

Lucidity Letter

Vol. 3, Nos. 2 & 3
Psychology
August, 1984

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Problems Related to Experimentation While Dreaming Lucidly

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Lucid dreaming offers a unique opportunity for the study of dreams. The lucid dreamer, unlike the ordinary dreamer, knows that what is being experienced is a dream, and thus while dreaming, can investigate dream content, how dreams work and how consciousness works during dreams, as well as do exploratory experimentation.

For some years I have experimented while dreaming lucidly. I plan an experiment while awake. When I realize I am dreaming I try to remember a cue word or phrase that expresses the experiment. In a series of experiments I planned to handle an object and note its realistic solidity, then put my hand through that object, and then feel it again as solid. Once I discovered I was dreaming, if I could bring to mind the word "solidity" or "test solidity," I generally had no problem remembering what to do. While experimenting in dreams, I meet with certain problems that arise out of the nature of dreaming. I will discuss these problems out of my own experience and according to my understanding of dreams. I'll begin with the more obvious problems.

1. No note taking. There is the problem of not being able to take notes. Actually I can, but they disappear when I wake up.

2. Interruption. There is both the problem of waking up before finishing an experiment and the fear of waking up that occasionally makes me rush through an experiment. False awakenings (dreaming that I have awakened) and what I think of as the spliced—film effect, in which suddenly I am dreaming something else, have the same effect as waking up, since I no longer know I am dreaming.
3. Undesirable circumstances. The dreamer cannot select the circumstances in which he or she will experiment. Experiments must be carried out in whatever dream environment is found when the dreamer becomes lucid. I had planned to do ten jumps in a dream. I became lucid when I was poised up inside a tower with little to stand on. As I was afraid of falling, I could not proceed with my jumps.
4. Intrusions. The dreamer cannot prevent intrusions into the experiment. Things appear or disappear. Events happen without warning. If a beast takes my hand, I have to deal with him. I was testing the continuity of consciousness from dreaming to being awake by counting in the dream, intending to continue through the act of waking up and slightly beyond. I was counting out loud at a regular speed, deliberating on each number. Other activity continued in the room. Someone began pinching me in my seat. This distracted me. I tried to shake him off and couldn't, so I ignored him. Next, I had bothersome grape seeds in my mouth. I needed to spit them out and had to be careful not to lose count nor lose my rhythm.
5. The “reality” of the dream. In spite of knowing I am dreaming, the dream may be so convincing that it disturbs my progress. Once when someone wanted to take a picture of me with my Uncle Tom, I thought it was not right to interrupt the picture—taking to proceed with the experiment.
6. The attraction of the dream. There is always some disappointment when I discover I am dreaming. Even when the dream has been unpleasant, or upon waking reflection I can see nothing that could have interested me, the dream attracts me so greatly that it takes a certain amount of will power to proceed with my experiment. Often I ignore experimenting in order to try to go on with the dream.
7. The presence of only what is being experienced. There is to the dream only what is being experienced. What has just been seen is gone and cannot be seen again. There is nothing out of view, behind me or to the sides. Nevertheless, it seems that there is physical continuity from what was experienced earlier, and it seems the environment extends out of sight. Therefore, I may make wrong assumptions about my experience. When I saw only light, I assumed without warrant that I was surrounded by light. When I was trying to carry out a pre—planned dream, for which I needed a plant, I turned and saw a potted plant. I wrongly assumed that it had already been there. But I had produced it, for it did not exist until I saw it.

8. The occurrence of what is anticipated. What is anticipated in dreams tends to occur, either directly or indirectly. Anticipations include desire, intention, fear, the observation of a possibility and the expectation of certain responses. If I plan to go upstairs, stairs appear. If I expect to land when I fall, I land (or wake up suddenly). If I don't expect to land, I keep falling. If I want to look out of the window, I next find myself outside the window. This effect has serious implications for experiments, for we are likely to see happen what we expect to happen. When I tested for solidity, things felt normal when I first felt them, but when I intended my hand to go through them, it did, feeling their texture. However, what is anticipated may not occur. Nor can all elements of a dream ever be anticipated. Though I carried out a pre—planned dream, many of the elements were surprising. For instance, the salesman that I hoped to take part in the dream turned out to be a saleswoman.

9. Deactivation of the dream environment. To maintain the dream environment I must interact with it. When I stopped to compose poetry, and when I was trying to remember where I was sleeping, the activity in the dream environment diminished or stopped. If my mind is taken off the environment altogether, the environment is in danger of being lost, causing me to wake up. When I was trying to mentally picture my grandmother's house while I kept my eyes open, as I can do while awake, I needed to keep running down the dream road to keep my interaction with the dream and not wake up.

10. Limitations of memory. While dreaming, I remember few circumstances of my waking life. What I remember is largely the previous events of the dream, plus a few stray memories. I can bring little to mind, though there is no problem with rote memory. There is no awareness of a continuity of events leading to the present place and moment. Memories are often false. In my first 277 lucid dreams for which I had planned experiments, in only 122 of them (44%) was I able to bring to mind in whole or in part the experiment that I had planned to do. Sometimes I mistakenly proceeded upon a former experiment. Sometimes during an experiment I forget what I am to be doing or what I am looking for. If I do not wake up soon, I may forget some of what happened. When I was composing poetry, I kept the compositions to only two lines, and even then I often could not retain parts of the lines.

11. Knowledge not based on sense experience. Much of my understanding of the dream is not determined by sense experience. My recognition of places, people and objects does not depend on what I see. I spontaneously assume I am in Hong Kong without any clues in the environment that make it Hong Kong and without any memory of arriving in Hong Kong. I "recognize" Charlotte, my wife, without looking at her. I can "know" what she said without hearing it said. I can "know" what is happening out of sight. False memories come in the same manner. Such spontaneous unconsciously supplied knowledge accompanies dream experiments. For one experiment I wanted to change whatever dream

environment I found myself in to New Market in Calcutta.

Actually, the identity of where I was did not depend on what I saw, but on what I “knew” it to be. In a lucid dream I “knew” I was flying about in my real bedroom, in spite of the fact that there was nothing truly recognizable in the room. Fortunately, false memories, recognitions, understanding and knowledge can be looked at critically upon awaking by recalling the actual events and sense experience of the dream.

12. Limitations of rationality and judgment. While dreaming, I have no such thing as a scientific attitude, nor often even a rational attitude. I can make little critical judgment about the progress or outcome of my experiment. I am not aware of inconsistencies, changes or implications. The judgments that I do make are more frequently spontaneous knowledge, not based on my perception of the experiment. When I try an experiment not planned ahead while awake, I often do such irrational experiments” as trying to make Psalm 140 appear or examining the car my mother just left in the dream so that I can compare it when I wake up with the one she “really” left in. In another dream in which I wanted to examine objects for authentic duplication of waking reality, I was absurdly trying to decide whether a painting was authentically by Goya.

13. The dreamer’s spontaneous action and speech. While dreaming I often speak and act spontaneously. These unpremeditated actions, rather than arising out of what I am doing in the dream, protrude into the dream. I had planned to repeat the Lord’s Prayer in a dream. When I remembered to do so, I spontaneously proceeded to sing it to a similar tune. I eventually realized that that was taking too long, and that I should continue by only repeating it. In other experiments I attempted to put into alphabetical order objects I saw in the dream. I consistently had the problem that while I repeated the words for what I had seen, trying to remember them, I spontaneously changed some words and added others, usually alliterative byproducts of the original words. In a dream I saw stairs, a pipe, some paper, and a wheel. But when I made the list and repeated it, I ended up with “air, pipe, paper, steel, wheel.” Stairs had been dropped. Air and steel had been added. Fortunately, when I reviewed the dream I could see that that had happened.

14. Words brought to mind tend to be related to the ongoing dream. I found that each time I composed a couple of lines of poetry in a dream, by letting them come to mind, the lines had a relationship to what I had been dreaming. When I tried to remember a forgotten address by simply speaking it, part of the incorrect address that I said was related to my dream location. In a series of dreams I tried to recall where I was sleeping. Each time but once my guess was incorrect. The time I was correct I guessed that I was in Landour, though not more specific than that. However, when I looked back on the whole series of tests I saw that in every case my guess was related to my dream situation. The time I had guessed correctly I had indeed been walking along a street as I would find only while staying in Landour. It only seemed that I had guessed correctly.

15. The experimenter is always a part of the experiment. If I test my memory or thinking,

obviously I test myself. But also if I test the dream environment, whatever I experience of myself physically is a part of the environment I am testing. All aspects of what I experience remains dependent on my creation of it. I can never separate myself from anything I investigate. When I intended to be still and watch a dream impartially, I could never feel separated from it. In a solidity experiment, I placed my hand inside my uncle to see the effect if I kept it in him. My arm looked normal up to the point where it entered him. It seemed I was successfully keeping my hand inside him. However, upon waking reflection, I realized that I had not observed my hand staying inside him. I did not recall feeling my hand inside him, or feeling his texture or moving my hand inside. I had only seen my arm stop at my uncle's body.

Obviously there are limitations and problems in experimenting while dreaming. Still, dream experimentation and observation is valuable. Occasionally, I remember planned experiments. When I remember them I can carry them out. I can observe them closely. More often than not I remember the dream well upon awaking. And (what can be seen over and over again in the examples I gave) once awake, I can reflect critically on the dream, the experiment, the results and myself as the dreamer. I can see the inconsistencies, changes and implications that I had missed. I can make comparisons with earlier experience. I can spot false memories, false assumptions, and bad judgments. Thus in spite of the limitations and problems, I am able to carry out experiments in lucid dreams and learn from them.

¹Paper presented at the symposium "Lucid Dreams: Induction and Content" at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Baltimore, April 12, 1984.

Original source: *Lucidity Letter Back Issues*, Vol. 3, No's 2 & 3, August, 1984, page 87.