



Dreaming to reduce fantasy? – Fantasy proneness, dissociation, and subjective sleep experiences

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Abstract

Fantasy proneness refers to an extensive involvement in fantasy and daydreaming. Previous studies have shown that fantasy proneness overlaps with dissociative tendencies, as measured with the Dissociative Experiences Scale. We tested the hypothesis that deviant sleep experiences form the critical link between fantasy proneness and dissociation. Undergraduate students ($N = 205$) completed the Creative Experiences Questionnaire, the Dissociative Experiences Scale, and the Iowa Sleep Experiences Survey. Self-reports of sleep experiences, such as narcolepsy, vivid and unusual dreams, and deviant nocturnal experiences, but not lucid dreaming, were related to both fantasy proneness and dissociation. However, the relationship between fantasy proneness and dissociation was only partially accounted for by these sleep experiences. This suggests that deviant sleep experiences but also other, as yet unknown, factors contribute to the overlap between fantasy proneness and dissociation.

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1. Introduction

Crick and Mitchison (1995, p. 150) said about the function of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep that “we dream to reduce fantasy”. This hypothesis is based on the idea that REM sleep serves to

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increase the efficiency of the brain (Crick & Mitchison, 1983). Evidence for this idea comes from three different sources. Firstly, the Echidna (an Australian monotreme) possesses an abnormally large neocortex relative to its body. Interestingly, this species differs markedly in its REM sleep from other mammals in that it exhibits an REM-like sleep state that is not accompanied by an activated cortex. Thus one could argue that the Echidna does not dream (Siegel, Manger, Nieuhuis, Fahringer, & Pettigrew, 1998). This suggests that one function of dream sleep might be to store more information in a smaller cortical space. Secondly, simulation experiments with neural nets indicate that random stimulation from the brain stem during REM sleep might prevent overlap of stored information by reducing interactions between related nodes in the cortex (Gardner Medwin & Kaul, 1995). This would reduce involuntary activation of related, but inappropriate concepts. Thirdly, Cartwright and Ratzel (1972) indicate that for individuals who are low in fantasy, REM deprivation does lead to an “increase in accessibility to daytime fantasy” (p. 280).

These findings have interesting implications for the study of fantasy proneness. This concept was first introduced by Wilson and Barber (1983) to describe the characteristics of a small group of individuals which they labeled fantasizers. These individuals spend a large portion of the day fantasizing, have extremely vivid fantasies and childhood memories, and experience strong bodily concomitants of fantasies. In addition, fantasizers report out-of-body and other paranormal experiences. Certain groups such as actors and fantasy role players have found to exhibit elevated levels of fantasy proneness (Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Muris, 2001). Fantasy proneness has also been related to the susceptibility to the development of pseudomemories (Merckelbach, Muris, Horselenberg, & Stougie, 2000).

Speculations about how REM sleep and daydreaming might be related to each other have a long tradition in psychology that dates back to Freud (1907/1906). Following that tradition, one could argue that individual differences in fantasy proneness might be fuelled by disruptions in REM sleep. However, while the robust effects of sleep deprivation on human performance have been extensively studied (e.g., Jewett, Dijk, Kronauer, & Dinges, 1999; Williamson, Feyer, Mattock, Friswell, & Finlay Brown, 2001), the issue of how sleep experiences such as lucid dreaming, narcolepsy, and other nocturnal experiences relate to personality traits has received less attention (but see, e.g., Blagrove & Hartnell, 2000; Levin, 1994; Schredl & Erlacher, 2004). This is surprising, as individual differences in sleeping behavior are stable over time and different contexts (Watson, 2003). In addition, there are reliable and valid self-report measures that tap individual differences in sleep-related behavior (Watson, 2001). One important exception is a pioneering study by Watson (2001), who explicitly looked at the relationship between sleep experiences and dissociative symptoms such as depersonalization, absorption, derealization, and memory problems. In two large samples, this author demonstrated that sleep-related experiences, as measured by the Iowa Sleep Experiences Scale (ISES; Watson, 2001, 2003) are related to dissociative symptoms, as indexed by the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES; Bernstein & Putnam, 1986), with Pearson correlations circling around .50. This is an important finding, because it might shed a new light on the origins of dissociative symptoms.

Common explanations for the origins of dissociation have focused on early traumatic experiences as its antecedents (Gast, Rodewald, Nickel, & Emrich, 2001). Thus many authors assume that trauma elicits cognitive avoidance strategies. By this view, acute dissociation during trauma would promote compartmentalization of traumatic experiences, would serve to reduce their impact (van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995). It is thought that these acute peritraumatic dissociative

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