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An exploration of the unassisted gravity dream

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Abstract: Flying dreams are termed 'gravity dreams,' along with dreams that include falling, climbing, descending and floating through air, water and stairs. Enormous wave dreams are also considered to be gravity dreams. Phenomenological studies looking at flying dreams are scarce, and this area of dreaming remains largely unexplored, despite gravity dreams being listed as one of the most commonly reported dreams. This study uses phenomenologically-orientated qualitative thematic analysis to explore the idiographic experience of the embodied self during an unassisted gravity dream. Six gravity dreamers were interviewed. Thematic analysis uncovered six major themes: 'Boundaries;' 'Not of this world;' 'Being more than oneself'; 'Temporality' (the sense of infinity or forever in the dream); 'Locus of control' and 'Gravity Dreaming as a Process' (in terms of learning to fly over time or a history of gravity dreaming). Four of the participant dreams described were lucid in nature. The discussion suggests that explorations of existential experiences enable us to push the boundaries of research, generating new ways to practice psychotherapy and greater understanding of how our experiences shape the formation of both therapist and therapy.

Keywords: Gravity dreams; qualitative thematic analysis; existential experience; psychotherapy

> *I fly in my dreams, I know it is my privilege, I do not recall a single situation when I was unable to fly. To execute every sort of curve and angle with a light impulse, a flying mathematics – that is so distinct that it has permanently suffused my basic sense of happiness.* Friedrich Nietzsche

This research is grounded in my own subjective experience of gravity dreaming. Unassisted flying, a regular feature of my nocturnal world, began at a time in my life when my life was bounded by numerous constraints: religious, physical and psychological.

My interest in the research topic also stems from professional concerns. In my psychotherapy practice, gravity dreams have been reported as significant and memorable. This has fueled my desire to explore the experience of the gravity dream, in terms of the embodied self and the potential significance of such a dream to the dreamer.

As an integrative psychotherapist, I tend towards embracing a pluralist philosophical stance, one which disputes the possibility of any one single answer to the central questions of human existence. I reject the notion of absolute or fundamental truths; I regard different sources of knowledge as having their own validity (McLeod, 2017). I perceive reality as mediated by individual experience and as socially and culturally situated. The data in this study derives from individual stories and from the subjective perceptions of my participants (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006).

Gravity Dreams

Flying dreams are termed 'gravity dreams.' This definition also embraces dreams that include falling, climbing, descending and floating through air, water, stairs and elevators (Maggiolini, Persico, & Crippa, 2007). Dreams involving enormous waves

are also considered to fall in this category (Bulkeley, 2016). An unassisted gravity dream is one in which we fly or fall without assistance. Such dreams are often lucid; describing the relationship between flying and lucid dreams, Barrett (1991) notes that the lucidity usually precedes the flying, rather than being triggered by it.

Gravitational dreams, which have been recorded throughout history, seem to have a connection with the forces of physical reality. They appear to reflect an existential awareness of the dangers posed by these forces and the limitations of our existence. Such dreams have been described as emotional and very powerful, invoking in the dreamer an awareness of life and death and producing significant vertiginous bodily sensations that carry over into waking awareness (Bulkeley, 2016).

Flying and falling dreams are listed amongst the most common dreams in empirical studies. Maggiolini and colleagues report that these elements are present in 38.1% of recalled dreams (Maggiolini et al., 2007). The frequency of flying and falling dreams is estimated to fall somewhere between 65% and 80% of all examined dreams. Falling dreams have a higher incidence (73.8%) than dreams involving flying or soaring (48.3%) (Saul & Curtis, 1967).

Gravity dreaming is closely linked with lucid dreaming. Scientific studies have shown that during lucid dreaming our brains exhibit high frequency gamma waves, as seen in meditative and hypnotic states (Morley, 2016). This points to possibilities for psychological growth during such dream states. Gravity dreams have been described as 'numinous', archetypal and significant (Bulkeley, 2014). Jung suggested that lucid dreams "may prove to be the richest jewel in the treasure house of psychic experience" (Knudson, 2001, p.167).

Existentialists, while rejecting Jung's view of an unconscious, view dreams as constituting a microcosm of the dreamer's lived world (Deurzen, 2012). Dreams are also seen as significant by Dasein analysts, who contend that they reveal an individual's spectrum of world-openness (Cooper, 2003).

Regardless of whether dreams are a microcosm of our inner-world or a means by which we nocturnally demonstrate our world-openness, these tantalizing and mysterious aspects of our being merit greater attention. Dream work has been found to be a useful psychotherapeutic tool (Hill & Goates, 2004), with potentially beneficial effects. Research involving patients with post-traumatic stress disorder, insomnia and nightmares suggests that working with lucid dreaming can help patients experience symptom relief (Zadra & Phihl, 1997). Research by Crook and Hill (2003) found that clients reacted positively when encouraged by their therapists to bring their dreams to therapy. Deeper exploration of these nocturnal experiences may well enrich therapeutic practice.

A look at the Literature

Theoretical Perspectives

While there has been little systematic research into the phenomenology of gravity dreams (Schredl, 2004, p.31), theories abound regarding dreams and their purposes.

In the field of neurobiology, activation-synthesis theory proposes that dreams are interpretations by our forebrains of random activity passing from our spinal cord to our cerebellum during Rapid Eye Movement (REM) Sleep (Hobson & McCarley, 1977). For Hobson (2005), many supposedly meaningful dreams are actually the simple reflection of sleep-related changes in the brain state. Alternatively, threat stimulation theory hypothesizes that, when dreaming, humans are playing out an evolutionary function geared to helping them deal with threats in waking life (Zadra, Desjardins, & Marcotte, 2006).

From a psychodynamic perspective, Freud proposed that dreams had both a surface, 'manifest' content and a hidden, 'latent' content. For him, dreams represented an attempt to disguise hidden desires (West, 2011). Some psychodynamic theories of dream analysis have been criticized for being interpretive and reductive (Condrau, 1993). An example is Freud's belief that falling dreams stem from our early childhood memories of being tossed around by an adult. In contrast, Gutheil (1951) associated falling in dreams with loss of temper and self-control: a 'falling down' in relation to prevailing moral standards.

For Jung, dreams had a greater significance than this: in some instances, they contained a pre-eminent wisdom which could guide human action. Dreams revealed unexplored aspects of ourselves, "the unvarnished, natural truth" that could help us challenge the limited views we have of ourselves. They offered a spontaneous self-portrayal, in symbolic form, of the actual situation in the unconscious (West, 2011, p.3).

The gestalt therapist Fritz Perls described the dream as an 'existential messenger'. He proposed that clients be encouraged to go back through their dream, creating a first-person narrative that would increase their sense of authorship of the experience. This is turn would facilitate a deeper understanding of the unconscious (Yalom, 1980). For Deurzen, taking an existential position, it matters little whether dreams are a product of relaxing brain cells or a directly meaningful expression of clients' current preoccupations. Rather, the dream is "a microcosm inhabited by the same intentions and worries as their actual world" (Deurzen, 2012, p.170).

From the phenomenological Dasein analytical perspective, dreams are not minor, truncated, spectral, reproductions of

waking life but modes of experience that are autonomous and authentic in their own right (Stern, 1977). This is a position I have come to share through my work as a psychotherapist. In my experience, dreams appear to have some form of symbiotic relationship with the lived world and as such are human experiences worthy of exploration.

Research Perspectives

Regarding the taxonomy of dreams, Kuiken and Sikora (1993) propose four basic categories: mundane, anxiety, transcendent and existential. Transcendent dreams involve ineffable significance, visual-spatial shifts, magical success and transcendent awareness. Existential dreams can involve separation, sensory saturation, feeling shifts and self-perception in depth. Gravity dreams appear to span the existential and transcendent categories.

Gravity dreams have received some specific theoretical attention. Back in the 1940s, Irving Harris (1948) suggested a link between dreams of falling and certain personality traits, including: difficulty in expressing defiance, especially in the mother-child relationship; a tendency to naive, uninhibited expression of feeling; and a tendency to use defensiveness to protect self-esteem. He went on to argue that the mothers of patients with these traits had been insufficiently involved with them, resulting in a defensive introjection (Harris, 1960).

For Maggiolini, Persico, and Crippa (2007), falling dreams are generally connected with fear, while flying dreams are associated with happiness or surprise. Falling dreams have also been associated with higher neuroticism scores (Schredl, 2011). On the other hand, flying dreams have been linked with low neuroticism, openness to experience, boundary thinness, dream recall frequency and playing a musical instrument (Schredl, 2007). Other research has found a link between flying dreams and creativity (Brink, Solis-Brink, & Hunter, 1977).

The potential links between gravity dreams and emotionality suggest that gaining a better understanding of this phenomenon requires a psychotherapeutic approach. Just as Hobson (1988) hypothesized that the fundamental function of the flying dream is to reawaken our sense of self as an agent by integrating maps of self-representation, I too see a link between personality correlates and gravity dreaming. Since our histories shape who we are and who we become, the story of why and how we dream is likely to be complex and intricate.

Researchers have also explored lucidity in relation to gravity dreams. The Oxford dictionary defines lucid as 'sane, rational, clear minded or easily understood'. While Snyder (1988) detected an association between lucidity and flying dreams, Barrett (1991) found that individuals experiencing flying dreams were significantly more likely than other dreamers to describe their dreams as lucid.

Gackenbach and Schillig (1983) regarded lucid dreamers as a subset of people whose vestibular system in the inner ear was subject to intense activation during sleep. However, later research by Leslie (1996) found that while activating the vestibular system in a sleep laboratory could stimulate lucid dreaming, subjects were able to have lucid dreams without such stimulation. Stumbys (2014) supports this when he describes spontaneous, passive, lucid dreams as well as active lucid dreams, suggesting we can actively encourage ourselves to become lucid dreamers.

Saul and Curtis (1967) provide a vignette of a woman with terrifying repetitive dreams of falling. In her therapy, this was found to be related to the pressures placed on her by her husband's alcoholism: "Whatever it was in Ann's makeup and whatever external circumstances made life too much for her, when her response became one of enraged giving in, giving up, letting go, she had severe anxiety dreams of falling" (Saul & Curtis, 1967, p.3).

While the available literature sheds some light on the prevalence, functions and possible benefits of gravity dreams, it reveals little about them in terms of an individual's embodied, lived experience. Although there has been some research into the ways in which personality correlates with gravity dreaming (Schredl, 2002, 2007; Schredl et al., 2017), little work has been done on the situatedness of the gravity dream in the life of the dreamer.

The exploration of dreams has lost favour among certain psychotherapy traditions, following reductionist models, which related dreaming to neurochemical changes in the brain. Shifts in cultural and spiritual traditions have also impacted our openness to existential dream phenomena. However there has been a recent resurgence in the interest of dreams, following studies demonstrating their role in understanding our mental health (Robb, 2018). We know that patients with depression experience more nightmares (Hublin, Kaprio, & Partinen, 1999; Mume, 2009), and that patients with personality disorders have more negative dreams (Schredl, Paul, Reinhard, Ebner-Priemer, & Schmadhl, 2012). Research has also found that shifts in dream content can be indicators for psychological progression in therapy (Beauchemin, 1995).

Greene (2017) found that 10 out of 13 participants in her study had been unable to locate therapists who welcomed the inclusion of spiritual beliefs in therapy. These participants sensed discomfort in their therapists when they shared spiritual or religious experiences. This, I believe, is why it is paramount to include experiences such as gravity dreams and transcendental phenomena into our therapy room, without judgment, but with curiosity and interest.

Aim of Research

The primary aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of six gravity dreamers. The research used a phenomenologically orientated qualitative thematic analysis to explore the idiographic experience of the embodied self during an unassisted gravity dream.

Phenomenology seeks to capture and describe people's lived experiences, as conveyed through their personal narratives, with the aim of bringing to shed light on "that which has previously remained hidden" (Thayer, 2003, p.86). There are two dominant phenomenological traditions: the descriptive (Husserl, 1980) and the hermeneutic (Ricoeur, 2004; Smith et al, 2009). For hermeneutic phenomenologist van Manen (2015), phenomenology is interested in anything that presents itself to consciousness, whether the object is real or imagined, empirically measurable or subjectively felt. This paves the way for the exploration of human experience, which is subjective, intangible and existential.

As my literature search had pointed to the existential nature of gravity dreams, I decided to use four existential dimensions (physical, social, personal and temporal) to shape the interview schedule I would use with participants. Throughout the research I sought to engage reflexivity, whether in my role as witness or as the author of the study (Finlay & Evans, 2009). I kept a journal in which I noted down the details of my journey, assessed my relationship with each participant, and explored any pre-existing assumptions, specifically those which might from my own history as a dream flyer (Finlay & Ballinger, 2006).

Methodology

This study is phenomenologically orientated in that it seeks to grasp and describe aspects of participants' unique lived experience and it takes an existential orientation. This is potentially transformative for both researcher and participant, since it offers individuals an opportunity to be 'witnessed' and gives them both a voice and space to begin to make sense of their experience (Finlay, 2011).

In this study, I have sought to explore the gravity dream experience from an embodied perspective which draws on these four existential dimensions. At least four existential dimensions have been identified in relation to an individual's experience of the world. While Binswanger (1946) highlighted the physical, social and personal dimensions (*Unwelt, Mitwelt, Eigenwelt*), a fourth spiritual/temporal dimension (*Uberwelt*) was proposed by Buber (1923), Japers (1931) and Tillich (1952). For Merleau-Ponty, our bodily being is the place where ontology, epistemology and ethics meet; embodiment cannot be considered separately from being and knowing (Todres, 2007). A phenomenologically orientated enquiry allowed me to explore not only the emotional experiences of my participants but also their embodied experiences. The study sought to explore individual, as opposed to collective, human experience, understanding this to be complex, contextual, emergent and transpersonal.

The specific methodology used for this research was phenomenologically orientated qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I did not intend this study to be one where I seek to explain or interpret a phenomenon in a positivist manner. The starting point was how gravity dreaming is to be understood as a subjective individual experience, not a concrete reality. I used thematic analysis to identify emergent existential themes without interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke, is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and can be seen as a methodology in its own right.

The use of thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report emergent themes was also influenced by my desire to unravel aspects of participants' surface reality via a semantic, inductive approach, rather than look for latent themes in the data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Some of the initial themes were linked to the questions in my interview schedule, and to that extent started off as 'top down' themes (Hayes, 1997), fed by the existential nature of the questions. However, the final five major themes, none of which bore much relation to interview questions, emerged on the basis of an inductive approach (Patton, 1990). None of these themes generated were driven by my theoretical interest in the subject area.

Participants

In terms of my selection criteria, participants could be of either sex and aged 18 years or above. They had to have experienced gravity dreaming within the last five years and have retained a vivid memory of such dreaming. They were also required to have no leaning towards loss of sense of reality. Given my awareness that a subject such as lucid dreaming could be open to fanciful, imaginative descriptions and conjectures, this was an important consideration for a study that sought to present a true reflection of the embodied experience of the gravity dreamer.

An advert was placed in the Psychotherapist, a magazine published by the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) requesting the participation of gravity dreamers in a 40-minute interview. Eight people replied to the advert, of whom six followed through to interview. Initial information regarding participants' background, occupation and interest in

the study was gained by phone or email, and on this basis, assessments were made about candidates' suitability for the study.

Recruiting through a psychotherapy magazine made for a relatively homogeneous sample. Four of the participants were female and two were male; all six were between 35 and 65 years of age. In terms of profession, the participants comprised: a consultant clinical psychologist and psychotherapist; two psychotherapists; two doctors of psychotherapy; and a company director who had experienced being in therapy. Despite this apparent homogeneity, it was understood that participants would vary in their philosophical orientations as well as their socio-cultural backgrounds, and that this would have an impact on the data.

Due to the geographical spread of the participants, the interviews were conducted online via a conferencing application. Audio and video recordings of interviews were made to facilitate my description of the participants' experience and were saved anonymously on a password-protected computer. Participant names were changed to codes. The interviews were transcribed to text for analysis.

Data Gathering and Analysis

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, towards the goal of gathering rich, first-person accounts of gravity dreaming. Interviews were conducted via an online video conferencing application and were recorded using both an audio and video recording. The data was saved securely on a password-protected computer. The interviews were then transcribed.

Following the first interview, I added three more questions to the interview schedule to enable participants to focus more directly on their physical experiences (Gendlin, 2003). The schedule was adhered to as closely as possible to avoid my slipping into a therapeutic role.

Paralleling the work we do as psychotherapists daily, the focus during interviews was on participants' reconstructions of their experience. Questions were designed to explore participants' sense of embodiment and temporality/spatiality (Umwelt) and sense of 'selfhood' (Eigenwelt) during their dream and their degree of emotional connection to the dream. Questions also explored participants' 'sense-making' of the dream, and their sociality (Mitwelt) during the dream. Since existential, hermeneutic phenomenologists argue that all description is already interpretation, participants were encouraged to make sense of their dreams themselves (Young, 1993).

Repeated, systematic readings of the transcript were undertaken to explore recurrent existential themes, using an inductive, sematic, thematic analysis. The thematic analysis used was an essentialist method, one which was intended to report the experiences, meanings and reality of the participants in order to "unpick or unravel the surface of reality" (Braun & Clarke, 2017, p.81). Themes that captured a patterned response from the participants were coded. A process of coding and reviewing codes then ensued before the themes were named and defined. Initial themes were derived from the questions themselves, and this resulted in 15 themes (two more were subsequently added following a review of the data by a 'critical friend': see Table 1 in the appendix at the end of the paper).

Each data set was coded separately and comparisons were made across the data corpus (Saldana, 2016). The subsequent data sets then influenced the themes attributed and were recorded as initial themes and subthemes, which were put into a chart. This provided the basis for a process of data recycling towards achieving a final thematic map. Bar charts detailing the number of participant responses attributed to each main theme helped this process.

A 'critical friend'-- a respected and trustworthy colleague, who understood my philosophical perspective and could therefore shed light on my 'blind spots' (Bager-Charleson, 2014) – was invited to read through the transcripts and make her own suggestions regarding emergent themes. This helped me 'bracket' some of my assumptions, and also allowed themes to emerge that were independent of my own gravity dreaming lens. Data extracts were taken for the results section.

While participants were invited to comment on the interview and the identified emergent themes, only one participant was interested in reading the interview. However, all participants were interested in seeing the final results.

Ethical Aspects

Participants received an Informed Consent document which required their signature. They were also given a Letter of Intention which: outlined the study; informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any point; told them of any potential risks; and gave them my personal details. The letter also explained in detail how the research would ensure confidentiality and data protection.

Practice-based research involves ethical guidelines which put the client's interests first (Bager-Charleson, 2012) and ensures that the research relationship is equal and not exploitative. In the case of my study, data was stored in a locked hard drive on my work computer. At every stage of the research I aspired to operate ethically within the guidelines of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the United

Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy and Metanoia Institute (Middlesex University). Participants' names were coded and were not shared with my 'critical friend'. Extracts from texts used in the results section were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms.

Phenomenology advocates an attitude of loving acceptance of all aspects of a client's existence (Cooper, 1993), which I aspired to achieve. Throughout I strove for non-maleficence: the avoidance of harm to my participants or causing them distress. Along with their right of withdrawal, participants were also entitled to refuse to answer specific questions. In addition, they were offered debriefing interviews to ensure they had been adequately supported (in the event, none felt this was necessary). Copies of the transcripts were offered to participants, but only one took up the offer. They made no comment on the content but wanted to keep the transcript for their own personal development. One participant wanted to see the video and all participants were interested in my findings and any future work to do with gravity dreams.

Findings

Thematic analysis uncovered six major themes: 'Boundaries;' 'Not of this world;' 'Being more than oneself'; 'Temporality' (the sense of infinity or forever in the dream); 'Locus of control' and 'Gravity Dreaming as a Process' (in terms of learning to fly over time or a history of gravity dreaming).

Theme 1: Boundaries

The theme of boundaries was an unexpected theme, and one that came up at some point in every interview. Participants were asked whether they had a sense of their mortality during their dream. The response of one participant (Monika) was that the dream was more about: "Breaking free, breaking boundaries, going beyond, but I see those actually much more about life and affirming life and wanting more from life, rather than death".

Participants used terminology suggestive of breaking free of emotional or psychological constraints, such as "escaping" constraints and "dissipating" boundaries. Bridget spoke in the following terms:

> I have been working in therapy and thinking about my wisdom and archetypal things, my sense of self and my creativity and freedom. I've seen it more as me seeking to be free and somehow without the kind of fettered everyday living and script and all of that kind of stuff and shame and everything, without that, this part of me is alive and powerful. (Bridget)

While Rebecca believed her dream was about breaking free of her unhappy relationship, Mark thought his was about breaking free of his work issues and making the decision to change his job.

Theme 2: Not of This World

This transcendent theme was coded thus because participants saw the dream content as coming from outside of themselves or from a higher part of their normal functioning. This fits with the spiritual dimension of an existential dream.

Participants believed their dream was either not a dream or made reference to a landscape that was not of this world. Describing a dream in which she was flying with her recently deceased daughter, Sarah spoke of her belief that her dream contained an After-Death-Communication with her daughter (Botkin & Hogan, 2014). It was moving and heartwarming to hear her describe her sense that the dream involved actual contact with her daughter. She believed they were meeting in a different realm, a place in between, where death was no longer an obstacle for contact.

When I later asked Sarah about the emotion connected to her dream, she replied thus:

> That joy of connection and recognition and being with XXXX, and she was happy, which you can imagine was really important for me…I believe that I did have contact with XXXX, yes. (Sarah)

I was profoundly impacted by this interview. I recognized the comfort and solace this dream had given Sarah during her grief. Believing that her daughter was safe and happy had made a real difference to her ability to deal with her mourning.

When describing his gravity dream, Mark spoke of being "absolutely convinced within the dream that it is not a dream". He believed a higher consciousness was assisting him through his work difficulties.

For Monika, gravity dreams were different from ordinary dreams:

> I am aware of the fact, that this is not like you know just a regular story or something that I saw last night that trickles into my subconscious and brings something up. You know it's separate; it belongs to itself. (Monika)

Bridget's dreams were pivotal for her survival; she described them as a 'private' place where nobody could hurt her. They were again very much separate from her earthly experiences.

Theme 3: Being More Than Oneself

One question asked of participants was whether they were themselves during their gravity dreams. All six affirmed that they were. However I was surprised when I realised they were actually describing being 'more than themselves.' Monika put it thus:

> I am me. I am absolutely me, but I am me without the weight of the world, I think I would probably say that I'm more spiritually or soulfully connected and I'm inhabiting that part of myself, that's hampered in the everyday-ness of living. I'm much more uhh, I can feel my own wisdom, or that part of myself, that just knows that without any sense of doubt or without any of the drama of my internal inferiority, without any of that. I just am, it's almost as if I am in touch with a part of myself that is really not so lively in everyday living. (Monika)

This was echoed by Bridget:

> I don't feel mortal. I don't feel of this world. I feel like the essence of me is connected to the dream world in such a different way, there isn't any sense of beginning or end of life or death. (Bridget)

Theme 4: Temporality

Participants described a sense of infinity, or 'forever-ness', about the dream experience. This demonstrated an existential 'temporality' to the dream content.

> There's a forever quality about this. It is something that you've done before that you're doing now that you know you will do again in the future and it doesn't end. (Monika)

> For me we know that the body will die, but I guess the dream, it had a real, almost like you could touch it, a real sense of being more than the body, so there is a sense of eternal in it. (Sarah)

Theme 5: Locus of Control

Participants felt that they were in control of their gravity and their dream, suggesting a strong internal locus of control (Woodward, 1982). All six participants mentioned having a sense of power during their dream: four used the term 'powerful' to describe how they felt, while two referred to 'empowerment'.

The 'locus of control' coding also fits with a lucid profile (Barrett, 1991); four of the six participants were aware that they were dreaming.

Theme 6: Gravity Dreaming as a Process

Five participants described learning to fly over time, and of experiencing flying dreams since childhood. Monika captured the experience in vivid terms:

> I've gone all shivery now. I could feel like, oh, it's such an experience, because it's very vivid for me, so, I've been doing it since I was a very small child, so I had a real sense of the earth below me and so exhilarated and kind of powerful and I could see the trees...I know that I've done this before, and what are the steps and so then I realize, actually, I'll just begin floating, although in my recollection of trying to remember how I did it, I remember that at one point I thought I needed to run and jump, but now that is seem to have mastered it, or whatever it is, I don't need to do that... It does involve concentration; it's not involuntary stuff. (Monika)

Bridget and Sarah, too, had long histories of flying dreams:

> I know that I was a child, a tiny child, flying, because of the whole experience and the flying experience as a grown up is very different because I remember, in the dream when I was a child, that I was in a watering can, a green watering can, and I was really low down to the earth, so I could see the detail of the soil as I flew. (Bridget)

> I'm feeling emotional now because I've done it since I was very, very small and I feel like it is part of me and its part of the historic aspect of my life. (Sarah)

Mark contrasted the flying dreams of his childhood with his subsequent dream experiences:

> Very early in my life I remember in my childhood I had a lot of flying dreams, which were very low level, just skimming along the ground, and I suppose those are the two contrasting types of gravity dreams I've had in my life, and there is some of the same feelings but not nearly the same kind of exhilaration, perhaps more of a frustration, but that was when I was a child really. (Mark)

Adam noted a locational shift in the progression of his flying dreams: "I am wondering if they started indoors and I got more powerful and started going outdoors".

Discussion

The use of existential dimensions in my interview questions proved both beneficial and challenging. While it was relatively easy to produce questions associated with existential themes, I was aware that this was presumptuous to the extent that it assumed that accounts of the gravity dreams were going to be existential. However, I take the view that lifeworld dimensions are fundamental to all experience, so it was a reasonable assumption to make. While some of the initial themes sprang directly from interview questions, five of the final six themes emerged inductively from the data.

As a gravity dreamer, I am aware that I had assumptions about the themes that might be generated. I acknowledge the active role of the researcher in identifying themes and reporting them (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). However, I was not anticipating the more inductive codes, even though they did fit with my experience.

In relation to the transcendent 'Not of This World' theme, Hamilton (2014) refers to dreams that come from a spiritual realm or a higher consciousness. For Spinelli (2005), these are not personal dreams, concerning un-reflected upon matter. Assagioli (1965, p.5) defines the higher consciousness as "the sphere of aesthetic experience, creative inspiration, and higher states of consciousness...denoting our higher potentialities which seek to express themselves, but which we often repel and repress." Perhaps this has relevance for gravity dreaming?

An interesting finding was that all six gravity dreamers chose to focus on flying dreams during interviews, despite mentioning that they had experienced other types of gravity dreams, including falling and tsunami ones. Why might flying dreams have featured so strongly? Could it be that a gravity flyer, rather than a gravity faller, is more likely to come forward to participate in research?

As a psychotherapist, I am interested in self-insight as an embodied form of understanding. Participants made sense of their experience and reached new understandings through the process of recalling their gravity dream. During the study, I witnessed four participants describe themselves as "more than" the ways they were during waking life. Todres (2007) uses the term 'freedom-wound', which he believes is a soulful space we can occupy where we are grounded in great freedom and great vulnerability. This I believe may be a theme in gravity dreams, although it is something I would like to study further.

The gravity dream motif was an interesting finding of this research, and merits further research. The theme 'gravity dreaming as a process' points to a learned skill that develops alongside our emotional and psychological world. There are many psychological explanations for a dream series that involves developing a skill such as flying. Such an experience might be associated with a freedom-wound (Todres, 2007), a personality trait (Schredl, 2007), an avoidant attachment pattern (Bowlby, 2005) a creative adjustment (Evans & Gilbert, 2005), or some form of psychic compensation (Smith, 2015). Certainly the notion of 'the wounded healer' is well known in psychotherapy (Sharp, 1998). Further research might shed more light on our clients' existential concerns and histories, enabling a deeper appreciation of why these dreams can be life-changing for certain individuals.

Some participants in this study referred to a sense of the "unreal" or "other-worldly". Lee (2017) views depersonalisation in dreams as a form of reflective awareness, related to past traumatic experiences, in which the dreamer's sense of self seems unreal. There is evidence to suggest that individuals experiencing depersonalisation during dreams develop fewer trauma-related symptoms subsequently (Shilony & Grossman, 1993). Bridget during her interview described thus:

The meaning I make now is that somehow that was, that's a place of safety for this part of me that, sadly my history and the people involved in my history would have, unfortunately, would not have cherished, would have been very destructive about it, so I feel I am very fortunate to have somehow found this place, to keep this part of me, but somehow this part of me cannot be kept, can't be squashed down in that way, because at night this part of me is exercising itself. (Bridget)

It would make sense that participants needed to feel control and power during their dreamscape if there were difficulties in their waking lives. Four participants recalled being aware that they were dreaming and feeling they were in control of their dream. However, while this supports previous the findings of previous research (Gackenbach & Schillig, 1983), it does not mean that this can be generalised across gravity dreams.

Through the process of recalling their dreams, participants were able to gain fresh insights into the significance of the experience, paralleling the work done in therapy. Participants had carried their dreams and remembered them vividly for many years. The fact that they are night-time experiences renders them no less significant than those encountered during the day.

Significantly, one proven intervention for the treatment of trauma is Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing therapy (EMDR), which replicates the eye movements found in REM sleep. It is during these REM cycles that we experience our dreams (Davidson & Parker, 2001). Perhaps we are generating our own EMDR as we dream? The gravity dreaming sequence may tell the story of our struggles and our healing.

Robb (2018) found that clients who dreamed about traumatic events were more likely to heal from them.

That the dreams of the participants often seemed linked to their emotional survival and growth and development is profound. By exploring gravity dream motifs in our professional practice, we may not only aid the healing process but also help our clients gain fresh understandings, function at a higher level and become more aware of their own moods.

The clinical relevance for bringing dream work into psychotherapy is well documented. The exploration of existential phenomena takes the shame out of the intangible and pushes the boundaries of psychotherapeutic research, assisting the development of our discipline. Robb (2018, p.18) defines the challenge thus: "If we fail to take the simple step of remembering and understanding our dreams, we are throwing away a gift from our brains without even bothering to open it."

Closing Remarks

Throughout my research I have sought to breathe life into a subject which has thus far enjoyed only a marginal position in psychotherapy research. My own experiences of gravity dreaming were paramount to my psychic survival as a child and it has been profoundly moving to discover that I have not been alone in my experiences.

With five psychotherapists and a psychotherapy client in my research pool, I was aware of the likelihood of wounds in their history. However, my research did not attempt to place my dreamers in their specific context or provide a history of their lives. It did not explore their theoretical orientations, the changes in their motifs, or whether they had experienced other existential dream phenomena. It did not ask whether their dream experiences had influenced them as therapists or if they had shared their experiences with others. These are areas I hope to explore in future narratively orientated research.

Further phenomenological research is needed to deepen the descriptions of experience which have begun to emerge in my somewhat sketchy thematic analysis. While I believe I managed to capture something of the experience, a thorough going phenomenological analysis is needed to more fully explicate the existential dimensions and evoke the phenomenon.

All the participants were significantly impacted by their experiences of gravity dreams. They believed that in some way these dreams were assisting them through life events. I feel enormous gratitude to them for so generously giving up their time freely to help me explore our shared passion. Their enthusiasm made me appreciate the potential benefits of gravity dreaming for the wider community. One participant (Sarah) summed it up thus:

> [Gravity dreaming] is one of life's great profound experiences and if you haven't had it, wow, what a shame that is, and so I feel blessed, you know, you can't just order it up, either you get it or you don't…

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Having done my integrative psychotherapy training with Ken Evans (and his wife Joanna Hewitt Evans) it feels fitting that I publish my first piece of original research in the journal that he founded. It was both Ken and Joanna who started me on this journey to be 'all that I can be', and at the tender age of forty-five years old, I feel that I really am at the beginning of that journey.

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About the Author

Claire Mitchell is an integrative psychotherapist in private practice in Jersey (British Isles) having done her post-graduate training with Ken Evans and Joanna Hewitt Evans. Her practice is humanistic and relationally-centred. She employs EMDR in her work seeing some similarities with REM sleep patterns. Claire also has two degrees in psychology and business studies. She is currently in her fourth year of her Doctorate of Psychotherapy by Professional Studies (DPsych) programme at Metanoia, London. Her research interests include existential dream phenomena such as, 'After Death Contacts' (dreams of the dead), precognitive dreams, and shared dreams. She regards her training in psychotherapy as a diving board into a myriad of fascinating areas that grab her attention.

Appendix

INITIAL THEMES	SUB-THEMES	FINAL THEMES
Sense of gravity	Ascending, build up of energy, floating, awareness of elements, familiar sensation	
	Movement, sense of speed, moving through space, sense of lifting	
Boundaries	Transcending barriers, escaping, dissipating, freedom, breaking free	BOUNDARIES
	Noticing boundaries, disconnect to body in waking life, out of my body, did not feel physical, awareness of physicality	
Temporality/infinity themes	Foreverness, infinity	TEMPORALITY
Embodiment	Sense of movement, sense of lifting, physical freedom, feeling trapped, aliveness	
	Being oneself, being more than oneself, being stronger, more spiritually aware, high-self	MORE THAN ONESELF
	More than in waking life	
Emotional connection	Enjoyment, peaceful, greed, exhilaration, positivity, hope, calm, excitement, nostalgia	
	Potential, energy, strength, possibility, surprised, priviledged, lucky	
Sociality	Positive connection with other, solitary, negative connection with other	
Locus of control	Powerful, in control, empowerment, control,controlling	LOCUS OF CONTROL
Possible connections with Life	A shift (in understanding), life going well, relationship changes, career changes, intellectual struggle	
	Evolution, life change, epiphany, transformation, no immediate connection	
Sense Making	Not a dream, contact with spirit, spiritual beliefs, breaking free, archetypes, higher wisdom, always able to fly,	NOT OF THIS WORLD
	As a learning from childhood, not of this world, epiphany, potential, spiritual beliefs	
Lucid	Aware dreaming	
History of gravity dreams	Natural to fly, starting off on the ground, flying changing over time, always flown as a child, a skill to learn	GRAVITY DREAMING AS A PROCESS

Table 1: Emergent themes