

# The self of my dreams: A case study of an elaborate and contextualized dream self-concept

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**Summary.** For many people, dreams feel disconnected, incoherent, and often meaningless. In this case study, we have identified a member of a subpopulation whose dreams are phenomenologically similar to experiences in his waking state, potentially allowing for a dream self-concept to develop. The purpose of this case study was to examine provide a thorough analysis of his dream experiences and investigate how those integrate into a dream self-concept. The participant completed a month-long dream diary, then a series of self-concept assessments regarding his waking and dream self-concepts. Upon completion, two research assistants coded the content of his diary entries, linking the content to the dream and waking self-aspects. The results revealed that his waking and dream self-concepts contained highly contextualized content, but both contained self-structures that focused mainly on personal attributes, close others, and skills. Overall, this suggests that our participant has an elaborate and contextualized dream self-concept, with a similar latent self-structure as his waking life.

**Keywords:** Self-concept, Phenomenology of Dream Self, Lucid dreams

## 1. Introduction

As is the case in one's waking life, dreams are typically experienced from the basis of the individual dreamer's perspective (Foulkes, 1985; Snyder, 1970), with the majority of those experiences being exclusively or mostly from a first-person point-of-view (Soper et al., 1994). Consequently, the subjectivity of both waking and dream experiences share some similarities despite the frequently unrecognizable and odd environments dreamscapes afford. To place all human experiences – both waking and dreaming – into the same phenomenological framework could allow for the identification of parallel processes, including the development and maintenance of an elaborate dream self-concept. The purpose of the reported case study is to provide a thorough analysis of a seemingly unique individual with a very rich and abundant dream life. We suggest that the content, structure, and consistency of his dreams indicate that one could develop a dream self-concept that is distinguishable from a waking self-concept.

## Phenomenology of the Dream Self

Phenomenology is the process through which people describe phenomena through their experiences (Husserl, 1907), where human experience itself is a subject of study based on the consciousness and intention of the person (Langridge, 2007). Several psychological constructs can be best understood using this framework, including the self; it is inextricably linked to our experiences. This perspec-

tive suggests that viewing the dream self and waking self as unrelated entities loses the importance of dreams for the person. Dreams are in themselves experiences, and we our 'ourselves' in them just as we are in our waking lives (Kara & Özcan, 2019).

Despite many dreams being explained away as fantasy or as temporary and random images, dreams still provide some of the same social, emotional, and psychological experiences as those in people's waking lives. To better understand such experiences, the Phenomenological Dream-Self Model (Kara & Selvi, 2017) was proposed. In this model, the Dream Self is defined as the dreamer in a given moment, at a given place, perceiving one's experiences and having emotional responses to them (Kara & Özcan, 2019). As such, the Dream Self is superficially different yet functionally similar to one's waking self; the "I" in one's dreams rather than when awake (or "dream ego," Jenkins, 2001). If people typically experience their dreams from a first-person perspective, then this "I" is quite active, and not all that different from the "I" while they are awake. Thus, to assume that dream experiences are not our own is mischaracterizing dreams as unimportant to the self.

This is not to say that dreaming and waking experiences are identical. Contrary to earlier assertions by Hall and Nordby (1972), the Dream Self can have its own set of needs, goals, and purposes that are distinct from the waking self. These characteristics and experiences create a unique version of the person that differs from the person who navigates the waking world, yet they can also inform and influence each other through dream work with a trained therapist (Jenkins, 2014).

Accessing dream content when applying to a larger understanding of a self-concept can be a difficult but necessary process in understanding the Dream Self. Approaches such as Direct Self-Evident Dream Theory (Jennings 1986, 2007) place a significant emphasis on allowing dream content to serve as useful information in itself, rather than being portrayed as disguised desires or symbolic representations of waking stimuli. In these approaches, the dreams become the focus of study rather than the interpretations of them,

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because the stimuli and the reactions to those stimuli within the dream are indicative of characteristics of the Dream Self. When several dreams create a coherent series, that series can in turn be the subject of study (Jenkins, 2001).

The difficulty in understanding dream series information and how it may relate to the Dream Self mostly comes from the difficulty in accessing and remembering the content. Both the waking world and dream world are perceived subjectively, but the dream world is more difficult to ground the flow of images through the senses (Grochmal-Bach & Pachalska, 2004; McTaggart, 1934, 1968) due to lack of consistency. Without environmental consistency, the Dream Self has no sense of the passage of time, nor agency, and is therefore often perceived as a passive entity, merely reacting to stimuli (Edelman, 1992; Pachalska et al., 2015). This may, however, depend on the dynamic between dream experiences and the dream self.

In some cases, the barriers between the dream and waking selves become less rigid. Some dreams contain oddities that defy explanation, but many of them contain the same cognitions, emotions, actions, and people as is experienced in one's waking life (Antrobus et al., 1995; Nir & Tononi, 2010). In addition, many dream experiences can inform and influence one's waking life. For example, social interactions occur between the dream self and others, and these interactions – often with representations of family members – provide practice for social skills that can be utilized upon waking (Nöltner & Schredl, 2022). Emotional reactions to dream content (e.g., social uneasiness, escaping a threat, or feeling confused) influence how much anxiety people feel upon waking (Saez-Urribarri & Oberst, 2019). Such vivid dream content engages the dream self as an actor rather than as an observer of the dreamscape.

In other instances, the dream self is even more fully engaged. Lucid dreams contain a sense of awareness or self-reflection during the course of the dream, including memory for past events, logical reasoning, and intentional actions after reflection (Gackenbach, 1991b; Green & McCreery, 1994; LaBerge, 1985; LaBerge & Gackenbach, 2000). Such cognitive abilities are linked to higher levels of awareness of one's own thoughts and feelings during the dream, intra-dream self-reflection, taking on dual self-perspectives in the dream, and the manifestation of objects and figures to serve the dreamer's goals (Lee, 2017; Lee et al., 2007).

This more elaborate and active version of the dream self would suggest that the intentional and self-reflective processes in one's waking life that allow for the construction of a self-concept may be achievable for the dream self as well. To better understand how this could be possible, it is important to first define the self-concept, identify its structural components, and discuss the mechanisms through which it develops and is maintained through exposure to consistent social and physical environments.

### Self-Concept Development and Maintenance

The self-concept has its roots in several facets of one's life. Early theorists such as William James recognized the phenomenological nature of the construction of the self, suggesting that it is divided into distinguishable entities such as the social and spiritual (James, 1890). Since the inception of the term, scholars and researchers have recognized that the self-concept is a reflection of one's social environment, what may be referred to as the "looking glass self" (Mead,

1934). In other ways, the self-concept is part of a narrative sequence of experiences; the piece that binds our experiences together and makes them coherent (Freeman, 1992; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Marsh et al., 1988; Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Young-Eisendrath & Hall, 1988). This allows for schematic, experiential and social elements to be involved simultaneously in the definition of the self-concept. Thus, for a thorough assessment of the self-concept, we propose that six higher-order categories are required: individual self, relational self, collective self, ecological self, ability self, and self-defining memories.

Any experience, trait, or characteristic can be incorporated into the self-concept, but these are often categorized across higher-order categories through regular activation of memory systems. The Tripartite Model of the Self (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001) outlines how people define themselves based on the characteristics that make them unique (*individual self*; e.g., talkative, tall), based on their ties to close others (*relational self*; e.g., father, brother, friend), and based on the social identities they share with others (*collective self*; e.g., employee, club member, sports fan). According to Horvath (1990), people also internalize aspects of their physical environment into their self-concept, such as self-defining locations and objects (*ecological self*; e.g., house or office as examples of self-defining locations; laptop or basketball as examples of self-defining objects; see also Neisser, 1993). The regular activation of these declarative memory systems create a sense of coherence, in turn fostering a sense of identity (Markus, 1977); the more established a characteristic is in memory, the more likely it is to become self-relevant.

The self-concept can also develop through other memory systems beyond semantic memory (Vandekerckhove, 2009). Procedural memory systems allow for a sense of agency over one's environment (Voyer & Franks, 2014), leading to an implicit internalization of those skills into any number of *ability self-concepts* (e.g., cooking, fixing cars; Peiffer et al., 2020). Examples of this include academic (e.g., Geary & Xu, 2022), social (e.g., Breil et al., 2022), and athletic self-concepts (e.g., Marsh et al., 2015). In contrast, episodic memory systems incorporate salient experiences into autobiographical memories (Jiang et al., 2020), which in turn may foster *self-defining memories* (e.g., first day at work, birth of a child; Adler et al., 2017; Blagov et al., 2021; Singer et al. 2013). Taken together, the conglomeration of these categories provide individuals a sense of who they are and where they fit into their social and physical environments across time.

The stability of those environments, however, may be the key component to developing and maintaining a self-concept. When social and physical environments change, the self-concept often changes as well (Gore & Cross, 2014). While awake, it is rare to experience drastic environmental changes in one's day-to-day life. Most of the time, people can expect to interact with familiar people in familiar spaces from one day to the next. It would be disorienting to have no predictable experiences in everyday life, forcing one's attention on the here-and-now, and therefore making it difficult to develop an identity with any coherence or meaning. For many people, however, this describes their experiences while dreaming. The lack of coherence or consistency from one dream experience to another creates an unstable social and physical environment, lacking the psychological affordances to develop any sense of a self-concept. In rare instances, dream experiences are consistent for some peo-

ple. In those cases, we suggest individuals would develop and maintain a dream self-concept, which would appear no less elaborate than the self-concept of one's waking life.

To date, no research has identified a person who has such experiences, much less whether that person has developed a dream self-concept. In a series of conversations with the principal investigator, we have identified an individual who indeed has such experiences. In his dreams, he is frequently assigned to a task, carries out the task, and is debriefed on the task in the same dreamscape almost every night. The dream tasks are often adventurous or fantastical in nature and do not resemble the tasks he carries out in his waking life. The noteworthy characteristics of his dreams are the consistency of them, enough to allow for a dream self-concept to develop and maintain. The purpose of our case study was to examine how elaborate our participant's dream self-concept is, how it can be used as a basis to describe his dream experiences, and how it relates to his waking self-concept.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participant and Procedure

The participant was a 29-year-old African American, cis-gender, heterosexual male with no history of traumatic brain injury, and no prescription drug use at the time of the study. The participant is an acquaintance of the principal investigator, who self-identifies as someone who dreams in the same dreamscape nightly. The dreamscape is organized like a city, with a high resemblance to the participant's current residence in Louisville, Kentucky. In this city, there is an airport, skyscrapers, a mall, an amusement park, a warehouse, apartments, and houses. There are multiple layers of the same cityscape built on top of each other, with each layer representing a different version of the city. The participant is able to transport himself from place to place through portals in door frames and wells filled with metallic black liquid in the basements of specific buildings. Anything that resembles an actual landmark is exaggerated in size. For example, the Ohio River is as large as an ocean. For nearly every dream experience, the participant is briefed on a task in an elevator that appears in different locations, and he is

debriefed in a garage close to the center of the dreamscape city.

To allow for a full range of the participant's experiences in the dreamscape, he was asked to complete a one-month dream diary, noting in the morning what he could remember dreaming the previous night. Diary entries were noted by the participant as written narratives, often as a single, short paragraph (20-50 words), and as a brief description of an experience within the dream. There were no entries that involved more than one dream experience, although some of them lasted for as long as he was asleep. These entries were noted between September 29 to October 31, 2022. There were missing entries on October 3, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 23. This resulted in a total of 26 diary entries, showing a 79% dream recall rate for the month. Some examples included:

- Four or five of us. I can't remember their names, but we were after a guy, who was loading dead bodies into a machine that extracts their bones. We argued a bit about the moral quandary before fighting over it. We ended up at The Well. The Well is a structure at the bottom of the Warehouse, which seems to send me to some random place when I dive into it.
- I met a young lady who went by Susan. She was living at the bottom of the mall making IEDs. She taught me how to make one.  
Sometimes these tasks involve collaborating with different versions of himself. Some examples included:
- Twin me again. Did a job together. Can combine thoughts for higher brain function. 2 mics, 2 speakers, one mixer. More than us two. Girl me, military me, and cyborg me. We share thoughts. Worked together during search and rescue.
- Younger me gave older me a gig, neutralize a bully. After doing the job, I hung out with my younger self and explained our music career to him.  
The tasks in his dreams contain some continuity, and some references to past dream experiences. Some examples included:
- Found a key that could turn any door with a keyhole into an elevator, which took me to some business owner's office. I've met him before. He asks questions and explains nothing and has an extremely nondescript face.

Table 1. Qualitative Comparisons of Dream and Waking Self-Concept Content.

Self Content	Dream	Waking
Individual Self	Father, Black, male, mercenary, politician, planner, fearless, salesman, negotiator	Father, Black, male, musician, altruist, honest, orator, philosopher, fearless
Relational Self	Slender Hispanic young woman, Hispanic late teen, Casey, Young Black woman, Military Me, Girl Me, E.D. Me, Elevator Guy	Son, daughter, Justin, Yons, Jeff, Mom, Robert, Kenisha, Casey
Collective Self	Free People Militia, Band of Mercs, Coalition of Me's, Agents of Elevator Guy	Space Camp, LouiEvolve, Universal Life Church
Ecological-Places Self	Hispanic woman's house, warehouse, garage, Ohio River, Tall Apartments, Skyscraper with mall, the well	Russell Neighborhood
Ecological-Objects Self	Elevator key	N/A
Ability Self	Oration, music, tracking, trapping, negotiating, fighting	Words, melodic, empathy, marketing, sales, project management
Self-Defining Memories	First dream, first awareness of vault meaning, meetings with Elevator Guy, capturing/releasing hydra, almost capsizing a boat, falling through hole in expressway	First show, birth of son, Birth of daughter, first song, finishing high school, first fight, first time inconvenienced someone, assault with weapon, therapy, church as a child

- I was back in the room with the linoleum. Only this time there were a number of large generators that looked like thrones with a big gemstone on top. I absorbed some kind of energy from one.

On November 16, 2022, the principal investigator met with the participant over Zoom to conduct a battery of assessments for his dream and waking self-concepts. For each self-concept category, the participant provided qualitative answers for each area of the self (see Table 1). He was also asked to provide quantitative ratings as to how self-descriptive each aspect was to him (1= *Not at all descriptive*, 5 = *Almost completely descriptive*).

## 2.2. Materials

### 2.2.1 Tripartite Self (Individual, Relational, Collective)

To assess the individual self, the participant was asked to complete a Twenty Statements Test (TST, Kuhn and McPartland, 1954) to provide a list of his personality traits and physical attributes. He was asked to provide as many as he felt was thorough for both his dream self and waking self. To assess his relational and collective selves, the participant was asked to list people and groups that he believed to be important to how he defined his dream and waking self-concepts. These questions were developed by the lead author and are based upon the Tripartite Model of Self (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). The dream self questions were, "Who are people from your dreams you are close to who you think of when you think of your dream self?" and "Which groups are you affiliated with in your dreams that you think of when you think of your dream self?" The waking self questions were, "Who are people from your waking life you are close to who you think of when you think of yourself while awake?" and "Which groups in your waking life are you affiliated with that you think of when you think of yourself while awake?"

### 2.2.2 Ecological Self (Self-Defining Objects and Places)

To assess his ecological self, the participant was asked to list places and objects that were self-defining in his dream and waking life. These questions were developed by the

lead author and are based upon the Ecological Model of Self (Hormuth, 1990). The dream self questions were, "Which places from your dreams do you think of when you think of your dream self?" and "Which objects from your dreams do you think of when you think of your dream self?" The waking self questions were, "Which places from your waking life do you think of when you think of your waking self?" and "Which objects from your waking life do you think of when you think of your waking self?"

### 2.2.3 Ability Self and Self-Defining Memories

Self-defining skills and life events reflect the procedural and episodic memories that are inextricably linked to the self. To assess his self-defining abilities and memories, the participant was asked to list skills and life events that he believed to be important to how he defined his dream and waking self-concepts. These questions were developed by the lead author and are based upon procedural (Peiffer et al., 2020) and episodic memory models of the self (Blagov et al., 2021). The dream self questions were, "What are some self-defining skills that your dream self possesses?" and "What are some important events from your dreams that you think of when you think of your dream self?" The waking self questions were, "What are some self-defining skills that your waking self possesses?" and "What are some important events from your waking life that you think of when you think of your waking self?"

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Comparisons between Waking and Dream Self Content and Structure

The total number of items listed in each category were tallied, the percentage of items in each category out of the total number of items across categories were calculated, and the number of identical items on each list were also tallied (see Table 2). Overall, the participant displayed a high level of self-concept contextualization between the two lists. The participant provided nine items for the both the Dream and Waking Individual Self lists, four of which were identical between the two lists. There were eight items for the Dream

Table 2. Quantitative Comparisons of Dream and Waking Self-Concept Content.

Self Content	Dream	%	Waking	%	Identical Items
Individual Self Count	9.00	21.95	9.00	23.68	4
Individual Self Descriptiveness	4.11		4.56		
Relational Self Count	8.00	19.51	9.00	23.68	1
Relational Self Descriptiveness	4.38		4.33		
Collective Self Count	4.00	9.76	3.00	7.89	0
Collective Self Descriptiveness	5.00		3.33		
Ecological-Place Self Count	7.00	17.07	1.00	2.63	0
Ecological-Place Self Descriptiveness	3.43		5.00		
Ecological-Objects Count	1.00	2.44	0.00	0.00	0
Ecological-Objects Descriptiveness	4.00		N/A		
Ability Self Count	6.00	14.63	6.00	15.79	2
Ability Self Descriptiveness	4.17		3.83		
Self-Defining Memories Count	6.00	14.63	10.00	26.32	0
Self-Defining Memories Descriptiveness	3.33		4.50		



**Table 3.** Frequency of Dream and Waking Self-Concept Content in Dream Diary Entries.

Self Content	Dream Self	Waking Self
Individual Self	12 (46%)	5 (19%)
Relational Self	2 (8%)	2 (8%)
Collective Self	2 (8%)	0 (0%)
Ecological-Place Self	8 (31%)	1 (4%)
Ecological-Objects Self	2 (8%)	0 (0%)
Ability Self	7 (27%)	3 (12%)
Self-Defining Memories	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Relational Self list, and nine items for the Waking Relational Self list, with only one item being identical between the two lists. Four items were provided for the Dream Collective Self list, whereas three were provided for the Waking Collective Self list, with no identical items between the lists. There were seven items for Dream Ecological-Places Self list, and only one for the Waking Ecological-Places Self list, with no identical items between the lists. There was one item for the Dream Ecological-Objects Self list, and none provided for the Waking Ecological-Objects Self list. There were six items listed for both the Dream Ability Self and Waking Ability Self lists, but only two were identical between the lists. There were six items for the Dream Self-Defining Memories list, and ten items for the Waking Self-Defining Memories Events list, but there were no identical items between the lists. Thus, his dream and waking self-concepts contained a similar amount of content, but very little overlap between them.

Despite showing a high amount of contextualization in content, the participant also demonstrated similar latent structures between the dream and waking self-concepts. The degree to which Individual Self (21.95% Dream vs. 23.68% Waking), Relational Self (19.51% Dream vs. 23.68% Waking), and Ability Self (14.63% Dream vs. 15.79% Waking) served as prominent structures of self-definition were similar. Notable differences occurred between the number of self-aspects dedicated to Ecological-Places Self (17.07% Dream vs. 2.63% Waking) and Self-Defining Memories (14.63% Dream vs. 26.32% Waking), suggesting differential importance in ecological and self-defining memories between these two forms of the self-concept.

### 3.2. Evidence of Dream and Waking Self in Dream Content

To examine how frequently the participant's dream and waking self-concept aspects were evident in his dreams, two research assistants independently compared the content between the participant's waking and dream self-concept and his diary entries. The research assistants were asked to indicate whether an aspect from each self-concept category (e.g., Individual Self, Relational Self, Ecological-Places Self, etc.) was present in each diary entry. A meeting with the principal investigator to reconcile any discrepancies between coders resulted in 100% agreement. The total number of instances of each category was then tallied, and percentages of instances of each category across the 26 valid entries were also calculated (see Table 3).

Individual Self aspects from the dream self-concept were the most likely to appear in the dream diary entries. Specifically, 46% of all entries contained at least one mention of an Individual Self attribute from the dream self-concept. Other common categories from the dream self-concept included Ecological-Places Self (31% of all diary entries contained at least one mention of a dream self-concept place) and Ability Self (27% of all diary entries contained at least one mention of a dream self-concept ability). Aspects from the Relational Self, Collective Self, and Ecological-Objects Self categories were less likely to appear across diary entries (all three appeared in only 8% of all diary entries), and dream Self-Defining Memories did not appear at all.

There was further evidence that the dream and waking self-concepts were highly contextualized. Waking self-concept aspects were rarely mentioned in dream diary entries. Individual Self aspects from the waking self-concept were the most commonly mentioned in dream entries (19% of all entries included at least one of these), followed by Ability Self (12%), Relational Self (8%), and Ecological-Places Self (4%). None of the dream entries contained Collective Self, Ecological-Objects Self, or Self-Defining Memories from his waking self-concept.

## 4. Discussion

The self-concept has long been understood as a reflection of one's social and physical environment (Mead, 1934). For most people, these environments rarely change abruptly or significantly; most people can safely assume that their lives will typically involve the same locations with the same people. Consequently, the stability of those environments allows the self-concept to develop and be maintained. It is difficult to enact change in the self when the environment does not (Gore & Cross, 2014).

It is for this reason that many people would not report a coherent self-concept in their dream state. For them, dreams are temporary, incoherent, and inconsequential. The instability of those experiences provides little fertile ground for a self-concept to develop. If people's waking lives existed in such frequent states of instability and upheaval, it would be just as difficult to develop a consistent waking self-concept. To describe waking life as temporary, incoherent, and inconsequential would likely force people into persistent states of reactivity, never fostering a structured sense of who they are. Thus, it is no surprise that inconsistent dream experiences have the same outcome for many people.

We were fortunate enough to find someone for whom this was not the case. His well-developed memory for vivid dream experiences allowed for a detailed account of his activities in the dreamscape, connections among those experiences, and access to those experiences in his waking state. His extensive memory for dream experiences alone is noteworthy in itself. This in turn allowed for an elaborate and contextualized self-concept to develop for his dream state, which was also influenced by the stability and consistency of the nightly dreamscape. His dream self-concept was elaborate because it represented every element of a complete self-definition: individual, relational, collective, ecological, abilities, and memories. These aspects of the dream self-concept were also evident in his dream diary entries, with the only exception being self-defining memories from his dreams. Of all the areas of the self-concept, it appeared that the individual, ecological, and abilities aspects of his dream self-concept were most often represented in

his dreams. In short, it was very common for his dream experiences to engage his unique attributes and skills in self-defining locations. It may be the consistency of these three elements that allow for the maintenance of his dream self-concept.

Our participant's dream self-concept was contextualized, however, because there was minimal overlap in the content between his dream and waking self-concepts. Despite the low degree of identical content, our participant displayed very similar self-structures. The relative frequency and descriptiveness of individual, relational, and ability aspects were nearly identical between dream and waking self-concepts, despite those aspects rarely repeating between the two lists. The degree to which differences in content and structure indicate integrative or compartmentalized self-structures is worth further consideration. Often, content-related self-concept change is an adaptive response to changing life events and commitments (Bower, 1981; Sedikides, 1992), whereas self-structure change is often the result of minimizing the impact of stress and salient negative experiences such as trauma (Linville, 1987; Showers, 2002; Showers, Abramson & Hogan, 1998). Based on what was found with our participant, we would suggest the differences in content relate to the distinct and adaptive needs in the waking versus dream environments, but the similarities in self-structure indicate this is not a response to stressful life conditions. In short, these are adaptive differences, not pathological ones.

It is important to note that the fundamental structure of our participant's dream self is not the events, the colors, or symbols in the dream, but the subjective perceptions of the dream self experiencing the dream as an interconnected series of events in a consistent dreamscape. In this way, the dream self and the waking self share similar phenomenological characteristics; both are agents navigating familiar environments. The defining feature of one's waking self is the subjective perceptions guided by multiple self-categories to navigate the social and physical environment. The same experiences apply to our participant's dream self. This challenges many dream models used in psychotherapy, with the exception of the Phenomenological Dream Self Model (Kara & Selvi, 2017). Previous models have led many theorists and clinicians to focus excessively on details (symbols, archetypes, etc.) that could be considered irrelevant to the dream self, and as a result, they often miss the correct interpretation of the dream as a phenomenological experience of the whole person. It is important to understand that, at least in our participant's case, that a dream is an experience and that there is a dream self who experiences it.

Our participant's dream series was longstanding, interconnected, and self-referencing, which differs from previous notions of dream series. Mattoon (1978) suggested that the interpretation of dream series fall into one of three categories: a) elements that are of special importance for the individual, b) traumatic dreams that discontinue after the resolution of that trauma, or c) an anticipated development or transition in one's overall mental state. All three of these suggest the dreams have more importance to the waking self than to the dream self. It may be the case, however, that some dream experiences are only important to the dream self alone, developing and nurturing an identity that is conducive to the longstanding and familiar elements of the dreamscape. As such, the dream series may simply be the interconnected experiences of the dream self rather than

having evident connections to one's waking life.

Our case study approached our participant's experiences with the purpose of describing rather than interpreting his dreams. Dream work can be utilized as a tool that can be evaluated by either the client or the therapist, but other methods may allow for objective third parties to evaluate the effectiveness of that work as well (see Jenkins, 2014). For future research investigating the nature of dreams for people like our participant, such dream work would have to adapt to the consistency of the dream experiences as well as the contextualization between the dream and waking selves. Rather than examining influences between the dream and waking selves, such dream work may be able to examine changes within the dream self and dream contexts. Future research may also seek to address some of the limitations of our study.

## 5. Limitations and Future Directions

This case study was a small step in a potentially larger program of research. Despite the insights gained from this participant's self-concept assessments and dream diary, it is difficult to know how many individuals also dream in the same dreamscape nightly, and if they would exhibit the same trends in self-content, self-structures, and overall self-concept. A larger sample of participants with stable and consistent dream environments would therefore be crucial to answering these questions, and to better understand if dream self-concepts are more common. In addition to identifying similarities within this sample, further research could also explore individual differences in these experiences and outcomes. For example, self-representation within dreams has been linked to visuospatial skills (Foulkes et al., 1991) and age (Foulkes, 1982, 1987). These same factors may also influence the ability to develop a dream self-concept.

Neurological patterns may also help explain how consistent dreamscapes and dream self-concepts develop. An analysis of dream stages could provide important insights into the processes through which they develop. For example, the quality and intensity of social interactions within dreams depends on whether the person experiences the interaction during the REM or NREM stages (McNamara et al., 2007). People with an elaborate dream self-concept may have longer periods within these stages, to allow for more social interactions to occur. Individuals who develop an elaborate dream self-concept may also have a highly engaged Default Mode Network (DMN) during their waking state, which functions similarly to REM sleep (Domhoff, 2011). This may allow people with a dream self-concept to have more access to both conscious and subconscious cognitions in both their waking and dreaming lives.

## 6. Conclusions

From a phenomenological standpoint, all human experiences are fit to study, even those that occur while dreaming (Kara & Selvi, 2017). For many people, such an analysis would bear little fruit; dreams feel too disconnected and random to pinpoint any trends in them. Our case study demonstrated, however, that our participant experiences his dreams in a coherent, consistent, and stable world, one in which he can visit familiar locations, interact with familiar others, and engage in well-honed skills that fit the context. Consequently, he developed an elaborate self-concept within this state, one that contained all the elements of a

complete self-definition. Due to the fantastical nature of the dreamscape, his dream self-concept was quite distinct from his waking self-concept, but he utilized the same self-structures to understand himself through personal attributes, close others, and abilities. It is unclear whether he is one of only a few human beings with this experience, or he may be representative of a surprisingly large subset of humans whose dreams foster the development and maintenance of a dream self-concept. Further research of those with similar experiences would provide considerable insights into the phenomenological nature of dreams on the construction of the self. By utilizing this same process for studying these experiences, we may gain further insights into the mysteries of dreaming, and the various processes through which humans gain a better understanding of who they are.

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