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# A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO CHILDREN IDEAS ABOUT DREAMS AND MIND[1]

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## Abstract

Children's understanding of dreams as mental states was examined as an instance of their development of a mind in general. Ten children between three and nine years of age were interviewed to determine how well they understood the location, privacy, and origin of their own dreams and mind. Findings revealed significant age increases in dream and mind understanding. Results show that young children (3 to 5-years-old) experienced short dreams related to specific actions such as run, jump, or video games. Older children (7 to 8-years.old), however, report more complex dreams and twice as many dreams as younger children; more importantly, their role in dreams becomes more active. Data also show how children's conceptions about private processes are not static but evolved with age in somehow predictable sequences as Kohlberg stated years ago (1969).

## Keywords

Children ideas, Dreams, Mind, Imagination

## Introduction

This study described and interpreted findings from research with ten children that were individually interview about their notions and ideas on dreams and mind. Following the findings of previous studies, we considered that children dreams, and mind are conscious experiences woven from their memories and general knowledge (Medina Liberty, 2019, 2020). Children ideas about their dreams and mind are not new. Freud was the first to study dreams systematically from his own psychoanalytic perspective. Some years later, Piaget made careful observations of children development and dreams were part of his general theory of intellectual growth (Piaget, 1962). These two authors made dreams visible in the academic arena that, currently, counts with many modern techniques for study dreams and mind.

Interestingly and in contrast to the abundance of current research on children's understanding of beliefs, play, or scientific notions, little is known about their conceptions of dreams or mind. Ekstein maintains that sometimes is problematic to know when young children can distinguish dreams from imagination, fantasy, daydreams, or play. Piaget described three stages in children's understanding of their dreams. According to Piaget, in the first stage, when they are 5 or 6 years old, they experience dreams as coming from outside of themselves and remaining external. The second stage, between 7 and 8 years of age, children believe that dreams arise in themselves but are external to themselves Children feel dreams have something to do with their thoughts, but dreams appear as things occurring in their bedrooms or in front of their heads. In the third stage, between 8 and 9 years old, children experience dreams as internal and of mental origin, that is, as part of their thought, feelings and ideas (Piaget, 1962).

Current research confirms Piaget's ideas about dreams and enriches them with new findings (see Meyer & Shore, 2001; Long & Manley, 2019). Interest in what children think and say about dreams or the mind in general is spreading among a growing number of researchers during the last decades (Foulkes, 1999; Tafreshi & Racine, 2015). Why is this topic receiving such increased scrutiny? The importance of dreams and mind stems, essentially, from its role in our ordinary understanding of people. This understanding can be called our everyday, commonsense, or lay psychology. Research on everyday psychology attempts to characterize how people understand each other's actions, thoughts, and lives standing of ourselves. The realm of everyday psychology constitutes, we believe, a foundational domain of human understanding; it is one of the three or four most basic

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topics that humans think and learn about. Bruner called this approach as *Folk psychology* or simply *Cultural psychology* (Bruner, 1996).

Recent studies of children's understanding of the mind paint a very different picture of young children's understanding of mental states and mental entities. Preschool children have been shown to be knowledgeable about beliefs and desires (e.g., Wellman & Bartsch, 1988), knowledge (e.g., Pillow, 1989), thoughts and mental images (Estes, Wellman. & Woolley. 1989). and pretense (e.g., Leslie, 1988). Overall, this research has found that young children between the ages of 3 and 5 acquire a sensible, albeit initial, understanding of the nature of their own and others' minds.

Theory of mind developments have been correlated with children's understanding of the unreality and privacy of dreams. These findings contrast with earlier dualisms found in old investigations. All children judged entities, photographs, to be in appropriately different terms of perceptually public terms of versus physical private fictional dreams nature of dreams. They also are individuated, many 3-year-olds believed that dreams are directly shared by more than one person. The findings suggest that children as young as 6 have learned that Western culture deems dreams to be non-real, private, as psychological occurrences.

In contrast to characteristically controlled situations of the theory-of-mind studies, we adopted a qualitative perspective to explore young children's ideas about dreams and other cognitive processes not observable directly such as imagination and mind. We work in children's natural environments such their home, and to lesser extent in their schools.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were ten male preschool children (4 to 9 years old) from a private kindergarten in Mexico City. Four children were 4 to 5 years old and 6 were 6 to 9 years old.

### *Procedure*

The basic design involves asking questions about a set of predetermine items related to dreams, mind, or imagination. When the child was interested in further elaborating of his answer, we let him do that. Those involved in conducting the interviews were allowed to apply his criterion to guide the children's responses without distancing too much from the original interview items.

Although we sustained open and free conversations with the children beginning with some general questions (i.e., when you are sleeping do you have dreams?), we tried to orient conversations toward several more specific topics:

1) Do you know what is the mind?
2) Do you know what makes you possible to think?
3) Do you think all day long?
4) Do you think when you are sleeping?
5) Can you tell me what is a dream?
6) Do you remember last night dream?
7) What was about?
8) Can other people see your thoughts?
9) Can other people see your dreams?
10) Can other people see what are imagining?

## Results

Children responses show that as they aged, they became more likely to judge dreams as not real, private, internal psychological occurrences. One evident finding is that children's dreams are different from those of adults (Piaget, 1962; Foulkes, 1999; Medina Liberty, 2020). Childr5en dre4ams are more dependent on 5he external environment and less coherent than our own, but more importantly, they still dream some kind of dream. That is, dreams are not the same across life span. Current research show that dreaming develops, and it that it does so in some kind of accord with waking cognitive development.

**Young children (4 to 5-years-old).**

-Dreams are short and plots are too simple.
-Characters are often animals and/or come from TV shows and videogames
-Dream content includes concrete actions such as running or jumping.
-Children do not include themselves as dream characters
-Think that eyes or mouth are the origin of dreams, and that other people can see them

-5-years-old kids show some sort of transition because began to think that dreams and mind are in their brain.

**Older children (6 to 9-years-old)**

-Dreams are longer and plots more complex
-Dreams include more diverse characters
-Dreams and mind are considered private and inaccessible to other people
-Dream content increases in social-interaction activities and settings.
-Children dreams show self-representation, the self-performing a variety of dream activities.

As can be seen, dreams and children's notions about them evolved across ages. Young children think that dreams and mind can be in some external organs such as the eyes or the mouth. Dreams in older children have action, a storyline, and many main characters. The increasingly richness of dreams at this age range help to better understand dreams and imagination nature. We found that children became more likely to judge dreams as not real, private, internal psychological occurrences. Imagination and mind are considered also private but real, "it is something you do" was the more common answer.

Eight- and nine-years old kids clearly differentiate dreams or imagination as inner events that are not located in external reality and, therefore, they are private. Older children also considered that dreams, imagination and mind are in their heads, "is something that happened in the interior of my head". By the time children were 8 or 9 years old of age, they understood that dreams are believed to be unreal and private. Around 7 years of age, mind and imagination are considered also private but real, they are conceived of as something happening inside the head.

## Discussion

Although this is qualitative research, some patterns can be observed in children's notions about cognitive processes not accessible in a direct way. We confirm results from previous study (Medina Liberty, 2020). We observed an order in the construction of notions related to dreams, imagination and mind in general. In a first phase, children between from 4 to 5-years-old consider dreams to be real and they have difficulty to differentiating oneiric reality from material reality. Around the ages of 5 to 6 or 7, children go through a phase where they recognize that dreams, imagination, and mind are private and personal events. Around 8 or 9-years-old children's notions begin to show features like that of adults. Naturally, adults exhibit notions much more complex specially when they correspond to scientific work.

Although it is almost unnecessary to say it, a quantitative study would be needed to enrich these findings. Nevertheless, as a first approach to children's notions about dreams and mind we were able to find interesting information about a difficult topic.

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