

Comments on the OBE/Lucid Dream Controversy

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The lucid dream experience and the out-of-body experience are currently being interpreted in quite different ways. The two positions I would like to focus on are the most extreme positions taken by the lucid dream and OBE camps. The OBEers, who describe their experiences as actual separation from the physical body, tend to relegate lucid dreaming to a lesser state of awareness or a state from which one can catapult oneself out-of-body. The extreme lucid dreamer position claims that OBEers are simplistically naive and are “just” dreaming lucidly confusing a hallucinated dream world for a supposed spiritual world or “real” physical world (LaBerge, 1985).

It is important at this point to recognize that controlled Western style research in these states of consciousness is in a state of infancy. Tart published the first controlled out-of-body research in 1967 and 1968, less than 20 years ago. Lucid dream research is significantly less than a decade old. An important model for this consciousness research is a participant observer stance in which theoretical models are initially based on one's own subjective experiences. It becomes quite natural, therefore, to form a position from one's own experience and to hold onto it mightily. At times, one can mistakenly and prematurely reify a stance into an encrusted and rigid monolith that walls off and obstructs more than it enlightens. Such premature reifications may be occurring in the extreme OBE/lucid dream camps. Mutual dialogues in the spirit of our acknowledged limited understanding of states of consciousness research may be the most fruitful position for progress in the current OBE/lucid dream controversy.

REM Phenomena in OBEs

That there is some connection between dreaming and OBEs is quite clear despite the objections of some authors (Gabbard & Twemlow, 1984). Several correlations between REM sleep phenomena and some out-of-body reports have been cited (Salley, 1982). Catalepsy, or physical paralysis, is a frequently noticed concomitant of an OBE. One well known OBEer, Sylvan Muldoon, considered “astral catalepsy” a “fundamental law of astral projection” (Muldoon & Carrington, 1977). (Astral projection is an old occult term for an OBE.) Muldoon's experiences led him to believe that catalepsy always occurs prior to an OBE and terminates with the return of the “astral body” to the physical body.

This catalepsy experience among OBE reports is frequently reported. Blue Harary (Morris, Harary, Janis, Hartwell, & Roll, 1978), Oliver Fox (pseudonym, 1962),

and Yram (pseudonym, 1965) in describing their own OBEs, describe clear paralysis during their experiences. Crookall's (1966) and Carrington's (Muldoon & Carrington, 1977, pp. 28-38) compendiums of many OBE reports cite repeated references to catalepsy. The paralysis is not typical of all OBEs and both Robert Monroe (1977) and Eileen Garrett (Crookall, 1966, p. 175) report paralysis most consistently only in their early OBEs. It appears clear, however, that this "astral catalepsy" so frequently reported in the OBE literature is similar if not identical to REM paralysis that routinely and persistently accompanies dreaming.

A second correspondence between dreaming and OBEs are clearly seen in OBE induction techniques. Conscious dreaming is repeatedly referenced as an out-of-body separation technique. Upon recognizing that one is dreaming consciously (lucidly dreaming), one can reportedly will oneself out-of-body (Fox, 1962; Monroe, 1977; Muldoon & Carrington, 1977; Ophiel, 1961). A second OBE separation technique involves developing a trance state through extremely deep relaxation. Mastery of this technique reportedly results in catalepsy, conscious sleep, and separation from the physical body. This relationship of dreaming to OBEs is found not only in the Western occult tradition, but also in cultures throughout the world. Sheils (1978) found that in 67 non-Western cultures, sleep is described as the most important source of the OBE in 79% of the cultures.

A third correlation between dreaming and OBEs is suggested in occasional reports of sexual arousal during OBEs. Monroe (1977, p. 195) comments that "the most consistent physical reaction noted when returning (from an OBE) is a penile erection." References on sexual responsiveness are noteworthy for their absence in the older occult OBE literature. Many current subjects who report OBEs also describe penile erections or vaginal engorgement and lubrication during the separation (Monroe, personal communication). The extent of sexual arousal during OBEs remains unclear and anecdotal at present. The association of sexual arousal during REM periods, dreaming and at least some OBEs provide further evidence for correlations between lucid dreaming and OBEs.

A simple OBE physiology equals REM physiology is very clearly not evident. The very few physiological studies of OBEers are remarkable for the lack of any consistencies across subjects monitored (Rogo, 1985). The subjective reports of gifted OBEers does indicate, however, that sleep states and REM phenomena are correlated with at least some OBEs.

Lucid Dreams, OBEs, and Parapsychology

Correlations between lucid dreaming and OBE phenomena prove neither the identity nor the dissimilarity of these two states of consciousness. OBEers argue that the occasional occurrence of psi phenomena, which has been found in a few

parapsychological studies of OBEs (see Rogo, 1978 for a review of this literature) argues for a clear distinction between lucid dreaming and OBEs. Some argue, however, that the rare incidences of documented ESP phenomena during OBEs can be explained with a lucid dreaming plus telepathy explanation (LaBerge, 1985). The use of the term telepathy explains nothing. The term refers to no known process; it is merely a label used to describe the acquisition of information by some, as yet, unexplained method. Since telepathy is no more understood than OBEs, this “explanation” offers little more than a different label for the same data.

The difficulty of achieving ESP results in OBE studies certainly does not strengthen the OBEs-are-distinct-from-lucid-dreams position. It seems clear that confirmative parapsychological studies are crucial for the OBE position to establish its viability. The difficulty of OBE verifiability in parapsychological studies may, however, be a function of the research designs themselves. It is argued that current OBE research designs are plagued by assumptions that may stack the deck against finding any veridical data because inappropriate designs are perhaps being used.

Let us assume, for a moment, that the OBE position is valid. Let us assume that some organized aspect of consciousness can operate outside of the physical body. Let us also assume, for a moment, that “spiritual” or “astral” levels of consciousness exist that are separate from the physical world. Such levels are frequently described by OBEers as well as by most religious and occult disciplines (see Monroe, 1985 for an extensive description of such levels). If such positions are correct, it is probable that there is evolutionary pressure supporting and driving the development of a type of conscious organization that can perceive and operate on these different levels. The purpose of this assumed “astral body” then, is to function cognitively on levels different from the physical world. It would seem that this “astral consciousness” would be redundant if it was evolutionarily designed to function on the physical level since the senses of the physical body already function well on the physical level. Following this line of logic, the “astral consciousness” may not be particularly adept at functioning at the level of the physical world.

The parapsychological studies that have been designed as yet require that the OBEer function at a physical level to obtain physical world data while out-of-body. This assumption that the OBE state should be able to prove its ability to function at a physical level, a level which its conscious organization may or may not be well suited, may explain the generally poor results of OBE parapsychological studies. Some OBEers, in fact, claim that out-of-body sensory systems are quite poor (Harary, 1978; Monroe, 1982; personal communication).

This problem could be circumvented by working with two skilled OBEers who attempt to meet on these hypothesized “astral levels” of consciousness and then share information that can be verified. Controlled studies of this type could then provide

evidence as to whether an OBE is “only” a lucid dream or distinctly different from dream consciousness seen as a hal-lucinated experience. This design might then (admittedly speculatively) allow for OBE consciousness to operate at a level appropriate to its mode of functioning. A study of note in this direction using hypnosis, not OBE states, is described by Tart (1969).

Tart had two highly hypnotizable subjects hypnotize each other simultaneously. They both became silent and after returning to full waking consciousness reported the same imagery experience while silent in trance. Harary (1978) similarly describes helping a friend get out-of-body while he himself was out-of-body. His friend reported knowledge of the experience on their next meeting. Controlled research along these lines may provide an appropriate design that may best be able to test the OBE position.

Conclusions

Probably the most important distinction between the OBE and lucid dream positions is the existence of the ‘reality’ of the separation. The lucid dreamers see the subjective separation experience as an hallucinated dream phenomena. The OBEers view the experience as “real” allowing a dissociated aspect of consciousness to operate in the physical world or in a “real” “astral” world. As mentioned previously, these positions are testable and verifiable. If researchers can demonstrate that two people can report the same veridical experience simultaneously while lucidly dreaming or out-of-body, then researchers could begin to map out levels of consciousness different from physical world reality that may have a reality of their own, governed by different laws than the physical world. If this occurs, then, some forms of lucid dreams may be seen as quite different from “just a dream.”

Speculating that such a different picture of reality is developed encompassing “real” levels very different from each other with very different conscious organizations developed to perceive each level, the OBE and the lucid dream positions may begin to overlap very clearly. Perhaps some forms of lucid dreams are totally “in one’s own head” in which one is consciously working within a personal, individual level of consciousness. Perhaps other forms of lucid dreams allow one to decouple from this personal mental sphere and emerge into a transpersonal reality that is not governed by one’s own thoughts alone. This latter form of a lucid dream would appear to be identical to what is labeled an OBE by the OBE camp.

In conclusion, the ideas discussed here are admittedly highly speculative and may well prove to be incorrect. It is argued, however, that allowing ourselves to theorize beyond the limits of current data and to speculate outside of current assumptions of reality may be necessary to understand the lucid dream and OBE experiences. It is possible that some forms of OBEs and lucid dreams may not, in fact, be fully explainable in terms of current accepted scientific models. OBEs and lucid dreams may become important

vehicles through which expanded models are developed.

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