Social Dreaming: a paradox accepted (a psychoanalyst's condensed thoughts on Social Dreaming)

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Abstract

The text addresses the Social Dreaming of Lawrence and its functions, offering a reflection on the potential of this instrument in contributing to the increase in shared creativity, to achieve a democratic balance between the parties in the act of dreaming, investigating and evaluating aspects more subjective and personal related to the very act of dreaming and can do it in an intersubjective dimension.

Key words: dream, group, social dreaming, transitional space

<<paradox accepted can have positive value>> (D.W.Winnicott)
Who has a dream? As a matter of fact we all do, but we are not used to answering such a question!
Dreams are as they often say 'silly, mysterious, embarassing , amazing', but in the first place: they are personal.
How can one ask for dreams in a public space?
The idea might sound like a surrealistic image from Bunuel's Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie, where adding to the escalating sense of madness there comes a character announcing- out of the blue- that he wants to share his dream with the ladies and gentlemen…
Nearly a hundred years ago Freud has carved a passage through social resistance to paying serious attention to dreams by recognising them as highly precious media carrying valid psycho-social meaning.
He made dreams acceptable and available for two-person investigations in the analytical space: delegates from distinct regions of the unconscious speaking a forgotten language that we all know.
Sharing dreams in the analytical process became known as "the royal road to the unconscious"; a formidable and indispensable instrument of uncovering and understanding transference- and- countertransference processes and possible ways of elaboration.
So…who has a dream? However unusual, this is exactly the question asked at the beginning of every Social Dreaming Matrix which causes the matrix become expectant, invites the first dream to appear and starts the dream-association exchange rolling.
As I look around Wednesday evenings to see familiar and unfamiliar faces in the room where we meet once a month for the second year now,* I can see an ordinary set of people who gather here to spend an evening with their dreams .
This is the first on-going Social Dreaming Matrix in the U.K. ,a unique experience for us all.

Gordon Lawrence keeps quoting the definition <<*a matrix is a place where things can grow*>>.

Regarding the setting the Matrix can be considered in many ways an open formation: people can come-and-go, but most often they would come-and-come…

The frames are basic also in non-clinical spaces like this, as they outline the shape of the container that is being created.

Initially we have all struggled with the idea that the group of social dreamers is not to be considered a group in the traditional sense: the boundaries around it are not definite.They are penetrable in space and time and, I believe this was the most difficult concept to digest, group dynamics don't apply here.

<<*The task*>>, again in Lawrence's words, is <<*to be available for the dreams and associations related to them' and to liberate ourselves from the defines of treating each-other or each other's dreams as representations of personal inner worlds*>> .

What makes this possible? It has taken me nearly fifteen years to grasp the meaning of Gordon Lawrence's vision and translate it into my own language.

Now, when I attempt conceptualising phenomena that might offer some analytical insight into the dynamic processes of the social-dreaming-experience I need to bring distant,but very closely linked ideas together.

John Byng-Hall ,this central and most original figure of British family therapy, while recalling crucial moments in the history of family therapy describes (Supervision in Family Therapy,) how revolutionary it was to realise that the 'most fundamental' transference was not to the therapists but to other members of the family. This freed the therapists from addressing individual processes and allowed them to turn their attention to the family as a unit and uncover the vast and fascinating area of family dynamics in this light.

This shift has 'enabled the model of change to alter' and created a new stance that made possible for the participants to engage in a different transferential experience.

I believe that by introducing changes in the setting, deconstructing traditional boundaries and relational techniques (basic components of the adult's self representation, role and identity) in Social Dreaming something similarly basic happens : the 'most fundamental' transference gets established not between the individuals but between the members of the matrix and the dreams.

This altered model allows the dreamers to take part in creating an associative network of images , ideas and reflections that each participant relates to: the texture contains and is partly woven of the individuals' thoughts, affects and memories, but they belong to the community of dreamers at the same time. It is all right to use the others' dream-elements and everybody welcomes new bits that the next person adds to the construct. As the private domain is always profoundly respected the personal opens up to be fertilised by new meanings .

There are no interpretations in the usual sense either: the meaning is being woven from dream imagery , talking pictures, tunes, rhythms associated sensuous fragments, intellectual references, linkages to everyday 's events; socio-economic and human

drama. A 'harmonious mix-up' ,to borrow Balint's expressive term, of primary and secondary processes reflected upon in this intermediary space.

Since in this atmosphere ego boundaries do not have to be guarded all the time sharing becomes possible and the participants experience a high level of intimacy. The atmosphere sometimes gets fully charged, passionate ,tense ,then meditative and reflective again. The convenors are part of these processes. Sometimes they will be 'guides' helping the dreams stay in focus, other times participant observers ,in the next moment players themselves.

As a result of these changes in this community of dreamers a new transitional container is being created.

Though this all might sound like a thrilling description of discovering a never-seen-land the experience itself is utterly familiar: it takes us all back to a place long forgotten yet never unconsciously abandoned ,the psychodynamic zone where playing is possible.

In *Playing and Reality* Winnicott (1971) writes <<*this intermediate area of experience,unchallenged in the respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality,constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work*>>.

He postulates the existence of a transitional space where transitional phenomena take place and where transitional objects are being created.

In the Social Dreaming Matrix dreams acquire such a transitional nature, they became the mind-objects that make members of the Matrix experience the direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is " lost " in play.'

This is exactly the magic of our Wednesday nights :being 'lost' in Social Dreaming.

Looking amazed at how dreams link up, move together, follow resembling story-lines ,contain similar images, colours ,feelings or rhythm the question often arises: where do our dreams come from? Are we conjuring them up from within or do they approach us from without ? Are they waiting for a dreamer to be dreamt?

<<*Of the transitional object it can be said that that is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?'The important point is that no decision on this point is expected*>> continues Winniccott .

This advice has resonances also in Social Dreaming: such a question can not be asked without the danger of invading the potential space.It might deprive the dreamer of a sense of creativity and the experience of being in touch with one's own and others' creations. The processes of Social Dreaming effect not only the dreamers: dreams undergo dynamic changes, as well.

Working with 'two body' dreams in the analytical space one's experience is that verbal elements are rather rare and always deserve special attention. In Social Dreaming dreams unexpectedly start talking. Shorter and longer verbal sequences, even elaborate dialogues alternate with more archaic, sensuous elements.

This extraordinary phenomenon seems to reflect transformations in the nature of dreams: the primary processes seem to allow secondary processes more prominence which results in a much more balanced mix of visual and verbal.

Does this mean that the technique used in Social Dreaming modifies the dynamics of the dream-work? If the emphasis is less on the private aspects of the dreams, the instinctual-affective charge does not get interpreted, do dreams become more straightforward and direct? Is there less repression and concealment necessary when the main area of exploration is our relationship and our reactions to the world in which we are living? Does the gap become narrower between the manifest and the latent content of the dreams or what we observe is simply the result of working predominantly with the social content hence allowing the dreams come closer to the conscious through the formative experiences inherent in Social Dreaming?

The Matrix presents a place where 'things can grow', but also a place where the nature of dreams (dream characteristics) can be further explored as a function of external-internal changes. Observing how dreams behave during the times of social crises and traumatisation-our Matrix has entered its second year last September- has opened up a particularly fascinating field of inquiry.

Dreams seem to be capable of taking the Matrix on a 'crush–course' in trauma theory and elaboration.

Initially Following the trauma there was a powerful silence: the dreams refused to appear After a while frightening dream contents swept through the shared dream-space; bizarre objects ,composite creatures and plants, absurd body images, not fitting elements, wrong colours and functions dominated. As if the trauma has blown up the dream imagery and the loose fragments have joined up in wrong combinations. Even elementary sensual features decomposed, the smell, the sight, the voice ,the touch or pace of things have gone out of order. This breakdown of differentiation and representation reflected a collapse of orientation in space and time and a chaotic confusion between external and internal. The dreams bore witness to how the trauma splits the self.

Ferenczi introduces the idea of Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality (Ferenczi, l913) taking us through the steps of the decline of the feeling of omnipotence'. Ferenczi, like Winnicott believes that (to quote Playing and Reality again) the task of reality acceptance is never completed ,that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and the relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience (Cf. Riviere, 1936) which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc).

The place we inhabit in Social Dreaming is this intermediate area and what we explore is the capacity of the dream to function as a communicative link between external and psychic reality.

Reclaiming larger territories from 'the unknown', or infinite prepares us for action in a world which seems getting more-and-more out of control.

Turning to the community of dreamers to make sense of our dreams has proven to be all along these years a complex and electrifying exercise in keeping ourselves more fit to understand our internal and external world. Examining changes in the

environment and society through the prism of our dreams gives us access to being in touch with related conscious and unconscious impulses and wishes thus enabling us to become more aware of changes in the psychic world.

Social Dreaming opens up not only the 'royal road' to the unconscious but also a very 'democratic road' to a better sense of reality and a more creative relationship to our life.

Judit Szekacs is a bi-lingual psychoanalyst who came to the UK from Hungary in 1990. Together with a small group of psychoanalysts, therapists, artists and social scientists, she founded Imago East-West and later the Multilingual Psychotherapy Centre (MLPC) to create a space where diverse experiences of negotiating cultural and linguistic change could be explored and shared. In 2001 she organized, together with Kathleen Kelley-Laine and Judith Meszaros, the Lost Childhood Conferences in Budapest, London and Paris, resulting in the book *Lost Childhood and the Language of Exile* (2004) published by the Freud Museum and MLPC. She writes about body-and-mind, trauma, emigration, changing context, new technology and Social Dreaming (with Gordon Lawrence Institute).