

Maintaining Self-Awareness During Sleep Paralysis and Lucid Dreaming: Correlates to Shamanic Practices

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Traditionally, different cultures, in geographically and climatically diverse settings, have generated colloquial descriptions that match the medical symptoms of Isolated Sleep Paralysis (ISP). Works have been introduced that demonstrate the almost universal incidence of, and in Europe, the “Old Hag,” “Succubus,” or “Incubus” experiences (Ness, 1978; Hufford, 1982; Conesa, 2004). Isolated Sleep Paralysis itself, when it occurs frequently, highly correlates with lucid dreaming, Out-the-Body-Experiences (OBE), and the Feeling of Presence (FOP) and has been used successfully, as a “consciousness springboard,” to achieve dream lucidity in addition to other techniques that have been devised, rediscovered, and used, with varying degrees of success, to induce and sustain lucid dreaming—to enhance and prolong self-awareness during REM states (Conesa, 2003). Consistent with some shamanic practices for producing, maintaining, or altering states of consciousness, the incidence of sleep paralysis is higher in the narcoleptic and insomniac patient population, both dreaming conditions resulting in either the alteration of consciousness per se, or of sleep deprivation and the higher probability of experiencing the “uncanny” dream. A dreaming cube model is proposed that consolidates states of consciousness, no matter their origin, in terms of four dimensions: perceptual acuity, increased self-awareness, cognitive embeddedness, and functional control. This model transcends the common division of consciousness into “dream” and “awake” realities, or “normal” and “altered” consciousness.

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Dream Cube Model for Dream Lucidity

This empirically derived model is based on a 108-item questionnaire normalized by an international and cross-cultural sample of actual reports and experiences from lucid dreamers and sleep paralysis (SP) sufferers (Conesa, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004). As a disclaimer, the model is also based on forty years of personal experiences with OBE, chronic ISP, and lucid dreaming. Dream lucidity is measured along four phenomenological dimensions:

- 1) **COGNITIVE EMBEDDEDNESS:** The degree to which a dreaming agent is able to replicate and operate at normal awake levels and exercise basic cognitive functions (attention, memory, problem solving, logical thinking, intra-psychic, interpersonal, insight, etc.) during SP and/or LD states.
- 2) **PERCEPTUAL ACUITY:** The degree to which a dreaming agent can perceive the dream landscape with a full contingency of and maximal perceptual acuity (vision, auditory, somatosensory, etc.) during SP and/or LD states.
- 3) **FUNCTIONAL CONTROL:** The degree to which a dreaming agent can mobilize “virtual” gross and fine motor functions during SP and/or LD states (walking, writing, dancing, flying, masticating, etc.). Ironically, the atonic state of SP often becomes a signal itself to attempt mobility. In OBE phenomenology, a “cognitive solution” and projection of an “astral body” and its functions is included under this dimension to the extent that *it* can be controlled.

All three dimensions give rise to the generalized and typical phenomenological description of:

- 4) **SELF-AWARENESS/DREAM LUCIDITY:** A consciousness-as-self-awareness dimension that categorizes all instances of incremental dream lucidity.

The Shamanic Tight Rope

The initial impotency of sleep paralysis and the sleeper’s desire to gain motor control over the extremities, leads to an opportunity where, if lucid dreaming can be achieved, these skills can be transferred to the new dreaming situation.

Not only is dream self-awareness gained earlier than in a regular, spontaneous lucid dream but the control learned during the state of sleep paralysis impotency has carry-over effects into lucid dreaming per se: a positive cognitive gradient.

In more general terms, this struggle-for-success and the amplification of self-awareness between SP and LD states, means walking a fine, cognitive-affective line between chaos and control: the shamanic tight rope. This fine line extends to related states, their recognition, cajoling, incantation, accommodation, and resolution:

Chaos	Control
Anxiety	Contemplation (controlled attention)
Fear	Elation
Frightening hag	Spirit helper (ally entity, totemic spirit)*
Dream reality	Waking reality

* Inherent ambiguity when the “hag” becomes the guiding “angel”

Common to traditional or modern interpretations of dream lucidity as a functional element in shamanic journeys, and sustaining and controlling the bordering-on-the-chaotic effects of self-induced hallucinogenic experiences, is a mental attitude and discipline that I refer to *functional detachment* (i.e., sobriety, temperance).

Techniques for Achieving Functional Detachment (or dreaming sobriety and temperance)

- ⊗ Breathing techniques or chanting to alleviate anxiety and focus attention
- ⊗ Fasting and contemplative disciplines in preparation for “dream work” and shamanic journeys
- ⊗ Attention-gathering techniques (looking at bodies of water, listening to sounds)
- ⊗ The possession of dream talismans such as the Ojibwa dream catcher
- ⊗ Predormital, self-hypnotic techniques (Nardi, 1981; Conesa-Sevilla, 2003, 2004).
- ⊗ While in the atonic state of SP: breathing calmly and, in a predetermined fashion, focusing one’s attention on a body-axial, as opposed to peripheral, chest, thoracic, abdominal body areas (navel, solar plexus, or genitals)
- ⊗ While experiencing a series of predormital SP episodes: bringing one’s legs up to the chest or ventral areas as in a fetal position

...any technique that manages, in more modern terms, “to achieve good through a kind of blending of the mentalization of day with that of the night” (J. Leonard Corning, cited by Van de Castle, 1994, p. 216).

Notes: **i.** The predormital mind set seems to be a contributing factor not only to dream content but also to their control. **ii.** In our data we found a trend toward negative dreams or nightmares occurring earlier in the evening as opposed to during the latter stages of REM. **iii.** There were also more reports of SP occurring at the onset of dreaming.

Symbolic Representations of Successfully Using the Sleep Paralysis Experience to Achieve Lucid Dreaming States

- ⊗ Unification of earth (Id) and sky (Ideal Super Ego) elements and the human form (the flying dragon as an alchemic and transpersonal representation of successful unification)
- ⊗ Unification of serpent and eagle motifs (Anon)
- ⊗ Movement from dark (black-red) to light (white-yellow)

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