

Gordon Lawrence's Social Dreaming Matrix: Background, Origins, History, and Developments

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Abstract

This article comes soon after the death of Gordon Lawrence, the “discoverer” of social dreaming. It captures this moment to celebrate Lawrence’s legacy and to reflect upon the development of social dreaming since its “discovery” in 1982 and its potential, both realised and unrealised. The article gives a brief history of social dreaming, its origins and development. In doing so, it attempts to situate social dreaming in the context of the Tavistock group relations tradition. Social dreaming is described as both belonging to and rejecting that tradition. It draws upon Lawrence’s unpublished notebooks, personal communications, experiences in social dreaming, and selections of the available literature. The post social dreaming matrix events such as the dialogues and reflection groups and the creative role synthesis are also briefly discussed. Finally, there is a discussion of some of the theory of social dreaming.

Key words: social dreaming, creativity, matrix, group relations, unthought known, sphinx.

INTRODUCTION

This article is intended to provide a personal perspective, appreciation, and summary of the history and background of social dreaming, with a particular focus on its “discoverer”, Gordon Lawrence. It highlights the main features of social dreaming and reflects upon its significance for us today. It is not intended to be a complete overview of the field. For Lawrence’s own assessment of social dreaming see his *Introduction to Social Dreaming* (2005). For a recent summary in the context of the “associative unconscious”, see Baglioni and Fubini’s “Social dreaming” (2013).

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WHAT IS "SOCIAL DREAMING"?

"Social dreaming" is the name given to a particular method of sharing dreams in a collective specifically gathered for that purpose. It was "discovered" by the late W. Gordon Lawrence in 1982. During the dream-sharing event, called a "matrix", the participants share their real, night time dreams, images, and associations. These dreams are not initially interpreted or given explicit meaning by the matrix convenors (called "hosts"). Instead, participants are able to allow the dream images and associations to gradually accumulate in the course of the matrix. As part of this process, the participants often feel they are perceiving new emerging meanings and thoughts. It is claimed that these thoughts arise from a shared social unconscious and that this is eventually made available to thinking through a combination of the matrix itself and the dialogue or reflection that happens after it. The main purpose of social dreaming is, therefore, to provide a forum for the sharing of hidden or unspoken thoughts and feelings about the social circumstances of the social dreaming participants. It is about creating new thoughts about the world that we share.

WORKING WITH DREAMS

Before discussing social dreaming as a specific technique, method, or process, we should consider what it is *not*, because there are many suppositions about dreaming, the nature of dreams, and their place in ontology that are not necessarily helpful in our understanding of *social* dreaming. It should be clear from the outset that the sharing of dreams with a gathering of others cannot be compared to the recounting of a dream in the clinical context and dyadic situation of analyst–analysand. But neither is any sharing of dreams in a collective necessarily social dreaming. It is true that there are many ways of working with collective dreams, and some of them may initially sound as if they might be social dreaming in another guise. As an example, it is worth asking why Montague Ullman's book *Appreciating Dreams, a Group Approach* (2006) is *not* about social dreaming, even if Gordon Lawrence acknowledged Ullman as an influence. In this case, the fundamental differences are twofold: first, Ullman's work is therapeutic and the use of dreams in groups as therapy is far removed from the purpose and the more "community" feel of dream sharing in a social dreaming context. Second, it conceives of dreams as the private belongings of each individual. The sharing of the dream in public in Ullman's work is there to help the individual understand the meanings of that private material for him or herself:

The dreamer who wishes to get into better contact with her dream faces a dilemma. On the basis of her general experience with her own dreams, she has some awareness that dreams come from a very private part of her psyche. Paradoxically, to get at that private area, she has to go public with the dream. (Ullman, 2006, p. 6)

Even when using a word such as “socialisation” in the context of this group dream work, Ullman does not mean the same as in “social” dreaming. For Ullman “Socialization of the dream” refers to the act of making the meanings expressed in the dream part of the context of waking life (Ullman, 2006, p. 4). These are all very different concepts to the ones that can be applied to the understanding of the process of social dreaming. Dreams used in groups for the purposes of individual therapy are not social dreaming.

Sometimes it is believed that Jung’s “collective unconscious” is a version of social dreaming. However, Jung’s collective archetypes, he thought, were inborn, primordial, and common to all (Jung, 1991). They are connected to myths and fairy tales and identifiable through generally recognised symbols (the Mother, the Trickster, the Cross, and so on). However, the shared images of the social dreaming matrix are only occasionally reminiscent of Jungian archetypes. The vast majority of images and the way they merge together in the process of the matrix appear to come from a different shared source, that is, that shared experience of life (the “social”) that we all experience. This is not the same as a primordial archetype that we share through inheritance.

Now and then, it is pointed out that “social dreaming” has always existed as a source of wisdom among ancient indigenous populations. This notion, that was important to Lawrence as a kind of justification for the method (Lawrence, 1998, 2003), persists today (see Clare & Zarbafi, for example: “The Senoi tribe used Social Dreaming to big effect in dealing with all aspects of their lives” (Clare & Zarbafi, 2009, p. 166)). In particular, the Australian aboriginal concept of the dream as belonging *outside* the Self seems to be enticingly relevant to our understanding of social dreaming. However, the anthropological approach, interesting though it is, is not a study of social dreaming as understood in this article. It may be a demonstration of the validity of dreamwork through the ages and among different cultures, and it may help us to appreciate that sharing dreams in collectives is nothing new, but it often includes a visionary and sometimes mystical and/or religious element that is largely absent from social dreaming. Perhaps Lawrence and some of his followers were overly anxious in justifying his “discovery” by using the weight of history and ancient “wisdom”,

rather than a scientific approach, simply because the nature of social dreaming itself was so difficult to understand and justify. Citing indigenous collective dreaming as if it were social dreaming then became, for Lawrence, just another example of the validity of the process, whether justified or not. This almost cavalier approach would sometimes lead Lawrence to throw dissimilar ideas into the same pot, so to speak, where social dreaming would be at once "spiritual", an example of Bion's "O", as well as being a "revelation", an "act of faith", and "a way of continuing to re-conceptualize the relationships between human beings themselves and all that exists on the earth" (Lawrence, 1998, p. 41). This, like tribal dream sharing, certainly sounds attractive and is easily made popular. However, it seems to provide little analytical understanding of social dreaming in scientific terms.

The differences and similarities between indigenous dream sharing and social dreaming are probably multifarious and subtle, and there is no space in this article to do them justice. In Lawrence's work and edited editions, there is no sense of a critical stance in this respect, and this has not been helpful to our understanding of social dreaming as a process (for an extreme version of this way of thinking, see Leigh-Ross, 2003). It is clear that dream sharing existed before Jung and Lawrence, but it is not certain how close it is to the origins and nature of social dreaming. Indigenous dream sharing is best used as an example for comparison with social dreaming rather than cited as a source. It is in this more mature, comparative rather than derivative sense that Gosling and Case (2013) use examples from American indigenous populations' use of shared dreaming.

Instead, it seems to me that the roots of social dreaming come from the first half of the twentieth century. It is then that art (with the surrealists close in the wake of Freud) and social science seem to take a specific interest in the sharing of dreams. It is probably no coincidence, therefore, that the social science work for Charlotte Beradt's study, *Third Reich of Dreams* (1968), cited below as the initial stimulus for social dreaming, was prepared in the 1930s, a few years after the 1924 publication of Breton's "Surrealist manifesto" (Breton, 1992). In other words, it seems that in the first half of the twentieth century it became admissible to consider dreams as something more than random images, either useless or only privately and personally helpful. I suggest that this growing acceptability of dreams as a joint source of thought and creativity created the apposite background for the emergence of social dreaming.

GORDON LAWRENCE'S WRITINGS AND THE ORIGINS OF SOCIAL DREAMING

I begin this section by outlining some of the important biographical events in Gordon Lawrence's life inasmuch as they are related to the beginnings and development of social dreaming. In the first place, it is of paramount importance to point out that the idea of the social dreaming matrix did not emerge from some well meditated theory or idea, but rather by a series of circumstances not all of which were fortuitous to its "discoverer", Gordon Lawrence. In terms of theory, the acknowledged first source of social dreaming was Charlotte Beradt's book *Third Reich of Dreams* (1968), where it became clear to Lawrence that a collection of individual dreams, in this case recorded from Germans between 1933 and 1939, could tell a societal story rather than just a personal tale (Lawrence, 1998, pp. 15–17). In terms of practice, the immediate trigger for Lawrence was as a result of his work with groups at the Tavistock during which he noticed that a dream would often be offered but could not be dealt with. According to Lawrence, the way of working with groups at that time at the Tavistock Institute made it impossible to consider the dream as a part of the group work, since the dream was understood as residing uniquely in the domain of the personal, that is to say the clinical analyst–analysand relationship. This was frustrating to Lawrence because he intuited that the dream had something that was vital for the group but that could not be expressed and considered. This was why, in 1982, he and his colleague, Patricia Daniel, ran the first social dreaming matrices, a series called "A project in social dreaming and creativity". Lawrence's own version of the story of social dreaming is documented in most of his publications but particularly in his first edited collection of essays on the subject of social dreaming, *Social Dreaming @ Work* (1998).

This first attempt at social dreaming did not immediately lead to any more and there was a gap of six years between this first experiment and the next attempt in Israel, during which time Lawrence broke away from the Tavistock, then joined Shell International in a consultancy role and was also appointed President of IFSI in Paris. This was not a successful time for Lawrence and from 1989–1991, he found himself "in the wilderness" in the words of his close friend and supporter, Bipin Patel (personal communication).

Lawrence always wished to claim that the roots of social dreaming were in group relations. It is ironic, then, that it was this very isolation from the world of group relations that seemed to give him space and opportunity to develop social dreaming, untethered by the restrictions

of group relations training. Away from the formal trappings of group relations, Lawrence was able to begin his series of social dreaming weekends at his house in Vieussan in the south of France. There, he would invite a variety of people, friends and colleagues, to participate in social dreaming and related discussions. These events gave Lawrence an opportunity to share and test out his ideas with other dreamers, academics, and thinkers, many of them distinguished and well known in their fields. In addition to this, Lawrence embarked on a project for offering social dreaming as part of a consultancy group he founded with Martin Walker, Marc Maltz, and Bipin Patel: Symbiont Technologies. Although in terms of financial success, Symbiont Technologies never got off the ground, it did provide Lawrence with another forum for sharing and thinking about social dreaming and, according to Patel, the first book, *Social Dreaming @ Work* was the direct result of this work.

PUBLICATIONS ON DREAMING WITH A DIRECT INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL DREAMING

There are some thinkers who were important influences on Lawrence's development of social dreaming. First among these is Charlotte Beradt's *Third Reich of Dreams* (1968) mentioned above. Beradt's work was often cited by Lawrence as being the first indication of the possibility of understanding dreams socially instead of individually. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), was, of course, key to our understanding of free association. Lawrence showed how it was possible to use free association applied to social dreaming matrices. Bion's works in general were also a fundamental source for understanding how social dreaming had its roots in group relations. Bion's *Experiences in Groups* (1961), is the source of Lawrence's conception of social dreaming as dealing with that part of the unconscious that Bion denominated "sphinx", that is, shared intellectual knowledge. It was probably an inspiration for the title of Lawrence's second edited collection, *Experiences in Social Dreaming* (2003). Christopher Bollas' *The Shadow of the Object* (1987) is the source for the all-important concept of the "unthought known", that seemed to provide an explanation for Lawrence's idea that dreams represented knowledge that was known but unavailable for thought. David Bohm's book *On Dialogue* (1996), was influential in informing ideas about post-matrix activities. Bohm's book *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980) is essential reading to understand Lawrence's more "scientific" leanings when he talks about social dreaming in terms of the "infinite" and quantum physics. The link between Bohm's implicate order and how dreams convert this into

“explicate” was inspired by Montague Ullman’s work. In particular, Lawrence cites Ullman’s dream process diagram, “making the implicit explicit”, first published in “The transformation process in dreams” (Ullman, 1975). For further science, systems thinking, theories of chaos and complexity, which represented an expansion of the “social” into the “universal”, Lawrence relied on Fritjof Capra’s work, in particular his book *The Web of Life* (1997). Lawrence often acknowledged his debt to the work of Matte-Blanco, in particular *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets* (1975) and *Thinking, Feeling, and Being* (1988).

Even though Lawrence’s dabbling with science is fascinating, it is also true to say that, like his thinking about the role of dreams in indigenous populations, these links are, at best, tenuous in terms of providing a basis for development and research. His ideas connecting quantum physics to social dreaming, for example, lack the kind of analytical discipline that would make them useful for further intellectual pursuit (see, for example, Lawrence, 2003, p. 9). It may have better served the ultimate purpose of understanding and promoting social dreaming if Lawrence had been less grandiose, more parsimonious in his affirmations.

THEORY OF SOCIAL DREAMING

“Matrix” vs. “group”

The words “matrix”, “social”, and “creativity” that formed part of the original experiment have remained central to the development of social dreaming to the present day. “Matrix” was chosen for both positive and negative reasons. In a negative sense “matrix” was simply a reaction and defence against the possibility that, in the early 1980s, dream participants and Lawrence’s colleagues would understand any group gathering of people at the Tavistock Institute’s Group Relations Programme, of which Lawrence was then joint Director, as a “group” in the “group relational” sense of the word and all the group dynamics that would entail. The very idea of recounting and considering a dream in a group conducted in a Tavistock environment at that time, was not acceptable group material, but rather to be confined to the one-to-one situation of analyst and analysand, as mentioned above. In Lawrence’s own words, if dreams were expressed during the course of group work at the Tavistock “it was difficult to work with them, because the idea of analysis of the individual dreamer was taboo” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 2).

The other reason for choosing the word “matrix” was more positive. “Matrix” for Lawrence could be used to define a containing space of

potential birth, the birth of new thought and ideas (defined as “a place out of which something grows”; from a social dreaming event, 1989, in Lawrence, unpublished notebook, March/April), and it was also a space that enabled Lawrence to explore other areas of potential taboo, such as the possibility of allowing a spiritual, even mystical dimension, to infringe upon the clearly boundaried consultancy work of an institution such as the Tavistock:

Matrix describes the space from which everything that exists in our Universe, indeed the cosmos, has its origins. Matrix exists before mankind developed groups. And it may well be that group is a defence against the experience of the formlessness of matrix. The social dreaming matrix, purposely convened in the here-and-now, is a reflection of the primordial matrix of humanity. (Lawrence, 2003, p. 3)

It is interesting to note here the difference between Lawrence's more objective attitude to the “matrix” as distinct from the “group” and his own somewhat mystical vision of his “discovery”. Invocations of our “Universe, indeed the cosmos” and claims to the pre-human existence of the matrix seem exaggerated and even grandiose, quasi-religious, or mystical in nature. In his later work, Lawrence toned down but never abandoned this idea. In *Introduction to Social Dreaming* (2005), for example, “matrix” becomes a place for the “infinite”, and later even becomes a book title, *Infinite Possibilities of Social Dreaming* (2007). It is as if Lawrence was convinced of the idea that the social dreaming matrix was somehow transcendental, while group work was more everyday: “A group is an arena for individuals to pursue a primary task and to exercise their sense of purpose and their needs for power and security—at its worst, in a finite world dominated by task achievement” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 40). It seems possible that Lawrence's vision for social dreaming may have been significantly tainted by his own struggles with the Tavistock community, as represented in group work and his need for the recognition of the (greater) importance his achievements. At some moments in his discourse there are some odd attempts at a “scientific” approach in his appreciation of the “infinite” of the matrix:

Recently, scientists using the Hubble Space Telescope and the Keck Telescope have discovered a new galaxy as the most distant object ever observed in the universe. This galaxy is so old that its light started its journey to earth when the universe was in its infancy, just 750 million years after the Big Bang. This illustrates, again, how knowledge is being wrested from the unknown by using scientific methods. What has hitherto been in the infinite is now part of finite knowledge. (Lawrence, 2005, p. 41)

Implicit in this extract is the implication that there is scientific support for the claim that the social dreaming matrix is concerned with the "infinite". At the same time, elsewhere, Lawrence feels uncomfortable with such an idea and suggests that his use of the "infinite" is poetic: "and infinite is being used in the poetic sense rather than the scientific" (Lawrence, 2007, p. 15). In addition to this, he makes a clear link between his idea of the "infinite" and the unconscious ("The unconscious and the infinite are linked", Lawrence, 2007, p. 14). Lawrence was fascinated by the idea of the "infinite", and there are at least three definitions of "infinite" identified as an essential feature of the social dreaming matrix: the "scientific", the poetic, and the psychological. The concept, however, remained ambiguous and Lawrence himself did not provide a clear idea of what this quality of social dreaming within the matrix really was.

The "snowflake" pattern and the role of the host

Participants in a social dreaming matrix are invited to sit in a "snowflake" configuration (patterns such as various clusters of four groups of chairs, for example) as opposed to a circle that could be recognised as a seating arrangement for group work. This seating differentiates the matrix from the group by discouraging face-to-face engagement between participants, the idea being that we are interested primarily in the dream material and not in the individual person who is telling the dream. The deliberate patterning of the seating in this way for the social dreaming matrix also implies a change of role for the consultant. In group work, learning is fruit of the experience of the group dynamics as experienced by members of the group. In this context, the role of the consultant includes the containment of anxiety and the interpretation of psychodynamic group events in terms of the perception of projection and transference, and in a context of the shifting nature of the roles in the group between work group and the basic assumptions (ba), for example, as initially postulated by Wilfred Bion and subsequently corroborated through practice (see, for example, Bion, 1961; Bion Talamo, Borgogno, & Merciai, 1998; French & Vince 2002). In the matrix, however, every effort is made to avoid the dynamics of group work. Instead, free association is encouraged. This difference is reflected in the different role of a social dreaming "host" compared to the "consultant". In social dreaming, the needs of the participants are not principally about containment (although the matrix is a container for the dream material) or learning through experience. Instead, a space needs to be held that allows for the telling of dreams and associated images through free association. The host will often be seen to

contribute to the matrix as a participant in a way that more closely resembles the other participants in the matrix compared to a group relations consultant. The host achieves this through refraining from interpretation and judgment and by the linking and connection of disparate dream images for the purposes of illuminating emergent meaning. The host function of linking and connecting is made important by the nature of the free association in the matrix. By allowing participants to speak their spontaneous and emerging associations to the dreams and images, the matrix often becomes a space that may sometimes resemble a "stream of consciousness". The host will attempt to select relevant connections between what might otherwise appear to the participants as being an irretrievably unconnected welter of images. As a result of these differences in role, the social dreaming host will offer working hypotheses intended to clarify and aid understanding without ever stating meaning.

The "social" in "social dreaming" and the "unthought known"

The word "social" was used as a way of distinguishing the "social" dreams as they are presented in the matrix from the "individual" dreams that are normally associated with dream interpretation in the context of psychoanalysis. "Social" in this way is the opposite of personal. The emphasis in the social dreaming matrix is on the dreams, not the dreamer, that is to say, the "social" and not the individual.

In the early days of social dreaming there was an attempt to justify the use of this term by making specific links to society, so that the word "social" formed part of the "primary task": "To associate to and interpret the potential social content and meanings of participants' dreams." The working hypothesis stated that it was possible to "have dreams which go beyond the individual's personal pre-occupations and echo with experiences in society, work, the family, and other systems." Similarly, the aim of the social dreaming matrix was described as "to help participants make creative use of their unconscious awareness to find *new ways of exploring social issues*." (Primary task and aim taken from an early social dreaming matrix organised by Lawrence in about March 1989 and taken from his personal unpublished notebooks. The italics are mine).

However, after many years of practice and development, rather than "exploring social issues", Lawrence would later tend to say "new ways of thinking". In other words, the narrow confines implied by "social issues" were expanded to include more complex layers of meaning and possibility. According to Lawrence "The 'social' is about the larger society, the environment of the cosmos" (Lawrence, personal communication, 2 December 2006).

This “environment of the cosmos” is clearly more than what we might otherwise understand as “social”. If we follow Lawrence’s evolution away from a narrow definition of “social” to this concept of “cosmos”, it seems that what he means by this is the shared knowledge that is harboured in each of our unconscious minds until it can be transformed into a conscious thought, as it emerges from the unconscious in the form of dream or dream-like images and brought into recognition. In this way, our conscious thoughts are transformed through a greater understanding brought about by recognition of the knowing that is present in a shared unconscious. This “cosmos” therefore implies all that can be thought and known, and clearly that must go beyond societal and other human systems.

So, it is through this “environment” of what can be thought and known that Lawrence reaches for the “cosmos”. In reaching out for such a meaning, Lawrence has recourse to Christopher Bollas’ discussion of the “unthought known” (Bollas, 1987; Lawrence, 2005), and applies this idea to the way the participant in the social dreaming matrix “knows” and shares the “known” with others in the matrix, and suggests that this “known” is “unthought” (because it resides in the unconscious) until it is brought into the conscious realm through the sharing of dreams in the matrix. And although, as we have seen, there was initially an overt emphasis on “social issues”, especially in the early social dreaming events, Lawrence’s personal notebooks show a consistent early desire to understand the deeper significance of the dream sense as it emerged in the social dreaming matrices. This is why, at least as early as 1989, Lawrence’s notebooks reveal a pre-occupation with what is “known” and what is “thought”, the “knower” and the “thinker”. Thus, in *Introduction to Social Dreaming. Transforming Thinking* (2005), Lawrence attempts to link thinking-as-dreaming to thinking-as-an-unthought-known. And this unthought known is both the knowledge located in the unconscious and the acknowledgement of some transcendental understanding located where the unconscious becomes “infinity”:

As the dreams are recounted and the participants free-associate, the infinite becomes immanent; it begins to be in the participants’ grasp, and not as something imagined to be transcendent. The infinite is the unknown, and the dream introduces us to this: it questions what we have assumed, and accepted, to be social knowledge. (Lawrence, 2005, p. 11)

I understand by this that the “infinite” is what is unknown to the conscious mind because it has not been thought. “Infinite” things are known, by all the participants of a matrix, within that “cosmos”. In this sense, the matrix becomes the container of the “cosmos”. What is

unknown to conscious thought might yet be known unconsciously. Once we are introduced to the infinite in this sense through the dreams in the matrix, this unknown becomes potentially known and translated into conscious thought. This thought is then a challenge to accepted social knowledge. Here, then, Lawrence actually questions the quality of knowledge in the "social" and equates it with conscious thought that is then challenged by the unthought known as it is revealed through the dream work in the matrix. There is a knowledge, in this context, that is conscious knowledge ("*thought* known"), and can be challenged or enriched by another kind of knowledge, that is not merely "social" but somehow more transcendental and unconscious ("*unthought* known"). Here too, it is worth noting that there is an implied difference between what is known or can be known and what is commonly termed "knowledge", the latter being that which is agreed by society, recorded and handed down from generation to generation in the form of accepted norms that support the structures and pillars of society. This difference is also part of many people's experiential understanding of the social dreaming matrix. "Social" becomes insufficient as a means of describing the shared understanding of the matrix. For many participants, there is a sense of a shared knowing in some other, transcendental realm that feels closer to the sensation of the matrix. This is a sensation that suggests that participants in a matrix share a form of knowledge, thoughts, and feelings about complex matters of humanity that are difficult to extrapolate in the course of "normal" conscious thought. This may be Lawrence's "cosmos" or "larger issues": "Larger issues can be explored in the SDM—death/life, truth/falsehood, man's inhumanity to man, environmental issues, politics, etc." (Lawrence, personal communication, 2 December 2006).

It is not obvious, in the light of this debate, that "social" is a good enough description of the process of the matrix. Lawrence himself attempted to use different definitions in reaching for a satisfactory holistic description. Among these various definitions, he also referred to the dream space as an "ecology", which is maybe the nearest we come to an acknowledged holistic description of the process. In his early unpublished notebooks, for example, Lawrence identifies "psycho-systemic perspective" as an "eco-system" and "spiritual knowing" is placed alongside "the individual and the environment", (Lawrence, unpublished notebook, March/April 1989). Later, in 2003, Lawrence was able to write the following:

The ecology of forgotten dreams is the infinite.

What comes to be known when it is thought depends on the opportunities and the impediments presented by the eco-niche that each of us

inhabits. By “eco” I am referring to the whole natural world in which we are located. Loosely, I am using it in the sense of ecological. By “niche” I mean the slice of the environment that we occupy. I have the idea that even a single-cell organism dreams, or participates in proto-dreaming. Thus, evolution comes about in the context of the eco-niche the organism inhabits. (Lawrence, 2003, p. 11)

It seems probable here that the idea of “proto-dreaming” is akin to Bion’s “proto-mental phenomena” (Bion, 1961, p. 101 of 2000 edition). It would be particularly interesting (and like a fair number of Lawrence’s affirmations, it is not completely clear) to understand what Lawrence meant by a “single-cell organism” dreaming and the idea of “evolution” in this context. Here then, in the evocation of an ecology of dreams, Lawrence touches upon the shared dream space as being comparable to our shared and interrelated environment, that is to say, the “whole natural world”, and that takes us beyond the “social” and into the kind of close approximation to nature that suggests an intimate link between the unconscious and the environment.

The relationship between dream and dreamer

In his embracing of the freedom of thought that social dreaming provided him, Lawrence took for granted the nature of dreaming in social dreaming as being about the shared unconscious. He did not consider the possibility that a Freudian preconscious might be at work; neither did he preoccupy himself with the possibility that a dream that belonged only to a single individual in the matrix might be shared with others but still maintain its status as a personal dream. For Lawrence, once in the “container” of the matrix, the dream was a shared dream and no longer belonged to anybody in particular. “Proof” of this shared unconscious in social dreaming is understood as being partly demonstrated by the perceived lack of individuals relating to each other in psychodynamically interactive ways that would be typical of both shared and individual interactions within normal group work. While this is certainly experientially true, there is room for some future debate and development of these issues that Lawrence largely avoided.

Social dreaming and creativity

When social dreaming began, “creativity” was as much part of the project as “social dreaming”, as was made clear in the title of the first matrix: “A project in social dreaming and creativity”. Interestingly, the importance of creativity in social dreaming was also the subject of one of Lawrence’s last publications, *The Creativity of Social Dreaming* (2010).

"Creativity" is an elusive concept, easy to feel, difficult to define. Compared to "matrix" or even "social", "creativity" is an abstract idea that is probably more successfully "measured" in intensity rather than in presence or non-presence, existence or non-existence. To understand what "creativity" means in the context of social dreaming, it is useful to envisage it as a process that is partly equivalent to the creation of the "new thoughts". Typically, Lawrence introduced a matrix with the following words or similar: "Our task today is to transform our thinking by offering our dreams and free associating with them, and in the process think new thoughts. What is the first dream?" This creativity implied in "new thinking" is the very essence of the social dreaming matrix, without which there would be no vital activity. If the matrix were merely a recounting of people's dream stories and images, then there would be very little meaning and point for participants. It is by combining the unconscious images from (or elicited by) dreams with the conscious universe of accepted thought from different parts of the matrix that the individual conscious mind is provoked into thinking new thoughts. Furthermore, we are not simply discussing creativity in terms of creating new ideas, but in a more transcendental sense that allows for a broadening and renewal of understanding in an autopoietic, a kind of creativity not far removed from what Fritjof Capra (whom Lawrence quotes in this context) calls "evolutionary creativity" (Capra, 2003, p. 28). The thinking that emerges from the social dreaming matrix in this sense is "evolutionary creativity" because it allows for new thoughts and human progress in the pursuit of a sense of living as regeneration, renewal, and development.

Creativity in social dreaming relies on a tapping into the shared or social unconscious. For social dreamers, the unconscious is a source of inspiration and discovery. Lawrence himself was keen to point out how some inventions and discoveries were dreamt into existence. This is connected to the idea that a benefit of social dreaming is to allow the emergence of unconscious thought into consciousness, which is akin to bringing out creativity: "If, however, we rely exclusively on our consciousness and do not take account of the unconscious, we are cutting ourselves off from our creativity" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 59).

Social dreaming, Bion, and group relations

There is, in Lawrence's own reflections of his work, at once a reluctance to let go of the group relations world and a rejection of some of what he regarded as weaker or even damaging ideas from the world of group relations conferences.

To begin with, Lawrence clearly stated that “social dreaming has its roots in my thinking in group relations” (Personal communication, 16 November 2008). Lawrence claimed that some of what is vital in social dreaming was missing in group relations. According to Lawrence, Bion was misunderstood and misapplied in group relations. Lawrence believed that consultant members of staff were overly preoccupied with spotting Bion’s basic assumptions (ba) rather than getting to the roots of the bas, that is to say unconscious thinking. In Lawrence’s understanding, group relations consultants, in part at least, had ended up classifying and identifying basic assumptions rather than facilitating learning through unconscious thinking. Much can be understood from the following words from Lawrence spoken during an interview with me:

Bion was on about the thinking in groups . . . the idea of unconscious thinking to inform the Basic Assumptions gets completely missed out. For Bion, insight comes from the unconscious. I don’t think Bion had the idea that the unconscious was the dreadful thing that people talk about. He could see the positive bits to it. He had a mystic, not religious idea of analysis. It wasn’t cause and effect and so on. (Personal communication, 16 November 2008)

In this communication, Lawrence revealed what he believed he had brought to the world in social dreaming. First, social dreaming deals unequivocally with the unconscious in a way that is not pathological; it is not the indicator of illness in a Freudian sense that clearly he believed had been transported into a psychoanalytical approach to groups. Second, when Lawrence points to consultants identifying the bas he is partly referring to his distaste for interpretation. For Lawrence, the very studied lack of interpretation in social dreaming and its replacement by “working hypotheses” is a key to allowing the unconscious to illuminate our thinking. Later on, in the same interview, Lawrence states:

I detest the interpretation in group relations . . . Working hypotheses approximate reality as you see it, knowing that you’ll never actually know what reality is. Interpretation is about “I’ve got the power”. [It] goes against the idea of understanding the unknown. You immediately translate it into the known. In a working hypothesis I’m accepting the unknown.

This thinking is itself one of the main goals of social dreaming, hence the subtitle of his book *Introduction . . ., Transforming Thinking*. In identifying Bion as having a “mystic” idea of analysis, Lawrence is able to sanction the rather “magical” sense that people take away with them after a social dreaming session, where meaning seems to have emerged in an indefinable way, that is to say neither by “cause and

effect" nor in the ways we are accustomed to understand meaning through logical sequential sentences that lead rationally to conclusions. The idea of the mystical in this context is very much linked to holistic concepts. Sometimes the complexity of systems is so great that emerging properties might seem to emerge by "magic", as it were, rather than through perceivable paths of logic.

By framing his thoughts in this way, using Bion and group relations as a basis for talking about social dreaming, Lawrence's desire was to render social dreaming "respectable". This is how he put it, in citing Winnicott, when I asked him about why he had been so reluctant to discuss in depth other examples of collective dream work, such as the aboriginal dreamtime or a Jungian approach: "Winnicott was respectable but dreamtime wasn't, simply because I didn't know enough about it" (Personal communication, 16 November 2008).

Finally, in talking about Bion and theories of the unconscious, it needs to be pointed out that Lawrence suggested that social dreaming was connected with Bion's idea of the "sphinx" as opposed to "Oedipus", the sphinx representing the idea of intellectual problems and knowledge appropriate to group work, while Oedipus is concerned with pairing in group work or the dyadic relationship in analyst-analysand work (Bion, 1961, p. 8 in 2000 edition) In doing so, Lawrence can allow for the unknown (the "eternal sphinx") to be spun out during the course of social dreaming while at the same time claiming a "respectable" source. Taking this as a basic starting point, Lawrence went on to identify four areas belonging to this unconscious "sphinx-like" space: "being", "becoming", "unthought known", and "dreaming". His idea was that these four areas could be visually represented as four faces of a single three dimensional pyramid (Figure 1) where: "being" is what we are; "becoming" is the future; the "unthought known" is what is in the unconscious but has yet to be

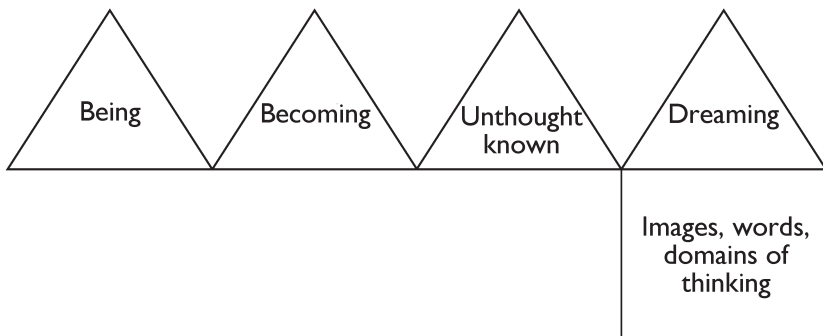


Figure 1: The four modes of thinking (Lawrence, 2005, p. 22).

thought; and “dreaming” is the bringing of this unthought known to the consciously thinking mind.

Dialogues, organisational role analysis and creative role synthesis

It has always been recognised that there is a need for something to happen after the social dreaming matrix, even though it is the matrix itself that has captured our attention. The need arises from the fact that participants in the matrix may be left with a bewildering sense of a mass of dream images and associations that are felt to be in various degrees of comprehension and confusion. The post matrix events, therefore, are designed to help participants in their transition back to a more everyday manner of thinking and to attempt to make some sense of the dreams and images of the matrix.

There are various possibilities for the post matrix sessions. Typically, matrices are followed up by some form of “dialogue”. The shifting away from the “reverie” space of the matrix to this “dialogue” space is emphasised by rearranging the chairs in a rectangle so that they are neither the “snowflake” of the matrix, nor the circle of the small group recognisable as typical of a group relations conference. This dialogue used to simply consist of a twenty minute review of the experience of what it had been like to participate in the matrix. However, this simple dialogue has developed and there has been an on-going attempt to understand the meaning of the matrix without falling into the “trap” of interpretation. The sense of “dialogue” has been closely associated to David Bohm’s use of the word as defined in his book *On Dialogue* (1996), where he talks about “participatory thought” and the “infinite”. Recently, however, the tendency has been to try to go back to the dreams themselves, for example, by some sort of “synthesis” of the dream images in a “dream reflection group”, (or “systems synthesis”). These are opportunities for the participants, with the help of the host as facilitator, to reflect upon the dream images, which are linked together to form a “collage” of images, from which one or more working hypotheses are postulated.

Another example of a post-matrix events is the creative role synthesis (CRS), where an individual brings—to a group of about five participants from the bigger social dreaming matrix—a problem or puzzle from the work place and any associated dreams that the presenter feels may be relevant. Then the participants are invited to free associate to the puzzle and its dreams in a way that can allow meaning to suggest itself. Again, as in so much that is important to Lawrence, this is seen as emanating from organisational role analysis (ORA), that is to say from a practice with its roots in group relations.

In talking about ORA, Lawrence acknowledges the work of Irving Borwick, and in doing so I think he points to one of the links that enabled him to move towards the CRS through an understanding of the ORA:

Borwick introduced us to the Mapping Exercise, which was how to begin an ORA . . . The individual was regarded as a private matter but it would be possible to disentangle how role performance could be illuminated by the character of the individual. To work directly on the individual was seen as irrelevant. The Mapping Exercise . . . was based on the assumption that every individual carries a mental map of the systems in which they live and work. (Lawrence, 2006, pp. 31–32)

It seems to me that Lawrence saw a “map” in the collected images of the social dreaming matrix and that this “map” was a suitable preliminary to understanding role in the work system, not by looking at the character of the individual but by understanding what the dream images were saying about the systems relevant to an individual at work. This “map” was the product of the free association. So, the “problem or puzzle” that the individual brings to the CRS is illuminated by the use of the unconscious imagery “map” of the matrix as later applied to the post matrix CRS event. In Lawrence’s own words:

What participants all share is the experience of social dreaming and its work of free association, which fosters spontaneity and the expression of uninhibited creative responses. Such responses are different from the pre-programmed interventions of professionals. With the experience of the “abstracting and analogising” process of free association the boundaries around the “connection sets” of the brain are loosened. Thus novel syntheses are more possible. (Gordon Lawrence, “Working note: creative role synthesis”, prepared for CRS practice at one of the Vieussan sessions).

What the CRS attempts to achieve, therefore, is a process that can be made directly relevant to the real life issues of workers in a work system but using processes that are faithful to the premises of the social dreaming matrix.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have been outlining the background and history of social dreaming as a method of collectively exploring the shared unconscious. In this short history, I have had to pay special attention to the figure of Gordon Lawrence, as the “discoverer” of social dreaming. In doing so, I have attempted to define the main themes of the study as well as trying to better understand the nature of Lawrence’s

role in the development of social dreaming, past and future. I have discussed how Lawrence had wanted to place social dreaming in a work context and how this was attempted through his own consultancy group, but I have also pointed out how this has not actually materialised in any meaningful way. The article has also discussed the influence of the Tavistock group relations tradition on the development of social dreaming and how this contributed to the definition of “matrix” vs. “group”, the idea of “social” as applied to dreams and the place of “creativity” as central to the method. Finally, I have discussed the main areas of post-social dreaming activities, such as dialogues, dream reflection groups and creative role syntheses.

Before Gordon Lawrence passed away, his colleagues and friends founded the Gordon Lawrence Foundation to promote social dreaming and preserve his legacy. I have, in this article, attempted to show where we stand in that legacy today in the hope that social dreaming may be further developed in theory and application in the future.

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