

Social Dreaming in a Transactional Analysis Context

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Abstract

We all dream, individually and collectively. The latter is called “social dreaming,” an established practice in a number of groups and societies. For example, elders in some tribes gather to share dreams in order to find direction. In the analytic world, social dreaming was discovered to be an important way of increasing awareness of aspects of the collectively held unconscious. In this article, the concept of the social dreaming matrix is explored along with the way it was applied and experienced during the 18th bi-annual transactional analysis conference held in Sydney, Australia, in 2006. Themes and issues from the conference experience are discussed.

Dreaming and Social Dreaming

There is a significant body of psychotherapy literature on the topic of dreaming, beginning with Freud's (1900/1955) *Traumdeutung* (translated as *The Interpretation of Dreams*). Unfortunately, much of it is based on inadequate English translations of what Freud originally meant. It was Bettelheim (1983/1991) who brought back Freud's deep sense of our holistic souls (“psyche” actually means “soul”) and of psychoanalysts as “ministers of souls,” something that was almost totally omitted from English translations of Freud's work. Instead, working with dreams was most often portrayed as an exclusively mental activity, something that happened in our minds. Bettelheim argued that a translation such as “the interpretation of dreams” implicitly promised a clear-cut, definite explanation of dreams (p. 67), far from the original meaning of “deutung,” which is much more explorative. In fact, Bettelheim quotes Freud as saying that a dream is “a result of the activity of our own soul” (p. 71). Bettelheim suggested that a better translation for *Traumdeutung* would have been “An Inquiry for the Meaning of Dreams” (p. 70).

When a dream is considered to be more than just a mental activity, it delves into the totality of our existence, including our brains, bodies, and souls. It refers to our history, present, and future and to our existence as an individual as well as an individual-in-community. In this context, Bion's (1961) distinction between the world of the egocentric and the sociocentric is important; it is the divide between narcissism and social-ism. Dreams fit into both areas: We can look for their individual meaning for the dreamer as well as their collective meaning for the community in which the dreamer dreams. This leaves room for the thought that dreams are around, looking for a dreamer in order to be dreamt.

Berne included dreams in his understanding of individual script and described dreaming as the process during which, at night, when the controlling ego is asleep, repressed id wishes “show themselves in distinguished form in dreams” (Berne, 1947/1971, p. 76). That is what Freud meant about dreams being the royal road to the individual unconscious. In an attempt to find individual meaning for a dream, one often starts by regarding all elements (people, features, events) of the dream as personal projections and therefore parts of oneself. After all, the dreamer is the maker of the dream, and whatever one puts into the dream must be what is in oneself. A dream is, therefore, owned by the dreamer: It is a personal possession. In transactional analysis, this way of looking at dreams was worked out in the rededication approach (Goulding & Goulding, 1979) and more recently by Bowater (2003). This view fits well in individualistic Western psychology, at the expense, however, of discounting a more group-centered social psychology. It is more Jungian than Freudian to see that dreams are a collective as well as an individual phenomenon.

We-ness

Extending our existence into the social systems in which we live, it is important to take

into account that $1+1 > 2$. When two or more people engage, share lives, or form a community, something comes into existence that is not exclusively the product of the individuals involved. There is “a shared field, a common communicative home, which is mutually constructed” (Parlett, 1991, p. 75). It is the total that is more than the sum of the parts. Not only is this a notion in gestalt therapy and systemic approaches, it has become a key element in relational psychotherapy. It can also be regarded as a basis for understanding the concept of the collective unconscious.

Out of a fear of symbiosis, transactional analysis has always held itself at a distance from “we-ness” (Summers & Tudor, 2000; Tudor, 2006). However, we-ness is an important concept in extending from the individual to the social. We are bound in relationships and communities, to which we contribute with our bodies, minds, and souls and to which others contribute as well, thus jointly cocreating dynamics, parts of which are hidden and unconscious. No wonder these unconscious parts show up in dreams!

This leaves space to regard our dreams as parts of something collectively shared, in which a wider community plays a part and collective shared meaning can be found. It is of interest that anthropological research that describes the role dreams play in the daily life of “primitive” tribes refers to societies with collective-based cultures, such as the tribes of the Kalahari desert (van der Post & Pottiez, 1986), Taiwanese aboriginal tribes (Ogawa & Asai as cited in Lawrence, 1998a, p. 187), and most notably, the Malay tribes researched in the 1930s (Stewart, 1969). In a 15-year study of the Senoi—a jungle tribe in the rain forests of Malay—Stewart found that dream interpretation was a regular feature of daily life. In families, during breakfast members would listen to each other’s dreams and associate to them. Afterward, the head of the family would go to the tribe council meeting to report, discuss, and analyze the dreams. Stewart related this practice to the fact that the Senoi lived without conflict with their neighbors and did not know violent crime. Dream interpretation and expression seemed to be ways to integrate and own their tribal sha-

dow sides, which consequently did not need to be projected onto neighbors who then became “enemies.”

Social Dreaming Matrix

It is increasingly acknowledged that the meaning of a dream cannot be understood except in relation to the context in which it is told. In analytic groups, a dream told during a session is considered a bearer of fresh meanings that refer to the emotional life of the group as a whole, to the emotions, difficulties, and problems that the group is busy with at that moment in its history (Friedman, Neri, & Pines, 2002).

Social dreaming as a methodology was discovered (not invented) by W. Gordon Lawrence in the early 1980s, and the first social dreaming matrix was conducted in 1982 at the Tavistock Institute in London (Lawrence, 1998b, 2003, 2007). In a social dreaming matrix, people come together to share their dreams, sitting in what is called a “matrix.” The primary task is to associate to one’s own and other participants’ dreams as they are made available to the matrix so as to make links and connections (Lawrence, 2003, p. 2). The matrix serves as a “womb,” “a place from which something is bred, grows and develops” (p. 3) and out of which the life of the group unconscious can be explored. In this sense, the matrix is the container for receiving dreams as they are told by the dreamer of the dream and taken up by those present (the “takers”) who understand the dream, the latter of which includes all participants. The matrix requires that participants take responsibility for engaging in the task.

A social dreaming matrix takes participants into thinking about the other and frees them from being bound and restricted in the world of the “I.” An important aspect is that in social dreaming the emphasis is on association rather than interpretation. Maltz and Walker (1998) argue that dream interpretation tends to focus attention on the individual, while associating enables links between people to be elaborated (p. 164). Bringing dreams into the matrix and working with their meaning inducts participants into the world of the sociocentric. This brings the matrix into the domain of the sphinx in the

Oedipal drama: the realm of knowledge, scientific method, and truth searching (Lawrence, 2003, p. 5).

Eco-niches

All that is located in the participants both individually and collectively will be relevant for what is known in the dream matrix. Bollas (1991) describes how the unthought known is the outcome of countless meetings between the subject and the object world. This is the realm of what Lawrence (2003) calls the “eco-niche” (p. 11), the part each participant inhabits and the collective denominator in it. The eco-niche includes the slice of the environment each individual occupies.

The eco-niche occupied by an Indian peasant’s child is different from that of someone born in Scotland, or born in Kosovo in the last ten years or born in Manhattan or in the Bronx. This is further complicated for the child by the wealth of the parents, their psychopathology, the educational opportunities he or she has, and so on. (p. 11)

This reminds us of Berne’s (1972) writing on the script apparatus, where cultural, family social class, ethical, sexual, and regional aspects are part of the personal script. In social dreaming, these aspects are the slices of the environment that are present in the matrix and represented by the participants. When participants bring themselves in while associating to dreams, they are not doing so for narcissistic self-gratification but as an offering to benefit the whole.

In the social dreaming matrix, dreams are reflected on by participants carrying their own eco-niches and are received into the matrix of a collective eco-niche. With this in mind, we thought it would be interesting to work with dreams in the context of the eco-niches of participants at a transactional analysis conference as well as in the context of the eco-niche of transactional analysis within the world of psychotherapy and consulting modalities. We also took into account the variation of old and new approaches within transactional analysis (van Beekum, 2006) and the wider context of Australia, where the conference was held.

Social Dreaming in an Australian Context

Australia has had a Western-based dominant culture since the first European fleet landed in Sydney Cove in 1788. However, its indigenous inhabitants, Aborigines, have lived here for an estimated 40,000 years, although they now make up just 1.5% of the population.

In Aboriginal culture, dreamtime is not only a concept about the past, it is a way of keeping history alive in a tradition of oral storytelling. Australian Jungian psychotherapist Peter O’Connor (2001), in his famous study of Irish myths, makes it clear that the longer stories were not written up and only told orally from generation to generation, the more they would become vague and unclear, with changing characters and situations. They became more dreams that are “out there” than stories that are “fact.” They can be considered to be part of the process that Bion (1967) called “alpha-functioning” (p. 56): the transformation of experience, mainly experience into dreamthoughts. Roman and Greek myths, written down more than 2000 years ago, are thus much more solid stories than Irish myth or Aboriginal stories, in which dream, dreamthought, and myth are heavily interwoven.

In a way, Australian culture denies the existence of Aboriginal history, although it holds an idealizing transference to the Aborigine as a dreamer. This double bind of rejection and introjection shapes the soul—or, as some would argue, the lack of soul—of modern Australia (Tacey, 1995). Australia has a kind of split soul. On one side is a highly narcissistic, overt false white self filled with everything that looks good (our bodies, our house decorations, our beach fronts, our sports); this is embodied in the phrase “no worries, mate” and in a cultural self-belief that “being white is like being free” (McKinney, 2005). On the other side there is a fearful hidden self that exists in the destruction of culture by genocide (and the denial of it) by separating children from their families and actively promoting low education levels, low birth rates, and high health problems in Aboriginal communities (Meehan, 2000). In *Bipolar Nation*, Hartcher (2007) argues that Australians today are more economically secure yet existentially as anxious as ever: “On the one hand

we see a more prosperous, confident and aspirational society, and on the other the continuation of a well-cultivated sense of fear, xenophobia and insecurity” (p. 41).

As we described earlier, dreams are a result of the activity of our soul, including our collective soul. So, when our soul is hiding, where else can we look other than into dreams? Introducing social dreaming in an Australian transactional analysis context must, therefore, have special meaning. Practiced at conferences and in analytical group process training, social dreaming has been applied in Australia since 1989. The current container for this way of working is Group Relations Australia, an association formed to promote the study of unconscious behavior in organizations and society (see www.grouprelations.org.au). Social dreaming was not part of the previous 17 transactional analysis conferences held in Australia and New Zealand, nor has it been anywhere else in the transactional analysis world. The fact that it is being featured now is probably an expression of a reclaiming by transactional analysis of its psychoanalytic roots.

Conference on “Living Groups”

The 18th Australasian Transactional Analysis conference was held from 17-19 November 2006 in Sydney; its theme was “Living Groups: Understanding and Exploring the Individual and the Collective in Groups.” The conference was organized as a residential event; accommodations and conference activities were all at one venue.

In *Principles of Group Treatment*, Berne (1963/2001) wrote, “In order for the student to consider himself literate in his chosen field, he should have some over-all familiarity with the literature on both group treatment and group dynamics” (p. 198). Thus, the Sydney conference was designed to provide delegates with a way to integrate past, current, and future aspirations in group theory and group practice. It also aimed to expand to a broader base of participants and not be restricted solely to the transactional analysis community.

The objectives of the conference were: (1) to convene as a community for ongoing professional development, (2) to commit to the

growth of transactional analysis in the Australasian region, and (3) to integrate past, current, and future aspirations in group theory and group practice.

The conference followed, in part, the format used in the successful, highly interactive 1996 ITAA conference in Amsterdam on “Ego States in Transactional Analysis” (van Beekum & Sell, 1996). There were no applied higher education workshops, only academic paper presentations. In sessions of 90 minutes, the paper presenter had just 30 minutes to present. The rest of the time was allocated to group discussion led by a moderator. The moderators reported on the discussion in a plenary later that day, which also included further discussion. With three keynote speakers (one psychoanalyst, one sociodramatist, and one transactional analyst), the content of the conference was well covered.

In contrast to the Amsterdam conference, two important experiential events were added to the Sydney program: one was a large group reflection session at the end of each day, as was previously done at the 2001 Sydney conference and the 2005 Edinburgh conference. This will not be reported on here. The other experiential event was a social dreaming matrix at the start of each of the three days. We served as the consultants for this social dreaming matrix. A total of 60 participants joined, almost all from Australia and New Zealand. They represented a cross section of the transactional analysis community in the region, including trainers, certified transactional analysts, and trainees working in areas such as psychotherapy, counseling, training, and consulting. Some other people with interest in the theme joined from outside the field of transactional analysis, including individuals from universities and corporations.

Setting Up the Social Dreaming Matrix

Our role as consultants for the social dreaming matrix was twofold. On the one hand, we managed the event by managing time, task, and territory. We took responsibility for the task, designed the layout of the chairs, prepared the room, organized with the conference center for an uninterrupted session, and kept the time boundary. On the other hand, we served as

consultants to the process by introducing the task in the matrix, working together in close alliance, and consulting about the task. The task was described as follows: to associate to one's own and other participants' dreams as they were made available to the matrix so as to make links and connections and to find meaning in the context of the transactional analysis community. As consultants we did not bring our own dreams into the matrix so that we could be fully available as "takers" and work and connect with what came into the matrix. We contained the process, offered meaning and connections, and left it to the matrix to pick up that meaning or not in the same way that, developmentally, parents bring meaning to a child about what is happening but leave it to the child to play with that meaning, accept or reject it, and learn from it.

Themes and Issues from the Experience

The first session: The participants quickly picked up on the task and started to share dreams.

- I dreamt that I was climbing the stairs in a flat in London, schlepping my suitcases up the stairs, coming into pokey rooms, but when I got in it was a beautiful arena.
- I dreamt I was at the hairdressers; they were telling me what to do with my hair to make a ponytail.

Participants associated these dreams with their transition into the conference, with the "luggage" they brought that was metaphorically filled with issues from home and work and from their transactional analysis background. Filling the suitcases became a metaphor for the dilemma "What am I willing to share and what am I not?" How light or heavy the luggage was related to being filled with excitement about something new and with anxieties about this new space, a new language, and a new conference structure. People associated with fear of coming together and being told what to do in a setting that reminded many of boarding school, of thinking what to pack and what to leave home and doing the linen correctly. Is this a beautiful place where we can be, enjoy, and learn, or is this an institution with restricting rules or even an old men's home?

- I dreamt of myself preparing meals and my

mother walked in saying, "Why do you keep on missing me in what I do?"

- I dreamt of being in a pub with fellow servicemen; the captain spoke with a plum in his mouth and then there was this fight between an octopus and what looked like a giant bird.
- I dreamt of a machine with mechanical arms and legs; it was very neutral, not specifically caring or threatening, just neutral.

The associations went into starting to question the task and the work, especially the safety of the work, when a fight would come up between something smothering and something that can fly away. Would we be entangled in the scary depth of the unconscious, pulling the group down into strangling the idealized elders represented by the consultants and with many of the transactional analysis elders in the room present, or would we fly away from it? How neutral would the consultants be and how mechanical and can we understand their language? Is this social dreaming work and its link with psychoanalysis a language that we can speak or can learn to speak or is it the language of those posh others and therefore not ours? Are we doing the right thing here?

- I dreamt that I had to change my top; a man was threatening to kill people and put his foot in the door. I changed my top anyway.
- I dreamt that I was longing for love and relationship.
- I dreamt about this man fighting with an angel.
- I dreamt I was going to the zoo, but there was too much to see.

How hard it can be to trust each other and take off our layers in each other's presence when we are not sure of others' intentions. There may be a potential threat. The Biblical image of Jacob wrestling with an angel was interpreted by Jung (1973) in his chapter "Confrontation with the Unconscious." It is the fight with ourselves and our (dark) unaware parts. Can we fight and connect, do we stay or run? Can we find love in this process? Can we pick up on the richness of what is out there or is it too much to see? What is lost by not being able to see it? The zoo of social dreaming may add

some exotic new species, but do we have time to see it all and does it add real value? There were also associations with Australian wildlife—so present at the venue—including the different noises of the birds, the fear of the alleged presence of spiders and snakes, and the real presence of cockroaches. All were quite spooky, dangerous, and exotic as representations of Australia's hidden self.

The second session: In the second session, the reported dreams were different. They expressed, much more than in the first session, the fear and anxiety of being destroyed by forces that, in the associations, grew to extraordinary and uncontrollable apocalyptic proportions.

- I dreamt of impending danger, out there in the countryside, with a tornado coming and a fellow with a knife.
- I was at home and violated, and I was horrified because I had thought that I was protected.
- I dreamt of my house being in danger, with strange people. There was a sort of spell about the house, where once a murder had taken place when a father killed his daughter.
- I dreamt of being on the phone for the whole night to check on the rain coming.
- I dreamt of this picture of a line of washed clothes in the garden and then saw a skeleton, which collapsed.

The associations were about the unsafe home and the unsafe country as metaphors for our mental home, which was threatened by tornadoes and hurricanes and dangerous others. There were associations about the process of going through a hurricane, starting with the fears in advance, then the fantasy about how to control the hurricane by packing up the house and one's possessions to keep them safe. The question, as in the first session, again became what to pack and how to decide what is of value to keep? The amount of energy it costs to go through all that and then, often, the hurricane changed its path or diminished in strength, ending in frustration about all the work done. Can we not be more trusting, and, of course, how do we know what we can trust? Are other approaches in transactional analysis, especially

regaining analytic roots and relational approaches, destroying our comfort zones? What to pack to keep? Death and dying, even violence, as destruction coming from the outside, seem to feed one side of the fear. How to contain an (un)expected hurricane?

- I dreamt that I wanted to make passionate love with my partner and was feeling guilt about that, especially about the pleasure I had.
- I dreamt about my trainer as my source of milk and being on a journey with her in a big car, which she handled so cleverly, something I would never be able to do.

People expressed fear of passion and enjoyment from within, the destruction of feeling too much enjoyment. Or, are we into the destruction of our own capacities by projecting them out onto idealized others? How can we own that energy again? There were also associations about protection and about how the placing of the chairs in the room were providing personal space and made connections possible.

- I dreamt I was in a village where I met this old frail man, who looked like my father, and he said, "Is this where you went?" And off he went.

This reflected the expectation of a connection that did not come or a confirmation about a broken relationship. The old men's home from the first session came back, as did the mother in one of the dreams who complained that the daughter kept missing her in what she did—as if we are into zones or areas where our parents cannot follow anymore and signal us, so we lose them. This raised questions about what we do with our elders, how we hold them and stay connected with them and what it means "to move on" (this was worked with in the large group later in the day when the participants reflected on the deaths by suicide of Petruska Clarkson in Europe and Maggie White in Australia).

One powerful association that was offered was that our collective was acting like a group of porcupines as in Schopenhauer's famous fable. Luepnitz (2002) describes the fable as follows:

A troop of porcupines is milling about in a cold winter's day. In order to keep from

freezing, the animals move closer together. Just as they are close enough to huddle, however, they start to poke each other with their quills. In order to stop the pain, they spread out, lose the advantage of commingling and again begin to shiver. This sends them back into the search of each other and the cycle repeats as they struggle to find a comfortable distance between entanglement and freezing. (p. 2)

What an addition to stroke theory—understanding the dynamic between positive and negative strokes!

The third session:

- I dreamt about this speaker in an auditorium, whose face went ugly when he spoke: his tooth became loose, his eyes popped out and rotated, his mouth changed. In the next scene a computer lab was raided by a group of young lads. When it was all over, a woman wrapped up in a rope held up this little piece of green, crying out, “I saved it, I saved it.”
- I dreamt about these seven young soldiers coming back from the front, with their uniforms in tatters. They had a strong bond together and passed me when I was building my garden from rocks. They joined me in building; we needed to work hard to break the rocks. I am interrupted by a call from the hospital where I am a head nurse. I can’t find anything to wear and when I put on my uniform, I discover that it is too small and too short. I am torn between not going and staying, doing my duty. I am aware that what I want is to stay and be with the soldiers breaking new ground and building a garden.

The associations offered were about the question of what to do after all the destruction of the war. Was this Eric Berne’s war 50 years ago when he developed transactional analysis? Or was it the current war among approaches in transactional analysis? What is left of the old theory and where may we be caught between the old and the new, which is not yet clear? The metaphor of the uniform, the image of something institutionalized: Can we fight together and still find a way to reconnect in our brokenness? Is there a space into which we can bring our terrors? When all the raiding is over, what

can be kept to continue and grow? Our uniforms, associated with our concepts and structures, may not fit anymore. Can we grow again what we had before? Is there a new direction in transactional analysis where we can grow something new?

- I dreamt that I came home from the conference to find out that I was being betrayed.

Is this the betrayal of Eric Berne’s transactional analysis? When we speak about our own dreams, are we also betraying them? There is also the betrayal of those who were muted by all those who did speak. One association was about reading one’s own father’s diaries of 50 years ago, discovering his perception of life at the time and now engaging him in it. Berne surely was in the room. . . .

Epilogue

We do not pretend that the reflections just described are complete. However, they offer an account of the work that was done in the three sessions at the conference, during which we shared our dreams and associated to them. Through its structure and task, the social dreaming matrix provided protection so that we could pause and reflect about understanding aspects of our eco-niches/cultural scripts within the collective gathering at the Sydney conference. The matrix offered a process of reflection; it was not about outcomes that could be contracted for. Understandably, in the transactional analysis context, this caused some discomfort about speaking another language. However, the spirit of exploration and the curiosity about finding new meaning was there throughout the three sessions.

We want to conclude by expressing hope that we continue to break new ground by allowing ourselves to perceive and explore the unknown and to discover a way, through our vulnerabilities, to collectively work with building authenticity while dismantling our false assumptions about ourselves and ourselves with others.

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