

The social in social dreaming

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A community, a group or an organization, or even a society may call forward a dream – unconsciously “asking” a dreamer to dream on its behalf (see Long 2019). Social Dreaming brings forward the dreams so unconsciously requested.

1. What I am calling the “raw dream” begins the process. Different theorists give different explanations of this raw dream which may be a bodily sensation, an emotion (Hartmann 2008; Bion 1962b), a repressed or simple wish (Freud 1900); even a desire for solutions to problems (Barrett 1993) or for trauma relief (Langs 1988; Revonuscu 2000). This is the initial “dream”; not yet a thought, nor even necessarily an image, but perhaps a kind of natural sign stimulating what Bion calls the alpha process of dreaming. Freud named this the latent content of the dream. In the case of the raw dream, the sign-vehicle is the initial unconscious form of the dream, unknowable to the conscious mind; the object would be the sensation, emotion or desire; the interpretant would be the alpha process of transformation.

2. The formation of the dream “as experienced” is complex. Freud claims that the day residue – thoughts, images or emotions left over from the day, join with the wish and thus create dream images. The dream as experienced is what he terms the manifest content. For Bion, dream thoughts are communicated as images which are the manifest content of the dream. In waking life, pre-conceptions waiting, as it were, to become thoughts, concretised in reality, are based upon such dream thoughts. The sign-vehicle is the dream as experienced; the object would be the sensation, emotion or desire; the interpretant would be the dream narrative or the particular pattern of images produced, including words, numbers, sensations or even music. This interpretant is influenced by the personal history of the dreamer, the social context and the thoughts, symbols and narratives available from the culture of the dreamer.

3. The dream “as reported” is another part of the continuum of dream development. For Freud, the work of secondary revision changes the dream from the moment we start to recall it. In the report that the dreamer gives him

or herself, thoughts and images unacceptable to consciousness are repressed or defensively transformed. Due to the social unconscious described by Fromm (1962) and Hopper (2003) some thoughts that are unacceptable to the group may be repressed. In the report given to others, some elements of the dream may be consciously discarded or changed for a variety of reasons including shame, guilt, social sensitivities and political reasons. But the dream as reported is now in a consciously accessible form. The dream as reported becomes the sign-vehicle, the object is the expressed dream meaning and the interpretant is the network of possible meanings available and accessible to the dreamer/reporter for whom the dream is a sign. It should be noted that the social unconscious as described by Fromm and Hopper is different from the associative unconscious insofar as it, the former, is the unconscious formulation and operation of social rules and mores that become instituted and hence affect behaviour through constraint and motivation; while the latter is a broad semiotic field shared by an interacting community. The social unconscious may restrict or allow associations; the associative unconscious exists as a potential and actual semiotic field.

4. The dream, extended in the social context, brings yet further transformations. The dream moves from being an experience of the dreamer to becoming a representation or sign of something for the community in the social dreaming matrix, or whatever form a community might have for sharing dreams, and from them to the broader community. Social dreaming is a method whereby dreams can be presented to a matrix of people from an interacting community. In the matrix, dreams are reported and matrix members associate to the dreams and make connections between them. The matrix is basically a container or place for things to grow. In the social dreaming matrix, social meaning is grown. The dreams as they evolve are the sign-vehicles, the object is the unconscious of the dreaming community and the interpretant is the matrix. This is despite there being many people in the matrix – perhaps each with their own “interpretations” or ways of making meaning - in social dreaming it is the matrix as a whole with its thinking and emergent meaning that is the Peircean interpretant (Peirce 1984). Essentially, the matrix is formed from the associative unconscious of the represented community. This associative unconscious, as previously described, is a network of all signs and symbols available to that community. In the case of the social dreaming matrix, these signs and symbols are drawn upon – through the process of free association – in order to find new connections and associations;

to extend the dreams, to discover new meanings and to use these new meanings for better understanding society. In the matrix, the restrictions on free association are the usual ones: repression; suppression; thoughts disallowed through social pressure and influence, limitations due to technologies as yet uncreated and biological limitations. The dream thus extended in the matrix becomes a sign from and for the community. Out of this new meaning emerges.

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