2013) acknowledge that while numerous studies support CH, its formulation remains vague. They suggest that to better capture the connection between dreams and waking life, it is necessary to specify factors such as the type of waking experience and emotional involvement, which have often been overlooked.

Domhoff's adaptation of CH to neurocognitive theory is an important step toward integrating modern cognitive neuroscience with the study of dreams. However, this revision still falls short of addressing the complexity of how emotional and existential factors influence both dreaming and waking experiences. The call for specificity regarding emotional involvement is valid, but it also highlights the tension between the desire to quantify dream content and the need to understand the deeply subjective nature of the dream experience. A more integrative approach, which incorporates cognitive neuroscience and phenomenological insights into dreams' emotional and existential content, could offer a more comprehensive understanding. Such an integrative approach is particularly relevant in counselling psychology, where the focus is often on subjective emotional experiences and the transformative potential of dreamwork. Incorporating existential themes such as personal meaning and identity would deepen our understanding of how dreams serve as tools for processing unresolved concerns, offering valuable insights for therapeutic practice (Craig & Walsh, 1993). Hobson and Schredl (2011) highlight the discontinuities in dreams, particularly when individuals experience something entirely new in their dreams or fail to dream about certain activities. Schredl (2020) argues that dreams

influence waking life by enhancing decision-making and contributing to behavioural change. While Hobson and Schredl (2011) acknowledge the role of dreams in decision-making and behaviour change, this perspective might underestimate the existential function of dreams. Dreams can serve as a space for reflection, identity formation, and the processing of unresolved existential concerns, which go beyond mere behavioural change. The emphasis on decision-making and practical outcomes overlooks the deeper, more transformative potential of dreams, particularly in relation to self-understanding and existential growth.

**Broader Theoretical Frameworks:** A more expansive critique could consider integrating alternative perspectives, such as those offered by Jungian dream theory, which emphasises the unconscious and archetypal symbols in dreams. Jung's theory of individuation, for example, aligns more with existential views of self-development and could offer a richer understanding of dreams as tools for integrating disparate aspects of the self. This could present a more holistic view of dreams as a means of navigating existential crises and fostering personal growth, which is particularly relevant in the context of counselling psychology.

### ***Threat Simulation Theory (TST) and Social Simulation theory (SST)***

Revonsuo's threat simulation theory (TST) argues that dreams function as a mechanism for rehearsing responses to threats, positing that such simulations are evolutionarily advantageous for survival (Revonsuo, 2000). While TST has significantly contributed to understanding dream functions, the theory's claims are not without substantial challenges. A major criticism lies in the assumption that all dreams of threat serve adaptive functions directly related to survival (Desjardins & Zadra, 2006). This narrow framing of dream content oversimplifies the wide variety of dream experiences, many of which do not involve threats at all, such as dreams involving mundane scenarios or abstract phenomena (e.g., socialising or problem-solving). This raises questions about the universality of threat simulation as a function of dreaming, suggesting that the theory may be too restrictive in its focus,

potentially neglecting the multifaceted nature of dreams (Zadra, Desjardins, Marcotte, 2006). Hobson (2009) argues that dreams could serve functions beyond threat simulation, such as processing unresolved psychological material, integrating emotional experiences, or reflecting latent cognitive processes.

A more nuanced understanding could incorporate existential and phenomenological perspectives, which view dreams not just as threat simulations but as reflections of broader existential concerns. For instance, Heidegger's concept of "being-toward-death" or Sartre's focus on personal freedom could offer a framework for interpreting dreams as sites of existential reflection or confrontation with personal mortality, anxiety, and meaning (Heidegger, 1927; Satre, 2007). Such perspectives would address the limitations of TST by emphasising the existential dimensions of dreams that may not directly relate to survival but reflect deeper psychological and existential issues, such as identity formation or the search for meaning.

Valli and Revonsuo's (2009) empirical review lends support to TST by showing a high frequency of threatening dreams, but it is essential to critically evaluate the methodological rigour of their study. While the large sample sizes (500 to 700 respondents) increase the study's generalisability, the research lacks nuance in explaining the variability of dream content. For example, the high incidence of threatening dreams (66.4%) is not critically examined in relation to potential confounding factors such as dream recall ability, emotional significance, or contextual influences (e.g., participants' recent experiences or stress levels). A more nuanced approach would involve considering how different types of threats (e.g., social, physical) are processed in dreams and whether the content of these dreams has any meaningful impact on real-world behaviours. For instance, does dreaming of an attack make one more vigilant in waking life, or does it merely reflect latent fears without functional adaptation? Without such analyses, TST risks being overly reductionist, focusing solely on threat simulation without accounting for dreams' broader emotional, social, and psychological dimensions.

Malcolm-Smith and Solms (2004) provide a substantial critique of TST, challenging the idea that dreams consistently simulate threats in a way that corresponds to real-world survival mechanisms. Their study finds that only a small proportion (8.48%) of participants dream of life-threatening events, which directly contradicts Revonsuo's hypothesis. However, it is important to consider the limitations of Malcolm-Smith and Solms' study, such as the lack of control for dream recall ability and the failure to consider how contextual factors (e.g., participants' current psychological state or their history of trauma) may influence dream content. Furthermore, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw conclusions about the long-term impact of threatening dreams on waking life. Future research should explore the dynamic relationship between dream content and waking life over time, considering how dreams reflect waking concerns and how they may also influence cognitive or emotional processing in real life.

The lack of longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of dreams on behaviour remains a major limitation of both TST and the studies critiquing it. Future research should prioritise longitudinal designs that track dreams' content and subsequent behavioural changes in waking life. For example, one could explore whether recurrent dreams of threat correlate with increased vigilance or avoidance behaviours, as TST would predict. Without such studies, the theory remains speculative in its evolutionary claims. Moreover, research should expand beyond evolutionary psychology into a more integrated approach that includes existential, cognitive, and affective dimensions of dreams, acknowledging that dreams can be seen as a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social processes rather than purely evolutionary adaptations.

Revonsuo's social simulation theory (SST), developed as a complementary framework to TST, argues that dreams may simulate social interactions and internal emotional states, which help individuals navigate complex social environments (Revonsuo, 2006). While SST broadens the scope of dream theory by focusing on emotional and social functions, it also suffers from several weaknesses. Firstly, SST lacks operational clarity in defining what constitutes a "social interaction" in dreams and

how these interactions translate into waking life behaviours (Domhoff & Schneider, 2018; King & DeCicco, 2009). There is no clear mechanism outlined in the theory for how dreams influence social competence or interpersonal behaviour in waking life. For instance, while SST suggests that dreams rehearse social interactions, little empirical evidence proves that frequent social dreams lead to enhanced real-life social skills or better emotional regulation in social contexts. This lack of empirical validation limits SST's utility for both academic inquiry and therapeutic practice, especially in the context of counselling psychology.

Tuominen et al. (2019) support SST by finding that dreams overrepresent social interactions compared to waking life. However, their study, which relies on a small sample of 15 students, is highly susceptible to methodological issues such as social desirability bias, where participants may report dream content in a way that aligns with societal expectations of social engagement. The small sample size also limits the generalisability of their findings, and the lack of control for cultural factors (e.g., different cultural norms around social interaction) further weakens the conclusions. Future studies could address these shortcomings by incorporating more diverse samples and using more robust methodologies, such as structured dream content analysis or ecological momentary assessment, to provide a clearer understanding of the social and emotional dimensions of dreams.

Moreover, SST's limitations become apparent when considering its practical application in therapeutic contexts. For instance, while SST posits that dreams simulate social interactions, how this simulation influences real-world social functioning or emotional regulation in therapy remains unclear. In counselling psychology, there is growing interest in integrating dreamwork into therapeutic modalities, particularly in exploring issues of identity, relational dynamics, and emotional processing. However, for SST to be useful in such contexts, clearer operational definitions and empirical support are needed to demonstrate how social dreams can be linked to improvements in real-world social behaviour, emotional intelligence, or conflict resolution skills.



In summary, both TST and SST offer important insights into the potential functions of dreams, particularly in relation to threat simulation and social interaction. However, both theories suffer from significant limitations in their empirical validation and operational clarity. TST is challenged by conflicting evidence, such as that presented by Malcolm-Smith and Solms (2004), and its narrow focus on threats limits its applicability. While offering a more holistic view of dreaming, SST is undermined by a lack of operational clarity and insufficient empirical support for its claims regarding social rehearsal. To move forward, future research must prioritise more nuanced and diversified methodologies, such as longitudinal studies, large, more representative samples, and more robust experimental designs to test the validity of both TST and SST. Additionally, theories should be refined to account for the broader spectrum of dream content and its complex relationship with waking life, incorporating insights from existential, phenomenological, and cognitive theories.

For clinical practice, particularly within the context of counselling psychology, dream research should be more integrated into therapeutic approaches. Dreamwork can potentially address deeper emotional, psychological, and existential concerns, fostering personal growth, identity formation, and emotional regulation. The application of dream theories such as TST and SST can help clinicians better understand the symbolic and emotional significance of dreams, providing clients with tools to process unresolved issues, improve social functioning, and confront existential anxieties.

### ***Types of Dreams***

The previous section demonstrated that dreaming could improve adaptability and well-being (Barrett, 2007; Sayed, 2011; Franklin & Zyphur, 2005). Various types of transformative dreams have been identified, such as lucid dreams (Laberge, 1980), nightmares (Pesant & Zadra, 2006; Zadra, 2006), creative dreams (Barrett, 1993; 2017), and impactful dreams (Kuiken, 1993, 2006; Knudson, 1999, 2013). These dreams are discussed next, followed by dreams in contemporary psychotherapy.

## Nightmares

Nightmares, defined as long, frightening dreams that often result in the sleeper awakening, are a common form of dream disturbance (Hartmann, 1984; Hersen, 1971; Levin & Fireman, 2002; Miller & DiPilato, 1983). In clinical practice, the DSM-IV criteria for Nightmare Disorder (307.47) have remained largely unchanged since their earlier classification as dream anxiety disorder in the DSM-III-R.

However, as with many psychological phenomena, there are discrepancies in how nightmares are defined, particularly with regard to the criterion that the individual must awaken due to fear or distress. While some studies, such as those by Belicki (1992), Kales et al. (1980), Schredl (2003), and Wood & Bootzin (1990), do not include the waking criterion, it is widely assumed that the intensity of emotional experiences in the dream leads to awakening, thus serving as an indirect measure of the nightmare's severity. However, it is essential to critically engage with this reliance on awakening as the primary indicator of nightmare intensity (Dietch et al. 2021). While awakening is often associated with vivid dreams, it could be argued that there are other mechanisms at play, such as the participant's overall emotional state or the subjective interpretation of the dream's content, which may not necessarily result in awakening but could still indicate a traumatic or highly intense experience.

The question of whether a nightmare is the only type of dream that can provoke awakening remains a contentious one. Nightmare research has been criticised for its overreliance on the waking criterion (Nielsen, 2005). A more nuanced approach may be needed, one that considers the full spectrum of dream intensity, encompassing both those dreams that induce awakening and those that do not but still elicit substantial emotional responses, as both types might be indicative of psychological distress. Siclari, Valli, and Arnulf (2020) argue that vivid dreams, characterised by anxiety and fear, can often be conceptualised as nightmares when they involve situations where the individual is fighting for survival, integrity, security, or self-esteem, thus resulting in awakening. While this framing is useful, it highlights the importance of further distinguishing between the various levels of distress in dreams and nightmares, as not all fear-based dreams necessitate the same degree of psychological intervention.

Hublin et al. (1999) found a significant genetic correlation in the occurrence of nightmares, with their study suggesting that approximately 45-51% of the differences in nightmare frequency in children, and 37% in adulthood, are attributable to genetics. This raises critical questions about the interplay between genetic predispositions and environmental factors in the development of nightmares (Ollilia et al., 2024). While genetic factors are clearly influential, one must also consider the psychological and socio-cultural factors that contribute to the manifestation of nightmares, particularly given the variability in nightmare prevalence across different age groups (El Shabbagh et al., 2023; Lemyre, Bastien, Vallieres, 2019; Li et al., 2010). In addition, the longitudinal findings of Hublin et al. (1999), showing a persistence of nightmare experiences from childhood into adulthood, emphasise the need for a comprehensive understanding of how early dream experiences might set the stage for later psychological outcomes.

Belicki (1992) emphasised the distinction between nightmare frequency and the suffering associated with these dreams. This distinction is essential for a deeper understanding of nightmare pathology, as it suggests that even individuals who experience frequent nightmares may not necessarily suffer from them in a way that impacts their daily functioning (Ollilia et al., 2024). Conversely, some individuals may experience nightmares infrequently, but the emotional distress they cause could be profound and long-lasting (Gieselmann, ait Aoudia, Carr, 2019). Such insights call for a more individualised approach to assessing the impact of nightmares, particularly when considering their role in psychiatric disorders. The lack of research examining the specific impact of nightmare experiences, particularly in relation to mental health outcomes, remains a significant gap in the literature.

Levin and Nielsen (2009) proposed that nightmares arise from two primary processes: affect load, the result of emotional pressures in daily life, and affect distress, the emotional toll of adverse events. This dual-process model offers a compelling framework for understanding the complexity of nightmares, yet it requires more empirical validation to ascertain whether both affect load and distress

are equally predictive of nightmare frequency and severity across different populations. Supporting this view, Fireman, Levin, and Pope (2014) found that nightmares often reflect deficits in emotional regulation rather than merely representing bad dreams. This aligns with Nielsen's (2017) description of idiopathic nightmares, which are frequently linked to adverse childhood experiences. However, the focus on childhood experiences as the primary etiological factor for idiopathic nightmares warrants further exploration, as it tends to overlook the potential contributions of later life stressors, trauma, or ongoing psychological challenges that may contribute to the persistence of nightmares (Garriques, Dhruve, Nadoriff, 2024).

Given the high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences and their significant impact on mental and physical health in adulthood, it is critical to investigate the ways in which these early experiences shape the psychological and neurological processes involved in dreaming, including the potential for nightmares to serve as a mechanism of emotional processing or coping with unresolved trauma. More research is needed to explore these connections in greater depth, particularly regarding the ways in which nightmares might function as a form of psychological defence or maladaptive coping strategy.

## **Lucid Dreams**

Lucid dreaming is the phenomenon in which individuals become aware that they are dreaming while still in the dream state (van Eeden, 1913; LaBerge & Rheingold, 1990; Tholey & Utecht, 1987; Baird et al., 2019). This awareness often allows dreamers to exert some degree of control over their actions within the dream, and in some cases, they can use bodily movements to signal lucidity to the external world (Voss, Holzmann, Tuin, Hobson, 2009; Baird et al., 2019). However, while the ability to signal lucidity is well-documented, it remains unclear whether this act of signalling reflects a universal characteristic of lucidity or whether it is a specific cultural or methodological artefact, particularly in studies where participants are pre-instructed to engage in such signalling behaviour (Ellis, De Koninck, Bastien, 2021; Harb, Brownlow Ross, 2016; Ouchene et al. 2023).

Lucid dreams are generally considered to occur during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep (Hearne, 1978; LaBerge, 1980), with Schredl and Erlacher (2004) supporting the REM-sleep hypothesis. However, the exclusive association with REM sleep has been contested, with some research suggesting that lucidity might be induced under other sleep phases or through external influences such as meditation or heightened states of awareness (Harb, Brownlow, Ross, 2016). This raises the question of whether REM sleep is an essential condition for lucidity, or if lucidity itself is a multifactorial phenomenon that can emerge under a broader range of circumstances. The limited frequency with which people experience lucid dreams, despite their potential psychological and spiritual significance (Gackenback, 1978; Knudson, 2003), has led to the underrepresentation of lucid dreaming as an area of scientific inquiry (Sparrow et al., 2018). While some researchers have framed lucid dreaming in mystical terms, others have adopted a more scientifically rigorous approach that focuses on experimental studies (Kuiken, 1995; Hunt, 1982; LaBerge, 1980). The challenge, however, lies in balancing scientific objectivity with the subjective nature of lucidity, which resists straightforward categorisation and calls for an integrated understanding of the experiential, cognitive, existential and sensory dimensions of the experience.

A consistent finding across lucid dreaming research is the link between lucid dream frequency and dream recall (Belicki, Hunt, & Belicki, 1978; Blackmore, 1982; Hearne, 1978; Watson, 2001; Wolpin, Marston, Randolph, & Clothies, 1992). Schredl (2004) identified a significant correlation between lucid dream frequency and certain personality traits, such as "thin boundaries," absorption, imagination, and openness to experience. While these findings are valuable, they call for further investigation into the specific mechanisms by which personality traits influence lucid dreaming. Specifically, how do traits like absorption or imagination foster the development of lucidity, and could other psychological constructs, such as emotional regulation or cognitive flexibility, play a more substantial role? (Shafiei, 2019; Zink, 2013b) This exploration is important from a counselling psychology perspective, where the role of emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and self-awareness

in therapeutic processes is well-documented. Schredl's (2019) study, which found that attitudes towards dreams correlated with lucidity, suggests that both personality and attitudinal factors play a pivotal role in dream recall and lucidity. However, the reliance on self-report measures in these studies poses significant methodological challenges, as participants may exaggerate or downplay the frequency or intensity of their lucid dreams based on cultural or social expectations. Additionally, the predominantly university student sample from Schredl's (2004) study limits the generalisability of the findings, as it may not reflect the broader population's dream experiences or attitudes.

Schredl's use of rating scales in surveys, while standard in dream research, may obscure the richness of individual dream experiences. Rating scales are inherently reductive and may fail to capture the complexity of lucid dreaming, particularly with regard to its qualitative aspects. For example, the depth of lucidity, emotional intensity, and the impact of lucidity on waking life are variables that may not be fully conveyed through a numerical scale (Stewart & Koulack, 1989). Furthermore, the use of online surveys introduces the potential for response bias, as participants may respond based on what they perceive is expected of them rather than providing an accurate representation of their experiences (Stumbrys et al., 2014). The cultural context in which lucid dreaming is explored also warrants consideration; varying cultural beliefs about dreams may influence how people interpret and report their lucid dreams, complicating cross-cultural comparisons. The absence of a standardised definition of lucidity further exacerbates these issues, as the experience can range from a fleeting awareness of being in a dream to full control over the dream narrative.

Rossi (1972) proposed that lucidity exists on a spectrum between "self-awareness" and "consciously directed effort," suggesting that lucid dreaming is not a binary phenomenon but rather a gradation of awareness and control. This model challenges the conventional view of lucidity as a categorical phenomenon, advocating instead for a more fluid conceptualisation that better accounts for the variety of lucid experiences. Rossi's perspective raises critical questions about how lucidity is measured and whether current methodologies adequately capture the full range of experiences.

Moreover, the emphasis on lucidity as a form of “consciously directed effort” emphasises the need for a more nuanced exploration of how volition, identity formation, and other cognitive processes contribute to the experience of lucidity and its potential therapeutic value (Hartmann, 1998).

Schredl (2018) suggested that keeping a dream journal could influence the recall of lucid dreams, linking motivation and attitudes towards dreams with dream recall frequency. However, while dream journals may encourage reflection, the potential for bias in recall also suggests that individuals with stronger motivations may report lucid dreams more frequently than others, thereby distorting the true prevalence of the phenomenon (Schredl, Fuchs, Mallett, 2022). The methodological limitations of such studies, particularly with regard to sample selection, recall bias, and the difficulty of quantifying lucidity, indicate the need for more sophisticated tools and approaches to study this phenomenon in greater depth. Future research must refine its measurement techniques to better capture the nuances of lucidity, including the intensity of awareness, the degree of control, and the emotional impact of lucid dreaming.

Nielsen (2000) raised an important question about the cognitive abilities involved in dream reporting: Are there cognitive activities beyond the individual’s introspective capabilities that influence how they perceive and report their dreams? This line of inquiry opens new avenues for exploring the cognitive mechanisms underlying lucid dreaming and highlights the need for further investigation into how cognitive training or psychological interventions might influence dream recall and lucidity. Beaulieu-Prevost and Zadra (2005) and Windt (2013) agree that positive attitudes towards dreams and specific training techniques can improve dream recall and the ability to report dreams accurately. This suggests that lucidity may not only be a spontaneous phenomenon but could be cultivated through training, raising important questions about the role of cognitive and emotional processes in dream experiences.

## **Dreams and Creativity: A Critical Engagement**

The historical origins of inventive ideas found in dreams showcase human potential across centuries. From antiquity to modern times, researchers have drawn connections between dreaming and heightened creativity (Cartwright, 2010; Hobson & Schredl, 2011; Kramer, 2013). This creative capacity, it is suggested, demonstrates how individuals can harness their dreams as a valuable resource to enhance their wakeful lives. Dreams have been linked to the generation of art, mathematical proofs, architectural designs, and even advancements in technology such as computer programming (Barrett, 2001, 2017; Garfield, 1995). Essentially, dreaming constitutes a distinct psychological state in which the brain engages in processes that offer solutions to problems that may be insurmountable during waking hours (Garfield, 1974, 1995).

One area of interest has been the association between REM sleep, vivid dreaming, and creativity. Zink & Pietrowsky (2013) conducted a quantitative study exploring the relationship between lucid dreaming, dream characteristics, and creativity. The study found that participants who experienced frequent lucid dreams performed better in creativity-related tasks than those who did not. However, the study had methodological limitations that warrant further scrutiny. For example, the sample was biased by participants' prior interest in lucid dreaming, leading to overrepresentation in this group. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data from an online survey introduces concerns about data accuracy and generalisability. While these findings suggest a potential link between lucid dreaming and creativity, they also raise questions about the role of pre-existing beliefs and biases in shaping participants' experiences of creativity during dreams.

Similarly, Barrett (2001) posits that dreaming is an altered state where the brain operates under different parameters than in waking life. This high brain activity during dreams may foster problem-solving abilities that are less accessible during waking hours. However, it is important to critically assess how we conceptualise and measure "creativity." In many of these studies, creativity is often defined narrowly—typically through tasks involving divergent thinking or artistic production—yet



creativity can manifest in myriad ways, including cognitive flexibility, emotional insight, and novel problem-solving approaches. A more nuanced understanding of creativity, perhaps from a transpersonal or existential perspective, could deepen our engagement with the ways in which dreams contribute to personal growth and development.

Building on this, Glaskin et al. (2015) explored the link between perception, dreams, and creative realisation through a meta-analysis. They noted that extending perceptual openness from wakefulness into the dream state creates a valuable framework for understanding the psychological impact of dreams. In particular, they argued that the cognitive processes during dreaming could help solve waking life problems. However, the authors called for further primary research to verify these claims. The critique of this meta-analysis highlights an ongoing challenge in dream research: while many studies explore the potential of dreams in enhancing creativity, the empirical evidence remains inconclusive, and the methodologies employed often lack robustness. One limitation is the failure to account for how individual differences, such as personality traits, cultural backgrounds, or even pre-dream emotional states, influence dream content and subsequent creativity.

Franklin and Zyphur's (2015) meta-analysis of dream studies further reinforces the idea that visual images and emotions experienced in dreams influence thinking and behaviour. The authors argue that our experiences in dreams enhance our cognitive flexibility and emotional insight, which may ultimately lead to problem-solving and innovative thinking. However, they also assert that time spent on dreams affects brain development, which can influence future behavioural predispositions. This hypothesis invites further discussion about the role of dreams in shaping long-term cognitive and emotional trajectories. From a counselling psychology perspective, these findings suggest that dreams may play a significant role in emotional processing and self-understanding, potentially providing therapeutic insights for clients.

## **Theoretical Frameworks and Critiques**

To deepen the critical engagement with these studies, it is essential to consider the theoretical underpinnings that shape our understanding of creativity in dreams. For example, cognitive-behavioural models of creativity tend to focus on how dreams can provide solutions to problems through pattern recognition and cognitive restructuring. In contrast, existential approaches might view dreams as symbolic expressions of the client's search for meaning or resolution of existential concerns such as death, freedom, isolation, and identity. Understanding dreams through these different theoretical lenses can offer valuable insights into how they contribute to the therapeutic process.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, dreams might be viewed as windows into the unconscious mind, revealing hidden desires, fears, or conflicts that shape waking behaviour. This view aligns with Freud's early work on dreams as wish fulfilment but also invites critique from a contemporary standpoint. For instance, modern neuropsychological research, which emphasises the role of the brain in processing emotional memories during sleep, may challenge the purely symbolic or unconscious interpretation of dreams as posited by Freudian theory. In contrast, existential and phenomenological frameworks, which emphasise individual lived experience and self-authenticity, might focus more on how dreams reflect the individual's quest for meaning and personal identity.

Additionally, the measurement of creativity within dream research remains a contested area. Traditional approaches to assessing creativity often rely on standardised tests, such as the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, which focus on divergent thinking and problem-solving (Celume, Ivcevic, Zenasni, 2023). While these measures provide useful insights into cognitive flexibility, they fail to capture creativity's broader, more nuanced dimensions, including emotional, social, and spiritual growth. This highlights a critical gap in the research, where creativity is often defined in a narrow, task-oriented way, neglecting the holistic and dynamic nature of creative expression in dreams.

## **Cultural and Existential Implications**

Culturally, dreams and creativity hold distinct meanings across societies. In some cultures, dreams are seen as a source of wisdom or spiritual guidance, while in others, they may be viewed as mere mental byproducts of the unconscious mind. In counselling psychology, cultural competence is critical when working with clients who may have different understandings of dreams and their relevance to personal growth. For example, indigenous cultures often regard dreams as essential components of identity formation and community cohesion (Lohmann, 2019). This cultural variability suggests that therapeutic approaches should be flexible, accommodating clients' diverse beliefs and practices surrounding dreams.

From an existential perspective, dreams can be seen as reflections of the client's inner struggles with meaning, identity, and freedom. Existential therapy focuses on helping clients confront their anxieties related to death, isolation, and authenticity. In this context, dreams may serve as powerful tools for exploring the deeper, often unconscious, aspects of the self. For example, lucid dreaming, where individuals gain conscious control over their dreams, may offer clients an opportunity to explore existential themes in a safe, controlled environment. Such an approach could be particularly beneficial for clients experiencing existential crises, helping them integrate unconscious insights into their conscious decision-making processes.

## **Conclusion and Future Directions**

In conclusion, while the link between dreams and creativity holds promise, there is still much to learn. Studies have demonstrated the potential of dreams to enhance cognitive flexibility, problem-solving, and emotional insight. However, critical engagement with the methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and cultural implications of these studies is necessary to fully understand the role of dreams in creativity.

Counselling psychologists may begin to incorporate dream-related creativity into their work by exploring the therapeutic potential of lucid dreaming, using dreams as a tool for emotional insight, and

recognizing the role of dreams in clients' search for meaning and personal growth. Future research should focus on refining the measurement of creativity in dreams, exploring cultural variations in dream interpretation, and investigating the existential significance of dreams in psychotherapy. By engaging with these perspectives, counselling psychology can develop a more holistic, integrative approach to working with clients' dreams, enhancing both therapeutic practice and theoretical understanding.

## **. Impactful Dreams**

Dreams that have an enduring impact on the dreamers' life have been addressed using several names: impactful, big dreams, vivid, extraordinary dreams (see Krippner, 2001 for a review), and highly memorable dreams, to name a few (Barrett, 2001; Bogzaran, 2003; Bulkeley, 2000; Kuiken & Sikora, 1993). *This study adopts the term "vivid dreams" due to the interchangeable nature of these names.*

Kuiken and Sikora (1996) defined impactful dreams as "dreams that noticeably influence thoughts and feelings after waking" (p.98). These dreams are considered to exert a significant effect on the participant's emotional and psychological states. However, *as they argue, the procedures for identifying impactful dreams challenge conventional conceptions of dream interpretation, as the meanings of impactful dreams do not always correlate directly with historical or situational causes, such as personality traits, prior interpersonal relationships, or traumatic events (Knudson, 2001; Kuiken, Lee, Northcott, 2023). This observation highlights that impactful dreams often transcend straightforward explanatory models, inviting deeper inquiry into their significance.*

Furthermore, the experience of an impactful dream does not inherently lead to an immediate understanding of its content. *As Knudson (2001) points out, meaning is often attributed after the dreamer has engaged with it in waking consciousness. Kuiken et al. (2018, p. 60) emphasise that the meaning of an impactful dream, much like a poem, emerges not from explanatory "why" questions but from explorations of "how" dream elements (e.g., objects, places, characters, events) present themselves. This interpretative approach emphasises that the value of impactful dreams lies in the*

*descriptive richness of their content and the reflective process it prompts. Bulkeley (2019) emphasises that this process of explication involves uncovering the implicit and inexpressible dimensions of the dream, which can reveal novel insights into the dreamer's psyche. Such a perspective challenges reductionist interpretations and suggests that impactful dreams have a transformative potential that warrants careful exploration.*

In their 1993 study, Kuiken and Sikora identified distinct types of impactful dreams that influence subsequent waking thoughts and emotions. These categories included anxiety dreams, transcendent dreams, and existential dreams. *Anxiety dreams closely resembled nightmares, as described in earlier research, characterised by intense fear, avoidance, and heightened vigilance upon awakening. Transcendent dreams, on the other hand, involved archetypal motifs and evoked feelings of ecstasy, awe, and a heightened awareness of spiritual or existential possibilities. Existential dreams, a category not previously highlighted in the literature, involved experiences of emotional turmoil, such as agony or discouragement, and often served to surface suppressed emotions (Hartmann, 2008; Knudson, 2003). Additionally, Kuiken and Sikora (1993) noted a fourth category—mundane dreams—which lacked the distinctive qualities of the other three but were still memorable to the dreamer.*

Building on this, Busink and Kuiken (1996) conducted a qualitative study involving 30 volunteers aged between 18 and 45 years. Using cluster analysis, they identified five classes of dreams, each with a characteristic emotional profile and set of experiential features such as sensory phenomena, goals, and movement styles. *Four of these categories corresponded to the types of dreams Kuiken and Sikora (1993) had identified: anxiety, transcendent, existential, and mundane dreams. A fifth category, alienation dreams, emerged, characterised by interpersonal concerns and emotional agitation. The addition of alienation dreams emphasises the dynamic and evolving nature of dream classification frameworks, offering further avenues for understanding interpersonal and emotional dimensions of impactful dreaming (Kuiken, 2024). While the addition of alienation dreams*

*enriches the classification framework, it is important to note that these categories are still in the early stages of development and require further validation.*

It is also important to recognise that Kuiken and Sikora's (1993) research primarily focused on the classification of dreams rather than on exploring the life context of the dreamer or examining the evolving significance of these dreams over time. *As noted by Knudson (1999), the understanding of impactful dreams could be further enhanced by considering how these dreams play a role in the ongoing life of the dreamer, particularly in terms of their emotional and psychological integration. Moreover, impactful dreams often reveal unresolved issues or unprocessed emotions, offering a therapeutic entry point for addressing these latent concerns (Kramer, 2007; Kuiken, 2024).* This notion is clinically relevant, especially in cases where intense emotions are evoked in dreams that do not align with the dreamer's conscious expectations. Understanding this aspect emphasises the potential utility of impactful dreams in therapeutic settings, particularly for processing trauma and promoting emotional integration.

Olsen, Schredl, and Carlsson (2020) conducted a study investigating the conscious use of dreams in waking life. Their study, involving 667 participants over the age of 18, found that 62.1% of participants believed that dreams had a significant impact on their waking lives. Furthermore, 55.8% of participants reported that dreams contributed to their creative processes, and 52.9% found that dreams helped with emotional and non-emotional problem-solving. *The study highlights the pervasive influence of dreams on waking cognition and creativity, emphasising their relevance in personal decision-making processes. These findings emphasise the potential for impactful dreams to influence decision-making and problem-solving in waking life. This intersection between dreaming and waking states highlights a fertile area for further interdisciplinary research, encompassing psychological, cognitive, and neuroscientific perspectives.*

The analysis of various studies on impactful dreams reveals that different types of dreams have distinct and significant effects on one's waking life. *While Kuiken and Sikora's (1993) framework for*

*classifying impactful dreams remains a compelling and replicable tool, subsequent studies have introduced other types of impactful dreams, such as significant dreams (Knudson), big dreams (Jung), earliest remembered dreams (Bulkeley), and central image dreams (Hartmann). However, it is the framework of Kuiken and Sikora (1993) that is most relevant to this research due to its detailed classification of dreams that are particularly influential in shaping the dreamer's waking life experience. This classification framework provides a valuable foundation for exploring how impactful dreams function as catalysts for psychological growth and transformation.*

*As contemporary research continues to explore the wide variety of impactful dreams, the need for qualitative studies that investigate how these dreams are experienced and interpreted over time remains crucial. Such research could illuminate the complex interplay between dream content, individual meaning-making processes, and broader psychological integration, providing new pathways for both theoretical and clinical advancements.*

### **Qualitative Studies on Impactful Dreams**

The research on vivid dreams and their enduring impact has predominantly relied on quantitative methodologies (Pagel, 1992; Kuiken & Sikora, 1993; Schredl, 2020; Kuiken, Ming-Ni, & Peyton, 2023). Several researchers have highlighted a gap in qualitative approaches that explore the subjective, metaphorical connections between dreams and an individual's waking life (Knudson, 2006; Malinowski et al., 2014). This gap has been addressed in part by Malinowski et al. (2014), who conducted a qualitative study using four participants. Through detailed semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, they identified three key themes that highlight the continuity between dreams and waking life: experiential continuity, emotional continuity, and representative continuity. While these findings contribute to the broader understanding of the complex relationship between dreams and waking life, there is a critical need for a deeper exploration of the implications of these themes in counselling psychology.

The first theme, experiential continuity, suggests that thoughts and experiences from waking life are reflected in dreams, while emotional continuity indicates that the emotions felt in dreams carry over into waking life. Representative continuity, the third theme, explores how waking life is symbolically represented in dreams. These themes offer valuable insights, but the study's reliance on only four participants may not fully capture the diversity of how dreams connect with waking life. Furthermore, the study's reliance on thematic analysis—often criticised for its tendency to simplify complex subjective phenomena into rigid categories—limits the depth of subjective insights that could be gained from a more interpretive, phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2009). This raises questions about the appropriateness of thematic analysis for studying the rich, dynamic nature of dreams, which are inherently fluid and subjective in nature (Bagey, 2012). The use of more interpretive methodologies, such as phenomenological analysis or narrative inquiry, might uncover deeper layers of meaning and the evolving nature of dream experiences that thematic analysis may overlook.

Additionally, the small sample size in Malinowski et al. (2014) raises concerns about the generalisability of the findings. The study's methodological limitations reflect a broader issue in dream research: the challenge of capturing the complexity of dreams in a small sample. While qualitative methods prioritise depth over breadth, a larger, more diverse sample would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how impactful dreams function across different cultural or personal contexts. The lack of cultural diversity within the sample in Malinowski et al. (2014) further limits the study's relevance to broader populations. Dreams are deeply shaped by cultural, social, and personal contexts, and there is a pressing need to conduct research that examines how these factors influence dream experiences across different demographic groups (Krippner & Malinowski, 2017). Cultural biases and assumptions about the universal nature of dreams could lead to the oversimplification of findings, and exploring cross-cultural perspectives would provide a more nuanced understanding of how dreams are interpreted and integrated into waking life (Hall, 1953; Lohmann, 2019).



An earlier qualitative study by Carey (2010) examined the impact of meaningful dreams on the lives of 12 middle-aged women who had worked with their dreams for over 30 years. The participants, aged between 49 and 64, reported that meaningful dreams served as a guide during key life decisions. While this study presents valuable findings about the long-term impact of dreams, its focus on a homogenous sample of women from the U.S. raises concerns about the cultural specificity of the results. The lack of cross-cultural comparison may limit the study's applicability, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how women from different backgrounds use dreams in decision-making. Furthermore, the fact that these dreams were experienced decades ago introduces the issue of memory distortion, potentially obscuring the original meanings of the dreams (Carey, 2010). This highlights the need for longitudinal studies that explore the evolving meaning of dreams over time and account for potential changes in memory and interpretation (Kuiken, 2020).

Similarly, Schulte (2008) used purposive sampling to recruit 10 adult participants who underwent open-ended interviews to understand how individuals learn from their dreams. The study's thematic analysis revealed that dreams are closely connected to waking experiences, supporting the notion of experiential continuity. While Schulte's findings align with those of Malinowski et al. (2014), the study's focus on educational psychology may limit its broader application to other domains of psychology, such as clinical or existential interpretations of dreams (Davey, 2023). Educational psychology primarily examines learning processes in academic settings, which may not fully capture the therapeutic or existential significance of dreams for individuals working through personal or psychological issues (Davey, 2023). Additionally, although useful, Schulte's use of thematic analysis may oversimplify the complexity of dream symbolism and subjective experience, as it tends to reduce the richness of participants' narratives into predefined themes. As Bagey (2012) criticises, there is a risk in treating dream interpretation as something that can be "mastered" scientifically, which overlooks the ever-evolving, subjective nature of dream meaning. To address these concerns, future studies should

consider more flexible, interpretive approaches that honour the dynamic and subjective qualities of dream experiences.

Malinowski et al. (2014) also found that individual differences, particularly attitudes, significantly influence how people perceive the continuity between their dreams and waking life. This is crucial, as it highlights the role of personal perspective in shaping dream experiences. This finding suggests that future research could benefit from a deeper exploration of how personality traits, cultural backgrounds, and psychological states influence the interpretation and integration of dreams into waking life. In particular, exploring how these individual differences affect the therapeutic use of dreams could offer valuable insights for counselling psychologists. Research could examine how clients with different personality traits or psychological conditions engage with their dreams in therapy and whether these dreams can serve as a tool for insight, healing, or personal growth. Additionally, examining the role of cultural and spiritual beliefs in the interpretation of dreams would enrich our understanding of how dreams can be meaningfully integrated into the therapeutic process (Krippner & Malinowski, 2017).

Another recent qualitative study by Iftikhar et al. (2020) explored the connection between impactful dreams and their function in waking life using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study involved four adults and uncovered ten themes, including participants' curiosity about their dreams, the connection between dreaming and waking life, and how dreams reflect personality traits. The use of IPA in this study allows for a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of the participants, focusing on their personal interpretations of dreams. This approach is preferable to thematic analysis in capturing the subjective nature of dreams. However, the study's small sample size (four participants) limits its generalisability, and the research could be expanded by including a more diverse group to explore the range of ways dreams influence people from different cultural or demographic backgrounds (Iftikhar et al., 2020). Future studies could also build on this research by exploring how these dreams function in therapeutic contexts, particularly in existential or

psychodynamic approaches, where the exploration of meaning and unconscious material is central to the therapeutic process (Emmy van Deurzen, 2009).

Overall, the qualitative studies on impactful dreams reviewed here illustrate a growing body of research that highlights the complex relationship between dreams and waking life. While these studies contribute important insights into the subjective experience of dreams, they also demonstrate the challenges of studying such a deeply personal phenomenon. Limitations such as small sample sizes, the risk of cultural biases, and methodological constraints (such as the reliance on thematic analysis) must be addressed in future research. To build a more comprehensive understanding of impactful dreams, it will be essential to employ a variety of qualitative methodologies, including longitudinal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and more interpretive, phenomenological approaches. Additionally, future research should explore the clinical implications of these findings, examining how dreams can be utilised in therapeutic settings to promote self-awareness, emotional processing, and healing. This would not only enhance the relevance of dream research in the field of counselling psychology but also offer practical insights for therapists seeking to integrate dreams into their clinical work.

### ***Dreams in Contemporary Psychological Treatment***

The use of dreams in psychotherapy has been a central technique since Freud's seminal work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, with many clinicians positing that dreams hold psychological significance and therefore offer clinical value in therapy (Crook & Hill, 2003; Eudell-Simmons & Hilsenroth, 2005, 2007; Hill, 1996; Hill & Knox, 2010; Hill & Spangler, 2007; Moustakas, 1996; Schredl et al., 2000). By exploring dreams, therapists can facilitate emotional processing, offer guidance, and help clients uncover connections between their thoughts and daily experiences. Dreams serve as a valuable tool to access hidden emotions and offer insights into clients' inner worlds, contributing to their therapeutic progress and self-awareness.

Dreaming and psychotherapy share several common features, such as affect regulation, conflict resolution, problem-solving, self-awareness, and adaptation (Pagel, 2001). However, a critical question arises: Does the therapist's theoretical orientation influence the interpretation process, potentially limiting the client's autonomy? For example, a psychodynamic therapist might emphasise latent content, whereas a cognitive behavioural therapist may focus on present-day cognitive schemas. This tension emphasises the need to explore whether such frameworks fully honour the client's subjective experience of dreams.

In recent decades, there has been a notable resurgence of interest in the field of dreams within psychology. This is evident through new models and increased research demonstrating the effectiveness of incorporating dreams into psychotherapy (Lyon & Wimmer, 2005). In Western clinical settings, the dreamer is often positioned as the expert of their dreams, while the therapist serves as a knowledgeable guide (Barrett, 2001; Hill, 1996). Although empowering, this approach assumes a level of dream literacy that may not always exist. Furthermore, it risks underutilising the therapist's expertise in decoding complex or symbolic dream content (Caviglia, 2021; Coolidge, 2022; Roesler, 2023). To balance empowerment and guidance, co-interpretative methods, where therapists and clients collaboratively analyse dreams, could offer a promising direction for future research.

Dreamwork has played a pivotal role in psychology's early development, yet its importance has fluctuated due to the dominance of empirically driven models. Lenard and Dawson (2018) argue that dreams have been marginalised in psychological practice because few therapists have been trained in dreamwork (Cartwright, 1993) or avoid it altogether (Crook & Hill, 2003; Ellis, 2020; Fox, 2002; Hill & Knox, 2010; Hoffman & Lewis, 2014; Keller et al., 1995; King, Bulkeley, Welt, 2011; Schredl, 2000). The noticeable tension has arisen from the increase in novel developments within dream research, particularly cognitive neuroscience findings, which are rarely disseminated into training programs or supported in professional development (King, Bulkeley, Welt, 2011; Hoffman & Lewis, 2014).

Existential-phenomenological approaches, influenced by philosophers like Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, emphasise dreams as embodied and temporal experiences. This stands in contrast to cognitive behavioural methods, which focus on measurable, present-focused goals (Hill et al. 2004). Such theoretical divergences highlight the need for a nuanced critique of how dreams are integrated into therapy, particularly when attempting to reconcile experiential and evidence-based paradigms.

Schredl et al. (2010) highlight the growing recognition of dream interpretation in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), as contemporary scientific research links dreams to cognitive and emotional processes (Hill et al., 2004; Scarpelli, 2019). Tapping into dream content has been shown to enhance psychological treatment (Spangler & Sim, 2023). However, while this integration is promising, it raises concerns about whether CBT's structured, goal-oriented framework can accommodate the nuanced, subjective nature of dreams. Future research should explore how dream interpretation can be standardised within CBT without sacrificing its experiential depth.

Several systematic studies on the frequency of applying dreams in therapy reveal both their value and challenges. Keller et al. (1995) surveyed 228 clinicians engaged in private practice and found that 57% occasionally used dreams, 9% frequently, 4% usually, and 17% never used dreamwork in therapy. Interestingly, therapists noted that clients often initiated dream discussions themselves. However, the study did not differentiate between therapeutic modalities, which included Freudian, Gestalt, and Jungian frameworks. In contrast, Schredl et al. (2000) surveyed 131 privately practising therapists, finding that 28% actively worked on dreams, 49% had a history of doing so, and 70.4% of clients reported benefiting from dreamwork. These findings suggest that dreamwork is gaining prominence across modalities such as CBT, existential, gestalt, and dreamwork-specific approaches.

Nevertheless, these studies did not explicitly define treatment success, and the narrow focus on Western private-practice therapists limits their generalisability. For example, Schredl's focus on two German cities emphasises the need for cross-cultural research. Additionally, only therapists with psychoanalytic training appear to prompt dream use more frequently.

Emerging neuroscientific research presents an opportunity to enhance dreamwork's therapeutic applications. For example, findings on REM sleep and emotional regulation provide insights that could inform clinical practice. However, the challenge lies in ensuring dreams are not reduced to mere neurobiological processes, neglecting their symbolic and existential significance. Interdisciplinary collaboration between neuroscience and phenomenology may offer a more holistic understanding of dreams.

Several existing dream models affirm that dreams are psychologically meaningful and valuable to therapy. Yet, the lack of standardised manuals and training for dream interpretation has led therapists to rely on their theoretical assumptions (Werman, 1978; Schredl, 2000; Hackett, 2020), instead of staying up-to-date with current research. For example, Kara and Ozcan (2019) note that symbolic interpretations—such as equating upright objects with male sexuality—can overshadow the client's subjective experience. This highlights the need for flexible, co-constructed methods of dream analysis that honour the client's voice while incorporating the therapist's expertise.

In summary, dreams continue to hold significant promise in psychological treatment, offering a window into clients' emotional and cognitive worlds. However, addressing theoretical biases, cultural limitations, and the divide between experiential and evidence-based approaches remains critical to unlocking dreams' full therapeutic potential.

### ***Literature Review Conclusion***

The literature on vivid dreams has yielded valuable insights that transcend 'time' and cultural boundaries, highlighting the profound nature of dreaming and its deep-rooted connections to human consciousness (King, Bulkeley, Welt, 2011, p.2). Ancient civilisations viewed dreams as powerful communication channels with the divine and sources of healing and wisdom (Tedlock, 1989; Bruner, 1989, cited in Tedlock). In ancient Egypt, sleep temples served as sacred spaces for communicating with deities and making important decisions that impacted society, while in ancient Greece, dreams

were believed to originate from both spiritual entities and the individual, seen as sources of healing and insight. In China, dreams were considered reflections of the balance of universal forces, particularly the interplay of yin and yang within individuals. Additionally, in biblical accounts, dreams were regarded as channels of communication with the divine, intricately woven into the fabric of daily life. While these ancient perspectives highlight the universal and transformative nature of dreams, their interpretations were often contextually bound to specific spiritual, philosophical, and societal frameworks. This emphasises the importance of recognising both cultural richness and historical specificity when analysing dreams.

Western metaphysics has influenced contemporary interpretations, losing their prominence by devaluing dreams and their meaning, creating a dualistic perspective that may constrain our understanding of dreams' ongoing impact and significance beyond the boundaries of waking life (Cartwright, 2008). The enduring contributions of Freud, Jung, and Boss to Western psychology have provided fundamental frameworks for understanding dreams' intricacies, revealing connections to the unconscious mind, the exploration of the psyche, and existential realities (Béres & Blum, 2017; Freud, 1900; Jung, 1964; Bizzri et al., 2020). While their theories have been widely applied, their emphasis on universal archetypes or the unconscious can sometimes overlook individual and cultural variability in dream interpretation. As such, integrating culturally sensitive approaches into these frameworks may provide more inclusive applications in contemporary contexts.

Philosophical approaches to dreaming, such as Windt's transparency view and Rosen's narrative fabrication thesis, have added depth to our understanding of dream reporting and the qualitative dimensions of dreaming (Windt, 2013; Rosen, 2013). Concurrently, theories like the emotional regulation theory, continuity hypothesis, threat simulation theory, and social simulation theory emphasise the adaptive value of dreaming and its relevance in counselling psychology (Kramer, 2010; Cartwright, 2010; Revonsuo, 2003; Revonsuo, Tuominen, & Valli, 2015). However, these theories are not without critique. For example, while the continuity hypothesis emphasises a link between waking

experiences and dream content, it has been criticised for underexploring dreams that challenge or deviate from waking reality. Similarly, adaptive theories such as threat and social simulation have faced limitations in explaining non-threatening or neutral dream content. Future research might benefit from integrating these theories with broader existential or phenomenological approaches to capture the diversity of dream phenomena.

Another major contention in the field of dreams research lies in the divide between researchers who prioritise empirical evidence to establish dreams' functional roles and those who emphasise the interpretative, meaningful aspects of dreaming. This division has often been misunderstood, with empirical studies critiqued for neglecting subjective meaning and interpretative approaches dismissed as unscientific or speculative. For instance, the hypothesis that dreams may be vestigial or by-product processes—akin to evolutionary relics—raises critical questions about whether they serve any adaptive purpose at all. Critics of this perspective argue that such a reductionist view risks oversimplifying the complexity of dreaming and dismissing its psychological and existential significance. Conversely, researchers exploring dream meaning often face accusations of lacking rigour, as interpretative methods are frequently deemed less robust or generalisable than empirical approaches. This polarisation risks stagnating progress in the field by framing the debate as mutually exclusive, rather than as complementary approaches that could together enrich our understanding of dreaming.

Moreover, this dichotomy highlights underlying philosophical disagreements about the nature of dreams and their place in human experience. While empirical research strives to validate functional theories (e.g., threat simulation or emotional regulation), it often fails to address the personal and transformative dimensions of dreaming that remain central to many lived experiences. Conversely, those advocating for the meaningfulness of dreams may overlook how functional theories could provide a structural foundation for understanding why certain dreams emerge. Bridging these perspectives requires a more integrative approach that values both empirical rigour and interpretative depth, acknowledging that dreams may simultaneously possess adaptive functions and profound subjective



meanings. Such an approach could not only reconcile existing divides but also address the persistent question of whether dreams are inherently 'useful' or meaningful, or if their significance lies primarily in how individuals engage with them.

The section on types of dreams and qualitative studies has shed light on the profound influence of impactful dreams on individuals' waking lives (Schredl, 2010). While classifications may vary based on measurement and variables employed, acknowledging broader cultural contexts becomes paramount in gaining deeper insights into dreams' profound impact on human actions.

This literature review delves into ancient cultural and spiritual ideas, enriching the understanding of vivid dreams and their resonance within the human experience. By incorporating perspectives from Egypt, Greece, China, and biblical accounts, we unlock valuable insights into the enduring significance of dreams across time and diverse civilisations. Acknowledging cultural contexts in dream interpretations opens pathways to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of this complex and transformative phenomenon. These synthesised findings serve as a firm foundation for future research and practice, inviting interdisciplinary collaborations to unlock the full potential of dreams as meaningful pathways to self-discovery and growth. Embracing cultural sensitivity and fostering an interdisciplinary approach will illuminate the universal significance of dreams in shaping the human psyche and revealing the interconnectedness of waking life and the enigmatic realm of the dream.

Overall, while the field has made significant strides in understanding vivid dreams' cultural, psychological, and philosophical dimensions, several challenges remain. These include reconciling diverse theoretical approaches, addressing methodological inconsistencies, and incorporating underexplored cultural perspectives. Current research highlights dreams' potential for psychological insight and emotional regulation, yet deeper engagement with existential-phenomenological approaches could broaden our understanding of their transformative and meaning-making capacities.

This synthesis not only emphasises the relevance of dreams in counselling psychology but also charts promising pathways for future interdisciplinary exploration.

This led to the current research paper exploring the ongoing impact of vivid dreams from an existential-phenomenological perspective.

### **Reflexivity in the Research Process**

My interest in dreams is deeply personal and rooted in a long-standing belief in their transformative potential. I approach this research with the assumption that dreams are not merely imagined phenomena but real, meaningful experiences that serve as messages or warnings, guiding personal and spiritual growth. This belief, integral to my identity as a counselling psychologist and psychotherapist, has inevitably shaped my engagement with the rich and multifaceted literature on vivid dreams. In my view, dreams hold the power to illuminate paths of self-discovery, healing, and existential insight, offering profound opportunities for personal and spiritual development.

Reflecting on the research process, I am keenly aware of how my positionality influenced my approach to the topic. My personal and professional interests in existential-phenomenological psychology orient me toward viewing dreams as deeply meaningful and transformative experiences. This lens shaped my engagement with the literature, leading me to prioritise themes of meaning-making, personal growth, and cultural diversity. This belief system influenced not only the framing of my research questions but also my engagement with the literature and interpretation of findings.

Engaging with ancient cultural perspectives on dreams—ranging from Egyptian sleep temples to Chinese yin-yang philosophies—evoked a sense of wonder and respect for the universal yet contextually rich nature of dreaming. However, as a researcher situated within a contemporary Western framework, I remained mindful of the risks of romanticising or misinterpreting these cultural practices through a present-day lens. To mitigate this, I sought to critically engage with historical interpretations

while incorporating voices from diverse disciplines, recognising the limitations of my own cultural and temporal standpoint.

Navigating the tension between empirical and interpretative approaches to dreams presented a key challenge. My preference for existential and phenomenological frameworks often clashed with empirical paradigms, such as emotional regulation or threat simulation theories. Rather than viewing these approaches as conflicting, I leaned into their dialectical tension, articulating how they might complement one another. For example, while emotional regulation theories emphasise adaptive functions, I framed these insights within a broader existential and spiritual context, highlighting the transformative potential of dreams to guide personal growth and healing. This dialectical process was enriched through member checking (see p.) with peers and participants, whose feedback helped refine my interpretations and broaden my understanding.

The incorporation of member checking was particularly transformative in deepening my appreciation for the relational and socially embedded dimensions of dreaming. Participants often highlighted aspects of dreams as shared and deeply relational phenomena, which challenged my initial focus on individual existential meaning. This iterative process emphasised the importance of co-constructing meaning with participants, ensuring their voices and insights remained central to the analysis.

Additionally, I reflected on how my personal experiences with vivid dreams shaped my research process. This connection occasionally blurred the boundary between researcher and subject, prompting me to engage in ongoing reflexivity to maintain critical distance. I documented these reflections in a research journal, which became a space to explore how my assumptions and experiences influenced my interpretations. This practice heightened my awareness of potential biases and deepened my empathy for participants' narratives, enabling a more open and nuanced approach to the data.

The interdisciplinary nature of the literature added another layer of complexity. Engaging with philosophical, psychological, and cultural theories of dreaming required me to navigate the epistemological distinctions among these fields while striving for synthesis. For instance, while philosophical perspectives like Windt's transparency view and Rosen's narrative fabrication thesis challenged me to reconsider the nature of dream experiences, I maintained that dreams reflect deeper truths that bridge psychological processes and existential realities. Integrating such diverse perspectives required a delicate balance between differentiation and integration, as well as a willingness to embrace the ambiguities inherent in dream research.

By maintaining a reflexive stance throughout this research process, I sought to balance my belief in dreams' transformative power with a commitment to academic rigour and cultural sensitivity. This reflexivity was woven into every stage of the research, from the framing of questions to the interpretation of findings, ensuring that my positionality was transparent and critically examined. While I am deeply invested in the view of dreams as meaningful and transformative phenomena, I remained open to alternative interpretations, embracing pluralism and interdisciplinary insights to cultivate a holistic understanding of dreams.

Ultimately, this research journey became both a scholarly and personal exploration of dreams as pathways to self-discovery, healing, and growth. By foregrounding my own stance while engaging critically with diverse perspectives, I aimed to foster a dialogue that embraces complexity and inclusivity. This process emphasised the importance of dreams as windows into the human condition, revealing their enduring capacity to illuminate the intersections of cultural, psychological, and existential dimensions.

## **Chapter Two**

### ***Methodology and method***

“There is no such thing as *the one* phenomenology”,

- Heidegger (1962)

### ***Introduction***

The literature review demonstrated challenges to understanding dreams due to various reasons surrounding their impact and use upon waking, from historical accounts to contemporary research. This has provided an opportunity to conduct a qualitative study. The paucity of qualitative research on vivid dreams in the extant literature supports the relevance and juncture of exploring the experience from an existential-phenomenological perspective. A qualitative psychological study would allow participants to put forward their accounts of their experiences of dreaming and the impact upon awakening, allowing me to gain answers to important questions left unexplored by previous research that constitute the aims of the present study, such as a). understand the experience of dreaming, b). how the participants make sense of the experience, and c) their understanding of processing the impact of the dream on their lives. This chapter introduces the research question and examines the methodological framework used to answer it. The inquiry delves into Structural Existential Analysis (SEA), an existential-phenomenological method developed by van Deurzen (2010, 2014), rooted in the works of Husserl, Binswanger, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger. The chapter covers methodological considerations, data analysis, and ethics.

The study's aim was to answer the research question:

***What is the experience of vivid dreams and their impact on the dreamer's life? A phenomenological enquiry.***

### **Phenomenological Research**

Dreams involve complex human interactions that can only be studied or explained from the dreamers' accounts (Windt, 2013). Complex dream reports demand complex understanding; thus, the

scope of dream research can be better understood using qualitative methods orientated towards subjective experiences. Qualitative research can sometimes better understand issues within dreaming, adding insights into therapeutic dreamwork within counselling psychology, teaching, and dream research (Hill, 2004; Lyon & Wimmer, 2005). Phenomenological research aims to 'give voice' to individual experiences and acknowledges the influence of historical and cultural factors (Dividsen, 2013). It aims to capture the collective experience of a specific group of individuals, exploring how they perceive and interpret a particular phenomenon (Willig, 2013, p.59). By delving into the question "*what is this experience like,*" phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence and significance of everyday existence (Lavery, 2003). Through this approach, researchers gain a deeper understanding of individuals' subjective meaning and lived experiences within a given context. An essence can be considered as a structure of a phenomenon's fundamental meanings that explain the phenomenon in question (Dahlberg, 2006). For example, a cup cannot be viewed from its material essence without recognising it as a cup. How an object or cup is structured illuminates its characteristics; otherwise, it would not be a cup. Our daily experiences are inherently influenced by our personal and cultural understanding. This method aims "*to capture as closely as possible how a phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place* (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 27)." Phenomenology can be characterised as an approach that begins with exploring individual experiences and gradually unfolds to illuminate how we exist as Moustakas (1996, p.14) describes "*that all our knowledge begins with experience...*".

This is achieved by eliciting '*thick descriptions*' that can illuminate the world as it is experienced and then engaged in close analysis by the researcher who attempts to limit their influence. As a psychological research method, Polkinghorne (1989) reminds us that using these methods, researchers need to focus on '*the configurations of experience*' (p.41). Our experience can be thought of as a phenomenological field that has structure. This structure is our '*way of being*' for an individual or group. These structures are present at a '*given moment of time and structured over time as we exist in time*'

(Apter, 2001, p.13). Phenomenological research aims to study lived experience as experienced through individuals' lives rather than theorising, categorising, conceptualising, or reflecting on it (Embree, 2017). Following this reasoning, the subjective experience becomes the grounds to explore human concepts such as 'reality' or dreams and rethink the validity of psychological concepts experienced from the standpoint of how it is interwoven between our inner experiences and the cultural milieu with which human existence takes place (Holzkamp, 1991; Gonzalez-Rey, 2019). Several approaches exist, seeking to provide a pure description or those orientated towards experiential interpretative accounts. For this study, dream accounts are first explained in a descriptive form; second, an interpretative stance derived from the context of the participants. The following section discusses the philosophical basis of the current study; then, I will discuss SEA.

### **Epistemological perspective**

Epistemology is a philosophical concept in research that is concerned with 'the study and acquisition of knowledge (Ataro, 2020); the relationship between the knower and the would-be knower (Ponterotto, 2005) leading to *'the grounds upon which we believe something to be true'* through questioning *'how we know the things we think we know'* (Oliver, 2010, p.20). The epistemological assumptions of phenomenological research consider what it believes to be knowable but will be accompanied by assumptions about how it views and understands the world. The researcher's epistemological approach is crucial to the research process, as it lays the foundations for the knowledge building process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2016) and communication of knowledge (Atero, 2020). Epistemology concerns how we understand being, and phenomenology is the methodology of acquiring knowledge. The epistemological stance I drew upon takes Husserl's descriptive phenomenology as he focused on *intentionality* and the meaning of lived experience (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p.173). In addition, this study is underpinned by Heidegger's ontological (what is there to know in the nature of experience) hermeneutic method, discussed later, as there is an attempt to understand phenomena through the meaning-making individuals ascribe to them.

## Husserlian Epistemology

Phenomenology is rooted in 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy (May, Angel, Ellenberger, 1958; see Kelman 1965; Tymieniecka, 2002). Edmund Husserl (1927) has been credited with being the father of phenomenology (Osbourne, 1990). Seeking to understand perceptual experiences, meaning-making and the impact of dreams on a participant's life spearheading this exploration, this research study lends itself to phenomenological research. Phenomenology attempts to undercut the ingrained assumptions inherent in Western psychology (Polkinghorne, 1989), the notion of objective reality. Husserl believed only our direct subjective world experience is 'knowable' (Brooks, BPS, 2015). Husserl adopted the concept of '*intentionality*' from his mentor Brentano – consciousness and the objects from which it is directed (Tymieniecka, 2002; De Santis, 2021). For example, our thoughts and feelings are always directed toward something, or our dreams and experiences are directed towards something (Zahavi, 2003). Intrinsic in the intentionality process implies that all perpetual experiences are imbued with meaning. Husserl states:

*“By ‘intentionality’, we understand the distinguishing property of lived-experiences: ‘being consciousness of something’”*

(Husserl 2014, p.162; Kersten, 1983, p.213).

Intentionality is a mode of consciousness (de Santis, 2021, p.250) directedness to a phenomenon or an object (Kersten, 1983, p.213), and the validity of knowledge is justified as a subjective act. The phenomenological researcher focuses their inquiry on descriptions of a participant's experiences by attempting to suspend (prior knowledge) their natural propensity towards bias, changing to a phenomenological perspective (van Deurzen, 2014). Husserl (1927) introduced the phenomenological reduction of suspending our beliefs and biases. The researcher concentrates on the subjective experience of what is given in awareness, rendering external objects in abeyance through inquiry, which distils the essence or structures of lived experience (Tuffour, 2017) or the essence of what is described. Following this method, Phenomenology researchers explore the structures of



experience in how a phenomenon occurs, typical or general, across a group of people (Polkinghorne, 1989; Langdridge, 2007; Tuffour, 2017). Phenomenological researchers do not attempt to find the objective truth about the external world but rather elicit what it is like to live in a world that appears in such a way (Findlay, 2011)

In this respect, through the process of reduction, descriptive phenomenology seeks to understand experience '*as it presents itself*' (Giorgi, 1992, p121; Osbourne, 1990) before our bias sets in (Spiegelberg, 1978). This requires me to stay as close as possible to the experience. Husserl's (1927) dictum "*unto the things themselves*" characterises researchers' attempt to remain close to the experience arrived at through the '*original data of consciousness*' (Paley, 1997, p.189). The research focuses on meaningful themes arising from the general structure of experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The methodological process of reaching an essence of 'purity' distilled from the experiences has been criticised for being too elusive and philosophical (Tuffour, 2017). Noe (2007) supports this claim by suggesting phenomenological research is logically and conceptually independent of empirical findings. However, the phenomenological view – how things seem to us – Noe claims can contribute to scientific research once we grasp what phenomenology 'is'. To this end, Noe suggests phenomenology is a method of exploring the things and situations we understand through interpretation (Noe, 2007). Husserl's descriptive phenomenology was thought to be only partially achieved.

Heidegger (1927), whose hermeneutic phenomenology will be discussed next, believed that the process of suspending our prior knowledge and achieving a "*God's eye view*" is not entirely possible (Davidsen, 2013). Giorgi & Giorgi (2008) stated that in instances where descriptive accounts are unattainable – flashbacks or psychosis - involuntary images such as psychosis could not be examined for the structures of experience. Interestingly, descriptive phenomenology may be challenged with reports of white dreams, defined as the feeling of experiencing a dream without the ability to elucidate further the experience (Fazekas, Nemeth, Overgaard, 2019). While Giorgi & Giorgi (cited in Willig 2008) emphasised that Husserl's descriptive psychology can be applied to precognitive dreams (Stowell, 1997a, 1997b) and

dreams in general, this study focused on uncovering the experience of dreaming, particularly about how dreams impact our waking life.

### ***Interpretative Phenomenology***

Interpretative phenomenology departs from Husserl's epistemological approach by focusing on understanding ontologically (what it means to be) how we exist in relationship to our world or how we understand the nature of reality from the viewpoint of Dasein (Heidegger, 1927/1962) rather than from that of consciousness. Dasein can be thought of as '*Being-there*' – possessing experience that is always already having an understanding between itself and the world. Inspired by Husserl's *sixth Logical Investigation*, the central theme '*categorical intuition*' – the process of grasping an experience given to intuition beyond that which is presented to our senses rather than '*reasoning and inference*' (Lohmar, 2002; Moran & Cohen, 2012, p.59), leads Heidegger to the understanding that our experience and the intrinsic relationship to the world also includes a historical-socio context. Understanding can be achieved through our sense-making in worldly activities, not through suspending belief. Thus, reality from this view is not external but formed from our preliminary understanding concerning the meaning of what we are attempting to understand (Lavery, 2003; Willig, 2013).

Therefore, a circularity of meaning-making through the process of constant and ongoing experience is '*borne out by the thing's themselves*' (Gadamer, 1960, p.271 cited in Grondin, 2015). Heidegger believed it was impossible to encounter a phenomenon without being influenced somehow (Stephenson, Giles, Bissaker, 2017). This viewpoint places our experience as inextricably connected to the world (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008), a way in which we are and understand ourselves rather than a concrete 'is' (Davidsen, 2013), leading to Heidegger positing 'Dasein' search is for the meaning of 'being'. In this view, the Heideggerian phenomenological approach is inherently interpretative. We cannot unknown our historical and inter-relatedness as being human in the world ('being-in-the-world') (Tuffour, 2017; Smith, 2008, cited in Willig & Stainton-Rogers).

Thus, its psychological approach acknowledges that meaning is intrinsic and fundamental to knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.9). In addition, numerous scholars have argued that perceiving life as meaningful is crucial for the functional well-being of humans (Heidegger, 1962; Crescioni & Baumeister, 2013). Scholars in the dream literature have found that in the exploration of a dream, accounts can yield multiple meanings (van Deurzen, 2002, p.146; Szpowkowska, 2003, p.16; Burke, 1997), and contain influences from a particular culture (Burke, 1997, p.7) when clarifying an individual's worldview and position in the dream. Kuiken (1991) states that dreams are '*inherently metaphoric*'; the imagery is constructed to represent concepts of a waking phenomenon (p.136). The meaning of the dream and its transformative potential is not always given to direct experience, requiring both participant and researcher to explore what is not initially visible (double hermeneutic). In this respect, descriptive accounts of dream experiences are positioned from the participant's input and interpreted upon the dream status through its wider '*social, cultural, psychological*' (Willig, 2013) and existential meaning (van Deurzen, 2002).

Funnelling the participant's experience, singularly through cognitive, emotional or social perspectives, expecting to attain a pure description or attain a measurable unit, may distance me from the way it is essentially meaningful and impactful. Recently, dream interpretation followed the theoretical bias and abstract conceptualisations of the theorist that often viewed what the dream expressed as an entity meaningfully distant from the participant. For example, symbolically, elongated objects such as tall buildings or an obelisk could be the referent of male sexual organs- motivated by a libidinal instinct (Freud, 1910). The accounts of dream experiences that have already occurred raise questions about whether interpretative phenomenology can accurately capture the report data. These accounts rely on my ability to extract information skillfully and the participants' to adequately articulate the experience. This put into question both my ability to formulate questions and the participants' ability to convey the nuances of their experience.

Considering the limitations of applying the aforementioned phenomenological methods to dream experiences, I am compelled to uncover the in-depth experiences reflecting how participants positioned themselves within the dream world and its lasting impact. The phenomenological dialogue is not a quest for truth but a way to understand the structure of experience and participants' sense-making at the "being" level (May, 1953). I will aim to get as close as possible to the experiential world of the participant by attuning myself to their position and attempting to view their world through their eyes. Deurzen (2002) provides clear guidance in working with dreams. The dream accounts will be understood through the participant's assigned meaning, and further interpretations will be verified to remain close to their original meaningful expression (See validity in dream research p 132). Immersion into the participant's experience is essential, considering their psychological, cultural and inter-related sense-making experiences, knowing that I cannot be meaningfully detached. It is worth noting that, within the literature, studying dreams poses many challenges (Hackett, 2020). The experience occurs during sleep and is open to fanciful confabulations on waking. Freud (1910/ 2010) noted one aspect of this difficulty called secondary revision – the process of articulating the dream image that can either omit salient features or exaggerate others. These observations cannot be suspended or compartmentalised during my interactions.

As the participant attempts to make sense of their experiences during an interview, my intention towards this recollective process is to develop an array of questions (See Appendix B ) that best illuminate this research study's aims. I will consider that some dreams may be vivid and impactful. Schredl (2000) and Barrett (2001) remind us that impactful experiences can be instances of creativity, Negative daytime mood (Schredl, 2010) following strong emotions from nightmares (Nielsen, 2010), or transformational experiences during lucid dreams (Krakow et al., 2000; Spoormaker et al., 2003; Germain, 2002; Davis, 2009; Pruiksma, 2012). I will attune my sight to what appears and how it occurs meaningfully in the lived experience through language. Interpretations of the dream material will be reflected upon to observe how my motivations unduly move the meaning away from what was initially intended. The

participants will be aided with a dream journal (Discussed in data collection) that will capture the experience as close to its occurrence and act as a barometer to justify my interpretation.

The surveyed literature in interpretative phenomenology raises questions about my role and approaches to how the study's aims are best achieved and developed. A branch of phenomenological research – structured existential analysis (SEA) – aims to provide a revision of the meaning expressed about the subjective experience through the lens of interpretation to limit defiling the participant's original intention with my interpretation (Todres, 2005). I shall argue that SEA (van Deurzen, 2014) provides the most comprehensive way to illustrate how our existence is meaningfully given to us in experience while demonstrating my understanding through interpretation.

## **Methodology**

### **Choosing the Methodology**

Methodology refers to a deliberate and planned course of action that guides the research process and influences the selection of research questions (Ritchie et al., 2013; Berto & Plebani, 2015; Cappelen, Gendler, & Hawthorne, 2016). Within this study, the pursuit of meaning is deeply rooted in the psyche, and the research journey is a systematic exploration to advance our understanding. Various methodologies such as Narrative Inquiry, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and SEA were initially considered. Although initially inclined towards IPA, as my knowledge of research methods deepened, I ultimately concluded that SEA was the most suitable approach. Upon completing the research, the outcome validated my initial choice of employing SEA as the methodology for this study.

### **Alternate Methods**

**Narrative analysis** is valuable for capturing participants' stories and connecting them to the past, present, and future (Riessman, 1993). It is applicable in dream research, as Pace-Schott (2013) argues that dreams contain story elements linked to waking life. Recalled dreams offer a ready form of story-like narrative that contributes to understanding experiences and the sense of self (Bell, 2002).

However, despite its suitability, narrative inquiry was not selected due to various limitations. Narrative inquiry considers dreams as 'objects of narrative report' (Walsh, 2010, p.3) and treats story-telling as an objective performance rather than a lived phenomenon (Smiths & Sparkes, 2009). However, the existential perspective sees dreams as experiential. Thus, considering the dream as a narrative might merge the perceptual consciousness of dream "facts" with reflective consciousness about the dream (Hobson, 2009). The remarkable coherence of dreams is credited to the mind's cognitive synthesis after the fact, utilising the narrative sense-making abilities from waking life (Hobson, 2002). Modern dream research discounts external influences on dream narratives and attributes them to the dreamer's creativity despite novelty, strangeness, and a lack of control. Rosen (2013) argues that accurately reporting dream content is challenging due to technological limitations. Abnormalities like REM sleep behaviour disorder (RBD) can cause dream enactment (Nielsen, 2007). Eye signalling experiments on lucid dreamers suggest that dreaming involves more than narratives; it includes experiences, and dreamers know they are dreaming (Rosen, 2013). Dreaming is a creative aspect of reflective thinking in images, encompassing various experiences that resist reductive explanations (Rosen, 2013). SEA allows researchers to explore the contextual richness of dreams beyond language (Rosenweld & Ochburg, 1992). According to Hillman (1978), dreams should be seen as contexts, not just texts, and the researcher can embrace multiple 'levels of interpretation' during the dream experience (p.160). To address the symbolic nature of dreams and enable personal interpretation, SEA offers flexibility and recognition of symbolic and metaphorical dimensions, engaging with individual meaning across four dimensions and heuristic devices. (see p.78).

**Interpretative phenomenological analysis** was a potential method for this research because it focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Smith, Jarman and Osborn (1999) state that IPA explores the idiographic ways individuals view and experience reality; thus, the method is phenomenological. Various authors, including Smith (1996), Smith (1996) and Larkin, Eatough and Osborn (2011), highlight that IPA facilitates the researcher to

interpret the experience of study participants' personal lived experiences ( double hermeneutics). In this way, the method is preferred for psychological research as it focuses on subjective experiences. However, using IPA in psychological studies is also constrained by several shortcomings, limiting its scope to the current research. First, Smith and Osborn (2003) and Willig (2001) highlight that the IPA approach is essentially more cognitive, rendering it less 'compatible with aspects of phenomenology' (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p.7). This raises the concern that IPA is limited in considering various interpretations of dreams, including 'non-propositional, pre-cognitive knowledge, and symbolic nature of dreams' (p.7). IPA focuses on conceptualising the research data through thematic analysis, which is not directly experiential or existential and phenomenological. Therefore, IPA was not selected because thematical accounts may not capture and interpret the symbolism of dreams derived from the hermeneutic relationship between me, the participant and the dream (triple hermeneutic). Johnson et al. (2004) have suggested that IPA possesses features comparable to those of other phenomenological approaches. The approach is limited because, like other phenomenological research methods, it requires dream elements to be distinguished between presentation (conveying information) and representational interpretations (manner of depicting something). In support of the limitations, Smith, Jarman and Osborn (1999) note that IPA lacks adequate interpretative power due to its descriptive nature. A critical methodological issue that presents a limitation of considering IPA is the approach for analysing vivid experiences through time, which allowed this research to focus on experiential events in time.

Finally, as highlighted in sections on psychological dreams and types of dreams, quantitative approaches would be better suited to exploring generalisable features such as Dream recall frequency (DRF) positive correlation with creativity to impactful dream accounts. The structured existential analysis explored eleven participants' experiences without purporting to claim the analysis can be generalised beyond those who participated. Its depth permits identifying things that would not be found in 'content analysis' (Hall & Norby, 1972) or questionnaires, as most questions are derived from my

analysis of existing literature rather than from searching beyond it by asking open questions.

Furthermore, a positivist, empirical approach may struggle to integrate paradoxical data or explore reflexivity, which is integral to the SEA method of interpretation. However, themes that emerge in this study that may be generalised to a broader population will be recommended for further studies.

### **Structural Existential Analysis**

For this research, I chose an Existential-phenomenological approach. There was substantial consideration of the method that derived three criteria upon which to apply to this research:

- a. Qualitative
- b. Phenomenological
- c. Existential

A descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology guided the existential-phenomenological framework chosen that was central to the methodology as I was positioned to understand phenomena fundamental to the experience of dreaming. Existential-phenomenology views that 'all knowledge is human knowledge' or described by Spiegelberg (1964), '*perceptual experience is the only valid evidence for our knowledge of the 'real' world*' (p.326), and is appropriately understood through a person's phenomenal experience, then the exploration of phenomenal experience as it is given to our being in existence directs our thoughts to '*what does it mean to exist*' (ontology). The structural existential analysis is a method that draws on the ontological and epistemological position, similar to other phenomenological research methods; understanding of lived experience as it appears to and is interpreted as an expression of meaningful experience by the perceiver directed towards their world of experience rather than a mechanically learned response to stimuli (van Deurzen, 2014). As the existential-phenomenological view constitutes complementary approaches, SEA goes a step further than traditional interpretative phenomenological approaches and explores the ontological nature of reality or what is there that can be known. Joined together in this fashion, SEA can be understood as a philosophical and psychological orientation to understand the 'being' and 'essence' of experience as revealed through descriptive and



interpretative research reported by the dreamer. Thus, researchers applying this method can engage participants with an attitude of wonder. According to this method, human experience can be thought of as existing simultaneously in 'four worlds' within a spatio-temporal dimension: physical (Umwelt), social (Mitwelt), personal (Eigenwelt), and spiritual (Überwelt) (van Deurzen, 2010). SEA emphasises the importance of how human beings experience the world through various dimensions and phenomenological enquiry into how to explore a person's experience on all of these levels (van Deurzen, 2002, 2014). In this model of human existence, van Deurzen points out:

*Phenomenology is not just a technique to rival with statistical analysis. It is a way of life and you cannot practice it unless you understand its spirit and adopt its philosophy. Practising phenomenology teaches you to sharpen your capacity for observation and self-observation. It demands that you immerse yourself in your sensory experience and become reflective about your affective life. (van Deurzen, 2014, p.70)*

This way of viewing the experience can help participants with limited ways of relating or promoting aspects of well-being and strength (Ownsworth & Nash, 2015). The importance ascribed to these 'worlds' impacts our psychological health' (Rozzi, 2020). This model of experience attempts to understand how individuals position themselves in the world and the trajectory of their life's valuable journey in therapy (van Deurzen, 2002). Counselling psychology recognises that a holistic approach to psychological functioning and well-being depends on an individual's health across multiple domains (Jones-Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016). Various heuristic devices are used in homage to the way SEA and counselling psychology understand an individual search for understanding rather than emphasising universal truth. In addition to the descriptive and interpretative methods that attempt to derive knowledge, SEA also includes an array of phenomenological devices suitable to explore the complex dimensions of the dream world as it is lived. According to van Deurzen, SEA explores the whole intentional arc, dreaming included, through the dimensions we move through simultaneously to 'study subjectivity objectively and objectivity subjectively' (van Deurzen, 2014, p.1). Deurzen's approach enables the researcher to engage in how the nature of the participant's reality is experienced and gain a closer and easier grasp of the essence of the experience. It is a philosophical and psychological map to chart a course through the tributaries of human experiential existence. Over-indulgent or less well-engaged

areas of a particular domain in a participant's life can signal the necessary work at any time. Deurzen reminds us that:

*'If we want to fully understand human existence we should not limit ourselves to the study of psychology. The unexplored continent that we need to get familiar with is not primarily that of the human psyche, but that of life and human living' (van Deurzen, 2014, p.131)*

I am uniquely positioned to grasp how a person is situated in the world. The SEA approach to knowledge is derived through description and a circular process of verification (van Deurzen, 2014).

SEA researchers recognise that exploring experience implicates the researcher's worldview, accepting that experience is not directly accessible (Willig, 2013). The extent to which the experiential account is successful depends upon the belief that language can directly access an individual's life world' (Willig, 2013) rather than an opinion.

The SEA can be applied through six broad methods of analysis of experience:

1. The three reductions

- Phenomenological reduction

- Eidetic reduction

- Transcendental reduction

2. Dialogical and hermeneutic interviewing

3. Working with Bias

4. The Four worlds' model and its paradoxes

5. Working with the timeline of the life-world

6. The movement between emotions and values: The emotional compass

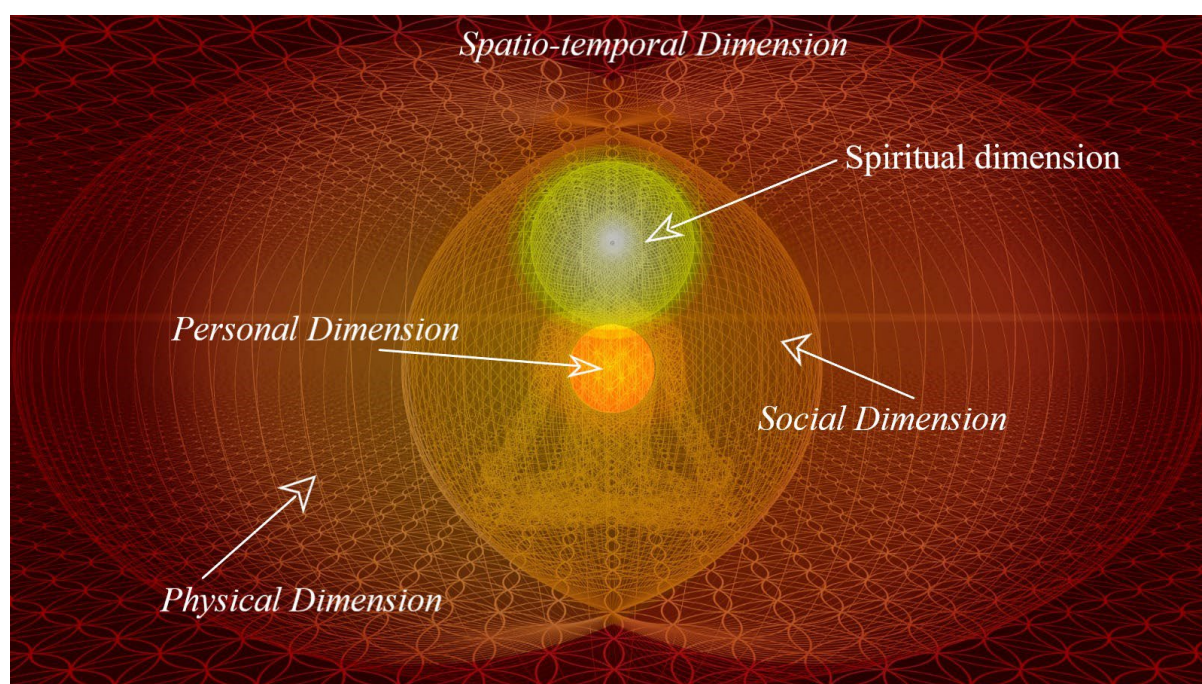
To design and orientate this research towards dreaming and its impact on waking, I followed the framework of three of van Deurzen's tools applicable to this study. These were the four worlds model and its paradoxes, working with timelines and the emotional compass. Dreaming has been viewed from a biological wish-fulfilment approach or archetypal symbolism (Freud, 1900; Jung, 1944). These

points have merit; however, the existential view is distinct and examines dreams from a historically spiritual-psycho-social perspective in the context of existence. As a trainee counselling psychologist, I found it important to explore dreams by gathering data, ideas, and ways of understanding so that they can be used in therapy and disseminated to other colleagues. The present study attempts to survey “*what is it like to exist in the dream world*” from an existential-phenomenological perspective that is frequently overlooked in modern psychological research.

### ***The Four Worlds’ model and its paradoxes***

The dimensions of existence represent the foundations of what we perceive as reality. These four dimensions offer a flexible framework for how a phenomenon can present itself. They form part of our spatio-temporal environment, providing a structured approach to organising descriptive information within the perceptual realms of our world—encompassing the physical, social, personal, and meaningful aspects of our experiences. Deurzen(2010) acknowledges that our embeddedness in the world is intertwined with these experiential dimensions. It is important to view these unfolding dimensions of experience that van Deurzen wants to direct our attention towards not the experience's content but the relation-sense that uncovers the how of the phenomenon. (For a comprehensive review, see van Deurzen, 2010). Here, in Figure 1, van Deurzen uses the terms *Umwelt (physical)*, *Mitwelt (Social)*, *Eigenwelt (personal)*, and *Überwelt (spiritual)* to designate different aspects of the phenomenological concept of the lifeworld (see Figure. 1), which can be thought of as follows:

**Figure. 1: Dimensions of existence.**



*(Adaptation of van Deurzen Fourworld, 2010, 2014)*

### ***Working with the timeline of the life-world***

The use of the timeline as an analytic tool can facilitate me in understanding the experience of dreaming, the moments after waking, and the impact of a dream on the participant's life. The way the participant makes decisions, influenced by the preceding dream experience, is 'eminently important' in illuminating the direction in which their behaviour is proceeding (van Deurzen, 2014). The dream occurs while we are in time; however, the depiction of the dream may have references from the past, present or future. The moments upon waking as we realise our dreams may allow us to understand temporality, which can be thought of then as past, present and future converging in the moment of our vision that we realise our experience with its potential to enhance our current life position. The timeline is particularly important to the participant's experience as it intrinsically carries our waking experiences, a feature of the duration of the dream whilst asleep. It impacts our ability to retrieve a distant fading scenario or understand a sequence of events. Moustakas (1996, p.11) suggests, "*In such an uncovering, one must know how to lift out what is essential, when to question it, when to pursue it more*

*fully, and when to leave it alone. Timeline is a critical element.*” The dimensions of future, past and present are suggested not to be accessible or perceptible to the participant; therefore, it is considered ‘*off the clock*’ (MacDuffe & Mashour, 2010).

The participant’s experience was conceptualised as a continuous temporal process and was specifically applied to the interview and data analysis. The experience of interest in this research is the dream account and its impact on the participant’s life; therefore, the dream account and the dream journal entries represent the dreaming process. The moment of waking represents the transition to waking and how the participant is impacted. Subsequent insights drawn during the interview represent temporal links to oneiric states.

### **The Emotional Compass**

In dreams, emotions are to be understood as one of the most fundamental phenomena confronting us directly with our existence. Heidegger refers to mood, feeling or affect as *Befindlichkeit*. Further, emotions and moods are not just internal or subjective experiences but how we sense how we find ourselves (Gendlin, 1979). The participants’ most profound concern, understanding our existence, is to grasp the uncanny nature of their being (Heidegger, 1967). In this sense, mood was related to our attunement to the world and was specifically illuminated during the interview. Further prompts were required to elicit depth, applying the timeline heuristic with an emotional focus to elicit moods. These emotional states are featured during the dream, in the transition to waking, and continue in their activities of daily living. The interview questions and prompts reflected the affective dimension, and throughout the transcript analysis, references to the emotional dimension were highlighted.



Figure 2: Emotional Compass Diagram

### ***Criticism of Structural Existential Analysis***

Critics have generally directed their views towards SEA, noting its application and usefulness in clinical settings (van Deurzen, 2010, 2014; Feigin, 2021). However, there are few critical appraisals of SEA as a psychological research method. Feigin (2021) applied SEA to the '*coming out*' process of gay men in the Jewish community, revealing both strengths and limitations. One limitation is the loosely applied guidelines, making replication and monitoring of the analytic process challenging (Feigin, 2021). Rozzi (2020) also criticised SEA for lacking specific research conduct guidelines, leading to ambiguity and potential validity concerns. While some argue for more systematic and demarcated approaches, others value the method's flexibility (Deurzen, 2014; Rozzi, 2020). This may always result in limited use in novel research, discouraging users in favour of more established models such as IPA (Smith, 2009). For this study, the flexibility of SEA was deemed essential for understanding the meaning-making of dreams, allowing for new insights and sustained immersion in the data. The iterative nature and

sustained immersion in the data may yield new insights, but novel researchers may find such immersive processes unstructured or elusive. As interpretation and meaning can be beyond the time scope of a given project, therefore inhibiting a satisfactory conclusion on the analysis. Reading a book may best illustrate this point as further meaning can be extracted when you re-visit the text with a new understanding. Thus, a limited time frame should focus the meaning-making process on a given conclusion. Nonetheless, the strength of SEA lies in its focus on participant experiences and rigorous analysis, enabling deep understanding within the context of the dreamer's life (van Deurzen, 2014). The strength of SEA can be viewed in light of research focusing on dreams, as Deurzen explains:

*'At that later moment our tools of observation and scrutiny of the data, that is, the heuristic devices of structural analysis will help us organise the information systematically..... We engage fully in the situation. The more we are able to resonate and the closer we will place ourselves to the new data. Our observations will only be as valid as the intensity of experience we have been able to generate when collecting them.'* (van Deurzen, 2014)

### **Reflexivity using SEA:**

In this research, I chose an existential-phenomenological approach, guided by SEA, to explore the experience of dreaming. This method offered flexibility, enabling both deductive and inductive engagement with the data. Deductively, SEA provided a structured framework, such as the four worlds model and emotional compass, to analyse experiences systematically. Inductively, it allowed emerging themes and insights to surface naturally through participants' descriptions and reflections. As a researcher, my experience with Structural Existential Analysis (SEA) profoundly shaped the course of this study. I was naturally drawn to SEA's holistic perspective and its potential to illuminate the lived experience of dreaming. From the outset, I was aware of how my existential-phenomenological orientation would influence the research process, from data collection to interpretation. This awareness brought opportunities and challenges, requiring continuous self-reflection to remain attuned to the participants' narratives rather than my preconceptions.

Engaging with SEA was both intellectually stimulating and deeply personal. Its flexibility resonated with my preference for non-linear, exploratory methods, yet I found myself grappling with moments of uncertainty, particularly when the lack of prescriptive guidelines felt destabilising. These challenges required me to trust the process, allowing themes to emerge organically rather than forcing meaning prematurely. This iterative engagement mirrored the existential concept of 'being-in-the-world', as I navigated the space between structure and openness. My immersion in the data was also shaped by my relationship with dreaming, which brought a sense of wonder and a need to bracket my experiences to honour the participants' perspectives. Conducting interviews, I noticed how my curiosity and empathy as a therapist informed my approach, creating a balance between curiosity and maintaining a critical, research-oriented stance. Throughout, SEA's emphasis on the "four worlds" and temporal dimensions provided a grounding framework that enhanced my understanding of the participants' experiences. At times, I found this framework enriched by my professional practice, where similar existential paradoxes often arise. However, I also recognised the challenge of translating participants' complex experiences into coherent themes without oversimplifying their narratives.

Ultimately, this research process was as much about my growth as a qualitative researcher as it was about the participants' experiences. The SEA framework challenged me to embrace complexity, resist closure, and remain present with the data. This reflexive journey deepened my appreciation for the transformative potential of existential-phenomenological research, not only for understanding phenomena like dreaming but also for fostering meaningful engagement with human experience.



## ***Dream Research Reflexivity***

Reflexivity can be understood as establishing rigour and quality, a gold standard for determining trustworthiness (Teh & Lek, 2018). As mentioned earlier, in phenomenological studies, researchers often have personal experience with the phenomenon under investigation and a genuine interest in gaining deeper insights into how others perceive it. This personal involvement and introspection contribute to my reflexivity, enhancing the overall credibility of the study. Kvale (1995) highlights the significance of the interview researcher's genuine interest and passion for learning from others' perspectives. In this study, I hold a personal interest and genuine curiosity, which aligns with Kvale's emphasis. It was incumbent upon me to place in abeyance my suppositions that could direct how interview data is interpreted. It was important to disclose personal biases and assumptions about the research topic to engage in trustworthy research.

I have had an early interest in dreams from childhood. At various significant moments where the dream has impacted my life, I kept a dream journal, ranging from life-changing decision of choosing my GCSEs to more intense life events of losing my father to cancer. Through these dreams, I gained insight into my waking life situation, which guided in making life changes that lacked clarity. At various times, there was no clear meaning to the dreams, in particular, the dreams before my father's passing frequently reoccurred. I began writing down the dreams, hoping to understand the ones taunting me; I did not consider psychological support but discussed these nocturnal encounters with friends and family. These discussions provided therapeutic value and gave me a sense of understanding and personal transformation that led to making simple decisions and significant life changes derived from dreams. Therefore, I am biased towards dreams as a source of knowledge, and recording and studying these experiences benefits the participant's life. The experience of dreaming as a knowable reality and understanding of the lifeworld (which is knowable in as much as it emanates from us) from which the participant can draw knowledge is the starting point of the interplay between my ontological and epistemological position.

My desire to find out how individuals respond to these nocturnal mysteries has propelled me to move forward with this view to be studied. However, this thesis led me to grasp the complexities of the dreaming mind and understand the multifaceted factors contributing to these nocturnal mysteries. Phenomenology '*is a way of life*' (van Deurzen, 2014), which I have adopted as it (many of its philosophical revelations) closely reflects my lived experiences. Before embarking on this research journey, I questioned the credibility of dreams as a worthwhile research study; I wondered how and to what extent other participants believed that dreaming is not '*just a dream*' but an experience that encompasses and goes beyond our everyday constraints. This research was conceived of in a context; it occurred within a space and time between (two) Individuals. As this existential-phenomenological research examined dreaming and its impact on waking, I recognised that I was the '*research instrument*' (Dodgson, 2019, p.1). The researcher can be described as an instrumental figure who actively chose the topic, and the research questions guided the research process, the analyses, and the interpretation of data (Wertz, 2005). Due to my existential-phenomenological approach, I believe I actively influenced the data with the participants. Personal therapy was used to reflect upon issues arising during the interviews to be transparent about what I brought to the research dialogue. Thus, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process, in which I recorded my observations and connections that occurred to me about the participants' material. Examining my experience and personal insights from an in-depth reflection has been the premise of my understanding and interpretations.

I recognised that interpreting the findings is not just based on a cursory analysis of the participants' data, an observation of how I arrived at or how I conducted myself throughout the analysis, but an in-depth consideration of how interpretation is influenced by my assumptions, values, use of language, and political position, the cyclical process through questions that are acted upon each time they reveal a greater awareness of the phenomenon in question. An initial sense of feeling estranged from the participants led to a change in my narrative of feeling connected to their experiences. In light

of these grounds of my inextricable engagement, reflective practice is a process by which the researcher turns back upon and takes account of itself, perpetually, to ensure that I acknowledge and account for the multiple layers and complexities of interpreting my participant's data in the analysis. During this phase, I attempted to gain a closer understanding of the participants' world of experience as I used my experience to facilitate how best to grasp and make sense of their lived dreams. Remaining faithful to their account, I questioned my application of the structural existential analysis heuristics, remaining open to the fact, in my summation of the data, that no fixed truths are privileged that may emerge, and various truths may arise viewed from a different perspective. Aspects of the participant's reality may be obscured by my questioning equally. The analysis process can move me beyond my current revelations to what was previously not noticeable, too subtle or too peripheral. Having the experience of being a participant who often recalls their dreams in detail allowed me to connect with the participant's account.

### ***Validity in Dreams Research***

Phenomenological research can provide meaningful contributions to human research as it addresses the complex nature of a given phenomenon rather than constricting it. The methodological orientation can shed light on the less perceptible meaning and illuminate the lived context by which meaning can be understood. However, these strengths are considered limitations. For example, can the participant provide direct access to the lived experience? As the section dream recall outlines, I may rely on the participant to produce meaning, leading to a limited recall, misrepresentation due to omissions, and being socially desirable during the interview. In research, validity refers to whether a given method can truly capture what is intended to be measured. Therefore, validity is particularly important since it pertains to how the study was carried out, as referred to in the reflexivity section, and thus ensures the reliability of results. The commentary by Forrer (2014) is important in understanding the concept of validity in dream research as I focus on verifying the validity of the interpretation of dreams. Forrer (2014) contends with several scholars' arguments and various dream theories,

especially the continuity hypothesis, arguing that dreams represent waking life experiences. The interpretation of dream metaphors is scientific, and as Forrer (2014) argues, it is possible to establish the validity of such interpretations, especially when compared with the manifestations in waking life, i.e., they either align with the predictions or fail to match. Thus, the rigour of dream interpretation could be assessed by establishing whether the dream reports match an individual's waking life experiences. According to Morrow (2005), the criteria for trustworthiness in dreams research (which is a form of qualitative study) are closely linked to the paradigmatic framework in use; for instance, counselling psychology has, for a long time, complied with post-positivist rigour standards, but trends show increasing use of phenomenology in this discipline.

Similarly, other authors such as Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999), Morrow (2005) and Schwandt (2007) consider the concept of trustworthiness by exploring the different standards of quality, namely, validity, credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability are utilised in qualitative research. In this light, when interpretations of dream reports align with waking life experiences, there is the aspect of confirmability, which shows that my interpretation was valid. Sandelowski (1986) agrees with the statement and explores the strategies to attain rigour in a qualitative study, noting the steps that research must follow to confirm outcomes. The steps include audibility or a clear decision trail from myself about the study, from the start to the end, and this includes clearly describing the research procedures, data collection methods and the time it took, settings of data gathering, data reduction strategies to facilitate analysis and also techniques utilised to ascertain the applicability and truth value of the information collected (Sandelowski, 1986). Morrow (2005) is in agreement with the assertions by Sandelowski (1986) but explores other crucial strategies to attain validity, for example, reflexivity or self-reflection, and this includes keeping a journal of self-reflection up to the completion of research to record reactions, experiences and awareness of any biases or assumptions. Morrow (2015) further notes that the credibility of this form of research could be attained by prolonged engagement with study participants. In addition, the researcher can get valid outcomes in dream research by consulting with

peer debriefers or a research team who reflect the researcher's responses to the entire research process (Morrow, 2005). Reflexivity is important for several reasons, including describing how the study was carried out, how I addressed challenges along the way (biases) and building rapport with participants.

As discussed in the semi-structured interview section, the questions that formulated the interview were drawn up in light of suggestive findings from the literature review and on the SEA heuristic tools. These questions were grounded in relevant studies from the extant literature yet allowed the participants to openly describe their dream imagery and its meaning in the context of the participants' lives in their own way.

## ***Method***

### ***Design***

I sought a purposeful sample of eleven participants who self-identified as vivid dreamers. A dream journal was emailed to each participant, requiring them to record their experiences for two weeks. Interviews ensued within two days after the dream journal's final entry to prevent memory decay and remain in close connection with the dreamt material. A semi-structured interview was carried out with each participant, along with the dream diary, after which their preferred online platform recorded the interview and transcribed it verbatim. SEA analysis followed, applying the various heuristics resulting in themes formulated into a table to create a picture of the experience of vivid dreaming on waking.

### ***Participants***

I aimed to explore the dream experience and its impact upon waking. This study's research aims, and the study population's characteristics determined the participants to be selected and how many were sufficient and relevant to the research question. This study looked for participants who

could describe aspects of their dream experience and their ability to articulate complex experiences (Stenstrom et al., 2012). The inclusion criteria described the conditions for the target participants to have met to be included in the research. After obtaining ethical approval from the research ethics committee of The New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and Middlesex University (Appendix C). The prospective participants were sought from anonymous online dream forums Reddit, Dream Doctor, and others online. The moderators of several online dream platform sites were approached to obtain consent to post an advert to recruit online members. I posted a thread outlining my research with the rationale for the study and allowed space for some discussion. The inclusion and exclusion criteria and my email address were posted, inviting participants interested in contacting me. Since consent was secured, adverts were posted at three intervals to maximise the advert's visibility to prospective participants. The participants interested in the study were asked to email me for further information. They were then sent an information sheet with the contact details and detailed information about what was required of them in terms of commitment and the nature of the study (see Appendix E). The interviewee was initially screened through back-and-forth emails to determine if they met the recruitment inclusion criteria. The study comprised completing a dream journal for two weeks that would later form a part of the participant's dream retrieval tools. The participants were advised on confidentiality issues and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. An interview was arranged at a time that was convenient for the participants who decided to participate in the study.

This study selected a purposeful sample of eleven adults who met the following inclusion criteria: a) participants who frequently experience vivid dreams, b) participants who have experienced a vivid dream within the last two weeks, c) participants capable of speaking fluent English, d) participants may have experienced mental health issues in the past or have an ongoing mental health diagnosis but currently no psychotic episodes (See exclusion criteria) e) participants that can read, understand the consent form and participate fully in the in-depth interviews (see exclusion criteria). The aim was to study participants aged 18 – 50. The primary purpose of selecting this age group was the higher

prevalence of dream recall and the ability to articulate responses (Nielsen, 2012). In children, dream recall frequency (DRF) requires cognitive and linguistic maturity to recall and report dreams that might not be present at too young. Research by Nielsen (2012) noted the challenges faced in assessing DRF in young children due to limited recall ability and difficulty discerning dreams from waking experiences. Children have demonstrated weaker recall abilities than compared to adults, but by the teenage years, their ability to recall dreams considerably improves (Siegel, 2005). DR Strauch (2005) conducted longitudinal studies on children aged 7 - 15, showing a developmental progression in the ability to recall dreams.

DRF increased from adolescence (ages 10–19) to early adulthood (20–29) and then decreased again for the next 20 years (Nielsen, 2012). The REM sleep architecture features change with ageing, often opposite to those observed during child development. The NREM-REM sleep cycle progressively shortens, and the number of cycles during the night reduces (Giambra et al., 1996; Scarpelli et al., 2019). This observed effect of reducing REM sleep may be attributed to cognitive deterioration (Giambra et al., 1996). In a study, Schredl (1991) showed that individuals with mild cognitive impairment exhibited diminished REM sleep and lower dream recall rates than their healthy subjects. In a subsequent cross-sectional study involving participants aged 17–92 (n = 2328), a decline in dream recall frequency (DRF) was observed with increasing age. This decline continued until age 56, after which no further decrease was evident (Funkhouser, Hirsbrunner, Cornu, Bahro, 1999).

## **Data Gathering**

### ***Methods of collecting dreams and Methodological challenges to dreams research***

As illustrated in the section '*Definition of dreams*' and the '*Literature Review*', The authenticity and accuracy of dream accounts pose methodological challenges in dream research. Researchers typically rely on dream reports rather than directly studying dream experiences (Zadra & Domhoff, 2011). Different approaches for gathering dream reports include the most recent dream method, dream diaries, questionnaires, and laboratory awakenings (Putois et al., 2020). While these methods have

varying levels of reliability and validity, dream diaries are considered appropriate for reducing recall bias (Schredl, 2010). Therefore, this study utilised a dream diary for data collection.

### ***Home Dreams vs. Laboratory Dreams***

Several studies have investigated if the setting where dream reports are gathered could have a considerable impact on the reporting of the content of these dreams (Foulkes, 1979; Domhoff Schneider, 1999; Sikka et al., 2018; Picard-Deland, Nielsen and Carr, 2021). Foulkes (1979) explored four studies that found home and laboratory studies had no significant differences in how dream reports could be obtained from young children. Foulkes acknowledged that a biased recall at home, as opposed to the impacts of REM-monitoring procedures in the lab, could cause such insignificant differences. Domhoff and Schneider (1999) present findings consistent with those by Foulkes (1979), as after using Cohen's  $h$  statistic for accounting for effect sizes, the former argued that even in instances when there is statistical significance, the differences between the laboratory and home samples are minimal in magnitude. Accordingly, the findings show that the effect of settings, in this case, home versus laboratory, does not account for many differences in reporting the dream contents.

Sikka et al. (2018) also focused on dream content, particularly emotions in dreaming, with their comparison of home and laboratory dream reports for both early and later REM sleep awakenings using 18 adults as the study participants. After utilising the modified Differential Emotions Scale to analyse two blind judges, the 120 laboratory and 151 home dream reports, the findings illustrated that home reports contained more emotions than the laboratory early REM reports, even though not for this setting's late REM reports. Similarly, Sikka et al. (2018) found that home reports were more negative than laboratory reports. Still, most importantly, there were significant differences between home and early REM reports compared to late REM reports. De Waterman, Elton & Kenemans (1993) and Schredl (2008) critique the validity of laboratory dream reports. Whether they could be considered representative of dreams is questionable as participants are not in their private environment. Therefore,



dreams were recorded in what participants identified as home settings following a) covid-19 b) Laboratory settings are beyond the financial scope of this project, and c) Home settings are considered the most natural environment preferred by the participants.

### ***Dream Journal***

This study values and accepts the participant's report as similar to any subsequent waking event. Participants were asked to complete a dream diary (Appendix D) over two weeks and record the dream most efficiently and conveniently. As laboratory methods were unavailable for the research, continuing with a dream diary was appropriate. The dream diary as a collection instrument can minimise memory decay, confabulations or recollective errors related to the dream account during the interview in this study (Zadra & Domhoff, 1996; Schredl, 2002; Windt, 2013). Studies using dream diaries may shed light on whether and how dreams that have an impact are processed and made sense of by the participant (Schredl, 2009). A dream diary allowed the participants to capture the dream as it appeared. They are considered important sources of information as they capture the experience of dream life close to its occurrence, rather than in studies exploring retrospective dreams over more extended periods. While quantitative research debates focus on the lack of standardisation and validation, this study employs a dream diary to understand the experience and sense-making of their life. Schredl (2002) conducted a study on 285 participants exploring the relationship between questionnaire and diary methods over two weeks. The study found that keeping a dream diary increased participants' ability to recall their dreams. Schredl (2018) cautions us against the way dreams are reported. If a participant only reports the dream action and not the accompanying thoughts and emotions, it's likely to form a biased picture of the experience. Although the dream reporting criteria Schredl described appear to include the minimal components that may comprise a dream, the present study applies a broader criterion to gain a more in-depth understanding of the client's dream world, as

seen through the SEA heuristics. Dream diaries were submitted during the interview and used as part of the validity process.

### **Semi-Structured Interviewing**

Historically, starting with Freud, interviews have been a key method in producing psychological knowledge about dreams (Kvale, 1994). This study used a semi-structured interview with a dialogical focus, recorded through online platforms, lasting from sixty to ninety minutes. The interview was transcribed and examined through a SEA. Demographic data was gathered to understand the participants' lives, including their ethnic backgrounds, to contextualise cultural beliefs, practices about dreaming, and past experiences that may influence dream-related behaviour (Schredl, 2020). This semi-structured approach allowed me to employ a blend of closed and open-ended questions followed up with how or why prompts (Adams, 2015, cited in Newcomer).

Participants were asked to recollect and describe their dreams in as much detail as possible during the interview. They were encouraged to focus on dreams they had recently recorded in their dream diaries, ensuring the descriptions were closer to the occurrence of the dream, thereby minimising memory bias (Mangiaruga, Scarpelli, Bartolacci, Gennaro, 2018). Dream diaries served as a preparatory tool, prompting participants to document their dreams immediately upon waking, capturing vivid details, emotional content, and sensory impressions. Participants recorded their dreams at home using various methods, such as handwritten notes in a journal, audio recordings on their phones, or digital note-taking apps. These options provided flexibility, allowing participants to choose a method that best suited their routines and comfort. This process helped ensure that the recollections discussed in the interviews were rich and comprehensive.

During the interviews, participants were prompted to reflect on when the dream occurred (e.g., whether it was during a specific life event or emotional state) and how the dream was recollected (e.g., spontaneously upon waking or triggered later by external stimuli). For instance, participants were often

asked: “Can you describe what you recalled immediately upon waking, and did any details emerge as you reflected on the dream later?” This dual approach allowed the exploration of both immediate and delayed recollections, uncovering layers of meaning and emotional resonance over time.

The initial explication comprised the first layer of the dream's description and meaningful aspects. Wolcott (1994) suggested that description is the foundation on which ‘analysis rests’ (Saldana, 2018, p.382). A second explication often followed, delving deeper into omitted aspects, such as overlooked emotions or details. Langridge (2007) observed that the researcher’s role could also involve interpreting the participants’ understanding. Participants frequently reported that the process of discussing their dreams led to spontaneous recall of previously forgotten aspects, particularly emotionally salient features (Schredl, 2010). For example, pivotal moments or symbols in the dream were often recollected during this phase, leading to transformative insights or shifts in the participant’s understanding of the dream’s impact (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

### **Combining Interviewing and Dream Diaries**

Quick data collection methods like standardised questionnaires may fail to capture the richness and immediacy of dream experiences, as daily experiences can intrude on memory (Mangiaruga, Scarpelli, Bartolacci, Gennaro, 2018). Thus, this study incorporated both dream diaries and semi-structured interviews to offer a multi-faceted exploration of dreams. While the diaries captured immediate, unfiltered details, the interviews enabled participants to elaborate on these entries, often exploring their emotional and phenomenological depth. This dual method ensured a balance between precision and interpretative richness.

The interviews focused on qualitative features (e.g., who, what, when) and qualitative structures (e.g., vividness, sensory modalities, and phenomenological features as interpreted). Questions like “Who appeared in your dream?”, “What stood out the most?”, and “How did the dream make you feel immediately after waking?” were used to scaffold the participant’s recall and reflection.

The iterative process between diary entries and dialogical interviewing facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the dream's significance in the participant's life.

### **Dialogical Considerations in the Interviews**

Kvale (1994) reminds us that the researcher's questions can shape the findings and should aim to elicit new knowledge. SEA heuristic devices represented quasi-instruments to explore reality, serving as a guide rather than the territory. Good rapport between researcher and participant was crucial to fostering trust and facilitating open dialogue. A key characteristic of phenomenological interviewing is the attitude of empathy and wonder. No matter how strange or unrealistic the participants' experiences might appear, I maintained an attitude of wonder and empathy, aiming to 'feel into' (van Deurzen, 2014) the participant's experience without confrontation.

The dialogical interviews were characterised by mutual respect and a shared commitment to illuminating phenomena. I approached each interview with other-directed intentionality (Zahavi, 2015), enabling the participants to unfold their experiences freely. This empathic and non-judgmental stance allowed the conditions of possibility to emerge, revealing nuanced insights into how dreams were recollected, interpreted, and experienced as meaningful events in the participants' lives.

### **Reflexivity:**

In conducting semi-structured interviews as part of this study, reflexivity was central to my approach, ensuring awareness of how my own beliefs and actions shaped the research process. My view of dreams as meaningful and transformative phenomena influenced the design and implementation of the interviews, requiring a balance between honouring my perspective and remaining open to participants' diverse experiences. By adopting a dialogical format, I aimed to create a collaborative space where participants could share freely, guided by empathetic prompts that encouraged rich, nuanced descriptions.

The integration of dream diaries added depth, capturing the immediacy of dream experiences while minimising memory biases. I recognised that the act of recording dreams could itself shape participants' recollections and approached this with flexibility, allowing participants to choose their preferred methods of documentation. During the interviews, I noticed how the dialogical process often prompted the spontaneous recall of forgotten details, highlighting the co-constructed nature of meaning-making in this context.

I remained mindful of my interpretative role, striving to balance my own insights with a commitment to respecting participants' unique understandings. Guided by an empathic stance, I sought to "feel into" their experiences without imposing assumptions, fostering an open dialogue that revealed the layers of significance within their dreams. This reflexive awareness ensured that the findings remained authentic, capturing both the richness of participants' narratives and the transformative potential of dreams in their lives.

### ***Analytic Strategy***

The interview was transcribed personally from a digital recording a day after each interview transpired to maintain continuity with the closeness of the dialogue and to preserve the nuances in the interview data. SEA procedures follow other phenomenological research methods. A summary of the interview experiences was immediately written so that I could make sense of the interviews and note my instant impressions.

The process of analysis followed Nine stages:

1. Read and re-read
2. Initial noting
3. Application of 'the timeline Heuristic
4. Application of the Four Worlds Heuristic
5. Application of the Emotional Compass Heuristic

6. Development and verification of emergent themes
7. Members check I: Review and feedback on their analysis
8. Theme consolidation Process
9. Members check II: Theme consolidation process

In van Deurzen's guidance on navigating using SEA, she suggests it is much less concerned with prescriptive methods and having an attitude towards exploration (van Deurzen, 2012).

**The first step of the analysis (reading and re-reading):** Once the interview was fully transcribed, I stayed faithful to the participants' experience by including non-verbal communication. The recording was played and replayed in tandem while reading the transcript to get a feel of the data and 'to heighten consciousness to a more intense level where I can be more precise in understanding a viewpoint on reality' (Deurzen, 2014, p.73. quote modified) of the participant. A familiarity – immersion- arose between the dialogical interview and the subsequent reading. In the **second phase**, each interview reading encouraged deeper immersion, which further attuned my awareness of the lived experience described. I chose the line-by-line approach to guide this stage of the analytic process to gain a fine-grained understanding of the phenomenon and uncover less easily discoverable aspects of the experience. I made descriptive notes describing each participant's experience (Attinasi, 1991). This was a challenging and lengthy process because the dream had to be first understood in the context of the participants' lives, and then the identified symbolism was cross-referenced through further interpretation. In line with SEA, questions (*Appendix B*) in the interview aimed to explore each phenomenon on a multi-dimensional level. All aspects of the dream image prompted clarification on its current meaning to the participants. As I gradually understood the symbolic material, further interpretation and ideas provided a better explanation of the experience with the participants' (See validity and members checking section). The verbatim and notes provided the grounds by which to draw themes before applying the heuristics in the third phase.

Table 1: Method of analysis

Emergent themes	Verbatim	Descriptive	Interpretative	Queries and ideas
Continuation of dream	<i>“After being transported to different plains, when I woke up, I just felt heavy, it was like the freeness and freedom of the dream world evaporate from your body, and you are in that heaviness”</i>	Transported to a different location; woke up feeling heavy.	Carryover of experience.	Participants' experiences continue from the dream dimension to the waking.
Intentional actions towards the dream material	<i>“Normally when I have this dream I am absolutely petrified, For some reason, as I was confronted with usually dying, I just reached over to embrace it, and I could see that small advances toward it, that little action just changed things. I wasn't even sure it was going to work, but all this time, I didn't think to do that”</i>	Confronted with dying, embracing and advancing towards it	Confrontation with existential realities of dying in dreaming. Acceptance and intentional action towards dream characters	Heightened awareness during dream, precipitated by intense emotions leading to change or adaptation in dream – focus and intent

The **third** layer considers the participant's phenomenological experience using the timeline that 'is eminently important and dictates the direction a person's thinking is proceeding' (van Deurzen, 2014, p.79). Heidegger (1975, p. 389) states that '*temporality is the condition for understanding being*'. In this view, Heidegger conceives it as our '*thrownness*' that '*underlies and gives meaning to our being*' (Dahlstrom, 1994, p.168). In this respect, the temporal heuristic structured how the experiential process was captured from dreaming, the moment of awakening, and the impact on the participant's life, viewed as temporal phases in time (See table below). The temporal experience was delineated, and relevant

questions were asked during the interview according to these dimensions of experience, and when analysing the transcript, references to the temporal phases were highlighted. Details in the table below:

Table 2 Method of analysis

Emergent themes while dreaming	Verbatim	Emergent themes when awakening	Verbatim	Emergent themes after awakening	Verbatim
Being with others in the Dreamspace: The tension of interpersonal limits	<i>"I can't believe I just stood there and watched 50 Vietnamese people get killed. That's not like me, especially when their children called me horrible. I've done some things in the past, but nothing like this. I feel so guilty it was so unlike me to act that way"</i>	Awakening to Being	<i>"After being transported to different plains, when I woke up, I just felt heavy, it was like the freeness and freedom of the dream world evaporate from your body, and you are in that heaviness"</i>	The Architecture of Integration: Constructing Meaning from the dream experience	<i>"Instantly, I knew this dream of 'Mugwort' was 'Taemong' a good 'Omen', and in my culture, I need to act on what this means. Good luck; after speaking to my mum, so I went out to play the lottery. Although dream it looks bad but it's a sign of things getting better, the expulsion of things that are bad in my life"</i>
The Dreaming Principle: Dreams as a Portal to New existential realities and Insights	<i>"I mean, I just would never have guessed if you asked me what to do. As I embraced this individual, I felt such relief, I was just in a state of gratitude in the dream. Like, why didn't I do this earlier. I was just filled with joy, and peace. So happy"</i>	The Burden of Knowing: premonitions as Existential Responsibility and Anxiety	<i>"I am always left with what does it mean, that is all I cannot say WHAT..... DOES..... IT..... MEAN?"</i>	Engaging the Dream more deeply: A Journey of Self-Reflection and Growth	<i>"The amount of consideration I have taken in for my life from that dream. I am thankful for my life and my sons every single day"</i>

In the interview, I continuously engaged with the descriptive data, and a renewed sense of the participant's lifeworld enabled me to explore each sentence, continuously verifying the experience of



the participants through the timeline heuristic, ensuring that I systematically considered at which level the phenomena emanating from the temporal perspectives reflected the four worlds. **The fourth stage** of the analysis required using the ‘*four worlds*’ heuristic device to identify themes that sufficiently represented the emerging concerns (salient or relevant to the research topic) from the data that is equally grounded in the data. The application of the hermeneutic cycle involved going beyond patterns, looking at how the participants described their interaction within the worldly dimensions, and attempting to get a sense of the phenomenon at a deeper level through my interpretation. Initially, the data was divided across three temporal phases, as outlined above. Once this had been completed, the data was analysed through the four dimensions of existence shown in the table above. The interview data was reviewed to see which aspect referred to the corresponding dimension.

Table 3: Method of analysis

	Dreaming as Being: Origins and Echoes from My Experience (Past)	Awakening to Being: Confronting the Threshold Between dream world and waking reality (Present)	Living with the Dream: Integrating dream wisdom into waking Life (Future)
Physical			
Social	<i>"I can't believe I just stood there and watched 50 Vietnamese people get killed. That's not like me, especially when their children called me horrible. I've done some things in the past, but nothing like this. I feel so guilty it was so unlike me to act that way"</i>		<i>"Instantly, I knew this dream of 'Mugwort' was 'Taemong' a good 'Omen', and in my culture, I need to act on what this means. Good luck; after speaking to my mum, so I went out to play the lottery. Although dream it looks bad but it's a sign of things getting better, the expulsion of things that are bad in my life"</i>
Personal		<i>"I am always left with what does it mean, that is all I cannot say WHAT..... DOES..... IT..... MEAN?"</i>	
Spiritual	<i>"I mean, I just would never have guessed if you asked me what to do. As I embraced this individual, I felt such relief, I was just in a state of gratitude in the dream. Like, why didn't I do this earlier. I was just filled with joy, and peace. So happy"</i>		

The phenomenological analysis of the **fifth stage** using the emotional compass focuses on how the world is given to us in experience and *how* the dream world is revealed through its meaning and salient features (van Deurzen, 2014). For Heidegger, our mood reveals how the world is disclosed to us, while

our emotions can be understood as to how we live or act out. Mood and emotions can present as the already structural lens of experience, which, through the 'emotional compass' heuristic, are analysed as our way of attunement whilst being-in-the-world-dreaming. When analysing the data, responses relating to mood and emotions were drawn out and tracked along a trajectory before they were referenced in the table above.

Table 4: Method of analysis

Dreaming as Being: Origins and Echoes from My Experience (Past)		Awakening to Being: Confronting the Threshold Between dream world and waking reality (Present)	Living with the Dream: Integrating dream wisdom into waking Life (Future)
Physical		<i>"Initially, I had to sift through the weight of these emotions because I had several dreams that night  "I am trying to understand how I felt. I felt very heavy from being so emotional and anxious and helpless"</i>	<i>"Where I was faced with my life seconds from ending, I just want to experience more enjoyment. But who will take my dreams seriously"</i>
Social		<i>"my phone was already in my hand when I woke up with all that anxiety, so I sent her a message. I did not do anything, but I did because I felt like I did, you know what I mean"</i>	<i>"I went through a phase of caring to not caring, and only at that point was I able to work through what I think is other people's fear of what I see and can make sense of. Now I am able to trust others whether they believe it or not; they always like to talk about dreams"</i>
Personal		<i>I get so anxious when having to think of myself as that person you never expect to be, but my dreams always have a way of showing such candour"</i>	
Spiritual			

The **sixth stage** of the analysis involved verifying the themes before exploring possible connections to be merged into Temporal themes. The themes representing the participant's experience were checked rigorously against the data to ensure they accurately reflected their experiences within the heuristics. Returning to the data and searching for further confirmation that the participant's objects of concern are represented in each theme served in the iterative process in the write-up. As part of the ongoing hermeneutic cycle, themes may change as new insights and knowledge about the data are learned. Several themes appeared to stand out more than others; therefore, I reviewed their importance during the analysis. Other themes less well emergent required further verification of the study's importance. Reviewing data in the iterative process allowed for a connection between the whole and its

part, revealing the emergence of a novel finding linked to the moments of awakening theme that underpinned many of the experiences upon awakening and subsequent participant behaviour. As I engaged with the phenomenon, clarity emerged about the unexpected novel theme '*Accumulating Insight*' effect (first noted in the pilot study), *Coping Mechanism in the Dreams Wake*, and *Replaying Dreams*.

**Stage Seven** After completing the analysis up to that point, each participant was actively engaged in the research process. They were sent an email containing their individual analysis, including the identified themes and direct quotes from their interviews. In this step, participants were given the opportunity to review their analysis and provide feedback. They were free to remove any direct quotes they were uncomfortable with or make changes to ensure their global impression and themes were accurately captured. This involvement of the participants in reviewing their analysis and providing input was important in maintaining the integrity and authenticity of their experiences. It allowed them to directly influence how their stories and themes were represented in the final research findings. The feedback process involved participants reviewing their transcripts and theme descriptions against their original intent and meaning. Any discrepancies noted by participants were used to revise themes or refine interpretations, ensuring alignment with their lived experiences. For example, participants could clarify ambiguous phrases or suggest alternative terminology that better reflects their narrative. This iterative exchange not only validated the findings but also reduced potential misrepresentation I may have suggested.

By allowing participants to revise and contribute to their analysis, I aimed to honour their perspectives and ensure that their voices were accurately reflected in the study. The participants' themes were organised into broader headings in **stage eight** of the analysis).

Table 5 Method of analysis

	<b>Dreaming as Being: Origins and Echoes from My Experience (Past)</b>	<b>Awakening to Being: Confronting the Threshold Between dream world and waking reality (Present)</b>	<b>Living with the Dream: Integrating dream wisdom into waking Life (Future)</b>
Physical	<b>1) The Body in Dreaming: Limits, Concerns, and the Felt Experience of the Dream World</b>	<b>6) The Threshold of Waking: The Transition from Dream to Waking Reality</b>	<b>13) ) Personal Practices of Dream Engagement: Rituals for Meaning and Integration</b>
Social	<b>2) Being with Others in the Dreamspace: The Tension of Interpersonal limits</b>	<b>7) Dreams and Duty: The Pull of Social Obligations and Moral Responsibility</b>	<b>14) Shared Dreaming: The Collective Space and Experience of Dreaming Together</b> 14.1) Space of Integration: <b>Merging Dream and Waking Life</b> 14.1.1) ) <b>The Architecture of Integration: Constructing Meaning from the Dream Experience</b> 14.1.2) <b>Acquisitional Integration: The Ongoing Process of Dream Incorporation</b> 14.1.3) <b>Living in the Void: The Struggle with Unresolved Dreams and Unintegrated Meaning</b> 14.2) <b>The Dance of Trust and Shame: The Emotional Cost of Dream Sharing</b> 14.3) <b>Sharing Revelations: The Transformative Power of Dream Disclosure</b>

This involved applying van Deurzen's (2014) structural existential analysis to each participant's themes to identify overlaps in life impacts across their stories. The resulting broad headings were used to describe how each participant's account related to them and to the other corresponding narratives. Throughout the ongoing hermeneutic cycle, themes were subject to revision based on new insights and knowledge gained from the data. Additional data checking procedures were integrated at this stage to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings. These included reviewing emerging themes against raw interview data and diary entries to confirm their consistency. For instance, themes derived from one section of a participant's interview were compared with other parts of their narrative to identify congruence or contradictions. This process minimised the risk of thematic overgeneralisation or selective interpretation.

Specific themes stood out more prominently among the participants, leading to a focused review of their significance while analysing common themes. Other themes that emerged less prominently underwent further verification to ascertain their importance to the study. This iterative

process of reviewing the data allowed for a holistic understanding of the shared phenomenon, revealing novel findings common to multiple participants. These findings were connected to the temporal themes, four worlds, and heuristic devices underpinning the common experiences upon awakening and subsequent participant behaviour. As I engaged with this collective phenomenon, a sense of clarity gradually emerged. A second member check was performed in **stage nine** following the completion of step eight. The participants received an email containing a list of headings, with the ones pertinent to their story highlighted. Additionally, they were given descriptions explaining how their story correlated with each heading. This facilitated the participants in understanding how their stories were portrayed in relation to others and in contemplating whether their stories could align with further headings.

Participants were encouraged to critically assess how the headings captured the essence of their experiences. This stage allowed for refinement based on participants' insights and provided an opportunity for them to challenge or expand interpretations. For example, one participant noted that their experience of a particular theme ('emotional clarity') resonated across multiple headings, prompting a review of how that theme was represented across other accounts. Notably, out of the 11 participants, only nine engaged and responded to the emails. For those who responded, their feedback was incorporated into the final synthesis of themes, reinforcing the trustworthiness of the findings. The data of the two participants who did not respond were still carefully reviewed to ensure their perspectives were accurately captured based on the available information.

### ***Reflexivity***

Navigating the interpretation of symbols and metaphors inherent in the dreams reported by the participants proved to be a complex and nuanced endeavour. Rather than viewing the analysis as a straightforward process, it required an in-depth understanding of the dreamers' lives to support my interpretative rendition. The task of dividing the interview data into the three temporal dimensions and their corresponding heuristic devices posed considerable challenges, as the material naturally

intertwined across participants. Deciphering the different worlds presented in the transcripts often necessitated multiple readings and careful contemplation. To maintain clarity and avoid getting overwhelmed, I took regular breaks, sometimes spanning several days, allowing space for new insights to emerge. Each engagement with the material offered a fresh lens through which to explore and appreciate the diverse layers of meaning. It became evident that these experiences were inherently multi-faceted, inviting a multitude of interpretations and highlighting the richness and complexity of subjective experiences.

### ***Ethical considerations***

This research study was conducted in line with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) ethical guidelines (2010; 2021). Throughout the planning of this study, it was important to keep under review any possible ethical implications to avoid unwillingly inflicting harm to the participants. Following ethical guidelines, participants were sent emails to set out the study's aims, confidentiality protocols, data collection, and their right to censor personal information or withdraw from the study. The aim was to promote their autonomy and dignity and protect them from harm.

### ***Informed Consent***

I obtained the participants' written consent and reminded them that the interview was recorded before the research interview. The participant was informed that data from their interview would be used in the study and informed that any identifying information would be anonymised. The participant was informed that the interview could involve some distress and assured they could feel safe in their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The participant was given an information sheet to overview the study and confidentiality measures (see below).

## **Confidentiality**

An interview was conducted online through Skype on a 256-bit password-encrypted internet line. The participant was asked to be in a confidential place, and I, throughout the interview, was in a confidential space. The participant's identifying details were changed, and I ensured that all documentation relating to the interview contained no identifying details. The recorded interviews were immediately deleted from the online platforms and stored on a separate password-encrypted computer. The completed consent form with the participant's demographic information provided to me was stored securely in a secured filing cabinet in my home.

## **Limiting Distress in the Interview**

Dream research involves delving deeply into personal experiences. Acknowledging that interviews may evoke difficult and unexpressed emotions as participants recall and reenact their dream experiences is important. The study recognises the participants' dignity and integrity, empowering them as the ultimate authorities on the meaning of their dreams. Others' interpretations can be misleading, incorrect, or even harmful. Ethical dreamwork supports participants in exploring their dream images, feelings, and associations, facilitating a full experience, appreciation, and understanding of the dream. Participants were informed of their right to halt the interview if they felt distressed, and a debriefing session provided information on local psychotherapy and counselling services in case they needed additional support during or after the interview.

## **Member Check:**

Member checking is an integral aspect of qualitative research methodology, aiming to establish the validity and trustworthiness of the study (Doyle, 2007; Guba, 1981). It involves participants reviewing transcripts or early parts of the analysis to ensure the accuracy of ideas and representation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, member checking was employed to demonstrate rigour and

enhance the credibility of the research project (Maxwell 1992, 2005). It confirmed the 'respondent interview' accounts and ensured their voices were accurately represented (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Guba and Lincoln (1989) highlighted the need for researchers to align their ontological and epistemological stance with member-checking procedures in qualitative research (Varpio et al., 2017; DeCino & Waalkes, 2018). They cautioned against adopting positivist undertones in member checking, as it conflicts with the ever-evolving nature of participants' experiences and my understanding of the phenomenon. In qualitative research, the focus is not on discovering objective truth; therefore, member checks should not be approached to achieve absolute representation (Koelsch, 2013). However, despite the non-positivist philosophy of qualitative research, some researchers still employ mechanistic procedures in member checks to achieve greater accuracy in representing an objective truth (Cho & Trent, 2006).

Hillman (1975) proposes that the dream's meaning becomes distorted when translated into the language of wakeful conversation. However, engaging with the dream within its realm is challenging for the conscious self. The study recognised that data does not have definitive versions but multiple interpretations influenced by my standpoint and perspective (Richardson, 2000; Kradin, 2006). Understanding this, I embraced the idea that each interpretation depends on the angles of repose or lenses brought to the work. Several researchers have argued that 'members check' reduces bias and misinterpretation (Thomas, 2017). Ethical considerations were taken into account, addressing power dynamics and representation issues voiced by scholars such as Britzman (2000), Buchbinder (2011), Dennis (2014), Fine & Weis (1996), and Lather (2007). Madill & Sullivan (2017) emphasised the need for qualitative researchers to address several issues to ensure best practices in member checking. Firstly, there is often a disconnect between researchers and participants in terms of knowledge and power. The researcher's knowledge tends to be etic and theoretical, while the participants' knowledge is emic and experiential (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, and Francis, 2011). This disparity in knowledge



can lead to participant ambivalence or challenges, as their assumptions about the research or the phenomenon may not align with those of the researcher (Madill & Sullivan, 2017).

Secondly, participants may struggle to provide specific feedback when the phenomenon under investigation is outside their awareness or challenging to comprehend (Madill and Sullivan, 2017). This limitation arises when participants lack understanding or familiarity with certain aspects of the research topic. Thirdly, the issue of participant compliance and the desire to please researchers can influence the feedback provided during member checking (Reilly, 2013). Participants who possess agreeable personalities or a willingness to comply with my interpretations may yield to my views during the member checking process (McCoyd & Shdaimah, 2007). This can potentially hinder the identification of alternative perspectives and undermine the validity of the findings.

Fourthly, participants may experience recall limitations, forgetting certain interview content or their experiences between data collection and member checking (Reilly, 2013). This memory lapse can impact the accuracy and completeness of their feedback during the member checking process. To address these challenges, I have employed several strategies. Establishing a collaborative and egalitarian relationship with participants is crucial to addressing the knowledge and power disparity. Engaging participants in meaningful discussions, providing clarifications, and seeking their perspectives can help bridge the gap (Madill & Sullivan, 2017). To address difficulties in providing feedback on unfamiliar aspects, I used visual aids, prompts, or real-life examples to facilitate participant understanding and engagement (Madill & Sullivan, 2017). To mitigate the issue of compliance and the desire to please, I encouraged open and honest feedback, explicitly stating that alternative perspectives or disagreements are valued (Reilly, 2013). Creating a safe and non-judgmental environment can empower participants to express their genuine thoughts. Regarding memory limitations, I provided participants with relevant materials or summaries of their previous interviews to aid their recollection during member checking (Reilly, 2013). By adopting these strategies, I attempted to enhance the quality and effectiveness of member checking, addressing the inherent challenges and

promoting a more comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives. As a Black male researcher and aspiring scholar, the study aimed to amplify the participants' voices and acknowledge their unique perspectives and experiences. Grounded in existential philosophy, this research study acknowledges the profound impact of dreams on individuals' lives and recognises the existential concerns and themes embedded within these experiences. I recognise that members checking is influenced by me, instead of being 'objective'; however, I hope that, as Moustakas (1994) states, *"lets the phenomena of dreams and waking life shine forth, and support people in learning directly from their own perceptions and experiences"* (p.4) and *"The caring of the therapist projects itself into this person's world, evokes awareness of loss, inspires a search to understand what is blocking growth, and ultimately moves the person to recognise and express new feelings and new ways of being"* (p.7). The member check process sought to validate the interpretations of vivid dreams by incorporating participants' reflections on the existential dimensions present in their lived experience of dreaming (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the member check sessions, participants were provided with a summary of their vivid dream narratives, highlighting the identified themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis. They were encouraged to reflect on how these themes aligned with their personal existential concerns, such as questions of meaning, freedom, responsibility, and identity. This collaborative dialogue aimed to validate the existential interpretations derived from the dream accounts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Shenton, 2004; Morse, 1994; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Tracy, 2010). The member check sessions also allowed participants to provide insights into the transformative potential of vivid dreams within the context of counselling psychology. Participants were invited to share their perspectives on how their dream experiences might relate to their psychological well-being, personal growth, and therapeutic process. Their feedback and reflections enriched the understanding of the implications of vivid dreams on their lives within a counselling psychological perspective (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Shenton, 2004; Morse, 1994; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004). Furthermore, the member check process acknowledged the importance of existential philosophy in

interpreting and understanding vivid dreams. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how their dream narratives resonated with their broader existential concerns and dilemmas. By considering the existential dimensions present in their dreams, the study aimed to align the interpretations with the core principles of existential psychology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). The feedback obtained during the member check sessions was carefully analysed and integrated into the final interpretations of vivid dreams. The insights provided by participants regarding the existential dimensions, the transformative potential, and the connections to counselling psychology in clinical practice were taken into account to refine and validate the findings. This iterative process ensured that the interpretations were in line with the participants' lived experiences and reflective of the interplay between vivid dreams and existential psychology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Shenton, 2004; Morse, 1994; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Tracy, 2010). While acknowledging the value of member check sessions in validating interpretations, it is important to recognise that individual perspectives and biases may influence the feedback provided by participants. The member check process captured a snapshot of the participants' experiences and interpretations at a specific moment in time, potentially overlooking potential changes in their perspectives over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, by engaging participants in a collaborative dialogue, the member check sessions provided a means to integrate the existential theory, existential concerns, and insights from counselling psychology in clinical practice into the interpretations of vivid dreams (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Shenton, 2004; Morse, 1994; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004; Tracy, 2010). This comprehensive approach enriched the understanding of the transformative nature of dreams and their relevance to individuals' psychological well-being and personal growth.

## Chapter Three Findings

Participant Demographic Table 6

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Occupation	Location & Cultural Identity	Use of Dream Journal			Dreams disclosed
					Before	During	After	
Francesca	36	F	Fashion	South America	✓	✓	✓	2
Kelly-Ann	42	F	Counsellor	Britain	✓	✓	✓	3
Helen	38	F	Jeweller	Greece		✓		3
Mareva	29	F	Environmental Engineer	Native America		✓		3
Lucy	24	F	Architect	Asia		✓	✓	3
Jonathan	32	M	Computing	Asia		✓		2
Jackie	22	F	Retail	Europe	✓	✓	✓	3
Olga	34	F	Musician	Europe	✓	✓	✓	4
Hinata	45	F	Retail	Europe	✓	✓	✓	1
Bhavisana	32	F	Medical Doctor	Europe		✓		2
Astrid	27	F	Psychologist	India		✓		2

### Introduction

This chapter will explore the eleven participants' semi-structured interview descriptions in-depth through structural existential analysis. The study aimed to begin the journey toward understanding how the participants made sense of their experiences and how those experiences impacted their lives through their dreams. The data collected included recording a dream journal over two weeks, allowing participants to present both a first-person participant perspective of living out the dream experience and a third-person observer perspective where the participant, upon waking, analysed the impact of their

dream experience alongside the interviewer. The participants' responses to the question on how vivid dreams affect their lives analysis led to three chronological categories (hereafter called temporal dimensions) reflecting the use of a dream journal:

- Dreaming as Being: Origins and Echoes from my Experiences (Past)
- Awakening to Being: Confronting the Threshold Between Dream World and Waking Reality
- Living with the Dream: Integrating Dream Wisdom into Waking Life (Future)

The findings are presented within each temporal dimension according to the four dimensions of analysis (physical, social, personal, and spiritual). Using an interpretative process (Heidegger, 1962; van Deurzen, 2016, 2014; Spineli, 2005), I posited the themes, which is a subjective interpretation. The interpretation of the dreams might appear different if another researcher had analysed them. Various symbols' meanings are complex because each participant has no similar symbols. However, findings are based on observations, members' checks, and evidence sufficiently so that I can follow my interpretations and rationale. This chapter begins with a brief exploration of the participants' dreams in context, after which verbatim extracts support exploring the temporal dimension themes and four dimensions from the transcripts. While the temporal dimensions were common across the accounts, themes that diverged and differed are also discussed.

Table 7: Temporal phase of themes

	Dreaming as Being: Origins and Echoes from My Experience (Past)	Awakening to Being: Confronting the Threshold Between dream world and waking reality (Present)	Living with the Dream: Integrating dream wisdom into waking Life (Future)
Physical	1) The Body in Dreaming: Limits, Concerns, and the Felt Experience of the Dream World	6) The Threshold of Waking: The Transition from Dream to Waking Reality	13) ) Personal Practices of Dream Engagement: Rituals for Meaning and Integration
Social	2) Being with Others in the Dreamspace: The Tension of Interpersonal limits	7) Dreams and Duty: The Pull of Social Obligations and Moral Responsibility	14) Shared Dreaming: The Collective Space and Experience of Dreaming Together 14.1) Space of Integration: Merging Dream and Waking Life 14.1.1) ) The Architecture of Integration: Constructing Meaning from the Dream Experience 14.1.2) Acquisitional Integration: The Ongoing Process of Dream Incorporation 14.1.3) Living in the Void: The Struggle with Unresolved Dreams and Unintegrated Meaning 14.2) The Dance of Trust and Shame: The Emotional Cost of Dream Sharing 14.3) Sharing Revelations: The Transformative Power of Dream Disclosure
Personal	3) Dreams as Metaphor: Reframing the Self Through the Dreaming Experience	8) Fragmented Selves: The Dreamer's Struggle with Identity and Authenticity in the Dream 9) Becoming One with the Dream: Rebuilding the Relationship Between Self and Dream 10) Coping Mechanisms in the Dream's Wake: The Compulsion to Move Forward 11) The Burden of Knowing: Premonitions as Existential Responsibility and Anxiety	15) Engaging the Dream More Deeply: A Journey of Self-Reflection and Growth
Spiritual	4) The Dreaming Principle: Dreams as a Portal to New Existential Realities and Insights 5) Consciously Engaging with Dreams: A Pathway to Self-Discovery and Transformation	12) Accumulating Insight: The Transformative Process of Dream Integration	16) ) Replaying Dreams: Assembling Meaning from Experiences 17) Staying on Path: Using Dreams to Navigate Life's Pathways 18) Being with Dreams: Living in Dialogue with the Dream World 19) Living with Dreams: Incorporating Dream Wisdom into Everyday Life

I have organised the data into three temporal themes that best reflect the participants' presentation of their vivid dreams' impact on their waking lives. The first theme, **'Dreaming as Being,'** highlights the participants' accounts of facing their ultimate concerns in their lives. These concerns included death, freedom and responsibility, isolation and meaninglessness as inbuilt properties perceived as inescapable aspects of human existence. These struggles, at times, were figuratively presented or represented during dreaming from their reports (see definitions for explanation). The second theme, **'Awakening to Being,'** explores the participants' immediate experience upon awakening from their dreams. Through the lens of their vivid dreams, it shows the process of altering their perception of themselves and how they perceive others. It considers the process of coping and making sense of the accumulative dream experiences. The final theme is **'Living with the Dream'.** This theme explores how the participants engage with their lives influenced by their dreams, deepening their relationship to self and feeling integrated through sharing with others. The theme highlights that despite the participants enduring frequent nocturnal encounters with existential concerns, they can continue to be enriched by their dreams through deciphering and engaging the imagery.

## **Dreaming as Being: Origins and Echoes from My Experiences (Past)**

The participants report their nocturnal experiences as *'puzzles'* or *'riddles'* whose purpose is to elicit thinking or test their ingenuity – fundamentally – a process to acquire knowledge *'you never know what you are going to dream in the night, and it is always a mystery'* (**Helen**). These participants feel dreaming is important and use it as a basis for reflection, adding it to more abstract ideas of life or depth to existing ideas. They use their dreams to reflect upon and realise what is at stake in life. The participants feel these subjunctive states (see definitions) arise when facing their ultimate concerns, as Mareva exemplifies: *'It's always friggin death if I am awake or asleep that I have to think about more'*. In their discussions, all participants described their experiences of dreams as facing – *'everything that life can throw at you'* (**Hinata**). This demonstrates a broad spectrum of human issues subjunctively

displayed by the dream material, such as being confronted with their mortality, having to deal with challenges in their relationships, questioning aspects of their self, and uncovering symbolic meaning towards adopting principles of living – critical issues at a point in their lives.

The following themes track the participants as they face what are essentially existential realities, experiencing feelings of hopelessness, horror, and grief that proved challenging, thought-provoking and difficult to accept. These experiences for all participants had profound and significant effects on the way they related to the world, their way of interacting in relationships, and how they related to themselves. The participants describe how their experiences changed them as the dream material journeys through to and impacted their way of life, a theme strongly reflected in the themes **‘Awakening to Being’** and **‘Living with the Dream’**. In their own individual ways, through this process, they begin to assemble clues relevant to their lives, thus making sense of the fragmented dream material by identifying how their experiences can be used to change their lives towards growth. Therefore, the theme **‘Dreaming as Being’** serves as the experiential ground through which the four dimensions that lead to the above named themes emerged. In this way, it stands in its own right as many participants derived a level of personal growth between their confrontations with the existential realities through the different dimensions.

The first theme to emerge, *‘The Body in Dreaming: Limits, Concerns, and the Felt Experience of the Dream World,’* details how the participants’ bodies serve as an interface for experiences, observing their encounters with their dreams, and interacting with these for their purposes. As the participants make sense of their world, they rely on the dreamworld’s impact on their bodies and the responses of their bodies to these impacts. In *‘Being with Others in the Dreamspace: The Tension of Interpersonal Limits’* shows the consequences of acted out attitudes and patterns of behaviour in ways that leave the participants feeling alienated, isolated, and experiencing despair, yet attempting to reconcile or seek to overcome interpersonal challenges.



Astonished by the figural representation of the self-being expressed, '*Dreams as Metaphor: Reframing the Self Through the Dreaming Experience*' illustrates how their dreams posed questions and provoked emotions that raised awareness of an unilluminated side of themselves. *The Dreaming Principle: Dreams as a Portal to New Existential Realities and Insights*' illustrates how some participants encounter novel dream imagery that enlivens their perception of possibilities that transcend their currently held perceptions of how to live. The participants become aware and are inspired that their dreams are resources to greater living principles.

The final theme, '*Consciously Engaging with Dreams: A Pathway to Self-Discovery and Transformation*,' examines some of the participants' intentional experiences that either involved pre-dream practices or heightened consciousness within the dream to advance inner growth. The participants describe their feelings towards these novel interactions, disentangling the conveyed experiences. These themes appeared to prepare the participants for the future, provide insight into the participant's existential concerns, or generate new perspectives on living. In the interview, all participants were animated in explaining their dreams, moving their bodies and arms to demonstrate the actions depicted in the imagery. It was not possible to rely on words alone, but I could also engage with the felt qualities of the dream experience to convey the symbolism of the imagery. Among the descriptions of their impactful experiences used by all the participants were "*another universe*", "*omnipotent*", "*mysterious*", "*valuable*", "*spiritual*", "*having an impact*", "*meaningful*", and "*premonitory*." In addition, every participant referred to symbolism or imagery in dreams, often in the context of how symbols and imagery are understood and interpreted as impacting their lives. Overall, this theme shows the impacts of the participants' experiences as they attempt to convey their accounts of how they were simultaneously felt and perceived.

## **Physical Dimension**

### ***The Body in Dreaming: Limits, Concerns, and the Felt Experience of the Dream World***

For all participants they remembered their dreams vividly as embodied sensations in time and space; that is, the participants were convinced that they were experiencing an actual event in a vivid environment: “I cannot tell the difference”( **Mareva**), “I would feel everything that I would see in my dream” (**Helen**), “Yes I knew I was literally In everything” (**Kelly-ann**), “it made me [interference] feel like I wanted to get out of there. But in my dream, I did not realise that was a dream” (**Jonathan**), “it just seemed normal in the dream I did not question it I did not even notice it was not him. It was so real I was able to feel the touch” (**Bhavisana**)

Life and death posed the most fundamental challenge among the participants' dilemmas and tensions. These encounters brought about strong feelings and concerns, reminding them of their limitations and possibilities. Others talked about feeling ‘unsafe’ and ‘insecure’, being exploited sexually, feeling pain, anxiety, a sense of infidelity, relating to the natural environments, and embodying the values of spiritual entities and connecting with them. I was moved while observing the range of emotions that intensified through the dream narrative, including fear, surprise, and joy. In describing the moment of realising her mortality, Mareva conveys the tragedy she experienced:

*I did not question it because it seemed so natural. But so, the plane takes off and then We are up in the air. [interference] I don't know, we were up high, when all of a sudden, I get the feeling of we are losing elevation. I was so unsafe, Like that feeling of your stomach dropping or your stomach rising. I was feeling so anxious and fearful as if I was going to die” (**Mareva**)*

Danger and death were often witnessed through the destruction of other people in the dream.

Bhavisana reflects Mareva's sudden feeling of anxiety upon facing death as she describes the limited time she had to process her impending reality.

*“The bridge began to swing; I could feel it, so I immediately held on. It was anxiety provoking because I saw my life flash before me as I was about to die. It was just so frightening. At*

*that very point, things became more real, and I was just more aware of everything.... Watching the people about to fall off the bridge, then me too” (Bhavisana)*

Olga echoed the bewilderment experienced by Bhavisana, but her description also demonstrates how she interpreted the sensations and the emotion of ‘anguish’ emanating from the ‘being’ before she had to process her confrontation with the possibility of death in the dream.

*“I just felt hyper-realistic. It didn't look hyper-realistic, but it felt like I meant this. This person was like, in the doorway. Like screaming, like, inconsolable, just screaming like freaking out and had grabbed both of my wrists and was like, pulling my wrists down like I'm standing And they're standing, and they have my wrist, and they're just like, pulling them down as hard as possible. Like, in all of their, like, I could feel the anguish in this person erm being, like, because of how hard they we're pulling on my arms like, and just and I'm standing there thinking they are going to kill me. And I am just like losing I'm at like, not at me, not because of me, but just in general just like losing it.”*  
(Olga)

The participants reported being filled with fear and anxiety as they faced the prospect of dying in their dreams. They felt fear and sensations that impacted them within the dream, illustrated by Bhavisana's extract as she describes, ‘At that very point things became more real, and I was just more aware of everything’. Helen tells her intimate sense of embodied presence connected to familiar sounds and the visual aesthetics of her dream. The moment of facing death became a reality in anticipation of tactile sensations of what her ex-husband may have intended to inflict upon her.

*“It was as if I was standing there with him in real life. You know the surroundings the Sound of his voice, the clothes he was wearing? I believe maybe they were, you know, actual clothes. I've seen some times he had the purple tie. I really thought he was going to push me off the cliff because I could feel his hands on my back” (Helen)*

Francesca described the terror that she felt with the weight of the silicone in the water pressing down on her chest.

*“it was just cold on my skin. It felt like it was just, Yeah, a cold feeling. And I knew it was plastic because it felt like you know, when you put latex on in the glove kind of feeling. It reminded me of my weight training, the weight on my chest. I could not breathe. It was just horrifying to face that feeling of you might die in my dream” (Francesca)*

The participants above described a reduced sense of perceptual awareness of their body position and movement to know where they were in a given space, particularly as they moved or interacted with dream characters – what Olga describes as ‘pulling’. However, for Lucy, she described this experience as being ‘touched’ unexpectedly:

*“I said, “What are you doing” and he touched my, my anus in my, you know, it felt real him touching me sexually. Then I screamed, I could feel the pain in my throat And I got really upset obviously, I was trying to seek help to be safe in the restaurant. I ran around looking for someone to help.... Just to help” (Lucy)*

For Jonathan, this manifested through his perceived infidelity, similar to Lucy, which correlated with their intentionality as they were immersed in their experiences.

*“I was looking around, and I was like anxious because [erm] I do not know why. But I was just like, kind of worried about what if my wife is around. I kept looking around and around, and the anxiety made me feel dizzy in the dream” (Jonathan)*

Other participants in the interview found describing their dream experience within their given vocabulary more challenging. They decided to use metaphors or relate their experience to movies to address how the sensations and the feelings felt to try and convey the experience within their dreams. Kelly-ann describes emphatically about the experience of having to be transported to ‘different places:

*“No problem. There's a Doctor Strange, the Marvel Avengers one. He has this moment where he is leaving the medical profession. And yes, he's trying to understand he doesn't understand the spiritual realm at all. So this woman, whoever the bloody hell Her name is. She says, Okay, I'm going to show you, and she pushes his spirit out of his physical body. Goes through this Mad, almost like a 'trip' for about five minutes where he's in so many different places at one time and experiences so many different dimensions of his existence that he doesn't even know; it felt like that, it literally felt like that being sent to different places, the desert, the ocean, forests, the ice lands” (Kelly-ann)*

*“oh boy, its very much like another life, Like, like an alternate. I mean, I know a lot of people would probably find this phrase distasteful. But it's almost like an alternate universe that you wake up from, but you still retain the sensation. The help of being in the war zone was angelic. Like its a lot of the time my dreaming life. It's very, very much like my physical life” (Hinata)*

In her account, Jackie described the vividness of her encounter with a spiritual object before realising it was conscious.

*“it was a mix between white light and blue light, like warm golden light and blue light. And it was moving, like basically a ball of energy. And it had a conscience; I guess it was aware of things or it had an awareness. I actually have gone up to it and like, touched it” (Jackie)*

The vividness of the dream was not only visually dominant but was described as a metaphorical ‘trip’ (**Kelly-ann**), ‘Conscious’ (**Jackie**), “alternate universe” (**Hinata**), and “latex.” (**Francesca**). The participants reported states of intense emotions, as seen in Francesca's story concerning her drowning; Hinata was walking through a war zone, Jackie was in the presence of spiritual energy, and Kelly-ann described passing through various dimensions. The sensory experiences were intensely felt and vividly pronounced, illustrating a heightened state of emotions. Finally, for some, the participants describe their confrontation with pain coincided with their encounter

with external objects. The idea of focus began to emerge through the participants' narratives and appeared to be linked to what was most important within the dream. The following quotes demonstrate this:

*"it just seemed like it was an important part, like I was very focused on it like it wasn't kind of like a slight detail; it was like I watched very intently as she injected this botox into him. With my son I was, I remember feeling a little bit distressed when they injected him because the needle was pretty much as long as his leg is thick and they were putting, you know, injecting his leg, and I remember thinking that needle looked so long like it looked longer than his leg is thick and how's that going to work it's probably going to hurt him. I could feel the pain in my forehead as they injected him"*  
(Bhavisana)

*"Like the weirdest things you wouldn't expect, like, body language that you would have forgotten about, you know, like the loose gasp of the fingers, for instance, or the blade clenched up toes, and the slippers were so clear. You know the, the colour of that dal clearly comes back to me. I felt my stomach hurting which I remembered how bad a cook he was. I hope I'm not going to think about too much though, cuz I don't particularly want to be revisiting it a lot"* (Astrid)

Bhavisana states: '*I was very focused*'; Astrid described it as '*so clear*', demonstrating both the vivid intensity to their senses and the object being observed. However, Mareva shares a crucial insight within the interview that opens the discussion to how and why her dreams are notably recalled and the meaning to these participants. The following extract exemplifies this:

*"some dreams don't involve sensation because doesn't need it. Some dreams are completely visual, some dreams, it depends on what the focus is on, and it's worse when it comes to an end and wake up",* (Mareva)

The above provided verbatim suggests that dream experiences can vary regarding sensory involvement. Some dreams may lack sensations, focusing primarily on visual imagery, while others may incorporate different senses depending on the dream's specific focus. Additionally, the text indicates

that the ending of a dream can impact the dreamer's experience, potentially causing a shift in awareness during the transition to wakefulness.

These observations highlight the diverse nature of dreams and how they manifest differently for individuals. Dreams can range from vivid sensory experiences encompassing multiple senses to more visually oriented scenarios. The idea that certain dreams may be focused on specific aspects or themes implies the existence of different typologies or categories of dreams, each with its own unique characteristics.

Mareva's experiences provide captivating insights, hinting at a potential classification of dreams.

Mareva's dreams appear to focus on particular aspects, leading to potential variations in sensory involvement. This aligns with the understanding that dreams can manifest unique patterns and qualities, offering valuable psychological insights into dreaming.

Mareva's experiences offer intriguing insights and raise the possibility of a distinctive dream typology.

The specific focus and nature of their dream experiences suggest the existence of a separate category within the realm of dreams. Mareva's observations imply a dream type that emerges from their heightened attention and emphasis on specific elements within their dreams. This indicates that dreams can display diverse typologies, each characterised by the distinct focal points and themes experienced by individuals like Mareva. The physical dimension shows how these participants experienced a broad spectrum of sensations when faced with death, relationships, and spiritual beings as a way of being connected to the participant's narrative whilst trying to understand the dream. The experience of spatiotemporal events provided the grounds for discernability as the participant's emotions intensified. Within this mix of emotions and dream narrative, the participants' dreams were highly focused on a particular sense, and as Mareva eloquently explained, the dream '*focus*' depends on what is being conveyed and for the participant to understand metaphorically. The embodied world conveys

meaningful aspects within the dream and illustrates how emotions and sensations may filter into waking.

The embodied nature of certain dream experiences seems to highlight fragility, vulnerability, and dependency on a stable and non-threatening environment. These dreams often involve the rehearsal of injury, the fear of death, and death itself, presented in a physically convincing manner. These dreams' focus appears to be punctuating vivid imagery, similar to the intense scenes found in disaster movies, catastrophic events, and scenarios involving violence towards oneself and others. These dreams also present challenges to survival, often incorporating bizarre physical obstructions.

The vividness of imagery in dreams has been explored in the literature, with studies highlighting the richness and intensity of visual experiences during dreaming (Kahan & LaBerge, 2011; Ruby et al., 2013). Dream imagery can be highly detailed, realistic, and emotionally charged, akin to the visual intensity observed in cinematic portrayals of disasters and challenging situations. This suggests that the vividness of dream imagery may contribute to the immersive and emotionally impactful nature of these dream experiences.

Furthermore, the presence of physical sensations and the convincing portrayal of injuries and death in dreams align with research on the embodiment of dream experiences (Desseilles et al., 2011; Vallat et al., 2017). Dreams can evoke sensory perceptions, including tactile, visual, and auditory sensations, leading to a sense of physical presence and engagement within the dream world. The embodiment of dream experiences enhances the realism and emotional impact of the dream content.

## **Social Dimension**

### **Being with Others in the Dreamspace: The Tension of Interpersonal Limits**

Whilst the physical dimension was significantly linked to embodied confrontations of death, health, infidelity, sexuality and connections to the environment and spiritual values. Every participant reported a social interaction except Francesca. This theme shows the impact of social tensions that



contributed significantly to their perceptions of their relationships. In these accounts, there were instances of alienation, isolation from others, and failure to connect in intimate relationships or meet the expectations of symbolic figures. The following extracts show profound and significant implications that led to feelings of hopelessness and emotions of despair and sadness as a result of these confrontations with others. As Olga describes her experience of other's dependency on her ability to solve issues, she describes feeling isolated:

*"The PA malfunctioned, and no one responded as I looked around; everyone depends on me to solve the issues that everyone else can complete. If I don't do it, I'm seen as uncooperative, and they try to alienate me, but as I do it, they just keep adding additional tasks piling them all up for me to do. So, when I say this to them, they just don't get it, and I feel this sense of isolation"* (Olga)

*Astrid describes how her ex-husband frequently made crass comments to subjugate her into accepting she had no affiliation to anyone or anything except him*

*"It was him in all his pompous grandeur saying, "how can you be African, you cannot cook or even look like one. They don't even respect you". It's a blessing I am willing to indulge you"; it was just like me to sit there like a fly on shit. Seeing myself in that way made me feel like I needed to get out of there. I pitied myself, it was shameful to see"* (Astrid)

Considering the impact of viewing oneself within these relationships reflected both the participants' sense of personal value from others and glimpses of their ability to see a space for themselves in the dream material that's left them wanting to challenge others, as exemplified by Jonathan:

*"Leaving the army threw up many challenges for me, I had no voice to speak up for myself for many years, and as I was being transferred out in that scene, It was weird watching all those miniature people jumping off my shoulders, all the people I have served under. I could do something about it now".* (Jonathan)

Participants describe how their interactions showed how others perceive their qualities and how they wish to be perceived by others. Some participants describe these foregrounded qualities as incongruous or erroneous depictions represented, held by the dream material.

*"I just saw grandad walking in the farm yard, doing what he normally does, but it was as if I didn't care. I wanted to approach him, but I was acting out of character; it felt so disconnected"*  
**(Mareva)**

Jackie echoed Mareva's experience of feeling disconnected from others in her dream and further described the incongruous nature.

*"I can't believe I just stood there and watched 50 Vietnamese people get killed. That's not like me, especially when their children called me horrible. I've done some things in the past, but nothing like this. I feel so guilty it was so unlike me to act that way"* **(Jackie)**

**Kelly-ann** also described how others viewed her in the dream and vehemently contested their perceptions.

*"Egyptian god surrounded me, but what was strange was that there were so many white people. It was strange they were calling me out for being prejudiced and racist against them. I just wanted to save everybody and everything"* **(Kelly-ann)**

For many participants, the dreams appeared to suggest a way to change their character attributes predicated on the participants' recognising these discontents within themselves.

*"After watching those people fall off the bridge, it was as if I wanted them to go (die) so that I could survive..... That's so mean. I find it extraordinary that I could be so mean in my dreams. I do wonder if I am a secret anarchist because I always see this other side to me in dreams"* **(Bhavisana)**

For **Hinata**, the experience of leaving the injured and severely wounded also felt disconnected from her waking character.

*“I just walked past hundreds and thousands of people and could have helped every one of them. I didn’t, I was just concerned with completing my mission because I had to. They all screamed out at me, saying how shallow or out of touch I am. ” (Hinata)*

As most of the participants experienced their relationships with others being held in question to change. The participants also describe how they faced the demands of spiritual being or were presented with situations intended to invoke this response.

*“The ghosts surrounded me, and I couldn’t do anything about it no matter how hard I fought. When I was close to giving up, I curled into a ball on the fall, and it all stopped. I noticed soon as I intended to fight, it started again and then when I stopped, things settled, so I guess I needed to be calm and humble. Someone I haven’t been for years” (Helen)*

All participants shared this sense of shame and guilt about what others thought of them, along with how they would like to be seen by others. A repeated theme in all their dreams was the shame of social judgement of others, and the dream material seems to suggest that their existing ways of acting were unbecoming of them. Another way was the desire to please others and not upset or disappoint them, leading to *“me being so subservient I keep getting taken advantage of. What do I have to do to make it stop. It keeps happening in my dreams and in my life. Am I really that easy” (Lucy)*

Summary: All participants spoke of their close relationships, friends, experiences with colleagues and affiliate involvement; this connected experience of others naturally affects the development of particular beliefs and attitudes, including perceptions of how they experience themselves. The dreams influenced

all the participants significantly. The way each participant thought of themselves was challenged as they viewed aspects of themselves that appeared incongruent with their waking self. The negative portrayals of themselves left participants feeling discontent and anxious but, ultimately, a desire to change.

## **Personal Dimension**

### **Dreams as Metaphor: Reframing the Self Through the Dreaming Experience**

All participants unanimously describe their dreams as highly personal and consistently emphasise their significant psychological impact on their lives. These dreams are deeply meaningful to them, evoking intense emotions and leaving a lasting imprint on their thoughts and behaviours. By highlighting the personal nature and the profound psychological influence of their dreams, participants emphasise the transformative power that dream experiences hold in shaping their overall well-being and inner growth. In addition to their highly personal and psychologically impactful nature, the participants' dreams also portray a dialectical perspective of their selves. Symbolic riddles within their dreams act as metaphors, posing questions that explore their lived possibilities, limitations, and how they may have closed themselves off from self-awareness. As the participants described their dreams, themes of anxiety, fear, desires, and hopes emerged, reflecting their internal struggles with their sense of self. These dreams serve as a platform for the participants to confront and navigate their inner conflicts and gain deeper insights into their identities and personal growth. The following quotes exemplify this:

*“As I was teaching, I mistakenly put the colour blue with the heart than the colour green for the heart chakra while teaching, so it’s a mistake I’m familiar with in my life, and the dream showed the mistake on the whiteboard, not only can I make mistakes but I can learn from them in the process. It just opened up new ways of seeing things” (Olga)*

*“Being taken to all those places at the time made no sense. Why a desert, an ocean or a forest. Again, it made no sense, but then I realised in the dream, all that I was searching for was that place in myself to be content. I could see who I am, my identity, me in all those places I went too. It was almost like the biblical ‘I am that I am’. No reference to what it ‘is’ opens your mind to not being specific and defining yourself. If I am not a specific thing, then I can become anything” (Kelly-ann)*

Olga and Kelly-ann’s realisations were emblematic of the experience for many participants in their dream narratives. The impact of these experiences seemed to allow them to reflect on the possibilities of whom they were becoming. Helen describes that responding to the uncanny symbolism in the dream allowed her to view her weaknesses as strengths, leading her to become more optimistic as she goes on to say:

*“I was so anxious before the exam that I dreamt about competing against a drone that sat on top of a Christmas tree outside my window; how absurd is that, and what does it symbolise? Why would a drone sit there, I thought. In the dream, I decided to take the exam until I won, which took all night because I woke up when I won. I could see in the dream” (Helen)*

Hinata also adopted an optimistic approach when reflecting on how a simple choice she made meant she was able to help others:

*“I’m a lonely person, so I was alone in the dream. It was so hard trying to be understood when travelling past all those people that I had to complete this mission. I knew that it was for the better, but I could see in the dream that despite having good intentions, if you don’t communicate with others, no one will know, as I did in the dream. The dream me is so disconnected, I guess that is me trying to do what seems right” (Hinata)*

For many participants, as mentioned above, struggles centred upon aspects of their identity. An interesting point was how the participants responded to the challenging situations within the dream. Other participants described this phenomenon in further depth concerning their self-efficacy.

*“Well, I was able to keep the gunmen away from killing the people at work and individuals in the street, but when they came to our house, as we sat around the table. I knew I had not done enough. I tried my best, and as I tried to run away, I heard gunshots one by one, and the final shoot hit me. I died trying.... I thought, and then I regained consciousness only to be given a chance. I was so scared. Not of dying but not being effective enough. There’s no pain in dying as I have done many times, but there’s pain in suffering, and I hate feeling as if I couldn’t help, so when I came back around, it was another chance” (Jackie)*

Many participants used the idea of chance or opportunity to view their situation positively and understand their confrontations with themselves as a freedom to choose their perspective, as Lucy states:

*“This exploitation of me in the workplace I come to accept as normal. Now doing this research, I have come to accept it in my dreams, but I was so distressed in that dream it was like all the men who have tried this trying to touch me at once. I thought in the dream, I was not going to take this and I called the police. I used the police weapon against him to take back my independence; that’s what that image meant to me” (Lucy)*

*“My relationship with my wife just became meaningless because in the dream, the more I thought about her, the further away we became, and the less I thought about her, the closer we became, so I was so confused because it felt like I was cheating on her. The way I want to get close to my wife makes us go further away. I wonder if I lose myself, I may end up finding her – ironic huh! (Jonathan)*

Francesca rather wryly described her dream experience of drowning as facing a self-deprecating fight within herself.

*“I was drowning under so much weight, that feeling that I took on too much, but I thought I could get ahead and succeed. I can’t do anything right, and in this lockdown, it feels like I’m always messing up; it translated into the dream. I could see in the dream that my humility was leaking*

*into the silicone. I could see how this leaves me vulnerable, but I didn't give up, and I just remember my resolve, I just knew I would get to the top" (Francesca)*

Francesca's resolve was a critical motivating component in her dream, similar to the space of opportunity spoken about by Lucy. The other participants' resolve was hinged on their personal values that, if not upheld, would descend into emptiness and a sense of purposelessness.

*"It was me per se I was trying to save, I was trying to save me so that I could save my son. He is the most meaningful person in my life. That made me more determined, and I guess why I didn't care about the other above his life" (Bhavisana)*

*"There was a part of me still hanging on somewhere no matter how much he had broken me. I knew this because I wasn't dishevelled and unkempt, but I noticed I didn't have a ring on my finger because they were like jagged potato wedges. So, I knew someday I would be able to liberate myself from him" (Astrid)*

For Mareva, engaging in her intimate relationship was seen as 'valuable' and a form of self-expression reflecting those values related to herself.

*"Definitely, the worst moment of my life was feeling I was going to lose him and not being able to tell him how valuable and how much I felt for him. It was obvious in the dream I'm insecure, but when you have had your life flash before you more than three times, I can live with that but knowing I didn't love with my all, I couldn't" (Mareva)*

Overall, the participants on the personal dimension experienced significant impacts on themselves within their dreams. There was also overwhelming self-realisation in accepting and acknowledging aspects of themselves that warranted changing or reintegrating into themselves. For all participants, this developed into a stronger resolve. The participants implicitly describe the realisation that the dream imagery provided the impetus to view life beyond their personal enclaves. This resolve to become

greater than one is echoed by our human need to actualise our potential or transcend the self or spiritual fulfilment in religious or non-religious practices.

## Spiritual Dimension

### The Dreaming Principle: Dreams as a Portal to New Existential Realities and Insights

While the participants' struggle with identity, personal values, self-efficacy and self-worth are portrayed psychologically in the personal dimension, some participants describe a sense of purpose that enabled them to discover and feel connected to their lives through novel material presented in the spiritual dimension. Participants describe how their dreams presented meaningful questions, as well as the principles of living, healing, transformation, growth, and inspiration. They describe their dreams as a gateway into new perspectives or a way to broaden their perspective on situations they encounter in their waking lives. These individuals are discovering in their dreams that their reasoning and imagination can be used to surpass preconceived notions of limitations. The absurdity and meaninglessness of the dream material enliven their perception of possibilities. In their discussion, the participants become aware of their power of choice rather than being victims of possibility, and through this process, they are impacted by it. The participants describe their dreams as resources, embodying a sense of new possibilities and bringing their experiences to life in ways they cannot in the waking world. The following quote demonstrates this:

*“As I arrived at what looked like a type of portal made of energy, something I’ve never seen. I automatically knew I was not allowed entry with the dying images of all those people from the warzone. It wasn’t clear what to do, but I tried to think of them less, but I couldn’t, it was just so bloody. I knew I had to, to save them. It then occurred to me I was the only one chosen to deliver the canister, but even in my momentary excitement, I couldn’t help. I was baffled about what to do, be happy I’m their saviour or wallow in self-pity. The portal began to close, and I remember the anxiety of failing and when I said to myself, I did my best, it began to open. I tried to be neutral and I think that neutrality was a way of not putting myself above or below others” (Hinata)*



Hinata described her courage not to be dissuaded in her purpose to assist those in need. Standing resolute, the possibility of change filtered into her awareness as she described how she internalised her sense of *'failing'* as the possibility of change came at the moment she expressed her humility. Lucy describes the experience of internalising in-depth emotions in her impactful dream as she attempts to reconcile her feeling of shame and self-blame

*"These types of insects were so shiny with green and blues so vivid that I don't know why I poured this powerful herbal liquid to kill them. The guilt was so intense in the dream, and I started to feel ashamed. I grabbed all of them out of the fish tank looking thing, and I saw them dying, but their faces were of all the people who take advantage of me. At that moment, I dropped them and felt so in contempt of them. I couldn't ignore their unique colours as they lay suspended in the air. I couldn't stay upset, but I didn't forgive them my intention was to make things right for me, not for them. Another thing was I'd help revive them. As I did, I could feel a repairing in my body"* (Lucy)

Lucy describes a process of healing, forgiveness and generosity from the insects (abusers) in the mugwort. Helen is the most emphatic of the spiritual experience and gives voice to the intricate transformation process.

*"Ghost swirling around me, I had nothing to lose except to stand in their faces. I launched myself into them and literally hoped for the best. All I had left was to face them. 'I can't explain, but it was like a calling from inside me, no more like a release inside me exploding to get out' strangely enough, I just questioned myself 'do' or 'don't' so I just committed myself to..... 'do' "* (Helen)

Helen's sudden leap of faith fueled her 'optimism' that would reinforce her connection to the spiritual transformation within her. She describes, *'it was not without its consequences because I did not just wake up like usual, I remember thinking in the dream what about all the other areas of my life I need to face and do I have to bring this kind of energy to it'*. Several other participants spoke of when they were suddenly confronted with the choice to shift their existing way of thinking. For most, this was not a

linear, logical process but one that appears to be steered up from the emotional deaths of being confronted with possibilities. The intuitive process *'is just something you get' and 'it's not logical but in the moment'* (Olga).

In the dream *'there's no one thing telling you to react. It's just emotion, intense emotion and that thing inside you desiring change'* (Kelly-ann). She describes the sense of surrealness felt and experienced vividly by many of the participants as they both react to their dream:

*"These are not your usual places and colours in their makeup you come across every day, so when I was taken to what seemed like the desert or the blue, blue ocean and hues of green forest, I didn't understand why I was taken here. Every time I said in each of the places I was taken, 'why am I here' the ocean swirled like a tsunami, every time I asked in the forest, the trees bent, now where do trees bend and oceans swirls when you ask questions. I was trying to make the right decision of where to stay, but it was like each place could read my intentions, so I had to clear my mind of expectations"* (Kelly-ann)

Olga expressed another positive aspect of the experience, which was her spiritual connection to her impactful dream. Olga describes

*"I mean, I just would never have guessed if you asked me what to do. As I embraced this individual, I felt such relief, I was just in a state of gratitude in the dream. Like, why didn't I do this earlier. I was just filled with joy, and peace. So happy"* (Olga)

Overall, impactful experiences featured significantly in the spiritual dimension; only six participants referred to its effects, in contrast to the overwhelming occurrence of significant dreams and experiences on the physical, social and personal dimensions. However, all of the participants experienced a transformation within the dream. There was a powerful sense of realisation in relation to the process of

accepting and acknowledging their struggles within their dreams. For every participant, this was a challenging and significant process; it brought feelings of despair for some and, for others, the possibility of realising a different self-inspired inner work. For all Participants, acknowledging and accepting an alternate perspective of themselves allowed them to realise they have the capacity for change.

### ***Consciously Engaging with Dreams: A Pathway to Self-Discovery and Transformation***

In this theme, participants explore their intentional creative capacity by engaging in the mysterious realm of their vivid dreams. Like the *Pygmalion effect*, where high expectations improve performance, these immersive dreams can profoundly impact the dreamers' lives. Rather than fleeting experiences, these dreams carry deep significance and can shape their waking reality. By embracing the transformative potential of their dreams and holding positive beliefs about them, participants enhance their ability to find solutions to real-life challenges. This process acts as a growth mechanism, where the participants' positive expectations influence their dream experiences and their capacity to address unresolved issues in their waking lives. Although the exact factors influencing the dream process remain unknown, each participant demonstrated unique practices and methods to facilitate positive personal growth. However, this journey is not without challenges. The dreamers encounter intense emotions such as anxiety, guilt, and anger while navigating unfamiliar situations. Nevertheless, they use this process to cope, discover meaning, and foster personal growth. Kelly-ann describes common practices in the following passage:

*I say within the past month, as I think I explained to you, I said I was fasting, or maybe I didn't. But I've been doing a liquid water fast for the past 40 days. And so with that, I've just been having raw juices, raw smoothies. Very, very, very thin, watery soups. So obviously with that, that strips away so many different things like toxics, negative energy, unhelpful thoughts. It's very likely you have these kinds of experiences because you become an open vessel, but I have these all the time. In this case,*

*one of my main intentions for the 'Fast' was to reconnect with the elements, one of my other intentions to reconnect with the divine reconnect with Mother Nature. I'm very much a nature person" (Kelly-ann)*

For Kelly-ann, self-restraint through fasting becomes an aid that 'strips away' any barriers to becoming an 'open vessel'. The ritual practice is precipitated by a clear intention to renew and align with nature and a deeper meaning with the 'Divine'. This quotation describes the initial practices – of one's actions, life planning and spiritual intention. It felt that this was something the participants stumbled upon during the dreaming process, as Olga describes:

*"Normally when I have this dream I am absolutely petrified, For some reason, as I was confronted with usually dying, I just reached over to embrace it, and I could see that small advances toward it, that little action just changed things. I wasn't even sure it was going to work, but all this time, I didn't think to do that" (Olga)*

Kelly-ann had a similar experience, describing being confronted unexpectedly with sudden intense emotions while dreaming and intentionally altering the dream.

*"I was just being thrown around, and then grandad appeared, I was confused as why he was there, I could see his face, but it was him. In that second, before being transported, I was hit with that feeling of grief. That split second felt like hours because I was able to reason with him before he continued to journey on" (Kelly-ann)*

Hinata describes a temporal continuity within the dream with periods of intense emotions:

*"it's not like I felt guilt and sadness all the way through, I just noticed it was more intense when I focused more on different figure over different periods within the dream. It was weird because I had to maintain my attention but it wasn't like being lucid" (Hinata)*

For Olga and Kelly-ann, sudden intense emotions and prominent figures appear to generate and allow for dream interaction. However, for Hinata, visually focusing on human figures with intention also

provided this. Both Jackie and Olga describe their reactions '*after this engaging experience, it is like you become more aware of what you can do, but I was just stuck in the dream, and the energy of the orb just became uncomfortably overwhelming*' (Jackie) and '*there was this feeling of heaviness as I began to become more conscious, not conscious in the dream but like as if I was transitioning. I know this because I have often had these experiences of semi-waking, and it was in some way similar to that*' (Olga)

Hinata further echoes this transitory experience from the waking perspective and explains her attempts at 'organising' this experience.

*"it does spill over into my real life. I use them to guide me a lot In ermm in in I guess searching my inner world in my mind and my inner issues and everything. It's like a seamless cycle but I've been learnt to just sit with the awe-inspiring ones and the bloody nightmares because there all fascinating and tell you something about yourself. In that moment of awakening, I learnt to stay of out of my head and sit with what comes because soon as you start to get on with your day it, its gone"* (Hinata)

## **Summary of 'Dreaming as Being'**

When taken together, participants in this study addressed the meaningful impact of dreaming, touching on fundamental existential themes. They faced aspects of existence with an acceptance of unknown knowledge. The physical dimension included sensory experiences and environmental references. The social dimension reflected participants' roles in waking life and how they could change them. The personal dimension revealed metaphorical representations of identities in dreams, accompanied by intense feelings of isolation and potential growth. The spiritual dimension featured intentional practices and impactful experiences, especially in the past. This theme provides insight into the struggles and triumphs of experiencing vivid dreams.

## Reflexivity on the First Theme

Throughout the analysis of the first theme, I reflected on my positioning as a researcher, particularly my assumptions about the existential nature of dreams and how participants might interpret their experiences across dimensions. The involvement of member checking in this phase deepened my understanding of the data. Sharing my preliminary interpretations with participants provided an opportunity to validate the resonance of their narratives and refine my insights where discrepancies arose.

For example, participants' feedback often clarified nuances in their lived experiences, especially regarding the metaphorical representations of their identities and their sense of isolation and growth. These moments reminded me to remain open to interpretations that deviated from my initial readings and reaffirmed the importance of grounding my analysis in the participants' lived realities rather than over-interpreting their accounts through a purely existential lens. Member checking also enriched my analysis by highlighting overlooked aspects, such as subtle sensory references in the physical dimension, which participants felt were crucial to their experiences. This process not only validated my interpretations but also reinforced my commitment to honouring participants' voices and experiences, making their contributions central to the narrative I constructed.

## Awakening to Being

The '**Awakening to Being**' refers to the immersive and reflected experiences immediately upon awakening from dreaming. However, there was great variety in the waking experiences reported by the participants '*I had four dreams that night*' (**Francesca**), '*I was going through a period of restless sleep, so I had several dreams that night*' (**Olga**), '*I remember waking up from that bloody dream and then diving straight back into the second part of it*' so I could not tell you when I woke up because

*sometimes I still think I am in the dream” (Kelly-ann).* All participants described being affected in some way by these profound experiences by the givens of existence during their impactful dreams, showing their vulnerability on the different dimensions to varying degrees.

The transition to being ‘fully awake’ in their discussions uncovered three identifiable moments across the sample of participants explained below. The first exemplified by Mareva:

*‘As you journey into waking, you do not really notice it because you are still immersed in the emotions, and your peripheral awareness of things tends to give it away because if I keep steering forward, I am locked in the dream’.*

Jonathan also described the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of experience in ostensibly dismissive terms, though there was an avoidance in his tone that indicated that his tone involved some ambivalence:

*“I woke up, and I was with it for about ten minutes, then I thought about why am I dreaming about work, what the dream could mean, but then it was time to get ready for work and just forgot about it” (Jonathan).*

After the initial immersion period, Jonathan described a stage of reflection or understanding the meaning of the dreams, followed by a third stage of action. An unexpected novel theme, for a minority of participants, consecutive dreams intertwine at times of awakening, as highlighted in the opening excerpts that required the participants to filter and trace back the meaningful experiences, feelings and emotions to their original dream as Olga further elaborates:

*“Initially, I had to sift through the weight of these emotions because I had several dreams that night, but I recalled another dream from an experience I had in one of those three dreams that night..... Yes, it is not the first time this has happen..... I’ve recalled another dream while being*

*in another dream..... it seems absurd, but it is true, usually because something I am doing in that dream makes me think of another dream (Olga).*

The first stage, highlighted by Mareva's account, highlights how the participant remains continuously immersed. This is discussed in the theme '*The Threshold of Waking: The Transition from Dream to Waking Reality*'. Reflecting on his thoughts, emotions, and meaning formed the second stage in Jonathan's account and is discussed in the theme '*Dreams and Duty: The Pull of Social Obligations and Moral Responsibility*' and '*Fragmented Selves: The Dreamer's Struggle with Identity and authenticity in the Dream World*'. Jonathan describes a way of managing impactful experiences, discussed in two themes, '*Coping Mechanisms in the Dream's Wake: The Compulsion to Move Forward*' and '*The Burden of Knowing: Premonitions as Existential Responsibility and Anxiety*'. The unexpected theme called '*Accumulating Insight: The Transformative Process of Dream Integration*' follows the above stages but is distinguished by consecutive dreams experienced over various temporal periods; upon awakening, feelings and emotions intertwine and are analysed and processed in more complex ways.

## **Physical Dimension**

***The Threshold of Waking: The Transition from Dream to Waking Reality*** The participants' experiences taken together suggest from their reports a continuity of physical sensations and emotions, leaving the freedoms of the dreaming world and entering the constraints of the waking world. Several participants described a temporal dimension whereby 'I was in it for 10 minutes' while others stated, '*I was in it for half a day; it was like I kept falling back into the dream*' (Jonathan). The following extracts show the participants' experience of being temporarily transfixed or re-enacting actions from their dreams. Hinata exemplifies this:



*I do not remember when I woke up, but I guess it was still lingering of [pause], sort of what I am feeling now because I'm just speaking about it now. Furthermore, emotions are fresh now as they were when I woke up, but I guess there was a feeling a sense of like almost being in tears over the frustration of that one, that one moment where seeing death one second where everything came on top of me like one gigantic anvil at one time. And that is, I think that is what I kind of woke up with. So immediately waking up, I, unfortunately, do not remember exactly how I woke up. However, I think there was that same sense of there was that carryover between the dream and waking up, and I do have that quite a lot. There was that awareness of that" (Hinata)*

All participants explored their dreams and experiences in their discussions, going beyond mere descriptions. Their conversations revealed a fascinating phenomenon: a carry-over process where they sought to relive and embody their struggles during the interview. It became evident that the depth of their experiences transcended verbal expression, prompting them to recreate and convey their inner difficulties more viscerally and experientially. This immersive approach allowed them to bridge the gap between language and the ineffable aspects of their dream encounters. By immersing themselves in the embodied reenactment of their struggles, the participants aimed to convey the intricate nuances and emotional depth that couldn't be fully captured through words alone.

*"absolutely terrified. I saw I was saying this prayer. I woke up about this time and was frozen. I could not move i, I was afraid to open my eyes. I was awake. Conscious now. I do not know the will, maybe seconds. Maybe minutes? No, probably not longer than one or two minutes. I could not bring myself to move. I could not move. Weirdly, I felt more freedom in the dream. I was terrified to open my eyes. I did not know what I would see. Of course, nothing. I was awaking I was in my room. Everything was normal, of course. But you know, I was as if I could not move. Frozen, I cannot describe it any better" (Helen)*

*"I am trying to understand how I felt. I felt very heavy from being so emotional and anxious and helpless" (Francesca)*

*"I became aware of the sound of cars outside after I experienced the aeroplane crash*

*, and I was like, oh good [laughter] this was a dream, and then I woke up and I was like [laughter] thank god. but....[deep breath, sigh].. these dreams, a lot of the time There so real that I cannot tell if I am actually going to die or not. So, these days I am just like, whatever, bring it on" (Mareva)*

*"After being transported to different plains, when I woke up, I just felt heavy, it was like the freeness and freedom of the dream world evaporate from your body, and you are in that heaviness" (Kelly-ann)*

Other participants experienced a vivid connection between the interactions in their dreams and the sensations felt in their waking bodies. Olga's acknowledgement was also an embodied change in her outlook on life.

*"I know this from when I woke up. I felt like on my left leg like something like laying on my left thigh. I started feeling the inner change like joy and this doubt lifting off my body" (Olga)*

Kelly-ann and Lucy illustrate the impact and experience within the dream journey through to waking, whereby they are still immersed and begin to check their reality.

*"Yeah, then I was weeping so much. I was really hurt. Really, really Weeping. Like, I woke up, and I was really crying; when you cry a lot, it kind of dries, like, you know, you can feel that, like your tear and stuff. Ah, I looked into the mirror to see like, if I really did cry, then I realised that I did cry" (Lucy)*

*"was crying, but in real life, I was also crying. So when I woke up, I had tears down my face. They were not tears of sadness but upliftment and feeling awe-struck" (Kelly-ann)*

As many participants describe their physical experience alongside that of immersion, some participants describe engaging in the process of psychological reflection:

*“yeah. Yeah. Like something I made me feel as if I'd done something wrong to my wife in real life. Contacting her in the morning when I get up is my daily routine. But Additionally, I had anxiety from the dream. I just I would say” (Jonathan)*

*“I woke up feeling the terror that we all were going to die. I felt like shit. It was a real shock but most of all the guilt of all those people dying” (Bhavisana)*

*“I mean, I woke up; it was in haste. So it was very abrupt..... And then I sat with it for 10 minutes, and I was just thinking... I was in a bit of a shock from that type of dream..... I was just sitting with like, questioning, you know why I had that dream” (Francesca)*

*“it was extremely disconcerting and unsettling when I woke up as I still felt trapped” (Astrid)*

In their discussions, the participants revealed an ongoing dialogue between their dreams and waking life. Mareva's account exemplifies how the dream experience seamlessly transitions into wakefulness, while Francesca highlights the lingering ambivalence and the urge to interpret the dream upon awakening. This interconnectedness was not merely mental but also had a physical and emotional dimension. It is noteworthy that some participants, who identify themselves as vivid dreamers, expressed a profound absorption and lasting impact of their dream experiences, extending well beyond the immediate waking moments. Their descriptions evoke a unique and highly immersive connection to their dream world, setting them apart from more typical dream encounters.

## **Social Dimension**

### ***Dreams and Duty: The Pull of Social Obligations and Moral Responsibility***

Following on from the immersion in the physical dimension. The participants reflect on interactions within their dreams and feel as if facing loneliness, abandonment, and desires with others as an obligation to meet their relationship responsibilities. To understand these experiences, they initiate various reactions: elicit affection from close relationships, make contact with others, and

thoughts considering one's welfare. The participants spoke of their dreams as social motivators to be proactive towards others in response to their guilt and insecurity. Mareva reports feeling the need 'to get close' to her partner before work for fear of not seeing him again.

*" My eyes were not fully open yet, and as my hand was getting ready, I just ran into his arms to get close to my husband. Knowing he is going and the thought he might not come back scared me"* (Mareva)

*"my phone was already in my hand when I woke up with all that anxiety, so I sent her a message. I did not do anything, but I did because I felt like I did, you know what I mean"* (Jonathan)

*My intuition knew my son was there, but the mother in me required something more in-depth, and that was his personal touch. I went straight away to look at his leg because I felt so bad"* (Bhavisana)

The participants started to engage in behaviours that reassured them yet immediately offered them relief by temporarily absolving their sense of guilt. Jonathan stated that he focused on checking in with his partner, illustrating that his sense of infidelity impacted him while acknowledging he was not guilty.

*"I normally text my partner, but this time I felt a lot of guilt and anxiety. I just sent a text message before I left the bed"* (Jonathan)

Mareva and Bhavisana were also obliged to make contact with close others from their dreams, highlighting aspects of their responsibility.

*"I had prolonged this for far too long. I grabbed my phone and dialled grandad's number, and he answered. I cried, and he said, "when are you coming to see me" he was not mad or anything"* (Mareva)

*"The first thing was to check on my son, but I was in a different mindset. I felt bad, and I said to him, "is mommy that bad", I know he cannot talk, but it was just reassurance I needed"* (Bhavisana)

In addition to feeling driven to connect with others or seek reassurance about their family's safety, the participants described how their vivid dreams generated a newfound courage to address conflicts in their lives. This shift in perspective led them to reevaluate the significance of certain aspects they once valued highly, while placing greater importance on previously overlooked elements in their future interactions. The following extracts further show evidence of the participants' obligations and responsibilities:

*“how subservient I have been with him. I valued safe companionship at the expense of myself. I did not feel I was more important, but if I’m not happy, how can this be a conducive relationship? What about me in this ” ( Astrid)*

*“Never have I taken responsibility for myself. I always believe I have done something to make these types of things happen. I need to take responsibility for myself when being around people; otherwise, they will always take advantage” (Lucy)*

Astrid and Lucy reflect on the impact of seeing how they have been around others, which has resulted in them being inattentive towards their own needs. The external perspective of themselves reveals values and responsibility to self that seemed to have been neglected. Reflective on that moment, a change in themselves began to arise. Jackie reflected on her sense of guilt within her family relationship as she viewed the assailants as her intentions to hush her family members but not her close brother. Inadvertently, he was murdered, leading to the guilt and impetus to commit authentically to her values.

*“be careful what you dream for I did not wish for them to be killed just to stop the constant pressure to be something I am not; however, my brother got caught up in the shooting. I remember waking up, just like being still in shock of everything, then going over to his bed, climbing in with him, hugging him from behind, and just starting to cry. I just felt like I need to make some change to my life permanently” (Jackie)*

The social obligations in the dreams filter into waking as the fragile sides of their relationship, expressing a vulnerability in these relationships. This leads the participants to check in and strengthen a bond stemming from their insecurities. The participants attempt to strengthen their bonds or check in as the dream has illustrated neglected aspects or unilluminated parts of themselves. While outwardly expressed, this reaction is internally driven and seldom shared with whom the affection is directed. Mareva describes this as an isolating process “because many people do not take dreams seriously”. Mareva’s account highlights the isolating nature of their dream experiences, as they express frustration with the lack of serious consideration given to dreams by many people. This finding raises important questions about the divide between the participants and others who dismiss or overlook the significance of dreams. It would be valuable to explore whether the participants experienced frustration or anger due to this disregard for an essential aspect of their individuality. Additionally, investigating whether they felt compelled to suppress or abandon their dream experiences to conform and fit into societal norms could shed further light on the complexities of their experiences. Jackie’s change in focus to committing to personal values is a feature all participants felt their dreams impacted their sense of self, which will be discussed in the next theme.

## ***Personal dimension***

### ***Fragmented Selves: The Dreamer’s Struggle with Identity and Authenticity in the Dream World***

In their discussion, dreams provide a privileged position on ‘the stories you tell yourself about yourself’, up close or from an external viewpoint. Experiencing anxiety and guilt within the dream seemed crucial for understanding aspects of themselves. Most participants describe a sense of ‘inauthenticity’, and in their daily activities, they are inadvertently shown how they have neglected to take responsibility for their lives. The participants’ dream portraying interactions of being inauthentic is contrasted with a vision of a way of living or conceiving themselves as acceptable. Acknowledging their

ways as unsightly, accept that these are genuinely aspects of themselves that can be changed as conveyed by the dream material.

*“My head and face are always some anime characters and never my own, and until I recognise something, I do that I realise these negative things are part of me. I’ve come to realise I cannot keep disowning what is me and accept myself” (Hinata)*

*“The silicon was that part of me always doing too much and does not know when to say no. I looked hideous drowning, and I think I just have myself to blame” (Francesca)*

*I get so anxious when having to think of myself as that person you never expect to be, but my dreams always have a way of showing such candour” (Astrid)*

The participants describe three distinct ways symbolic representation manifests in their dreams: through anthropomorphic elements, outer objects, and mischaracterizations of themselves. They recognise that these symbolic experiences have played a crucial role in helping them identify different aspects of their being and come to terms with their personal growth. By grappling with the merging of self and the "not-me" within their dream material, the participants are drawn into profound questions of identity, exploring what they are and what they are not. This intricate interplay between self and others in their dream narratives fosters a compassionate acceptance of themselves and a deeper understanding of their evolving identities. Mareva dealt with feelings of abandonment in her plane crash, whilst Bhavisana protests against being more sinister :

*“I am definitely not that type of person being so mean, and I try hard not to be. It may just be that me, who can be themselves in the dream, and I am okay with that” (Bhavisana)*

*“I am going to be okay; I am going to be okay is what I tell myself, so scared of being left by myself. Do I need to die to be free from this or what is the dream saying” (Mareva)*

Mareva's dream showed a part of herself she was aware of, which results in a continued impact to confront that part of herself she acknowledges. To some degree, there is a shift in her perspective that something extreme may affect change in the continued feelings she experiences. Facing death in this way may have resulted in Mareva initiating a change process.

Further evidence of how the participants' selves were symbolically represented, depicting struggles with themselves, can be seen in the following:

*"The German, Japanese, and African guys all represent me and how much I am at work. Secretly work is the only place I find people understand me, but I always dream of work, and it's weird how come I am so frustrated with being there"* (Jonathan)

*"Curling up is what I used to do as a child to protect myself from these things. I still do it now, Like it's my ritual and charm"* (Helen)

*"Me putting my hand on those black men's heads was supposed to be my way of blessing them, but instead, I inflicted damage, and that just spoke to me in so many ways that my journey needs to be realigned"* (Kelly-ann)

The way that the participants spoke about how they understood themselves varied. Two common experiences described were that what was experienced was symbolically personal (secret) and that their dream often repeated a particular theme.

*"I have this dream all the time. Every month for like four days in a row, and it's always sexual and me being abused"* (Lucy)



*“These long dreadlocks were connected to the pods, and mine what not full but nearly there, saying I am getting there, so I need to keep going” (Kelly-ann)*

For all participants, the meaning became clearer due to these personal themes, leading to a search for ways to enhance themselves personally, which is discussed in the temporal theme 'Impact on waking lives'. For all participants, the height of the emotional impact led to the process of assigning meaning to their dreams. This meaning attributing was not only an exercise in examining the dream's content but also immediate responses to be acted upon with others or reflections of one's relationship with self and attempts at the overall message meaning of the dream itself. As there was no clear answer to the participants' questions and curiosity, this further led to a systematic search discussed in the theme 'Impact on lives'. Interpretation involved a sinister side. Drawing from past experiences, the sinister side motivated two actions: 1) acknowledgement and acceptance of the dream's message and 2) avoidance, which led to a lack of integration and loneliness.

### ***Becoming One with the Dream: Rebuilding the Relationship Between Self and Dream***

This theme attempts to convey the challenges of deriving a single meaning through their understanding of the dream. Some talked about attributing meaningful aspects to themselves in a more supportive and positive way, whilst some acknowledged a more unfavourable interpreted outcome. Others illuminated a sinister side to dreaming and the burden of deriving a possible meaning. These extracts demonstrated how the participants related the meaning of their dreams to significant events in their lives from the past, present and future.

*This dream just shows how introverted I am. I guess it's saying that I need to relate to others more” (Hinata)*

*You just cannot tell, I've experienced dreams like this before, and I think it's showing I'm under a lot of pressure, but why am I drowning in something I am meant to be good at in my life? I just think that maybe it's trying to say something more like a situation may end horribly” (Francesca)*

*Is the dream telling me to fight back, or will I always be taken advantage of sometimes, it is hard to tell. I think before I told the police, I am going to have a better life” (Lucy)*

All the participants took time to engage emotionally in all three dimensions (physical, social, and personal). After the initial shock subsided, they began to feel more aware, and a wave of other emotions quickly overtook them.. Some described a shift with themselves before making an interpretation that accompanied a worrying tone and intense emotions, with Francesca saying: *“I just wonder what the dream means. Is it saying I am stressed because I have had this before and it comes true that it is something else”*, implicit in her expression is *‘I hate getting it wrong because they will just keep coming back (Lucy)*, it is like *‘you have this companion, and until you understand what it is trying to say it keeps coming back like it wants to get out, so you have this weird relationship with your thoughts but an even deeper one with this imagery because you picture it, play out in your mind’ (Hinata)*. Francesca described what the dream means, suggesting that uncertainty accompanies understanding dreams. Only two participants described this uncertain position as positive.

*“You just never know what they really mean, so I do worry, but that adds to the excitement of piecing it all together” (Jackie)*

*“I find them all fascinating, from the nightmares to the crazy one, because they all have something to say about yourself that you can learn from” (Hinata)*

Hinata’s relationship through the interview borders on a love & hate relationship or a necessary part of accepting both positive and negative aspects of herself. The participants describe and attribute positive meanings to their dreams that appear to foster an attitude of improving life. The responsibility of misinterpreting the purpose and possible consequences is indeterminate for the other participants. This will be further explored in the following two Themes: *‘Coping Mechanisms in the Dream’s Wake: The Compulsion to Move Forward’ and The Burden of Knowing: Premonitions as Existential Responsibility and Anxiety’*.

### ***Coping Mechanisms in the Dream's Wake: The Compulsion to Move Forward***

In this Novel theme, five participants describe their struggles with impactful experiences and how they begin to cope with feeling overwhelmed. Two participants describe their unique ability to recall dreams later after being provided with a periodic space to re-engage the dream. Hinata attributes this freedom and choice to delay to her attitude towards dreams, and Helen states she feels '*more ready once the emotions have disappeared*'. Whereas, for others, interpreting ceases to matter as they describe being compelled to carry on with everyday mundane activities that delay exploration, as Francesca explains:

*"I mean, I just sat with it for 10 minutes, but that is what it, I had lots of things to do, but I did not have time to deal with it. I was just wondering what this dream means. Sometimes it's just too much, and I need to get on with my day. I just put it in a box, and that its"* (**Francesca**)

Bhavisana describes a similar experience of being occupied with everyday affairs as she tries to get on with daily tasks but begins to allude to a dilemma that the dream is meaningful.

*"These days I do not have time. I mean, I know it means something important, but I have my son, and if he calls for his bottle, I cannot investigate. I don't have no one that takes my dreams seriously"* (**Bhavisana**)

*"I wake up, and I'm drenched with sweat, bruises from crashing and then I have to face my day somehow. Bring it on"* (**Mareva**)

*"emotionally deplete, physically exhausted, to say the least. I cannot look at what it means straight away. It is the same when anything major happens like an accident; you deal with the injured, and then you look at things afterwards"* (**Helen**)

*“In my culture, when a bad dream, when you have them, you pray. Sometimes I cannot pray before I need to go to work, so I say it in my head, but the dream keeps coming back, and I cannot stop dreaming” (Lucy)*

Of the four quotes above, Lucy was the only participant to make a cultural reference to how she copes with and attempts to engage her dreams, and Bhasvisana does not have personal support from others. Both the culture and support of discussing dreams will be discussed in the theme ‘**space of integration**’. Some participants described struggling with fear and anxiety as they confront their dreams, as illustrated in Lucy’s quote when explaining how ‘*the dreams keep coming back*’. At the end of her quote, Lucy accepts her question, feeling hopeless to cease dreaming about the reality of her situation. Some participants accept this as a given of life while showing a sense of resilience and the need to ‘*bring it on*’.

Helen describes how she delays her dreams to explore their implications after the immediate experience.

*“I go out and get on with my day, and at night soon as my head hits the pillow, it all comes back like I am seeing it again but this time without the emotion” (Helen)*

Helen describes her sense of freedom to explore her dreams without struggling to manage difficult emotions. For Hinata, recalling dreams is a choice triggered by a word or phrase associated with the dream.

*“I do not have that problem recalling my dream. For me it’s quite the opposite. I usually have my phone or like a text editor. I have been doing this for over 20 years, and I can just write a phrase and sometimes a word, and I can recall it, all of it. Sometimes it may take weeks because there is just so many like every day” (Hinata)*

The participants described a range of ways they try to cope and get on with their lives: put into a box, prioritise other commitments, avoidance, courage, ‘*bring it on*’, culture and distance. There is a sense of powerlessness to halt the continuous flow of dreams as they manage their emotional reactions towards the impact this has on their daily activities. Despite being aware of the possible implications, ‘*I cannot look at what it means straight away*’, they still accepted some responsibility to owning what it may mean as they get through their day. This way of coping could be interpreted as denial, as the participants appear to avoid the meaning until they are prepared to engage with the dreams later. However, the next theme looks deeper into the experience of this population of participants and what appears to be avoidance rest on avoiding emotions of guilt and self-blame, which is explored in the theme ‘*The Burden of Knowing: Premonitions as Existential Responsibility and Anxiety*’ and a reduced psychological capacity from feeling overwhelmed with that responsibility.

## ***Spiritual Dimension***

### ***The Burden of Knowing: Premonitions as Existential Responsibility and Anxiety***

This theme shows how the participants engage more deeply in understanding the ramifications of their vivid dreams. Unlike Hollywood movies portraying an impending disaster to be prevented, the imagery described appears to be relative to the situation in their lives. The participants who experienced their dreams as foreboding events reported they are reluctant to discuss them so as not to be viewed as weird or mentally unstable, as Helen describes:

*“I find this type of dream very stressful because when I wake up among all the others throughout the night, what do I start. If I tell my Mum, she will worry, and then we need to call people in my family. Then there is a big family meeting” (Helen)*

*“I find them a gift and a curse but more of a burden because you have to make up your mind whether to keep or discard them, so it is a lot of guilt. Discard, and things come true, you feel bad;*

*if you say something to a relative, they begin to worry. In my culture, this means a lot, and I just wish sometimes I did not have to decide” (Mareva)*

*“I am always left with what does it mean, that is all I cannot say WHAT..... DOES..... IT..... MEAN?” (Francesca)*

Many participants describe feeling burdened with sharing their dreams as it is clear that while it may have personal relevance, it has broader implications as Mareva said: *‘in my culture, this means a lot’*. Others describe an impoverished personal space to discuss their dreams and experience of dream telling, which is discussed in the theme **‘Shared Dreaming’**.

### ***Accumulating Insight: The Transformative Process of Dream Integration***

This Novel theme highlights how participants employ affective experiences akin to mnemonic devices, allowing them to retrace ideas and associations. This process aids in recalling dream experiences, both during the dream state and upon awakening. Although a minority theme, discussed by only four participants, it holds significance due to the deeply personal and distinctive manner in which these individuals experienced a convergence of emotions. This amalgamation involves two or more emotions upon awakening, a more profound sense of self-integration during dreaming, and excessive dreams and their content upon awakening. The following extracts are from the participants' accounts:

*“maybe once every couple of weeks.[slight pause] Those ones stick with me because they feel like real life [slight pause] so vivid, and I wake up suddenly. They are always they always end badly. And that is why I remember them. As I’m so tired from work, I fall back to sleep into another one (dream) like the plane crash, and I wake up feeling different emotions” (Mareva)*

*“After having multiple dreams [pause] it depends on how tired I am. I cannot always remember all of them, and I cannot always remember all of them at once. Sometimes I’ll go about my day. And*

*remember one and then another one. So usually, I can recall two or three at once, and then all of the feelings accompany the images too. But when I am really really tired, the dreams are vaguer and less memorable, but the emotions seem more intense” (Mareva)*

There is a sense throughout many of the participants' experiences of several dreams as a disintegration of their self and worldview, reflected in the theme '**Fragmented Selves**'. A radical shift transpires in how they approach their lives and experience their selves upon awakening. This appears to be a powerful experience for Mareva, shown by her comments: *'I can recall two or three at once, then all of the feelings accompany the images too'*.

*"I feel the touch in the dream and wake up from the different dreams. This week I had the dream every day for three days, and I woke up with the sensation of someone rubbing their hands all over me. The emotions came from all the dreams the same as in the past, and it reminds me of the stuff that happened in the past. I feel fear, sadness, helplessness and guilt all the same time, like a weight on you. I feel too many because I have not done any actions in the past” (Lucy)*

Although the dreams were impactful, these participants were preoccupied with the initial immersion and emotions. Mareva states, 'Those ones stick with me because they feel like real life. ' These emotions and sensations are experienced as confusing as it feels paradoxical, as described in Lucy's comments: *"I feel fear, sadness, helpless and guilt all the same time, like a weight on you. I feel too many. Is it because I have not done any actions in the past"*, they are trying to understand, yet attempting to trace the original experience:

*"It's worse when you forget some of your dreams; you are just left with emotions, but when you have many, many of them, it's even more emotional" (Lucy).*

This is challenging as they not only have to contend with their emotions of one dream but also several, with the potential of grasping a more significant meaning if the dream imagery is present. Mareva found that attempting to recount her experience throughout the day allowed the dreams to emerge

spontaneously (discussed in *Replaying Dreams*). Lucy expressed some ambivalence, highlighting the challenges of understanding the emotions disconnected from the imagery.

Olga, Hinata, and Jackie found that these consecutive experiences had a positive impact, which contributed to their connecting to long-standing issues in their lives. There was a radical shift in the way they began to experience the present moment and the way they experienced their lives following this experience:

*“There was something that I felt like I started to understand from previous dreams I had in the last couple of weeks was like, not fearing something, but instead trying to embrace it with love instead of like running away from it. So I felt like a very extreme version of that idea” (Olga)*

Olga embraced a felt sense with the dream that shifted her understanding rooted in fear to engaging her dreams with ‘love’, which led to developing feelings of control and creating a space for more profound ‘inner work’ as expressed in this second quote:

*“Just the, like, the fact that I had gone back to another dream, in the dream that I just had. That's what I remember. First, out of all of it I was able to easily learn from both dreams as I was in the last dream. I started thinking like that, like, you know, oh, like I started thinking about the mistake. It's like a rush as you recognise what's going on, and you take the knowledge into the current dream because I had the dream hold the being days later. I am going through some deep inner work to change my life, and I'm sure it will continue tonight or tomorrow” (Olga).*

*I woke up, physically woke up at this point. And I remember saying to myself, I've been in this moment; I've seen this moment several times before. That's what I said to myself; when I woke up, I literally just woke up, and I was like in awe ecstasy, I just I felt like even me sitting in that bed. At that time. I felt like I had been to that moment before. And I said that to myself. I said, You've been in this moment a few times now. Now being in That moment meant honouring one's life. I don't know. I don't know how if I was time travelling in my head. I don't know what the hell was happening. All I know what that I had been in different realms, I had several dreams. But what I noticed I was in different rooms, different*



*places that do not abide by the same laws I that's all I knew. On this occasion, I just went straight back to sleep, went straight back to sleep. Again, I saw what looked like or what I thought was a Sun again. When I saw the sun again, on this occasion. It was a black woman with dreadlocks; when I woke up from that last dream, I had the knowledge from all three" (Kelly-ann)*

*"All these experiences come at you as you wake up in that moment you start being more spiritual" (Hinata)*

Olga identified a significant anomaly within the dream and recognised in the process that this occurred in a previous dream within this study. Kelly-ann experienced an overwhelming feeling of *'being in everything'*; she describes the most dominant emotion as *'ecstasy'*. This led to a transformation that impacted her emotionally, initially at the point of waking up and into waking life. The participants showed heightened awareness of their mortality, as reflected in comments such as *'honour one's life'* and *'deep inner work to change my life'*, suggesting that they have begun to find personal growth derived from their vivid dreams. This allowed the participants to discover a profound and more meaningful way of engaging with their worlds, as they realised this understanding through their experiences *'life makes more sense, but there are still struggles'*. Hinata spoke of finding a deeper connection to *'being more spiritual'*, which suggests she feels change and personal growth derived from her dream is affecting her life for the better because of a change in perception.

Helen and Francesca also experienced consecutive dreams throughout the study period but had a completely different response to the others as they describe their experience as more challenging with these profound realisations, the amount of dream imagery and considering their implications as excessive and overwhelming:

*"It is too much, I would need a psychiatrist to understand what's going on. You know, when you have all these dreams, I feel like I am going crazy, so I have to disconnect because it's too much" (Helen)*

*“I do not really remember because that night I had four dreams. That's just one of the four dreams I had that night.- So I woke up.... So pretty much like, snap I'm up, and I'm like, wow, you know..... and then going back to sleep. And then there was another dream. I just remember that I could not cope, and I did not want to close my eyes; it is not easy” (Francesca)*

Helen and Francesca illustrated a negative perspective of experiencing vivid dreams not described in the literature. For Francesca, the lack of control she experienced, feeling overwhelmed, resulted in her feeling anxious, which both exhausted and worried her, with consequences of not understanding her dream. Helen described being on the verge of going crazy. Francesca and Helen experienced negative feelings and emotions linked to their dreams, contributing to their fear of getting back to sleep or disconnecting from their emotions.

In **summary**, the 11 participants' experiences centred on vivid dreams, revealing a unique unfolding of their life processes upon awakening. The physical dimension showed continuous immersion in impactful emotions and less articulated sensations. In the social dimension, participants gained a deeper understanding of their relationships with others, leading to increased authenticity and connection. The personal dimension involved developing self-acceptance and responsibility, aligning with the dialectic states presented in their dreams. Coping with impactful experiences was challenging, leading to compensatory behaviours, but some participants harnessed these experiences to form a more positive sense of self. Awakening was a holistic process involving meaningful relationships with themselves and others.

### **Reflexivity on the Second Theme**

The second theme presented rich accounts of how participants navigated vivid dreams and their unfolding impact upon awakening. My reflexivity centred on my awareness of how my interpretations could unconsciously prioritise certain dimensions over others, such as personal growth

over relational dynamics. Member checking played a significant role in ensuring a balanced representation of participants' experiences.

When sharing preliminary interpretations, participants often expanded on their relationships with others, offering new perspectives that emphasised the depth of their social connections and authenticity. Their feedback also illuminated instances where I had inadvertently underestimated the intensity of their emotional experiences or the challenges of coping with vivid dreams. This collaborative process revealed how participants' narratives about awakening as a holistic process were deeply intertwined with their ongoing efforts to integrate their experiences across dimensions. The member checking sessions were humbling and illuminating, reminding me of the importance of maintaining an iterative approach to the analysis. By revisiting the data with participants' feedback, I was able to capture a richer and more nuanced understanding of their experiences while ensuring that their voices remained central to the study.

### ***Living with the Dream: Integrating dream wisdom into waking life***

#### ***(Future)***

Each participant reportedly experienced profound changes during and immediately after their vivid dreams. All participants were affected by their encounters; for most, they described changing their way of life, worldview, personal values, and behaviour, which led them to alter their approach to life practices, dream sharing, relationships with themselves, and spiritual growth. This temporal theme collects participants' reports on their attempts to interface their waking and dreaming worlds for the sake of a more purposeful life. It was an inherent quality of wanting to be more or search for more systematically, to expand one's being and consciousness beyond one's existing framework to something greater. The participants realised their capacity to use their understanding and emotions to break down the pre-conceived ideas of limitations or things the way they are, leading to enlivening

possibilities. The participants embarked on developing an orientation towards life that does not slide into compensatory or dismissive behaviours but ones that they feel in charge of their lives, not as a victim, discovering their agency, and committing to psychological change. Something that either the participants themselves or their dream sharer recognised. This suggests there were some fundamental shifts in their way of being in the world with dreams.

## ***Physical Dimension***

### ***Personal Practices of Dream Engagement: Rituals for Meaning and Integration***

This theme highlights the participants' active pursuit of transformation in their waking lives, influenced by the profound impact of their dream experiences. Through their encounters with dreams, they encountered challenges and revelations that shifted their outlook on life, leading to a more fulfilling and meaningful reality. These transformative journeys, rooted in the realm of dreams, played a significant role in shaping their perceptions and driving them towards profound personal growth. The Participants describe trying to embody and empower themselves with the possibilities uncovered in their dreams by prioritizing personal activities that allow them to feel present. The following extracts show:

*“So I decided to take up ‘Bouldering’ so that I can live a little. I just thought that if I ever get into a situation like that, I might stand a chance. It’s crazy that I’m thinking this, but at least it is a skill and most of all exercise, us mums need that” (Bhavisana)*

*“being spiritually aware is so important, and that dream connected me to the physical plane. I’ve started Yoga classes since last week and continue to do more fasting,” Kelly-ann*

*“in seeing myself drowning, I wondered if I was losing my ability to swim. It was time to get back into shape and go swimming and other activities” (Francesca)*

The participants above decided to engage in physical activities in response to their dreams. All the activities they engaged in somehow related to a part of them they believed needed enhancing. For

other participants, the experience was internalised, which affected their outlook on life. Francesca stated that her focus was on getting ‘*back into shape*’, showing that she prioritises activities that may compensate her for what transpired in her dreams. Kelly-ann began cultivating new practices through yoga, which has given more purpose to ‘fasting’ and other existing practices while enhancing her spiritual development towards the dream world.

Other participants expressed their deeply held values through their words and actions, as reflected in the following quotes:

*“I ultimately know I did not do anything wrong against my wife, but I should try to show her how much I love her not just with gifts but my everyday way of doing things, I have, after all, committed to taking care of her” (Jonathan)*

*“Dealing with this situation with all those who are dead or dying, I could not keep it to myself. Rabbi said I should talk it out. I needed that spiritual understanding to get it out and share” (Hinata)*

*“That man {dream image} and me calling for help showed me that I need to do something about this, and I think I may need fight back and be firmer” (Lucy)*

*“Experiencing such an intense moment will change you. I am just this channel of compassion now and being it and doing it in everything I do” (Olga)*

*“Where I was faced with my life seconds from ending, I just want to experience more enjoyment. But who will take my dreams seriously” (Helen)*

All the participants found ways to cope with the burden of their dreams by cultivating a spirit of resolution, which helped them respond to their concerns and gave them a sense of well-being. This

appeared to be a novel experience for some participants, evidenced by It being also a way of connecting with others, illustrated by Hinata, who stated, "*I needed that spiritual understanding to get it out and share*". These moments offer the participants a way to discuss their experience, which is discussed in the next theme.

## ***Social Dimension***

### ***Shared Dreaming: The Collective Space and Experience of Dreaming Together***

This theme attempts to show how the participants describe the interplay between the teller and the listener perspective, which is viewed as an essential process when seeking a deeper and more meaningful understanding, which inadvertently develops better relationships with others following their impactful dreams. Three subthemes emerged as the participants described their challenges and desires to discuss their dream revelations.

### ***Space of Integration: Merging Dream and Waking Life***

In their discussion, dreams are reported as playing a pivotal role in allowing the participant to broaden their interactions with others, developing emotional and perceptual experiences outside of waking. Considered in this way, the dream provides the participant with the added advantage of using another mode of consciousness to develop personal growth from within. These dreams also provide the landscape through which the participant can understand their emotions and sense of possibilities. These possibilities are demonstrated in how the participant may appear to themselves with others in their dream, applying and understanding alternate perspectives and emotional responses. For some participants, however, the dream imagery has not been understood or integrated unless the participant has a frame of reference (cultural) or developed an inner system to understand the dream image or its content.

### ***The Architecture of Integration: Constructing Meaning from the Dream Experience***

The theme highlights how participants have revealed their impactful dreams by relating their dreams to their culture, past experiences, or close relationships to guide current understanding and action.

*“I woke up early in the morning, and I saw a text from my mum. As I called her, she said you had one of those dreams again. Now my mother knows this is another thing, but as I told her about the pods and my spiritual path, we talked about it for about half an hour. It's not something that I myself have, but my grandmother, my mother all have this thing where we talk about our dream with each other” (Kelly-ann)*

*“Instantly, I knew this dream of ‘Mugwort’ was ‘Taemong’ a good ‘Omen’, and in my culture, I need to act on what this means. Good luck; after speaking to my mum, so I went out to play the lottery. Although dream it looks bad but it's a sign of things getting better, the expulsion of things that are bad in my life” (Lucy)*

*“I spoke in-depth with my dad, and he reminded me of ‘dus swapna’; it just made so much more sense why I am being haunted. Only then was I able to accept myself, respect that part of me that is more deserving” (Astrid)*

The participants described how they had developed more profound and more meaningful insights from discussing their dreams with others as Kelly-ann describes an alliance with close ones, saying: *‘It's not something that I myself has but my grandmother, my mother all have this thing’* implying that she has an external frame and resource to understand the complexity of her dreams. Lucy described an internal directive or map as she references: *‘Taemong’ a good ‘Omen’ and in my culture, I need to act on what this means’* suggesting a cultural imperative, a way to act to honour her experience of the dream. For Astrid, the dream's meaning was contextualised through the dialogue with her father and the spiritual tradition she follows of understanding ‘dus swapna’ (Nights, omens, misfortunes)

(Eranimos, 2017). All three participants described an external frame of reference that has been internalised, allowing them to find and understand their dreams.

### ***Acquisitional Integration: The Ongoing Process of Dream Incorporation***

More than half of the participants expressed a natural inclination to interpret the symbolic imagery in their dreams by recognising underlying patterns and meanings that resonate with their personal experiences. Through frequent interpretations, they systematically integrated these symbols into their understanding of themselves and their lives.

*“When I tell people I have these dreams, they think I am crazy, but they all enjoy listening but it is always, at first, a lonely journey because you gain an understanding over time. I can tell you this because I started so early on in my life that the earlier you map this out, the quicker you see a pattern, so that is how I got to develop an understanding. It's more fascinating when you tell others before you say what it means, and then you vibe off each other's thoughts of what it could mean. It's great for building relationships” (Hinata)*

*“It's not something you know when it starts, you just already know, like I said before. I like talking to my friends about my dreams, and it's something we just do to get through things in life. I really appreciate her making me and my dreams feel so visible” (Helen)*

*“I had no choice because I knew every time, almost every day I went to bed, these really, really vivid scenes were playing out that forced me to understand what was going on. As I have spoken to others, my original thought has found a home to be understood. The intuition of what they mean is not something we are attuned to anymore; therefore, when I discuss them with my close peers, I can get another perspective on my life” (Olga).*

*“Unless you meet someone who dreams wildly as you do ‘they think it's just a dream’ and talking to someone else helps those images in your brain be more understood. I'm thankful to have a person who understands, which is so valuable. After seeing the same dream over and over, you get to understand the dream more to a degree intuitively and then yourself a little bit more too” (Mareva)*



The participants describe an appreciation for discussing their dreams with people. Hinata, Helen Mareva, and Olga describe sharing their dreams in ongoing relationships that provide a space of acceptance. Helen describes how discussing her dreams with others makes her feel so visible, showing a way of being understood. Olga and Helen described an inherent way of understanding dreams in their comments, *"Intuition of what they mean is not something we are attuned to anymore; It's not something you know when it starts, you just already know"*, suggesting that given the space one can connect naturally with their dreams. Mareva also echoes an intuitive understanding that is facilitated within close relationships with her partner.

### ***Living in the Void: The Struggle with Unresolved Dreams and Unintegrated Meaning***

While the Framework of integration delves into the underlying assumptions of dream sharing, the current theme sheds light on the participants' quest to comprehend the profound impact of their vivid dream experiences without a clear internal map. They find themselves navigating through the complexities of these vivid dreams, akin to unravelling an intricate puzzle without a guiding example.

*"When you are bombarded with all these images on a daily basis, it can be overwhelming, especially if you have no one to talk to or even a cultural reference to know what it all means. I was ashamed to tell people about these things happening to me initially"* (Hinata)

*"A lot of the time I have no one to talk to, and so I do not understand things that happen in my dreams. It's only from reading books. I would really discuss this with other people unless it comes up in a random conversation"* (Bhavisana)

*"I am just too scared to tell anyone about my dreams because I do not want to be seen as crazy and who would care"* (Francesca)

The participants describe being unable to discuss their dreams and feeling isolated. Hinata initially felt a sense of disenchantment talking to others about her dreams. Francesca echoed this sense of isolation and was 'scared', showing a limited relationship with others to discuss her dreams. Bhavisana describes her thoughts in a more genuine way, "I have no one to talk to, and so I do not understand things," but she generally understands her dream 'from reading books. '

### ***The Dance of Trust and Shame: The Emotional Cost of Dream Sharing***

The participants report a disjunction between what they consider an essential source of meaning in their lives, yet they feel others do not share this. People are not interested or feel irrelevant (fit the dominant thought about dreams). In some sense, the participants describe being isolated because they view their experience as personally significant. This theme shows how impactful experiences can be an isolating process if unexpressed or a force for liberation and personal transformation given the platform. The following verbatims show Helen and Jackie's emotional reactions, which were filled with shame and sadness, yet the slightest glimpse of understanding and being able to express themselves left them feeling less anxious and more relaxed and self-assured.

*"I am going to be judged, and its shameful to talk about things that are personal to you and friends who you trust ignore what you say. I just don't talk about them anymore, but if I could, it would be really helpful"* (Francesca)

*"I went through a phase of caring to not caring, and only at that point was I able to work through what I think is other people's fear of what I see and can make sense of. Now I am able to trust others whether they believe it or not; they always like to talk about dreams"* (Hinata)

The lack of social dialogue and fear of being judged by others led to emotions of shame and rejection of others as Francesca says: 'I just don't talk about them' however, developing the resolve to see one's

dreams as a helpful resource both socially and personally allowed Olga to move from feelings of shame to a sense of trust in others really enjoying 'to talk about dreams'.

### ***Sharing Revelations: The Transformative Power of Dream Disclosure***

Participants find interest in the joint examination of their meaningful experiences. The act of sharing dreams revealed both risks and advantages, which became evident through the participants' discussions with others and the dialogues within this study interview. They encountered potential pitfalls and valuable insights as they delved into the intricacies of sharing their dream experiences.

Sharing dreams exposed the participants to certain pitfalls, including scepticism and judgment from others who may not take dreams seriously. This often led to feelings of frustration and isolation when their experiences were met with a lack of understanding or dismissive attitudes. Additionally, they were pressured to suppress or downplay their dream-related experiences to conform to societal norms.

However, sharing dreams also brought valuable insights. The participants gained new perspectives, interpretations, and possible meanings for their dream experiences through conversations about their dreams. They discovered personal significance and found opportunities for self-reflection and growth. The participants' shared discussions allowed them to build connections and develop a sense of camaraderie with others who shared similar experiences or offered support, as Hinata exemplifies:

*"I would not have made that connection if we were not discussing this right here, and that is what I mean that these experiences are not mine alone; they need and should be shared"* (Hinata)

*"talk about synchronisation; this study came at the right time when I was doing inner work and going through a difficult time in my life. If you had not drawn my attention by asking questions to the fact that there may be a connection, I would never have guessed"* (Olga )

*“It feels pleasant to be understood; had we not delved into the dream particulars, I would have probably just been left with the emotionally unsettling part. However, I'm amused at how much detail is actually in there that we both unsheathed” (Astrid)*

The participants were curious and excited, uncovering their dreams during the interview. Astrid was surprised and fully engaged when responding to questions concerning the meaning of dreams, shown in her comments: *‘we both unsheathed’*, showing various meanings that can be arrived at given a different perspective. Olga and Hinata use the word *‘connection’* to describe how sharing dream experiences further enriches the actual dream imagery seen from a different point of view.

## ***Personal Dimension***

### ***Engaging the Dream More Deeply: A Journey of Self-Reflection and Growth***

The participants describe how confronting aspects of themselves in dreams influences their waking selves more significantly than many other areas of their lives. Dreams depict personal ways of being in visible form and *“reciprocally convey”* these modes of being by changing them in impactful ways. These changes give the participant a critical perspective on living and provide clues to them that their ways of being are not reality but a way of viewing it. In this way, Some participants describe their dreams as bridging the gap between their ordinary sense of self and extraordinary perceptions, pushing them towards unfamiliar possibilities and alternative ways of being. This experience can be challenging yet transformative, opening their minds to new insights and expanded self-awareness. Participants attempt to describe these novel realisations through the symbols that point to realised possibilities and open a path towards a fulfilling way of being and living more fully as expressed.

*“I was able to see a new way of being better in my life. Seeing myself show such compassion really gave me the greatest lesson that I can be more..... I feel that I've got a greater connection to my purpose and what I should be doing with people around in my life” (Olga)*

*“I realised how easily the control in my life can be taken away in a situation like drowning, you know, I just think that from now on, I need to be aware of the choices I make and the consequences of them because they can make the difference to me succeeding or failing” (Francesca)*

*“The amount of consideration I have taken in for my life from that dream. I am thankful for my life and my sons every single day” (Bhavisana)*

*“Being that close to death has really allowed me to think about what matters to me. It has made me definitely more conscious of what I can and cannot do and how quickly things can change. It made me want to just do good for myself so that I'm there for others” (Mareva)*

*“You only really know what freedom is when the enjoyment of how you live have been constricted to liken living to a caged animal. The me in the dream, as I have said before, was not in a good place. I know that I was on edge seeing myself, but I was hopeful and determined to choose something more” (Astrid)*

The participants showed an increased awareness of being a better version of themselves through comments such as *“The amount of consideration I have taken in for my life”, “I was able to see a new way of being better in my life”, “It made me want to just do good for myself.* This allowed the participants to discover a more meaningful way of relating to their dreams and waking world as they acknowledged they were *“determined to choose something more”* in their lives. The participants could conceive of themselves more positively; Olga spoke of self-‘compassion’, which shows she could overcome and actively make better decisions through an altered perspective. Mareva talked about approaching her life from a different perspective, motivated by her conscious awareness of her mortality.

Other participants echoed an internalised transformed perspective towards themselves in their lives, as illustrated in the following quotes:

*“This was not about me but doing something greater for humanity, was my sense. I was pushed to my limits of seeing so much agony and death, but it was for a greater cause” (Hinata)*

*“It made me a better person. That anxiety made me feel so uncomfortable I do not want to feel that way again, so I’m listening to my gut feelings more” (Jonathan)*

*“I always felt like my life was not worth living from the abuse in the first dream, but the second one in this study made me think more about how important my life is and working past the baggage I am carrying. It’s early days now, but I am beginning to see myself making it happen” (Lucy)*

*“Seeing yourself or parts of yourself represented in your dreams and at the same time experiencing yourself from a different perspective is really revealing, but you never know from the character you see what part or how much of that change you need to make. I just remember the most standout part of me when seeing myself, and hopefully, each time I have such a dream I can continue to make more changes” (Jackie)*

All the participants found a way and embraced working towards bettering themselves. The active choice to summon the courage to change in the face of their impactful dreams illustrates one of the greatest maxims through the ages of ‘Know thyself’. Jackie described the rich possibilities of developing oneself from viewing various perspectives, one that appeared grounded in the struggles with understanding the self. She used the words ‘*at the same time experiencing yourself from a different perspective*’ to show that what the self means is subjective, can be perceived in various ways, and is not a universal concept in the participants’ view.

## ***Spiritual***

### ***Replaying Dreams: Assembling Meaning from Experiences***

As '***Engaging the Dream More Deeply***' illustrated the participants' motivation to transcend, 'Replay and Assemble' communicates the reported ways dreams continue to enrich, animate and inspire a learning experience through internally generated or spontaneous recalling of their dreams in their lives. Some participants wondered about the source of their dreams, while others talked about a psychological relationship with the dream imagery that is positive and negative as expressed:

*I was so fascinated by the place, it reminded me of the ancient Ephesus routines in Greece, so I searched for it but did not find it" (Jackie)*

*When I google search the place, that is when I really made a deeper connection, and that process in the search keeps you connected because it's like you find images or see them that reinforce what you already saw" (Hinata)*

*"I just love visiting my grandparents, especially the feeling on my feet. Sometimes I try to close my eye to picture it or walk outside on the grass. It's so comforting thinking about it with the sensations" (Mareva)*

The participants indulged in their post-dreaming experience and engaged in the possibility of finding aspects of their dreams with comments such as: "when I think about the scene of all those people I cannot but help think there is more to discover" (Kelly-ann). For other participants, it is not only aesthetic in nature but curiosity into the internally sourced interface of the dream as expressed: "*I go outside and walk on the grass" (Mareva), "the search keeps you connected", I searched for it" (Jackie)*. These extracts highlight how despite the fragments of the dream they could recall, participants explored to make sense of their dreams. A type of epistemological endeavour to understand the nature and the source of their experiences, as in Olga's excerpt below:

*"Sometimes these experiences have got to be coming from something more than in our heads because at times you are faced with a void or some kind of space that when I first saw it was like space, but after experiencing it a few times, its alive and this is some kind of interface to something on the other side" (Olga)*

*It just got to be more than my peripheral dream vision because when you start to be able to look around, this is like alive energy, and I'm not talking about something physics teaches you but a real force that I think is divine or some sort of omnipotent power" (Hinata)*

*"These dreams I have cannot come from me because they are of things that you do not see every day, so it must be coming from something bigger and greater than me" (Helen)*

There was an inquisitiveness in Olga, Hinata, and Helen in recalling moments as they contemplated the possibility of something reciprocal beyond the dream 'interface'. The participants demonstrated an expanding of ideas in the way the dreams related to life as they contemplated the implications of their thinking, which encouraged transformation, healing, inspiration and personal growth. The participants recognised a feedback loop of 'generating-to-speculate', as they felt capable of navigating their lives due to their ability to reflect upon their dreams.

*"There were moments when I deeply contemplated the connection between my dreams and my waking life. It was like my dreams were offering me insights and possibilities that could transform and heal aspects of my life. It was an exciting and inspiring process of exploration and personal growth." (Hinata)*

*"Reflecting on my dreams, I realised that they held a profound significance beyond the realm of dreams. They were like a portal to understanding myself and my life on a deeper level. It was as if my dreams were providing me with guidance and wisdom, encouraging me to embrace transformation and navigate my life with more clarity and purpose." (Helen)*

*"As I contemplated the possibility of something reciprocal beyond the dream 'interface,' I felt a sense of curiosity and wonder. It made me question if there was a two-way communication*



*happening between my dreams and my waking life. It was like there was a dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences that went beyond the boundaries of each realm." (Olga)*

Two participants talked about spontaneously recalling their dreams in unexpected circumstances that invoked emotions and feelings that continued with them throughout their day.

*"I was just going to the supermarket, and as I went to pick some vegetables, suddenly there it was, the dream playing right in front of me. I felt as if it made my day. If it were not for me being self-conscious, I would have stayed in it, and I did not wait to see people's faces" (Lucy)*

*"I caught the subway to work, and I just laughed to myself because the dream came back to me for no reason. I thought are you trying to tell me something" (Jonathan).*

Other participants expressed this curiosity and attempted to manifest aspects of their dreams in a moment of creative music production.

*"I was like, what was the melody the couple were singing. I am an artist, and I often get these moments of creativity, and I always try to capture these moments" (Olga).*

*"I woke up, and I tried to sing the song. Of course, I remembered it, and I wrote most of it down" (Helen)*

The participants show how the process of actively or spontaneously recalling their dreams offers the prospects of experiencing moments of creativity, 'positive attitude' and 'well-being' for different reasons. Although the participants could draw upon positive experiences, some struggled to distinguish or were unable to determine whether an event or experience occurred during the waking state or as the content of a dream. Lucy reported that dreams could feel like real memories:

*“ The leaves looked like the mugwort I put in the fish tank, so I quickly checked on the tropical fish to make sure I didn’t really kill them. I sometimes have to think twice because it may be something I have done and then dreamt about it, or dreamt about it.” (Lucy)*

*“ I’ve had dreams before where I have mistakenly thought that an event in the dream has happened in waking. For instance, the dream of someone depending on me, like the one I wrote down before I called my work colleague to check if I had fixed the mixer properly for the next gig. Sometimes the dreams affect me so much that I sometimes I am not sure if it happened or not “ (Olga)*

*“Sometimes I can’t tell the difference because I had the dream about working with my colleague and I still thought they were putting loads of work for me to do on my desk” (Jonathan)*

*“ Its happened to me before where I think what I have done in the dream I have done it when I am awake. I literally thought I called a friend this week but it was in a dream and she said we didn’t have this particular conversation” (Francesca).*

The participants reported that their dreams have a greater impact on their waking life than they realised, and a significant amount of reflection was carried out to interpret their importance, meaning, and how to develop this internal resource. Some participants were about to manifest creative aspects of their dream in the form of music. A negative part of their recollection during wakefulness led to dreams being mistaken for transpired experiences. The participants, who vividly recalled their dreams, found themselves deeply connected to the emotions they experienced. This strong identification with dream emotions made it difficult for them to separate the dream content from their waking reality. As a result, their perception of reality became positively and negatively influenced, affecting their ability to make certain decisions and navigate their lives effectively.

### **Staying on Path: Using Dreams to Navigate Life's Pathways**

This theme demonstrates the participants' challenging feelings around wishing to live up to the revelatory message from their vivid dreams. The following extracts illustrate how the participants straddle the territory between re-evaluating their values and embodying their perception of what they believed the dream conveyed. Observing how participants perceive the qualities they need to possess is interesting. The following extracts convey:

*"As you enter adulthood, we forget to pay attention to almost the collateral beauty of life. And when I say the collateral beauty of life is there's so much bloody destruction in the world as it is, You do not pay attention to simple things such as the trees dancing. The same when people are dying; excuse my candidness, but it's only when people are dying or when they're losing someone that they almost now start to remember, "oh my god the sky is so beautiful". The water is so beautiful. No, for me personally, I do that every single day I can look at a bloody plastic bag, swelling around in the wind, but this dream allowed me to get in touch with my emotions and guide me on that process more"* (Kelly-ann)

*"It has absolutely informed, like, my thought process and dealing with those intense emotions. Like since I've had that dream, it's absolutely like 100% like, if I find myself like, going back to like an old, like thought pattern or negative feelings, then I'm like, remember to change it in the dream, you know, I don't even really like consciously try to remind myself of that dream I just in life, like when I get too deep into it thinking of being a certain way, but I'm just like that, remember that? Like, it just kind of popped back into my mind. And it's, yeah, it's still like I'm working through it, trying to be more compassionate person from now on. (Olga)*

Both participants described a shift within themselves as they experienced and expressed their emotion, with Kelly-ann saying: '*this dream allowed me to get in touch with my emotions and guide me on that process more*', suggesting that the dream helped to position her focus in line with the environmental spaces she appreciates. Olga linked bringing more of her sensitive side to others and the effect this may have '*trying to be more compassionate person from now on*'. The participants recognised their

attitudes and commitment to living up to the principles conveyed in the dreams. This appeared to be a powerful experience for Olga, demonstrated through her description: *'if I find myself like, going back to like an old, like thought pattern or negative feelings then I'm like, remember to change it in the dream'*. This ties in with her previous quote in *'Consciously Engaging with Dreams'*, where a change in her perception towards confronting aspects of her dream developed and reinforced ways to approach her life.

The participants demonstrated an increased awareness of committing to new ways of living as they became more conscious of what to value psychologically and spiritually. This led to a further re-evaluation of their ultimate concerns, as the participants described a transformation of their existing paradigm, which seemed to complement their existing value system. They struggled with their identities and making sense of their dreams and what they conveyed. They understood that living congruent with the values each participant experienced was challenging and complex, as adhering to such commitment required greater awareness, as shown in Kelly-ann's quote about *'pay attention to simple things such as the trees dancing'*.

Some participants grappled with the positive portrayals and the unsettling imagery and had diminished hopes during the study of attempting to uphold the principles conveyed:

*"It was like living with cognitive dissonance that after seeing those bodies, I felt guilty every few days. I'm thankful and humbled with my life, but I just struggled. I have done this for 30 plus years and these two weeks are no different. Somethings there is no explanation"* (Hinata)

*"I was in such a bad mood, with feelings of anger or sadness, but then I remembered the dream. This is something I am trying to be a forgiving person, but it is hard, and I noticed I'm just distraught I should have done thing to change earlier than waiting to talk about it in some study"* (Lucy)

Hinata used the words 'every few days', highlighting the emotionally negative impact of part of what she had experienced whilst acknowledging the positive impact derived from the message conveyed. Lucy recognised the challenges to forgive and expressed anger towards herself that the necessary changes to advance through her continued relationship challenges could have been initiated earlier than within the time of the current study.

### ***Being with Dreams: Living in Dialogue with the Dream World***

'Being with dreams' aims to show how the participants have struggled in the past, profound struggles to understand the fragmented clues that made a lasting impact were important to informing their developing identity. A genesis into their curiosity about their dreams and their uses. The participants acknowledge a greater sense of understanding due to these experiences, which they claimed allowed them to engage with life's challenges more resourcefully, as the account of Hinata exemplifies:

*"What started this, you could say, was those repetitive dreams that each time I had them, I had to connect parts together. Since then, I no longer believe these are just ours. It's something more than us, like a gift. It's like something trying to get out. It's got to get out, I got to tell it. I have been through so much that "* (Hinata)

*"They are never just a dream on their own, but I am my dreams. I have a library of dream journals I've kept for over 30 years, and they always match up at one point or another. So depending on if you have the time to see, unless you want to be like me, a lonely cat woman whose work friends think you're crazy, you will find an answer to what you are looking for as I have since I was young"* (Hinata).

Hinata identifies with her dreams and recognises their importance to her growth and personal well-being, saying: 'They are never just a dream on its own, but I am my dreams. I have a library of dream journals I've kept for over 30 years and 'I no longer believe these are just ours'. The nature and

function of her dream are important to her, as she has documented their positive impact. These convictions of the belief her dreams hold value are evident in Hinata's resolve irrespective of the opinion of others: *'whos work friends think you're crazy'*. These profound experiences have been central to her understanding of life. Hinata has chosen to give voice to and connect them to her waking life "It's got to get out, I got to tell it. I have been through so much that ", suggesting she understands the significant influence on her life and the significance that can impact others. The other participants reflect Hinata's intimate understanding towards a more companionate relationship with her dreams.

*"I mean, I guess, ever since I can remember, I had really vivid, really, really vivid dreams, even I think some of my earliest memories are actually remembering certain dreams that I've had..... But I have just, I guess I'm used to it. And I have just accepted it as part of who I am"* (Olga)

*"This dream reminded me of when I was, maybe, seven years old. They have been with me for so long that I cannot imagine life without them as they are a part of me"* (Francesca)

*"I grew up listening to my mother speaking about her vivid dreams, I grew up listening to my grandmother talking about her vivid dreams. The dreams make me who I am, and I engage them"* (Kelly-ann)

*"The furthest back I can remember having dreams, dreams in general or vivid dreams, was Probably when I was 10. They were not written. But many of them I remember because they were usually traumatic like when I was in a car crash. I did not realise then, but they really helped me to understand things about myself"* (Mareva)

*"Pretty early on. I remember having them early on in childhood, but more vividly, at least since I was a teenager, I was so depressed and felt suicidal in my teenage years, not knowing who I was. The dreams really helped me"* (Jackie)

*"It was confusing these visions of the night as a child; it was like having a double vision of things you have already experienced. In school, I was called names such as Medusa. I was fascinated by Egyptian gods, so I studied them"* (Kelly-ann)

The participants acknowledged that previous experiences had contributed to developing coping strategies and increased resilience in their lives. They found that understanding their dreams assisted them in dealing with challenges in their waking lives. Furthermore, these confrontations facilitated personal growth in various aspects. Kelly-ann followed spiritual practices by focusing on Egyptian history, whilst Helen attended sessions with a child psychologist:

*"I have been dreaming my whole life. All these silly dreams, more serious traumatic dreams, more nightmares when bad things happen to me. It's actually a part of me. I was taken to see a child psychologist, who I later found is a spiritualist. I learnt a lot about myself in certain dreams while others are more than about you; they are about others, they are like premonitions"* (Helen)

Helen's personal growth journey began in childhood, characterized by initial experiences of alienation and emotional instability. However, as she faced and navigated through these challenges, she gradually found a sense of integration and a place to call home within herself. This process of growth and self-discovery allowed her to overcome her struggles and fostered a greater sense of stability and emotional well-being. She learnt how some dreams have significance that relates to herself and others. This may have led to Helen trivialising some dreams and emphasising others viewed as profound.

Other participants refer to dreams that provided ways for them to respond to situations they struggled with in their past:

*"I was never accepted being half Japanese living in Spain. My father's family always treated me as nothing, which would always lead to negative dreams. So, I'm never enough and in ways being taken advantage of since I was a child".....* (Lucy)

*"It's traumatic facing cancer as a child. I think dreaming about it has prepared me to handle any situation. You can find ways to enjoy there and act differently because you have this play space in your mind to see things differently"* (Astrid)

*So the dreams also helped me understand taking responsibility. I grew up with my dad at work. They were a way to help me understand being a man but not a woman because I do not know my Mum” (Jonathan)*

*Alcohol made him aggressive when he came home. I remember going to bed after a really bad night and dreaming that the drink was to flush away his pain. So I guess it was a way for me to forgive the way he was towards us me and my sisters” (Bhavisana)*

Jonathan stated that it helped him take ‘responsibility’ to graduate to be a man in his childhood. Astrid used the words ‘prepared me to handle any situation’, highlighting that her early dream experiences developed her resolve so that she could face adversity. Bhavisana's dreams allowed her to bring compassion and resilience in challenging circumstances and respond to how they affected other family members.

### ***Living with Dreams: Incorporating Dream Wisdom into Everyday Life***

Although the participants could develop positive changes in their lives from the remaining clues of their dreams, they were still challenged with confronting the givens in relation to themselves. This theme aims to capture an understanding of these profound experiences, demonstrating that impactful dream experiences are an ongoing journey, as the participants live with the prospects of the possible meaning and knowing that there is no single interpretation and, therefore, multiple possibilities to strive for:

*“You just become more connected each time you think about what it may imply to a situation in your life, so the good thing is you never run out of ways of thinking about them” ( Jackie)*

*The meaning of the dream from when I was a child still has meaning today, just like all the others, so there is so much meaning, everyday meaning, and if I could sit down with all of them, I would probably somewhere find the meaning of life” (Helen)*



*“the more I focus on the experience in those dreams is, the more I see how relevant they are at times when I am in a crisis and the possibilities that are open to me” (Olga)*

*“Imagine having one hand over your eyes every day, there is something you might miss on that side. So, I see dreams like another way of opening up my life and being part of everything I do, feel and see every single day, especially when I most need them to be” (Kelly-ann)*

*“Well, it is not as if I can stop dreaming, so I guess with most things in life, you have to learn to live with them, and in my case, I have the chance to make mine better {laughter}” (Mareva)*

Despite being enriched through their initial understanding of the dreams, the participants felt that there was more to discover, reveal, and augment them in some way. For example, Helen and Mareva felt their dreams were meaningful, giving them a sense of purpose in living. The other participants described the positive impact, acknowledging the potential growth their impactful dreams bear on their lives. There was concern about misinterpreting or seeing the relevant meaning within their lives, but they demonstrated a resolve to include dreams as an aspect of themselves. Kelly-ann and Olga viewed their dreams as a lens through which to view unfolding possibilities, caveating by pointing out they have helped to clarify moments of significance and crisis.

The following extracts show how the participants face the concerns of existence in tandem with positive, impactful experiences.

*“I think if I did not experience that anxiety, my wife and I would have had lots of arguments. They impose themselves on showing you what you need to do” (Jonathan)*

*“If I’m engrossed in something or drifting too deeply into something negative but It not necessarily negative, my dreams become unsettling and always related to what I am challenged with in my life” (Francesca)*

I had that mistake dream early on in the study, and I thought things would be okay, but just days later, I had this reoccurring nightmare that came from nowhere. I dealt with that stuff, at least I thought years ago” (Olga)

*“I consider myself an introvert, and with that, I dream about being a carefree person. That is in my dreams, I cannot do that in waking because I cannot control others, but in my dream, I do not feel that sense of shame or remorse or sadness. So I get a sense of freedom without the other stuff in my dreams” (Hinata)*

*“Life is full of good and bad, and as long as I feel my experiences the way I do, my dreams will always show this, so I guess they will always show my reality” (Mareva)*

All participants pointed out positive feelings congruent with the most enduring aspects of paying attention to their uncanny dreams

*“If something is going on in my life, I can guarantee to count on my dreams alerting me to something even if they are visually horrible or emotionally upsetting” (Astrid)*

*“ I know this is from a source greater than just me, but they have to be shared irrespective of what others may suggest. They are weird, but I have gained so much from them. Not only the dream itself but working them out” (Hinata)*

*“If they were only straightforward and less crazy, I am sure I would get a lot more out of them. That goes for talking to others as well” (Bhavisana)*

*“Complex, I would say and really helpful to discover things and finding ways to change” (Jonathan)*

*“Taking your time to make connections in your life has to be the single most important thing towards becoming a better person” (Olga)*

*“They scare me, but they help me decide things in my path” (Francesca)*

*“you always worry what people have to say. What greater criticism or deciding what's important for your life” (Helen)*

*“Even though they never turn out always pleasant, I am changed every day” (Jackie)*

*“I cannot imagine being without some of my dreams”..... (Mareva)*

*“People know me for having bizarre dreams, So I use that and my dreams to further my life and my ambitions. My dreams show me what is more important and what is not along the way” (Kelly-ann)*

*“Shame of what people think has stopped me from talking about my dreams, but this study made me realise how they can be useful when talking to someone that cares” (Lucy)*

As the participants embraced their strange, mysterious and emotionally surprising dreams, they were also reminders of inner struggles within and attempted to make sense of their dreams. This connecting process led them to use these experiences as a resource for *‘greater possibilities to living’*. They all understood the significance of this resource and how it can be used in their lives as a valuable dialogue to connect with others and for their spiritual well-being. They were concerned with the stigma surrounding disclosing dreams and how others would perceive them; however, it was clear that their well-being and desire for spiritual growth were far greater to strive for than succumbing to shame.

### **Summary of Living with the Dream**

This temporal theme shows the impact on the participants as they continue to be influenced by their dreams and develop various positive methods to improve their lives. They all cultivated new practices on the physical dimension, and some participants struggled socially; there was a sharp

awareness of the inner framework of integration that was impoverished for understanding their dreams. This often led to feelings of shame and isolation; however, for those participants who could share their dreams with others, it motivated them to engage with their dreams more deeply, relating to themselves, with others and their world. The personal dimension was characterised by the participants' inner desire to be greater to themselves and consciously search for meaningful ways to deepen their sense of self, reflect more positively about altering their lives, and engage in personal development that would enable them to experience their self positively. This theme demonstrates that despite not fully understanding the meaning of their dreams, the participants were actively choosing to draw positive experiences into their lives rather than remain ambivalent whilst adapting to the changing interpretations that help to enrich their ways of living. Also, It illustrates how these participants' dreams have been historically insightful resources in their development and continue to be ongoing sources of growth throughout their lifespan. This does not suggest that the participants' struggles with the given of existence cease to affect them, but the extent to which they are in touch with and in close proximity to their reality. As this study has shown, impactful experiences occur more frequently for these participants, and implementing a dream journal can facilitate growth, optimism and strength while confronting the challenges they experience.

### **Reflexivity on the Third Theme**

This temporal theme brought forward the participants' active engagement with their dreams as ongoing resources for growth and self-development. My reflexivity during this phase centred on the potential influence of my enthusiasm for dreamwork on the analysis and the interpretations I constructed. Member checking was integral to mitigating this bias and ensuring that participants' perspectives guided the narrative.

Sharing the evolving analysis with participants highlighted areas where my interpretations could have unintentionally downplayed their struggles with shame and isolation. Their feedback helped refine the

balance between recognising their challenges and celebrating their growth. Participants' validation of the themes also affirmed the relevance of certain practices, such as journaling, as tools for resilience and optimism, while providing additional context about their motivations and outcomes that I had not initially considered.

The member checking process reinforced the importance of capturing the temporality of their experiences, as participants often reflected on how their understanding of their dreams evolved over time. This iterative dialogue deepened my appreciation of the complexity of their journeys and ensured that the analysis accurately reflected the participants' lived realities, enhancing the trustworthiness of the research.

## **Conclusion**

This study has illuminated vivid dreams' profound and multi-faceted impact on individuals' lives. The exploration of various dimensions – physical, social, personal, and spiritual – has revealed intricate connections and interplays that contribute to participants' growth and transformation. The overarching theme that emerges is the confrontation of existential givens within the dream realm. Through these vivid dreams, participants encountered existential realities that extended beyond the boundaries of the dream itself. Themes of mortality, purpose, responsibility, and meaninglessness were vividly portrayed within the dream narratives, leading participants to reassess their worldviews and values. The process of grappling with these existential confrontations triggered complex emotions, including guilt, shame, anger, and grief. The participants' struggle to interpret and integrate these experiences reflected the intricate interplay between their dream world and waking life.

This study also highlights the importance of communication and sharing experiences as participants navigated the aftermath of vivid dreams. Communicating their encounters allowed for a sense of catharsis, easing the burden of responsibility and shame. The participants' resilience in facing these

challenges and their ability to derive meaning from their dreams led to adopting positive coping strategies and lifestyle changes.

Furthermore, the findings emphasise the enduring nature of the dream journey. Dreams, as vehicles of exploration and reflection, continue to serve as sources of insight and growth throughout individuals' lives. The ongoing quest for meaning within dream experiences mirrors the continuous evolution of personal progress. While participants grappled with the inherent uncertainties and shifting interpretations of dreams, their resilience and determination to engage with existential realities remained steadfast. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between vivid dreams and existential concerns. It sheds light on the transformative power of dreams in shaping individuals' perceptions, emotions, and behaviours. The journey to decipher dream meanings emerges as a dynamic process, reflecting the ever-evolving relationship between the dreamer and their inner world. As participants navigate the complexities of their dream experiences, they navigate their own path of self-discovery, personal growth, and a deeper connection with the profound dimensions of existence. The key findings of the structured existential analysis will be interpreted in detail in chapter 4, including relating the findings to those of previous research and dream theory.

## Chapter Four: Discussion

### Introduction

This study aimed to examine and describe the lived experiences of individuals who have had vivid dreams and found them to impact their waking lives significantly. This chapter presents the findings of the structural existential analysis, utilising four dimensions and heuristic devices while considering relevant literature on dreams and dreaming. According to this analysis, relevant books on dream theories, historical and cultural perspectives on dreams, and the authors' own experiences in assisting others in understanding their dreams were incorporated into the discussion. These additions addressed areas not previously covered, as indicated by the findings. Additionally, research articles that presented and discussed findings related to various aspects of dreaming were examined, particularly focusing on vivid dreams' ongoing significance upon awakening. The study's findings showed three temporal themes that captured the participants' perceptions, thoughts, feelings and lived experiences of what it is like to experience vivid dreams. The research question for this dissertation involved the exploration of vivid dreams and their impacts on an individual's life. The present study had three key research aims to achieve, which were related to the research question; they include (1) to understand the experience of dreaming, (2) to assess how the participants make sense of the experience, and (3) to assess their understanding of the process of dealing with the impacts of dream on their life. In this chapter, findings from the data analysis process presented in the previous chapter will be discussed to facilitate the generation of new knowledge for addressing the three research aims. During the discussion process, findings from this study will be compared and contrasted with those from the previous studies in this context. This chapter critically discusses the three temporal themes generated from the structured existential analysis of collected data from the participants: **Dreaming as Being, Awakening to Being and Living with the Dream**. Newly generated evidence from the analysis conducted in this chapter will then be used to answer the primary research question, which involves the exploration of vivid dreams and their impacts on an individual's life. The first of these sections examined

the dreamers' experience of vivid dreams, demonstrating participants' struggle with their existential realities as they experience and try to make sense of symbolic and waking-related imagery. The second explored the transition to waking, showing the dreamer's experience of emotionally engaging with the dream material, perceptually and through a change in how they relate to the self and others. This also demonstrates how the dreamers started to engage with the dream material differently by finding ways of coping and meaningfulness, adapting to bizarre experiences, and engaging in precognitive experiences that evoked positive and negative emotions. The third section describes how the dreamers underwent transformative and personal growth that connects this dream study's contribution to counselling psychology. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive examination of the research findings, acknowledging study limitations, proposing recommendations for further research, and assessing the contribution of the findings to counselling psychology. An existential discussion and general interpretation of the reported findings are presented to evaluate whether the research aims have been met.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The analysis yielded significant findings regarding the embodiment of sensations and values in the physical dimension and the profound impact of dreams. These experiences were not confined to the individual's personal and spiritual dimensions but also interconnected with other aspects of their lives. Furthermore, the participants shared their dream experiences in the social world, highlighting dreams' broader influence and significance in shaping their overall well-being and understanding of themselves. The reported data from the conducted analysis demonstrated that vivid dreams and their impact on waking significantly forced most participants to confront different forms of existential concerns, precisely the reality about their mortality and responsibility, and to experience feelings of meaninglessness and purposefulness in life. The reported results from the analysis further demonstrated that dreams provided participants with the opportunity to overcome their struggles and



complex emotions, such as shame, guilt, grief and anger, which have negative consequences on their experiences upon awakening and that most of the participants found their dreams to be isolating experience. However, such experiences were relatively different when they communicated with others, leaving some participants feeling alienated and insecure. Specifically, the feeling of isolation developed among the participants after they developed strong feelings and concerns about the nature of their dreams.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that most participants developed strong relationships with their dreams, as they were concerned about their dreams' meaning and the ongoing possible changed meanings while developing new understandings of the symbolic imagery. Additionally, findings from the analysis postulated that the increased knowledge of the struggles within their dreams in their personal lives made most of the participants develop a sense of responsibility and feelings of shame, conditions which provided them with the opportunity to share their experiences with others they trust or those that share similar experiences. Specifically, this research established that some participants perceived dreams as terrifying, especially when they tried to navigate their meanings. Through sharing their dream experiences, participants were able to understand their past behaviours and become more optimistic about their ability to gain new knowledge and understanding of their relationships. The *Living with the Dream* themes specifically reflected the effects of the dream journey on the participants' lives, specifically as they tried to reconstruct their reality with the framework of new possibilities based on their dream experiences. To develop conducive relationships, which allowed them to face life experiences positively, the study showed that the participants adopted recent lifestyle changes and ways of being with others. In the context of the spiritual dimension, the ability of the participants to cope with the challenges and develop resilience, as well as the adoption of the principle of living purposefully, was vital in the management and understanding of their dreams. From a general perspective, it can be noted that this study's findings demonstrated that the participants' need to

comprehensively understand the meaning of their dreams is not a singular moment, with the consequences of existential realities within their dreams still observed as a continuous struggle.

### **Dreaming as Being**

This section shows how the first research aim was achieved through the analysis, identifying and developing the first temporal theme, "Dreaming as Being", which highlighted the participants' accounts as they faced their ultimate concerns. Under the temporal theme of Dreaming as Being, different subthemes through the four dimensions and heuristic devices were reported; they include *The Body in Dreaming*, *Being with Others in the Dreamspace*, *Dreams as Metaphor*, *The Dreaming Principle*, and *Consciously Engaging with Dreams*. The reported data outlined concerns such as freedom and responsibility, death, isolation and meaninglessness, and meaningful principles. Findings from the present study demonstrate that most of the participants included in the analysis reported their nocturnal experiences as puzzles or riddles with the primary purpose of eliciting thinking or testing their integrity. The results from this study support the findings from the previous study by Kuiken and Ming-Ni (2015), which assessed the influence of impactful dreams on self-perceptual depth and spiritual transformation using the self-perceptual depth scale with their analysis reporting that existential dreams involve the open, feeling-oriented form of expression which may not emerge during other forms of the dreaming process, such as nightmares. From a general perspective, the participants in the present study perceived dreaming as an essential aspect of being and used it as a basis for reflecting upon their lives. The reported findings in this research echo the evidence presented in the studies by Fireman, Levin and Pope (2014) and Rover and Schredl (2017), which established that waking dream reflection often leads to a significant increase in the awareness of feelings. A comparative assessment of findings from the present study and evidence from the abovementioned research studies shows that dreams can be used to reflect an individual's waking life and that dreams lead to the incorporation of conscious experiences into their dream content. Contrary to the findings from the present study, which describe the dream as an essential aspect of self-reflection, evidence from the previous studies by

Windt et al. (2014) and Schredl and Reinhard (2011) demonstrate that dreams are a patchwork of memory fragments but not straightforward replay of waking life as expressed by some of the participants in the present research. Therefore, it is justifiable to note that not all dreams are based on waking life experiences, with some being symbolic or providing novel material.

The first subtheme which emerged from the temporal theme “Dreaming as Being” is “*The Body in Dreaming*”, which specifically outlines how the bodies of the participants serve as an interface for experiences as well as observing their encounters with the dreams and interacting with these aspects for their purpose. Specifically, the reported data in this study suggest that all participants vividly remembered their dreams as embodied sensations in time and space. The findings are consistent with the results from a longitudinal study by Soffer-Dudek (2012) and Schredl et al. (2019), which report that some participants could recall or remember their dreams naturally. However, Soffer-Dudek (2012) included quality of sleep as a mediating factor that influenced the ability of the participants to recall their dreams. This aspect was not included in the present study's analysis. Furthermore, results from the present study are consistent with those from the previous research studies by Szpakowska (2010) and Gosden (2020), which established that most people are often able to recall their dreams, but such events are often compromised by different factors such as stress or experiencing trauma which makes people have vivid dreams or nightmares. In the context of dilemmas and tensions faced by the participants, the reported findings from the present study identified life and death as the most fundamental challenges, which specifically reminded them about their limitations and possibilities. Similar to the present study, the memory processing analysis by Stenstrom et al. (2012) also reported that most of the participants dreamt about life and death, with death symbolising major life transitions such as a new job, home or other life responsibilities which may be overwhelming or not effectively managed. A comprehensive description of life and death experiences in dreams is presented in the previous study by Bulkeley (2014), which involved the assessment of the impacts of end-of-life dreams and visions on the actual life of individuals, with the analysis showing that experiences from end-of-life

dreams and visions can be used to foretell the future and the deceased friends and family (Nyblom, 2021). From this perspective, Dreams have predictive value (Harris, 2009, p.2) or foreboding possibilities, especially about the future (p.5) and can foreground knowledge for the dreamer in the dreaming process, their family members, friends and those close to them.

The findings from this study show that participants had varying experiences related to their dreams. Specifically, some of the participants who struggled with identity, personal values, self-efficacy and self-worth were portrayed psychologically in the personal dimension, while others described a sense of purpose, which provided them with the opportunity to discover and feel connected to their lives through dreams. Therefore, these findings can be used for a comprehensive understanding of the findings presented in the recent lucid dreaming study by Yu and Shen (2019), which compared the three types of lucid dream induction methods and indicated that the use of cognitive techniques such as wake-up-back-to-Bed, reality testing/ reflection could be followed with a significant increase in the frequency of lucid dreaming. The study's participants described their dreams as highly personal and associated with psychological impacts. Similar to the results from the present study, fear and anxiety have been identified as significant aspects of dreaming in many previous studies. In line with Revonsuo's explanations (2015), the threat stimulation theory posits that dreaming fulfils a neurobiological function by enabling offline simulation of threatening events. This allows for the rehearsal of threat-avoidance skills by activating the fear-related amygdala-cortical network (Revonsuo, 2000). Therefore, such a mechanism allows for the promotion of adapted behavioural responses in dreamers' real-life situations. By contrast, findings from the present study suggest that dreaming often facilitates the resolution of current emotional conflict, a significant decrease in the following day's negative mood, and an extension of learning. Even though the primary theoretical perspectives of evidence from the previous studies and findings from the present study are significantly different, as the first one focuses on the optimisation of waking effective reactions and the latter emphasises the resolution of current emotional distress, both converge to suggest that experiencing fears during

dreams often lead to the development of more adapted responses which may threaten the signals during wakefulness. Therefore, it is justifiable to note that memories from an individual's affective history are often replayed in virtual and safe dream environments, which allows for their reorganisation.

Similar to wakefulness situations, the present study's results demonstrated that most participants experience different emotions in their dreams. Even though the previous studies by Conte et al. (2020), Schredl (2004) and Scarpelli (2019) reported a relative predominance of negative emotions, including fear and anxiety, during the dreaming process, findings from the present study suggest that there is a relative balance between positive and negative emotions. Both joy and other positive emotions may prevail in most dreaming situations. Additionally, the study emphasises the significance of embodied sensations and values on the impact of dreams on the physical dimension, their connection to other dimensions and the sharing of experiences in the social world. From a general perspective, impactful experiences featured significantly within the spiritual dimension of dreaming among the participants in the present study. *Consciously Engaging with Dreams* is another key subtheme reported from the conducted structured existential analysis where the included participants described their intentional creative ability by getting involved in the unknown dreaming process. Consistent with the results from the present study, analysis conducted by Ullman (1999) established that deliberate dreaming is critical in enhancing an individual's ability to reverie their imaginations, ideas and visions. Based on the responses provided by the participants interviewed in the present study, it can be noted that they had primarily experienced existential dreams and transcendent dreams. Concerning the explanations by Kuiken (2015) and Olsen et al. (2020), existential dreams lead to the generation of feeling-oriented expressions, while transcendent dreams, on the other hand, are associated with the occurrence of meditative mindfulness. However, the findings are contrary to the results reported in the studies by Eldredge (2016) and Stumbrys, Erlacher and Malinowski et al. (2015), which demonstrated that dream lucidity is not a distinctive characteristic of any of the impactful types of dreams even though transcendent dreams and existential dreams presented signs of pre-lucid

reflection. Therefore, it is justifiable to note that the consequences of these two forms of impactful dreams on an individual's experiences can be examined closely by assessing the role of dream lucidity, specifically, awareness among participants while dreaming.

### **Awakening to Being**

The analysis led to the generation of the second theme, the Awakening to Being, referring to the immersive and reflected experiences that the participants reported immediately upon awakening from dreaming. Specifically, findings from the presented study demonstrated that all participants were affected in relatively the same manner by different forms of profound experiences during their vivid dreams, indicating their vulnerability on different dimensions. Similar to the findings from the previous studies by Voss (2009) and Revonsuo (2000), the analysis conducted in the present research demonstrated that most of the participants experienced many problems in achieving dream lucidity. Such a problem has been reported in the studies by LaBerge (1980) and Stumbrys & Erlacher (2016), which proposed using the wake-back-to-bed method for achieving lucidity. Even though the present study did not involve an assessment of any form of the sleep cycle, its results can be further explained using the evidence presented in the previous study by Barrett (1992), which recommended that individuals should set the alarm for waking up at least 4-5 hours after falling asleep to interrupt the rapid-eye movement (REM) cycle effectively. Corresponding arguments have been reported in the research by Cartwright (2010) and Pace-Schott, Germain, and Malid (2015), which explain that successful interruption of the REM cycle allows an individual to re-enter the dream after falling back to sleep. In some participants, the present study's findings suggest that consecutive dreams often intertwine at times of awakening, making the participants filter and trace back some of the meaningful experiences, emotions and feelings to their original dreams. These findings can be interpreted further using Glucksman and Kramer's (2004) arguments that dreams' most important psychological function is alleviating emotional distress. The findings from the analysis indicate that dreams often depict distressing events that metaphorically represent real-life situations. These dreams serve as a platform

for the dreamers to rehearse self-protective or self-restorative responses, leading to successful adaptation.

*The Threshold of Waking* is another key subtheme reported from the analysis, which demonstrates explicitly how the participants continued to experience different forms of physical sensations and emotions, making them leave the freedoms of the dreaming environment and enter the constraints of the waking world. From a general perspective, the findings reported in the present study are consistent with the evidence from the previous studies by Mallet et al. (2021), Domhoff (2003) and Schredl and Reinhart (2010), which describe dreams as presentations of life-like scenarios, waking concerns are metaphorically represented in the dreams, scenarios taking place in a dream often involve misfortunes and negative emotions, and that the emotionally significant themes often take place more than once within an individual's dream series. Generally, this study's data shows that the participants experienced a continuous dialogue with their dream into waking, indicating that they were physically and emotionally connected within the dream's physical dimension. The findings can be explained in detail using evidence from previous literature on sleeping and dreaming theories. Specifically, dream researchers such as Solms (2000), Revonsuo (2000), and Nir and Tononi (2010) comprehensively explained the functional value of improved waking performance, which is a primary indication that the individual has had adequate and quality sleep. Even though not reported by all of the participants in this study, findings from the analysis suggest that reports of self-perceptual depths mostly followed existential dreams (Kuiken, 2006). Furthermore, the existential perspective of such a shift in self-understanding was substantiated by the reported findings, which indicated that existential disquietude was generally frequent after the existential dream compared to the other forms of impactful dreams (see definitions). Therefore, these findings can be explained using the arguments by Hobson and Schredl (2011) and Revonsuo, Tuominen, and Valli (2015) that beyond the temporal association with bereavement, existential dreams seem to be an important type of questioning which helps in

addressing matters of ultimate concerns, such as spiritual convictions and its lack, belief and disbelief about religion, meaning of life and values of life.

From the **social dimension** perspective, the analysis revealed that most participants deeply reflected on the interactions within their dreams and developed feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and the desire to meet their related responsibilities. The findings are consistent with Barnes, Watkins, and Klotz (2021), Schredl & Schweikert (2022) and Zink and Pietrowsky's (2013) arguments that "in dreams begin responsibilities, " implying that the experienced dream will connect to some responsibilities connected to other individuals the dreamer will have to fulfil upon awakening. As a strategy for enhancing a detailed understanding of these experiences, the analysis revealed that the participants initiated different reactions, such as developing close relationships, thoughts about considering one's welfare and the desire to make contact with others. In line with the findings from the previous studies by Curci and Rime (2005) and McNamara 1996, and Kahn, Pace-Schott and Hobson, 2002, findings from the present study demonstrated that the experiences of their vivid dreams led them to develop a sense of courage, which they required for confronting conflicts in their lives, making some of the things that they previously valued unessential. Similar findings have been reported in the previous study by Olsen, Schredl and Carlsson (2013) and Duffey et al. (2004), which established a positive correlation between vivid dreams and prompting of intimacy and intricacy in self-perception. However, the findings from this research were contrary to those from the previous study by Gilchrist, Davidson, and Shakespare-Finch (2007) and Domhoff and Meyer-Gomes (2006), which attempted to show how vivid dreams were associated with the occurrence of negative social behaviours among the dreamers upon awakening. This study's findings can be further explained from the perspective of dream recall frequency, which postulates that the dreaming process leads to combining and juxtaposing memories in a manner that helps accentuate the felt meanings and metaphorically influences the transformation of such meanings. In vivid dreams like those in the present study, such meanings can be further emphasised through intensive self-reflection. Nonetheless, as reported by



some of the participants in this study, the powerful ending of dreams often leads to the development of waking thoughts and feelings, which are independent of dream reflection and interpretation. Even though not categorically mentioned in the collected data for analysis, specific examples of such vivid dreams include existential, transcendent, and nightmares (Geber, 1978; Maggiolini, Persico & Crippa, 2007; Kuiken, 2006; Robert & Zadra, 2014).

From the **personal dimension** perspective, the analysis in this study shed light on the complex nature of the self. Specifically, the findings revealed that the participants perceived dreams as a unique opportunity to observe the narratives they construct for themselves. Additionally, they expressed that experiencing feelings of guilt and anxiety played a vital role in shaping what they each described as their sense of self. Regarding the explanations by Revonsuo (2005) and Kuiken (2015), transcendent dreams are based on the numinosity of big dreams compared to existential dreams, which are based on the incongruous magnitude involving agonising sadness, anxiety, guilt, and valued personal insights. Therefore, a comparative assessment of evidence from the previous study by Liu et al. (2022) and the findings reported in the present study demonstrates that most of the participants included in this research experienced existential dreams. In the context of the **spiritual dimension**, the analysis identified a subtheme, 'Accumulating Insight', that specifically involved assessing the participants' experiences and retracing ideas and associations, which is vital in helping them recall their dreams during the dreaming process and awakening states. Even though the collected data describes this as a minority theme, as only four participants responded to it, its inclusion in the present analysis was key as it provided detailed information about the intertwining of emotions upon awakening, excessive dreams (van Hilten, 1993; Nielsen, 2005; 2011; Solms, 2000) and their content upon awakening as well as deeper self-integration while dreaming. The overall effects of vivid dreams on the self-perceptual and spiritual transformation of the dreamers have also been assessed and reported in a wide range of literary publications, such as the studies by Gackenbach, Ellerman, Hall, (2011), Schredl (2020) and Thomas, Pollak, Kahan (2015). Therefore, the findings of this study shed light on the understanding of

the impacts of experienced dreams on the self, drawing upon evidence from previous research. In particular, the analysis conducted by Nixon, Dale, DeKoninck (2017) and Kara and Ozcan (2019) revealed that existential dreams were significantly associated with a higher reported self-perceptual depth when compared to other types of dreams, including mundane dreams, nightmares, and transcendent dreams. The findings of this study not only support but also replicate the findings of a previous study by Kuiken, Lee, and Singh (2006) and echo the analysis of Deslauriers (2013) regarding the expression of existential dreams. These findings indicate that the spiritual transformation associated with transcendent dreams often involves a profound sense of liberation from the everyday complexities experienced by the dreamer. Consequently, this unrestricted sense of vitality strongly suggests the aesthetic foundation underlying the transformative experiences that give rise to various forms of vivid dreams in individuals.

### **Living with the Dream**

The third theme generated from the analysis was the ongoing impact of vivid dreams in the dreamer's waking life. Specifically, findings reported in the present study demonstrated that the participants engaged differently with their lives influenced by the vivid dreams they had experienced. The magnitude of such impacts was influenced by their relationship with self and the feeling of integration by sharing with others. Similar to the present study, the impacts of dreams on waking life have been explored and reported in much existing literature, including the studies by Houran and Lange (1998) and Watt et al. (2014). Specifically, evidence from the study by Deslaurius (2012) shows that vivid dreams, such as transcendent dreams, often have predictive value on the future of the dreamers, including the onset of their illness or mental decline. Furthermore, Bulkeley (2019) reported that human beings often dream for at least two hours every night they sleep and are likely to experience vivid dreams and unsettling dreams predicting events that may unfold in their lives in the future. From a general perspective, findings from the present study indicate that the participants

continued to be enriched with their dreams by deciphering and engaging in imagery despite enduring frequent nocturnal struggles.

The present study's findings further support those from the studies by Kuiken (1996) and Knudson (2006), which demonstrated a significant association between an individual's social and emotional well-being quality and the types of dreams they would experience. Specifically, individuals living with neurological and psychological conditions, including Parkinson's disease and Phantom limb, frequently report vivid dreams that impact their well-being (Siclari et al., 2020; Otaiko, 2020). Negative emotions characterise these dreams and have been correlated with future cognitive decline in affected individuals (Otaiku, 2022). The emphasis on dreams and beliefs about them often differs across different cultures and social backgrounds of the involved individuals (Givrad, 2016; Crick & Mitchison, 1983; Beaulieu-Prevost and Zadra, 2005; Schredl and Goritz, 2017). While the present study's findings align with the analysis conducted by Deslauriers (2002), it was crucial to investigate further the potential influence of different life stages on the types of dreams individuals experience. Specifically, an analysis by Nielsen, Svob, and Kuiken (2009) and Wong, Cruz, and Hare (2022) revealed that significant life events such as pregnancy could often give rise to parasomnia, such as nightmares or vivid dreams, as expectant mothers may experience concerns and worries about the well-being of their unborn child (Dagan, 2008; Coo et al., 2014; Sabourin et al., 2018).

Furthermore, in the context of older adults, geriatric psychiatry and dream coaching studies have explored this population's unique aspects of dream experiences. Dreams among older adults have been found to reflect themes related to life review, legacy, and transitions associated with ageing (Smith, 2010). Moreover, the impact of cognitive changes and neurodegenerative conditions on dream content and emotional experiences is an area of growing interest in ageing and dream research (Guenole et al., 2010; Cipolli et al., 2017). By considering the specific life stage of older adults, researchers can gain insights into how dreams may affect their psychological well-being and adaptation to the ageing process, promoting gerotranscendental development (Wadensten, 2009).

In addition to the impact of dream types on future life, it is noteworthy that an individual's present or past life experiences can also shape the nature of their dreams. One of the study participants, Mareva, exemplified this phenomenon, who reported that the content and focus of her dreams varied depending on the specific sense predominant in the dream, often engaging a combination of senses. Mareva's experience highlights the intricate relationship between personal experiences and the multisensory aspects of dreams, suggesting that the context in which dreams occur plays a significant role in their formation and subjective experience. Exploring individual variations in dream content and sensory engagement adds depth to our understanding of the intricate interplay between personal history, dream experiences, and their potential psychological implications. Therefore, there is a positive correlation between life events and the types of dreams experienced by an individual.

Findings from the present study demonstrate that every participant experienced profound changes in their life either during or immediately after their vivid dreams. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that each participant was profoundly influenced by their dream experiences, resulting in a lasting impact on their lives. These vivid dreams brought about significant transformations in their values, worldviews, and behaviours, prompting them to change their daily practices, cultivate a deeper relationship with themselves, engage in dream sharing, and foster spiritual growth. These findings can be explained by the self-organisation theory of dreaming, which proposes that the sleeping brain functions as a self-organising system capable of integrating disparate and incongruous neuronal signals, encompassing various elements of dreams, into a relatively cohesive narrative during the sleep process. Moreover, it suggests that the experiences encountered in dreams may subsequently manifest in one's waking life, exerting an ongoing impact on the individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (Solms, 2002; Kramer, 2010; Cartwright, 2010). Even though findings from the present study are further echoed in the previous study by Malinowski and Horton (2021), there is a significant disparity between the two studies. Specifically, the present study reported that almost all participants experienced most

dream events later in their lives. On the other hand, Malinowski et al. (2021) argued that dreams beginning early in the sleep cycle were more continuous than those during the later phase. Malinowski (2021) and the present study findings suggest the researcher's focus impacts the focus on how the dreams are integrated into their lives at the time of study.

In the context of the **physical dimension**, this study has demonstrated that most participants actively sought transformation to their present lives because their general perception about life was changed by the nature of the dreams they experienced. Specifically, it is important to note that most of the participants in this study were trying very hard to empower and embody themselves with the probabilities uncovered in their dreams through prioritising personal activities which allowed them to feel present. Even though these findings support previous arguments by Luminet et al., 2000 and Lachman's analysis (2022) that the type of dreams experienced by an individual often helps in altering their overall behaviours and relationship with others, the findings are contrary to the arguments by Schredl (2009) and McNamara (2012) that dreaming cannot predict an individual's future life experiences as it is generally based in the previous life encounters and events which took place in the past life of the dreamer. The impacts of dreams on a dreamer's waking life can be further explained using the Jungian theory of dreams. According to Carey (2010) and Knudson (2006), dreams help organise and interpret everyday life experiences. Similarly, evidence from the previous studies by Malinowski et al. (2014), Malcolm-Smith and Solms (2004), and Revonsuo (2000) shows that some people often consider dreams to be essential sources of information about both present and future life, the spiritual world as well as oneself. Therefore, these findings can be explained using the arguments by Schredl (2011) and Schredl (2020) that dreams are essential spaces of action like waking life or a mode of communication with different people as well as supernatural beings (McNamara, Bulkeley, 2015). From this perspective, it can be argued that dreams primarily reflect ordinary daily life experiences and sometimes even anticipate future events that occupy the dreamer's thoughts during waking life.

In the **social dimension**, the analysis revealed that the participants experienced different challenges and desires when discussing their dream revelations. Specifically, findings in this context demonstrated that the participants described the interplay between the 'teller' and 'listener' perspective, which was a necessary process when seeking an understanding of the impact of their vivid dreams. The findings reported in the present study are echoed in the analysis by Lohmann (2019) and Tuominen, Stenberg, Revonsuo, and Valli (2019), which established that dreams often play an essential role in providing dreamers with the opportunity to broaden their interactions with those within their social spaces, development of emotional and perceptual experiences in the waking life and beyond. These findings can be further explained using the arguments by Barrett (2001), Glaskin (2015) and Siclari, Valli and Arnulf (2020) that dreams often provide involved individuals with the opportunity to use different modes of consciousness to facilitate the development of personal growth from within their inner self. Furthermore, this study established that experiencing vivid dreams helped create a platform that the participants could use to understand the nature of their emotions and sense of possibilities.

The *cultural integration* perspective of vivid dreams was also reported in the findings of this study, as it established that most participants related the occurrence of impactful dreams to formative experiences in childhood, cultures, and close relationships to allow for current understanding and action. The findings support previous arguments by Krippner and Faith (2001), Lewis and Krippner (2015) and Schulte (2008) that dreams in various cultures convey knowledge of the future, literally or through symbolic references to forthcoming events. However, the findings contradict the arguments by Iftikhar et al. (2020) and Lenard and Dawson (2018) that in some societies, dreams are generally considered unreal fragments irrelevant to the essential concerns of daily life activities. A comparative assessment of results from the present study and those reported in the previous studies by Nielsen (2017) and Siclari, Valli and Arnulf (2020) demonstrates that cultural backgrounds and orientations influence the nature of vivid dreams experienced by a person. With reference to the explanations provided by Carey (2010) concerning the impacts of culture on the nature of dreaming, it can be noted

that an individual's culture often supplies the templates for dream interpretation, imagery and expression and that dreams, in many cases provide experiences which confirm, extend or modify cultural models of reality.

**The spiritual perspective** of vivid dream effects on waking life was also assessed and reported in the generated findings. Specifically, this study reported that some participants were unaware of the source or meaning of their dreams. In contrast, others discussed the psychological relationship with the dream imagery, which was both negatively and positively experienced. However, their worries about the actual sources of their dreams can be addressed using Deslaurier's notion of emotional and spiritual intelligence of dreams, which describes dreams as the organisation of daily life experiences (Barrett, 2001; Bogzaran, 2003; Bulkeley, 2000; Kuiken & Sikora, 1993). Likewise, Freud's psychoanalytic dream theory can explain the inception of a dream. According to this theory, dreams represent an individual's unconscious thoughts and desires, which might be unsettling if brought into conscious awareness.

The findings further established that most of the participants included in the present study experienced greater impacts of their dreams on waking life than they realised and that a significant amount of reflection was conducted to facilitate a comprehensive interpretation of dream meaning, importance and how they lead to the development of internal resources. While explaining the relationship between dream experiences and waking life, findings from the study by Iftikhar et al. (2020) demonstrated that negative recollections of dreams during wakefulness made most vivid dreams misunderstood as if they had actually happened. Corresponding results were reported in the present study, with the data showing that participants who could recall their dreams later identified with emotions experienced during the dreaming process. The aspect of living with a dream was also reported in the present study, with the findings showing that the participants could develop positive changes in their lives using the remaining clues of their experienced dreams but were still challenged to confront the existential concerns related to themselves. Therefore, these findings go beyond the

previous arguments by Iftikhar et al. (2020) and Levin and Nielsen (2009) that dreams are primarily based on past experiences and cannot be used for predicting an individual's future.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of the study is that the research question was broad. During the interviews, I felt time pressure to adhere to the structure of my semi-structured interview approach, which sometimes led me to rephrase or replace words to elicit more detailed accounts of specific unusual phenomena, such as the intertwining of dream succession, continued immersion in dream experiences, and pre-dream practices. In some instances, participants needed time to understand the intent behind certain questions, particularly regarding the impact of dreams upon waking, which may have been unclear due to the participants' personal understanding of dream imagery. The broadness of the research question might limit the ability of participants to provide more comprehensive data for each topic within the research domain. However, the broad scope also allowed unexpected connections to emerge across these topics. For example, the Accumulating Insight theme was drawn from the material across all interview questions in several participants' cases.

The limitation here lies in the small sample size of 11 participants, which, though relatively high for a qualitative study, does impact the research's accuracy and the extent to which the findings can be generalised. In qualitative research, the primary goal isn't to draw broad generalisations but to deeply explore individual experiences, a core aspect of counselling psychology. Therefore, employing extensive statistical analyses would not have significantly contributed to this study's objectives. Recruiting participants for the present study posed challenges due to the limited research on the ongoing significance of vivid dreams and the lack of engagement in related discussions or research. The only successful recruitment strategy involved targeting online spaces frequented by individuals who identify as frequent vivid dreamers, such as the "r/Dreams" sub-reddit on Reddit.com and a private server called "dream doctor" focused on dream interpretation.



While these online communities provided a convenient platform to find frequent vivid dreamers, relying solely on them for recruitment raises concerns about the validity and reliability of the findings. There is a risk that participants from these communities might share specific interpretations based on their shared experiences, which may not represent other vivid dreamers who are not part of these communities. Moreover, the diverse discourses found on Reddit could influence dream interpretations, including critical or fringe ideologies, while adhering to common beliefs or Freudian narratives may be considered the community norm in these spaces. The study acknowledges a notable limitation in its reliance on one male participant's perspective, which undoubtedly provided valuable insights. However, this limited representation may affect a comprehensive understanding of how gender-related dynamics influence male experiences. Given the study's research objectives, a more balanced participant composition would facilitate cross-gender and cross-cultural comparisons and better identify the profound impacts of vivid dreams for those who identify as Male and from a different origin.

## **Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this phenomenological analysis was to assess the experiences of vivid dreaming in the participant's life. The study revealed that vivid dreaming was related to different experiences among the dreamers, which later impacted their waking life. In order to examine the impacts of vivid dreaming on the participants' lives, the study focused on addressing three research aims based on the newly generated findings. The aims include (1) to understand the experience of dreaming, (2) to assess how the participants make sense of the experience, and (3) to assess their understanding of the process of dealing with the impacts of dreams on their lives. In this section, further analysis will be conducted to assess whether all three research aims and questions for this study were comprehensively addressed.

The first research aim was to understand the experiences of dreaming. Concerning the results reported from the conducted analysis, it can be noted that the participants included in this study had

varying forms of dreaming experiences, both positive and negative. Specifically, some participants reported dreaming experiences in the form of puzzles and riddles to elicit thinking and test their ingenuity. Furthermore, the present study has established that the participants perceived dreaming as an essential process in human life specifically used as a basis for reflection, allowing for adding abstract ideas into their lives. Therefore, it is essential to note that the participants included in this analysis used dreams as a basis for reflecting upon and realising their key purpose in life and that such subjective states often develop when they face their ultimate concerns. The feelings of hopelessness, horror, and grief are other important experiences reported among the participants included in this analysis. All these factors form the challenges or negative experiences related to the dreaming process. Therefore, such negative experiences had adverse impacts on how the participants related to their world, the approaches they used for interacting in relationships, and how they related to themselves. Furthermore, the participants explained how the dreaming experiences transformed their lives and relationships with others. At different personal levels, the participants were able to assemble clues relevant to their lives as a strategy for making sense of the fragmented dream materials by identifying the approaches that they could use for enhancing personal growth based on the reported dreaming experiences. Based on the responses from the participants in this study, dreams can be described as conscious experiences. Specifically, the participants reported that they could vividly recall their dream experiences as embodied sensations in space and time and were convinced of experiencing actual events in a vivid environment. The participants were further filled with fear and anxiety related to the dreaming process, especially the negative experiences.

The second aim of this phenomenological analysis was to assess how the participants made sense of the dreaming experience. The reported findings demonstrated that the participants had mixed reactions regarding the types of dreams they experienced. Making sense of dream experiences about life and death posed fundamental challenges among the participants included in the present analysis, with such experiences eliciting dilemmas and tensions the participants faced. Such experiences led to

developing strong feelings and concerns, which reminded the participants about their strengths and limitations. Furthermore, dreams about death or negative dream experiences made most of the participants feel unsafe and insecure about life, vulnerable to sexual exploitation, anxiety, feeling pain, and a sense of infidelity, as well as embodying the values of spiritual entities. As they made sense of the dreaming experiences, most participants developed a wide range of emotions, such as surprise, fear, and joy, depending on the type of dream experiences, which were further intensified through the dream narrative. Even though some participants could vividly express their dream experiences, some could not comprehensively describe their dream experiences within their given vocabulary. In such cases, they decided to use metaphors or were able to relate their dream experiences to movies to address how sensations and feelings limited their ability to make sense of their dream experiences. Furthermore, the present study has established that the vividness of dreams experienced by the participants was both visually dominant and metaphorical. Participants reported experiencing intense emotions in response to negative dream experiences. They connected these emotions to the potential for significant life changes they had already undergone or might face in the future. In dreams, where the participants were experiencing pain, they linked such experiences with their ability to encounter external objects. Comparative analysis of the responses provided by the participants shows that the dream experiences were related to the waking life of the participants, which allowed them to understand the embodied experiences they were currently facing. Furthermore, this phenomenological analysis has demonstrated that the participants experienced a sense of shame and guilt regarding what other people thought about them and how others would perceive them in relation to their dream experiences.

The third research aim for this analysis was to assess their understanding of the process of dealing with the impacts of dreams on their life. Specifically, this aim has been extensively discussed and addressed based on the new knowledge generated from interpreting the third temporal theme: the impact of dreams on waking life. Findings from the present study demonstrate that the participants

reported significant changes in their lives either during or immediately after experiencing the impactful dreams. Therefore, the conducted analysis shows a significant relationship between dream experiences and life events experienced by dreamers later in their lives. The dreams experienced by the participants made them change their approaches toward life practices, spiritual growth, and relationships with others. Because of the dreams they experienced, the conducted analysis demonstrated that most of the participants could make a strong connection with the sense of purpose and meaning.

Furthermore, the dreams the participants experienced allowed them to embark on developing principles of living an orientation towards life and establishing positive spiritual, psychological, social and behavioural changes. Dream experiences allowed the participants to support and empower themselves with the possibilities that uncovered their dreams through prioritising personal activities, allowing them to feel present. Therefore, it is essential to note that impactful dreams not only led to negative perceptions among participants about life but also motivated them to work towards achieving their personal goals and growth. Furthermore, the physical dimension of dreams shows that some of the participants were motivated to take part in different types of physical activities in response to their dreams, while in the case of others, there was the internalisation of the experiences which impacted their overall outlook in life. The reported findings further demonstrated that dreams played an important role in allowing the participants to widen their interactions with others and establish emotional and perceptual experiences in their waking lives. From the cultural perspective, this study has demonstrated that the dreams the participants experienced significantly impacted their culture, past experiences, and close relationships, which acted as a guideline for their current understandings and actions.

## **Implications for Counselling Psychology :**

### **The Role of Dreams and Multi-Sensory Integration**

Dreams offer a unique and underutilised avenue for therapeutic exploration in counselling psychology, providing valuable insights into clients' inner worlds. Building on past research and emphasising practical considerations, this study sheds light on how counselling psychologists can navigate the complexities of dreamwork. It highlights the challenges professionals face, including engaging with multidisciplinary dream literature, managing time constraints, and addressing the perceived need for accurate interpretation (Yalom, 2002). Despite these challenges, the study supports previous findings (King & DeCicco, 2009; Morewedge & Norton, 2009), showing that dreams significantly impact many individuals seeking psychological help.

### **Challenges and Opportunities in Dream Interpretation**

Navigating conflicting perspectives on dreams can be daunting for counselling psychologists. Historically, psychological dreamwork has been heavily influenced by Freudian and Jungian theories, which emphasise the symbolic and unconscious meanings of dreams. However, these approaches often require specialised training, leaving many practitioners uncertain about their role in addressing dream content. Furthermore, therapeutic approaches like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), rooted in realist assumptions, often minimise the significance of dreams, framing them as narratives derived from autobiographical memory (Montangero, 2009). This dichotomy—between interpreting dreams as deeply symbolic or dismissing them as inconsequential—can create uncertainty. The study's findings, however, encourage an open and exploratory approach to dreamwork. Rather than rigidly interpreting dreams, counselling psychologists are invited to see them as evolving reflections of the dreamer's meaningful, mental and emotional life. Participants in the study demonstrated the ability to interpret their dreams, derive meaningful insights, and uncover liberating sensations without professional

guidance. Seven of the eight participants reached these realisations independently, suggesting that counselling psychologists can harness clients' innate capacity for self-awareness to facilitate similar explorations.

### **Enhancing Dream Engagement Through Visualisation**

Counselling psychologists can create opportunities for clients to re-engage with dream content through visualisation exercises. These tasks help clients mentally recreate dream scenarios, interact with symbols, and reflect on their emotional significance in a safe, controlled setting. Practitioners can facilitate a reflective space for deeper engagement by using “spontaneous recollections,” where clients naturally recall dream images during therapy. Encouraging clients to observe or interact with dream symbols in this way enhances their insight and strengthens the integration of dream experiences into their waking life narratives.

Visualisation serves as a bridge for clients to explore unprocessed emotions or unresolved conflicts. For example, a client might be guided to mentally revisit a dream environment that evoked fear or sadness and explore alternative actions or perspectives within the dream. When paired with guided imagery, visualisation exercises unlock deeper meanings tied to dream content, empowering clients to rewrite their emotional responses and fostering greater self-awareness and resilience.

### **Lucid Dreaming: A Pathway to Therapeutic Engagement**

An essential consideration in dreamwork is lucid dreaming, where dreamers achieve varying degrees of awareness and control within their dreams. This phenomenon exists on a spectrum: some individuals can consciously interact with their dream environments, while others may only experience partial awareness. For counselling psychologists, understanding this spectrum is crucial, as even minimal levels of lucid awareness can empower clients to actively engage with recurring dream themes in therapy. Lucid dreamers can experiment with dream scenarios, interact with symbolic characters, and explore emotionally charged environments. For example, a client experiencing recurring

nightmares involving a threatening figure might be guided to confront this figure in a lucid dream with curiosity rather than fear. This re-scripting of dream content fosters empowerment, allowing clients to address unresolved emotions within the dream itself, supporting resilience and growth in waking life.

### **Sensory and Somatic Approaches to Dreamwork**

Dreams often involve strong sensory elements—textures, temperatures, and tactile sensations—which can be leveraged therapeutically. Sensory interventions like sand tray therapy allow clients to symbolically recreate dream landscapes using tactile materials. For instance, moulding sand to represent a dream element can ground abstract dream experiences in a tangible form, deepening the client's emotional connection to the content. Temperature-based interventions can also evoke physical sensations tied to dream experiences. If a client recalls feeling cold in a dream, holding an ice pack during therapy might help them reconnect with associated emotional states, such as feelings of isolation or vulnerability. Conversely, warmth can symbolise comfort or safety, allowing for explorations of nurturing themes. Somatic interventions, like stretching or grounding exercises, can also help clients embody the emotional tone of their dreams, enhancing their connection to both the content and their lived experiences.

### **Addressing Specific Dream Patterns**

Counselling psychologists can tailor interventions to address recurring dream themes or patterns. Clients experiencing nightmares or distressing dreams can benefit from structured methods like Image Rehearsal Therapy (IRT) or Image Rescripting Therapy (Krakow et al., 2001; Krakow & Zadra, 2010; Thunker & Pietrowsky, 2012). These approaches empower clients to reframe distressing dream narratives, reclaiming a sense of agency and reducing the emotional impact of negative dream experiences. Clients who frequently dream of flying might benefit from exercises that evoke sensations of lightness or freedom, such as breathwork or guided imagery. These experiential techniques allow clients to embody the emotional essence of the dream, fostering insight into its relevance for their waking lives. Recurring dream patterns often reflect unspoken fears, unresolved traumas, or recurring

anxieties (Luborski. 2022). Counselling psychologists can guide clients toward deeper understanding and resolution by addressing these patterns. This process not only alleviates distress but also enhances clients' capacity to engage with their inner worlds.

### **Broadening the Therapeutic Application of Dreams**

By creatively incorporating dreamwork into therapy, counselling psychologists can access a wealth of insights into clients' unconscious fears, desires, and unresolved conflicts. The study highlights dreams' historical and cultural significance, showing their value as a means of self-exploration and emotional processing. Dream-related interventions align with a holistic view of therapy, respecting the interplay between mind, body, and emotions. Expanding dreamwork to embrace its full therapeutic potential allows psychologists to meet clients at the intersection of their conscious and unconscious experiences. This integrative approach emphasises the importance of recognising dreams not just as symbolic narratives but also as active participants in clients' psychological landscapes.

### **Expanding Clinical Implications**

Dreams are not only symbolic but can also reveal underlying psychological or neurological concerns. Lucid dreaming, for instance, offers therapeutic opportunities for building a client's sense of agency, while disturbed dream patterns might indicate broader mental health challenges, such as PTSD or insomnia (Ellis, Rufino, Nardoff, 2019). Dreamwork is especially beneficial for certain populations, such as postpartum women whose dreams may reflect anxieties and hopes tied to pregnancy and parenthood (Winget Kramer, Whitman, 1972; Worley, Bolstad, Nardoff, 2021). Exploring symbolic representations of these experiences allows counselling psychologists to support clients navigating significant life transitions. For trauma survivors, dreamwork provides a safe space to revisit and reframe distressing memories, transforming passive recollections into active opportunities for healing (Sabuncu, 2023). This therapeutic engagement not only reduces the emotional burden of unresolved trauma but also empowers clients to reclaim their narratives, fostering a sense of agency and hope (Lu et al., 2009; Nappi et al., 2010; Samson et al., 2023)



## **Integrating Multi-Sensory Modalities in Dreamwork**

To deepen clients' engagement with their dreams, counselling psychologists can incorporate multi-sensory interventions that align with the sensory dimensions of dream experiences. Dreams often involve vivid sensory impressions, which can be leveraged in therapy to evoke emotional and symbolic connections.

### **Auditory Interventions**

Sound plays a significant role in many dreams, whether through voices, music, or ambient noises. Incorporating auditory stimuli into therapy—such as playing specific sounds or music reminiscent of the dream—can help clients reconnect with the emotional atmosphere of their dreams. For instance, a client who dreams of hearing a comforting voice might benefit from recording and listening to affirmations, reinforcing feelings of support and safety (Ahonen-Eerikainen, 2002). Auditory interventions allow clients to relive and explore dream emotions in a structured therapeutic context (Ahonen-Eerikainen, 2002; Olbrich & Schredl, 2019).

### **Gustatory (Taste) Interventions**

While less common, dreams involving taste can reveal symbolic meanings (Schiffman, 1987). A client dreaming of sweet or bitter flavours might associate these tastes with specific emotions or life events. By introducing similar flavours in therapy, the psychologist can help the client ground the dream experience and explore its emotional or symbolic significance (Nielsen & Powell, 2015). For instance, tasting something sweet in the session could evoke feelings of comfort or joy, facilitating deeper reflection.

### **Vestibular (Balance and Movement) Interventions**

Dreams often involve movement sensations, such as flying, falling, or navigating unfamiliar spaces. Therapists can use gentle movement exercises to help clients process these experiences (Harris, 2021). For example, clients who frequently dream of falling might practice grounding techniques or mindful movements that mimic the sensation of flight or stability. These exercises allow clients to

integrate the emotional significance of movement—whether freedom, fear, or imbalance—into their waking lives (Peters et al., 2024; Salvesen, 2024).

### **Proprioceptive (Body Awareness) Interventions**

Dreams involving bodily sensations, such as floating or being weighed down, can be explored through proprioceptive techniques (Peters et al., 2024). Weighted blankets, for instance, can help clients feel grounded while processing themes of restriction or liberation. Visualisation exercises that encourage clients to imagine themselves moving freely in dream scenarios can also facilitate a sense of empowerment and control.

### **Olfactory (Smell) Interventions**

Smells are deeply tied to memory and emotion, and clients may report vivid olfactory experiences in their dreams (Radeanu & Cîrneai, 2020). Introducing related scents in therapy can help clients reconnect with these memories and emotions. For instance, a client dreaming of flowers might explore the nostalgic or joyful associations tied to that scent (Salvesen, 2024). Therapists can create a powerful sensory bridge between dream content and waking experiences by engaging the olfactory system.

### **Cutaneous (Touch) Interventions**

Tactile sensations in dreams—such as holding objects or feeling textures—can be explored through hands-on activities like sand tray therapy. Clients who dream of rough or comforting textures can engage with corresponding materials to process the emotional “texture” of their dreams (Raymond et al., 2002; Schredl et al., 2017b). For instance, shaping sand to represent dream symbols allows clients to externalise and examine their dream experiences in a tangible way.

### **Emotional Dimensions**

Dreams often evoke intense emotions, from fear and sadness to joy and anger. Therapists can guide clients in processing these emotions through techniques like image rescripting, where clients reimagine difficult dream scenarios with positive outcomes. Alternatively, clients may be encouraged to

express emotions tied to dream content through art, writing, or role-play, offering new avenues for emotional release and insight.

## **Conclusion**

The integration of multi-sensory modalities in dreamwork enhances therapeutic engagement and expands the therapeutic toolkit for counselling psychologists. By considering sensory experiences such as sound, touch, movement, and smell, psychologists can deepen clients' understanding of their dream content and foster greater emotional healing. Dreamwork facilitates self-exploration and emotional processing and offers a holistic approach to addressing psychological concerns, empowering clients to integrate their unconscious experiences into their conscious life narratives.

## **Suggestions for Further Research**

This study aligns with existing dream theories and echoes historical-cultural literature. It explores vivid dreams' ongoing significance through phenomenology, successfully contributing to the professional literature by shedding light on how individuals experience, interpret, and understand the impact of their dreams on their lives. Despite examining a small sample size of 11 participants, these findings greatly enriched existing knowledge and our understanding of working with dreams, proving their significance.

One recommendation for further research is to conduct more focused phenomenological studies on each theme explored in this population. However, it is important to keep 'space for integration' in mind. This population experiences challenges in having others accept the authenticity of their dreams, dealing with cultural implications, and facing feelings of shame, which are related to research on attitudes toward dreams and dream recall. Exploring these themes in depth could provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of this population and offer valuable insights for counselling psychologists and researchers working in this area.

Another valuable recommendation for future studies is to conduct a longitudinal investigation using a dream diary to explore each theme and its relation to the participants' lived experiences and how the meaning of dreams changes throughout their lifespan. While studies like the present one provide a snapshot in time, a longitudinal approach could offer insights into how the enriching effects of dreams impact individuals over time, similar to Carey's (2010) study. This deeper exploration could be particularly beneficial for counselling psychologists seeking to understand the evolving significance of vivid dreams and how individuals cope with challenges related to dream authenticity, cultural implications, and feelings of shame.

This study had a limitation concerning data collection, as only one interview was conducted with each participant. The decision to conduct just one interview was driven by the need to manage time constraints for the participants and me and to keep the data analysis process manageable. It's worth noting that this approach is commonly used in similar studies, as evidenced by most reviewed research relying on a single interview with participants.

However, considering Windt's transparency assumption of dream reporting, conducting multiple data-collection interviews could have provided an in-depth exploration of the participants' lived experiences for two primary reasons. Firstly, participants might have recalled additional experiences during subsequent interviews that were not initially brought up in the first interview, thereby contributing to a more extensive dataset. Secondly, participants who initially felt hesitant to discuss specific experiences might have become more at ease during follow-up interviews, benefiting from the rapport established after the first interview. Conducting a phenomenological study with at least two data collection interviews is recommended for future research. This approach would offer a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and enable a more thorough analysis of the impact of vivid dreams on their lives. A crucial recommendation for future research in this area is to include individuals who have experienced various forms of dream or sleep disorders, such as insomnia,

frequent nightmares, restless legs syndrome, REM sleep behaviour disorder, narcolepsy, and night terrors, as they often accompany and exacerbated by all psychiatric and neurological disorders.

By analysing participants' experiences with different dreams and sleep disorders, the study can generate more comprehensive findings about the impacts of vivid dreams on various populations' lives. This is particularly important as dream frequency and related disturbances change throughout an individual's lifespan and can be relevant for older adults facing debilitating conditions such as dementia, Alzheimer's, and Parkinson's. Incorporating a diverse range of participants with various sleep disorders and co-morbid conditions will enhance our understanding of the complex interactions between dreams, sleep disturbances, and overall well-being. This approach could provide valuable insights for counselling psychologists and researchers in this field and help improve the support and interventions offered to individuals facing dream-related challenges and neurological conditions.

## **Existential Perspective of Discussion**

This study explored the experience of vivid dreams from an existential-phenomenological perspective, drawing upon existential theories on dreams, existential philosophy and psychology, and the therapeutic implications for counselling practice. The analysis of the data revealed three major themes: (i) Dreaming as Being, (ii) Awakening to Being, and (iii) Living with the Dream. These themes align with the existential-phenomenological framework and shed light on the existential dimensions of dreams and their potential significance for personal growth and therapeutic work.

The first theme, *Dreaming as Being*, encompasses the understanding that dreams are not merely fleeting illusions or random mental processes but hold a more profound existential meaning. Medard Boss (1977), an influential figure in existential-phenomenological psychology, emphasised that dreams manifest our being-in-the-world, reflecting our fears, desires, and unresolved existential concerns. Dreams provide a unique window into the depths of psychological processes, offering glimpses of our authentic selves and existential dilemmas (van Deursen, 2002; 2010; 2014). Merleau-

Ponty's concept of embodied perception further supports this perspective, highlighting the embodied nature of dreams and the intertwined relationship between our physical and psychological experiences (Morley, 1999). Dreams are embodied expressions of our lived experiences, emotions, and perceptions (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

The second theme, *Awakening to Being*, focuses on the significance of the transitional phase between dreaming and waking. Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy offers valuable insights into this transitional state. According to Sartre, in the moment of awakening, we confront the stark reality of our existence and are responsible for making meaning out of our dreams and integrating them into our waking lives (Ellis, 2010). This liminal space allows self-reflection, introspection, and existential questioning (Morley, 1999). Husserl's (1913) phenomenology of '*Intentionality*' further emphasises the importance of the subjective experience of this awakening moment, where the dreamer becomes conscious of their dreams and engages in the process of meaning-making (Zahavi, 2003).

The third theme, *Living with the Dream*, explores the transformative potential of vivid dreams in the context of one's waking life. The structural existential analysis, developed by Emmy van Deurzen (2014), provides a framework for understanding the existential dimensions of dreams and their impact on personal growth and well-being. Dreams can reveal hidden aspects of our being and evoke intense emotions, calling attention to existential concerns such as identity, freedom, and purpose (Yalom, 2002). Uta Jaenicke's (2008; 2020) work on existential psychotherapy highlights the therapeutic implications of working with vivid experiences of existential '*Angst*' in dreams. Craig & Walsh (1993) emphasised the importance of phenomenological dreamwork on the here and now of the existential givens experienced, which can evoke a greater sense of immediacy, enhancing their insights and further impacting the dreamer. By engaging in a therapeutic dialogue, individuals can explore the existential themes presented in their dreams, gain deeper self-awareness, and make conscious choices aligned with their values and how they view their authentic selves.

The existential-phenomenological focus on understanding dreams offers a unique perspective for counselling psychology practice. Therapists can employ the insights of Medard Boss, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Husserl, van Deurzen, Craig, and Jaenicke to guide clients in exploring the existential dimensions of their dreams. By facilitating a reflective and collaborative process, therapists can help clients make meaning of their dreams, unravel existential dilemmas, and integrate the insights gained from dreams into their waking lives. This approach acknowledges the interconnectedness between dreams and waking reality, emphasising the potential of vivid dreams to spark personal growth and transformation.

In conclusion, this study delved into vivid dreams using an existential-phenomenological lens, revealing valuable insights into existential dimensions. Incorporating perspectives of various theorists, dreams were recognised as reflective of one's being-in-the-world, aiding self-reflection and meaning-making. Therapeutically, vivid dreams can deepen self-awareness, address existential dilemmas, and evoke powerful emotions related to identity, freedom, and purpose. Structural existential analysis, guided by knowledgeable therapists, integrates dream wisdom into waking life, fostering personal growth and authentic living. The therapeutic impact of dreams goes beyond the individual. Existential psychology connects personal experiences to the broader socio-cultural context. Therapists can tackle cultural conflicts and contribute to collective healing by addressing shared existential concerns in dreams. Dreams stimulate dialogue, reflection, and social understanding, enhancing existential well-being in communities.

Exploring vivid dreams in counselling must be done ethically, respecting clients' autonomy and cultures. Adherence to professional guidelines, like those of the British Psychological Society, is vital to upholding client well-being and confidentiality (BPS, 2021).

## **Implications for Existential Counselling Psychology: Practical Approaches to Dreamwork**

The qualitative study exploring the themes of *Dreaming as Being*, *Awakening to Being*, and *Living with the Dream* offers profound implications for existential counselling psychology. By integrating the philosophical insights of key existential thinkers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Medard Boss, we can uncover how dreams serve as meaningful pathways to self-exploration and therapeutic growth. Existential philosophy emphasises the importance of individual experience, authenticity, and engagement with one's existence in the world, and these themes resonate powerfully with dreamwork. This response delves into how these existential concepts can be translated into practical approaches for counselling psychologists, particularly in integrating dreams into therapy.

### **Embracing Authentic Existence: Dreams as Windows into the Self**

The concept of the authentic self is central to existential psychology. Heidegger's philosophy of Being-in-the-world stresses that authenticity arises from confronting the real conditions of our existence, accepting our limitations, responsibilities, and fully engaging with life (Heidegger, 1962). The theme of *Dreaming as Being* in the study underlines that dreams can offer a direct window into an individual's authentic self, revealing elements of their lived experience that might otherwise remain suppressed. From a therapeutic standpoint, dreams should not be viewed merely as subconscious musings. Instead, they represent direct expressions of a person's lived reality, allowing existential psychology to offer valuable insights. Rather than interpreting dreams through a symbolic lens, dreams are seen as existential manifestations that reveal crucial information about the dreamer's being.

### **Practical Application:**

In the therapy room, an existential therapist encourages clients to approach their dreams with openness and curiosity, recognising them as authentic expressions of the self. The therapist's role is not to interpret the dream but to explore the emotional, sensory, and existential significance of the dream content. The therapist invites the client to describe the dream in detail, emphasising the feelings



and sensations associated with it. Questions like “What in this dream feels most true to you?” or “What part of this dream resonates with your life right now?” allow the dream to be explored existentially. For example, a client may dream of falling from a great height, experiencing both fear and a strange sense of freedom. The therapist would explore the sensation of falling in the context of the client’s life, questioning whether this reflects a fear of failure or the experience of surrender and release of control. Through existential exploration, the dream helps uncover insights into the client’s authentic being, particularly in relation to waking life concerns. This approach echoes Sartre’s (1943) notion of existential freedom, in which choices and actions continuously shape one’s identity and experiences. In this case, the dream serves not only as a reflection of internal processes but as an embodiment of the client’s existential state, offering the therapist a path to understanding.

### **Seizing the Moment: Exploring the Transition from Dreaming to Waking**

Heidegger emphasises the centrality of the present moment in his philosophy, advocating for full engagement with each moment of experience (Heidegger, 1962). The theme of *Awakening to Being* from the study presents an excellent way to engage with this existential concern, as it captures the emotional and sensory residues that often linger immediately after waking from a dream. The period between the dream state and full consciousness provides a rich opportunity for existential reflection. Clients often experience lingering emotions and sensations in this transitional space, which can reveal insights into current existential concerns. This “liminal” moment represents a bridge between altered states of conscious and unconscious worlds, offering fertile ground for existential inquiry.

### **Practical Application:**

Therapists can encourage clients to explore the feelings, sensations, and thoughts that arise immediately after waking from a dream. Questions like “What do you remember feeling as you woke up?” or “How does that feeling relate to your life right now?” help clients connect their emotional states to existential concerns. For instance, if a client wakes up with a sense of dread after a vivid dream, the therapist might explore whether this feeling is tied to existential anxiety—such as worries about the

future, or unresolved fears. Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death (1962) invites exploration of existential concerns such as death, impermanence, and meaning. These reflections can serve as entry points into a deeper exploration of the client's fears, desires, and life choices. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) focus on the phenomenology of perception invites therapists to consider the lived, embodied experience of these moments. The transition from sleep to wakefulness may embody a shift in the client's mode of existence, revealing deeper existential insights related to their relationship with themselves and the world.

### **Integrating Dreams into Life: Aligning Actions with Values and Aspirations**

Sartre's (2007) assertion that "existence precedes essence" emphasises the responsibility individuals bear in creating meaning and purpose through their actions. Similarly, the study's theme of *Living with the Dream* suggests that dreams can guide individuals in aligning their waking life with their deepest values and aspirations. For the counselling psychologist, this suggests that the therapist's role is not simply to interpret the dreams but to use them as tools for fostering greater self-awareness. Dreams often reflect unresolved issues, conflicts, fears, and desires—offering profound implications for waking life choices.

### **Practical Application:**

Therapists can use dreams to help clients understand their deeper needs and longings. For instance, if a client dreams of being trapped in a dark room, the therapist can explore this in terms of the client's waking experience of feeling stuck—whether in a job, relationship, or life situation. The therapist might then explore what changes need to occur for the client to escape this state of emotional stagnation and move toward growth. In a different example, a client who dreams of running through a lush forest, feeling free and unburdened, might explore which aspects of their life are constraining their freedom. The therapist can ask, "What would it look like for you to feel as free as you did in this dream?" helping the client bring that freedom into their waking life. This approach aligns with Viktor Frankl's (1946)

concept of logotherapy, which emphasises the role of choice in finding meaning in life. In this sense, the dream becomes a guidepost, helping clients realign their waking lives with their values and desires.

### **Philosophical Foundations for Existential Dreamwork**

Existential philosophers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Medard Boss provide frameworks that deepen our understanding of dreams in therapy. These philosophical perspectives emphasise the existential significance of dreams, offering therapists tools to engage with them effectively. Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962) concept of thrownness suggests that individuals are thrust into existence without choice, facing the challenges of life. This "thrownness" is directly reflected in dreams, which provide a snapshot of the person's current being-in-the-world. Dreams offer clients an opportunity to confront their existential challenges and explore concerns related to identity, responsibility, and meaning (van Deurzen, 2002; 2010). Merleau-Ponty's *Being in the World* (1962) focus on embodiment emphasises that our experience of the world is rooted in the body. This principle applies to dreamwork by encouraging therapists to attend to the somatic elements of dreams (Carr et al., 2024; Salvensen et al., 2024; Okada, Matsuoka, Hatakeyama, 2005; van der Heijden et al., 2024). A dream in which the client feels physically trapped can offer deep insights into their existential condition, guiding the therapist's interventions.

#### **Medard Boss's Existential Analysis:**

Boss (1963) provides a structured approach to interpreting dreams through existential analysis, exploring themes such as authenticity, freedom, and responsibility. This approach helps therapists guide clients in examining the existential implications of their dreams, deepening their self-awareness.

### **Conclusion**

By grounding dreamwork in the existential insights of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Boss, existential psychotherapists can develop a holistic approach to dream exploration. Rather than focusing solely on dream interpretation, this approach encourages therapists to use dreams as powerful tools for facilitating deep existential engagement. Dreams can help clients make conscious choices in therapy

that align with their authentic selves and life aspirations. Through careful attention to dreams' embodied, sensory, and existential dimensions, therapists can guide clients in reconnecting with their innermost selves, empowering them to live more authentically and meaningfully. Ultimately, existential dreamwork offers a pathway for clients to navigate life's complexities and find greater meaning and fulfilment in their existence.

## **Directions for Academic Training for Counselling Psychology**

Although research findings emphasise the significance of dreamwork, psychotherapy often overlooks dreams due to the assumption that they are either devoid of meaning or too challenging to decipher. Therapists often contend with clients' immediate conscious concerns, leaving limited time for delving into existential aspects that necessitate extensive study (Parker, 2009).

However, the outcomes of this study demonstrate that various techniques for working with dreams can be acquired and readily applied. These findings also partially validate the effectiveness of addressing profound anxiety, as frequently identified in vivid dreams by Heidegger (1967) and substantiated by Jaenicke (2008; 2020). This anxiety lingers in the dreamer's consciousness. To confront the existential void in psychotherapy, Jaenicke suggests focusing on mood as a fundamental means of engaging with our 'Being.' Heidegger contends that anxiety inherently shapes us, and consequently, counselling psychologists can apply existential realities to the eerie encounter with the conditions of our existence. Subsequently, the client and therapist collaboratively determine whether to delve further into the dream. Integrating dreamwork training as a practical clinical tool into graduate and continuing education to enhance clinical practice and meet contemporary demands for depth and quality in psychotherapy would be advantageous. Moreover, it is invaluable for clinicians to be aware of the meanings and effective processing of formative childhood experiences. Boss (1977) asserts that addressing dreams centres around specific facets of the human condition, which become more sensitised through formative experiences. The dreams highlighted in this study emphasise concerns about life's physical,

social, personal, and spiritual aspects. Incorporating existential considerations within clinical settings not only fosters clients' psychological growth but also deepens the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist. Boss advises against objectifying dreams as mere occurrences we 'had' or 'made,' emphasising that a person exists as a dreaming being (*wesen*), possessing the capacity to perceive and respond with openness to the profound questions that dreams may pose about their existence. Incorporating dreamwork into clinical practice can provide a means of engaging with these existential questions and formative experiences more directly. It allows therapists to help clients explore the rich tapestry of their dreams, which often touch on life's physical, social, personal, and spiritual dimensions. By doing so, clinicians can create a deeper and more meaningful therapeutic alliance with their clients, promoting psychological growth and self-discovery. Boss's perspective encourages us to recognise that dreams are not isolated events but rather an integral part of our being. They are not something we merely "have" or "make" but reflect our existential being-in-the-world-with-dreams. This awareness can guide therapists to approach dreamwork with reverence for dreams' profound spiritual principles and insights.

## Conclusion

This study has illuminated vivid dreams' profound and multifaceted impact on individuals' lives, contributing to our understanding of this intricate dimension of human experience. Through a rigorous exploration of participants' lived experiences who have encountered impactful dreams, this research has shed light on various dimensions that influence psychological, emotional, and existential realities. The analysis of dream narratives revealed a rich tapestry of emotions, symbols, and existential dilemmas, echoing the theoretical underpinnings of prominent figures such as Freud, Jung, and Boss. Freud's notion of dreams as conduits to the unconscious mind resonated in participants' accounts of repressed impulses and desires surfacing through dream imagery. Similarly, Jung's perspective of dreams as avenues for self-discovery and individuation found resonance in the transformative journeys

reported by participants. Moreover, Boss's unique emphasis on contextualising dreams within the individual's life trajectory unveiled how dreams can intricately intertwine with one's existential realities. The findings also underlined the significance of cultural, personal, and social contexts in shaping the interpretation and impact of vivid dreams. The diverse range of dream experiences, including those of marginalised populations, pointed to the necessity of a culturally sensitive approach in both dream analysis and therapeutic interventions. This echoes the urgent call for a nuanced understanding of dreams beyond universal theories that suggest dreams have one function, aligning with the need for inclusivity and cultural competence in contemporary psychology. Furthermore, the study's exploration of dream-related distress, anxiety, and even trauma demonstrated the potentially sinister side of vivid dream experiences that are viewed as premonitory. This insight calls for a therapeutic approach that considers the potential psychological implications of vivid dreams. The recommendations for incorporating dream exploration into counselling and psychotherapy practices emphasise the importance of cultivating a safe and open space for clients to engage with their dreams as valuable sources of insight and healing. While this study has offered invaluable insights, it also recognises its limitations, particularly in sample size and the scope of theoretical exploration. Further research could delve into longitudinal studies, examining the evolving impact of vivid dreams over a person's lifespan and studies exploring dream experiences among populations with various sleep disorders or mental health conditions. In essence, this study serves as a stepping stone in bridging the gap between theoretical conceptualisations and the real-world implications of vivid dreams. It reinforces the notion that dreams, far from being mere ephemeral experiences, wield a substantial influence on individuals' psychological and existential dimensions. As we move forward, this research encourages a more holistic and culturally attuned approach to understanding, interpreting, and integrating vivid dream experiences, enriching the therapeutic landscape and advancing our knowledge of dreaming's ongoing significance in human consciousness.

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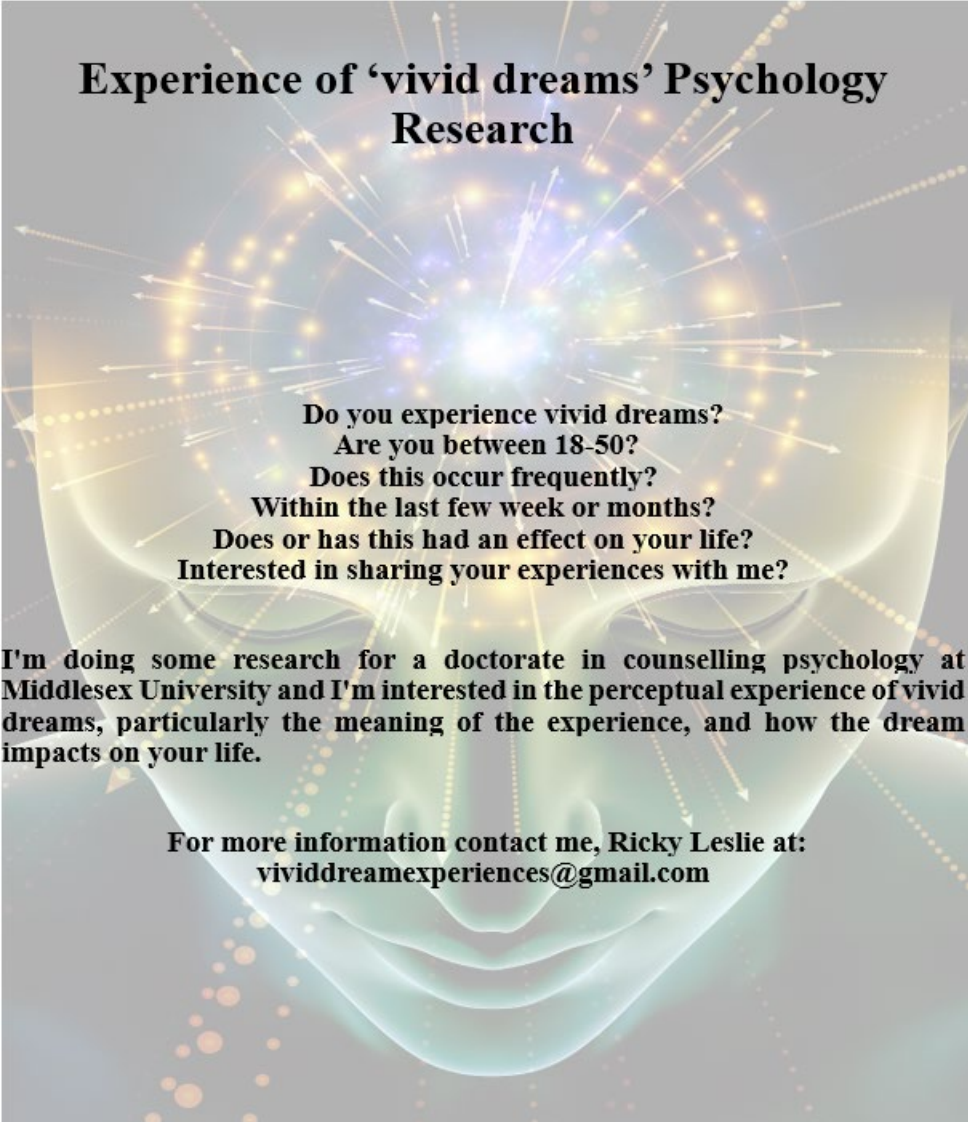
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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Recruitment Poster



**Experience of 'vivid dreams' Psychology Research**

**Do you experience vivid dreams?  
Are you between 18-50?  
Does this occur frequently?  
Within the last few week or months?  
Does or has this had an effect on your life?  
Interested in sharing your experiences with me?**

**I'm doing some research for a doctorate in counselling psychology at Middlesex University and I'm interested in the perceptual experience of vivid dreams, particularly the meaning of the experience, and how the dream impacts on your life.**

**For more information contact me, Ricky Leslie at:  
[vividdreamexperiences@gmail.com](mailto:vividdreamexperiences@gmail.com)**

## **Appendix B:** Interview questions

1. Describe the vivid dream in as much detail as you can? (Prompt – What was that like)
2. Can you describe what senses were present in the dream (Prompt- can you describe how this felt)
3. How have you experienced emotions in the dream, (Prompt - what is that like for you?)
4. Can you tell me about any thoughts, feelings or images in the sleeping-to-wake transition? (Prompt – can you describe what you were experiencing)
5. What was the effect upon awakening (adopted from pilot)
6. What impact has this dream had on your life ( Prompt – In what way is this important to you)
7. Have any of the dreams you have experienced over the past week effected your attitude, mood, decisions (what other possibilities are there

Through question one, I gathered the participants' dream accounts of the existential realities: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. Question two identified and developed the nine possible sensory experiences that may be present in the dream. The third question gave me more information about their emotions than the narrative story. Questions 4 and 5 were developed due to participants' challenges in understanding how dreams impacted their lives. The identification of the immediate experiences was realised. The Sixth question allowed for a greater understanding of the ongoing influence developed from questions 4 and 5. Question seven gave me further information about thoughts, feelings, decisions, and related behaviours prompted by dreams.

I was careful to gauge the effects of each participant's dream to conduct the interview in line with ethical guidelines and limit any stress from re-experiencing difficult emotions or unexplored struggles novelly disclosed.



## Appendix C: Ethical Approval

26<sup>th</sup> June 2020

Dear Ricky

### **Re: Ethics Approval**

We held an Ethics Board on 23<sup>rd</sup> June and the following decisions were made.

#### **Ethics Approval**

Your application was approved with some conditions.

#### **Conditions**

Please see the attached scanned comments and resubmit your application accordingly. **You will need to provide a covering letter outlining how you have addressed each condition.** It will be reviewed for Chair's action once received.

Please note that it is a condition of this ethics approval that recruitment, interviewing, or other contact with research participants only takes place when you are enrolled in a research supervision module.

Yours sincerely



**Prof Digby Tantam**  
**Chair Ethics Committee**  
**NSPC**

## Appendix D: Dream Journal



Dream Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Dream Description (Write or Draw in different colours)



What feelings did the dream evoke

What was meaningful in the dream

## How to use this Template

This is a tool to help you remember the dream and not a substitute for the interview.



1. Motivation to keep a dream journal can be challenging. So, it's important leading up to the interview to enjoy the process. Use the most accessible tool to record the dream (Write, draw, photos, images, voice recorder etc) next to your bed.



2. Upon awakening describe in as much detail the experience whilst in the dream (sensations, emotions, senses, colours, story, scene, location, people). Dreams can fade away quickly after you get out of bed. The feelings and thoughts now that you are awake should be written or colour coded separately



3. Write in the 'present tense', since that will help you to remember even more details by putting you "back" into the story of the dream. If there were any meaningful parts of the dream write it down (That reminds me of.. I have seen that in.....)



4. Tip! Things you can describe in the dream: Location, emotions and feelings, people, time, weather, activity, intensity, colour, visual, hearing, taste, smell, sensations, awareness, thoughts, anything else.

5. If you can't remember don't worry, try to write anything but importantly, don't fabricate or exaggerate the dream.



## Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet



Research project:

‘What is the experience of vivid dreams and their impact on the participant’s life? A phenomenological enquiry being carried out by: Ricky Leslie as a requirement for a DCPsych in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy from NSPC and Middlesex University



NSPC Ltd  
Existential Academy  
61-63 Fortune Green Road  
London  
NW6 1DR

Middlesex University  
The Burroughs  
London NW4 4BT

Dated: 08 /03 / 2021

### Participant Information Letter

Dear Participant

You are being invited to take part in a research study investigating vivid dreams. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take your time to read the following information carefully, and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

#### 1. What is the purpose of the research?

This study is designed to explore the experience of vivid dreams as it reveals itself through your own personal experiences and how this may have affected your life. Vivid dreaming is defined as: ‘very clear, detailed, intense, and the strength of immersion experienced, whilst dreaming’. This research will contribute to the knowledge of dreams in Existential philosophy and psychotherapy. This study is important so that professionals may better understand the vivid dream experience. You are being asked to participate because you have replied to my advertisement for people who have experienced vivid dreams.

#### 2. What will happen to me if I take part?

Currently, all interviews will all be conducted remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Normally, you will be invited to meet me for a 60 minute audio recorded interview; however, in this situation, it will be via Skype. *If you choose to be interviewed via Skype, you need to ensure that the interview will be held at a private space where you will not be interrupted. Any issues such as the use of a dream journal, potential technical problems or anything else related to the Skype interview will be discussed via email prior to the interview.*

I will send you a dream journal, containing instructions, that should be completed, every morning, leading up to the interview. The purpose of the dream journal is to help enhance recall

and the journal itself, apart from what you have disclosed in the interview, will not be used/kept as a resource. To maximise your experience, ensure that the journal is present with you and throughout the interview. It is advised that you email a copy to me before the interview. If you have used another method to capture your dream experience, for example, an audio recorder, write down the times of significant moments to reduce recall time in the interview. The interview will be semi-structured, in that I will start by prompting the interview with a question and then allowing a free flow of dialogue. The process will allow you to describe your experience as you lived it. I will be clarifying and asking you to elaborate on the details you provide. The study aims to shed light on these experiences that often impacts on dreamers. You will be asked to reflect on your experience of vivid dreams, recalling thoughts, feelings, and events. I am seeking vivid, accurate, sense impressions and comprehensive portrayals of what dreams were like for you. Also, this may include patterns of behaviour as well as situations, events, and people connected with your experience. The research method I am using is a qualitative one, and through this, I hope to capture a descriptive account of your experience. This project aims to build on research suggesting that there is a gap in the ‘personal meaning’ of dreams and exploring the experiences informed by your lifeworld.

You may find aspects of the interview challenging or distressing. It is my responsibility to ensure a safe environment is created and that the dialogue during the interview is conducted at a safe pace. If any aspect of the interview feels distressing, you can let me know, and I will be able to direct you to further emotional support.

Once the interview is complete, you will be given a short debriefing. Follow-up contact may also be conducted via telephone, email or a preferred method by you to ensure no undue effects or constructive contributions from the result of the interview. Your recording will then be transcribed and analysed along with the transcripts of the other participants to inform the analysis. The analysis, where your experience will uncover underlying themes, will be written up and submitted to Middlesex University examiners.

### 3. What will you do with the information that I provide?

It is important that I inform you of my procedures for maintaining your confidentiality during the research process and how long I am permitted in keeping your information. All information will be stored in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act. All data will be kept according to the GDPR and NSPC’s data retention schedule. Any Email communication will transpire through a research specific email account that will be deleted after the final submission of the study.

Any Email communication will transpire through a research specific email account that will be deleted after the final submission of the study.

*The interview will be transcribed. So, I will not use your full or last name in the interview, and the person transcribing the interview will not know who you are. I will be recording the interview on a laptop digital recorder and will transfer the files to an encrypted USB stick for storage, deleting the files from the Laptop. All of the information that you provide me will be identified only with a project code and stored either on the encrypted USB stick or in a locked filing cabinet. I will keep the key that links your details with the project code in a locked filing cabinet*

Your identity will be protected both during the transcript process and the writing up of the research; it will not appear on any document or transcript- the research documentation will be

numerically coded, and the key to the numbering will be kept on an encrypted file. The document will be as a doctoral thesis but may also be written up at a later date as a journal article or as part of a book, and any identifying information will be changed or disguised. Any reference that identifies you in the final document will take place under a pseudonym and identifiable information, e.g. significant landmarks, name of the school, names or identifiable events will also be altered.

At the time of the project's completion, the EU General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) emphasis that data should be stored electronically in a secure repository for a minimum of 10 years. I will ensure that all data will be securely stored/encrypted and that your details will be held separately and the interview transcript will be anonymised so that there is no way that you can be identified. The results of the research will be in a doctoral thesis and maybe later published. You will not be identified in any report or publication. If you wish to be given a copy of any reports resulting from the research, I will ask if you want to be put on a circulation list. The research should be completed by the end of 2022. The information will be kept at least until 6 months after I graduate, and will be treated as confidential. If my research is published, I will make sure that neither your name nor other identifying details are used.

Data will be stored according to the UK the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act.

#### 4. What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Dream research can involve in-depth exploration and can help you to understand difficult or unexpressed emotions. There is a small chance that the interview can be more challenging than anticipated. If this happens, I will be aware of and sensitive to your feelings, and I will talk to you about it. If you become distressed, I will ask if you would like to stop the interview. If you want to discuss your experiences in the interview further or finds elements of what comes up disturbing, I will be providing a list of resources for counselling and other organisations. In the unlikely event, I am required by law to break confidentiality because of a risk to yourself or others; I will discuss this with you during the interview or in the follow-up. Otherwise, whatever you tell me will be confidential. Follow-up contact may also be conducted via email to ensure no undue effects from the interview.

#### 5. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for you participating, being interviewed about vivid dreams may be an opportunity to reflect upon your processes and experience. Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantages or discomfort. However, taking part in the study may also be beneficial for you as you have a chance to talk through your experiences with an interested and understanding person. This research will make a significant contribution to counselling psychology and reinvigorate the qualitative and philosophical perspective that is often marginalised, in dreams research, due to its subjective nature.



## 6. Consent

You will be given a copy of this information sheet for your personal records, and if you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign the attached consent form before the study begins. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you decide to take part, you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If you were recruited from a service: whether or not you participate, will not affect the service you are currently receiving in any way.

## 7. Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is being undertaken as part of a doctoral degree programme and is not externally funded. All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics committee before they can proceed. The New School of Psychotherapy & Counselling and Middlesex Psychology Department's Ethics Committee has reviewed this proposal.

## 8. Who has reviewed the study?

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The NSPC research ethics sub-committee have approved this study

## 9. Expenses

Reasonable travel and/or incidental expenses can be paid on the attendance of the interview; please discuss your circumstances with me prior to arranging the interview.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

If you have any further questions, you can contact me at my research email:

[vividdreamexperiences@gmail.com](mailto:vividdreamexperiences@gmail.com)

If you have any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact my supervisor:

Dr Niklas Serning  
NSPC Ltd. 61 – 63 Fortune Green Road  
London NW6 1DR  
[office@nspc.org.uk](mailto:office@nspc.org.uk)  
0044 (0) 20 7435 8067

Or

The Principal  
NSPC Ltd. 61 – 63 Fortune Green Road  
London NW6 1DR  
[Admin@nspc.org.uk](mailto:Admin@nspc.org.uk)  
0044 (0) 20 7435 8067



## Appendix F: Consent Form

### Written Informed Consent Form

Title of study and academic year:

‘What is the experience of vivid dreams and their impact on the dreamer’s life? A phenomenological Inquiry.’ 2019/2020

Researcher’s name: Ricky Leslie

Supervisor’s name and email: Dr Niklas Serning, office@nspc.org.uk

- I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I have consented to act as a participant.
- I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet.
- I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.
- I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and I provide my consent that this may occur.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign Name

date: \_\_\_\_\_

**To the participant:** Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Health and Education Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits: \_\_\_\_\_





## Appendix G: Debriefing Sheet

### Participant debriefing letter

Dear Participant

Thank you for taking part in this research and making a valuable contribution towards the aims of the study. This debrief is your opportunity to talk about your experience of being interviewed and understand the nature of the research you have just participated in. It is important that our work as professionals is informed by the experiences of the people we aim to help and your participation has made a contribution to understanding the process and experience of vivid dreams.

If you feel you would like to talk more about the issues which have arisen in the interview process, or any difficult feelings you have experienced in relation to this, beyond the scope of the debrief, there is a list of organisations provided. As a resident of Greece you can access the services by contacting the below services:

BACP: Website: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk) Email: [bacp@bacp.co.uk](mailto:bacp@bacp.co.uk) Telephone: 01455  
883300

UKCP: Website: [www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk) Email: [info@ukcp.org.uk](mailto:info@ukcp.org.uk)  
Telephone: 020 7014 9955

BPS: Website: [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk) Email: [enquiries@bps.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@bps.org.uk) Telephone: 0116  
254 9568

If you have any further questions relating to the research I invite you to contact me on my research email: [vividdreamexperiences@gmail.com](mailto:vividdreamexperiences@gmail.com) my research supervisor, Dr Niklas Serning (email: [office@nspc.org.uk](mailto:office@nspc.org.uk)), is also available to speak to should you have any concerns that you feel you cannot raise with me.

Once again, I offer my sincere thanks for your participation in this project

Yours sincerely

Ricky Leslie