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The Identity of the dreaming “I”

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As is known, dreams can vary considerably. The kaleidoscope is a good metaphor for this process because each movement creates new scenes. In dreams people can morph from one character to another, or they can display characteristics of two people. The same applies to dream places. If, for example, a certain place reminds the dreamer of another place, he is immediately transported to that place. To be correct, he is not transported, but he is there as if he were always there, because space is only a backdrop and not a basic law on which the dream world is built. And all this is unrecognized by the dreamer, because such changes are normal and quite automatic in the dream world, as breathing is in the waking world. The basic laws there are psychological laws, but I do not want to expand on that topic here. My topic is the identity of the dreaming self, which can vary considerably too. It is a popular task among lucid dreamers to look into a mirror, and it can be quite surprising what the dreamer sees there. For example, I once saw quite an ugly old man in the mirror; I was not certain if he was human, because his features were so strange.



So what is my identity during my waking time? For now it is enough to say that my identity is assigned with a name and a number and is approved by the local authority. It seems to be quite fixed. I can't be one of you, I can't be a professional dancer living in Australia, and I can't be a sister of a disabled child. But I am a psychologist, a dreamer and a long term dream journalist. Although I have experience with the dreams of clients, my primary sources of experience and knowledge are my own dreams

Now, several of my dreams happened in settings that were completely different from that of my waking world. That triggered in me the question: Was I really Christoph in those unfamiliar settings? Finally this led to the general question of the identity of the dreaming "I", because at night this can be quite different. So I would like to recount some of my nocturnal experiences to illustrate that fact.

1. *In the first dream I saw – from above – a dear and close acquaintance of my mother who was well known in our family as "Aunt Giggi". She was old and lay in her bed and was slowly dying. On a bedside table stood an air humidifier which hummed and glowed in the dim light of a weak lamp. But suddenly I switched the perspective and I was her. I lay in bed, heard the humming of the humidifier from afar, but from a different angle. I also heard the voice of my mother or the voice of my best friend, talking to me. Then I woke up.*



It is sometimes mentioned in dream reports that the dreamer changes the perspective in the dream. He may watch a scene about what happens to a dream figure from above and suddenly he is the figure and experiences the scene from within. Sometimes he may even experience the dream scene both from within *and* from above. So this dream is a good introduction to the topic of the changing identity of the dreaming "I", because I was suddenly Aunt Giggi and I experienced the dream scene from her perspective. When I dreamt that dream I was 52 and a man. In the dream I was a woman about 85 years of age.



2. But now to the next dream: *I wanted to leave Iraq, I wanted to escape from the war. As I stood in a row of people waiting in front of a ticket counter at a train station, a man approached me and told me I should follow him; he would bring me to the frontier. We arranged a meeting in the evening at an agreed place. But he did not come. I phoned a number he had given me, but a foreign voice informed me that the man had become ill and could not come. So I tried to cross the border on my own initiative. But the customs officer refused to let me pass because the border was closed. I asked another customs officer and wanted to give him a tip. But it was hopeless.*

Now the setting of this dream was unfamiliar to me. I knew about the war in Iraq but that was all. Maybe this emotional information triggered that dream. The reason I tell it to you has to do with another interesting observation. Both customs officers looked at me like men look at a young woman. They looked at my breasts! And they treated me like men treat a woman – in this case politely. I did not realize this in the dream, but I did when I woke up and was amused. So obviously I was a woman in that dream and that was so natural that I did not even recognize it. And certainly I did not question my identity during the dream. In the dream I was simply me as I usually am. Only the quick glances of the two men and their general behaviour gave me a hint that something must have been quite different.

3. The next dream was more of someone else than me. *I was in a half observing, half participating position - I had a brother who was very creative but he became a criminal. I tried to keep contact with him but he often tried to avoid me. I found out, though, that he lived alone and played quite an important role in the underworld of the Turkish mafia. I told him many times that he should turn to our family for help but this was in vain. One day he was put in prison, but there he continued his dark path and saw to it that some of the prisoners were poisoned. That*



deed was the final sentence. He was put into solitary confinement and was muzzled when he yelled. Soon he died in prison but I had the opportunity to speak with him shortly before his death. We mused about whether he would go to heaven. But it was clear to both of us that this would not be the case.

Now, although I was twice in Turkey in waking life, I swear that I do not have a brother and certainly not a brother who was in the Turkish mafia. In this case I have to emphasize that I am a citizen of Switzerland when I am awake, and my only sibling is an older sister – but obviously in my dream life it was quite different. So who was I in that dream? Although I was in the observing perspective and experienced what happened to another dream figure, I interacted with that dream person who was definitely related to me – he was my brother. And finally I felt the deep shame that came over our family because of my evil brother. So I was not an anonymous observer, but had the implicit identity of a Turkish man who had a brother and who was a member of a larger family which cultivated the ideas of family honour and religious beliefs of heaven and hell.

4. The next dream was a long and stable lucid dream. *When I became lucid I found a small entrance which led to a very long tunnel that passed under a mountain. Despite being a bit frightened I continued my journey through the dark, driven by my curiosity. Finally I arrived at the end of it and entered a huge city which was constructed as one big building with countless majestic pillars and domes. I did not know where I was and was looking for somebody to ask. I approached someone I considered to be a female. As she lifted her head I looked into a very strange face, half Asiatic, half saurian. I tried to communicate with her, but we could not understand each other. Then I continued my journey and I left the marvellous town and walked on a country path. There my walk became boring. I did not know where to go and tried to switch back to my body in the bed – but I could not, I was stuck in that world! But I realized that I did not need to be afraid because the experience was not dangerous or frightening at all. So I continued my walk, feeling well aware of my walking body. On my back I felt a strange caressing feeling which I could not classify at first, but then on further consideration, I realized that I must*

have a saurian body myself with a shield on my back like a turtle. This shield was not a burden, nor was it restricting my walking movement. In fact, it caused the caressing feeling.

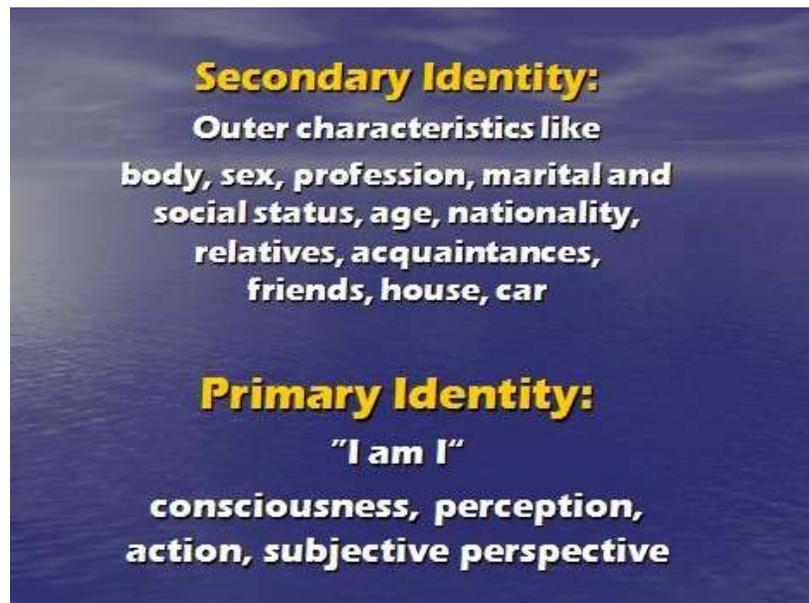
This dream is self-explanatory concerning the explicit identity of the dreaming “I”. I would like to emphasize the fact that I had a nonhuman body.

Occasionally I have had the experience that a lucid dream collapses. Then I “sit” in the void and scratch my non-existent head with a non-existent finger because I do not know what to do. This situation is devoid of any characteristics, only the “I” exists as usual and a sense of duration. Then, I usually wait until a new dream unfolds or, if it lasts too long, I fall asleep or I wake myself up to write down the dream before I forget it. This situation is interesting because the identity of the “I” still exists in spite of the fact that nothing else is there. But this identity has nearly no characteristics and surely no body.

Now we have heard of various changes to the identity of the dreaming “I”. Some are quite obvious, while others have such an unfamiliar setting that we can conclude implicitly that the identity of the dreamer must be somewhat different. Considering these facts, I came to the conclusion that I should divide the identity of a person into two parts: a primary identity and a secondary identity.

The primary identity is foundational and is that which we perceive from within all the time. It is the “I” that says “I am”. This “I” has basic qualities; these are consciousness, perception and action. It has an individual perspective, which is unique, but which is also limited by this individual point of view. Because our primary identity is so unchangeable we tend to overlook the fact that the part of the identity which I call the secondary identity has changed.

We attach secondary attributes to this primary identity. But those are not intrinsic because in dreams we cannot only change our age or profession, but we can also change our body, our sex and our relatives. We can even leave our human shape and identify with another living form.



So during the day we have a more or less fixed identity and we can't escape that, nor can we expand it very much, but we have some kind of variation in the roles we play in different situations; for example, the role we play in our families, at our workplace, with our friends, etc. Also our identity may change somewhat over the course of a lifetime.

At night our identity is more flexible; the spectrum of variation is broader and goes far beyond the changing of roles. Interestingly, those different dream identities usually have only one role, probably because the duration of this identification is relatively short and contains only one or two episodes in the life of that identity.

Now I would like to go back to our daytime identity: this is not as restricted as I described before because we humans have invented possibilities for broadening the spectrum of identities. In novels, computer games and movies we can identify with a hero and can forget our limitation of a fixed identity. This fixedness is felt as a limitation by the waking I because in the night it knows a much greater freedom. Indeed I think that this conscious or unconscious yearning for a variation of identity has triggered those cultural developments.

Before, I assumed that other people also have such dreams of a changed identity, but is this really so? I think so, because – at least during the day – I am not an extraterrestrial, but a human. So it is likely that other humans may have similar experiences. But we cannot be sure in that respect because this question has never been investigated with a larger population. Schredl and co-workers investigated common dream themesⁱ and there the change of sex, age or body (being an animal) appears towards the middle or end of a long list of dream themes. So the conclusion might be that other people also experience changes of identity, but not many and not often. This investigation, however, was based on a questionnaire which is not a very precise instrument because the answers are based on rough estimations.

One of the very big problems in this respect is that our culture does not hold dreaming in high esteem. So very, very few people keep a dream journal on a regular basis and without that we do not have a clearer picture of what happens in our dreams.

Another problem could be that younger people may have fewer dreams in which they change their identity. Inge Strauch and Barbara Meier found out that all people dream of unfamiliar settings, but the frequency increases with ageⁱⁱ. So younger people dream more of known surroundings and known people, while elderly persons more often find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings and are confronted with strangers. This agrees with what I find in my dream diary. I suspect that the unfamiliar dream settings correlate strongly with the variability of identity: if one dreams of an unfamiliar setting it is likely that the secondary identity of the perceiving “I” is also changed and unfamiliar.

The next problem is that although we tend, throughout both day and night, to be aware of things outside us, we are not very self-aware. In fact we never ask ourselves “Who am I right now?” because we take it for granted that we are always the same – and rightly so because our primary identity does not change! I am always I! But this blinds us to the fact that this “I” may have quite different secondary characteristics which may include a different sex and a different body.

So my final conclusion is to recommend that you keep a long term dream journal on a regular basis and, after waking up, ask the question: **“Who was I in that dream?”**

ⁱ Schredl, Michael, Ciric, Petra, Götz, Simon, Wittmann, Lutz: Typical Dreams: Stability and Gender Differences. *The Journal of Psychology* 2004, 138(6), 485-494.

ⁱⁱ Strauch, Inge, Meier, Barbara: *Den Träumen auf der Spur – Zugang zur modernen Traumforschung*; Huber, Bern 2004.