FANTASY WORLDS AND SELF-MAINTENANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LIFE

by John L. Caughey

Abstract. Because actual social experience is often damaging to conceptions of self, individuals in all societies engage in identity work beyond ordinary social interaction. For people in religious groups, identity work may involve the subjective experience of interactions with spirit beings as in altered states of consciousness such as dreams, reverie, or trance. In memories, anticipations, and fantasies, secular Americans, too, may experience gratifying imaginary social interactions when they gain recognition and acclaim from imagined others. Unlike spirit relations these fantasies are not culturally defined as "real." However, like spirit relations, they may have very real effects on self-maintenance.

Keywords: fantasy; identity; imagination and culture; self-maintenance; social interaction.

In this essay I want to show how the fantasy experiences of secular middle-class Americans are significant for the maintenance of self. I will also suggest that these imaginary experiences are directly parallel to some of the ways self-maintenance problems are handled in "religious" groups within which people engage in relationships with supernatural beings.[1]

In thinking about self-maintenance I shall follow anthropological work on identity that assumes each individual carries in mind an internalized version of the wider culture as a personal system of knowledge.[2] Such a system not only includes culturally structured conceptions of the external world, but also the individual's conceptions about his or her own self. These conceptions are culturally constituted in that they are based on assumptions about the nature of the self

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available in the individual's social worlds including systems of standards for defining positive and negative identities. Drawing upon these standards the individual maintains a set of conceptions about the kind of person he or she is now. These conceptions are not fixed but are, rather, unstable and changing because our actual social experience regularly offers various minor and major threats and challenges to the maintenance of a positive conception of self. We do not always perform our roles as well as we would like and this is disturbing and threatening. Furthermore, other people may directly or indirectly fail to confirm the image of self we are trying to maintain. For these reasons, individuals in all societies engage in various kinds of "identity work" beyond seeking to play their actual social roles in a satisfying and acceptable fashion.

IDENTITY WORK AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN "RELIGIOUS" GROUPS

Identity work takes different forms in different cultures. In groups which are religious in the sense that they include belief in supernatural beings, identity work may involve the subjective experience of social interactions with spirit beings. For example, the Moslem Sufis of Northern Pakistan, among whom I did field work in 1977, engaged in a wide variety of intricate social interactions with supernatural beings ranging from evil spirits to the souls of other people. Such experiences are based upon the imaging power of the human mind and most of them seem to take place in altered states of consciousness such as hallucinations, dreams, reverie, and trance. However, they are understood as authentic experiences of the self. These subjectively vivid experiences connect directly to identity problems fostered by Pakistani society.

Something similar occurs in some American subcultures. One interesting variant is the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, which involves some regular members and many of its ministers or mediums in social interactions with spirit beings. The anthropologist June Macklin provides an account of how this religious organization functions in Connecticut. She shows how mediums in trance states may drop their own identities to take on more satisfying, improved forms of self. For example, one female medium in trance becomes a "well educated male doctor whose credentials are impeccable [she had been blocked from pursuing her own education and medical career aspirations]; a mischievous child, center of attention which she herself never had; a high-born self-indulgent and powerful Egyptian woman; and so forth" (Macklin, 1977, 65-66). In other cases mediums may keep their own identities and enact trance relations with other beings such as attentive spirit lovers or the souls of deceased relatives.

The following account gives a vivid example of how satisfying these relationships may be as a form of identity repair. A sixty-seven-year-old male medium had experienced a problematic relationship with his strict father. "We always called my father the Boss, never Father or Dad. Well, after he died he came back [in the medium's trance state] just as he was in life, just like a bull in a china shop, blustering and giving orders. I told him, 'You think you're still alive; well, you're not! You're not the boss any longer. I'm the boss, now. And don't you come back until you can behave yourself, and conduct yourself civilly.' When he did return he came back on his knees—*on his knees*—humble and asking forgiveness" (Macklin 1977, 63). Through experiences in the mirror world of spirit relationships members of such groups can work through problematic aspects of social experience, often, as Macklin shows, in ways that both maintain the self and reinforce identity commitment to American values.

IDENTITY WORK AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN SECULAR AMERICA

It has often been assumed that the consciousness of rational, secular Americans is drastically different from that of people who experience relations with spirit beings. To an important extent this assumption is erroneous. Let us look at the consciousness of middle-class Americans. Social science accounts of American cognition often postulate an individual steadily oriented to external reality. They picture individuals engaged in rational problem-solving or classifying external perceptions and selecting appropriate behavioral responses. These descriptions are not an adequate representation of American consciousness.

Consider an American driving a car. Studies of this process have specified the complex cognitive processes necessary to accomplish this task. However, such studies ignore a fundamental aspect of the process because they do not describe the forms of consciousness that accompany it. As Erving Goffman once noted, "While outwardly participating in an activity . . . an individual can allow his attention to turn from what he and everyone else considers the real or serious world, and give himself up for a time to a playlike world in which he alone participates. This kind of inward emigration . . . may be called 'away' " (Goffman 1963, 69). Driving is a classic situation in which an American is likely to be "away." Because the route is familiar, the person rarely needs to devote much conscious attention to the task. In fact, informants often report "waking up" while driving and realizing that for the past several minutes they have been operating as it were on automatic pilot, only dimly aware of the external world through which they have just passed. This is because the driver has been engrossed in the playlike world— that is, in inner experiences that may be referred to as *daydreaming* or *the stream of consciousness*.

What do these stream of consciousness experiences consist of? Over the past seven years I have tried to explore this question from an ethnographic perspective. Preliminary research and surveys of the psychological literature showed that Americans spend a great amount of time in this state. That is, when a person's attention is not taken up with focused rational thought or some demanding or engrossing actual experience, his or her attention typically wanders off into the stream of consciousness. Initial interviews showed that the investigation of the stream is complicated by the fact that, as with dreams, there is a kind of general amnesia for inner experience unless a production is unusual or repeated frequently. Most people vaguely recognize that they "daydream a lot," but few pay much attention to the process, and few can give much in the way of a detailed description in a standard interview. However, it is possible to obtain better results by asking subjects to monitor their own thought processes in natural social situations. In the method I use informants are asked to try and catch themselves during routine moments of the day, to ask themselves the question, "What have I just been thinking about?", and to write down a record tracing the sequence back as far as possible.

Using mainly middle-class American subjects in the Baltimore-Washington area, most of whom have been associated with the university where I teach, I have collected more than four hundred stream of consciousness records. These texts include several distinct processes. First, one finds inner conversations; the individual half-consciously and silently talks to himself. Second, one finds memories; the individual spontaneously relives past experiences. Third, one gets anticipations; the individual rehearses expected upcoming activities. Finally one finds what I call *fantasies*, gratifying experiences which the informant does not consider "realistic."[3]

In a typical stream segment the individual moves fron one process to another, the contents being determined by chaims of association. In the following text a military wife and returning student is driving the Washington Beltway:

"God, I have to take the Graduate Record Exam in October!" ... Images of analogies, words like *peregrinate*, real numbers, lines, planes, x's and y's. "Gotta talk to someone in the department. Wonder who the best person would be?" Images of faces, voices, memories of conversations and feelings . . . . I hear a friend's voice, "It's really tough to get into graduate school here. You have to have a 3.5 . . . ." Goddamn ridiculous . . . I'd probably be a lot happier in Alaska . . . Image of me in a cotton blouse and jeans standing under a warm sun by a stream, reverently and deeply inhaling the fresh breeze, which is heavily scented with the fumes arising from heated pine and wildflowers. Not far behind me . . . is a modest log house complete with smoking chimney."

In this stream of consciousness record the Alaska segment is what I will explore as fantasy. Her Alaska experience can be differentiated from

memory in that it has not happened; she has never been to Alaska. It is also different from anticipation. She does not really expect to go to Alaska—and if she does, she knows it will not be like this.

FANTASY INTERACTIONS AND SELF-MAINTENANCE

Why should we concern ourselves with such imaginary experiences? One reason is that fantasy appears to be significant for self-maintenance. In the playlike world of daydreaming, important forms of identity work take place. Phenomenological explorations of stream of consciousness texts help us to understand how this is so. For the individual, fantasy is highly gratifying. As Sigmund Freud put it, the pleasure principle triumphs over the reality principle. Psychoanalytic interpreters typically define fantasy as a mechanism for the fulfillment of unconscious wishes or the resolution of unconscious conflict. However, fantasy is more than a defense mechanism. Similar to memory and anticipation, it is a form of subjective *experience*. One is separated from reality, but one is transported to another world. Objectively, the young woman above is driving the Beltway; subjectively, she finds herself as an actor-participant in another reality, an imaginary version of Alaska. To understand the gratifying nature of fantasy, including its self-maintenance functions, it is important to explore the inner structure of fantasy worlds ethnographically.[4]

American fantasies can be readily classified into a small number of categories. Each offers its own particular appeal for the American self. The Alaska segment above is an example of what may be called the natural world escape fantasy. Typical examples include visits to the houseboat, the desert island, the country farm, the isolated beach, and the tropical cruise ship. Here the individual departs from an objective situation and enters a natural setting whose beauty and peace provide gratification, as in the following: "I am on a luxurious cruise ship headed for Bermuda. It is late afternoon, and the sun is beginning to set amid a soft sky of rose pink . . . . The sun is a glowing orange ball whose warmth is sinking into my bronzed skin." Such fantasies have an obvious "vacation appeal"; they transfer the individual from stressful everyday reality to a world of peace and leisure.

Satisfying as these other worlds are as imaginary places, they have other sources of appeal most of which are shared by other fantasies as well. Typically the individual is not alone. As the Bermuda woman continues, "I have a gorgeous, refined man standing by my side as we share this wonder of nature together, . . . [he] has a fantastic body, black hair, and sparkling blue eyes. This man is intelligent, humorous, responsible, mature, wealthy, and tan, but best of all, he is modest. He is perfection." An important source of appeal of the fantasy world is that

one meets there an improved set of others. Similar to other fantasy places, unspoiled natural worlds are usually not deserted. On the contrary, they are conspicuously social. Several different kinds of beings may appear there including imaginary ideal types ("Mr. Right," "Prince Charming"), idealized versions of actual acquaintances, and imaginary replicas of American media celebrities: movie stars, musicians, sports figures—the gods of the secular American cosmology.[5]

All these imagined beings are "better" than real people in ways that directly or indirectly enhance the individual's sense of self-worth. First, they are fully appreciative of the fantasizer as a person. As one informant summarized, "Everyone adores me." Second, they are much more cooperative than real people. Enthusiastically, reliably, and untiringly, they always do what the fantasy self wants. In the real world, social interactions are often jarring to the individual's self worth; in fantasy these conflicts and threats are magically erased.

Good as fantasy worlds are in terms of settings and other persons, they have another even stronger appeal. Entry into the fantasy world also involves a transformation of self. Typically the individual acquires an improved self. The Bermuda fantasizer reports as follows: "As for me, I have a slender, shapely figure on which I put the most classic of clothes. I never go out of style, and I always have the perfect outfit for the occasion. I am a multifaceted woman. I am also consistently beautiful from the time I wake up to the time I go to bed. My makeup always looks fresh, and my energy is boundless. I am a wonderful lover for my wonderful lover, and I understand his every gesture and mood, but I am a career woman, always aware of local and world events. What more can I say? I, too, am perfect." Not only are appearance, attributes, and prowess enhanced and conflicts resolved, the self is also psychologically improved. The fantasy self feels harmonious, contented, and satisfied; "my emotions are never negative such as jealousy, anger, or depression. I just experience romance."

Other standard American fantasies include dreams of abundant material wealth, sexual romantic satisfaction, blissful married life, successful "justified" violence, and alternative career success. Similar to the natural world fantasy, each of these types includes an improved self and improved others, and each works through a particular problematic aspect of the American evaluation of self.

The alternative career provides an interesting variant. In these imaginary experiences the individual leaves behind his or her actual occupation and enters an imaginary version of another American career, often one for which the person has little or no actual aptitude. These fantasies typically involve success in what Americans define as "glamorous" celebrity fields such as that of novelist, rock star, com-

poser, musician, movie star, politician, model, or professional athlete. Part of the appeal is the gratifying sense of masterful performance in an activity defined as pleasurable and exciting. Also evident is the enjoyment of the material rewards success in these fields brings. Like the natural world escape, such fantasies provide some temporary role distance from the mundane and problematic reality of one's own work. They also offer the satisfaction of painless achievement in an area in which the person has aspirations but no success. Yet very important and conspicuous is the experience of self-worth through the imaginary acclaim, recognition, and applause of others.

One standard scenario includes the appearance of the fantasy self on a television talk show.

I am a young, newly discovered actress who has received stupendous acclaim for a supporting role in a new dramatic film. The fantasy opens with me walking through the heavy curtains of the Tonight Show stage to the enthusiastic applause of a rowdy, Friday audience . . . . I am conscious to smile to the crowd and greet a standing Johnny Carson, who offers me a friendly handshake, a smile, and a wink for encouragement . . . . We talk for a time about my newness in the business. He brings up my background, my law aspirations, and so on. This point is very impressive to Johnny and his audience. I am witty, confident, and gracious on stage, interjecting stories of how I was discovered . . . . I am asked what it was like to work with a particular distinguished and handsome leading man . . . . Later, I am asked to set up a film clip from the movie; it is of me in a dramatic scene with the star, ending with me in a highly emotional state, smashing a bat through the windshield of a sports car. The audience roars, applauds . . . .

In such fantasies the individual departs from his or her real occupational world, where recognition is often grudging, enters a glamorous, media-glorified career field, and becomes acclaimed as the best. The individual becomes "somebody" through the mass acclaims of others. Recognition of self-worth is offered by imaginary versions of the general public, of superstar members of the opposite sex, and of media commentators such as Johnny Carson, implicitly assumed to be the ultimate arbiters of personal worth. Indirectly this acclaim can often be interpreted as an implicit winning of respect from those in the individual's actual social world. Sometimes this aspect is explicit. The star's friends and family are pictured cheering in the audience. Often present also are those who have offered rejection in the past: parents, former teachers, ex-spouses, and critics of any kind. One not only gets the pleasure of their acclaim, past social failures are magically transcended and avenged.

As with many other standard fantasies, alternate career success does *not* provide an escape from American cultural values. By vividly conveying the gratifying self-worth to be obtained through career achievement, the individual reinternalizes the motivating force of this

value. This includes the notion that the attainment of this value is a key aspect of self-definition. In this sense fantasy is not a defense mechanism but rather a mental commercial for the middle-class-American value system.

THE REALITY OF FANTASY RELATIONS

As the above examples suggest, American fantasy interactions have direct parallels to the spirit interactions discussed earlier. Like spirit interactions, these secular imaginary interactions variously enhance or confirm self-worth through the fulfillment of blocked aspirations, improved social relations, the repair of identity damage, the resolution of conflict, and through the reinforcement of allegiance to cultural values. It may be objected, however, that there is an important difference. For secular Americans, unlike people who relate to spirits, these imaginary interactions are not defined as "real" experiences of the self. It is true that there is a difference, but it is more complex and less significant than it might at first appear. The complexity comes from our own taken-for-granted, but peculiar and erroneous, epistemological assumption that imaginary experience is "unreal" and hence insignificant in comparison to what we define as objective reality. This has often led us to overlook the importance of imaginary experience in general. In fact imaginary interactions are quite real—they do exist. And we do experience them much the way we experience objective "actual" interactions. They are also as subjectively vivid as going to a movie, attending the theater, reading a gothic novel, or participating in psychodrama; and whether or not we define them as real, the self-maintaining effects of fantasy may be just as significant as any of these other imaginary experiences. Furthermore, there are certain ways in which fantasy is closely linked to memory and anticipation.

In stream of consciousness texts one often finds the appearance of "painful memories"—the reexperiencing of past social interactions damaging to the individual's conception of self-worth. Frequently, however, the stream does not simply replay the past interaction; it moves on into fantasy that neutralizes the threat of the memory. Driving the Beltway—again—a young man recalls the breakup of a love affair.

"I still don't know why she left me . . . ." Scene of breakup still vivid: her room, she crying, me holding back tears. She means it this time. (Then he moves into fantasy) "If we'd met again, I bet she'd have confessed that she still loved me . . . ." (Image of) My apartment, home turf. Knock on door. Is expected. Heart racing. Liz walks in. Looking sleek, sexy as ever . . . . "But I always loved you, Mike. It's just that I needed time to realize it. Jack was nothing to me, just a temporary diversion from the problems we were having. Can't we start seeing each other again?"

Here the individual lives through a vivid, fantasy-modified version of the past in which the "true," if hidden emotions of the other are revealed to be love not rejection. In this way the "real" past may gradually be reconstructed, not by deliberate fabrication but by reexperiencing it through fantasy in a way that better accords with the definition of self the individual is seeking to maintain.

In other cases the stream of consciousness moves from anticipation, from a realistic scripting-out of some expected future action into an unrealistic playlike fantasy version of the future. In the following sequence the individual begins with an accurate anticipation involving a technical problem connected with his unconventional actual attempt to fulfill a houseboat fantasy. The problem involves sailing his already-purchased-boat up to Baltimore harbor. Then the scene shifts gradually into a fantasy mode.

... Seeing myself out on the Bay cruising up to Baltimore, reexperiencing that special gestalt of sun and wind and salt taste .... seeing things that need attending to ... boxes need to be stowed .... I am carrying on a conversation with a first mate, the faces change, becoming various possible companions for the cruise .... It (the conversation) is a running rationalization justifying my purchase of an old, non-nautical tub. It's a cheap place to live and it sure beats a high-rise .... My first mate becomes the woman I had lived with until about a year ago. I explain about my new living situation (on the boat) and how this fits into my long-range plans. I build this scenario persuasively and with flawless logic and Helen is impressed and convinced of the ultimate rightness of these plans as she never was in real life. At this point the sequence turns into a sexual seduction fantasy on the boat, out on the bay ....

In fantasy the individual not only successfully accomplishes a problematic sail; he also convinces an imaginary version of a most significant critic and detractor of the "ultimate rightness" of his plans with such success that she is completely seduced. In the process he reconvinces himself of the rightness of an unconventional and risky aspect of his lifeplan. The fantasy becomes "real" in the sense that it helps convince him that he really is "right," that he now can successfully justify himself against his critics; and it encourages him to make actual plans based on this conviction.

In conclusion, using the imaging power of the human mind, secular Americans conjure up images of other beings and play out imaginary social interactions with them. A review of texts of these interactions suggests that they represent important forms of identity work. Similar to spirit interactions in some religious groups, these imaginary interactions are of very real significance to the maintenance of the American self.

NOTES

1. Some of the material used here was previously published in Caughey (1984). This material is being used with permission of the University of Nebraska Press.

2. For discussions of this anthropological approach to identity, see Goodenough (1965), Wallace (1967), Caughey (1980), and Shweder and Levine (1984). Goodenough (1974) explicitly connects this approach to religious issues.

3. In this essay I use the term *fantasy* to refer to unrealistic but gratifying imaginary experiences. It should be noted that most informants report frightening and disturbing unrealistic experiences as well. These are analogous to the nightmares of sleep consciousness. See Hartmann (1984).

4. For the application of such an approach to imaginary social experience in general, see Caughey, (1984) and Fine (1983).

5. Americans often develop imaginary relationships with unmet media figures that are just as elaborate as their imaginary relationships with people of their actual social worlds. These include antagonistic relations, love relations, and admiration relations. In fantasy, as in spirit possession, the individual may also drop his or her actual identity and temporarily *become* the media figure, Caughey (1984: 31-76).

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