Dream Lucidity and the Breakdown of Reality: A Phenomenological Comparison of Lucid Dreaming and Psychotic Experience

Gaja Prinčič
University of Ljubljana
Vegova 4, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
gp68226@student.uni-lj.si

Aleš Oblak
University Psychiatric Clinic Ljubljana
Chengdujska 45, 1260 Ljubljana, Slovenija
ales.oblak@psih-klinika.si

1 Introduction

In lucid dreams, a person becomes aware that they are dreaming and may exert control over them. Unlike ordinary dreaming it involves awareness and agency, which makes it a useful contrast to disturbed agency that may be seen in psychosis. Psychosis is a psychiatric syndrome that involves impaired reality testing, delusions, and hallucinations. Jaspers (1997) described psychotic prodrome as a "delusional atmosphere," where the world feels strange and charged with new meaning. A person's lifeworld is characterised by what Heidegger (2008) referred to as unheimlich, the uncanny or, more literally, the "un-home-like." Both states involve alterations in the sense of reality: for example, derealisation-like experiences in lucid dreams (e.g., intensified colours, vivid imagery); in psychosis, a broader restructuring of perceived reality that may include delusional meanings and a sense that the world has become fundamentally different. Because of these coarse-grained similarities between the two states, lucid dreams can be thought of as a model of psychosis, however fine-grained descriptions of phenomenological similarities and differences are currently lacking in literature. Luhrmann (2016) further argues that psychotic experiences are shaped by cultural and personal context, not only by the underlying etiopathology. These observations motivate our core question: how do first-person experiences of dream lucidity compare to those of a psychotic episode?

2 Methods

We will conduct semi-structured phenomenological interviews with 15 lucid dreamers and 15 people who have experienced at least one psychotic episode. Exclusion criteria will include neurological developmental disorders. Each interview will focus on changes in reality perception, sense of self and others, felt control/agency, emotional intensity, and the personal significance of the experience. Special attention will be paid to contextual factors following Luhrmann's comparative phenomenological approach. Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed via Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT). We will code transcripts inductively, staying close to participants' own language, and co-construct meaning rather than assume objective truth. Following CGT, we will use constant comparison: after each interview, we will refine questions and coding schemes iteratively until thematic saturation, which the sample size of 15 per group is expected to achive.

3 Results

We expect that both groups will report altered reality and heightened salience: for example, a sudden shift in which "everything became vivid or unreal." Parallels may include fragmented time (lucid dreams with non-linear narratives; psychosis feeling timeless or accelerated), spatial distortions, depersonalisation, and strong emotional responses (fear, awe, euphoria). In contrast lucid dreamers will typically recognise the unreality and may manipulate the dream scene, emphasising insight and agency while in psychosis, people often fail to recognise hallucinations as unreal, instead describing confusion, distress, and a sense of external control.

4 Discussion

This phenomenological comparison aims to reveal common structures underlying altered states of consciousness. It supports Luhrmann (2016) view that psychosis involves lived meaning shaped by context and suggests that lucid dreams and psychosis both distort reality and intensify self-awareness. By highlighting these parallels, the study contributes to consciousness research and challenges rigid boundaries between "normal" and "pathological" experiences (i.e., those causing prolonged mental suffering). Limitations include the fact that dreaming and psychosis occur in fundamentally different states (dreams during REM sleep while psychosis unfolds in waking life and may persist for days or weeks). Nevertheless, the study may offer insight into how the mind constructs reality across altered states and how awareness-based approaches could help people cope with psychotic symptoms.

References

Heidegger, M. (2008). *Being and Time*. HarperCollins.

Jaspers, K. (1997). *General Psychopathology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 7th Edition.

Luhrmann, T. M. (2016). *Our Most Troubling Madness: Case Studies in Schizophrenia across Cultures*. University of California Press.