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# A "Light-Switch Phenomenon" in Lucid Dreams

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An extensive study of lucid dreams revealed that several persons reported difficulty in switching on an electric-light in both ordinary and lucid dreams. This was followed up by giving the task to 8 lucid dreamers. Six subjects reported that the light would not work properly, 1 subject "couldn't find the light-switch," and 1 subject stated that she *could* perform the task but only after she had "covered" her eyes in the dream and abolished the imagery. These findings indicate that any attempt to violate the current "brightness" level of imagery in dreams results in rationalized avoidance of the planned situation. This suggests an autonomous dream-producing process, which maneuvers the dream as best as possible within imagery limitations.

*Lucid dreams* — those in which the sleeping person is fully aware of being in a dream and can control the events — offer an important opportunity for studying the dreaming process "from within." An extensive study of lucid dreams (Delage, 1919; Gackenbach, 1978; Green, 1968; Hearne, 1978; Hervey de Saint Denys, 1867; Van Eeden, 1969) revealed that some accounts of both ordinary and lucid dreams referred to an inability of the dreamer to switch on an electric-light in the dream scenery (i.e., the light would not work). This observation was pursued by giving the task to a number of lucid dreamers in order to ascertain the reliability of such reports. The technique required subjects to perform certain tasks while having a lucid dream; the experimenter then looked for consistencies in their reports which might provide a basis for new theorizing.

## Method

Eight lucid dreamers, 5 females and 3 males, most of whom had corresponded with the author on the topic of lucid dreams, were requested to "attempt to switch on an electric-light in a lucid dream and report what happened." Subjects were naive as to the purpose of the experiment.

## Results

Subjects reported as follows:

- S1: "I went to the bedroom light switch and turned it on. To my surprise, a light came on behind me in a room to the side, but not in the bedroom. Then I tried the kitchen light switch. Nothing happened. Quite annoyed and frustrated that I couldn't get the lights to turn on, I went back to the bedroom and said to the young man, 'What's with the lights? They won't turn on!'"
- S2: "I switched it on and off several times and looked up at the light, which was a naked bulb. It kept sparking and flickering — I could see the filament light up and glow orangy-red. I thought 'typical of this place, nothing works properly.'"
- S3: "I just couldn't find the switch and seemed to search for ages."
- S4: "Attempting to switch on the [dream] bedside light is fruitless as the bulb will not come on."
- S5: "I tried to switch the light on — it would not come on."
- S6: "I tried switching on the lights in the corridor, but nothing happened."
- S7: "I know I'm dreaming when the bedside lamp will not switch on."
- S8: "I covered my eyes. I felt myself touch my eyelids and I couldn't see. I then felt the light switch and everything became very bright."

## Discussion

Subjects can routinely carry out pre-sleep instructions in lucid dreams (e.g., inspect objects, "fly," signal information out by making ocular movements), yet the task of switching on a light presents a strangely consistent difficulty. Its widespread nature indicates a possible important limitation in the "dream engineering" process. The case of S8, who *could* switch on a light but only after covering her eyes and abolishing the imagery, is revealing when considered with the experience of another person who reported that a light may be switched off first, and then on, but not the other way around. The possibility exists that there is a ceiling-limit on "brightness" in the dream imagery at any point (this ceiling may vary over time) and any attempt to violate that level by manipulating the dream results in rationalized avoidance of the intended situation. If so, it would suggest that an autonomous dream-producing process operates, which has to maneuver the dream within such limitations of imagery. Other less plausible explanations are: (a) that the phenomenon may reflect the operation of a "sleep-maintaining process" which avoids dream scenes such as a light suddenly switching on, since that might normally waken a sleeping person in real life (although a light can switch on from a reduced imagery level, as with S8) or (b) that the phenomenon may symbolize the "powerlessness" or "lack of energy" of the sleep state (although its apparent specificity does not support that notion). A large-scale study is to be undertaken to investigate the phenomenon in more detail and seek any other tasks which subjects find problematic.

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