

## Problems in the Historical Research of Lucid Dreaming

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The historical dimension to lucid dreaming (and dream research in general) is one that has been sadly neglected. Recent writings have not given an adequate account of the development of lucid dreaming, even limiting such an account to within the historical context of this century alone. As an opening to what is hoped will be a fruitful area of debate, there are some issues which need to be raised and discussed further. The four points that I want to cover in this article concern: the limited explanatory power of describing the history of lucid dreaming purely in terms of "events"; the validity of using the term "lucid dreaming" in a retrospective manner; the problems associated with evaluating any text that has undergone translation; and the potential problems associated with the changing meaning of certain "key words" within the lucid framework which need to be highlighted.

The history of lucid dreaming (and dream research in general) has not been adequately dealt with in the literature to date. Histories either describe isolated events or they just point to lucid-type literary references. What is lacking from both of these types of approach is that neither explains the "hows" or "whys" behind the events/lists given. There are many points and issues requiring some critical comment in the history of lucid dreaming which have not been discussed. For example, why did the idea not take root in 1913 but has done so today? What were the conditions at that time which prohibited interest developing, and why did these conditions change? Perhaps the importance of this kind of questioning can be shown by the following discussion.

It cannot be said that lucid dreaming has been embraced by mainstream dream psychology (or psychology in general) with any great enthusiasm, and the concept still effectively remains on the fringe of orthodox research. There is almost an air of "quiet reluctance" by mainstream researchers to really take the concept seriously -- note the absence of any real critical comment against the topic. Without any definite indications to the exact nature of this "reluctance" some speculation is, perhaps, justified.

It might be the case that the relatively slow development of interest in the subject by mainstream researchers is due to the curious and to date unexplained history surrounding the idea of lucid dreaming. If we try and view the concept as if we were completely new to it, the point about its history may become clear. It simplifies things if we ignore any recent historical work since this is not relevant to the way the concept has been presented over the last two decades or so.

The concept first appears in 1913 by name but effectively disappears from the literature until 1968/69 when van Eeden's article (or at least parts of it) is re-printed in Celia Green's anthology *Lucid Dreaming* (1968) and in Charles Tart's book *Altered States of Consciousness* (1969). This second appearance does not achieve immediate and widespread attention, and interest slowly develops over some twenty years. Now to a

person who is new to the subject and has, perhaps, a slightly cynical attitude, these events might imply that something "funny" is going on. After all, why does it take several thousand years of dream research to "suddenly" discover such an interesting phenomenon? Why didn't Freud, one of the most powerful forces in dream work of this century discover it, or at least why didn't he mention it in his book? Why are people now claiming to be lucid dreamers as opposed to the silence before 1913? Why has virtually every major dream researcher over-looked this phenomenon in their works, leaving it for a few to become the concept's champion? and so on. Without a proper history that can answer these types of questions, what is the most likely conclusion? It has to be that the concept was made up by van Eeden. Perhaps, and it is only speculation, but perhaps this is the type of conclusion that orthodox researchers arrived at or at least felt was the safest conclusion to reach in the absence of any proper answers to the type of question that I have illustrated. It has to be accepted that lucid dreaming's history as it has been traditionally presented is pretty suspicious; this is why the historical dimension to the subject must be dealt with in a thorough and careful way. The immediate task, therefore, is two-fold: a proper history of lucid dreaming must be mapped out which includes a credible explanation for its curious history (at least in this century); and a history of dream research in general must be outlined which deals with the major developments, and the assumptions, beliefs and circumstances that contributed to those events (within which lucid dreaming can be located and related to as well).

The second area for discussion concerns the validity of using the term "lucid dreaming" in a retrospective manner. That lucid-type references appear in Classical Texts (i.e. Aristotle) should not mean that we are necessarily justified in talking about Classical writers knowing about "lucid dreaming" -- how could they when the term did not come into existence until 1913? The reasons for not using it in this way are two-fold: it is not just a term that we are applying retrospectively; it is also all the assumptions and beliefs that we currently hold about the concept, including the way we view our psychological make-up, that get applied retrospectively as well. The Ancient Greeks not only had a very different view of a person's psychological make-up, but it also changed over time. It must be borne in mind that when they were discussing phenomena like dreams, it was done within their belief system and not ours. The very real danger is that we will read their writings according to our belief system and in consequence be led into making false and inaccurate deductions about what they actually meant. This is not to say that it is wrong to suggest that they might have been aware of lucid-type phenomena, the point being made here is that this particular aspect of historical research is not a simple matter of taking Ancient Texts at face value. Secondly, getting into a habit of using the term retrospectively will hide whatever terms may have existed for the phenomena prior to 1913. For example, based on comments made by Freud (1900) and Jones (1956), it is likely that lucid dreaming was known as the "dream within a dream" (a term likely to have been coined by Synesius of Cyrene -- I make this suggestion since this is the earliest use of this term that I have found), and so it is terms such as this that we will need in our historical investigations, not modern terms which,

we know before we start, we won't find in the literature prior to 1913. However innocently we may adopt this habit, it is tantamount to re-writing history in an inaccurate way.

The third area of discussion concerns the correct methodology that should be adopted when conducting historical research, especially connected to the Ancient Texts already mentioned. Leaving aside the points that have already been made concerning relative belief systems, etc., any Ancient Text or any text that has been subject to translation should be treated with great caution. This is not to suggest that all translators are incompetent, far from it, but because of the inherent contradictions that are present in the lucid dreaming concept, that might make the process of translation that bit harder.

Under normal conditions a translator must constantly make decisions on the "true" meaning of the work being translated. Any passage, sentence or word that appears ambiguous will be translated according to the translator's knowledge of the topic or subject at hand. Lucid-type references might prove especially difficult to handle if the translator concerned is ignorant of the concept itself. It is under these conditions that a key passage or phrase may become distorted either to create a lucid-type reference where one does not exist, or to hide a genuine one. Over time and because of the process of re-translation the problem may become compounded. Hence there is a need to treat lucid-type references with some caution. Wherever it is practicable the earliest translation should be consulted and preferably re-translated by someone sensitive to the issues involved.

Certainly "modern" translations of Aristotle (or any historical text) should be treated with further caution because these translations involve another distortion in themselves, because such works re-write the text in a style which is more accessible to the modern mind. Not only is this then a translation from the Greek into (eventually) English, but it is an actual re-working of the text to make it more "readable". In my own investigation of these references I used the Loeb edition which carries a page by page Greek into English translation. I had several of the more interesting passages re-translated orally by one of the Classics lecturers here at Exeter University. This allowed us to explore the passages with continual reference back to the lucidity concept and the Greek view of a person's psychological make-up. Dr. Seaford was able to confirm with some measure of certainty that one of the passages I had given him did refer to what we would call today lucid-type phenomena. But this does not mean that it is safe to conclude that the Greeks knew about lucid dreaming; further research into the Loeb translation and any older ones that exist must be a basic requirement before we can start to say with any real measure of certainty that lucid dreaming was known about during this time. Furthermore, without a proper consideration of the Greek psychological make-up, any conclusions would be out of context and thus premature.

If it is felt that I am being over-cautious and a little extreme in my warnings, this last section should demonstrate that taking references at face value and not paying attention to the kind of issues that I have attempted to highlight can cause real problems. Already

we have a similar problem developing at present in the way we view writings from earlier this century. Arnold-Forster, in her book *Studies in Dreams* (1921) describes how she developed her "dream consciousness"; it might be tempting to conclude that by this she meant that she had developed some sort of "lucid" state. However, she makes it clear on page 174 that in sleep there are two minds at work: the "normal" mind and a "dream" mind, but they are not the same thing. They may work simultaneously; the normal mind may influence the dream mind and whilst they are different parts of the same psyche this difference is a very real one. I do not believe that fragmentation of a person's psyche into different psychological parts is what under-pins the modern view of lucid dreaming. But what lies at the root of this confusion is the meaning of the word "consciousness".

Earlier this century (and this requires further research and verification) this word (consciousness) was used in a more simplistic way to merely refer to a particular frame of mind -- not necessarily one that was self-aware (which is how it tends to get used today). Hence the article in the *American Journal of Psychology* (1895-97) "Studies of Dream Consciousness" by Weed, Hallam, and Phinney, is only concerned with different types of dream experience, none of which are actually concerned with anything "lucid" (whilst there are some interesting dream reports mentioned which are ambiguous related to lucidity, they do not form the major concern of the article as reflected in the title). Without fully appreciating the way in which the usage and meaning of "consciousness" has changed it is all too easy to be drawn into making false assumptions about what people were writing about.

Obviously this whole issue requires greater consideration than I have given it here but it should show that the subject of historical psychology is not one that can be treated lightly -- there are some potentially very dangerous traps that need to be carefully avoided, otherwise costly and time consuming mistakes might be made.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive exploration of the problems of historical research into lucid dreaming but it does try to highlight a few of the more important issues that can be raised. Certainly it is hoped that this article will stimulate some further thought and discussion. We have only just begun to investigate and question the development of lucid dreaming and dream research in general, and there are many questions and issues that remain unexplored. In the past many writers have adopted an almost glib attitude to the whole historical dimension of dream research and most have not attempted to explain or question its development. Seen against this background, the lack of historical work in the field of lucid dreaming is not unusual -- the problem exists throughout the field of dream research.

For those interested in this dimension to the subject (and I would be pleased to hear from like-minded individuals), we should be concerned with asking questions, not trying to arrive at definitive answers. We are far from knowing who were the most important writers in the field, simply because we do not as yet appreciate the full extent of research that has been carried out. Anyone viewed as important can only be judged so when they are seen in relation to their fellow researchers, and this is something that we are far from being able to do. We can view researchers in isolation at present, but the lack of

surrounding historical context into which they fit is missing. Any final conclusions about a person's "importance" must be premature until we have the missing context.

From my own limited research into this area I am confident that if we remain objective and open-minded the historical investigation of dream research in all its forms will prove to be a rewarding and worthwhile area of study, as relevant to the present as any research currently underway.

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