

DREAMS AND DREAMERS

REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL DREAMING ONLINE

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In Social Dreaming, practice informs and gives shape to theory, not the other way around.

"I open myself against my will by dreaming of other planets

I dream of other ways of seeing this life"

Felipe Baeza, 2022

THE BIRTH OF SOCIAL DREAMING

Social Dreaming is a methodology discovered by Gordon Lawrence and his colleagues for sharing and working with dreams in relation to their socio-environmental context and for accessing the unconscious knowledge of dreams and their infinite possible meanings. Its roots lie in systemic and psychodynamic thought.

In 1982 Lawrence and Daniel at the Tavistock Institute began to explore the "possibility of dreaming socially." They organized a first workshop and called it the Social Dreaming and Creativity Project. The hypothesis was that the dream of the one who dreams in his or her role as a citizen would be welcomed as a social dream and would effectively provide the link between the individual and his or her ecological niche. Other workshops followed in France, Italy, Israel, Great Britain, the USA, and Australia; all contributed to the spread and development of that first experiment.

Lawrence devoted the second part of his professional life as a thinker, writer, and organizational consultant primarily to SD, by then disseminated internationally and in varied settings: organizational, research, social, artistic, educational, and professional.

The numerous books and articles edited by him stand as testimony.

THE MATRIX (THE PLACE OF SOCIAL DREAMING) AND ITS HOST

SD takes place in the Matrix, a place "where something can grow," from the Latin word for womb. The Matrix is at once a process and a form.

As a process, the matrix is the system and network of emotions and thoughts present in every social relationship, mostly neglected and unrecognized. It can be understood as the waking mirroring of the infinite and of those unconscious processes that generate dreaming in sleep (Lawrence, 2011).

As a form, the Social Dreaming Matrix (SDM) is composed of ten to sixty or more people, in a room where the chairs are arranged, if possible, according to configurations that repeat like fractals: a honeycomb, a snowflake—to evoke the fractal nature of dreams and foster connection among dreamers. This configuration allows one to be in visual contact with some dreamers, but not with all. It is almost an invitation to recognize that dreams emerge

in a protective penumbra and that senses other than sight are involved in the process. One experiences the creative possibility of being alone and in the presence of others.

Dreams are also systematically related, just as thought is. Every dream is a fractal of another, because dreaming reveals itself in repeating patterns: every dream is part of a sequence of dreams of the matrix... Working with the potential meanings of dreams, we attempt to find the pattern that connects them (Lawrence, 2005).

The matrix lasts an hour or an hour and a half and is convened by one or more hosts, depending on the number of participants: from twenty onward it is preferable to have two or more hosts present. The hosts help dreamers to stick to the task, model it, and protect the integrity of the process. In English there are two terms for hosting: "host" is the person who hosts, "guest" is the person who is hosted. In SD the Host is literally the one who hosts the dreams: he or she is not in the role of therapist nor of consultant.

"Matrix" is the term chosen by Paddy Daniels to define a setting that would not evoke the constellation of thoughts, associations, and dynamics linked to the word "group." Lawrence referred to the need to create a "Faraday cage" around the matrix to protect it from "group" interference.

Lawrence wrote about the necessity of creating a setting "where dreams converse with dreams" and favor the birth of new thoughts and new modes of thinking, going beyond both the subjective domain of individual therapy (what the dream means for me) and that of group therapy or Group Relations Conferences (what the dream means for the group).

This shift in perspective subsequently qualifies and defines all the parameters of practice: the definition of the task, the understanding of the process, the setting, management, and leadership.

Lawrence did not think of the idea of the "matrix" as a boundary, except as a space-time boundary. In other words, one cannot know in advance which particular social field—or fields—will shape the narrative of the dreams, whether personal, organizational, or societal. This can only be discovered through the work of sharing, associating, and connecting. It cannot be a given a priori.

The particular creativity of SD lies precisely within this openness; in the way different fields flow into one another, connecting what might appear to be seemingly separate areas of experience and modes of being. The challenge for the hosts of a matrix is to contain the work and at the same time maintain a mental space sufficiently open—like a flexible, wide-meshed net—to be able to welcome "true not-knowing," which is the source of every new and creative thought. Both dreamers and hosts must in fact maintain a sufficient dose of "negative capability," a concept Bion borrowed from Keats to allude to the capacity to remain in uncertainty, mystery, and doubt without turning to an impulsive search for facts, reason, and understanding (Bion, 1970).

Over time and with practice, both negative capability and the capacity to recognize that everything that happens in the matrix is like "a dream" develop and the matrix is perceived as a portal to the continuous flow of unconscious.

In the Matrix the heart of the process hinges on the distinction between dream and dreamer, as Lawrence describes in his last public seminar at the Tavistock Clinic: it is the dream and not the dreamer that is the subject of the Matrix. Shared dreams are seen as objects with a right to existence (rather than encrypted messages from a private psychic world). Participants are invited to look at each dream as if it had never existed before, recognizing its uniqueness. Like children who collect stones on the beach, each stone is seen and observed in its infinitesimal details; as Rilke wrote, “each stone/dream thus becomes at the center of its own universe.” In this way there is created that space between minds that Winnicott describes as the transitional area of play between mother and child that evolves into the space of culture (Winnicott, 1971).

What happens in the Matrix is not so much the search for the interpretation of the single dream; rather, through associations inspired by cultural and social objects—film, art, literature, memories—the narrative of the dream is expanded and amplified, avoiding boxing it prematurely into predefined explanations.

The practice seems apparently simple, and the necessity of learning the role of dreamer/member of the matrix is often underestimated. It is indeed like being invited to dream with the dreamer, letting associations emerge as if they themselves were part of some unconscious thread evoked by the dream. From this perspective it becomes possible to think, beyond the narrative of the dreams themselves, of the narrative of the matrix; that is, to think of the matrix as a collective dream in the process of being woven by the succession of dreams and associations.

THE DREAM REFLECTION DIALOGUE

The experience of the matrix and the nature of social dreaming (a process in becoming) have therefore indicated a subsequent methodological step: the creation of a new event following the SDM, namely the Dream Reflection Dialogue (DRD), where emerging themes, emotional tonality, and first attempts to formulate hypotheses about what has emerged in the matrix can be identified.

By creating a phase of reflection after the matrix, the distinction between the primary and secondary processes of thought is strengthened and preserved, thus confirming the nature of SD as a process of co-creation in which the role of the host becomes almost that of a “custodian” who maintains the integrity of the process and protects it.

TASK

The general purpose is to access unconscious social knowledge and to unveil its meanings. The narrative of dreams, both individual and social, leads to the interweaving of meaningful conversations, to the transformation of thought, and to access to creative thinking.

The matrix always begins with the host’s statement of the task: an invitation to share and to associate to the dreams that are offered in the matrix, in order to find links and create connections.

Over time the task has become more articulated: to transform dream-thought by associating as freely as possible to the dreams recounted in the matrix so as to find links, create connections, and perhaps release new thoughts. Where is the first dream?

The task is the necessary opening of the matrix, where each dreamer is not left in doubt and in the anxiety of not knowing what is being done, so that the field remains as open as possible to the true “not-knowing,” the one related to what will emerge from the dialogue among dreams and from their possible meanings.

Applications

Lawrence was a consultant, researcher, writer, and from the beginning it was important for him to verify not only that the initial hypotheses about SD were validated, but also that SD could navigate society and find its fields of application. Consulting in companies and schools, in health care and public administration, in research and intercultural contexts, in artistic fields and in those of creativity, in social inquiry are some of the areas where SD has found fertile ground for social application (Lawrence 1998, 2003, 2007, 2010; Long, Manley, 2019).

THE EVOLUTION OF SD

Containers and contents

By “Faraday cage” is meant any system consisting of a container made of electrically conductive material (or a hollow conductor) capable of insulating the internal environment from any electrostatic field present outside it, however intense it may be. The term “cage” is used to emphasize that the system can consist, in addition to a continuous metal sheet, also of a mesh or a series of bars suitably spaced. It should be noted, however, that the external body will not be as isolated as the internal one, since the cage, being traversed by an active electrostatic charge, once a high electrical potential is reached will seek to discharge the excessive potential onto nearby bodies externally (Wikipedia).

The 2022 Venice Art Biennale, evocatively titled “The Milk of Dreams” and populated two-thirds by female artists, inspired us to think of further meanings of the container-matrix and the Faraday cage.

A leaf, a gourd, a shell, a net, a bag, a shoulder bag, a satchel, a bottle, a pot, a box, a container is the theme of a vast exhibition hall that begins by taking up Ursula K. Le Guin’s essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction” (1986) and the thinking of the anthropologist Elisabeth Fisher, where the genesis of human culture is reformulated and the pervasive power of narrative is explained. It is hypothesized that the capacity for human invention was born from acts of gathering and care and that the first artifacts of our ancestors must have been containers to store food, berries, fruits, and grains... not only and not so much arrows and hunting spears. Perhaps both were necessary.

In the context of the matrix it is relevant to consider “the container as a metaphor for thinking through technology and narrative writing; to recognize that stories... are receptacles that open spaces for the expression of life in constant negotiation with the surrounding environment.” (The Milk of Dreams, catalog of the 2022 Venice Art Biennale).

Lawrence explained that he had to build a Faraday cage around SD to shield it from the influence of the “group” and group dynamics, and from the whole culture of the Group Relations Conference (GRC) in which he was immersed. The term “matrix” was one of the first steps in the direction of SD’s exploratory path. Lawrence saw the matrix as a “biosphere” (a network that connects all living beings) (Neri, 2004) and as a womb where something can grow.

In hypothesizing its existence in relation to SD, Lawrence was aware both of Foulkes’s concept of the Matrix and of Turquet’s reflections on the Large Group.

When Lawrence was working on the programs of the Group Relations Conferences at the Tavistock Institute, he nurtured a particular interest in the Large Study Group, especially for the potential that this type of group has to reflect on broader social phenomena. Lawrence writes that he was influenced by Turquet and his ideas on the Large Group, in particular by the concept of the Matrix as a place from which something can grow, and how this is conceptually distinct from the group: “The matrix has within it the potential creativity of a large group, and indeed the qualities of the matrix have yet to be explored at the experiential level” (Turquet, 1975, 96). In this sense, “matrix” seems a more inclusive concept because it also contains the configuration of the group (Baglioni and Fubini, 2017).

It is very interesting to reread the literature on SD, which now spans more than forty years; one realizes how choosing the matrix as the “place” of SD was a brilliant intuition, the first step in a long process to bring out its characteristics and to be able to appreciate how much falls within the ambit of the concept of group and how much within that of matrix. And how much, moreover—as Turquet affirms—the two are never far from each other.

The transformation of thought, or the experience in becoming, is visible in the terminology adopted to explore social dreaming. Until the early 2000s the word “group” of social dreaming recurs, sometimes in Lawrence, more often among colleagues who worked with him and contributed to the publication of books on SD: technique of group work, social dreaming group, the group unconscious, etc. Likewise the term—and role—“consultant,” “facilitator,” arrives in the first decade of the 2000s at the definition of the role of “host.” In this way language too can support the process that allows the matrix and its concept to become recognizable and definable, in a process that recalls sculpture: one begins with a solid block and then chisels away what is not needed until the figure can emerge from the material.

It took forty years of practice and experience for the meaning of “matrix” to reveal its shape, and in all likelihood it will continue to change and reveal more facets in the years to come.

Binocular vision

Lawrence turned to Bionian theories of binocular vision as support for explaining differences and the coexistence of many pairings associated with SD:

- matrix and group
- unconscious and conscious (and the creativity that emerges from their collaboration)

- individual dream (Oedipus and the field of psychoanalysis) and social dream (Sphinx and the field of knowledge and scientific knowing).

SD carries forward the Bionian intuition that a fundamental preoccupation of the group also concerns its own knowing and the modes that produce and manage the emergence of new knowledge.

“As an analyst I am much struck by the fact that the psychoanalytic cure of the individual and the group analysis described in this study deal with different aspects of the same phenomenon. The combination of the two methods offers the psychoanalyst the possibility of a rudimentary binocular vision. The observations can be grouped into two categories whose affinity is demonstrated by phenomena which, if examined with one method, are centered on the Oedipal situation in relation to the pairing group and, if examined with the other, are centered on the Sphinx and connected with problems of knowledge and the scientific method” (Bion, 1961, 16).

SD takes on the perspective of the Sphinx and focuses on the nature of the dreaming/thinking produced by human contexts. Dreaming represents the human mode of accessing the unconscious, with its unique logic [...] By making the patterns of dreaming part of our waking life we improve the bandwidth of consciousness (Lawrence, 2005, 29).

The thought of the matrix reflects systemic thinking; it tends toward connection and inclusion, not toward selection; there is no dream better than another, the many dreams are heard as a weaving of many threads that give expression to the unconscious and to the direction of the emerging discourse.

We think that today what happens in the matrix can be perceived, much more easily than it could at the beginning of SD, as a dream composed in its details by all the dreams told and by the free associations.

We conclude this introduction by proposing two methodological aspects that have emerged from years of SD practice that confirm its systemic vision and that will guide the subsequent reflections on SD online.

1) The possibility of recognizing that the work of the matrix, and everything that happens within it, is like the unravelling of an ongoing dream, in which there are no judgments, nor “undocumented immigrants” who are not well received: it is the capacity both of hosts and of dreamers to be able to read the whole as a oneiric narrative, unique and rich in a multiverse of possible meanings.

2) The dream, the associations, and the amplification contribute to the creation of that narrative which allows the transformation of dream thought into messages usable by the community of dreamers. A narrative that belongs to human nature and to the interdisciplinarity of philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and psychoanalytic studies—fields of research in Lawrence’s professional life and of colleagues who continued to deepen the practice and methodology of SD with him and after him.

SOCIAL DREAMING ONLINE

Lawrence devotes specific space to quantum reality and the digital age (Lawrence, 2005), asserting that the transformation of thought in Social Dreaming (SD) is deeply influenced and supported by the worldview offered by these two disciplines. He stops, however, at a theoretical-philosophical level, not bringing direct online work experiences that might support thoughts of its possible applications.

In the first book edited by Lawrence (1998) and dedicated to SD, Maltz and Walker write a chapter on an organizational consultation set up on traditional, well-tested criteria and offered by Maltz in the role of consultant, accompanied by the innovative presence of an online SD matrix of which Walker was the consultant (at the beginning of the 1990s the term “host” had not yet been discovered). It is an interesting experience in which dreams are an integral part of the consultation, but the aspect of online work is not explored.

The first attempts at online work appeared at the end of the last century, when the methodology of SD began to spread in Italy, received with a mixture of curiosity and desire to experiment with different ways of connecting and of opening up to the digital revolution. In particular, after an in-person experience, there was the possibility of continuing to share dreams and to maintain the deep and fruitful connection experienced face-to-face.

We think of the seminars at Vieussan, where Lawrence invited colleagues from many parts of the world to explore and develop the methodological aspects of SD.

It was a most interesting crucible of people who would meet for a few days, sharing the same sky and earth, excellent food and wine, and above all sleep, in a small village in the Languedoc, where the only sound was that of the river flowing at the bottom of the valley. A perfect situation in which to experiment with the creativity of the Matrix and develop new methodological frontiers. The subsequent sharing of dreams online via e-mail was a poor substitute for the intensity of the in-person seminars, for that skillful combination of unconscious, creative thinking and environmental/aesthetic conditions that fostered access to it. Subsequently, dreams would arrive in the dreamers' inboxes for a limited period of time; free associations and thoughts were exchanged and then the communication stopped spontaneously, as if there were neither the desire nor the motivation to continue. Online was perhaps only a “second best.”

It was also tried during the first two Italian editions of the training in 2006 and 2009 to keep participants connected, so that they would continue to exchange dreams and thoughts between one module and another.

Here, too, it proved superfluous. The connections formed during the residential meetings were more than sufficient to carry the dreamers through to the next module.

The “virtual” connection in these cases did not so much follow the need to explore the continuity of the matrix nor the discovery of the online environment, but seemed rather the “group” response to the difficulty of completing an experience and accepting its end.

Online work, however, has many years of experience behind it, and with it the development of thoughts on how to systematize it (Weinberg and Rolnick, 2020).

Ours in the field of SD is very limited, and we think it is still too early to be able to give consolidated answers to the many methodological questions—and not only those—posed by the spread of online work. It is, however, surely necessary to question and reflect on what changes, in a very rapid time, have influenced the methodology and our lives. In particular, in 2020 and during the pandemic, the shift to online work had the scope of a rushing river with a current against which one could not offer resistance.

Our first real SD online experiences began in the spring of 2020, when the alternative was between stopping the work or surviving by moving to online work.

We report, as objects of research and reflection, some initial hypotheses drawn from examples of SD online experiences, contemporaneous with the earliest times of the pandemic and with an unexpected explosion of interest in dreams, as if these could offer orientation in the confusion and loss of control of the pandemic.

We will observe:

- the ongoing matrix;
- the global matrix;
- SD training;
- an organizational consultation within the Health Service.

Working hypotheses: what changes in online work?

Together with many host colleagues who shared with us the same experience, it became clear that the unexpected circumstances could become an engine of learning and invite immersion in an action-research in the field of online work.

The experiences listed in the previous section led to a deeper appreciation of the difference between dreams and dreamers, between the matrix and those who give voice to dreams, as well as the potential of digital technology.

Let us begin with the dreamers and the hosts and finally arrive at the matrix and our hypotheses.

The setting of the matrix maintained the same temporal boundaries and the task, but certainly much else changed: the in-person space, predominantly acoustic and solicited by the fractal arrangement of chairs, the online becomes an above all visual and perhaps intrusive space; a presence of self and of others that is “lighter,” an “ego” left at the door, in order to allow oneself to give voice to a broader and more unconscious reality without interfering too much with judgments and opinions, is transformed into little rectangles contained within the enclosed space of the computer screen. All faces well visible, close—and not only faces, because often in the background one can glimpse the rooms of each of the dreamers; non-neutral glimpses of private life appear in the virtual environment.

There was much experimentation to address this new spatial setting: dimming the screen during the matrix, or removing it together with the audio and turning it back on when one had to speak—with the rather alienating result of often finding oneself in front of a screen made only of black boxes, sometimes mute; then it was discovered how to put at least a background photo on one’s screen. There was also an attempt to soften the visual focus by

individually choosing whether or not to turn off the video, or to leave it on but with one's gaze relaxed toward the horizon, in any case not constantly focused on the screen. Background noises, each one's own, led to the invitation to mute the audio, sometimes turned off ex officio by the host, an action that often elicited responses linked to the themes of authority and group dynamics, inevitably introducing into the matrix themes that in physical presence would have remained in the background.

Paradoxically, the virtual environment and distance introduced into the matrix the clandestine elements of the "real" and a greater integration between social elements and personal ones.

With online work there opened the extraordinary opportunity to attend the same event from different geographies, to meet people, colleagues, and dreamers who could never have been reached except virtually. The restrictions and imposed boundaries spurred the search for the "without boundary" and the excitement of being present without being physically so.

Again paradoxically, real isolation could be transformed into a kind of virtual omnipotence/omnipresence. Almost a response to the pandemic that does not stop at territorial borders: just as those undergoing confinement imposed by the pandemic find themselves enjoying the possibilities of the internet network that travels beyond territorial borders. Curiously—and perhaps not by chance—there are viruses like COVID-19 that spread among humans and viruses that spread among computers: all travel on the network across the globe...

In a dynamic poised between omnipotence and impotence, dreamers and hosts asked themselves about the equation between what was being lost and what was being gained: the nostalgia for the denied body, the lack of physicality and the impossibility of sharing the same space, of being able to read the non-verbal language of bodies, to feel the warmth of emotions and the connectedness with other dreamers. The mourning of this loss seems in part compensated by the pleasure of being able to connect with the wide world while remaining seated in front of one's own work table.

We also observed how the online environment led to a progressive reduction in the rituality of the matrix (in the arrangement of chairs, which obviously are not there; in the enunciation of the task, which became more discursive: it is rare to hear "the primary task of this matrix..."; in the boundaries that exist but have become more porous), toward a more flexible way of working where the essential remains and the rites give way to a necessary evolution.

The online or remote environment has not changed the essence of the matrix and its work with dreams.

- Our first hypothesis is that online is an environment just as those geographies linked to physical territoriality are. In other words, an online matrix is a portal of access to unconscious thought just as face-to-face matrices are. A matrix in Rome, New York, Delhi, or online does not change its nature: the matrix relates to the context, of which the online is one. Dreams, associations, and meanings emerge in the same modality insofar as one comes into contact with the constant flow of the unconscious, present in the individual as in the

social, as in the movement of the energy that animates the world we live in. The dreamer may be more or less at ease online; he or she may experience the limits and opportunities; the content of dreams will relate to the context and the process of the matrix will remain unchanged.

- Our second hypothesis is that precisely the characteristics of the online environment have made the characteristics of the matrix more visible. The direct experience of the unconscious—where there are no boundaries of time or space—favors the perception of the fluid and constant presence of the unconscious in transformation, close to the metamorphoses of energy and matter where nothing is created and nothing is destroyed, everything is transformed, noted in antiquity, asserted as laws by the chemist and physicist Lavoisier in the eighteenth century, the philosophical premises for the development of twentieth-century quantum mechanics and above all the patrimony of cultures and spiritual traditions.
- The third hypothesis concerns the setting and the role of the host: as in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, circumstances sometimes challenge the classic rules that define the setting; ultimately the containing and caretaking of the setting rely on the inner capacity for steadiness and mental openness of the analyst.

Ferro arrives at similar conclusions in *Psychoanalysis and Covidian Life* (2021), reflecting on the online setting and psychoanalysis.

Our experience in these three years is that the same happens in the role of the host: one welcomes the emergent, whatever it may be, as an expression of the present of the matrix; one adheres to the task and to the perception of the sequence of dreams and associations as an expression of the narrative of the matrix; the more this is the mental stance, the more the host is able to adapt varying, sometimes adverse circumstances to the task of the matrix.

- The fourth hypothesis is that access to global and systemic thinking has become more present. The experiences of the vast digital space, of the potential to move around the globe without boundaries, access the perpetual motion and continuity of the unconscious that manifest themselves in the matrix.

THE ONGOING MATRIX: DOES ONLINE DREAM THE ONLINE?

The ongoing matrix is a most interesting experience, begun at the end of the 1990s in different places and cultures. The definition “Ongoing” was another brilliant intuition in the evolution of SD: over the years it grasped and substantiated the continuous nature of the process of the matrix/unconscious. Its birth is tied to a physical place, a city, a particular context where a community of dreamers usually meets once a month to share a social dreaming matrix and the related DRD. The dreamers/citizens explore how dreams reveal the shared context (social, cultural, political, human). Participation is diverse in professional origin and age; there is no requirement to be present at all the meetings and it is usually free. The ongoing nature and open membership facilitate the perception of the flow of the continuous, evolving unconscious process narrated by dreams.

From 2002 Lilia Baglioni and I conducted an ongoing matrix in Rome, once a month for twelve consecutive years. The process requires time—but over time one can intuit, through

dreams and associations, the echo of the matrix reflecting on its own process. On that particular plane meaningful conversations take place; interesting thoughts are configured on existential questions, sustained by the connectedness of the dreamers and by the evolution of their capacity for thought. When the matrix speaks of itself it is possible to grasp traces of the evolutionary process of humanity at the level of thought. The matrix reveals itself as a living process that creates its own language and at the same time accesses a pre-existing language (Fitzpatrick, 2003) (Baglioni & Fubini, 2017).

An ongoing matrix with an average attendance of between 10 and 20 dreamers had been held in Turin for three years in a community meeting space. Many social themes characterized it; dreams linked to immigration prevailed—between welcome and rejection—environmental threats, and other themes tied to the contemporary and to the territory.

The advent of the pandemic forced a choice between an indefinite suspension—and perhaps an end to the ongoing matrix—or attempting the transition to online work. We chose the latter and the invitation sent out every month was sent in March together with a summary of the themes that had emerged in the matrices of previous months through the dreams where, in hindsight, one could glimpse the coming threat to which it had not been possible to give a name.

“In the January matrix, when Covid was an exotic, Eastern matter, over there in distant China, the theme of fear and danger in which control is lost surfaced strongly, in different declensions:

- a) the danger linked to poor visibility or to what is invisible but strikes us (driving in conditions of low visibility; progressive loss of sight);
- b) the fear of imminent dangers that one narrowly avoids (the venom of an insect that seems to have undergone a genetic mutation; slippery ground in the mountains; a car that skids on a bend);
- c) surreal situations that befall the earth (an articulated lorry that plunges onto the beach; a star that explodes and one cannot protect oneself);
- c) the necessity of containment and protection from danger, the demand that in conditions of risk someone would responsibly take care of us (if only there had been a guard rail);
- d) what has always worked seems no longer to work (a car missing parts or its brakes);
- e) the possibility of re-composing and completing past situations left open (the funeral of the unborn child).

In the February matrix, when Covid officially landed in Italy but there was still a certain disbelief about its scope, the matrix brought out:

- a) the anxiety of being unprepared (exams already taken and to be taken again, even the fifth-grade one...);
- b) being faced with an event of such scope as to change one’s perception of the world as happened on 11 September 2001 (on a skyscraper people forced to jump into the void...);
- c) the presence of an invisible enemy, at the doorstep, an attack on the West and its securities (being disoriented, not recognizing the territory; tsunami; who can stay inside and who must stay outside and even the injection/vaccine in the middle of the forehead);

d) in the presence of a threat to one's socio-cultural identity (we are the ones now on the dinghy... sent back at the border!).

The dreams anticipated what has now become part of the current social discourse."

With much trepidation, but also with courage, the four hosts and the dreamers met on Zoom to give life to their first online matrix, discovering how many more dreamers could be reached, coming from different geographical places and who would never have had the opportunity to participate in person. The number of those present in those first months, in fact, tripled: 40–50 dreamers from various places in Italy and abroad met, eager to be able to access a place of thought sufficiently open and containing.

To date, three years later, the ongoing matrix continues to meet once a month online.

Dreaming is an ongoing activity, and the matrix is its portal.

THE GLOBAL MATRIX

"Dreams of the global pandemic and visions of the future. An international social dreaming matrix" was launched in April 2020, with the task "of exploring and reflecting on the contexts, emergencies, and circumstances of the present moment, where a social trauma of global scope is underway." It was sponsored by five different organizations: SDiN, Nioda (Australia), Il Nodo (Italy), Ofek (Israel), TIHR (United Kingdom) and facilitated by nine hosts—Australian, Indian, English, Israeli, Italian, and American.

The three matrices, from early May to early June, covered the period of transition from lockdown to the partial lifting of restrictions in many of the affected countries.

Five continents, twenty-three countries. We received requests from more than 150 people and the limit set was 90 because the platform used could not accommodate more.

There were many dreams and many associations, as if they were just waiting to find a space to jump "on board." In a certain sense it was as if the first characteristic feature of this event was the reproduction of a selective process, both among the dreamers and among the dreams. Not everyone could be inside... a metaphor for the selection operated by the virus, by doctors who had to make the terrible choice of who would receive care; the memory of those who, before the pandemic, had faced the journey on the dinghy to Europe and of those who did not manage to arrive alive. Of how many humans can populate an overcrowded earth... A social trauma represented from the first moves that structured the matrix, together with the presence of that vital energy that moves when one is in danger—as during the pandemic—when the threat to the health and life of people, animals, and environment was at its maximum and propagated fear, isolation, and the fragmentation of the social networks that keep people connected to the roots of their humanity.

The themes that emerged were many, very many; many fractals of a central theme, mainly linked to trauma.

The global matrix was like a snapshot of social trauma prolonged over the span of 45 days. There were elements of transformation of thought, but the scope of the trauma, entirely in progress, we believe did not allow more than a beginning of transformative work.

The elaboration following the matrices was left to the individual dreamers and to their communities.

Dreamers and hosts were immersed in the trauma and in a kind of myopia of denial of the emotional scope of what was happening, and the hosts in particular were unable to think beyond the snapshot.

One certainly entered the experience of dreaming as a continuous and shared human activity, and it was possible to realize how the associations to dream images revealed the different cultural, religious, and spiritual backgrounds of the dreamers. Myths peculiar to the land from which one comes are different and differently articulated.

The first dream of the first matrix brought the image of a newborn in a basket among the plants of a city park. The associations of European origin spoke of Moses, of the ten plagues of Egypt, and of an incipient theme of divine punishment through the pandemic. On the other side of the globe, the newborn was associated with rebirth and the hope of radical changes in care for the environment that would follow these terrible circumstances.

The fearsome virus that invades the person with all its colored spikes was dreamed in Asia as a being that awakens in a human and is frightened to discover in what alien landscape it finds itself. Images that evoked the Holocaust in some dreamers elicited completely different associations among those who had experienced that piece of history only at a distance—both geographical and generational.

In social dreaming the matrix reveals the existence of the “multiverse,” a world where the different facets of the emergent find the space of coexistence, a systemic, non-hierarchical approach very different from that of the universe, the space where the one becomes a first and prevails over the others.

SOCIAL DREAMING TRAINING: WORKING WITH CIRCUMSTANCES

SD training is a one-year professional course divided into modules with the aim of preparing participants to become hosts. Work is done on the methodological aspects, on the applications, and on research in SD. The dreamers come from both different professional backgrounds and different nations.

In 2019 the second edition of the training had begun; with the advent of the pandemic in 2020 the teaching staff had to decide whether to suspend the training before the start of the second module. It was a very motivated group, and the staff realized that they had to adapt to the circumstances and nourish hope at a time when almost all in-person activities and travel had been cancelled. In response to the emergency the staff decided to move to online work and offer a “bridge” program to carry forward toward a second in-person module after the summer, when it was hypothesized that the worst of the pandemic would be over. Meetings with matrices, dialogues, and supervisions were organized, which would continue between one module and another until the end of the training.

This choice also proved to be a good intuition, because it offered an effective container at a time when so much seemed to be going adrift. In September, in fact, the pandemic was still

very present, and both the second module and the rest of the training were necessarily transferred online.

The content of the modules and the program remained the same. The matrices recorded the concerns and the chronicle of what was happening in the contexts of origin, and in particular in relation to the pandemic, responses to lockdown, and the climate crisis—not too different from what could have emerged had the work been in person.

What was really characteristic of the period and of the online transition was the gratitude of both participants and staff for the continuity and containment of the work despite adverse circumstances. Appreciation was shared for the stability of the training, of the regular meetings, and of the learning. There was a clear perception of having survived the danger of a closure/death, and that consequent to the fragmentation of the social trauma surrounding us: many spoke of an anchor in the midst of the storm. A safe container was offered in which the limitations imposed by the pandemic created transformative circumstances. We now hypothesize that online work led to a relaxation of boundaries and a softening of the pre-established rituality of the matrix, and that such an opening, rather than being experienced as an attack on the setting, became a channel for creative thought.

It was possible to live as direct experience the understanding of the task of the matrix “to transform dream thought” and “to release new thoughts.”

That is, the transformative and creative elements of the matrix became characteristic of that particular community of dreamers who were enjoying the online experience.

Indeed, the dreamers—perhaps also aided by a temporal dimension and mental spaces very different from the usual—began to bring their own artistic expressions ever more frequently, amplifying the emerging themes of the matrices through poems, ceramics, paintings, weavings, musical pieces, and improvisations. Articles were written and published.

Upon completion of the training, that community of dreamers decided to call itself “the never ending story” and to meet once a month to share a matrix and the subsequent dialogue; two hosts in turn facilitate the meeting and share a written elaboration on the narrative of the matrix. The matrix is still ongoing.

A CONSULTATION IN THE HEALTH SERVICE

We now wish to bring an example of how the online work of an organizational consultation had both facilitating aspects and aspects that hindered the work—perhaps not only linked to the online environment but above all to a lack of institutional containment and continuity. Not even the considerable potential of SD to develop connections succeeded in modifying the trend toward disintegration in the system in which the consultation had been commissioned.

The request was to help a bioethics committee weave relationships in the territory with institutions and professions outside the hospital; moreover, to foster a fruitful dialogue on bioethical issues within the committee and to prepare a future generational transition.

A methodological combination was used that associated both SD and group events and supervision on clinical cases (Baglioni and Fubini, 2017).

The first meeting—residential, of two half-days—was with a very heterogeneous group in terms of professional background, very active, and eager to confront the key themes of bioethics, such as the boundary between life and death, represented in the first dreams as an empty abyss into which one can fall and die, and later as an emptiness full of potential still to be explored. Questions were raised about the dilemmas of clinical practice, about the difficult choices between the demands of a “step-motherly” institution and the ethical sense of one’s work. The participants’ evaluation of that first meeting was positive, and it ended with the pleasure of knowing that there would be a next appointment in six months.

The committee received the report of the meeting and then everything stopped, overwhelmed by the Covid emergency in the hospital. It took a year before the continuation of the consultation could be considered and to do it online while at the same time a restructuring of the hospital organization was underway that in fact did not give the bioethics committee the necessary guarantees of continuity.

We will not enter here into the institutional dynamics of this consultation, which certainly had a great weight on its outcome, but will focus on the transition to online work.

A year after the first meeting, another could be organized—necessarily online. A team appeared, composed mostly of people new to the committee; the heterogeneity of the first meeting had almost disappeared, in favor of predominantly hospital staff and deeply traumatized. The emptiness full of potential of the first meeting became an emptiness of death, unbridgeable; time, become an enemy, was only the index of too long an interval between meetings, which had not managed to hold together vital connecting threads. It was very difficult to relate in a meaningful way to the “rectangles” on the screen, especially those of the new participants. It was a painful experience, as if one perceived an extreme need for care, for time to repair the connections torn by the trauma of Covid in the hospital, by the emotional fallout on professionals, and by institutional earthquakes. But neither time nor resources were available. And yet, despite the adverse circumstances, we observed how even here the condition of danger—perhaps the instinct for survival—released creative movements and the capacity to find strategies that responded to the truly difficult conditions of a Covid hospital and to the need to restore possible in-person meetings (relatives meet their loved ones on balconies; the room of farewells ...). There were two more in-person meetings for the consultation, and a year and a half later the work of the committee, not contained by adequate institutional support, was declared to have come to its end. The theme of the debate on end-of-life was in fact enacted in the consultation and there was not much more to be done. The plug was pulled.

Beyond institutional disinterest, we hypothesize that what weighed on the committee was the temporal coincidence with Covid, the lack of resources—not only economic but also of time and energy—to organize meetings. Online work was not a determining factor, but it did not facilitate the precarious situation in which the committee found itself. The second wave of Covid had arrived and it was assessed that it was more important to continue the

work than to wait to meet again in person. From a resumption point of view, it was a choice for life: better to meet online than to remain in an isolation that only accentuated the deprivations of the moment. The screen, with its aseptic distance through which we worked, however, contributed to the feeling of deprivation and resonated with the experience of months of Covid in the hospital. Health workers dressed like deep-sea divers, patients who could not be touched, relatives who could not approach their loved ones, so many deaths in solitude—all of this must have recalled a true hunger for in-person contact and the hope—unfortunately unfounded—of leaving the pandemic behind. It was both a painful and a creative experience for the solutions adopted after the meeting.

Our hypothesis is that in situations of great lack, of deep and ongoing traumas like those marked by the pandemic, the needs of individuals and of the group to receive adequate attention and containment become predominant. The matrix offered a space in which to narrate the trauma experienced, as did the clinical supervisions and the work of small groups; but the uncertainty about the possibility of continuing to exist as an institutionally recognized entity and the reliance on technology for elaboration was, for this committee, an emotionally very hard experience to manage. One group member expressed very powerfully all the pain and anger against the iPad, the computer, the mobile phones used in the hospital so that family members could bid a last farewell at a distance to their dying loved one. The online consultation reflected this experience as well.

CONCLUSIONS

Life is rich in paradoxes, and social dreaming does not escape this fate.

In SD the focus is on the dream and not on the dreamer, and yet participating in matrices can have a profound impact on one's way of approaching life.

The focus is on the work of the matrix, not on group dynamics, and yet a consultation that uses the methodology of SD often brings important changes to the culture of the group, to its vision, and to group dynamics themselves.

Paradoxical during the pandemic was how a death-dealing event such as the spread of the virus on a nearly global level opened up new possibilities, different modes of life and work, unexpected connections, considerations about the environment in which one lives.

Eros and Thanatos were both activated, in the search to find life in the midst of death. Something was lost; something else was gained.

Technology was an essential instrument for this to happen, and its characteristics—above all those of “navigating” beyond space/time restrictions—informed the changes of these years.

Specifically in SD we hypothesize that the limits imposed by the pandemic and by online work created a fertile ground of transformative possibilities. Boundaries, setting, rituality relaxed so as to allow unexpected creativities to emerge and a deeper clarity about what are the truly essential features of social dreaming:

- the ongoing nature of dreaming and the matrix as its portal of access;

- the narrative of the matrix and not of single dreams;
- the capacity within the matrix to read as a dream everything that happens inside it.

The paradox of creativity is that it emerges from the absence of what is familiar.

What initially appeared as limitations later proved to be great opportunities for enrichment.

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