

Living in a dream: Body and self-experience during waking and dream states in depersonalisation

ABSTRACT:

Background

Depersonalisation (DP) is characterized by fundamental alterations to the sense of self that include feelings of detachment and estrangement from one's body. The majority of previous research on DP has focused on atypical bodily self-consciousness during wakefulness. However, little is known about dream experiences in people with DP symptoms. This is surprising because many of the individuals with DP describe their daily waking experiences as being "dream-like", and not feeling fully present or real. The relationship between dream and waking experience in individuals with DP is so far unclear.

Aims

We aimed to investigate and quantify the subjective experience of body and self during waking and dreaming. Investigating dreams in people experiencing DP symptoms may help us understand whether the dream state is a 'spared space' where people can temporarily 'retrieve' their sense of self and sense of bodily presence.

Method

We conducted an online study in healthy participants ($n=514$) with DP traits. An online survey was hosted on the software platform Qualtrics and contained a participant information sheet, a consent form, demographic questions, and several measures of interest presented in the same order for each participant (see below). The participants could complete the survey at any time of day on a computer or mobile device. They completed the Cambridge Depersonalisation Scale, a short questionnaire on bodily experience in dreams and also answered questions on nightmare and dream recall frequency. To assess their waking experience participants completed a 'Body Boundaries' visual analogue scale, the Inclusion of Others in Self scale and two sub-scales from the Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA) questionnaire.

Results

We found that higher DP traits - i.e., higher scores on the Cambridge Depersonalisation Scale (CDS) - were associated with more frequent dream experiences from an outside observer perspective ($r = .28$) and more frequent dream experiences of distinct bodily sensations ($r = .23$). We also found that people with higher CDS scores had more frequent dream experiences of altered bodily perception ($r = .24$), more frequent nightmares ($r = .33$) and higher dream recall ($r = .17$). CDS scores were negatively correlated with body boundary scores ($r = -.31$) in waking states and there was a negative association between CDS scores and the degree of trust in interoceptive signals ($r = -.52$).

Conclusions

Our findings provide some support for the continuity hypothesis of dreaming, which proposes that there is a continuity between waking and dreaming states, and that the content and experiences of dreams are influenced by the individual's waking experiences and psychological processes. Our study elucidates the complex phenomenology of DP in relation to bodily selfhood during waking and dreaming and suggests avenues for potential therapeutic interventions in people with chronic depersonalisation (depersonalisation-derealisation disorder).

Keywords

Bodily self-consciousness, Body depersonalisation, Dreaming, Interoception, Self

Published Work:

Gwyther, M. P. D., Lenggenhager, B., Windt, J. M., Aspell, J. E., & Ciaunica, A. (2024). Examining the association between depersonalisation traits and the bodily self in waking and dreaming. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1), 6107. doi:10.1038/s41598-024-56119-w

Researchers' Contacts:

Jane Aspell

Anglia Ruskin University

Email: jane.aspell@aru.ac.uk

Anna Ciaunica

University of Lisbon/UCL

Email: a.ciaunica@ucl.ac.uk

Bigna Lenggenhager

University of Konstanz

Email: bigna.lenggenhager@uzh.ch

Jennifer Windt

Monash University

Email: jennifer.windt@monash.edu

Matthew Gwyther

Anglia Ruskin University

Email: mg110190@hotmail.co.uk