VISUAL IMAGINATION AND DREAMING

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INTRODUCTION

Visual imagination is the ability to develop spontaneous visualizations of people, places, or events without simultaneous external stimulation by the objects visualized. Visual imagery seems to provide a method for investigating consciousness and psychological processes. Individuals using visual imagery often experience a clearer realization of psychological processes than with verbal association techniques.

Techniques for utilizing visual imagery have been used as an adjunct to verbal psychotherapy (Singer, 1974). The individual is instructed to visually imagine and explore settings thought to possess symbolic significance and to describe the resultant process. A partial list of these settings include: meadows, mountains, caves, and bodies of water. Most therapists select the symbolic situation to be explored (Leuner, 1969). Occasionally, visual fantasies that arise spontaneously in therapy are utilized.
In the course of the authors' work with a visual image technique the impression has been developed that the visual imagery process has an impact on the production of dreams. This chapter describes a visual image technique and reports characteristics of the subsequent dreams. Comparison of these dreams with the subjects' previous dream experience and our own clinical experience with dreams are used to understand the effect of the technique on dreaming.

**Method**

The experimenter determines the subject's favorite, or most significant currently used room, and asks the subject to imagine himself in that room. He is then asked to describe the room in detail to the experimenter with his eyes closed so as to shut out the distraction of external stimuli. After the subject has described the room to the experimenter he is then asked to clean the room in a certain fashion. As he does so he is asked to report any feelings and thoughts that occur. The experimenter tells the subject to clean the room from the top down. This means that he should begin with the ceilings, then to the walls (top), working his way down to the floor. *All* the articles contained on the ceiling and walls are to be removed and brought to the center of the room. For the purposes of cleaning high places he should furnish himself, in his imagination, with the necessary implements including a ladder. As he works his way down to floor level, all articles there should be brought to the center of the room. Books should be taken out of bookcases, their nature described, and then should be put in the center. If it is a bedroom, everything should be placed on the bed (providing *it* is in the center of the room to begin with). Instruct the subject that in the center of the room he shall have a container to hold all of the articles he intends to discard. The container can be a valise, trunk, barrel, carton, etc., especially one that he might find while cleaning up. After he has everything in the center of
the room, instruct him to place what he does not want into the trash container. He should indicate what these things are that he is throwing away. He should be asked to wash the windows, vacuum the floor and carpet, clean the fixtures, and so forth, all of which he should do and describe. If the subject wishes to perform other activities such as painting the walls or polishing furniture, etc., he should be encouraged to do so. After he has all of his discards in the container (he might also throw out furniture which is placed in large containers) he should then put everything back in any way that he chooses. He is then instructed to take the container(s) to the doorway. He then comes back and cleans up the center of the room. Then he is asked to take the container(s) outside to a convenient location and either burn the container(s) completely or sink it in water, watching it until it disappears to the bottom. He then comes back, after describing his thoughts and feelings on watching the container burn or sink, looks again at the room, and describes how he feels. At this point the exercise ends.

Results

This technique has been used by the senior author (G.E.) with 40 subjects. Thirty of these subjects were patients who performed this technique at the outset of the psychotherapeutic process. The other subjects were colleagues. The subjects were told that the exercise might enhance their personal awareness. Dreaming was not mentioned as an effect of the technique. A representative sample of three subject illustrations are presented below:

Subject 1

A 50-year-old woman dreamed: "I am on a beach with my children and relatives. I am nude. In the background is the city of Cincinnati. I suddenly find myself in a big building that looks like a department store. Near the elevator I see a crippled old
man. I go up on the elevator. There seems to be many staircases going up and down. I find myself at a place that seems to be like a hotel. I go looking for my room and I make the wrong turn and I find myself at a staircase going to a place that I have never seen before.” This dream was reported to have been in color, and to be quite intense. She commented, “I never had a dream like that in my life.”

Subject 2

A man in his mid-30s reported the following dream: “I was sailing on a 12-meter sloop in the middle of the ocean against two other 12 meters. It was an Americas Cup race, which seemed unusual since there are only two boats in these races. The boat I was on was in second place. We were close to the first boat and quite far ahead of the third boat. I was very excited and was concentrating hard on getting ahead of the first boat. Suddenly, an enormous island with an enormous high mountain peak welled up out of the water between my boat and the first-place boat. Just as suddenly, I catapulted over the island and landed on the first boat. Then the island vanished, and the two boats were next to each other again. Next there was a great deal of confusion, and I landed back on my own boat. The race continued, and I had the feeling that I would catapult again onto the first boat.” He went on to report that the dream was very unusual. “I felt very moved by the dream experience and had no trouble remembering it,” he said. He went on, “I remembered the dream for the next couple of days. Although I enjoy remembering dreams and try to, I rarely recall them. Also, when I do, they just don’t stick in my mind like this one. The events were also weird. I have had sailing races in my awake life. Maybe the outcome is slightly different from what happens when I race. But my dreams don’t have such surrealistical things happen like mountains coming out of the water and then disappearing, or my leaping through the air to other boats. Also, the type of race stays close to what happens. In this dream there were three boats in what always is a two-boat race.” This dream was reported as being in color and was said to be very “vivid.”

Subject 3

A professional man at the age of 28 dreamed thus: “I am sitting in a large field. The sun is shining brightly and the sky is very
blue. The field is empty except for a yellow haystack appearing in the middle of the field. This haystack is four to five stories high and I am amazed to see one that high. There are several people climbing on it. I find myself climbing on it. I am half-way up when I discover that it is too steep and I begin to feel some anxiety. Behind me is my girlfriend urging me up. I notice that I am wearing blue jeans and a red bandana is tied to my waist. I feel frightened about falling off and I fall to my hands and knees to keep my balance. I continue to climb, but I slide as I do so. I start to experience an uncomfortable feeling of falling. The scene suddenly shifts and I am at the base of the haystack. I walk around it trying to find a less steep route up.” He was “struck” by the vividness and unusual quality of this dream experience. He said that he did not dream in color previously, nor did he ordinarily recall dreams well. He had no experience of the day preceding the dream or in a prior recent time before this dream that he could relate to account for the setting of the dream.

Thirty-eight of the subjects responded with dreams whose characteristics were experienced as unusual from their ordinary dream life. These dreams took place 24–48 hours after the completion of the visual imagination exercise. Several qualities seemed to differentiate these dreams from dreams ordinarily encountered by us in our own psychotherapeutic work.

1. Each of the 38 subjects who responded to the exercise with unusual dreaming described their dreams as “weird,” “odd,” or “fantastic.” The subjects seemed to be responding to gross distortions in the formal characteristics of the environment they encountered within the dream experience. For example, Subject 1 was in a department store packed with multiple staircases, like a Pironesi print. Subject 2 saw a mountain well up from the ocean in front of his boat, and Subject 3 climbed a haystack five stories high. Department stores, mountains and haystacks are represented in dreams which occur during the course of ordinary dreaming. However, in ordinary dreams these elements seem to retain the formal structure usually per-
ceived in the waking state. The subjects did not experience the ordinary representations of the waking world in the post-visual imagination dreams.

The subjects said these dreams were "different." They described these dreams as fantastic: the events having a surrealistic cast experientially. The subjects felt the settings were strange and unfamiliar, but the dreams were not reported as being like nightmares. The strangeness did not deter the subjects from exploring these unfamiliar places; whereas, in ordinary dreams the dreamer usually shies away from settings that are strange and prefers not to explore them. The strangeness in these dreams is not generally accompanied by anxiety, but if anxiety occurs the dreams continue uninterruptedly. These dreams occur as those before awakening.

2. Most subjects experienced themselves as moving up and down or in a vertical manner for a good portion of the dream. This movement was experienced as being of a self-propelled sort rather than one of being passively acted upon.

In all the dreams the dreamers were intimately involved in the action of the dream and not as participant observers, as often is the case in ordinary dreams. The dreamers were sometimes made uncomfortable by their behavior, but they did not shrink from entering into the experience. Their behavior was experienced as volitional rather than experiencing being acted upon by events.

3. The subjects sensed that the dreams were of extraordinary vividness. A number of subjects felt "moved" by the dream. For example, Subject 1 of the subject illustrations commented, "I never had a dream like that in my life." Another subject (not reported here) said, "It was a very odd dream. I don't recall a dream ever being that odd."
The experience of vividness, often used interchangeably with intensity by the subjects, was an ubiquitous occurrence. That such an experience is not infrequently found in the usual course of a person's dream life has been documented. That our subjects' responses moved them to characterize these dreams as "the most vivid I've ever had", sets them apart. This quality of singling out a specific dream event with certainty was quite striking.

4. The dreams are most often experienced in color, and they are of great color intensity.

5. The recall of the dream is usually very clear whether or not the subject regarded himself as a good or bad dream recaller—or even in those who claimed not to be aware ordinarily of having dreamed.

**Discussion**

The foregoing observations about the kind of dreams occurring after the visual imagination exercise (VIE) might allow us to link the imaginative faculty and dreaming. Three ideas might be considered in this connection:

1. One takes time out to do work that is not done ordinarily in the course of everyday life. In effect, the subject momentarily dehabituates, by which is meant that he reverses his usual habit(s) of everyday life. A reversal of this behavior allows one to become open to the freshness of an experience. In so doing there can be a sudden and new recognition about one's present existence. This recognition will then, in the form of an aroused action, carry itself out in the dream existence. There are numerous ways to dehabituate and the VIE is but one.
2. One is "granted permission" to clean up the clutter. Generally speaking, in the relationship between therapist and patient the latter is "granted permission" to speak freely about whatever he wishes in an atmosphere of benign tolerance and acceptance. This is called the condition of "free association" (Epstein, 1976). In much the same way there is an opportunity offered to the patient to freely use his imaginative faculty which has been lying dormant. Here, then, a visual mode of expression is wedded to the lexical mode (Horowitz, 1970). The form selected in which to imagine freely has highly symbolic meaning. The room (or a house) has long been thought to be symbolic of the Self (Bachelard, 1969). In the VIE one is asked to clean out the clutter, clutter that keeps one at a distance from the Self. This specific task that can be freely done via imaginal action is readily performed by the patient. In effect a space is opened in which a new experience in the form of dreaming can emerge.

3. Imagination should be differentiated from fantasy. In Western culture, and by common usage in the English language, fantasy and imagination are used interchangeably. Both functions meet by dint of being considered to be "unreal." Such common statements as, "it's only your imagination," and, "that's just a fantasy," testify to the idea of unreality connected with these activities. However, imagination and fantasy differ in a number of significant ways.¹ In non-Western contexts the imagination is viewed as a real function with a real spatial setting, albeit of an immaterial nature. In this vein Henry Corbin, one of the most eminent Western scholars of Islamic culture wrote: "It must be stressed that the world into which these Oriental (Islamic) theosophers probed is perfectly real. Its reality is more irrefutable and more coherent than that
of the empirical world, where reality is perceived by the senses. Upon returning, the beholders of this world are perfectly aware of having been "elsewhere"; They are not mere schizophrenics. This world is hidden behind the very act of sense perception and has to be sought underneath its apparent objective certainty. For this reason, we definitely cannot qualify it as being imaginary in the sense of the word, i.e., an unreal, or non-existent. Just as the Latin word "origo" has provided us in French with the derivatives originaire (native of), original, originel (primary), the word image can give us the term imaginal in addition to the regular derivative imaginary. We would thus have the imaginal world as an intermediary between the sensible world and the intelligible world (Corbin 1972).

In the same vein the dream realm is a real world in which the individual exists. How does this phenomenon tie in with the notion of day residue as the initiator and instigator of dream activity? Although the main thrust of this paper does not deal with the notion of day residue, it can be said, that, regardless of the actual validity of that idea there seems to be another source related to the arousal of dream activity besides the postulated ones of external waking events and fantasy activity. On occasion some aspect of what is discovered in the cleaning exercise appears in some direct manner in the dream. This was true for subject 2 where he discovered a calendar with pictures of boats buried in one of the drawers he cleaned in the VIE. However, the content of most subjects' dreams are not reflective of what appeared in the cleaning exercise.

Implications

That imagination has a regulatory capacity and is part of an overall imaginative faculty is not an essentially new idea (McMahon, 1976). Prior to the advent of the Cartesian revolu-
tion in Western thought, the imagination was viewed in exactly the way described above. Imagination was seen then to have a physical location in the ventricles of the brain and was stimulated into action by the taking in of external sensory stimuli of the "objective" world (McMahon, 1976). It was in effect an immaterial function acting on a material substance (the senses). The imagination was then viewed also as the regulator of various sorts of imagery that an individual would experience such as visual hallucinations and dreams. The discontinuity occurred when Descartes succeeded in removing the imaginative faculty from medicine, where it was used as a way of treating people with both physical and/or psychological disorders. Descartes' division of life into the res cogitans and res extensa succeeded in removing imagination because this function was viewed by him as immaterial and thus not real. Medicine became, thereby, bound up with what was material and able to be grasped as a concrete reality by the five senses as its domain of operation.

Imagery as a viable source of important experience has begun to gain some respectability in the fields of neuropsychiatry and neurophysiology (Galin, 1974). The use of the VIE reported here is a derivative of the imagination and imaginative faculty. It represents a way to try and reestablish the imagination within the framework of experience that would become once again an accepted part of the experiences of life in general and medicine in particular.

NOTES

1. The following are some of the differences between fantasy and imagination:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Imagination</th>
<th>Fantasy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Unique experience</td>
<td>1. Repetitive action and feeling</td>
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2. Creative and informs concrete world
3. Not wish fulfilling
4. Takes place in imaginal realm
5. Loss of self centeredness

2. Habitual
3. Wish fulfilling
4. Concerned with matter and the concrete world
5. Self-centered

REFERENCES