



Dreams, Diaries, and the Self: Using dreams and imagination to overcome symbolic rupture

Katherine Talian & Emily Abbey (Faculty Sponsor)
 Ramapo College of New Jersey, Mahwah, NJ, 07430



Introduction

Humans construct identity on an ongoing basis (Bergson, 1913). Identity construction is a process fundamentally based on the use of signs. Humans use signs—defined very basically as something that stands in for something else—to organize our relationship with the environment (Valsiner, 1997). Signs help us constructing who we are, how we think, how we relate to our emotions, and ultimately how we act. As we construct our identity, one may have disquieting experiences called symbolic ruptures, where one has momentarily lost the ability to tell his or her story. 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).

For example, when a loved one dies, the surviving loved ones may have a strong feeling of being lost or confused. In this project, we explore these disquieting types of events through private diaries. Writing in a diary constitutes an act of externalizing one’s internal “stream-of-consciousness,” thus potentially allowing researchers more access to meaning-making than one might typically see on a standardized questionnaire or even unstructured interview (Zittoun, 2006). Participants were asked to keep a diary of the content of their dreams. Within these diary entries, we find a mix of statements, some directly about the content of the dream, while others are imaginations for what the dream might mean and what the future could hold. In the process of recording *what is*, and thinking about what *could be*, we note that individuals create new meanings by working to overcome the ambivalence of these two notions (Abbey, 2012). In so doing, they use these new ideas about self to quiet disquieting events, and to overcome symbolic ruptures.

METHOD

Twenty-six Ramapo College students participated in this study. Participants volunteered during their Introduction to Psychology sections. Each participant was asked to record any dreams that they remembered and were comfortable sharing over a two-week period. They were asked to write as soon after waking as possible to preserve as much detail as they could. After writing the initial description of the dream, participants were then asked to provide analysis and introspection. They were asked to think about what the underlying meaning of the dream was and what personal issue it was bringing to light.

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.”

Illustration of overcoming symbolic rupture: Participant A, Entry One (Continued)

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 what 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. Her 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 hierarchical superior sense of continuity over the lower-level discontinuity that may be experienced, (Valsiner, 2001)

Participant A, Entry two (Continued)

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).

Discussion

If one is to look at the progression of her 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. Secondly, 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.

References

Abbey, E. (2012). Ambivalence and its Transformation. In J. Valsiner (Ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bergson, H. (1913). *Time and Free Will*. London: George Allen & Co.

Josephs, Ingrid. E., Valsiner, Jaan., & Surgan, Seth.E. (1999). The process of meaning construction. In J. Brandstädter and R.M. Lerner (Eds.), *Action & Self Development* (pp. 257-282). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lewin, Kurt. (1936). *Principles of topological psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.

Valsiner, J. (2000). *Culture and Human Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zittoun, T. (2006). *Transitions: Development through Symbolic Resources*. Charlotte, NC: InfoAge.

Zittoun, T. & Gillespie, A. (2011). Using diaries and self-writing in psychological research. In Abbey, E. & Surgan, S. (Eds.) *Emerging Methods in Psychology*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.