Clinical Applications for Consciousness in Sleep

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A bit more than ten years ago a new wave of systematic research began into dream "consciousness". The experience of knowing one is dreaming while the dream is ongoing left the quagmire of parapsychology and gained scientific respectability. Interest in "lucid dreaming" has since mushroomed beyond the few dissertations of the late 1970's to a body of work most recently organized and presented in Gackenbach and LaBerge's *Conscious Mind, Sleeping Brain* (1988). From a sleep researchers perspective several key lines of inquiry have been pursued in investigations of dream lucidity. These include, its psychophysiological bases, the content of the dream experience, who spontaneously experiences these dreams, how to induce lucidity while asleep, and clinical applications of dreaming lucidly. It should be noted that other disciplines also take this dream experience seriously with lines of discussion emerging in philosophy, religion, and anthropology.

This surge in interest began on opposite sides of the Atlantic when both Keith Hearne, at the University of Hull, and Stephen LaBerge, at Stanford University, were independently and completely unknown to one another working on the problem of how to verify that when one was conscious during a dream while one was in fact asleep and dreaming. Both came up with virtually the same procedure, an eye movement task. That is, their subjects were instructed prior to falling asleep that they were to signal with a prearranged set of eye movement signals when they knew they were dreaming. In both studies these researchers were able to establish that first the dreamer could provide such a signal, second that the sleep laboratory technician could read the signal as distinct from normal REM and third that independent judges could accurately pick out the signaled REM episodes. With these two ground breaking studies the area of lucid dreaming research was launched.

One of the best theoretical conceptualizations of dream lucidity is Harry Hunt's conceptualization which is put forth in the *Multiplicity of Dreams* (1989) of lucidity in sleep is a form of spontaneously emerging meditation. There are several lines of converging evidence which support the lucidity‑meditation link which will be briefly summarized herein (for a more complete summary see Gackenbach and Bosveld, 1989) before the clinical implications for working lucidly in sleep can be considered. This is necessary because the tie between psychotherapy and meditation is gaining considerable currency in contemporary Transpersonal Psychology.

Hunt based his theory originally on the phenomenological and philosophical parallels between the states of meditation and lucid dreaming and the fact that several meditation traditions directly talk about this state of consciousness in sleep. However, there are also now several studies of meditators and lucid dreamers which reveal important psychological and physiological parallels as well. Specifically, Hunt's theory is bolstered by Gackenbach's work on individual differences associated with lucid dreamers and the

individual difference literature on meditators. Both lucid dreamers and meditators exhibit the same pattern of personal characteristics. Perhaps more interesting are the results from five studies, which have found that the waking practice of meditation increases the frequency of experiences of consciousness in sleep.

Physiological parallel's between lucidity and meditation also exist. Supporting the meditation‑lucidity link is a finding with a muscle reflex as well as with two measures of electrical activity of the brain (for details see Gackenbach, in press). Further, based on their work with lucid dreamer type differences in vestibular sensitivity Snyder and Gackenbach (in press) hypothesize that REM sleep and especially lucid REM sleep might be best characterized as internalization of attention. Meditation has most often been conceptualized as a process of internalizing attention.

It is quite fair to conceptualize dream lucidity as a form of sleeping meditation and thus the clinical concerns relating psychotherapy to meditation become relevant to any discussion of psychotherapeutic applications of dreaming lucidly. Two perspectives seem to be emerging in the Transpersonal Psychology literature. One has argued that westerners who are practicing eastern traditions are running into troubles which their eastern teachers are at a loss to deal with and characterize as narcissistic problems which serve to both draw an individual into such practices and to stop their growth in such practices. This implies that one needs to have a self first in order to lose or transcend the self. Applied to lucidity this perspective would argue that one might use the lucid dream to work through normal day to day problems before undue focus is placed on lucidity as a vehicle for seeking the spiritual highest.

In a slightly different perspective it has been pointed out that it is hard to separate forms of pathology from forms of transpersonal experience. Spiritual pathologies can look psychotic but the difference between these and truly psychotic individuals lies in the history of the individual. The apparent spiritual psychosis may be reactive and state specific and the eastern traditions offer guides to getting through it. Applied to dream lucidity this perspective points out that when lucidity is used to only seek the highest spiritual ideal one may still experience problems. A case in point is that of psychotherapist Scott Sparrow who recalls the development of his lucidity, which he always framed as a spiritual quest:

> In my own life, I found that at the height of my lucid dreaming I ran into a brick wall of sorts. Lucid dreaming had become evidence of my evolution, a merit badge of sorts. Of course, I thought I was handling it okay; but I had no idea what I was repressing. Who does? Well, all kinds of very angry people began showing up in my dreams, and turning rather demonic to boot. A black panther walked in the front door and would not go away no matter how much I told him he was only a dream.

Although dream lucidity is probably not the most developed form of sleep consciousness, the characteristic of active involvement in the dream while it is ongoing offers a unique opportunity to the dreamer to consciously engage, experience, and

encounter his/her dream. That is, to be actively involved with the dream experience while knowing that one is fully engaged in a self created world. This apparent dual nature of the experience allows the introduction of volitional states not normally available while not lucid in sleep.

Working with your lucid dreams in one sense is classically Freudian in the sense that dreams are the "royal road to the unconscious". But lucidity allows working with your dream material while you are experiencing it. In that sense you are not working with remembered material as while awake and in therapy rather you are living fully the experience. You don't lose your sense that you are in a "real world" when you become lucid in sleep. This paper will give guide lines to work within the dream while lucid while also providing some cautions.

Therapy in Sleep

Gayle Delaney, a San Francisco based dream psychotherapist, notes that "if you look at what is uncomfortable in dreams you'll begin to get lucidity as a by‑product." After all, she goes on, "psychoanalysis is like the witness ‑ your taught to watch your thoughts to see where they go." Ernest Rossi, author of *Dreams and the Growth of Personality*, details a sequence of stages that his patient, Davina, went through in her dreams while in psychotherapy which moved her to lucid dreaming. He explains:

> The developing lucidity of Davina's dreams up to this point suggested three stages in the process of evolving consciousness and personality transformation. First there was a process of many divisions in her state‑of‑being, manifested by different images of herself in the same dream, that led to the hypothesis that a process of psychological change was in progress. Second, a process of self‑reflection then mediated her shifts from certain states‑of‑being to new dimensions of awareness. Third, she then began a process of actively participating in using this new awareness to (a) remove blocks hampering her self‑development, and (b) resolve the old hurts to her child‑self...Davin's constructive use of the process of lucid dreaming is in striking contrast to the rejection of lucidity by other dreamers who are not oriented to self‑development. When an individual is lacking in a certain level of self‑awareness, developmental blocks are experienced and the dreamer rejects the process of lucid dreaming. This was indicated by the Ph.D. dreamer....as follows: I got more and more confused in the dream until I said to myself, "Damn it! This is only a dream and you had better wake up. So I did and I threw the whole damn image away.

Defensive Techniques for Dealing With Nightmares

Confronting and conquering fearsome dream characters or situations, which was originally recommended by anthropologist Kilton Stewart, is a very common response to

nightmares when becoming lucid. Clearly aggressive responses to the fearsome qualities in our dreams is adaptive in that it relieves the immediate stress of the nightmare. This can teach us mastery in our dreams. Even when dream control fails we can still be left with a sense of mastery by simply waking up.

Further, and more importantly, such mastery lessons translate to waking behavior. Clinical psychologist Gordon Halliday describes how a client who was convinced she was unable to make any change in her life was greatly encouraged by changing a recurrent nightmare. After conquering her dream aggressor, the woman made significant improvements in her waking life. Halliday points out, however, that lucidity training was less useful for people who had secondary benefits from recurrent nightmares, such as a workman who was receiving disability payment and a woman who could control her husband by her "prophetic dreams from God."

However, when that remains our dream style or when it allows us to engage in counterproductive behaviors in the dream then such mastery behaviors can be excessive and perhaps maladaptive. Scott Sparrow, a Virginia Beach based psychotherapist, points out that, "One can easily escape from or destroy a dream figure. Such actions, while far from the endpoint of our growth, often fit into a developmental continuum as intermediate accomplishments. As the therapist, I serve as one who encourages the dreamer not to get stuck in such intermediate stages, and to continue working toward dialogue, reconciliation and integration."

Another technique which needs to be mentioned is a variation of attaining mastery in our dreams which also can be useful in the short run but if overused can be maladaptive. That is turning nasty things into sweet things. Again these allow us to confirm that we can have control over this fantasy setting but if any of these "defensive" techniques are used excessively we may be left with the emergence of consciousness in sleep functioning as yet another defense mechanism.

Existential psychotherapist Erik Craig warns that "one can work at becoming more lucid at the expense of becoming more aware." That is, attention focuses on lucidity "in order that the meaningfulness of ones dreams may be avoided." Further, Craig voices a concern, as have many in the field, that lucidity may become a fetish, "psychic objects for self gratification or even self‑congratulation." Lucidity in sleep can serve as a "narcissistic flight from one's fuller, though perhaps less appealing possibilities."

Cope Rather Than Escape

Delaney urges clients to "try to cope rather than escape." Our coping strategies in our lucid or nonlucid dreams are direct reflections of our coping strategies while awake. Lucidity offers us the unique opportunity of realizing it is just a dream and therefore gives us a comfort zone to work with our problems.

Most clinicians working with lucidity argue that a better strategy is to try to engage the dream character in a dialogue. By posing questions to the characters or to other aspects of the dream we are able to get in touch with and try to work through our issues. This dialogue should be done with a receptive mental attitude while engaging aspects of

self in the dream. If the dialogue is productive you may see the dream character change shape, become less fearsome, get smaller, disappear or merge with your "self" in the dream. West German psychologist Paul Tholey stresses speaking with dream characters but Delaney points out that if one is not prepared fully for such an interaction it might be difficult. In other words, the responses you get may not make sense. Ideally, reconciliation should be the outcome of such dream dialogue. [Editors Note: see Tholey's article in this issues of *Lucidity Letter* for more on this.]

Understanding Not Needed

As with the classical behaviorist approach to changes in behavior, one can resolve an issue in a lucid dream, not necessarily understand why and still reap the benefits of the dreamed action. An extreme "behaviorist" position on this is Canadian Peter Fellows who says that he never teaches "dream interpretation" while lucid. He notes:

> Time in a lucid dream is a precious commodity and I do not like to waste it. If, as I am dreaming, I become lucid at a point in the scenario where someone is sitting on my head, I do not begin to question him of her on the symbolic meaning of the experience. I act, and quickly. When symbolic dreams "work" for us, a waking life conflict is acted out in symbolic guise and resolved. Somehow, that resolution is translated back into real life with real effect. What lucidity enables us to do is to ensure that the dream conflict gets resolved and to reap the benefits in self‑confidence that come from doing so consciously. Interpreting the dream, knowing exactly what area of one's life the dream conflict was related to, is fine, but when the work is actually done, the result will be experienced whether or not the interpretation was correct.

This view is not unique to the lucid dreaming clinical literature, Milton Erickson used hypnotic techniques which distracted the conscious leaving him free to "talk with the unconscious." He emphasized that the conscious self did not need to remember what had been suggested to the deeper self‑that the changes would eventually arise "spontaneously" as a natural self governing process.

Cautions and Concerns

Due to the emergence of lucidity considerable concern has come up about whether one should control their dreams. Although there are instances when dream control is desirable (i.e. Overcoming victim stance in life; Recognition/exertion of one's own power to create one's personal reality; Enhanced assertiveness, self‑confidence) there are also circumstances when it is not desirable (i.e., When it interferes with the "corrective" function of dreams; Avoidance of productive anxiety and self‑confrontation). However, most agree that dream control meaning wholesale conscious manipulation, is not

possible.

Sparrow notes, "I believe the desire for lucidity is, to some undetermined extent, insincere. Why? To the extent that one has continued to repress the awareness of unresolved, possibly painful pre‑personal memories and issues (and that probably fits most of us to varying extents), the statement 'I want to become lucid,' implies a paradox. It seems to say: I am willing to become aware of what I've been unwilling to become aware of. How can we know ahead of time what we will suddenly perceive through our wide‑open dream eyes? How can we know if we're ready for it?" Sparrow goes on to note that "Perhaps not all of us possess repressed pre‑personal issues; does that make the lucid dream a comfortable experience? Not necessarily. Even transpersonal reality can be quite disturbing to the ego (e.g. Tart's research on the fear of psy) . . . . Wilber is a help here. If it's pre‑personal material, it can be disturbing to the extent that the ego will not include it inside its boundaries. If it's transpersonal material, it's disturbing as long as the ego does not wish to be included in a larger whole. To the ego, these fears feel quite similar!"

Psychotherapist Ken Kelzer speaks of the potential of "lucid dream burn‑out" for the dreamer using lucidity as a self growth vehicle. "What I am referring to here is a mental state of exhaustion that comes from overdoing a good thing, from exposing oneself to too much mental‑emotional intensity for too prolonged a period of time." He recommends down time to balance out the emotional intensity possible with lucidity. Further Kelzer recommends "the close tutelage of an experienced guide" when working lucidly in sleep as well as a safe environment.

As well as the cautions noted above and because of the potential power of lucid dreaming to deal with our "stuff" some experts have also expressed concerns. For instance, Gackenbach points to the addictive potential of lucidity. Another clinical/experiential concern is that extensive exposure to dream lucidity might, in some individuals, lead to questions of the nature of reality both while sleeping and while awake.

The point is that we really are on the ground floor of our experiences of consciousness in sleep and need to proceed cautiously. The traditional Tibetan literature points out that the Yoga of the dream state (lucid dreaming) is a dangerous pursuit, especially if waking meditation is not practiced. The author of *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* notes that, "the expounders of Tibetan yoga emphasize that the Path of Form [the six yogas, including dream yoga]...can be dangerous and is more difficult than its companion Path without Form, the Mahamudra [meditation]."

Existential psychotherapist Erik Craig argues that the essential question for the psychotherapeutic uses of dream lucidity is, "how may we best acquire and use the knowledge of this human territory in a way that respects and conserves its essential structure and nature as premeditated experience."

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