

Dreams, Diaries, and the Self:

Using dreams and imagination to overcome symbolic ruptures

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1.0 Introduction

The process of constructing identity begins during our adolescent years as the ability to form abstract thoughts emerges. It's a progression that is neither linear nor generalizable and is filled with ambivalence and ambiguity. Often, we spend as much time trying to discover who we are, or reconstructing our sense of self after a disquieting event, as we do feeling like we have "found" ourselves. Identity construction is a process that fundamentally is based on the use of signs—humans use signs to organize our relationship with the environment, constructing how we think, feel, regulate emotions, and act. For example, individuals may adorn themselves with particular styles of dress, or listen to specific genres of music (Abbey, 2003). They may have their skin tattooed, wear jewelry or pierce parts of their skin. These ornamentations (Valsiner, forthcoming), act symbolically to convey meanings that are known within a particular society. The process of making ourselves is a dialogical one (Hermans & Hermans, 2001), taking place in relation to other people. For example, a mother thinks of herself as such in relation to her children. Sometimes as we make meaning about the self, we may experience disquieting feelings. These are often times of symbolic rupture, for the person has lost the ability—at least momentarily—to tell their story in a fundamental way. For example, if one's romantic partner

leaves them for someone else, even basic thing like going for a walk might be difficult, as everything that was taken for granted is now called into question.

In this paper, we explore the use of diary writing during symbolic rupture. Especially in these periods of symbolic rupture, it's not unusual for some type of diary writing to occur (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2011). Writing in a diary constitutes an act of externalizing one's internal, ongoing, stream of consciousness. In diary writing, the person can create inclusive separation (Valsiner 1997) between the immediate externalized content and the ongoing stream of consciousness. In the present study, participants we aimed to get as close to the stream of consciousness as possible by asking participants to keep a diary of their dreams. Within these diary entries we find a mix of statements, some directly about the dream, while others are imaginations for what the dream might mean and what the future could hold. Contrasting the externalized notions from the dream on the one hand, and a person's imagined interpretations for what the dream might mean on the other, can lead to an emergent new meaning, arising by the individual overcoming the ambivalence of different understandings (Abbey, 2012). This is one reason diary writing can be rewarding: In the process of recording what *was*, and thinking about what *could be*, we can create a new sense of what *is*—new realizations about our self. Here we illustrate this process using the diary entries from an individual who even manages to use this process to change her identity so profoundly she is able to overcome a symbolic rupture (Zittoun, 2006) in her life, to rebuild herself after her sense after a deeply disquieting event.

2.0 Irreversible Time

In order to study how we make meaning about the self, it's necessary to understand the basic ontological framework within which that process occurs. We here focus specifically on the nature of the conception of time, and how it relates to our daily experience. Time is especially important, for it is the deepest soil for our lives, controlling our progression in life, and our sense of development throughout the lifespan. It's also especially important, as the one mode of conceptualizing time—perhaps the most popular in modern-day science—is fundamentally flawed. The flaw we speak of is owed to the work of Henri Bergson (1913), who compared the idea of time as a shelf that is merely a holder of life events, to his idea that time and human lives are deeply intertwined. The former perspective makes it plausible to engage in the process of prediction, for if time is only a placeholder, events can repeat themselves so long as the other conditions are held constant. This former ontological view sets the stage for the use of many statistical models of human life events, as well as generalizations about the future of individual's lives.

The contrasting view of time, the one that Bergson explored, was one where time is deeply entwined with daily life. Bergson wrote of the ego enduring (*durée*) continuously through time (Bergson, 1913) and so, our lives assume one large, ever-growing tangle of interwoven experiences that changes continually. Rather than being separate from time, human lives are deeply temporal, from the start we assume a pure duration— where our consciousness is freed from keeping past and present experiences separate and instead is allowed to endure through time. Bergson writes:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states...

it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then it would no longer

endure (Bergson, 1913, p. 100, emphasis original)

Much like a rolling snowball, Bergson explains, as the ego endures our experiential whole is growing, ever-changing. In irreversible time, even simple and seemingly repetitive life events such as having a morning cup of coffee never happen in a manner that is identical to another.

Time becomes irreversible, the future unpredictable, and our consciousness, continually shapeshifting, morphing into new versions of itself and thus becomes ever elusive to the hands of the researcher. The “predictability” so cherished in modern science (for good reason of want to answer important questions) is, within this framework, impossible. Human beings do not experience sameness within life events—the repetition of even the most mundane task, such as taking out the garbage or filing one’s nails, is never experienced in exactly the same way.

Since the future is perpetually open to uncertainty (given that there are no identical experiences as the ego endures) this must influence how we think about each sign we use to create meaning. While traditionally researchers may believe the sign references the immediate moment, with its meaning determined by both the past and present, in irreversible time, the sign explicitly refers to two things, simultaneously. In irreversible time, the sign speaks not only to what is at the present moment (offering the person information for how to organize his or her world, e.g., this is a pillow) but also provides meaning for that the signing might mean in the future, (e.g., it is time for sleeping, or it is time for a ‘pillow fight)

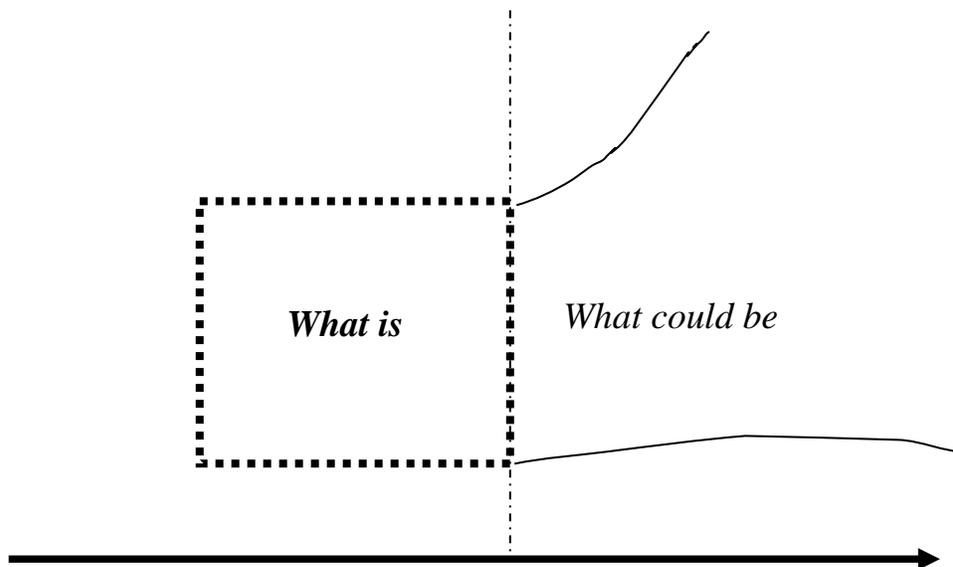


Figure 1: Openness of the sign to the future

These forms of guidance are ambiguous and incomplete. The meaning in our life—including that about our identity--appears as the imaginations for the future guide our movement while not fully determining it (Josephs, Valsiner & Surgan, 1999). This process of identity change occurs much like how the song emerges for the improvisational jazz musician

Assuming this reality, understanding an individual's development likely best entails that the researcher makes clear and compatible choices with his or her methodology (Branco & Valsiner, 1997). The fact that we accept the ontological assumption of irreversible time has clear implications for the design we should use to accurately represent the phenomena of interest. Our job, in this case, is especially difficult, because the stream of consciousness is constantly changing, and so too the person. So how it is possible to represent this change? Our focus is to understand how people work through ruptures in their world over time. In this case, we follow

the suggestions of Zittoun (2011), who suggest that the longitudinal recording of life events in diary form is an acceptable choice:

... following from the assumption that time irreversibly passes, is that consciousness itself is constantly changing. How can we capture something that constantly changes? One of the possible answers is to gather information which is constantly evolving. This might lead to the observation of longitudinal, real-time events. In our case, as we are interested in people's continuous interpretation of their environment, self-writing offers an interesting entry here. Diaries, or correspondences, are written on a regular basis, and can thus follow the rhythm of events. Writing regularly about self, a person reports these events, describes them, and at times, reflects on them, or expresses feelings or related thoughts. (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2011)

3.0 Ruptures & Symbolic Resources

Development is a process that is ongoing, even in cases where it outwardly appears that nothing is changing. As depicted in the figure below, there is as much change in *X remaining X* as there is in *X becoming Y*. The former requires the process of maintenance and homeostasis, while the latter is an emergent shifting (See Figure 2, below):

X-→X

X→Y

Figure 2: Two different forms of development

However, in our case, as we are interested in disquieting experiences, we are interested in the moments of emergent shifting, and what in formal terms, the experience of symbolic rupture. As Zittoun writes, *symbolic ruptures* can occur for any number of reasons, be it that one has moved, had a relationship end, a loved one pass on: any major instance of change in life, while hardly the only reason rupture occurs, is a good starting point to understand the sensation. In more detail, Zittoun articulates,

“In a situation of rupture, changes are instances of disquieting experiences... which suddenly endanger customary ways of doing things, put at stake taken-for-granted routines and definitions. The obvious suddenly comes into question. In other words, there is an interruption of uncertainty in everyday experience...” (Zittoun, 2006, p. 6).

While some people may write in a diary daily, it is often that they choose to do so in periods where ‘have something to report’ and the experience of symbolic rupture constitutes one such instance. During symbolic rupture the individual may feel a strong desire to overcome the ambivalences that appeared when the rupture occurred (e.g., a job was lost, a romantic partner left, a beloved person or animal passed, etc.), and will turn to diary writing to make sense of the experience, reconstructing the self in this process. As Zittoun & Gillespie continue, “Diaries enable one to follow changing processes through time, mainly after ruptures – that is, what narratives are about.” (Zittoun, 2012, p. 22).

4.0 Transformative power of ambivalence

Looking within the diary entries of those experiencing symbolic rupture, of individuals who are having disquieting feelings, we the researcher can see the creation of the ideal context for emergence. Within these diary entries we find a mix of statements, some directly about the dream, while others are imaginative, about what the dream *might* mean or what the future *could* hold. We frequently encounter ambivalence while re-reading the diary entry. That tension can lead to an emergent new meaning, arising by the individual overcoming the ambivalence of different understandings (Abbey, 2012). This is not ambivalence in the traditional sense of diametrically opposed positive and negative, or love versus hate. Within the current framework, ambivalence can be defined as a tension produced by a system entailing a kernel and at least two vectors that are non-isomorphic in size and direction.

Essentially, as long as there is a difference between the externalized idea, and its interpretation, ambivalence rises because these two different notions exist in some form of tension with one another. Ambivalence, in this sense, does not have to be purely diametric tension, as classically conceptualized. Abbey (2012), defines ambivalence as: “*a tension produced by a system entailing a kernel and at least two vectors that are non-isomorphic in size and direction*” (see **Figure 3, below**). Borrowing from Lewin (1936), in such a system, ambivalence can occur under all conditions except one, where the vectors are of exactly the same size and direction.” (Condition D; see Figure 4, below). Condition A represents the most typical understanding of ambivalence- two equally strong forces pulling the individual in opposite directions. In the current framework, this represents the maximum degree of ambivalence between the present and the future. Conditions B and C produce ambivalence that is weaker, yet nonetheless present. In Condition B, although the two forces are not completely opposing, they create a tension between

two different orientations In Condition C it is the discrepancy in strength of forces that creates ambivalence. (Abbey, 2012).

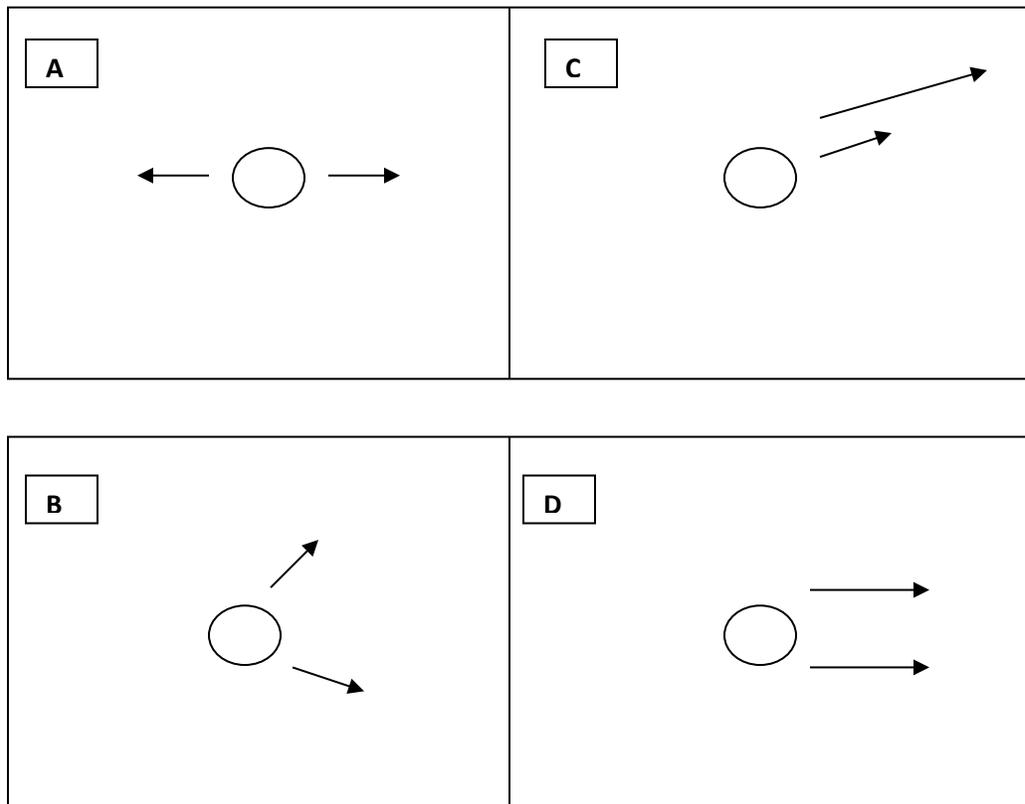


Figure 3: Types of ambivalence

Development of one's identity can occur as the person holds these two notions simultaneously. As he or she feels compelled to resolve the two understandings of the self, he or she may arrive at an emerging, new meaning. For example, the person writes about her partner leaving and her anger. But then, perhaps she notices how peaceful she feels without the constant fighting they

had been engaging in as a couple. In considering those two ideas she might arrive at the notion this is “for the better...” may emerge.

The above example also highlights how *imagination* is a central part of how one recreates his or her identity. Through imagination one may lead him or herself toward new understandings of the self, and toward new directions after a rupture may have occurred in his or her life. It is in this way that, through overcoming ambivalence, a semiotic bridge to a new future can be built (Abbey & Bastos, 2014). As stated at the beginning: In the process of recording what *was*, and imagining what *could be*, we can create a new sense of what *is*—new realizations about our self.

Inclusive separation and emergence of new ideas

As an example of how the tension between two alternate interpretations of a situation can lead to the emergence of a new idea, take Bullough’s introspective narrative recounting the experience of standing on a ship’s deck as the vessel is suddenly enveloped in a cloud of fog. In his description of the event, Bullough describes how his immediate sense of the situation is one of danger—for one has little sense of orientation. Yet in his narrative, Bullough also describes how he simultaneously distances from this immediate sense, realizing that the being shrouded in fog could also be a peaceful experience. As seen at the conclusion of this narrative, as tension of these juxtaposed alternate meanings---danger and peace--is overcome, a new meaning for the situation emerges. Bullough writes:

For most people it is an experience of acute unpleasantness. Apart from the physical annoyance and remoter forms of discomfort such as delays, it is apt to produce feelings of

peculiar anxiety, fears of invisible dangers, strains of watching and listening for distant and unlocalised signals. The listless movements of ships and her warning calls soon tell upon the nerves of the passengers; and that special, expectant, tacit anxiety, and nervousness, always associated with this experience, make a fog the dreaded terror of the sea (all the more terrifying because of its very silence and gentleness) for the expert seafarer no less than the ignorant landsman.

Nevertheless, a fog at sea can be a source of intense relish and enjoyment. Abstract from the experience of the sea fog, for the moment, its danger and practical unpleasantness, just as everyone in the enjoyment of a mountain climb disregards its physical labor and its danger (though, it is not denied, that these may incidentally enter into enjoyment and enhance it); direct the attention to the features “objectively” constituting the phenomenon—the veil surrounding you with an opaqueness as of transparent milk, blurring the outlines of things and distorting their shapes into weird grotesques...note the curious creamy smoothness of the water, hypocritically denying as it were any sense of danger; and, above all, the strange solitude and remoteness of the world, as it can be found only on the highest mountain tops: and the experience may acquire, in its uncanny mingling of repose and terror, a flavor of such concentrated poignancy and delight as to contrast sharply with the blind and distempered anxiety of its other aspects. This contrast, often emerging with startling suddenness, is like a momentary switching on of some new current, or of the passing ray of brighter light, illuminating the outlook upon perhaps the most ordinary objects. (, 1912, pp. 88-89, emphasis mine)

As Bullough's narrative description makes clear, through tension new sense of a situation can emerge quite suddenly, creating novel meanings such as the "delight" portrayed here.

5.0 Traveling from dreams to action through ambivalence

While many psychological studies may rely on data from a one-time questionnaire or during an interview, as explained above, we felt the diary better captured the longitudinal nature of human life experiences (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2011). Further, in this project we aimed to get as close as possible to the stream of consciousness and observe as the participant created a stream of consciousness between his or her externalization of that stream, and his or her imaginations of what that could mean. As Zittoun & Gillespie write,

...the written self-reflective text of a diary or an autobiographical text can be seen as a form of **externalisation of the flow of consciousness**. Hence, the study of self-writings opens a window onto the changeability of life in two senses: on the one hand, like diaries or regular correspondence, they can be close to daily events; on the other hand, they reveal the microprocesses of meaning making engaged by the process of writing. (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2011, emphasis mine)

As we look closely at her diary entries, we can see the ambivalence within the immediate externalizations of her dreams as well as places where she takes a more reflective analytical tone to the diary entry. Remarkably, over the course of her entries she can not only discuss this

symbolic rupture, but also, she is able to begin to redirect how she thinks about her identity, imaginatively fixing this rupture through overcoming a series of ambivalences.

Illustration of overcoming symbolic rupture

Participant A

Entry One

To provide some background, in this first diary entry, the participant appears to be experiencing a symbolic rupture due to her longtime romantic partner abandoning her suddenly. This has created quite a bit of disquiet and unrest, and she is trying to recreate her identity and understand how to relate to the environment without him. The first dream she wrote about in a diary begins with a clarification of the setting. She begins: “Tonight I dreamed about FRANK* my ex-boyfriend as of two days ago.” She describes that in the dream, she was in a shopping center without her former romantic partner. In the dream, she can see him with someone else. She is especially unhappy because this other person is a presumed sexual rival and Frank is having fun with “...a girl who isn’t me” she writes in the diary. She goes on to describe the dream, in it her former partner’s elevated mood state is positive, while simultaneously, she herself is feeling acutely singular: “He seems happy. I’m alone.” As she writes more about her dream, we begin to see evidence of a sense of emerging rupture, “I’m lost without him.” The notion of feeling “lost” without her partner implies the depth to which this has traveled in terms of self-definition, leaving her feeling as she doesn’t recognize herself without the presence of her partner. She goes on to reinforce how she feels trapped by what have become torturous thoughts, very much suggesting a rupture. She is visualizing him everywhere and yet, as they are no longer together,

it's extremely difficult emotionally. She writes of her dream, "I see him everywhere I go. I cannot escape him, he is ruining my life."

At this point in the description of her dream, there is a sudden shift. As dark as her memories of her dream had been until this point, suddenly she says her awareness makes a qualitative shift to a novel place, and this place is warm, filled with sun, "All of a sudden I jump to a whole new place. Sunny, warm, beautiful. It's Florida." This shift, so sudden is an instance where the stark contrast of two highly discordant meanings may lead to the construction of a high order, sign that is rich in its aesthetic sense. Here, we can see that imagining her ex-boyfriend in the shopping center with another (believed to be promiscuous) woman had a strongly negative tone. However, at the same time, she reports experiencing a "jump" in the path of her dream, where she was lead to a positively valenced "sunny and warm" place. The contrast of the two leave her with one, highly abstract comment, "*It is Florida*" * (*Florida is a state in the USA known for its year-round warmth and beautiful beaches.)

The participant continues in this diary entry to explore the meaning of the dream further, and we see a similar play of ambivalence, with the addition of the use of imagination to guide her future behavior. She writes first about how she first came to the college where these data were collected and immediately we can see a beautiful example of how thoughts about what could be offer direction for how one may begin to overcome rupture by offering ways to reorganize a relationship to the environment, guiding the person to reorganize her relationship to the environment. She writes: "I transferred to school here. I'm nervous to be alone but excited for my new chapter and journey in life." In this quotation, we see the ambivalence between a negatively valenced anxiety at being by oneself, contrasted with an open-ended field of

possibility of being excited for what this new life—one without Frank—may bring. See figure below:

‘nervous to be alone’ <> excited for a new chapter in my life’

This is an ambivalence which ‘begs’ to be overcome. And from this ambivalence, indeed a new sense of self seems to be emerging. She writes of how she understands on the emotional level, she is still in pain, “My heart is hurting.” She continues, “I want to forgive him. I want things to go back to the way they were.” Simultaneously she also expresses that she realizes this more “feeling” based statement isn’t going to serve her well in the long run. She immediately follows the previous statements regarding a desire for things to return to ‘normal’ with a contrasting voice. Here she points out that her more ‘rational’ and less ‘feeling’ based assessment of the situation speaks to her going forward in life without Frank, repeating to herself that it is time for her to change her physical location, and in so doing, move on from a partner she can no longer trust. She writes: “I want to forgive him. I want things to go back to the way they were. But that’s where my head comes in. My head is telling me to be smart and move on because ... maybe he has done this before...” “Thus, here we have a similar ambivalence emerge again. This time, it is one that can be characterized as existing—in her words—between her “heart” and her “head”. Her heart is the site of her more immediate feelings, but then her ‘head enters and says to her, “move on.” In the participant overcoming the ambivalence between these two, she arrives at a new sense of herself, and how she relates to the environment. She decides, “Maybe I should transfer schools.”

‘Heart “forgive him” <> Head “Move, maybe transfer schools’

Participant A

Entry two

Next comes another diary entry. In it, we can see that the participant is still wrestling with the symbolic rupture created by the departure of her long-time romantic partner. Yet in this dream, it appears as if the self-guiding of the previous dream has begun to help her reorganize her relationship to the environment. In this dream, although there is ambivalence as defined above, they all are of type C, explored above. That is to say, they appear to be only discrepancies in the strength of forces that create ambivalence. That is, all the notions expressed are positively valenced, they are just ambivalent due to the different strength in force of the vector. The participant writes:

I was in my dorm room, unpacking all my things. I took a step back and smiled. I was running outside, laying in the sun, doing well in school. I’m happy. I don’t want to go home. Jumped forward two years and I’m buying a small home with my best friends. Everything keeps getting better. I’m where I am supposed to be. Things just jump from image to image, but *everything is positive*. (Emphasis added)

Notice again how highly abstract signs convey deeply feeling-based emotional meanings (e.g., “everything is positive”) and, may emerge through the contrast of lower-level contrasting meanings. These higher order signs are especially important when trying to overcome symbolic rupture, for the fundamentally reorganize one’s relationship to the environment, providing a hierarchal superior sense of continuity over the lower-level discontinuity that may be experienced, (Valsiner, 2001)

Reading these comments in her diary, perhaps the participant has overcome the many iterations of ambivalence reminiscent of the: Heart “forgive him” <> Head “Move, maybe transfer schools, found I the previous entry. It seems she has arrived at a clearer sense that she will indeed move. So too, the higher order guiding thought of being in a warm and sunny environment, such a Florida” has led her toward a decision to abandon all parts of her current situation and move to that place. She comments about how thoughts of Florida have been dominating her stream-of-consciousness. She writes, “I’ve been dreaming about Florida so much.” Her next thought expresses the lower level ambivalence (again, all positively valenced, but some thoughts stronger than the other). She writes, “I think that means I need to take a chance and just do it.” The notion of just taking a chance is a powerful imagination, it opens an entire field of possible options for what might come next, and stands in stark contrast to earlier feelings of being “nothing” without her former romantic partner

It would appear, that as she has externalized her stream-of-consciousness, she has provided many opportunities for ambivalence, and to self-guide toward a more pleasant future. In this case, she overcomes ambivalence to arrive at the notion that she wants a clean slate type of new beginning: “I need a fresh start.” This notion is immediately contrasted with perhaps the only

negatively valenced statement of the entry. She writes about how her emotional experiences where I reside presently have been so discouraging that she can't see the environment in any other way: "New Jersey is cold, and Ramapo is giving me negative energy. Not because of the school itself but because of the events that took place in my life while I attended this school."

The last line of her diary is very interesting in multiple ways, she references her dreams as if they themselves were a semiotic mediator, a vehicle to overcome the rupture she was experiencing in her life. She writes, "If I see nothing but positivity in my dreams, I think my heart is telling me to go for it. *Florida...here I come.*" (Emphasis added).

6.0 Emotional Literacy & Dreams

If one is to look at the progression of the participant's emotional experience over the course of these diary entries, the change is quite striking. She begins from the place of heartbreak and symbolic rupture, where she explicitly states not only does she feel alone, she does not know how she is without her former romantic partner. Slowly, through the beauty of imagination, suggestions for widening the field of possible futures becomes real. At first there is only the suggestion to transfer schools. Secondarily, and in a more profound vein likely supported by the higher-order sign she has constructed), she proclaims: "I need to take a chance and just do it" This imaginative notion, filling out the field of possible futures is so wide and brave. It seems this is the key moment where she signals to herself via the diary entry that the symbolic rupture is over, and she is in the process of rebuilding who she is. For one, she knows she wants to be in a warmer climate, that is very important to her. She has imagined living with her friends in a small house and enjoying life in this sunny, temperate space. No longer is she alone and identity-less

Emotions play a significant role in the process of identity construction, and dreams provide an opportunity to play out scenes with a heavy emotional content that would otherwise be impossible. Dreams can transport the dreamer to places they would not be able to visit and allow them to have experiences that more clearly define what they are feeling. Dreams also allow dreamers to confront their feelings in a safer environment than reality. This can provide the ideal setting for improving emotional literacy. Emotional literacy, also called emotional intelligence, refers to being able to identify the cause of one's feelings and manage them effectively (Mayer 1996).

As seen in the dream above, the feelings of happiness that the participant experiences when she is transported to Florida in her dream contrast with the heartbreak and loneliness she feels where she is now. Her immediate peaceful feelings when she is in Florida is a clear sign to her. After her dream, the participant also has a clearer idea of how to assuage her negative feelings. She is also able to identify that there are multiple causes for her unrest: both the initial breakup, and her feeling of being surrounded by memories of her ex-boyfriend. This allows the participant to recognize the extent of her negative feelings and decide to improve her mental health. This end state of identifying emotions and understanding their causes is the emotionally literate stage. This participant's dreams provided her an opportunity to compare her feelings while she is at home and her feelings in her dream version of Florida. This solidifies her resolve to leave and gives her a clear direction for healing after her breakup.

7.0 Conclusion

Developing one's identity is a lifelong process, our self-narrative shifts alongside the stream-of-consciousness that runs within us. Too often we may ignore some of the most valuable resources we have to study that process: Diary writing, and especially, diary writing about dreaming.

Anything that can move us closer to the authentic duration of the ego as it moves with time will help us understand better the development of the human, in all its complexity. Understanding the ambivalences within our self may require a look at the stream-of-conscious dialogue. This dialogue cannot come from responding to questionnaires or interview questions, for it lives deeper within the mind, where the dreams run across our mind's screen.

Transition from dream to waking—where we think about our dream—can provide material for understanding the non-dreaming state of being. In looking at dreams here, we were able to understand how a disquieting experience was quieted and an individual was able to move forward in redefining the self. We were able to see the symbolic ruptures in her life, the ambivalences she was facing, and the promoter sign, “**Florida**” that she used to overcome the rupture and recreate a sense of self. It's not likely different methodological tools could have revealed these things to us in as much detail, nor allowed us to understand the phenomenological richness of her experience. Finding novel ways to record and analyze the dynamic nature of development continues to be one of the most difficult tasks in psychology. The ontological reality of irreversible time presents many challenges to researchers, and here we add dream analysis to the growing number of alternate ways to access the duration of human experience.

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