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Daydreaming

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Abstract

Daydreaming can be defined as the process by which we partly or fully decouple from what seems to be one's current activity in the world. It usually designates "anything one may be thinking about that does not pertain to the task in which one is currently involved" (Pereira and Diriwächter, 2008). Occurring within our flow of consciousness, it entails fantasy or a form of diurnal dreaming. Daydreaming can be more or less deliberate, have more or less clear goals, be more or less structured, and have diverse types of outcomes. Authors usually distinguish daydreams that may enrich people's relation to themselves, or their relation to the world, from those which seem not to enrich experiences. Most authors admit that daydreaming participates to our capacity to deal with our experiences and opens up new possibilities.

Keywords

Daydreaming · Fantasy · Phantasy · Imagination · Mind-wandering · Singer · Freud · Lacan · Winnicott · Sociocultural psychology · Psychoanalysis

Introduction

Daydreaming has long been identified as a form of dream with open eyes, a way of being lost in fancy. In common sense as well as in psychology, daydreaming can be seen more or less positively: either as a very positive and constructive process, as a form of harmless distraction, or as loss of time or even a negative process. It follows that daydreaming can be seen as more or less connected to the possible: daydreaming can be seen as a process that leads to the creation of new possibilities in life, or on the contrary, as something that prevents or impedes our engagement to the possible. Interestingly, these positions partake to different psychological traditions: psychoanalysis on the one hand, and on the other, more conventional psychology, connected by the pivotal work of Jerome L. Singer. This text has two main parts. In the first part, we review studies on daydreaming by highlighting their relation to the possible. We thus distinguish authors for whom daydreaming is a usual activity of mind which is enabling the possible; others who believe that daydreaming can even expand the possible; authors for whom daydreaming con-

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strains the possible; and authors working with a non-processual model of mind for whom daydreaming is an obstacle of the possible. In a second part, we build on this work and first adopt an analytical stance to distinguish content, form, and function of daydreaming; we finally define a sociocultural approach to daydreaming, according to which daydreaming is a semiotic process building on past internalized experiences, reconfigured in new ways, thus expanding the possible.

Reviewing Daydreaming

Daydreaming as Enabling the Possible in Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is focused on psychological processes by which "the obscure ways of [the] unconscious" can be made clear (Roudinesco and Plon 2007, p. 822). Psychoanalysis is a theory that assumes our lives are marked by the work of unconscious processes and highlights their affective nature; in addition it is an approach that assumes that semiotic processes – through language or other signs – can give form to our experience. In that domain, the notion of daydreaming is closely linked to those of fantasy, phantasy, dreaming, mind-wandering, and imagination (Laplanche and Pontalis 2007). For Freud, the creator of psychoanalysis, daydreams or phantasies are made of some traces of experiences, now combined in new ways:

> Phantasies arise from an unconscious combination, in accordance with certain trends, of things experienced and heard. (. . .) Phantasies are constructed by a process of amalgamation and distortion analogous to the decomposition of a chemical body, which is compounded with another one. For the first sort of distortion consists in a falsification of memory by a process of fragmentation in which chronological relations in particular are neglected. (. . .) A fragment of the visual scene is then joined up with a fragment of the auditory one and made up into the phantasy, while the fragment left over is linked up with something else. In this way it is made impossible to trace up an earlier connection. (Freud 1966, p. 252)

Other authors, such as Winnicott, Lacan, and Klein agree upon the experiential component in defining daydream's content. There are bits of previous experience that are recomposed and constitute the feelings and scenarios delineated by daydreaming.

Freud also considered daydream as a natural and usual process, in which we are daily engaged. It is a spontaneous activity, as is children's playing, and it is actually a continuation of children's play:

> As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of playing, he now phantasies. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called day-dreams. I believe that most people construct phantasies at times in their lives. This is a fact which has long been overlooked and whose importance has therefore not been sufficiently appreciated. (Freud 1959, p. 422)

Daydreaming is thus a common and usual process. It is often not taken very seriously, unless it is undertaken by artists, who cultivate their daydreaming capacity and who, thanks to their technique and talent, turn them into new and sharable cultural forms.

Most psychoanalytical traditions that developed after Freud admit with him that daydreaming is a key activity of our mind. Daydreaming participates to the processes by which mind elaborates or integrates more or less affectively charged experiences, and makes them acceptable or meaningful for the person. Daydream transforms experience by the process of decomposition of traces of past experience (personal, but also cultural, relational, etc.) and their reorganization in new psychological experiences. The processes by which these recompositions occur are those described by Freud in his analysis of dreaming and include displacement (of affects and content from semiotic forms), figuration (of abstract ideas into concrete things), and crystallization (of complex webs of meaning and affects into specific patterns) (Freud 2001a, b). Daydreaming can

take many forms, which are more or less conscious and more or less deliberate; their affective tonality can be positive or negative. This has been further explored by authors after Freud. Lacan shows that fantasies can have a defensive function and are the byproduct of a frustration of some form of satisfaction in daily life. They hence represent some psychic activity, they can be reflected upon, and they can thus give rise to new form of activity (Lacan 1982; Roudinesco and Plon 2007, p. 287). Piera Aulagnier, who followed some of Lacan's work, considered fantasy as the result of primary processes and thus as the product of a pursuit of pleasure (Castoriadis-Aulagnier 1975, p. 26). These authors agree upon the function of daydreaming: it thus constitutes a form of elaboration or transformation of affects, be they pleasurable, paradoxical, or unpleasant.

For psychoanalytically inclined authors, such as Freud, Winnicott, Lacan, and many others, daydreams can thus either simply accompany one's flow of thought or activities, and be free floating and associative, or can take the shape of systematic and deliberated scenario. These can be negative, as when some anxiety accompanies a travel to a new place, or positive, as when we anticipate with excitement what will be. Yet, the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of human experience – the fact that we can very strongly desire certain things and yet loath their very thought at the same time – dissolves some of the boundaries of this taxonomic classification.

Altogether, daydreaming is thus more generally seen as oriented toward the possible: some daydreams are oriented toward the future and thus preparing it; most daydreams engage, to different degree, the elaboration and therefore transformation of experience, which could be otherwise preventing activity; it thus enables the person to welcome what is to come and engage in new experiences.

Within that tradition, only few authors, such as Winnicott or Tisseron, consider that some forms of daydreaming are not linked to the generation of the possible those that engage a compulsive, dissociated, and defensive semiotic process. They are not related to the person's affects or in relation to the world:

> The patient may sit in her room and while doing nothing at all except breathe she has (in her fantasy) painted a picture, or she has done an interesting piece of work in her job, or she has been in a country walk; but from the observer's point of view, nothing has happened. In fact, nothing is happening because of the fact that in this dissociated state so much is happening. On the other hand, she may be sitting in her room thinking of tomorrow's job and making plans, or thinking about her holiday, and this may be an imaginative exploration of the world and of the place where dream and life are the same thing. (Winnicott 2001, p. 27)

Similarly, Tisseron considers that we can enter in a form of empty fantasy activity – empty in the sense that it does not participate in semiotic elaboration, for instance, as when we play repetitive online game without emotional participation (Tisseron 2012). In these examples, the authors distinguish two functions of daydreaming: that of the elaboration of experience and another compulsive, dissociative, yet defensive, which would not appear to participate in making life in the world possible for that person.

Daydreaming as Expanding the Possible: Jerome Singer's Legacy

In psychology, the first systematic exploration of daydreaming was made by Jerome L. Singer, who in 1975, dedicated a whole monograph to the topic which became foundational for the study of daydreaming. The book, reedited in 2014, opened with a phenomenological exploration of the author's own daydream, which consisted of a complex scenario, built over the years as self-standing world, and that he could summon at will (Singer 2014, Chapter 1). Trained as psychotherapist and working as experimental psychologist, he later developed systematic studies of daydreaming, including collecting testimonies in the media and the arts, observation, introspection, projective tests, questionnaires, and scales. Vast cohorts of college students in the 50s completed his questionnaires, including open questions and scales based for some part on theories of personality then in fashion. Most people did report daydreaming, mainly visuals, and often before falling asleep. Regarding content, Singer writes:

> we see that most people's daydream consist of projections in the future of the fairly practical immediate concerns they have in their daily life. This daydreaming cannot be equated with specifically wish-fulfilment ideation. It appears more appropriate to look upon the content for most of our sample as reflecting attempts at exploring the future. It is a form, of "trial action" in which individuals review a variety of alternatives, not by any means always involving satisfactory outcomes for themselves. (Singer 2014, p. 55)

Along the lines of psychoanalytic authors, Singer considers the remainder of daily life experiences as making up the content of daydreams. In terms of its function, he assumes a Jamesian position, which suggests that daydreaming is always part of our stream of consciousness and part of our handling the extreme complexity of the world in which we live. Experimental testing suggests that the less we are exposed to, or focused on, external stimuli, the more we can be attentive to our daydreaming. In other words, daydream is a regular feature of our waking life; we simply do not pay enough attention to it.

Through Singer and his colleagues' studies, contents of daydreams appeared to be about people, relations, daily incidents, food, sport, sex, travels, and mostly part of daily life concerns. Singer and colleagues also looked for age and sociodemographic variables explaining variations in daydreaming and, through scales evaluated by people, for clusters of daydreaming through statistical analysis. In terms of its affective nature, Singer indeed identified:

1. "Anxious distractibility in daydreaming": floating and worrisome daydreaming "is not a useful resource and [the persons] take little pleasure in it" (Singer 2014, p. 68).
2. "Guilty, negatively toned emotional daydream": these are the daydreams of people with high aspiration and self-doubts and ethical standards.
3. "Positive vivid daydreaming": this is "characterised by an enjoyment of daydreaming and its anticipation of the future and for self-distraction without any pathological implications" (Singer 2014, p. 70).

For Singer, it is then possible to identify two types of acceptance of inner life, one as more flexible, nonconforming, and interested in people, and the other as a form of curiosity toward the natural and physical world.

Finally, regarding the function of daydreaming, after reviewing the explanations available at his time, mainly psychoanalysis and cognitive approaches, Singer had a very modulated view: for him, the attention we give to daydreams and the way we handle our lives result from complex arrangements – biographical, educational, relational, experiential, etc. – and so daydreaming can have very different functions. Minimally, it is a way to enrich our experience: some are wishful explorations, some divert us from anger and frustrations, some provide us with distractions from boredom, and in many cases they are "rehearsals for future actions. They may suggest new and alternative ways of dealing with situations (. . .). They can encourage us to try new kinds of experiences, or at least to look for ways of reaching some compromise approach to these wishes" (Singer 2014, pp. 118–119). And indeed, for Singer, daydreaming is developed over the life span and could be supported through psychotherapy to enrich people's lives.

By all accounts, then, Jerome Singer's approach to daydreaming was open and generous; for him, daydreaming is a vital part of our experience, on the fringe of our consciousness, and plays a key function in enlarging possibilities in our lives, exploring them, testing them, or simply playing with them, so as to move on. Daydreaming is deeply related to the possible. In his own work, Singer moved to study of the development play and imagination, even into electronic age (Singer and Singer 1992, 2005, 2013).

Authors referring to Singer often work with his typology of daydreams and correlate positive vs. negative daydreams with different other variables or psychological functions. For instance, authors have found positive correlations between dysphonic daydreaming and sleep disturbance (Starker and Hasenfeld 1976) and negative correlations between positive daydreaming and sleep

disturbances. Others, such as Morley (Morley 1998), propose a phenomenological approach to daydreaming, which critically addresses Singer's emphasis on content and, using the metaphor of daydream as theatre, distinguishes daydream as lack versus as fulfilment. However, it seems that such approach transforms a model focused on processes (daydreaming as understood by Singer, inspired by psychoanalysis) into a model of types (of positive vs. negative daydreaming, wish fulfilment vs. lack); thus theorized, daydreaming loses its relation to the possible, as we will now see.

Daydreaming as Constraining the Possible: Unconscious Phantasms and Private Theatre

Some approaches in psychoanalysis and psychology assume that the deeper structures or processes of the psyche can constrain the richness or form that a given person's daydream can take.

On the psychoanalytical side, many authors distinguish the possibly conscious or quasi conscious nature of some of our fantasies, which are accessible to introspection and language, from other, deeper unconscious phantasies or phantasms. Grounding such distinction, Melanie Klein, a psychoanalyst who developed her understanding on the basis of the observation of very young infants, considers that daydreams find their form in deep and unconscious phantasies (Klein 1936). Because of their organizational force, these phantasies constrain the daydreams a person can engage in.

In a similar vein, Lacan distinguishes the imaginary concept of fantasy from that of phantasm (Lacan 1957). This notion conveys the idea that there is a form of dramatization of everyday life; the form that this drama may adopt for each person is depending on their phantasm (Lacan 1982; Roudinesco and Plon 2007, p. 287). In a slightly different manner, phenomenological approaches find a form of universal grounding in daydreaming; Morley thus proposes that daydreaming "reveals the meaning of moods and emotions as dramatic scenarios in a manner reminiscent of the Greek work theatron" (Morley 1998, p. 132). There is here a parallel between staging and daydreaming in Morley and the dramatic aspect of daydreaming developed by Freud, Klein, and Lacan, among others (Roudinesco and Plon 2007). Such approaches theorize the limits of daydreaming or the potential constraining that it may entail. They acknowledge, in a more or less rigid way, that the grounding of psyche establishes some form of fluid boundary for otherwise potentially infinite combinations.

Daydreaming as Impossibility

The most recent research on daydreaming has taken the label of mind-wandering, and it may or may not refer to Singer's proposition. In this psychology, the focus is not on processes of thinking but rather on outcomes. Affects are not theorized much, yet are assessed (as "satisfaction" or "well-being"); meaning or semiosis is not seen as relevant. These are considered in link to activities positively evaluated by the researcher – mainly, work (or learning). For most of this literature, daydream is seen as nuisance to the valued activity (i.e., work): mind-wandering is a way to be off-task and is usually considered as a loss of time. For instance, in a paper provocatively called "a wandering mind is an unhappy mind," Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) analyzed information obtained through a phone-based application about 2500 US person's activities, state of mind, and mood. Their results showed that mind-wandering occurs in 46.9% of the cases; they then add that although people

> were more likely to wander to pleasant topics (42.5% of samples) than to unpleasant topics (26.5% of samples), or neutral topics (31% of samples), people were no happier when thinking about pleasant topics than about their current activity ($b = -0.52$, not significant) and were considerably un-happier when thinking about neutral topics ($b = -7.2$, $P < 0.001$) or unpleasant topics ($b = -23.9$, $P < 0.001$) than about their current activity. (Killingsworth and Gilbert 2010, p. 932)

This type of research, content-free and decontextualized, is however hard to interpret. In any case, for these authors, mind-wandering consists in a loss of cognitive resources which would be better invested in something more efficient; it is thus seen as the result of a "cognitive control failure" (McMillan et al. 2013 for a review). The very fact of not being able to control their thoughts would be what makes people unhappy

(Stawarczyk et al. 2012). For such tradition, daydream harms or damages activities in which people should be fully involved; it is assessed negatively and seen as limiting the possible – a possible achieved through goal-oriented work.

Of course, one could question whether daydreaming and mind-wandering really entail the same phenomena. Newby-Clark and Thavendran (2018) suggest, in their review of the literature, that the lack of definition of these terms has also obscured the fact that they usually are operationalized in different ways. They propose to define daydreaming as "imagining events." This enables them to consider mind-wandering as a different phenomenon: it is just "off task" and passing from thought to thought, while daydreaming would thus be intentional and have an explicit object (i.e., imagining an event) (Newby-Clark and Thavendran 2018). This, again, creates a normative division within variation of daydreaming (goal orientation is good, off-task is bad) and loses the complexity and variation of daydreaming described by psychoanalysts and by Singer.

Expanding Daydream

Analyzing Daydreaming

After this review of approaches, we now propose to decompose their claims into four questions: (i) What is daydreaming made of, which refers to its content; (ii) what forms it can adopt; (iii) what shapes these forms; and (iv) what its function is.

What is daydreaming made of? Most authors agree on the fact that dreaming draws upon past experiences, which in mind, can be recombined in novel forms.

What forms can it adopt? There is much less consensus about the form of daydream. For the most comprehensive understandings, such as Singer's, daydreaming can take forms ranging from a general feeling to a fully formed scenario. A diffuse feeling of comfort may accompany the experience of suddenly hearing a long-lost song; that daydream may have no specific content, simply reenacting the feeling of safety that accompanied us the first time in which we heard that song. It can also take the form of a fully formed scenario; Singer thus described his former daydreams consisting of a whole season of football matches (Singer 2014); or one may engage in such daydream meeting an old lover by chance in an airport.

What shapes these forms? The form of daydream can be shaped by different forces and material. First, daydream may be partly shaped by the actual conditions of daydreaming; the football match may arise while watching one's son play football, or the hours of boredom due to a missed flight may trigger the romantic daydream. Second, for psychoanalysts, these daydreams are shaped by deeper psychic organization or phantasm. Third, people's daydreams are not only made by the content of their past experience, these also shape the form of these contents. Classical studies suggest that people daydream different shapes when looking at clouds, depending on their sociocultural experiences (Bartlett 1916, 1928); similarly, the material arrangement in which people move and live their lives produce patterns that can also shape daydreaming (Valsiner 2019).

What are the functions of daydreaming? As we have seen, the literature considers functions either in terms of outcome or in terms of process. In terms of outcome, daydreaming can be seen as constructive or dysphoric, positive or negative, and useful or useless. There is thus a difficult opposition between positive and negative affective qualities, not accounting for the paradoxical or contradictory nature of many of our desires and thoughts. In terms of process, daydream can be seen as elaboration of experience, which includes both the elaboration of affect through semiotic processes, and the production of novel forms based on such semiotic elaboration (i.e., have a new unexpected daydream). The process can have various degrees of relation to external stimuli – complete decoupling and intermediate or accompanied decoupling. We can then elaborate the past, for instance, going over a disagreement we had with a friend, reproducing what we replied and exploring alternative ways in which we could have engaged. This may give us the pleasure that that situation didn't have or simply calm us by making sense of what happened. In the present,

daydreaming may allow us to do something about the boredom we are feeling at the airport because of a delayed flight. And regarding the future, strolling through shops may trigger some ideas about a next trip to Sweden. Daydreaming can thus be seen as participating to the elaboration of past, present, and future experiences.

Reframing Daydream and the Possible

A sociocultural psychological perspective on daydreaming enables us to integrate the propositions of psychoanalysis with Singer's constructive view. In effect, current cultural psychology has a processual and developmental approach to mind and considers the psyche and human experience as semiotically, culturally mediated. It sees mind as elaborating affective experience through signs, as well as being able to generate affective experience through signs; these results from our experience of interacting with other and the world they inhabit (Vygotsky 1975). Experiences can thus be apprehended in more or less concrete ways and more or less conscious ways (Salvatore and Zittoun 2011; Valsiner 2000, 2014, 2019).

For sociocultural psychology, human experience is future-oriented; through play, perspective taking, imagination, fabulation, and fiction, humans can relive their pasts, explore alternatives, and, especially, generate their future (Gillespie 2005, 2006; Stenner 2018; Vygotsky 1994). Daydreaming is thus understood as one variation of these semiotically mediated processes, building on past internalized experiences, now reconfigured in new ways, often through creative synthesis (Vygotsky 1971), and build new possibilities. From such perspective, daydreaming, like imagination, is not mere repetition of past traces; these processes rather participate to the expansion of experience (Pelaprat and Cole 2011; Zittoun 2019; Zittoun and Gillespie 2016). Both daydreaming and imagination demand that we decouple or disengage from the flow of common affairs, situated in the socially shared reality, to engage in what can be called distal experiences that escape the social and physical laws of that reality. Given its past theoretical anchorage, the notion of daydreaming emphasizes, more than that of imagination, the pervasive, background presence of the phenomena, as well as its roots or extensions in unconscious and affective activities, closer to dreams. However, many of the forms of daydreams documented by the literature, whether classical or more recent (Pereira and Diriwächter 2008; Singer 1977), could be also considered as imagination.

In our proposition, daydreaming is seen as elaboration of experience and, more so, as a form of expansion of the possible. It can take the form of simply allowing us to leave the house to go to work or take the obvious form of coming up with a new idea or devising an unthought of solution. In any case, as a semiotic process part of the elaboration of experience, it can retrospectively participate in the sense-making of experience, to re-present experiences which have been so far not enough semiotically elaborated, presently mediate the relation to the real, or in a future-oriented manner, and pave the way to experiences to come. Daydreaming is thus part of creating the possible world in which we live.

Cross-References

- ▶ Anticipation
- ▶ Dream
- ▶ Fantasy
- ▶ Freud
- ▶ Future-Making
- ▶ Imagination
- ▶ Mind Wandering
- ▶ Vygotsky
- ▶ Winnicott

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