

Reply to Foulkes

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David Foulkes is quite correct in noting that when it comes to lucid dreaming we are no longer talking about sleep and dreaming in the “usual” way. Dream lucidity is a paradoxical phenomenon: to resolve the paradox requires a broadening of our understanding of the varieties of dreaming experience and a clarification of our usage of such terms as “sleep,” “awareness,” and “unconsciousness.” For example, Foulkes asserts that “to be asleep is to unaware and unreflective in specifiable ways.” Thus he finds it problematical to hear lucidity described as “being awake and aware in your dreams.” How could this be sleep? The answer is that to say “I is asleep” is vague; what this is probably intended to mean is that “I is asleep in regard to the external world”, i.e., not in sensory contact with it. In one sense lucid dreamers are aware of the external world: they know where they are sleeping. But as LaBerge et al point out, “this knowledge is a matter of memory, not perception” (1981, p. 731) As for “convergent indicators,” both subjective reports and physiological evidence indicate that lucid dreams typically occur during sound sleep (in regard to the external world).

Foulkes objects that the reports I used to illustrate lucid dreaming seem different enough from ordinary dreams to suggest that the two are “different animals.” Of course, these lucid dream reports don’t sound like the “usual” non-lucid dreams (75% of which, according to Snyder, 1970, make very dull reading). They were selected precisely because they were interesting. Lucid Dreaming was written with the general reader in mind; there was no room for dull examples. As for prosaic lucid dreams, I have hundreds of examples in my personal record. For quantitative comparisons of lucid and nonlucid dream reports, see the work of Gackenbach and colleagues (i.e., Gackenbach & Schillig, 1983).

Foulkes takes exception to what he regards as an “assumption” on my part: that “dreaming is more like perceiving or living life than like imagining.” LaBerge (1985) presents evidence showing that physiological reactions to dreamed actions were greater than those to imagined actions, and concludes, rather than assumes, that “this suggests that lucid dreaming (and by extension, dreaming in general) is more like actually doing than like merely imagining” (p. 88). Speaking of assumptions, Foulkes appears to regard the notion that “dreaming is symbolically instigated” as an observation rather than a hypothesis. As I explain at length in Chapter 8 of Lucid Dreaming, this is at best a debatable point

Foulkes further suggests “that sleep onset may be a more appropriate reference point than REM sleep for lucid dream phenomena”. However, no clear basis for this claim is provided: although lucid dreaming has on occasion been observed at sleep onset, this is in no way typical. In fact, the great majority of lucid dreams appear to occur in the context of the REM state.

“Is it necessarily as adaptive to be self-aware in...[the dream]...as it is in waking...?” and “if so,” asks Foulkes, “why is nonlucidity so pervasive during dreaming?” This reminds me of a question that one might have overheard in the not so distant past: “If writing were really useful then why is illiteracy so pervasive?” As for the question of whether consciousness is as adaptive in the dream as in the waking state, I refer the reader to LaBerge (1985, Chapter 1 especially pp. 6-7), where the argument is developed that the special usefulness of conscious, deliberate action is that it permits more flexible and creative response to unexpected, non-routine situations. Thus, consciousness appears to offer the same advantages to the dream as it does to the waking state. Note that this does not mean that it is desirable to always act deliberately whether asleep or awake.

Foulkes gives the impression that he considers lucid dreaming to be valueless except insofar as it elucidates the features of ordinary nonlucid dreaming by its “defective operations.” Leaving aside the odd notion that lucidity is a cognitive defect, why in any case, should the importance of lucid dreams derive solely from their similarities or differences with nonlucid dreams? Creative thinking may not be very much like ordinary thinking: does that make creativity unimportant? I believe that the relative rarity of lucid dreams has led some researchers (including Foulkes) to dismiss the phenomenon as “insignificant.” True, nonlucid dreaming “must comprise 99.44% of human dream experience.” But that doesn’t make lucid dreams nonexistent or unimportant. To say that dreams are essentially non-reflective is as misleading as the parallel claim: “mammals do not speak.” This later assertion is true of the vast majority of mammalian species with only one exception in 4000—homo sapiens. Whether this singular exception appears significant or not may depend upon one’s scope of vision and research interests. But in any case, we would miss the essence of what a mammal is to say they are creatures that do not speak (or swim, fly, etc.) even if most of them do not. Let us not make the same mistake in regard to dreams.

References

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