

Organisational Dreaming¹

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Wilfred Bion developed the concept of “*container and contained*” as a way of exploring phenomena in psychoanalysis, group and social behaviour². The relationship between container and contained is dynamic and to do with growth – the interaction between container and contained may transform both. *Dreamer* and *dream* may be thought of in this way.

There are different kinds of dreamers and different kinds of dreams. There is individual dreaming such as in psychotherapy, and social dreaming when people get together to share dreams and associations³. Organisational dreaming is a part of social dreaming and occurs when members of an organisation meet together to share dreams, associations, and connections within the recognized container of a project and the organisation’s primary task. There are also the dreams of (separated) individuals about the society they live in. Perhaps the most famous example are the dreams collected by Charlotte Beradt in Nazi Germany in the 1930’s⁴. Over the last year the Centre for Socio-Analysis has been exploring “Transitional Dreaming”⁵ - the hypothesis being that sharing dreams during a transition will increase individual and group capacities for managing the transition effectively and creatively.

Organisational Dreaming was used for the first time in Australia as part of a consultancy project with the Wasley Institute Management Group in April 1994. We didn’t have the words “Organisational Dreaming” at the time but used instead the generic description of “Social Dreaming” to refer to what we were doing. The Task of the consultancy was “To develop the commitment necessary to form a Trust to run the organisation”. During the first day of the consultancy it was evident that there was some ambivalence among the six members of the Management Group about this, and the form it would take. At the end of the day I suggested that we start with a Social Dreaming

¹ I would like to thank Joshua Bain for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² See Bion W.R., **Attention and Interpretation**, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970.

³ See, for example, W. Gordon Lawrence. Ed. **Experiences in Social Dreaming** Karnac. London. 2003.

⁴ Beradt C. **The Third Reich of Dreams**, 1966. Quadrangle Books. Chicago

⁵ See the Centre’s Website for a description of this work www.acsa.net.au .

Matrix⁶ the next day, and I gave an explanation of what it would mean. There was agreement and some enthusiasm.

The dreams that were offered by members of the group on the second day of the consultancy, together with associations, illuminated a shared unexpressed known that the members of the group all felt “illegitimate” in various ways. This “illegitimacy” was precluding them from “owning” what they were doing and acting with authority in their roles in the Management Group. The dreams, associations, and connections helped bring into shared consciousness the dilemmas and opportunities that were present, and provided members of the group with the opportunity of developing another space for themselves. Later in the day the Management Group met formally to propose, sanction, and implement the decision to form a Trust.

In organisational dreaming the dreaming is generated, and held, within three containers:

1. **The Task of the Matrix:** “To offer dreams, make associations to the dreams, and to make connections between the dreams”.
2. **The Task of the Project:** In the case of this consultancy “To develop the commitment necessary to form a Trust to run the organisation”.
3. **The Task of the Organisation.** In this case, the Wasley Institute primary task.

The task of Consultant is to draw attention to possible connections between dreams, links to the task of the consultancy, and offer hypotheses about dynamics.

In a consultancy project using organisational dreaming there will always be these three aspects:

1. Organisational Dreaming Matrix Task
2. Project Task
3. Organisation’s Primary Task.

Within organisational dreaming these three containers help shape the dreams that are offered, and provide a vertex for the associations that are made to the dreams, and for exploring the meanings of the dream. The focus in organisational dreaming is not on the meaning of the dream for the individual dreamer (that is left to the dreamer), but on what may illuminate organisational realities. An organisational dreaming matrix uncovers often

⁶ The word “Matrix” is used to describe the formation of dreamers, with the connotation of “out of which something grows”, Latin for “uterus”.

unexpressed organisational realities, and through the work and imaginative play with others developing and making shared organisational meaning.

Over the last 100 years since Freud we have tended to lose sight of dreams bearing the truth about group, organisational, societal, and other realities. Dreams have largely come to be regarded in Western societies as the property of an individual, and interpretations which may be correct for an individual in psychotherapy, are wrongly projected into other arenas, and perhaps more seriously other arenas are treated as though they are simply extensions of the dynamics of the two person psychotherapeutic relationship.

The hypothesis I wish to put forward is that dreams, and their content, are a function of the “container” in which they are dreamt. The nature of this container, and its task, will stimulate dreams, associations, and connections which are relevant to the functioning and growth of the container. Attachment to the “individual” as the locus for meaning and as **the** container prevents other loci, and systems, e.g. organisation, becoming the loci for meaning.

An implication is that there is a “meaning vertex” for dreams which is to be found in the container for the dreaming. The Matrix catches, like a dream catcher, the dreams that are relevant for that Matrix, but in addition the Matrix generates dreams that are relevant for the container the Matrix is expressing, in this case, the organisation. In a sense the Matrix is a place for something to be given birth.

Freud observed “The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind”⁷. I suggest that “the mind” may be the expression of an individual, an organisation, a society and so on. So, the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind of the individual, the mind of the organisation, the mind of society⁸ etc, *depending on the container for the dreaming*.

Organisations do dream. Or at least the people in them do. Mostly this goes unrecognized. Or if it is recognized the dream may be pooh poohed, “it’s just a dream”, or it may be interpreted as to do with the personality / pathology of the dreamer. Either way distances the dream from being taken seriously as a

⁷ Freud S. **The Interpretation of Dreams**, 1900. Standard Edition, 5, Ed. James Strachey. Hogarth Press, London, p.608.

⁸ For a very powerful description of the dreams of a society, Nazi Germany in the 1930’s, see Beradt C., *The Third Reich of Dreams*, 1966, Chicago: Quadrangle Books.

reflection of organisational life. As such we struggle on in the organisations we are part of through constantly cutting off the connections to the powerful underground organisational life that is there. Why? My experience of Organisational Dreaming indicates that the dreaming, and the associations and connections, frequently illuminates what I have earlier referred to as the “unexpressed known”. When the “unexpressed known” is made manifest in an Organisational Dreaming Matrix this can lead to a new understanding of differences within an organisation, a healing of splits for the members of the Matrix, and the possibility of a new culture emerging. Members of the organisation who have not been part of the Dreaming Matrix and represent the mainstream culture based on just these splits are threatened by the Organisational Dreaming and reject it. My hypothesis is that Organisational Dreaming is intuited within organisations to offer a hope of recombining, and becoming whole in a new way i.e. conscious and unconscious becoming linked in a healthy way. This may arouse anxiety that it will be too painful, and that it is better to continue on the path of creating “waking fictions” in the place of organisational dreams.

However now that Organisational Dreaming has been uncovered; the power, creativity and connectedness discovered, and that wonder and making can replace anxiety, I don’t think it will be too long before adventurous organisations twig to this reality.

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