UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES THROUGH DREAMWORK: WOMEN FINDING SIGNIFICANCE IN THE STORIES AND IMAGES OF DREAMS

by Gillian Finocan

This study seeks to understand how women make use of different popular dreamwork methods (a self-help dream book and an Ullman dream appreciation group) to shape their understanding of dreams in relation to their identities and to find significance in the stories and images of their dreams. A feminist qualitative method of interviewing and analysis is utilized to make sense of each woman's dreamwork experiences. Three dreamwork stories are presented with a specific focus on how each woman wrestled with the decision to share her dreams and on how she worked to incorporate the understanding she gained into the context of her life. Each story shows the struggles and tensions that emerged during the dreamwork process and how each woman actively made meaning out of the dreams she worked with rather than passively received an interpretation or agenda from the dreamwork methods.
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“Dreams are gifts we give ourselves in the form of pictures” (Brooks, 1997, p. 5); yet there is no universal key, model, or methodological solution perfect for unlocking the mystery of or purpose for these images. In American culture where working with and/or paying attention to dreams is not a part of “mainstream personal development,” individuals place different amounts of value on and differing levels of attention to their dreams (Ullman, 1987, p. 103). Vann & Alperstein (2000) suggest that some skeptical individuals disregard dream images by claiming the dreams have no meaning or by claiming that they, themselves, are not dreamers. Other individuals enjoy their dreams simply for the entertainment value of sharing a seemingly bizarre or exciting dream story. Dreams may also be used by individuals in a casual social interaction to present themselves in a self-affirming or positive way. Still, for others, their curiosity in the mystery behind the dream images leads them to try different methods for discovering meaning in their dream pictures and stories and to possibly learn more about themselves by working with their dreams (Vann & Alperstein, 2000).

Traditionally in American culture, dreamwork was left in the hands of professionals who served as the experts for interpreting and unlocking the mystery of dream images (Hillman, 1999). Today, the movement to “de-professionalize” dreams is an effort to remove dreams from a domain defined by pathology to one where dreams are healthy creations that can facilitate personal and social awareness. The movement to “de-professionalize” the understanding of dreams has also led to the creation of various dreamwork methods, including, but not limited to internet websites, organizations focusing specifically on dreams, workshops, classes, dream appreciation groups, and numerous self-help books and other dream specific publications (Hillman, 1990). Each of these approaches to working with one’s dream is an attempt to gain some insight from or appreciation for the dream without having to depend on some putatively privileged knowledge required to work with and understand dreams. Although there are numerous ways that individuals may appreciate their dreams, the dreamer’s understanding and use of these unique images is dependent upon the resources that he or she has access to. Moreover, each dreamwork approach is unique with respect to how individuals experience it and gain insight from it as well as how that insight shapes their understanding of dreams in relation to their identities.

Understanding how individuals are influenced, affected, and changed by these different self-help dreamwork methods has been limited to quantitative studies evaluating self-guided dreamwork based on the Hill Cognitive Experiential Model (Heaton, Hill, Peterson, Rochlen, & Zack, 1998; Hill, Rochlen, Zack, McCready, & Dematatis, 2003). These studies have focused specifically on the Hill Model and have used primarily Likert-scale questionnaires to evaluate the researchers’ previously identified categories for session depth, insight, and understanding (consisting of experiential, insight, and action gains) (Heaton et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2003). No studies have explored how specific and often unique gains from dreamwork influence the dreamer’s life. Moreover, no studies have explored how individuals uniquely experience or actively use different dreamwork methods throughout their process of gaining and incorporating insight from their dreams into their lives. Such an understanding of the dreamwork process requires a methodology and a presentation of participants’ experiences that a performance-based text is specifically designed to provide (Diversi, 1998). By way of a performance based text, the participants are invited to describe, in their own words, what the dreamwork process was like for
The findings are then presented in a way that evokes an emotional understanding in the reader allowing him or her to vicariously experience and understand the uniqueness and complexity of the dreamwork process (Diversi, 1998).

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to explore and better understand how women make use of different popular dreamwork methods (a self-help dream book and an Ullman dream appreciation group) to shape their understanding of dreams in relation to their identities and to find significance in the stories and images of their dreams. More specifically, short stories based on three women’s experiences with dreamwork are presented to illustrate the unique understanding that each dreamwork method helped her to gain and how she incorporated her new understanding into the context of her life.

**Popular Dreamwork Methods**

Although there are many different dreamwork methods that individuals may engage in, for the purpose of this study, the use of two popular dreamwork methods, in particular, are explored: a self-help book and a dream appreciation group. Both of these approaches allow dreamers to find meaning in their dreams without using the direct help of a professional. However, each of these self-help approaches promotes meaning making in a slightly different way. The main claims made by proponents of each of these popular dreamwork methods are presented with a specific focus on the rationale for how each of these methods can help individuals find meaning in their dreams.

Of the dream specific books available, self-help books have been rated as more helpful than other forms of popular dream literature (i.e., predicting the future books and dream symbol books) (Schredl, 2000); and self-help dream books share many of the qualities and characteristics common to the self-help genre as a whole (Zack, 2004). For example, like other self-help books that promise the readers that they do not need any special prior knowledge, authors such as Ann Faraday with *Dream Power* (1997), Patricia Garfield with *Creative Dreaming* (1995), and Gayle Delaney with *All About Dreams* (1998) promise that if readers incorporate simple dreamwork methods into their daily routines, they will be able to use these methods to “deal with common waking-life problems” (Bulkeley, 1997). Each of their books provides and promotes slightly different “simple, practical, ‘how-to’ suggestions for understanding” and interpreting dreams on one’s own (Bulkeley, 1997, p. 86). Moreover, these dream books, like most self-help books, present stereotypical dream anecdotes and universal themes that can be applied to anyone’s life, leading readers to feel a sense of invisible connection with others. Although these themes may seem common to many lay readers, the message from these books is that the dream creations are internal and unique and when interpreted by the individual, for the individual, the dreamer will experience enhanced “self-esteem, creativity, and spiritual vitality” (Bulkeley, 1997, p. 90).

The similarity between dream self-help books and the self-help genre as a whole is not limited to the common strategies described to readers in the text, but also includes the similarity in marketing strategies utilized by most, if not all, of the self-help authors. For example, the self-help dream books by these women (i.e., Faraday, 1997; Garfield, 1995; & Delaney, 1998) target a mass-market using enticing covers, inviting titles, promising claims, and prominent displays of each of their famous expert names. In addition to the presentation on the book covers, these women also promote and advertise their methods for working with dreams in every mass media outlet available to them, including television, radio, magazines, and the internet (Bulkeley, 1997).
Thus, the methods are not only purported to be simple and accessible but are also made available to as large an audience as possible via extensive advertising.

Although each of these women promotes their dream materials in a similar way, and each describes techniques and methods that can be easily utilized, Delaney, in particular, also argues in her book, *All About Dreams* (1998), that there are potential benefits for working on one’s own with a book instead of working with others. For example, she advocates for individual dreamwork because when individuals work with others, they have the potential to simply adopt an interpretation or meaning that is “appealing, nonthreatening, or convincing for the wrong reasons” (p. 100). Moreover, Delaney asserts that working with others has the potential for leading individuals to be dishonest with themselves. Even if the projections are correct and suggest a truth for the dreamer, these projections can “steal from the dreamer the benefits of discovering the interpretation” on one’s own (Delaney, 1998, p. 100). Specifically, the dreamer misses the “thrill” and “satisfaction of discovery” achieved through personal work as well as the “responsibility for the implications of his or her own interpretations” (p. 100). Thus, Delaney, like other proponents of the self-help approach, is a strong advocate for individuals working on their own to find meaning and significance in their dreams by way of their own “inner search” (Delaney, 1998, p. 100).

Although Delaney, Garfield, and Faraday each promotes a dreamwork method for members of the general public to work with their dreams on their own, others, such as Montague Ullman with *Working With Dreams* (1979) and *Appreciating Dreams: A Group Approach* (1996), as well as Jeremy Taylor with *Dream Work* (1983), have developed self-help approaches for working with dreams in groups. Unlike the self-help dream books that celebrate the ability to discover interpretations and meanings on one’s own, the dream appreciation groups bring individuals together to work on dreams in a communal fashion.

While acknowledging the value of individual perspectives, Ullman argues that working with groups allows individuals to have exposure to multiple perspectives besides their own and provides dreamers with a “social base” for working with the dream (Ullman, 1987). Ullman (1987) suggests that when an individual works alone, “the dreamer only has the life context he or she can relate spontaneously to the dream” and therefore is limited by his or her own personal reflections on the dream (p. 104). Moreover, Ullman (1996) argues that dreams are a reflection of an individual’s social context and therefore the best way to get at the meaningfulness of the dream is to return the dream to an atmosphere with a social component. Thus, through the simple process of sharing a dream in a group, dreamers are more open to receiving a different view of themselves (Ullman, 1987).

The opportunity to have a different view of one’s self via the dream group may be attained in one of two ways, each of which will invite honesty from the dreamer. First, a dreamer may notice a difference between the image of one’s self in the dream and one’s waking self-image. By confronting this discrepancy, the dreamer will be more honest with himself or herself because one’s “moral integrity, capacity for honesty, is on the line” (Ullman, 1996, p. 201). In a group setting, an apparent difference between the dreamer’s private and public self may become visible, thus motivating the dreamer to “close that gap” (Ullman, 1996, p. 201). Regardless of whether the discrepancy in the images is in relation to the dreamer or to the group, both invite the dreamer to be more honest. Consequently, as Ullman (1999) suggests, “dreamwork is a natural avenue for unloading personal secrets and moving toward greater personal freedom” (Ullman, 1999, p. 268). Personal freedom here is seen not as a function of isolated individual
perspective taking but rather the freedom resulting from the honesty brought out in a supportive social interaction.

If the supportiveness of the social interaction is essential to the dreamer’s ability to be honest with others and himself or herself, then knowing how that supportiveness will be maintained is a valid concern. Although the potential for social criticism is a possibility, Montague Ullman’s (1979) model is an example of a dream appreciation group that demands that the dreamer’s need for safety be met (Ullman, 1987). The need for safety is ensured both by way of the complete control over the group process given to the dreamer and the confidentiality promised by the group. In addition, the dreamer is considered the “expert” on his or her dream and any projection placed on the dream is owned by the individual who gives it. The experiential dream group does have a “leader” other than the dreamer, but the leader’s responsibilities include the close monitoring of the safety of the dreamer and making sure the process unfolds in a timely manner. Thus, the combination of confidentiality and of the dreamer’s privilege of control over what happens in the group fosters a safe and supportive social interaction.

Dream appreciation groups not only provide a supportive atmosphere for dreamers to feel comfortable acknowledging personal truths through communal sharing, but dreamers are also in a position to recognize social truths and problems that need to be changed. As Ullman (1999) suggests,

> The images we make use of in our dreams are social in origin even though they are idiosyncratically transformed for our personal use. Some of these images are bidirectional; that is they have something to say about the unsolved problems of society as well as of the individual. Looked at in this way they are pointers toward some of the negative or limiting aspects of society. Social insight derived from dreamwork can deepen social concern (p. 273).

Working with a dream in a group moves the focus from fixing and recognizing problems in an individual to confronting the “enduring flaws in the social structure” (Ullman, 1999, p. 267). Ullman’s (1987) claim about the benefit of dream groups is not that “dreamwork will save the world but that dreams can be a reminder that it needs saving” (p. 108). Thus, unlike a book that satisfies a personal need to understand one’s dream, the use of the group has potential social implications as well. The *individual* can find ways to adapt to an environment, but a *group* has the collective power to organize to change it.

Moreover, dream appreciation groups place all individuals on a “vast continuum held together by mutual needs, by feelings, and by biological necessities” (Ullman, 1999, p. 265). With the self-help books, individuals often feel a sense of connection knowing that other people have gone through similar experiences. However, in a dream group, the sense of connection is felt in the presence of others participating in the supportive group interaction. Each dreamer is still able to find meaning in his or her dream, but the meaning found is a product of connection and sharing with the group.

In sum, individuals interested in finding meaning in their dreams and an understanding of themselves have the option of working on their own or with others without depending on direct contact with a professional expert. For some dreamers, working on their own with self-help materials such as books offers them the privacy and rewarding experience of trying to figure out the puzzle of their dreams on their own. Dream group approaches, on the other hand, have a focus on community action and support rather than simply individual change. Though each
method promotes meaning in slightly different ways, how each individual uniquely experiences and makes use of these types of methods needs to be further explored and paid attention to. Acknowledging and recognizing the uniqueness of a participant’s experience allows for a more thorough understanding of the complexity of the dreamwork process to unfold.

**Research on Dreamwork Methods**

Very few studies have explored the effectiveness of self-guided methods for working with dreams (Heaton et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2003), and no studies have explored how different dreamwork methods are used by individuals to construct meaning and self-understanding from dreams. Those studies that have evaluated self-guided methods for working with dreams (Heaton et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2003) have used primarily a quantitative research approach and through questionnaires have identified the presence of session depth, insight, and understanding. However, none have identified how specific gains in these areas influence the dreamer and are incorporated into his or her life nor have they honored the complexity of the dreamwork process and the unique experiences that different individuals can have using similar dreamwork methods. The following section addresses the current research on the usefulness of self-guided methods for working with dreams. More specifically, the existing studies on self-guided methods for working with dreams are each critically reviewed in more detail in order to clarify the questions that remain unanswered by this research.

The quantitative study most relevant to the current investigation is Heaton and colleagues’ (1998) study, which examined the role the therapist plays in dream interpretation by comparing therapist facilitated and self-guided dream interpretation sessions. Heaton and colleagues (1998) found that therapist facilitated dream interpretation sessions were rated as more effective than self-guided dream interpretation sessions but that self-guided dream interpretation sessions were rated as effective in session depth, insight, and understanding as that achieved in a regular therapy session.

Although the study by Heaton and colleagues (1998) suggested that self-guided dream interpretation sessions may be effective, there were several methodological features of the study that both limit the generalizability of the findings and leave several important questions unanswered. For example, unlike popular self-help books and methods that are typically used over a period of time, Heaton and colleagues’ (1998) study exposed each participant to each of the 90-120 minute sessions only once. In addition, the analogue therapy sessions were based only on the Hill Cognitive Experiential Model of dreamwork and, as noted in the research, the manual used in the study was not representative of the popular self-help books available on the market. Moreover, there was no mention of how or why the participants chose the dreams they brought to the sessions and whether the type of dream they brought influenced the gains the participants were able to make in the sessions. Thus, based on this study, the experience of using popular self-help methods for working with dreams needs to be more fully explored.

In addition to the limitation attributed to the length, duration, and type of sessions used, the method of analysis leaves more questions to be answered. For example, all of the measures used in the study asked the participants to rate the dream interpretation session quantitatively. Evaluating the effectiveness of dream interpretation in this way not only forces participants to express themselves using specific categories or concepts identified by the researchers but also makes the generalizability of the study very limited considering the study’s small sample size (n = 25). More specifically, Heaton and colleagues (1998) identified one particular scale they used,
the Gains in Dream Interpretation Measure, as an “important first step in determining and understanding how clients benefit from dream interpretation sessions relative to regular therapy” (p. 120). However, different and perhaps more information could be captured by allowing the individuals to articulate how they viewed their experience in each of the sessions without having any questionnaire, coding, or interpretation restrictions imposed by the researchers. More specifically, a qualitative study using collaborative interviews would allow the investigator to explore how individuals respond to each of their personal gains that emerge with the use of dream interpretation and would allow the investigator to understand how the identified gains are incorporated into the participant’s life.

A later study by Hill and colleagues (2003) evaluated the effectiveness of a computer-assisted single session versus a therapist-facilitated dream interpretation session (again based on single analogue sessions of the Hill Cognitive Experiential Model of dreamwork). The computer-assisted session was not rated as positively as the therapist-facilitated session, but the computer-assisted session did allow participants to gain just as much insight into their dreams as the therapist assisted session (Hill et al., 2003). Unlike the previous research (Heaton et al., 1998), this study included, in addition to the same quantitative questionnaires, an open-ended question asking participants to identify what they liked most and least about each of the dream interpretation sessions. Categories were then developed for the statements and independently coded by several members of the research team. While the open-ended questions allowed the researcher to gain more information about why participants liked or disliked the different methods, the meanings derived from the participants’ responses were still shaped by the logic of the researchers’ coding scheme. In addition, there was no mention of how or why the individuals brought the dreams that they did to the sessions or how that decision influenced the gains that participants were able to make with each of the dreamwork methods.

Clearly, further qualitative research is needed to more thoroughly evaluate how individuals experience the different popular dreamwork methods, how they construct meaning from their dreams using these different dreamwork methods, how the decision to work with a particular dream influences the understanding gained, and finally, how the understanding is incorporated into the individual’s life.

The Present Study

In order to best address each of these questions, a feminist qualitative approach to understanding is utilized (Kirsch, 1999; Olesen, 2000). Such an approach is dependent upon the quality of the relationship between the researcher and the participant, and only a relationship characterized by trust and intimacy suffices. When a trustworthy and intimate relationship between the researcher and participants is fostered and participants are treated as the expert on their own experiences, the feminist approach asserts that a more thorough understanding of the dreamwork process is expected to be found. In the present study, an emphasis on developing trust and rapport between me as the researcher and the participants is fostered throughout the study by way of careful attention to the relationship during our interactions on the phone, in person, in my involvement with each of the dream groups, and during the interviews.

A researcher/participant relationship where the emphasis is on trust and on developing safety for intimacy allows for the participants to feel more comfortable opening up vulnerable and intimate details with me about their experiences using the dreamwork. Without that trust, the information gathered from the participants might be stilted because they would not feel safe or
comfortable sharing the intimate details of their expectations, reactions, and understandings of the process. The participants’ sharing of this type of information throughout the study and during the in-depth interviews allows for a new understanding of dreamwork to emerge—an understanding of how and why a particular dream is chosen by a dreamer to work with, how that dream is approached by way of the group or the self-help book, what sort of understanding emerges from the dream and from the dream in relation to the dreamer’s identity, and finally how the dreamer uses that understanding in terms of subsequent, feelings, actions, and understanding.

So as to best capture and present the participants’ experiences, a “performance-based, storytelling, listening, and hearing framework” is privileged (Denzin, 1997, p. 266). By representing these women’s experiences using storytelling, short stories, and performance based texts, the experiences of these women have the opportunity to continue living with each reader who interacts with and makes sense of them. A performance-text mirrors the external world and “allows the reader to re-experience the events in question, coming to see the truth of the narrative that contains them” (Denzin, 1997, p. 267). Unlike using statistics or thematic coding to sum up and describe the experiences of others, the use of short stories and performance-texts provides the “unique potential to bring lived experiences unknown to the reader closer to his or her own struggles for humanization” (Diversi, 1998, p. 132). Moreover, stories offer the reader the opportunity to experience a glimpse of a person’s life and community and “what it means to be informed by such values, meanings, relationships, and commitments” (Frank, 2000, p. 361). Short stories do test the dividing line between fact and fiction as, in Denzin’s (1997) phrasing, ‘reality and text become one’” (p.266). However, short stories give life to an experience that is rarely captured as well by any other method. Short stories invite the reader to accept beliefs that may be different from their own but are presented within the context of the “lives in which the beliefs make sense” (Frank, 2000, p. 361). Short stories require the reader to be active; to see, feel, and hear life in a way he or she may not be familiar with or used to (Frank, 2000). As Diversi (1998) writes:

Dialogues and descriptions (of places, smells, looks), which are integral parts of short stories, have the power to move readers from abstract, sterile notions to the lively imagery of otherwise distant social realities (p. 133).

By touching the readers’ feelings and emotions, the readers can be placed in the position to vicariously experience the struggles and tensions that the women experienced while exploring these different dreamwork methods. Moreover, the readers are able to develop their own interpretation of a dreamwork experience rather than having an interpretation of the experience dictated to them by the author (Diversi, 1998).

Method

Approach to Understanding

My understanding of the materials collected over the course of this research has changed as a function of being immersed in the ongoing study of dreamwork and by my encounters with many different dreamers and many different dreams. I started the project with the assumption that a comparison of dreamwork methods, based on the participant’s own words, would allow
relevant and coherent themes to emerge that previously may have been missed by the use of quantitative scales and experimental methodology. However, after further experience with dream groups and consultation with other researchers, I realized that focusing on a comparison between the two methods would lead participants to elaborate on the benefits and drawbacks of each method rather than on the specific details of their experiences with each of the methods. Even if the women identified similar benefits and drawbacks, this type of focus would distract from the experiential details of how each method on its own would help them to construct meaning and then incorporate that meaning into their lives. Questions that focused on simple comparison would allow me to confirm or disconfirm particular dreamwork characteristics and qualities specific to each method but these sorts of comparison questions would likely miss how women who use similar dreamwork methods might use them in very different ways depending on the fantasies, expectations, and motivations they bring to the dreamwork process. In addition, an experiential focus would allow for consideration of the dream itself. This includes both the content of the dream and the dreamer’s choice of that particular dream for use with a particular method.

In order to honor the uniqueness of each woman’s dreamwork experiences, I needed to change how I would approach the interview process and instead ask questions that would target their specific experiences rather than pull for general themes comparing the two dreamwork methods. Focusing more specifically on targeting the unique experiences each of these women would have, I needed to use “how” questions to learn about how they were affected, touched, and moved by the dreamwork process. For example, I became interested in how the dreamwork method shapes an individual’s understanding of her dreams, how the dreamwork method used shapes the individual’s understanding of her self-identity, and how the dreamer responds to the insight gained from using different dreamwork methods. Each of these thematic questions skirted around the issue of self-identity as women would relate to their dreams and dreamwork, but the framing of the questions in this way left the power with the dreamwork method—not the dreamer. My continued experience in dream groups and my witnessing of other women’s use and response to the dreamwork methods made me more aware of how women were in control both of how they would respond and of what they would respond to in the dreamwork process. I was also becoming increasingly aware of how carefully women selected a particular dream for use with these particular methods. These experiences again led to a reshaping of the questions I was interested in and able to explore.

Though the focus of the questions had been on the dreamwork process and experience, my commitment to feminist approaches led me to reframe my research questions to capture how the dreamers were active meaning-makers and used these methods to shape their understanding of dreams in relation to their identities rather than to passively absorb an interpretation or agenda of a dreamwork method. I became interested in their meaning making processes and the parts of their experiences that influenced how they would construct meaning from and understanding of their dreams in relation to their identities. I wanted to better understand how women would wrestle with the decision of what dream to share with others and how each dreamwork method would help them to construct and/or reinforce an understanding of their identities in relation to their dreams. Moreover, I was not only interested in how and what understanding they would construct during the process, but also how they would incorporate the meaning into the context of their lives.

With the reshaping of the questions also came a reshaping of the epistemology I wanted to approach the questions with. Qualitative methods that utilize thick description allowed me to
co-create with my participants accounts that have depth, richness, and evocativeness (Denzin, 1997, 2000, 2001; Richardson, 2000). Through this co-creation and thick description I was best able to understand how these women made sense of their dreams, their experiences using the dreamwork methods, and their incorporation of the dream’s meaning into the fabric of their lives. With this intimate understanding of each of the participant’s experiences, I was able to use the in-depth interviews and the rich description that arose from such interviews to create performance-texts. These performance-texts that were a function of my empathic understanding of my participants allowed me to both honor the detailed experiences they shared with me as well as to create richly evocative texts for the reader.

Participants

Participants were solicited via flyers and by word of mouth. Individuals interested in participating in the dream study contacted me by way of a study specific email account. Potential participants were then sent, via email, a message thanking them for their interest in the study, were given a copy of the informed consent form (Refer to Appendix A), and were asked to fill out and return an attached preliminary dream questionnaire requesting information, such as their demographics, background in dreamwork, frequency of dream recall, and exposure to popular dream literature (Refer to Appendix B).

The participants selected for participation were those who were still eager to participate after presented with the dreamwork questionnaire and informed consent form, who completed and returned their questionnaires, who had at least 1 dream a week, and who had schedules compatible with other participants (for dream group scheduling purposes). Each participant was then notified and a time was set up to meet so that the plan for the study could be explained and all additional questions that the participant had at that point could be answered. During the initial meeting, participants also signed an informed consent form describing their right to consent or withdraw from the study at anytime and assuring them that their confidentiality would be maintained. In addition, materials for the dreamwork conditions were distributed; and participants were asked to record all of their dreams in a personal journal throughout their time in the study.

The final group of participants were excited about the process, interested in their dreams, dedicated to the study, and engaged in the dreamwork they were involved with; however, the initial interest expressed by all who made contact with me waxed and waned depending on the time commitment they were willing to put into the experience and on the method they began with. Although 52 interested dreamers contacted me via the email account, 32 of those individuals either expressed concern about the time commitment and declined from participating or never responded to my initial informational email to them. Twenty women did complete at least one dreamwork method, but only 11 women completed both the dreamwork methods and an interview allowing them to reflect upon their experience. Of the other nine women who began the study, six of them completed the book portion and were no longer interested in participating in the study. One woman completed only the book portion and an interview but was unable to participate in a group due to time conflicts; and two women completed the group portion but due to time constraints and lack of interest did not use a book to explore their dreams, nor did they complete the interview. A total of 11 women participated in dreamwork and completed an interview following their experience.
In addition, the composition of the groups was largely determined by the availability of participants at the time of recruitment. Efforts to recruit participants were made over a nine month period and the groups were composed of the people who were interested at that particular time, who could make the time commitment to complete the study, and who had compatible schedules with other group members. Moreover, the duration of the groups was determined by the number of women in the group and the women’s scheduling availability. Regardless of the group size, each participant shared only one dream with the group.

Prior to their use of the dreamwork methods, each of the women provided some general information about herself and responded to the request to “Briefly describe why you wish to participate in this study.” All confidential information has been removed and pseudonyms are used in place of their actual names.

**Dream Group 1 (Stephanie, Becca, Jessie, and Cami).**

Stephanie was a 22 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual. At the time of the study, she was a full-time college student primarily studying history and criminology and was in her last semester at college. Stephanie reported that she remembered 2-3 dreams any given week and that she had detailed and lengthy dreams. Prior to the study she had tried to interpret dreams both on her own and with a friend. Alone, she had perused through magazine articles online and had read the dream symbol book, *Interpreting Dreams for Dummies.* She wrote:

I’ve always been fascinated by dreams. The idea that they might mean or symbolize something interests me. This is a chance to learn more about my dreams, and different dreamwork methods.

Becca was a 20 year-old Native-American Caucasian female who identified as bisexual. She was a full-time college student primarily studying mass communication. Prior to the study, Becca had tried to work with her dreams on her own using *The Dictionary of Dreams* and had also worked with friends. Becca reported that she had 2-3 dreams on any given week and that her dreams were detailed short stories. She wrote:

I’ve always been very interested in the nature of dreams, but I don’t know much about it. I would like to gain more understanding and knowledge about myself and others through participation in this study.

Jessie was a 29 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual. She was a college graduate with a BA in English Literature and worked at a university as an administrative associate. She reported remembering 4 to 5 dreams during any given week and that most of her dreams were detailed short stories. Jessie indicated that she would try to work with her dreams on her own by “referencing ‘dream dictionaries’ as a quick reference” and had also tried to work with or interpret dreams with a friend. She wrote:

I have always been interested in what our dreams might be trying to communicate to us about our daily activities or thoughts we might not have time to sort through or be comfortable to explore in our waking hours. I have also been interested in “lucid”
dreaming, or how much of what we dream we might actually have some control over, or if it is possible for us to manipulate what we dream about. I have also wondered how or why certain symbols, etc… have gotten their meanings when used to interpret dreams. Overall, I think it might be able to teach me a higher level of perception, while allowing me to start a routine to begin keeping a dream journal again.

Cami was a 20 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual. She was a full-time college student majoring in psychology. She reported remembering 6 to 7 dreams during any given week that were often short stories with little detail. She had tried to work with or interpret her dreams on her own and with a friend, but had never used any outside resources such as books, magazines, workshops, or a therapist to work with her dreams. She wrote:

I have always been interested in dreams but have no formal knowledge of them. I have no problems sharing my dream experiences with others and I am simply just curious about the study.

Stephanie, Becca, Jessie, and Cami began by using the self-help dream book over a period of 3 weeks and then participated in the dream group for a period of 5 weeks during the middle to end of the spring semester at the university they were affiliated with. None of these women had met prior to the study, but all expressed an interest in dreams and dreamwork methods. Given the number of school and work time commitments that each of the women had throughout the study, dream group meetings needed to be scheduled on a week to week basis in order to accommodate everyone’s schedule, with meetings often occurring late in the evenings. The group also decided to take a week off when one of the group members needed to leave campus due to a family emergency.

The group members all expressed satisfaction with the dream group and enjoyment of the process. However, when they were offered the option to continue working with one another through the end of the semester, Stephanie and Cami decided they were too stressed at that point in the semester with trying to finish their school work and that continuing would be too difficult given their busy schedules. Becca was also preoccupied both with school work and with a crisis that had erupted with a friend. She was afraid she did not have the energy to devote to the group given her stress associated both with her friend and with school work. Jessie, however, was fascinated by the dreamwork process, had hoped it would continue, and asked to be considered for inclusion in future dreamwork opportunities.

Dream Group 2 (Paige, Judy, Sara, and Shelly).

Paige was a 21 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual. She best described her political affiliation as a democrat and identified as a feminist. She was a full-time college student who primarily studied architecture. Prior to the study, Paige had used dream symbol books and dream dictionary books on her own and had tried working with her friends to interpret and work with dreams. She reported remembering 4 to 5 dreams during any given week and described her dreams as being detailed and lengthy. She wrote:
I have always been interested in dreams and want to better understand them, but have never known how to work with them. I would love to have the opportunity to learn what the best way is to understand my dreams and myself.

Judy was a 21 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual. Judy also identified as a democrat and as a feminist. At the time of the study she was a senior majoring in biology. More specific to her dreaming behavior and experience, she reported remembering on average 4 to 5 detailed and lengthy dreams a week. Prior to the study, she had tried to work with and interpret dreams on her own and with friends. She wrote:

I want to learn more about how dreams relate to and reflect conscious experience and to learn techniques for analyzing dreams.

Sara was a 21 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual. She described herself as liberal and as a feminist. At the time of the study, she was a senior in college majoring in public relations and business administration. She reported remembering on average 2 to 3 dreams a week that were often pieces of dreams or pieces of dreams with little detail. She had tried working on her own by using magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and had also tried working with friends to interpret and understand her dreams. She wrote:

I feel that dreams have meaning with what is happening in your life. I feel this study will help me to analyze my dreams and give me insight in my life.

Shelly was a 23 year-old Caucasian female and identified as heterosexual. She did not have any political affiliation and did not identify as a feminist. At the time of the study, she was a college graduate with a BS in physical education and health and was a full-time graduate student and part-time bartender. She reported remembering only 0 to 1 dreams during any given week and that most of her dreams were small fragments or pieces of dreams. Shelly indicated that she had tried to work with her dreams on her own by way of self-help magazine articles. She also reported that she had tried to work with and interpret her dreams with a friend. She wrote:

I think that analyzing dreams is extremely interesting. I would like to find out what some of my dreams mean, and how these relate to my life and the person that I am.

Paige, Judy, Sara, and Shelly began by participating in the dream group for a period of 3 weeks and then used the self-help dream book for a period of 3 weeks. The dream group took place at the end of the summer in the participants’ hometown. Following the dream group, each of the women continued her dreamwork with the book when she returned to her respective university. Some of the group members had a more intimate connection than others, but all were familiar with, had worked with, known, and interacted with one another for at least 4 years. Paige and Sara had known each other since childhood. Judy, too, had interacted with and spent time with Paige and Sara during their late teen years. Shelly did not become acquainted with all of them, however, until she lifeguarded with them during the summer. The group members knew each other in different contexts—socially, through summer work, and from high school—but none had participated in a group together where the emphasis was on sharing and the focus was on dreams.
Dream Group 3 (Dolores, Teresa, Doreen, Patricia, and Marilyn).

Dolores was a 79 year-old Caucasian female who identified as a democrat and a feminist. Her most recent occupations prior to retirement included archival work, social work, and working for a magazine. She reported remembering 4 to 5 dreams during any given week and described the dreams as short stories with little detail. Dolores had worked with and tried to interpret dreams on her own, but had never worked with others to try to understand her dreams. She wrote:

I am interested in participating because I’ve always had an interest—actually since childhood in meaning and interpretation.

Teresa was a 76 year-old Caucasian female who described her political affiliation as moderate and identified as a feminist. She was retired, but had an AB and three years of graduate work. She reported remembering 2 to 3 dreams on average any given week and described her dreams as small fragments or pieces of dreams. Teresa had tried to interpret and work with her dreams on her own and reported reading magazine articles that had either dream symbols or a scientific explanation in order to try to understand dreams. She indicated that she had worked with a therapist once in order to understand a dream and wrote that the dream she worked on was “a disturbing dream soon after the death of my husband when I was 41. The imagery was almost cubist.” With regards to her interest in participating, she wrote:

It sounded interesting, and I’m always trying to expand my mental faculties.

Doreen was an 80 year-old Caucasian female who described herself as liberal and as a feminist. She was retired, but was formerly a psychotherapist with a BS degree. She reported remembering 2 to 3 dreams during any given week and described them as detailed and lengthy. Doreen had tried to work with and interpret her dreams on her own, with friends, and with a therapist. Specific to the therapist, she noted that they “explored dreams as they related to my conflicts and circumstances.” She had read articles in various journals by psychoanalytic writers and reported reading over 10 books best described as dream symbol or self-help books. She wrote:

I find exploration of the meaning of dreams very interesting and have found that understanding my dreams has helped me grow.

Patricia was a 75 year-old Caucasian female who described herself as liberal and identified as a feminist. She was a retired college professor with a MA+ degree. She reported that on average she would remember at most 1 dream a week and the dreams she did remember she described as short stories with little detail. She reported that she had never tried to work with or interpret her dreams on her own or with a friend and that she had maybe read 1 to 3 articles relating to dreams, but was unable to remember the authors, titles, or type of articles she had read. Unlike other participants in the study, she wrote:
I’m not especially interested in dreams, but I am interested in assisting young people in their endeavors, especially academic ones—

Marilyn was an 82 year-old Caucasian female who described herself both as a democrat and as a feminist. She was a retired counselor who “nearly completed” her MSW. She reported that on average she would remember at most one dream a week and they were usually small fragments or pieces of dreams or they were short stories with little detail. She indicated that she had tried to work with and interpret her dreams on her own and although she had never tried to work with or interpret her dreams with a friend, she had been a member of a dream group for 10+ years. Marilyn had read magazine articles and books relating to the scientific aspects of dreams, but was unable to recall the titles or authors of the resources. She wrote:

I am interested due to long participating in the dream group.

Dolores, Teresa, Doreen, Patricia, and Marilyn were not interested in using the dream book but participated in a dream group for a period of 5 weeks. Each of the group members lived in the same retirement community. Of the group members, Teresa was new to the retirement community and had not known the others prior to participating in the study. Doreen and Dolores were the closest of the group members, but Doreen, Dolores, Patricia, and Marilyn all knew each other by way of participation in other activities together—activities often organized by the retirement community. Although four of the group members were familiar with one another before becoming involved in the study, each of the members disclosed information during the dream group that the other women had not known or been aware of prior to the study.

This group met during the fall season at the height of the 2004 presidential election. Given that the group met during the five weeks up to the election and that the interviews took place the week following the election, much conversation about volunteer opportunities and updates about political statistics were shared before and after each dream group meeting. Politics not only influenced the conversations that the women had with one another, but also were referenced to when the women associated to one another’s dream images. The mood for each of the women was also heavily influenced by the outcome of the election—especially during the interview process. Each of the women was devastated by the election results and much conversation concerning the state of the country accompanied the interviews detailing their experiences.

**Dreamwork Conditions**

**Popular self-help dream book.**

Gayle Delaney’s (1998) *All About Dreams* was chosen for the popular self-help book portion of the study because it met all of the criteria for a self-help book and was one of the most recently published books by one of the three well-known self-help professionals in the field (Delaney, Garfield, and Faraday). In addition, Delaney’s book was chosen because it appeared on the best-sellers list for both Barnes and Noble and Amazon.com. Additionally, Gayle Delaney had the most books listed on the “recommended list” and “reader’s choice list” on the Association for the Study of Dreams website. Each participant was asked to use the book as she would if she had selected it on her own and was instructed to work at her own pace for a period
of 3 weeks. During this time period, participants were asked to interpret their dreams and provide me with a written description of the dream(s) and their interpretations of the dream(s) using the self-help book.

Dream appreciation group.

Each participant who took part in a dream group used the Montague Ullman experiential dream group approach for a period of 3 to 5 weeks depending on the size of the group and the time constraints specific to her group. Each participant was given a description of the group approach titled “The Experiential Dream Group” by Ullman (1979) so that they would understand how the process would work and would be able to participate fully at the first dreamwork session. Each group had 4 to 5 participants, and I led each of the groups. My training prior to the beginning of the study included a semester of experience as a group leader using the Montague Ullman approach during a senior capstone course at Miami University. I was also very familiar with all recent publications explaining the approach in detail, including, Appreciating Dreams: A Group Approach (1996), The Variety of Dream Experience, 2nd Edition (1999), Working With Dreams (1979), and other articles and papers written by Montague Ullman. Although I was technically the “leader” of the groups, the leader’s main responsibility is to move the group members through the process in a timely fashion. In addition, the leader’s position in the group is not one of “expert” to interpret the dreamer’s dream for her. Instead, as the leader, I tried to maintain an egalitarian role with each of the other group members; and feedback from all members was welcomed and incorporated into the groups.

During each meeting the basic principles of confidentiality and safety for the dreamer were reviewed (Refer to Appendix C), and any suggestions for, questions about, or concerns regarding the process were addressed. Each participant had the opportunity to share one dream over the course of the dream group meetings. Each dream group session lasted approximately 90 minutes, and each group met on a weekly basis.

Qualitative Interviews

Following the completion of their use of the dreamwork method(s), participants were invited to participate in a 1 to 2 hour interview with me, the principal investigator. The goal of the interviews was to empower the participants by inviting them to share their stories and by treating each participant as the expert on her own experience. To increase the likelihood of honest and personally revealing stories, I had consciously cultivated relationships with each participant based on trustworthiness and personal connection.

The most important trust and rapport building part of the study experience was validating participants’ needs and their ideas. More specifically, concerns expressed about the nature and flow of the process were acknowledged and taken seriously. Also, accommodations were made whenever possible to ensure that time conflicts would not prevent participation in the group. Throughout the process, questions about my intentions and interest in dreaming were clarified and elaborated when necessary. Moreover, mutual self-disclosure between me as the researcher and the participants was encouraged and expected throughout the study. I made an effort to display interest in and care for each participant’s contributions by doing things such as checking in with each participant regularly via e-mail or phone. The trusting relationship was essential for
creating a warm atmosphere for the participant in order for her to feel comfortable sharing intimate details about her experiences with me (Kirsch, 1999).

Each interview was audio taped. The location of the interviews was negotiated so that the participant was comfortable, but the interview could still be completed in a professional way. I was the only person who conducted the interviews, not only because I had developed a relationship with each of the participants, but also because I was the most familiar with how the project was emerging and was able to incorporate all of the necessary questions to meet the changing needs of the study. The interviews were as collaborative and egalitarian as possible, so that the participant and I could come to a shared understanding of the participant’s experience rather than one of purely interpretation and/or coding by me as the researcher. Although I had questions to address in order to explore the participant’s dreamwork experience, I spontaneously asked all of the questions of interest rather than sticking to a strict protocol.

During the interviews, each woman was first asked to narrate how she viewed her dreamwork experience. Participants were invited to start with the aspect of the experience that stood out to them. Then, they were invited to expand upon thoughts and feelings that they had about the different aspects of the experience. The conversation was directed in a subtle way so that the participants could share what they were excited about, but I, as the researcher, could also explore the themes and topics I was most interested in. Questions were generated in an effort to better understand three aspects of each participant’s experience: her dreamwork history and expectations for the use of dreamwork, her actual experiences with the dreamwork methods, and her post-study reaction to her dreamwork experiences. The following questions are examples of questions I used to open up specific areas of each participant’s experiences. The questions were appropriately phrased to fit the flow of the conversation with each participant and were touched upon spontaneously throughout the interview process. The interview questions included:

**Dreamwork History and Expectations:**
1. Prior to the study, how had you worked with your dreams in order to find meaningfulness or gain insight from them, and how did you decide to use the dreamwork methods that you chose?
2. What motivates you to be interested in your dreams and how (if at all) has that motivation changed by using the different dreamwork methods in this study?
3. What expectations did you have prior to participating in each dreamwork method, and how did the dreamwork methods meet those expectations?
4. What fears or concerns did you have prior to using each dreamwork method, and what happened to those concerns during the course of your experience with each method?

**Experience with Dreamwork Methods:**
5. How did you view the overall experience of working with your dreams, and which method do you prefer?
6. What was the most valuable experience you had, and how did this experience relate to the method of dreamwork used?
7. What, if any, meanings were you able to find in your dreams? How did the dreamwork method you used influence the meaning you found in your dreams? Any specific examples?
8. How did you decide what dreams you wished to use with the book (and with the group)?
9. What did you learn about yourself and/or others by participating in each dreamwork method, and how did the specific dreamwork method you used affect what you learned?

10. Did you gain any insight into the dream or cultural context? If so, how did this insight impact you? Were you motivated to make any changes in your life or respond to your environment in a different way as a result of any insight you gained from either or both of the dreamwork methods?

11. What are the common themes that you find in your dreams, and how did each dreamwork method either shape or help you to explore those themes?

12. Did you feel a sense of connection to your self or to others by using either of the methods? If so, how did each dreamwork method influence your feeling of connection?

13. How did you use the book? Did you read it cover to cover? Skip around? Skip parts?

14. What, if anything, would you want to change about each of the methods?

15. Did you have any experiences that you saw as religious and/or spiritual, and what role did the dreamwork method play in these experiences?

Post-Study Reactions:

16. How has your exposure to different dreamwork methods affected your understanding of dreams, and how did each dreamwork method influence your understanding?

17. What is the purpose of understanding your dreams, and what role do you think dreams should have in your everyday life? Did any particular dreamwork method or experience influence your opinion?

18. What are the social and political aspects of dreaming, and how does each dreamwork method address these potential aspects?

19. How, if at all, can the dreamwork methods be used for social or political change?

20. How will each dreamwork method used influence your motivation to continue or discontinue future dreamwork?

Standpoint of a Feminist Dream Researcher

Prior to the beginning of the study, I had my own understandings of the benefits of qualitative research and also my own beliefs about dreams and methods for working with dreams. My main objective was to approach the study from a feminist qualitative standpoint (Kirsch, 1999; Olesen, 2000). More specifically, I had a preference for qualitative research methodologies because I believed that by validating and encouraging people to narrate their experiences, the interviews would capture information about their experiences that may have previously been missed by using only a quantitative approach. Through my commitment to feminist methodologies, I believed that participants would be the experts on their own experiences and wanted their help in constructing what the experiences were like for them. In terms of dreams, I believed that people would use their dreams to understand themselves and/or their social context better and that the methodology they made use of to explore their dreams would help inform their thinking about the dreams and their dream in relation to their identities. I also believed that dreams could be used for personal and social change and that acknowledgement and careful attention to dreams could foster the insight necessary to make those changes. Finally, based on my own experiences with each dreamwork method, I had a bias towards the dream appreciation group and thought that the use of the group would help the dreamer gain more relevant and contextual insights into her life than a self-help book would.
Although these assumptions and biases were present, I was very open to hearing a variety of experiences with each of the dreamwork methods and welcomed views that I found surprising or different from my own. By acknowledging my values upfront, I recognized that holding an objective stance in the interview would be impossible and that my values would be intimately tied to how the interview process unfolded and how the story of the participants’ experiences would be constructed. I kept a close watch on how my own views were shaping the interview process and the development of the study through continued conversations with other qualitative researchers familiar with the details and structure of the study. Although I did assess my thinking by way of dialogue with other researchers, I recognized that the interpretations and shared understanding of the participant’s experiences would be intricately tied to my own perspectives.

Memo Notes

Similar to a method used by Quartaro (1993) in her qualitative study of women using self-help books, I also used memo notes throughout the duration of the study. Memo notes allowed me to keep track of my evolving thoughts and reactions to the nature of the study and helped me to monitor the development of themes or insights throughout the research process. The notes also provided me with concrete material to discuss later with colleagues so that adjustments to my style could be made or reframing of my questions could be incorporated into the ongoing interviews. My reactions to my own experience in the dream groups, observations of what happened in the groups, and my reactions to other interactions with the participants were recorded. Memo notes were primarily used to allow me to reflect on the progress of the study, inform my thinking for the interview process, and shape my own understanding of what the experience was like for each of these women using the dreamwork methods.

Debriefing

Questions about the study were addressed throughout the process and participants were aware of my interest in the topic and my approach for understanding it. Participants were thanked for their participation in the study and were provided with a debriefing letter containing a list of other possible resources they could investigate in order to further their study of dreams (Refer to Appendix D).

Results

Throughout the duration of the study, I was fortunate to be offered a glimpse into the life of each of these women. Although my snapshot of their experiences with dreaming and dreamwork spanned over a period of several weeks, my experience with each of them was just that, a snapshot of a life that continues to progress and evolve and is never finished or complete. In order to fully capture and present to others what the dreamwork experiences were like for these women, an analysis that imposed my interpretation onto their experiences would not suffice. Regardless of the method the dreamers used to find meaning from their dreams, their understanding was influenced by the interpretations that were offered to them. The interpretations were windows to thinking about their lives differently, not doors that had been nailed closed with the definite interpretations. Thus, an analysis and representation that would allow their experiences with these methods to keep living and evolving with each reader who
would be exposed to them was the presentation style that needed to be used. Performance-texts in the form of stories had the unique ability to capture and present these women’s experiences in this way.

Although stories allow readers to take a more active role in developing interpretations of the women’s experiences, the presentation of the women’s experiences is not free from my own interpretation of how the women experienced these different dreamwork methods. My interpretations are based on the interactions I had with each of them and the relationships that developed throughout the study. I was involved with each of these women over a period of several weeks, was a member of each of their dream groups, and also participated in in-depth interviews where they were encouraged to detail what their experiences were like before, during, and after the work they did with each of their dreams. Each of the stories presented are co-created in the sense that all of the information is based on what I learned from my participants; however, I am the author of these stories and have made the careful and deliberate choices for the construction and presentation of their experiences.

In creating their stories, I reread my memo notes and the transcripts and identified “comments, questions, quotes, experiences, emotions, and stories, which in my view” captured what their experiences were like working with their dreams (Parry, 2004, p. 921). Following a process detailed by Parry (2004), I constructed each of these women’s stories by using many of their own words and at times including descriptions and details that are verbatim from the interview transcripts. Although their stories are based on how they described their experiences to me, I take full responsibility for the representation of their experiences. Some of the details of their stories are fictional, but all of the details reflect what I learned about their experiences and what the feelings are that they evoked in me during our time together in the dream group, throughout the duration of the study, and in our interview conversation.

Using an alternative method, such as short stories, to present data from my study “does not ensure a better product” nor does it mean that “one loses one’s ability to write in standard ways” because “there is so much to think about; so many conscientious decisions to be made” (Richardson, 2000, p. 254). Rather than judging the reporting of data on objectivity, validity, reliability, control and prediction, as is the case in scientific research, the new criteria for evaluating more ethnographic modes of writing is different from traditional standards, but continues to hold ethnography to high and difficult standards (Richardson, 2000). As Richardson (2000) notes, “Creative arts is one lens through which to view the world; analytical science is another. We see better with two lenses. We see best with both lenses focused and magnified.” (p. 254). In order to thoroughly evaluate the quality of qualitative ethnographic work, Richardson (2000) proposes the following criteria:

1. **Substantive contribution:** Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social-life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?

2. **Aesthetic merit:** Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?

3. **Reflexivity:** How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Ethical issues? How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to
make judgments about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?


5. Expresses a reality: Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience? Does it seem “true”—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the “real”? (p. 254).

In constructing these stories, a special focus has been placed on addressing each of these criteria. The presentation of the women’s experiences using stories may be what Denzin (1997) refers to as “messy texts”; however, the criteria by which these stories can be evaluated are concrete and allow the reader to evaluate the validity of the presentations using standards that are specific to the presentation style used.

For the purpose of this study, three of the eleven women who completed the interview portion of the study were chosen for the presentation of results: Stephanie, Paige, and Doreen. There were two main reasons that these three women were chosen for the presentation, both of which are equally important. First, I was able to develop a relationship with each of these women that allowed them to feel safe exploring what their experiences were like for them during the process. Rather than giving vague or general responses during our interview conversation, they each felt comfortable sharing intimate details about their experiences and candidly talked about what their expectations, reactions, and fantasies were as they related to the process. This kind of intimacy was essential for me to understand what their experiences were like for them and for me to be able to empathically relate in a way that would facilitate my writing of their stories. Secondly, each of these women shared information about the dreamwork experience that was unique and unlike dreamwork stories I had heard, witnessed, experienced, or read about before. Each of these women’s experiences also illustrates a different perspective on using dreamwork and captures elements of the experience that have not been addressed or focused on previously. None of these women represent the dreamwork experience, but each of their stories presents a unique struggle and tension that was experienced during the dreamwork process. Through the sharing of their stories, my hope is that the struggles and tensions will be illuminated so that the reader’s understanding of the process of dreamwork is deepened and enriched by way of exposure to these stories.

||Stephanie||

**Stephanie’s Background in Dreams and Dreamwork**

Stephanie was a 22 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual and whose interest in dreams was sparked by a spiritual experience she had prior to her involvement in the study. She described a dream she had during her senior year of high school—the night her mother died from brain surgery complications. In the dream, Stephanie had tried to hold her mother down in the hospital bed, but her mother would not be held down. Instead, Stephanie’s mom said goodbye, that it was time for her to go, and that she was leaving her body. Stephanie described this dream as “burned” in her memory and reported she had never had a dream like that before or since and consequently compared all of her other dreams to that dream.
In all of Stephanie’s previous work with dreams, she had relied on her own abilities and trusted her own insight. During her freshman year of college, Stephanie tried practicing the Shaman religion with her best friend at the time—not for the religious aspect of it—but in an attempt to gain self-understanding and meaning in her life based on Shamanic dreamwork practices. Shortly after she became involved with Shamanism, she was given a dream symbol book as a gift and used the symbolism explained in the book to try to find meaning from her dreams. When she reflected on her experience with using each of these approaches for understanding, she stated during our interview:

Well you know, even when I interpreted my dreams freshman year or used that book, they were still more of—I guess I would call them surface interpretations of dreams. I didn’t—I didn’t really see deep down into the meaning, I just kind of looked at the symbols of—I guess you could say on top—without going down to see the real emotion or meaning behind the dreams.

In her previous work with dreams, Stephanie had primarily found what she referred to as the “surface level” meaning in her dreams. She came to the study wanting to learn more about her dreams and different dreamwork methods; but she did not expect to get much, if any, understanding—especially from the dream group. She was skeptical of how she would be able to benefit from the dream group; but stated during the interview that she was “pleasantly surprised by the group experience.”

Although Stephanie described both her experiences using the dream group and the self-help dream book to find meaning from her dreams, the following story and supporting information is based on Stephanie’s experience with and response to the dream group—a dream group that took place two weeks before she departed for spring break. For the dream group, Stephanie decided to bring the dream she titled, “The Guy Pierce Dream.” Her dream is first presented followed by a story detailing her response to the dream group experience.

Stephanie’s Dream

The Guy Pierce dream.

I dreamt that Guy Pierce—the actor—was over visiting his aunt and uncle. It was probably 1870s-1900. He was a scientist/bookworm who did not notice what was going on around him that much. His aunt and uncle were having a social gathering. He did not realize it, and walked through the center of the room where the people were gathered. He wanted to get to a bookstore to get a new book. The people—mostly women and their marriage-age daughters—had been discussing who was eligible for marriage, and who should marry whom. He greeted his aunt, got his book, and began to go on his way. He caused quite a stir among the women because he was eligible and handsome. He greeted his uncle as he left.

Then, one of the daughters there, a pretty woman, sneezed/did something that traditionally meant that she got to find a man and get ten kisses from him. Pierce saw her coming and tried to run and hide in a room. First he tried hiding near a chair, but the chair was against a wall that was all windows—and she could see him. Then he ran into a bathroom and locked himself in it. She managed to convince him to come out.
Then Pierce and the woman were walking outside the house in the yard talking. A Korean daughter/woman was there, angry because her mother was making her go after guys, and she did not want to. She was pacing a little walkway by the house, pretending to exercise—while she was really waiting for Pierce. She had on a dress, but you could see, underneath—when she sat on the walkway, that she had on pants and converse-like sneakers.

Then Pierce, the woman from the bathroom, and another woman were sitting on the lawn talking. Pierce’s uncle, and a bunch of the other men, were shooting off fireworks. It was daytime, but it was the only legal time to do it. Pierce’s uncle was communicating with three planes in the air using a walky-talky. The planes kind of looked like the child toy gliders. They had a letter and three numbers and the numbers were all one higher than the other (ex. 746, 747, 748). The planes seemed to be monitoring the fireworks. Men were placing bets on the planes—of which ones would stay up the longest. Two of the planes looked really low in the air. Pierce realized that they were aiming to land on the lawn/field the people were all in. He started running/rushing everyone off to the side where a low brick wall was. He saw one daughter/woman who was dressed as a spoiled child—wearing a Hooters T-shirt with another shirt under it, her hair was in pigtails, and she was eating a giant lollipop—as they were moving towards the brick wall.

He got everyone over to the side, but then he was not completely sure if the planes were going to land in the field. He still thought so.

A Telling of Stephanie’s Story Based on Her Response to the Dream Group: A Performance-Text

I’m not one of those girls…but maybe I could be.

I’m happy with myself. Happy. I don’t need a guy to complete me. I’m not one of those girls. One of those girls who needs to be with someone in order to feel good about herself, the same kind of girl who knows what it feels like to have a boyfriend, to be loved, to be admired, to be attractive to men, to be wanted. I’m happy with myself, but part of me wonders…what would that be like?

I know part of my problem is that I’m shy. I’ve been shy all of my life—shy around people my age in general and with guys in particular. I don’t know how to talk to them. I guess I had semi-thought about looking, wanting, needing a guy or love before; but I never thought that something like that would come out in my dreams…this dream. I picked this dream because I thought it was interesting—it interested me personally. I saw things in it that I could interpret as being me or could see where in my everyday life the different parts of the dream had come from, but I never expected that the group would directly target this pattern in my life—a pattern where I just pull out a book and read whenever I’m in a social situation or I’m uncomfortable around people my age. Even if I am in a situation where the majority of people there are guys—like my Tae Kwon Do or skydiving class—I still bury myself in what I’m doing and don’t pay attention to who I am with. I’m perfectly happy with myself, without a guy, without being—well I’m happy with that; but sharing this dream with the group reminded me that maybe I do feel like something is missing. I’ve never experienced that side of life before—never been on a date or had a boyfriend. Not that I necessarily want a boyfriend, but it made me wonder what would happen if I got out there and tried to meet someone; if I tried to put myself in a situation where I could meet someone. Maybe I could learn to interact with guys if I could place myself in a situation where it is not familiar, where it is not something that I’m used to doing, where it is not
just my girlfriends. I can’t hide behind my book anymore. I’m happy with myself, but I want a change.

Change. I have my recipe for change and all the necessary ingredients to make change happen: Senior year, spring break from college, destination Cancun, just my best friend Sarah and me, a week where no one knows me, and a pool of available guys that I have never met before and may never see again. True, I know I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, I don’t do drugs—heck, I’ve never even been downtown to the bars before. Four years in college, and I’ve never been downtown. I may never have participated in that type of social scene before, but I want to try it; and it is just a matter of deciding how and when I will be able to do it on this trip.

As Sarah and I finally arrive in front of our Mexican hotel, I push open the cab door and touch my limp foot to the ground bringing life back to my legs and muscles that have been stuck in a sitting position for most of the day—thanks to the shuttle, planes, and cabs we have been riding in. Stepping out of the cab, my feet begin to tingle from the blood flooding back into them; and I feel the humid air envelop my body. I notice my heart beating in response to the chorus of festive sounds carried on the breeze. I hear the music thudding in the background coupled with happy, drunken college students laughing and cheering at the nearby patio bar. I swallow the available moisture in my mouth in an attempt to wet the salty dryness in the back of my throat. Despite the feeling of butterflies in my stomach, I walk towards the entrance of the hotel with determination. I am here—here in Cancun, and tonight I have the chance to try a social scene I have never been a part of.

Following behind Sarah, I hear her sigh; and I glance up in time to see her shake her head at the noisy crowd of revelers. I ignore her reaction and smile as I tighten my sweaty grip on the suitcase that holds my secret little outfit that I have never worn before, but have tucked away under my hiking boots in preparation for this night.

We walk through the automatic entrance doors, and I shiver in the sudden blast of icy air conditioning. We head towards the front desk situated at the center of the wide-open lobby decorated in coral and turquoise colored carpet, furniture, and artwork. I go through the motions of checking in, but I am distracted with the thoughts of how I should present my plan for tonight to Sarah and what going out to the bars—maybe the patio bar!—will be like. As I take the hotel key swipe cards from the receptionist, Sarah enthusiastically calls out to me, “Steph, look at all these advertisements for archaeological sites—soooo many to decide from!” I smile and give her an “Ooooh” in response, and watch as she collects several brochures and pamphlets from the display stand. Although archeological sites are what we had carefully planned for before we came, archeological sites are no longer on my mind.

We take the elevator to the 11th floor, find our door, and with the permission of the flashing green light, enter the room. I throw my luggage down on the bed and rip the zippers open looking in the corner of my suitcase, under my hiking boots, for the secret bag I have hidden. Sarah tosses her suitcase on the bed, but heads immediately to the window and pushes the drapes to the side. “I can’t wait until tomorrow!” she says. “Look at the moon, Steph! The sky is totally clear—the weather is going to be perfect for us tomorrow.” She comes back to her bed and starts flipping through her archeological tour guide and researching our touring strategy for the next day. I smile and acknowledge her excitement, but clutch my pink shopping bag and head to the bathroom to prepare for my own strategy—a strategy for tonight.

I shut the door and turn the bag upside down waiting for my outfit to fall out as if it is my candy stash from a full night of serious trick-or-treating. There it is. My new, short, black Paris Hilton skirt and my magenta pink halter top. I slide my skirt on and gyrate my hips so that the
flirty layers of fabric will fall into place and hang evenly from the lining hugging my thighs. I
then pull the pink top on and tie the straps into a knot behind my neck. As I look at the new me
in the mirror—a me with legs, and breasts, a waist and a bared neck—I rehearse in my head what
I am going to say to Sarah. I need her support. I need her to be excited. If a group of girls in the
dream group, who I don’t even know that well, can see how important making a change is for
me, certainly Sarah will appreciate how important it is for me to be able to do this—for me to
even take making a change into consideration. I fuss with my skirt a little more, fluff my hair,
take a deep breath and twist the door handle. As the door cracks open, I blurt out “Sarah,”
penetrating the stillness of the quiet hotel room and whispering to myself, “Just ask her,” “She
will be supportive,” “She will help me try this.” I step out of the bathroom and turn towards her
expression of wide eyes, raised eyebrows, and an open mouth. As Sarah stares at me in shock, I
take in a deep breath and say, “I have something to ask you.”

Paige

Paige’s Background in Dreams and Dreamwork

Paige was a 21 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual and whose
interest in dreams began the summer after she finished high school largely due to her association
with a friend and coworker who was interested in dreams. That summer, her friend was taking a
summer class focusing specifically on dreams and Paige was able to learn more about dreams
and dreaming by way of talking to her friend about the content of the course. Although she
became more aware of her dreams and would ask her friend to help her try to understand her
dreams, she was unable to find satisfying meaning from her dreams. Following that summer, she
searched for courses at her university that she, herself, could take to explore her dreams in
particular and dreaming in general, but never found a course that was directly applicable to her
interest.

Her interest was sparked by way of association with her friend, but she had only spoken
casually about the content of her dreams and had never made a serious effort to make sense of
her dreams on her own or with others. She had glanced through articles in magazines or dream
symbol books; however, most of these articles focused on others’ dreams, and she had only
given fleeting attention to her own dreams and what they could mean to her. Thus, she came to
the study craving exposure to and experience with learning how to actually work with and make
sense of her dreams. During Paige’s time in the study, she took part in a dream group where she
was familiar and/or friends with each of the other members. Following this experience, she then
used the self-help book to make sense of her dreams. Paige’s story depicting her experiences
throughout the study is presented. The dreams she worked with, the methods she used, and her
responses throughout the process are all presented within the context of her story.

A Telling of Paige’s Story Based on Her Response to the Dream Group: A Performance-Text

I was planning on sharing, but not really sharing.

Dear Diary,
I’ve decided to take part in a dream study and we all have been asked to keep a dream journal. Journaling is something I’m comfortable with—I’ve always kept a journal—but the dream group—now that is something I’m not so sure of. Part of me wonders why I’m even doing this—even letting myself be in this potentially vulnerable position. How am I going to hide personal information if it’s pulled from my dreams without my control? What if I’m put on the spot by someone else or pressured to reveal intimate details about my life—details about my past or secrets about my relationships with people these other girls know? Honestly, I am excited that I finally have the opportunity to learn more about my dreams and maybe even learn from my dreams what I should do in the future—but—I can’t help feeling a little scared. I’m a private person—a very private person and I’m worried about what might happen in the dream group and during the study.

Next Tuesday is our first dream group together. I made it clear that I did not want to share first. I will share. I am planning to share. I have agreed to share. But, I’m not really going to share.

Dear Diary,

Today was our first dream group and Sara shared her dream. Her dream was really short—almost like a skeleton of a dream—but we were able to help her get an inner meaning from the dream and spark her emotions. When we began associating to the dream I wasn’t quite sure how we were helping her. I sat right next to her on the couch—so close that our arms and thighs brushed against each other—and I carefully watched her during the process with a gross awareness of how she was responding. Shortly after we began, I noticed that her face flushed, her head turned down, and she stared at the dream like the words on the page were hypnotizing her. Gillian paused and asked Sara how she was doing and she laughed nervously, said she was fine, and asked us to continue. I was surprised that we were able to work with such a short dream for almost an hour. Each of the group members shared their final interpretations and we all turned towards Sara to see how she took it. She looked back at us with glossy eyes and her neck and cheeks were splotched with red. We quietly waited for her to talk about whatever she was obviously feeling so intensely. She thanked us for helping her with her dream, glanced down, and shook her head back and forth, touched her fingertips to her lips, and began to cry.

She started to talk, but hesitated and allowed herself to take a moment to organize what she wanted to say. She disclosed personal details about an important decision that she was forced to make several months earlier but had been trying to forget about. She talked about how alone she felt and how even though she was with her current boyfriend at the time and still is with him, she felt disconnected from him and judged by him. I was surprised with how emotional Sara was because of her dream—I wasn’t expecting this kind of reaction from any of the group members and did not think she would share with the group that her dream was telling her this. I guess she needed to talk about her experiences, and I’m glad that she trusted us and allowed us to share that experience with her, to be there for her, and comfort her. I hope that I—the group—was supportive.

Dear Diary,

Well, tonight Judy shared her dream. We again worked with the dream, and I found myself relating to her dream and identifying with the loneliness, isolation, and feelings of
obligation that emerged from it. Last week’s dream group felt more comfortable, but with this
dream—Judy’s dream—I wasn’t sure if too much of myself was bleeding into my associations
and interpretations. Turning the dream back over to Judy and listening to her response was
comforting, but also disappointing. On the one hand, I witnessed how she too hides a part of
herself from other people. However, she wasn’t willing to open that part of herself to us—
instead, Judy disclosed that she tends to “take on too much” in response to the group. There was
more behind the façade than what she presented to us. When she reviewed the associations and
interpretations we had offered her, she focused on the “takes on too much” theme, but did not
make any mention of my associations, which targeted the feeling that she has to be the best. I
know that part of her—I’ve seen that part of her—but she was not willing to admit that to us
even though we touched upon some of the rich and painful emotions in her dream. I felt like I
could relate to her—the Judy in the dream—but the Judy in the dream group was a different
person, composed and perfect.

Dear Diary,

It was my turn to share a dream tonight. I know each of these girls is a friend, but I’ve
never poured my heart out to them; and they don’t know how I feel and what I really think about
other people. I was not going to let them rupture my emotions with their interpretations. I
thought about this dream—The Scary Dream—for a few days. Thought about whether I should
bring it and what it might reveal about me. There were people in the dream known by each of the
group members but the group didn’t know how I felt about each of those people. And, I was very
careful not to let them know during the process.

Maybe I picked this dream because it was scary—I can handle scary. Scary is an easy
emotion…well at least not a vulnerable emotion…well maybe it’s more that it’s an acceptable
emotion. I don’t have to explain why I’m scared in this dream—everyone is scared of sharks. I
didn’t want to show my emotions or cry. I mean, I trust these girls—they aren’t strangers—but I
feel like any sympathy from them would just be—I don’t know—heartless or not really
meaningful. I don’t want their pity. I don’t want them to feel bad for me. I didn’t want to bring
up my past experiences. I’m done with that time in my life. I’ve changed. I’ve grown up A LOT.
Those people from high school are not important. I’m not going to let them hurt me anymore.

When I began to share my dream, I got very nervous and could feel myself blush and my
voice get shaky. Everyone was watching me. I hate public speaking and hate being put on the
spot. I recited my dream from memory, but I stared at the page with my dream on it as if I was
reading so that I did not have to look anyone else in the face and maybe, just maybe, they
wouldn’t see my face either. I presented my Scary Dream:

The scary dream.

It’s dark and stormy and we are outside a very tall lighthouse. I’m with a group
but the only person I remember is Casey. I remember being very scared. We follow a path and
now we are inside. There are many stairs and they are unstable. It is very dark and it may be
raining. I am frightened.

I am now in front of the ocean, beach type area. There is a dock and a boat on the right
side of it. I’m there with 5 or 6 people—the ones I remember are Annie, Mary (both from high
school), and Trischa (Casey’s fling). I don’t remember Casey being there. It is sunny and hot.
We’re all swimming and then I get scared and get out. I stand on the beach and watch the water while they stay in. I scream, “shark” but no one seems to respond. They hear me but swim casually to the dock. I realize my cat is missing and I know that she has been eaten. Trischa runs out of the water and is yelling everyone else is dead. The police come to recover the bodies. I say they are eaten. Trischa screams we have to get the bodies and goes back in. I can now see bodies floating as she swims out. One person, in a green and yellow shattered bathing suit, is alive and helps Trischa swim to the others. I am very scared and watch the water for sharks.

I am now back on the path (looks like DMB path of people) and there are many people, 100s—everyone is trying to get away. We are in line and I still worry about my cat and am curious about the bodies. We make it into the lighthouse. Once again it is scary and life threatening. It is unstable and there are rope bridges. It is also night again. There are rooms along the way—one is my grandmother’s house—only it looks nothing like it. I yell for someone and there is no one there. I am back in the lighthouse. I’m with Casey only. He is angry that I keep slowing him down but I want to check out the situation. I am very upset and he says he won’t let anything hurt me. Much of my fear of sharks and of the situation go away. We are almost through the lighthouse. We have to get to the top. There is an elevator we see when we get to the top. I say I have to go back and make sure they are dead. We see senator Kerry and we have to vote and put our votes in the ballot box. We do not have time to wait in line. We give our votes to Kerry—he says, “thanks,” half-confused. We run towards the elevator—skipping everyone in line. He yells after us that they don’t count if we don’t put them through the box. I shout back we were told it’s ok and he says ok. We get in the elevator and go down.

I became aware that the feeling of being scared was not the only emotion that would be sparked in me—scared was just the beginning. I scribbled notes on my dream page throughout the process and knew, with the help of the dream group members’ associations and interpretations, that the dream was telling me—reminding me—that I wanted these people out of my life. It was as if the dream was a dip into my past and made me wonder if Casey was going to be a repeat—a repeat of the hurt and pain my ex-boyfriend caused me in high school when he treated me like I was unworthy of his love, of anyone’s love, and made me feel like I had to work to prove that I loved him and if I didn’t, he would leave me. Even though these thoughts started to haunt me and absorb my attention, I knew that I did not want to discuss my feelings with the group. All of them were polite and nice, but they know me and they know Casey. They do not need to know about my past as well.

As I thought about the dream, I wondered if maybe the lighthouse was showing me where not to go and directing me away from my insecure feelings—especially as they relate to my boyfriends and their ex-girlfriends. Yet, for most of the dream, I remain either near or inside the large structure. When I was in the lighthouse with Casey, things were scary, unstable, and out of my control. Maybe I shouldn’t focus on the previous relationships that my boyfriend now and my boyfriend in the past had. But, how can I do that when Trischa (Casey’s fling) is now actively pursuing him despite the fact that I’m his girlfriend—not her. In the dream, she escapes from the sharks and then also tries to rescue all of the ex-girlfriends I have ever had to deal with. In my life, I do feel connected and supported by Casey, yet I can’t help but feel scared about the steadiness of our relationship because my insecurities flood my mind, distract me, and make me angry at him when he just lets Trischa flirt with him right in front of me. It is not ok for Casey to ignore me and treat me like I don’t exist when his ex-girlfriend is around. This can not go on. I will not let myself be made to feel like this anymore.
Although my feelings for Casey and concern about our relationship surfaced while the group was working with my dream, I only silently toyed with these thoughts and was not prepared to share them with the other girls. How was I supposed to share this experience with them? Even if I did want to share my thoughts, how could I even begin to explain how I was feeling? Why should I have to? If they really knew what I was thinking, what would they think of me? Would they judge me? Call me insecure? Not good enough? Unworthy? Jealous? Possessive? That’s not me, that’s not who I am.

As they finished working with the dream, they all kind of turned and stared at me waiting for me to say what the dream meant and how I had made sense of what they had been saying. All of their eyes focused on me, penetrated through me, questioned me, and waited for me to reveal something deeper—disclose a secret, or maybe even cry. They had hints of my experience, but I knew they could not get at what was really bothering me. I had that part of my past and the feelings associated with it securely shelved away; hidden from them and at least partially out of my sight too. Translating my interpretation of their work was not something I was ready to do. I paused, quietly said thank you, and then knowingly brushed off sharing the real feelings and meanings they had touched upon. Instead, I told them that all of the interpretations were helpful and that I did not have anything to add because they had done such a good job. They continued to stare at me, waiting, hoping, wanting more from me, I suppose…but I refused to give it to them.

That part of me was tucked away and was not going to come out for this dream or for this group.

Dear Diary,

During our last dream group tonight, I had fun analyzing and dissecting Shelly’s dream and noticed that I have improved at being able to associate to dreams and draw out details that others in the group do not notice initially, but then end up building upon and confirming once I have pointed the details out to them. My contributions are important and having the dreamer, in this case Shelly, latch onto my associations and interpretations is validating and shows me that I can be helpful and insightful. When we turned towards Shelly, she was still, with eyes widened, eyebrows raised, cheeks flushed, and pursed lips that hesitated for a few moments, but then succumbed to a bashful grin. She cocked her head to the side and darted glances up at each of us, said thank you for our comments, and then turned her attention back to the dream that lay in her lap. Shelly shared intimate glimpses into what her experience had been like several months ago before her dramatic break-up with her boyfriend. She related to us how the dream reflected her ongoing struggles and clarified how she made sense of her interactions with him and what she had been coping with during, and still recovering from, after her break-up. From her gifts of self-disclosure, I felt connected to her as well as the other group members and my heart opened to her experience as I tried to absorb some of the pain that she had been holding onto. Each of the other girls regretted that the group had to end and reminisced about how much they enjoyed working with one another. I smiled and added in my own comments of regret for the group having to end, but inside I knew I was secretly ready to move on—the group was not for me.

Looking forward to working on my own is not to say I did not enjoy the group—I did—I enjoyed analyzing and helping the other girls and working in the group informed the way I looked at and worked with my dreams on my own. I don’t think I’m meant to work with others. Maybe a dream buddy or one other person who I trust and know well could work with me on my
dreams, but I’m not interested in participating in a dream group again—at least not for a while. I’m a very emotional person and I think I’m best to work on my own.

Dear Diary,

     When I first had the Inside Looking Out dream, I didn’t think anything of it. I brought the dream to work with me and brought the dream book, knowing that I would have time to work on the dream during my down-time. I started to read through the dream and followed the guidelines from the book, by writing down each character’s name and exploring the “place” in the dream. As I continued the process, the dream suddenly clicked for me and a wave of pain crashed through me, bringing me to tears despite my attempt to keep a happy face on in front of my unsuspecting co-workers. The first dream had brought things… feelings, memories, thoughts from the past…back to me as if it was a reopening of the door to my past. This dream seemed like it was connected—as if I couldn’t have had this dream without first having The Scary Dream. However, the Inside Looking Out dream pounded me even harder and forced me to face my problems—the problems from my past. I called this dream, Inside Looking Out.

Inside looking out.

     I’m at [the golf resort] and it is like a high school reunion. My friend Brad (worked with freshman year in architecture) is there too. I haven’t hung out with him in a long time. We are having fun and laughing. Everyone is in the hot tub. I remember Seth and Jon, Annie, Mary, Whitney, Sara, and Brad—though there are a lot of people. Brad gets on my back or something and we go into the pool area. Everything looks the same on the inside. I am laughing and having a good time. I make it a point never to go underwater—I don’t want my mascara to run, don’t want Brad to see it run. He is very attentive to me. He is giving me all his attention—though now that I think of it he doesn’t know anyone else. I have a feeling of him staring at me but I have nothing but feelings of friendship for him and it’s just nice to hang out with him. We go under the rubber divider between the indoor and outdoor pools. Somehow I managed to get through without putting my head under and Brad on my back got through too.

     When we got to the other side it was just Sara and myself that I remember, other people were behind us but I do not know who. We start talking about how we would get out of the pool and stuff our bathing suits with snow and then jump back in- when we were younger. I then notice the water is very shallow, blue, and clean. The water is very clear. Only like 4 feet deep. We couldn’t figure out what happened. The area was very small too, about half of what it used to be in our memory. We got to the end of the pool and there are steps out. I was in amazement about how much it changed. We got out of the pool. We then realized they must have done construction because there was a small area of concrete and then another pool. This one was bigger and dark, the same color as the attached lake. Sara jumped in and swam out until she reached the end of the pool. I kept waiting for her to get to the end because I could not see the difference between the lake and the pool, and I don’t think she could either because she bumped into the end. I scan again where she is and try to see the divider between pool and lake. I notice a slide on the pavement and think about putting it next to the pool and sliding in but I keep being distracted and never do it. I was standing on the outside of the pool in my bikini and now become aware of this and look around, Brad is looking at me, I put my head down and forget he is
there—the last I see him. Then I saw Seth/Jon jump in the smaller pool. Everyone is outside swimming and having fun. I notice Whitney up in the lifeguard stand, not swimming.

I go over to her because I had put my camera under it, now getting wet (camera is green disposable). So I pick it up and hand it to her to watch. I then ask her to take candid pictures. I go to take one and it clicks like there are no more pictures left. I look and there are still 3. Whitney takes it and starts winding it backwards. She says something about going to the extra film I am very nervous she is erasing my other pictures and do not like this. She opens the camera and my negatives come out. I hold them up to the light. I remember one negative being of the pool party and the group around the pool, and then another negative with 4 pictures on it. The one with the 4 pictures on it is now big, like a sheet of paper. There are baby pictures of me—cute ones, my sister is in one, I recognize them, have seen them before. Mary is now looking over my shoulder.

I turn the negative and all the pictures change—new 4, like a hologram. I turn a few times and watch the pictures switch. I am confused.

I look to my left and everyone is crowded watching a movie. I lay on top of Annie next to Mary. I think about how I should take a picture and look over to Whitney like I’m about to ask her. I WAKE UP

The first dream seemed to be a questioning of whether I do still have those hurtful feelings, but with this dream I’ve been thinking, yeah, YEAH, I am hurt. I had never dreamed about Whitney before and even while I was dreaming, I remember feeling my stomach sink and being stabbed with feelings of nervousness, dread, devastation, betrayal, and pain. I am still hurt by my past, but what can I do? What am I supposed to do? I know most of my problems from high school were because of my boyfriend at the time and the immature girls like Whitney who would meet with him also. He humiliated me—they humiliated me—and dreaming about the golf course reminds me of that, of those times. I don’t know how to get over those experiences—it frustrates me that I still think about that—that I even let myself think of that. I’m sick of letting him continue to hurt me—sick of dreaming about things that remind me of him and of those girls hurting me. I had wanted to forget them instead of get over them—to close them out of my life. I can’t pretend those feelings aren’t there, I need to pay attention to them.

Dear Diary,

I had my interview with Gillian this evening and I let myself cry. These dreams have brought up emotions that I have tried to ignore, tried to hide, hide from others, and I guess even hide from myself. My past is still bothering me and I can no longer ignore it and pretend that it isn’t bothering me. As I began talking to Gillian, I didn’t think I would cry—that I would show my emotions to her or to anyone else. My experiences in high school were painful, shameful but our conversation did help me to feel listened to and supported. I didn’t think I would ever tell anyone about my ex-boyfriend or about Whitney—I can’t believe I told Gillian. But, you know, I told her, and it felt ok.

Doreen’s Background in Dreams and Dreamwork
Doreen was an 80 year-old Caucasian female who identified as heterosexual and who had been interested in and worked with her dreams for much of her life. She described how she became interested in her dreams in her early twenties when she was introduced to Freud and his writings focusing specifically on dreams. Freud’s work hooked her interest in terms of the more technical way of understanding dreams; however, she also began to appreciate dreams for the more personal meaning she was able to take away from them.

Throughout her life, she had been in psychotherapy a number of times and with some instances, dreamwork would become a part of the therapy if the therapist was willing to work with her dreams. Although her dreams were often incorporated into the treatment, they were not the primary reason she was in treatment. She reported that through her dreams she was able to become more self-aware and would use the dreams to better understand problems and conflicts that were troubling her. Throughout her time in treatment, she kept a dream journal where she noted dreams she had worked with as well as those she had found personally interesting.

Sharing her dreams with others was not a new experience for her, but working in a group where the primary focus was on dreams was something she had never tried prior to the study. Throughout her professional life as a psychotherapist, she had participated in a number of experiential groups, including a Gestalt group used in preparation for family therapy; however, none of these groups focused specifically on dreams. Although her professional development did not incorporate dreams specifically, dreams were and are important to her personally and in her connection with others. More recently, as she entered her retirement years, she would often share and continues to share dreams with her close friends as a part of an intimate exchange, but not with the purpose of analyzing or interpreting the dreams. Thus, she came to the study and to her dream group with a focus on developing intimacy with others by way of dreams. Doreen and each of the group members she worked with used only the dream group and had no interest in using a book to understand their dreams. Doreen’s story depicting her response to the dream group experience is presented. Her dream is included within the context of the story detailing her response.

*A Telling of Doreen’s Story Based on Her Response to the Dream Group: A Performance-Text*

**The unsent letter.**

Dear Evelyn,

I am writing this letter to you even though it has been over two months since you have passed away and I am here living, breathing, and dreaming about you and the memories we shared. I cherish the friendship we had and the fifty-one years we shared together. But, I regret that I was not the friend I needed to be when it mattered most—the friend I had always been to you—and we have been to each other. The friend I was up until the last three years before your death.

I am sorry Evelyn—so sorry. Those last three years—I felt caught up. Caught up with your family and willing to concede to the family’s way of dealing with problems. We shared all of those years together Evelyn—all of those years—yet at the end I didn’t fight back when your family intervened and treated you as if you were made of glass. I didn’t even know your sister Beatrice or know Nathan, who had left home at the age of eighteen before you and I had ever met. These people were strangers to me, yet I allowed them to dictate how you would be treated. 
and allowed them to play the family trump card over our years of friendship, connection, and intimacy we had had together. Everyday I ask myself, why, WHY did I play into the family dynamics that had distanced you from them all in the first place? They didn’t know you the way I knew you—you were my smart, loyal, strong, beautiful, and endearing friend. You were the kind of friend that brought a smile to my face and made me feel warm and supported just by being in your presence. I’m so angry with myself. How could I do that? How could I let them keep you in the dark when they knew you were dying, but wouldn’t tell you the truth; wouldn’t let me tell you the truth.

I didn’t realize how bound by your family I felt until I had this dream, Evelyn. This dream helped me feel a victory that I could at least be with you when you died—be with you in my dreams since I was not honest with you before your death. I remember this scene from the dream; a dream of you, my friend:

I was with a 93 year old friend at a hospital. Her sister and son were there also. We knew she was very ill. The doctor, a woman, came and told us she would not live much longer. She said “Her death is crowning” and said we should prepare. We didn’t know what to do. I felt the responsibility to start preparing rested on me and felt overwhelmed. I knew I couldn’t take her home with me or care for her alone. My daughter Maria criticized the doctor for being so abrupt but I differed saying I thought she did the right thing. Then I asked Nathan, her son, what he planned to do. He answered that he had bought a small house for her to die in and after her death he would sell it. It was a great relief to learn he had made plans and then I felt comfortable that I could participate with the family in meeting Evelyn’s needs. I began to cry and Maria criticized the doctor. I told her Evelyn and we needed to face her death together and that we should make her as comfortable as possible. Evelyn said she was cold. I told someone to get a white flannel nightgown for her and to put her in a warm bed near us. Evelyn looked pleased.

When I woke up from the dream, I felt like something had gotten dealt with. The dream was almost like taking your death away from the family—taking it back. I could decide what would be done and how you would be treated during your death as opposed to adopting what Nathan and Beatrice wanted me to do.

Reflecting on our friendship reminds me of how important true intimate connection is, and significant relationships are important to me and my life now more than ever before. I’ve noticed that other people in our retirement community have become very active in lots of different things, and it begins to feel as if the activity is the focus. That who you are is attached to what you are in the activities that go on—as opposed to being, reflecting, being together, sharing, and letting people know who you really are at a deeper level. Since I have lived in this retirement community—lived here with you—I have always wanted to find a group that had that similar feeling of living, where they want to know me and I want to know them. Most of my life who I was—who we were—was connected to doing and action. But as I’ve aged, I think “doing” begins to take second place—not for everybody—but for me and I think for us. What has become important is who I am and gathering whatever I can from my environment—from people around me like you, and from nature, quiet, music, just being, and being still. Socializing and doing the surface things are fun, but they are not enough.
When I saw the opportunity to be in a dream group, I thought the group could be that group and turn into a support group that would offer me the kind of intimacy and friendship I had with you. Forming a support group is not what happened at all. Perhaps I got my hopes up, perhaps it was too formalized being a part of a research study, and perhaps the focus should not have been on dreams, but instead on developing friendships with dreams as a secondary focus. Maybe it was the short duration of the group or it could have been the dynamic of the group—a dynamic where one member displayed her expertise of dreams based on previous experience rather than trying to connect with us personally.

Even though I did not develop the friendships and intimacy with the other group members as I had hoped, the group did help me expand my understanding of my dream. One group member pointed out that in the dream I was relegating responsibility as opposed to carrying it all on my own shoulders. I realized that I wasn’t all alone and that I could be helpful by asking people to do things, instead of just me facing the responsibility and burden of trying to help you on my own. The group members also pointed out the phrase, “Death is crowning” and I realized that in the dream I understood, yes, death is here at the door—it is no secret anymore—you are dying and so I can be there and I can say I’ll be there with you as you die. In the dream, you knew that you were dying and I could be there with you.

I could have brought other dreams to the group, but I wanted to bring this dream because I felt an emotional connection to it. I felt open to whatever I might feel—in other words—if it brought on more grief or whatever, I was willing to face the emotions. I had hoped that bringing this dream—a dream that connected me to you, my dearest friend—might also connect me with these other women by expressing my own willingness to share my deepest self. I thought this group might be different and I thought that maybe, just maybe, I could develop an intimacy and connection reminiscent of what we had together.

I was disappointed with this group I shared my dream of you with. The meaning of the dream seemed so apparent to me and I didn’t want to take it apart a whole lot because I felt it was pretty clear. The dream got too studied; there was too much focus on the little details of the dream rather than the sharing of what the dream meant to me. The group members were supposed to say “If it were my dream this is what it would mean to me” but that felt a little artificial because I didn’t get to share enough about myself, my connection to you, and what you meant to me. The process also felt stilted because I was separated while the group members were tearing it apart and looking at it without me. They were looking at it and exchanging with each other about what they saw in the dream, but I was separate and disconnected. I was invited back in at the end of the group, but they had discussed my dream without me and I was excluded from the process—excluded from sharing.

You know Evelyn, the dream group did not offer me the connection and intimacy I had hoped for, but at least it did help me to start remembering my dreams more and remember my dreams of you. Although my dreams in the past helped me work through struggles and problems I was having, particularly during the times in my life when I was in treatment, my dreams now have a more healing function. They help me put things in perspective and help draw a circle around things and around events in my life. My dreams enrich my life and what is happening to me. I don’t see it necessarily as a preparation for death, but I see them as a consolidation of my life and a way of enhancing my understanding rather than the sort of working-through role they played for me previously.

This dream helped me better understand the power of the spell I was under before your death. I am resentful that I bought into the attitude your family was preaching to me and that I
met their wishes and needs rather than your needs and the needs of our friendship. I feel remiss that I let it happen and that I didn’t give it more thought at the time. But, Evelyn, know that I love you and that I regret not talking directly to you about your death. I will miss you and forever love and cherish the friendship that we had—a kind of friendship that is hard to find in life, but I was able to have and nurture with you. Goodbye dearest friend—may you rest in peace.

Love,
Doreen

Discussion

Based on the multiple dream accounts collected during this study, participants showed how they were active meaning-makers of their dreams and the dreamwork process, not passive recipients of others’ interpretations or dreamwork agendas. The women would not allow meanings to be imposed on them, but instead worked with the information given to them to decide whether the meanings fit with their experience in a way that helped them re-evaluate their way of being. In addition, these women were not willing to work with a method that did not fit for them. They would either discontinue their use of the method altogether or would try to make adjustments in the process so that the method would best meet their needs and the needs of their dreams. The complexity of the dreamwork process is discussed with a focus on how these women were active meaning-makers and dreamwork critics throughout the process. The importance of the feminist methodology and performance-texts utilized is then described followed by suggestions for future research based on the limitations of the present study. Finally, implications and conclusions are presented.

Women as Active Meaning-Makers and Dreamwork Critics

Throughout the dreamwork process, women were active meaning-makers and decided how they would allow the process to unfold and how they would construct meaning and develop an understanding of themselves based on their dreams and the dreamwork methods. The experience of using these dreamwork methods was complex. The very process of developing new awareness and/or incorporating change as a result of this new awareness was influenced by the dreamer’s willingness to work with a particular method based on the feelings present in her dream, her comfort level with engaging in self-disclosure, her willingness to consider different insights constructed during the process based on her understanding of her dreams, and her reasons and motivations for participating. This section will review aspects of the dreamwork process that were present during the opening stages of the process and that influenced how different women made use of and experienced the dreamwork they engaged in.

Although several women had a sense of what their dreams meant prior to working with them, their willingness to engage in a particular method and their decisions to pay attention to particular dreams were influenced by the relationships they had with their dreams. When making these decisions of what dreams to work with and with how to work with them, the emotions and images present in the dream influenced their interest in and willingness to engage in the dreamwork. For example, Doreen brought a dream that had significant meaning for her—even before she had worked with the dream. She wanted to open up the emotions aroused by the
dream and use the dream group space to address the feelings and/or to connect with others via the feeling connection she had with her dreams—even the painful feelings she might have had.

Other dreamers chose dreams for very different reasons. For example, Stephanie chose to bring, “The Guy Pierce Dream” to the group—a dream that she found amusing and that she described as having a few scenes—but one that she did not initially see as targeting a core problem in her life. Nor was the dream one that brought up painful emotions for her. She wanted to share that dream because she was amused by it and thought others would be as well. In addition, not all women were interested in sharing with others the dreams that had significant meaning for them. These women wanted to be able to pay attention to and work with the dream on their own because they were not willing or comfortable sharing that vulnerable side of themselves with the other group members. Thus, the decision to share a particular dream or work with it in a particular way was carefully made depending on the feelings and emotions present in the dream. Further, how that decision was made by each of the dreamers was influenced by her unique comfort level both with that particular dream and with her feelings present in it.

The understandings that emerged from the dream and from the dreamwork process were also influenced by the changing relationships and comfort level the women had with their dreams and with the feelings in their dreams throughout the process. For some women, working with a dream they had little, if any insight into, allowed them to be more open to the process and to what the dreamwork method—either the book or the group—could offer them. They were not naïve to the meanings that were suggested; but without having a preconceived notion of what the dream was relating to, they were more receptive to entertaining different possibilities. Alternatively, dreamers were more critical of the process and the interpretations and meanings suggested to them when they felt an emotional connection to their dreams and/or had a sense of what their dreams related to in their waking life. These dreamers would consider additional or alternative suggestions for understanding their dreams, but they ultimately would focus only on the insight related to their original hunch regarding what the dream could mean.

How a woman understood her dream influenced how she would respond to the insights offered to her. Specific to the group interaction, some of the interpretations were at times difficult to take in because the interpretations targeted an issue that the dreamer struggled with. However, contrary to Delaney’s (1998) suggestion that dreamers are often dishonest with themselves in the context of a group interaction, the women in this study showed that they were honest with themselves and were only, at times, dishonest with others, if at all. For example, dreamers like Paige mulled over the interpretations offered to them and chose not to disclose sensitive personal information with the other group members. There was some dishonesty between the dreamer and other group members if she was afraid to share vulnerable information, but she was not dishonest with herself about what she felt the dream was targeting. Thus, at times they were less than fully honest with others, but the women in this study were able to hold on and process difficult interpretations even when they were uncomfortable revealing their feelings and reactions to others.

Regardless of the method used, women also would reject interpretations that did not fit for them or make sense for them; and there was not a single instance in this study when a woman seemed to disregard an interpretation simply because it was difficult for her to hear. Again, contrary to Delaney’s (1998) suggestion that in a group interaction women will be dishonest with themselves about what their dreams could mean, in this study, the women’s willingness to disregard interpretations instead showed that they were not willing to submit to interpretations that did not fit for them or their experiences. The women’s rejection of meanings that did not
make sense for them suggested a strength and confidence in themselves and their understandings of themselves as opposed to assuming that they were lying to themselves and/or unable to admit to their problems.

In addition, each of the women in this study wrestled with how the meanings that did resonate for her should be incorporated into her life. Their incorporation of the meanings was a complicated and, at times, difficult process. Some of their action plans might be open to criticism, but Stephanie, as well as other women in the study, showed that the process of change is difficult and requires real struggle. This process of change and incorporation of new awareness or understanding into their lives depended on the willingness they had to make changes, as well as the challenges, limitations, and resistances offered by their environments. The three stories presented are not exhaustive, but they illustrate some of the specific challenges that were faced during the process. The only way to fully appreciate the changes each of them made—whether subtle or drastic—was to pay attention to and acknowledge the process they each went through and continue to go through.

How women understood their dreams and experienced the process was also influenced by the motivations they had for participating and the expectations they brought to the process. In the group, for example, women such as Doreen came to the process wanting validation and support for the pain and regret she experienced in her life and in her dream. For her, like others, the hope for the group was that it would be a space for relating to others, forming connections, and developing a different kind of intimacy than was often experienced in her typical social interactions. The hope was also that the group would be a space to meet new people and allow group members to see deeper more vulnerable sides of each other. Through this deeper level of intimacy, the hope was to be able to foster connections with others and possibly develop new friendships. Other women using the groups, however, were more careful of what they would disclose or share and used the group as a technique or tool to gain more understanding rather than as an opportunity to share deeper parts of themselves. As a result, they would close the group off from their experiences by responding to the process with vague and general responses to the work that had been done on their dreams. They, like Paige, might have wanted to use the group to find meaning and understanding, but an understanding of the techniques that could later be translated to their individual dreamwork.

In addition to the hope for intimacy and the interest in learning techniques to work with one’s dreams, there was a wide range of reasons that the women used the dream groups—all of which influenced the dream group process and the dynamics of the group. These multiple motives were not mutually exclusive, and more than one motive played a role in how each woman approached the dream group process. For example, some women were simply curious as to what dreams could mean and wanted to learn more about dreamwork. Others wanted to compare their prior experiences with their work in the study to see if the dreamwork available via the study would offer them anything different from what they had previously experienced. Many women wanted to participate in the group in order to gain insight into their lives and to try to understand themselves better. Through this insight, they hoped to learn and gain an understanding that would help them know what to do in the future.

Personal insight and development were what motivated some women to participate, but others placed an emphasis on being there for other dreamers and helping them with their dreams rather than connecting with them during the process by way of mutual self-disclosure. There was a comfort and satisfaction at being able to listen and support others but at the same time a hesitancy to reciprocate and share parts of themselves during the process for fear that the support
would be fake or that their struggles would not be taken seriously. Some women were even voyeuristic and were interested in finding out others’ secrets and vulnerabilities but not willing or ready to share their own.

In addition, other women in this study used the dream groups as a competition—a competition in terms of showing off their expertise in comparison to others or in trying to come up with the best interpretation that would fit for the dreamer. Expertise was flaunted by certain dreamers when they made numerous references to dream writers or theorists such as Jung or Freud to validate their associations. Or, expertise was displayed with consistent references and comparisons to previous work in relation to the work that was currently being done in the study. For some women, the tone of voice used to express themselves and the manner in which the associations were delivered also reinforced a sense of expertise and served to distance the people who used this style of interacting from the rest of the group. Competition also emerged when women tried to be the most creative or most original with their associations and would not acknowledge or build on the associations of others, instead focusing only on their own tangents.

Moreover, the groups in this study suggested that cross-generational differences exist in terms of the motives and reasons dreamers want to work with their dreams, the types of dreams they have at different points in their lives, and their willingness to work with certain types of dreams and certain types of methods. For example, Dream Group 3, a group of women in their retirement years, expressed an interest in and willingness to work with dreams that they knew touched upon painful emotions as well as dreams that were important to them and that they had remembered for a number of years. More specifically, one woman brought a dream that she had had late August in 1974. Another woman in the group brought a recurrent dream that she had had numerous times over a period of 10-15 years. The women in Dream Group 3 were also comfortable and interested in discussing issues surrounding death and dying. Two of the women each brought a dream to the group that she had had following the death of someone who was very close to her. These women wanted to use the group to discuss their feelings and experiences associated with their real-life experiences as well as those present in the dream. On the other hand, Dream Group 1 and Dream Group 2, both groups of women in their 20s, tended to bring dreams they were amused by and that they were unsure as to what meanings would be constructed from the dream. The meanings that were constructed from these dreams often targeted problems or ongoing issues that they had in their lives, but most of the women were not aware that the dream was speaking to those particular problems before they decided to bring that particular dream. These cross-generational differences are specific to the opening stages of the dreamwork process but do suggest that women might approach these groups differently depending on the stage of life they are in.

More specific to how women used these particular methods throughout the study in order to pay attention to their dreams, the women who tried each of the methods—the book and the group—decided how they would use the methods in a way that would best meet their needs rather than passively follow the protocol of the method offered to them. When using the self-help book, for example, none of the women read the book cover to cover. Instead, all of them skipped around, focusing on the sections of the book that seemed most relevant, but disregarded interpretations that did not relate to their experience. Moreover, the only women who did find meaning that reinforced or enhanced their understanding of their dreams in relation to their identities were those women who had participated in the group first. All other women either reported they had not been able to gain an understanding that was of importance to them by way of the book or they discontinued the study if introduced to the book first. Not only did six
women discontinue their participation in the study when introduced with the book first, but also the five women in Dream Group 3 had no interest in even trying the self-help book in the first place. Instead, they expressed interest in participating in the study only if they could take part in the dream group portion of the study without using the self-help book.

The women’s lack of interest in and appreciation for the self-help book could be an artifact of the way the study was setup; however, the women’s lack of interest in and/or disappointment in the book needs to be acknowledged. Paige was the only participant who was at least appreciative of the role the book played in helping her understand her dreams, but even Paige attributed her insight into her “Inside Looking Out” dream to the emotions present in her dream and to the techniques she learned by way of earlier participation in the dream group. The multiple accounts of disappointment and lack of interest in using the book suggest that a self-help book does not sufficiently motivate most women to pay attention to their dreams. Rather, this book frustrated, disappointed, and negatively influenced their willingness to continue using dreamwork through the end of the study and in the future.

Self-help dream books may have value in limited and restricted ways. The books allowed for privacy and protection from making oneself vulnerable to others, but dreamers in this study were often left unsatisfied with the work they had done with the book. The dreamers were able to find quick interpretations, but often times the interpretations did not fit exactly for the dreamer. Moreover, the universal themes presented in the book did not offer sufficiently precise and specific insights to make them valuable in a deeply felt, personal sense—thus leading the dreamers to disregard the interpretations altogether. If the dreamers did entertain the meanings that emerged from the dream book, they could only attach themselves to possible themes related to their experiences but not to specific aspects of their lives. Because they could not relate the dream to specific aspects of their lives, they were not motivated to incorporate the meaning into their understanding of their identities and of their lives. Thus, the self-help book failed to meet the needs of the women in this study. Even if the book offered them the privacy of working on their own, the book did not motivate them to continue work with a self-help book in the future—especially in comparison to the understandings they were able to get from the group or by way of the techniques they learned in the group.

Specific to the dream group, one group in particular, Dream Group 3, adjusted and enhanced the Ullman process in ways that would better meet their needs. For example, the use of “If it were my dream this is what it would mean to me” felt artificial to these dreamers; and the group members agreed that it would be preferable to leave that phrase out of the discussion, trusting that hurtful comments and associations would not be made with reference to anyone’s dream. Moreover, they decided that it was more useful to ask questions of the dreamer throughout the process rather than only at the beginning and at the end after the group had shared its associations and interpretations of the dream. Thus, this dream group in particular was not willing to simply follow the Ullman procedure, but instead made changes in the process that would make the group more satisfying for them.

In addition, despite Ullman’s discussion of dream groups as a catalyst for social activism, none of these groups united in a way that indicated a confrontation of “enduring flaws in the social structure” and none of these women came to the group with the goal to use the group as an avenue for united change (Ullman, 1999, p. 267). The present study is limited in its ability to shed light on this potential function of dream groups given the time-limited nature of the groups. Perhaps such political activism could only emerge from long-standing groups.
At the same time, one of the groups in this study suggested that political activism was not at the forefront of participants’ expectations regarding dream groups. The women in Dream Group 3 were all politically active and involved in the 2004 Presidential Election; however, personal problems and struggles of the dreamers were the focus of the group meetings, not the overall social structure. The women would discuss current politics prior to and following the group; but the main focus during the actual meetings was on possible personal struggles the dreamer could be dealing with, not political change.

Through the group meetings, the women did share information about rallies and volunteer opportunities that other women in the group could and often did take part in. However, the motivation to be political was a function of the political climate they were a part of, not of the dreams they were having or the meanings that were emerging from the dreams via the group. Perhaps dream groups could validate the political agendas of the dreamers, but it is questionable whether the dream group itself would have a focus on confronting the social structure unless that was the agenda of each of the group members.

Although none of these groups were motivated to join together to bring about political change as a function of their participation in the dream group, the groups did make the dreamers more aware of how their social context was influencing their personal struggles. For example, when Doreen shared her dream about her friend Evelyn, each of the group members related to the feelings that came with having to cope with a loved one’s death. They talked about what a difficult time in their lives it was given the number of people they were forced to say goodbye to—sometimes even people younger than they were. They described similar instances of having lost loved ones and what it was like living in the retirement community and having to go through that experience often. In addition, when Stephanie shared her dream and disclosed her difficulty with intimacy with men, each of the women in the group validated how difficult it was to meet people on their University campus—especially if drinking and going out to the bars was not something they were interested in doing. Thus, there was an acknowledgement of the social context and of how the dreamer was not alone in terms of how she was feeling, but no movement towards political change emerged during the short duration of these groups.

In sum, these women were active meaning-makers of their dreams and critics of the dreamwork process—both in terms of their use of the book and the group. In order to more fully understand the dreamwork experience and honor the complexity of the process, the parts of the experiences that were most influential in the opening stages of the dreamwork process have been described. These include the dreamer’s willingness to work with a particular method based on the feelings present in her dream, her comfort level with engaging in self-disclosure, her willingness to consider different insights constructed during the process based on her understanding of her dreams, and her reasons and motivations for participating.

*Importance of Methodological Approach and Presentation*

Three stories were used to illustrate the process of dreamwork and to give attention to how women are moved by the experience in radically different ways depending on the motivations they have for participating. However, these stories are not exhaustive and do not represent the range of experiences that women have when paying attention to their dreams and using different dreamwork methods. These stories do suggest, however, that even a small group of women, all of whom are interested in working with their dreams, could come to the group and use it in very different ways depending on the agendas, fantasies, and expectations they bring to
the process. This new and different understanding, which became apparent during the study, was arrived at as a direct result of the feminist methodology utilized. Without such a relationship-oriented methodology, most, if not all, of this understanding and the personal experiences such understanding derives from would simply not have emerged from ratings on a measurement scale.

By using a feminist methodology and privileging women’s agency, new and deeper understandings about the dreamwork process emerged. Previously, experiences with dreamwork methods had been discussed only in terms of relative quantities of “experiential,” “insight,” and “action gains” (Heaton et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2003). However, in this study, empathic understanding was critical to learning about the experiences these women had with the dreamwork methods. Rather than being excluded from the interpretation and categorization of their experiences, the women in this study were invited to voice the parts of the experience that moved them, interested them, surprised them, and touched their lives. Through this intimate sharing, an emotional understanding of their experiences could emerge and participants shared with me what their hidden agendas, expectations, fantasies, and reactions were to dreaming and the dreamwork process. Thus, relationships with the participants allowed for the uniqueness of the individuals to be shown and for real and detailed reactions to the process to be shared.

Moreover, an effort was made to empower the participants by aiming to have a conversational interview where I was speaking with them rather than speaking to or for the women by way of a strict protocol (Kirsch, 1999). Although there was an inherent power dynamic within the researcher/participant dynamic, an egalitarian interaction was encouraged by way of my respectful and undivided attention towards them, mutual self-disclosure about the process, encouragement to share and elaborate upon any experiences they felt were relevant to the conversation, and the opportunity to spend time talking about the parts of the experience that were most important to them (Kirsch, 1999). The safety and effort to create a nonhierarchical relationship with the participants facilitated the opening up of deeper, more personal, and perhaps more vulnerable parts of their experiences.

This feminist methodology with an emphasis on fostering a trusting, safe, egalitarian relationship also allowed for a contextual understanding of the participants to come forth. Rather than evaluating decontextualized dreamwork effects or specific gains from the dreamwork experience, knowing the context of the women’s lives helped explain and validate why they made the decisions and choices that they did related to the dreamwork. Moreover, by grounding the participants’ experiences within their life context, the dreamwork experience was humanized and a different understanding of the dreamwork experiences was made possible by way of exposure to personal stories and experiences (Richardson, 1997).

Finally, a feminist methodology where the participants and the readers are moved to action was privileged. This research was not done only for publication, but designed so that the women would be moved to action by participation as well as those exposed to their experiences (Kirsch, 1999). Through the sharing of their personal stories with themselves, other group members, and me as the researcher, they were able to learn more about themselves and others and were changed by the process. Each of the women were moved by the experience in different ways and responded to the dreamwork and insight they gained in ways that would best fit into the context of their lives. Moreover, I, as the researcher, was touched by each of their experiences and through empathic understanding could learn more about the dreamwork process by way of my experiences with each of them. My exposure and witnessing of their stories not only enhanced my understanding of the dreamwork process, but also made me more aware of the
struggles that women face in the context of contemporary society. Each of these stories was based on individuals, but at the same time each story gave voice to cultural stories related to gender, in particular, and also age. The context of their stories was unique, but the struggles they experienced during the process were cultural stories that had not been voiced previously in the context of self-guided dreamwork.

In order to share that experiential understanding, performance-texts proved highly valuable to the presentation of these women’s experiences. Performance-texts both honored the women’s experiences by humanizing and contextualizing their experiences and also showed that these dreamwork methods have “real consequences for the fates of individuals” (Richardson, 1997, p. 32). Consequently, readers who are exposed to these stories are offered examples of “transformative possibilities” where through the participants’ storied examples of transformed lives, the stories both arise from and become a part of the “cultural heritage” and, in turn, affect the “future stories and future lives” of those exposed to them (Richardson, 1997, p. 33). This experiential understanding allows “different meanings and systems of meaning to emerge” with each person who vicariously learns about the participants’ experiences. As Richardson (1997) writes,

People do not even have to know each other for the social identification to take hold. By emotionally binding people together who have had the same experiences, whether in touch with each other or not, the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life. It provides a sociological community, the linking of separate individuals into a shared consciousness. Once linked, the possibility for social action on behalf of the collective is present, and, therewith, the possibility for societal transformation (p. 33).

Performance-texts have the power to create experiential understanding and through that understanding new possibilities are created not only for the participants who had the experiences, but also for each person who witnesses the stories. Of course, the extent to which the stories presented here succeed in achieving the kinds of influence discussed theoretically by Richardson and others is up to the reader to judge.

Limitations and Future Directions

Unlike previous studies (Heaton et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2003) that relied on analogue research resulting from a single group meeting, the present study explored participants’ use of self-help dreamwork materials over a course of several weeks. This increased length of participation dramatically improves upon previous research; but this study is also highly time limited itself. The participants’ experience with the dreamwork methods included 3 weeks with a self-help book and/or 3 to 5 weeks in a dream group, depending on the constraints and needs of the group members. This duration of the study, albeit longer than previous studies (Heaton et al., 1998; Hill et al., 2003) does not reflect the length of time that many women may and could participate in each of these methods. Although all of the women in this study were ready to move on after using the self-help book for 3 weeks, the short duration of the dream group likely masked the potential for understanding, intimacy, and connection that could emerge in the context of a long-standing group and, instead, can only shed light on the opening stages of the dreamwork process. Perhaps if dreamers had had the opportunity to share more than one dream
and to get to know each other better throughout the process, their motivations for bringing and working with particular dreams as well as their comfort in working with others would have been enhanced. Future research should examine the experience of being in a dream group for a longer period of time in order to better understand how individuals are influenced by way of involvement in a longer-term dream group. By focusing on members in a longer-term dream group, the process of developing trust, intimacy, and understanding with others could be better understood. Moreover, a longer-term dream group would allow for the exploration of how the kinds of relationships the individuals have with one another affect the insight able to be gained and the insight willing to be shared by the dreamer. Perhaps with stronger relationships and the fostering of trust among the group members, the sharing with others would increase as would the quality of the insight that the individual could get by way of the group.

In addition, the focus for this study was on two self-help dreamwork methods in particular. There are other methods that are similar to those used in this study (i.e. Faraday’s (1997) Dream Power, Garfield’s (1995) Creative Dreaming, and Taylor’s (1983) Dream Work); however, these three stories can not shed light on the experiences of using other dreamwork methods. Future research should explore the process of using other self-help dreamwork methods in order to appreciate and better understand the intricacies of different dreamwork methods and the possibilities that arise and come with these different experiences.

For this study, the experience of individuals using each of these methods was explored. However, the present study did not consider group process per se, nor did it take into account the extensive literature available on group process. The extent to which that literature might apply to or inform the formation and subsequent functioning of groups specifically devoted to experiential dreamwork is entirely unexplored in the literature. The ability of a particular dream group to achieve cohesion might be influenced by how often the group meets, whether the group members know each other before beginning a group together, whether the relationships among the group members create a safe space for the dreamer to self-disclose personal details about himself or herself following the sharing of a dream, whether it meets in someone’s home or in a more public place, whether the group members interact in other social settings besides the dreamwork sessions, or whether the group is one gender as it was in this study or mixed. Moreover, the group’s cohesion might also be influenced by whether the same person leads the group for each meeting or whether leadership rotates among the members. How intense the spirit of competition within a given group is might also contribute to the group’s cohesion. Thus, exploring how a dream group develops and maintains cohesion would be a fertile alternative direction for future research on dreamwork methods.

In addition, what the best combination of motives and expectations is among the group members needs to be clarified. Although the women were initially asked why they wished to participate in the dreamwork study, their true motives and reasons for participating were not revealed until later in the process—once a trusting relationship had been established with them. Knowing how best to assess for motivations initially is not clear, but information about the motives and expectations is important to know if the hope is that the group members will get along and will work well with one another. Moreover, future research should further explore the presence of cross-generational differences in motives and expectations for the dreamwork process. By better understanding these potential differences, perhaps the dreamwork process can address the needs and preferences of different groups.

The women in this study displayed several different motivations and reasons for participating in the dream group and for using the book. Although these reasons offer some
insight into how people are approaching these groups, further research needs to be done to explore what other motives individuals might have for working with these methods as well as how their motivation to continue in a group changes with longer involvement in the dreamwork process. For the book, individuals were ready to move on after only 3 weeks. However, their exposure to the dream group was short and many women indicated a wish to continue after having shared only one dream. Though the women in this study showed that they had several different reasons for participating in the dreamwork, future research should explore how their reasons for participating shift and motivations change over time. Perhaps with continued participation in a particular dreamwork method, other motives and reasons for participating in dreamwork will emerge in addition to the those present prior to and in the opening stages of the dreamwork process.

In addition, a better understanding of how the dreamer’s relationship with the dream affects the dreamwork process could help inform what the best approach would be for working with a particular dream. For example, the dreamwork process differed when the person was convinced of the dream’s meaning prior to working with it versus when the person had no idea what her dream meant or only had a small clue as to what the meaning could be based on the emotions that were present in the dream. The emotions and feelings present in the dream also largely influenced the relationship the dreamer had with her dream. Perhaps knowing how the dreamer’s relationship with the dream affects her willingness to engage with it could inform what kinds of dreams would be best suited for a dream group at different stages in the process. More specifically, dreams that were considered amusing might be more appropriate for the first dream that is shared whereas the dreams with more intense emotions could be reserved for when the dream group has grown and the members have gotten to know one another better.

Implications and Conclusions

Dreams do not currently have a prominent role in the lives of individuals in American culture despite the presence of many different nonprofessional dreamwork methods for interested individuals to pay attention to and to appreciate their dreams. Currently, many women turn to self-help dream books when they have the desire to pay attention to their dreams. However, as evidenced by this study, self-help dream books fail to provide sufficient motivation for many individuals to pay attention to their dreams and, if anything, frustrate and disappoint many if not most interested dreamers. This study suggests that dream groups provide a more accessible starting point for people to appreciate and share their dreams with others. Perhaps if more individuals use dreamwork methods, such as dream groups, that have the ability to sustain their interest; dreams could play a more central role for people to understand themselves and others on a more intimate level.

Moreover, dreamers with compatible interests, motivations, expectations, and fantasies about the dreamwork process might be more likely to develop a cohesive and fulfilling group, given that dreamers are active meaning makers of their dreams and of the dreamwork process. Regardless of the method presented to them, dreamers in this study constructed meaning from their dreams and the process based on what they personally brought to the method. Thus, a group of dreamers with compatible dream and dreamwork interests might have a more fulfilling experience and, in turn, allow dreams to play a more important role in their lives. As previously stated, “Dreams are gifts we give ourselves in the form of pictures” (Brooks, 1997, p. 5); yet the decisions made as to how to appreciate them and incorporate them into our lives determine the
kinds of gifts we allow ourselves to have. If we can better understand how to honor and improve how we use the dreamwork methods available, perhaps more people will have the opportunity to experience those gifts.
References

Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

STUDY TITLE: Working alone or with others: A comparison of popular dreamwork methods

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Gillian Finocan

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relative usefulness of different dreamwork methods by exploring how the method used helps individuals find meaningfulness or understanding from their dreams.

Based on the responses participants provide on the preliminary questionnaire, each participant will be assigned to a dreamwork condition where they will use two methods, an experiential dream group and a best-selling dream book. By consenting to participate, the participants are agreeing to share their dreams with others and to possibly comment on others dreams. At no time is anyone required to share a dream they do not wish to share or disclose information they do not wish to reveal. Participants will take part in a dream work method for a few hours each week for a period of seven weeks, and will also keep a written record of any dreams they have over the period of the study. Participants will be asked to provide the principal investigator with a total of 3 written descriptions of dreams and the interpretations of those dreams (2 from the best-selling dream book and 1 from the experiential dream group). Following this experience, each participant will be invited to participate in an interview with the principal investigator. These interviews are expected to take between 1 to 2 hours total per participant.

Participation is strictly voluntary. There is no penalty or loss of benefits of any kind associated with declining to participate. Participants are free to withdraw this consent and/or to withdraw from the study at any time. There are no foreseeable risks to participants and there is no deception involved in this study. Potential benefits for participants include: the opportunity to gain exposure to different dreamwork methods, which will provide various tools for understanding and exploring their dreams, and to learn more about themselves and/or others depending on the dream work method they participate in.

Everything the participant reveals will be kept confidential. The interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed so that the information shared can be used by the principal investigator. The participants name will not be associated with this information at any point in the research process and any identifying information that the participant mentions will be removed. Participants will also be assigned identification numbers and these numbers will be used to identify all dream materials collected. The names of participants will be kept in a separate, locked file from the locked file containing the dream materials. Only the principal investigator, her faculty advisor, and other members of her research team will have access to the dream materials. In addition, by consenting to this form, participants who will be working with others are agreeing to not discuss any personal information they learn about others during the process.

If the participant has questions about the study at any time, the participant is invited to contact either Gillian Finocan by phone at 529-2447 or by email at finocagm@muohio.edu or Roger
Knudson by phone at 529-2404 or by email at knudsorm@muohio.edu. If a participant has a question regarding rights of research participants, the participant may contact the Miami University Office for Advancement of Research and Scholarship at (513) 529-3734.

I have read the preceding statements and agree to participate in this study.

I further give my permission for the researcher to quote from my dreams and interview responses I contribute, verbatim, in part or in whole in any reports of this research (including papers presented at professional conferences, articles in professional journals, or book chapters). I am free to withdraw this consent at any time for any particular dream or for the entire set of dreams I have contributed. There is no penalty associated with withdrawing this consent.

_________________________________________
Signature of Participant                        Date
Appendix B

DREAM STUDY PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION I: BACKGROUND INFORMATION: Please answer the following questions as thoroughly and as honestly as possible. For each question either enter the necessary information or insert an “X” in the appropriate space.

1. Name __________________________________________

2. Your sex:  Male _________  Female _________

3. Your age: ______________________ years old

4. Educational Background (most recent degree): _____________________________________

5. Occupation: ___________________________

If student answer 4a, 4b, & 4c, if not, move on to #5.

a. Identify year in school:  Freshman ____ Sophomore ____ Junior ____ Senior ____

b. Do you belong to a fraternity/sorority?  Yes ______  No ______

b. What is/are your major(s)? ___________________________________

6. How would you best describe your political views and/or affiliation? _________________

7. Do you identify as a feminist?  Yes ______  No ______

8. Your ethnic background could best be described as:

   _____ African American _____ Caucasian

   _____ Asian American _____ Hispanic/Latino

   _____ Native-American _____ Other (please describe: ________________________)

9. Your sexual orientation could best be described as:

   _____ Heterosexual _____ Gay/Lesbian

   _____ Bisexual _____ Other (please describe: ____________________________ )
SECTION II: DREAM INFORMATION AND PERSONAL PREFERENCES: For each of the following items, please answer each question as thoroughly and as honestly as you can. Again, for each question either enter the necessary information or insert an “X” in the appropriate space.

The following questions will ask you to describe the nature of your dream recall.

1. On average how many dreams do you remember during any given week?

   0 to 1 ____  2 to 3 ____  4 to 5 ____  6 to 7 ____  8 or more ____

2. How many nightmares do you have in any given week? A nightmare is a scary dream that awakens you from sleep.

   0 to 1 ____  2 to 3 ____  4 to 5 ____  6 to 7 ____  8 or more ____

3. How would you best describe the majority of the dreams you remember?

   1 ____  2 ____  3 ____  4 ____  5 ____  6 ____
   Small fragments       Short stories          Detailed
   and or pieces of dreams   with little detail   lengthy dreams

The following questions will ask you to describe how you have worked with dreams in the past or are currently working with your dreams.

1. Have you ever tried to work with or interpret your dreams on your own?

   Yes _____  No _____

2. Have you ever tried to work with or interpret your dreams with a friend?

   Yes _____  No _____

3. Have you ever worked in a dream group?

   Yes _____  No _____
   If yes, how long has or did your group work together? ___________________________

4. Have you ever taken a course or workshop that focused specifically on dreams?

   Yes _____  No _____
   If yes, please identify and describe the work you did in this course.
5. Approximately how many magazine articles have you read on dreams?

None ____ 1-3 ____ 3-5 ____ 6-8 ____ 8-10 ____ Over 10 ____

Can you identify where you found these articles or who the authors or titles of the articles were?

Approximately how many books have you read on dreams?

None ____ 1-3 ____ 3-5 ____ 6-8 ____ 8-10 ____ Over 10 ____

Can you identify the title or author of the books that you have read or that have been the most meaningful for you?

6. How would you best describe the books/articles you have read (identify all that apply)

__________ Dream symbols
__________ Self-help
__________ Predicting the future
__________ Scientific
__________ Other (Please describe: _____________________________________________)

7. Have you ever worked with your dreams with a therapist?

Yes _____ No_____ 

If yes, describe the nature of this dream work

8. If you have a problem, which of the following would you prefer to do? (identify one)

__________ Solve the problem on your own  _________ Seek help from others

9. Briefly describe why you wish to participate in this study.
Appendix C

CONFIDENTIALITY SCRIPT

Principles of the Experiential Dream Group:

1. The dreamer remains in control of the process from beginning to end. The dreamer decides to share a dream, modulates the self-disclosure engaged in response to the group’s input, sets the limits of the exploratory dialogue, and has the option of terminating the process at any point.

2. The group is there to serve as a catalyst by stimulating and supporting the dreamer’s effort to relate to the dream. No one tells the dreamer what the dream means. The members of the group project their own feelings and content into the imagery in the hope that some of it resonates with the dreamer. All projections made during the group interaction will be prefaced with the statement, “If it were my dream…” or “If I were the dreamer…” in order for the group members to “own” each of his or her projections.

3. The dreamer is respected as the expert in relation to his or her dream. It is the dreamer who experiences at a feeling level the correctness of the fit of what the group has to offer. The dreamer is the ultimate source of validation and has the last word in accepting or rejecting the contributions of the group. It is the dreamer who has to experience a sense of closure before the process can come to a successful end.

4. All disclosures that take place in the group are completely confidential and all members must respect the dreamer and the other group members by not discussing the disclosures outside of the group setting.

Taken from:

Appendix D

DEBRIEFING LETTER

STUDY TITLE: Working alone or with others: A comparison of popular dreamwork methods

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Gillian Finocan

There has been little research on the usefulness of various dream work methods and none that qualitatively examine the experience of using self-help dream books and dream appreciation groups. Participants who want more information on various types of dream work may wish to read the following:

For dream group information, see the following:


For other self-help books by Gayle Delaney, see the following:


For other possible methods for working with dreams, see the following: