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The Creation of a Selfobject “Communal Home” for Collective Trauma: Applications of Social Dreaming and Kohut’s Group Self in Academic, Psychoanalytic, and Community Contexts

George Bermudez

This article describes and summarizes exploration of the unconscious group self (a self psychological–like configuration proposed by Heinz Kohut for group-level phenomena) by applying social dreaming (SDM), a group dreamwork practice developed by the neo-Bionian psychoanalyst Gordon Lawrence. A brief overview of the scant literature on the group self concept and social dreaming is provided, followed by a summary of several applications (SDMs on American xenophobia and Whiteness) with a focus on the creation of a communal home for witnessing, bearing, and integrating the dissociated affect related to collective trauma. In addition to the illuminating application of the group self concept, three other group self psychology concepts are proposed and defined: group self state dreams; the forward-edge function of social dreaming; and social dream moral witnessing, which promotes the emergence of a communal home for collective trauma.

KEYWORDS: Kohut; group self; collective trauma; social dreaming.

We posit the existence of a certain psychological configuration with regard to the group—let us call it the “group self”—which is analogous to the self of the individual. . . . The psychoanalytic concept of the self, however—whether it refers to the self of the individual or to the “self” of a person as a member of a group or, as
a “group self” to the self of a stable association of people—concerns a structure which dips into the deepest reach of the psyche. . . . The basic patterns of a nuclear group self (the group’s central ambitions and ideals) account not only for the continuity and the cohesion of the group but also determine its most important actions.

—Heinz Kohut (1976, pp. 837–838)

Whose house is this?
Whose night keeps out the light in here?
Say, who owns the house?
It’s not mine.
I dreamed another, sweeter, brighter
With a view of lakes crossed in painted boats:
Of fields wide as arms open for me.
This house is strange. Its shadows lie.
Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?

—Toni Morrison, epigraph to Home

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND DREAMS: IS THERE A ROLE FOR SOCIAL DREAMING IN CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYSIS?

In this section, I’d like to address the current putative marginal status of the dream in contemporary psychoanalysis and challenge that official narrative by presenting research evidence to the contrary. In addition, I will also focus on the cul-de-sac that psychoanalysis has perhaps constructed by its century-long focus on the individual or the dyad, neglecting (with scattered exceptions) the larger social context. I propose that Kohut’s embryonic formulations concerning the “group self” and the practice of “social dreaming” offer access to dimensions of the unconscious, what some are designating the social or historical unconscious or “thirdness” (Gerson, 2009), which increasingly puzzle contemporary psychoanalysts, some of whom have come to reluctantly consider a sociopolitical unconscious (Altman, Benjamin, Jacobs, & Wachtel, 2006), and that others of whom (Lichtenberg, Lachmann, & Fosshage, 2011) have begun to recognize as a primary motivational system (an “affiliative motivational system”; Lichtenberg et al., 2011, p. 19).

Lippmann (2000) decries the devalued status of dreams (theoretically and clinically) in contemporary psychoanalysis, generated, in his view, by a fickle relationship that reflects the nearly universal ambivalence toward the unconscious, that unruly dimension of human experience that will not submit to our Western desires for mastery and domination. Although I agree with Lippmann’s overall assessment of our ambivalent attitudes toward dreams and the unconscious, I do not share his pessimism concerning the potential for reintegration with psychoanalysis. In
contrast, it is my contention that contemporary psychoanalysis (a pluralistic conceptual landscape that parallels the complexity and ambiguity of the unconscious) offers renewed possibilities for the reintegration of dreams: For me, dreams remain the quintessential representation of the unconscious, the unformulated, the dissociated, and the repressed. In fact, there is some empirical evidence that supports my optimism: Lempen and Midgley (2006) surveyed and compared articles published in a psychoanalytic journal during two time periods (the early 1950s and the 1990s) to assess how the theoretical and clinical use of children's dreams had developed over time. Despite their conclusion that “there has been a decreased focus on dreams in a clinical context” (p. 228), the data suggest a more complex picture: The proportion of papers referring to dreams increased; the number of papers referring to dreams in their titles remained stable; the theoretical use of dreams increased; and, although the clinical use of dreams with children declined, their clinical use with adults expanded! Another study (Hill & Knox, 2010), surveying the clinical use of dreams in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, found that therapists addressed dreams with 50% of their patients and took up about one-half of the time in therapy discussing dreams. Rumors concerning the death of dreams and the divorce between psychoanalysis and dreams seem premature!

Paul Tolpin (1989) quotes Montaigne (“And I hold that it is true that dreams are faithful interpreters of our inclinations, but there is an art required to sorting and understanding them”) to support his assumptions concerning dreams and dream mentation—assumptions that I share: that they reveal the breadth and depth of human mentation and motivation and hence require a complex, nuanced, and paradoxical approach to understanding and applying clinically:

Dreams have no inherent motivating force, but are, rather, simply windows to the usually unconscious, continual operations of the mental processes that constitute the experiencing self to which REM sleep gives us brief access. The content of dreams is a vast variety of unconscious feelings and thoughts and the innumerable ways of dealing with those feelings and thoughts that our minds are capable of. Dreams, then, may consist of messages about somatic states, or they may be attempts to reduce internal psychological tensions. They can express conflicts, erotic and aggressive urges, wishes and fears of all kinds. They can express states of the self, moods, defensive tendencies, states of disorganization, states of satisfaction or desire, attempts to solve intellectual problems, visions of creative possibilities, and so on. They combine archaic memories and current experiences. . . . The list is incomplete. (p. 42)

Tolpin’s formulation comes very close to Bion’s (1970) ideas concerning dream function: Dreaming is what the unconscious mind attempts to do all the time; however, it is not always successful (Ogden, 2004). In addition, Bion (1970) proposed a synthetic or integrative function that undergirds the creation of meaning and psychological growth—this seems to bear similarity to the “self psychological”
For my purposes, I want to propose that Tolpin’s perspective on the multiple functions of dreams (despite his apparent commitment to an individualistic worldview—note the focus on the self) provides support for “social dreaming” (Lawrence, 2003a, 2003b; Lawrence & Daniel, 1982) as one of the functions that dreams serve, a function that has been eclipsed by the focus on the isolated, private mind. Indeed, we have clearly arrived in psychoanalysis (parallel to the contemporary shift to plurality) to see the value of a “multifunctional” model of dreaming (Fiss, 1989). As Fiss has noted, Freud (1905) proposed such an organizing principle in his analysis of Dora, suggesting that dream meaning may be of as many different sorts as the process of waking thought; in one case it could be a fulfilled wish, in another a realized fear, or again a reflection persisting on into sleep, or an intention, or a piece of creative thought. (p. 68)

However, in practice, he advocated for the primacy of the wish as the organizer of dream mentation and motivation.

In a roundtable discussion focused on the challenges of integrating a socio-political perspective into psychoanalysis, Jessica Benjamin (as cited in Altman et al., 2006) tells an anecdote concerning a group consultation in Germany that involved analysis of a dream containing an “obvious reference” to the Nazi regime and wartime activities. To her shock, the audience engaged (despite Benjamin’s interpretation) in a “blanketing denial” of the reference to Nazi murderous actions during World War II. Benjamin goes on to say that her experience in this context suggested a “kind of collective unconscious setup . . . that we carry an awful lot of things that are not individual, that are what you might call ‘transpersonal’ in our political unconscious” (p. 182). Furthermore, she argues that psychoanalysis has colluded in an institutional blindness (similar to that group of German therapists)—a taboo—a “denial of historical forces” (p. 182). It seems that Benjamin is groping to conceptualize two essential ideas that I introduce in this article: Kohut’s (1976) group self, a “psychological configuration” representing the collective “which is analogous to the self of the individual” (p. 837), and Gordon Lawrence’s (2003a, 2003b) social dreaming, an approach to understanding dreams that provides access to the unconscious of the group self.

It is noteworthy that a dream is the focus of Benjamin’s consultation and anecdote—a dream that contains reference to a social reality that is being disavowed, denied, dissociated. Benjamin (as cited in Altman et al., 2006) is describing her emerging awareness that she and other contemporary analysts have been in collusion with a psychoanalytic establishment whose “denial of historical forces is very much embedded in our early history, and the way that we failed to reorganize ourselves around that has had a very powerful influence, even for those of us who departed
from Freudian tradition” (p. 182). Benjamin and other contemporary analysts have been unconsciously organized by a traumatized psychoanalytic group self (see the recent work of Kuriloff, 2014, who chronicles the constricting impact on psychoanalytic theory of the intergenerational transmission of trauma by the generation of analysts who were survivors of the Holocaust).

Lynne Layton (2006), conversely, seems more clearly aware of the power of the “cultural third” and describes her conflict and struggle to feel “authorized” to analyze the sociopolitical unconscious as a psychoanalyst. Remarkably, like Benjamin, Layton, during the course of an analysis, confronts the “cultural third” or group self also through the medium of an analysand’s dream! The patient’s dream generates a dilemma for her—whether to address what seems an explicit reference in the manifest content to a political stance her patient is grappling with or to adhere to the narrower confines of the traditional focus on the dreamer’s more intimate interpersonal circumference. In the process, Layton discovers her own unconscious conflict: Is she straying from being an “authentic” analyst if she permits or encourages exploration that leads away from intrapsychic, private dimensions to a “political psyche” (Samuels, 1993, 2004)? Or is she colluding unconsciously with her “own resistance to linking the psychic and the social” (Samuels, 1993, p. 110)? Layton (2006) arrives at the view that she has been in collusion with a culture (group self) that decontextualizes and dehistoricizes—a powerful unconscious demand to dissociate individuals from their social context:

Cultural norms erect barriers to what can be thought, felt, and articulated, in speech. Because . . . they share the same dominant middle-class culture, therapists and their clients often adhere, consciously and unconsciously, to some of the same cultural norms. These norms . . . created dynamic unconscious conflicts as well . . . [and] can generate particular kinds of clinical enactments. . . . Normative unconscious processes result from narcissistic wounding inflicted by sexist, racist, and other power hierarchies whose norms mark one group as inferior to other groups. (p. 107)

These cultural norms, serving as cultural organizing principles that require delinking the psyche from social context, inform the traditional perspective on the clinical use of dreams, focusing on the private, personal experiences of the dreamer and retaining the lingering assumptions of the prerelational and preintersubjective paradigm of the “isolated mind” (Stolorow, 1992). Social dreaming (Lawrence, 2003; Lawrence & Daniel, 1982) practice and interpretation represent the emergence of a truly relational and intersubjectivist perspective: social dreaming for a social mind or, in Kohut’s terms, a “group self.” Furthermore, this renewed valuation of dreams in itself represents an engagement with what Lippmann (2000) refers to as psychoanalysis’s “unacknowledged ambivalence” toward dreams, deriving from cultural and systemic factors: He proposes that analysts display analytic arrogance in our struggle with “unknowingness,” uncertainty, and the puzzling nature of
dreams and the unconscious by imposing meaning using a preferred theory. The social dreaming perspective and method may be an antidote to these institutional, group self projections, using a democratic group dialogue that generates multiple interpretive narratives and encourages tolerance for ambiguity.

A BRIEF HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF SOCIAL DREAMING

Paul Lippmann (1998) eloquently describes the social character of dreams in an article, “The Nature of Dreams”:

The varied experiences in dreams may be thought of as continuously exploring, portraying, rehearsing, commenting upon, criticizing, adding to, varying, and improvising on aspects of the socially shared characteristics of a people. . . . In the deepest privacy of dreaming, the culture’s ways are being developed, tested, explored, and reinforced. (pp. 203–204)

Lawrence (2003a, 2003b), the originator of social dreaming, provides a description of the “social dreaming matrix” (SDM): a process involving a group of participants who share dreams and associations to those dreams, relying on the working hypothesis that the dreams shared reflect a collective cultural product, a social unconscious comprising dissociated social, political, and cultural experience. A major hypothesis is that the initial dream shared is a fractal of all subsequently narrated dreams; that is, the initial dream provides a pattern that is replicated in subsequent dreams. Our experiments with social dreaming appear to confirm this hypothesis, as I describe in a later section.

There are several other foundational assumptions: The dreams generated in SDM are metaphors for unconscious, disavowed, dissociated cultural and community experience—the unconscious of the group self; the dreams in SDM are the shared property of the dreaming community; focus must be on the dream, not the dreamer, which facilitates development of a safe “mental space,” an intersubjective–relational third (Benjamin, 2004; Gerson, 2004; Ogden, 1994; Winnicott, 1971); ascertaining dream meaning should be approached with the attitude of a working hypothesis; the content and meaning are unpacked through three psychoanalytic methods: associations (Freud), amplification (Jung), and animation (Bosnak, 2007; Bromberg, 2000, 2003). Jung’s method of image amplification, encouraging cultural and archetypal associations, attempts to go beyond Freud’s linear and private associations. Because relying solely on verbal associations may distance us from the nonverbal, unformulated dimension of the dream and the unconscious (Blechner, 2001, 2011), Bosnak’s strategy of animation (enactment/embodying of the dream’s imagery and nonverbal narrative) tries to circumvent being trapped in the “verbal associational network” (Lippmann, 2000) by enabling access to a procedurally organized implicit knowing.
In developing the radical paradigm of social dreaming and the SDM, Gordon Lawrence (2003a, 2003b) was influenced by several perspectives:

- Wilfred Bion’s (1970) theory of dreaming (Bion conceptualized dreaming as a fundamental and continuous mental process by which we make wholeness, synthesis, and meaning from our fragmented emotional experience)
- Charlotte Beradt’s (1968) *The Third Reich of Dreams* (a book reporting the dreams of ordinary German citizens during the period of 1933–1939—dreams reflecting their intuitive, dissociated, unconscious knowledge and foreknowledge of the Nazi regime’s murderous intentions)
- an anthropological narrative (Stewart, 1951) concerning the Senoi, a Malaysian tribe who interpreted their dreams as part of their daily communal lives—the cultural narrative is that the Senoi had not experienced war for numerous generations, presumably because of their ability to productively use dreams collectively

**SOCIAL DREAMING AND CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYSIS: CHALLENGES AND LINKAGES**

Contemporary psychoanalysis has opened up new vistas for understanding the psyche, the unconscious, and dreams: The emerging paradigm is pluralistic, transcending the polarity of intrapsychic versus interpersonal and developing an epistemology that encourages self-reflexivity (Rubin, 1998). However, as Gonzalez (2009) eloquently states, there “is a pressing need for contemporary psychoanalysis” to articulate an “intersection of the personal and the social . . . a place of linkage between the axes of intrapsychic fantasy and social categories” (p. 57). He argues that psychoanalysis must enlarge its project, moving beyond the dyadic and widening its scope to the social context:

> The psychoanalytic project has been conventionally understood as a conversation behind closed doors, the private contract between suffering patient and soul doctor, but increasingly we are called as analysts to make sense of the broader context in which that conversation takes place. . . . We can no longer practice in a hermetically sealed chamber and hope to remain relevant. (p. 57)

I agree with this challenge and propose that two contemporary psychoanalytic concepts, *thirdness* and the *group self*, have enormous relevance for and applicability to the conceptualization and practice of a socially oriented psychoanalysis. *Thirdness* was first introduced by Winnicott (1971), with his formulation of an “intermediate area of experience,” and was expanded by Ogden (1994), Britton (2004), Benjamin (2004), and Gerson (2004). The *group self* concept was first formulated by Kohut (1976) in an essay titled “Creativeness, Charisma, Group Psychology: Reflections
on the Self-Analysis of Freud,” asserting that a group’s core ambitions and ideals (analogous to their function in the individual psyche) inexorably shape the group’s actions. The group self and thirdness provide a theoretical foundation and scaffolding for the emergent theory and practice of community psychoanalysis (Twemlow & Parens, 2006), a theory and practice that seeks to expand psychoanalytic thinking and interventions to venues beyond the confines of the traditional dyadic setup: to larger systems, neighborhoods, and communities. I view social dreaming as an exploratory method and intervention to be added to the repertoire of community psychoanalysis.

Whereas Britton (2004) delineates thirdness as a developmental achievement (involving the evolution of oedipal consciousness of the exclusionary pair), Ogden (1994), Benjamin (2004), and Gerson (2004) emphasize thirdness as emergent intersubjective–relational processes and mental space. However, it is Gerson (2004, 2009), carefully distinguishing among three dimensions of thirdness (developmental, relational, and cultural), who, with his notion of cultural thirdness, provides a contemporary psychoanalytic foundation for social dreaming and community psychoanalysis. He defines the cultural third as a form of thirdness that “envelops, intrudes upon, and shapes interactions . . . as well as the subjectivities” (Gerson, 2004, p. 70). Gerson provides as examples the “incest taboo, language, and professional standards” (p. 70). I would (and I believe Benjamin and Layton would also) expand the latter to include the “political unconscious” (Samuels, 1993, 2004), the sociopolitical dimension of human experience (Layton, 2006), and the Jungian “cultural complex” (Singer & Kimbles, 2004). The SDM and the dissociated social dimension of all dreams provide us access to the unconscious organizing principles of the group self.

I believe there are several other conceptual developments in contemporary psychoanalysis that have further relevance for social dreaming: self psychology (Kohut, 1977, 1984), intersubjective systems theory (IST; Livingston, 2009; Stolorow, 1992, 1997), and relational psychoanalysis (Stern, 2009; C. Ullman, 2006). Psychoanalytic self psychology has contributed to the psychoanalytic theory of dreams by proposing “self-state dreams” (although foreshadowed in the work of Fairbairn from an internal object relations theoretical perspective), which provide a snapshot or X-ray of the current status of the individual self: I propose that the SDM generates “social state dreams,” which provide metaphors expressing the authentic, but dissociated, state of the community. IST has three principles that can be fruitfully applied to social dreaming: the idea of an intersubjective field emerging from the interaction of multiple subjectivities (analogous to Gerson’s cultural third and Ogden’s and Benjamin’s intersubjective third), the concept of the developmental dimension of transference (leading edge or forward edge), and the conflict between accessing dissociated affective experience and maintaining vital object ties. All three show promise in enhancing our understanding of SDM phenomena, particularly the forward-edge process (also outlined in the work of Fosshage, 1989, who maintains...
that dreams have the primary function of maintaining and restoring the organization of the self), which focuses our attention on the intuitive, developmental imagination of the group expressed through social dreams. Livingston (2009) refers to this dimension as the emergence of “embryonic new organizing principles.” The need to maintain vital object ties deepens our understanding of the enthrallment of groups to authority and powerful institutions: Recall in this regard Benjamin’s allusions to the psychoanalytic community’s taboos regarding sociopolitical and historical forces. Examples of these (the forward-edge process in social dreaming and the collectively shared disavowal because of group-wide attachments to authority) will be provided from our SDM experiments and applications.

Finally, I would like to provide an argument for the inclusion of witnessing (another emerging concept in contemporary psychoanalysis) as an essential form of intervention in psychoanalysis, along with traditional interpretation (Freud), holding (Winnicott), and containment (Bion), as proposed by a number of psychoanalytic writers (Poland, 2000; Stern, 2009; C. Ullman, 2006). Furthermore, as I believe that social dreaming is an emancipatory practice, representing a socially engaged community psychoanalysis, its practice is a form of “moral witnessing” (Boulanger, 2012; Margalit, 2002; C. Ullman, 2006), urging all dreamers and SDM participants to provide testimony to collectively and collusively dissociated human suffering. Following Gerson (2009), I provide in a later section a description of some of the defenses (denial, disavowal, intellectualization, projection, etc.) mobilized against moral witnessing during SDMs.

KOHUT AND A REINTEGRATED JUNG: RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL DREAMING AND CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYSIS

As Wolf (1988) suggests, Kohut’s group self configuration has enormous potential to illuminate the psychology of groups and their relationships to leaders as well as the psychology of intergroup relations. According to Wolf, charismatic leaders can help repair and reinspire a group’s damaged ambitions (e.g., Winston Churchill), and a messianic leader (such as Gandhi), through the restoration of ideals, can “instill the needed cohesion into the fragmented group self of his people” (p. 48).

Furthermore, Wolf (1988) avers that intergroup dynamics of jockeying for power may generate powerlessness in a group self, fueling narcissistic rage, which in turn generates violence. (My SDM on Whiteness confirms this assertion: The emergent dream images and dialogues provided a startling X-ray of the relationship between Blacks and Whites in America, with many persecutory dream images, some reparative images, an emergent sense of anxiety and a search for something lost, and many allusions to Black rage, which is equivalent to narcissistic rage.) Karterud and Stone (2003), developing Kohut’s group self concept, propose that a fundamental attribute of the group self, generating the supraindividual qualities of groups, is that group members share a “collective project” (p. 22). This formulation of a shared, collective
project allows us to give intentionality to an emergent group self—an intentionality that is difficult to attribute to a “cultural third” or an “intersubjective field”: “The project consists of certain ambitions, ideals, and resources embedded in a specific history (similar to the individual self), and the project can be carried out on all levels of sophistication” (p. 22). I have proposed (Bermudez, 2013) that the so-called American Dream is such a project for Americans, with numerous unconscious functions and motivations, which include defenses against death anxiety and mourning.

Samuels (1996) details Jung’s banishment and emerging reintegration into mainstream and contemporary psychoanalysis, arguing persuasively that “many of the central issues and features of contemporary psychoanalysis are reminiscent of positions taken by Jung in earlier years” (p. 471). Among other ideas, Jung had emphasized the transparent meaning of dreams via the manifest content, foreshadowing the contemporary perspective often credited to Erik Erikson. Jung insisted on a creative, nondestructive dimension to the unconscious psyche, analogous to self psychology’s emphasis on “self-righting” and Kohut’s “leading edge”; he argued for the clinical usefulness of the countertransference, bearing similarities to contemporary intersubjectivity theory’s notion of mutual influence; he anticipated contemporary thinking concerning multiplicity (Bromberg, 1996) with his conception of complexes, “splinter psyches,” and subpersonalities. As is well known, Jungian concepts display an appreciation of varying levels of unconscious life in a spectrum, including the personal, cultural, collective, and archetypal–spiritual dimension of psychic experience (Jacobi, 1973). Grounded in this formulation of psychic life, dream material may readily be understood as emerging from a sociocultural unconscious, which provides another theoretical basis for social dreaming that is both inclusive of archetypal phenomena and a study in *cultural complexes* (Silverstein, 2013; Singer & Kimbles, 2004). I make the case that a number of social identities (“nonrepresented voices”) are marginalized, and their social experience and the impact of this marginalization are collusively dissociated, that is, in the form of cultural complexes.

**APPLICATIONS OF THE SOCIAL DREAMING MATRIX APPROACH**

Beginning in 2011, I organized a series of social dreaming experiments and applications:

- I organized “Exploration of American Xenophobia” (SDM held at Antioch University Los Angeles [AULA], July, 2011), about which I provide some highlights in a later section of this article.
- In collaboration with a colleague (Bermudez & Silverstein, 2013; Silverstein, 2013), I successfully introduced the SDM (February 2012 at AULA) as an experiential exercise in teaching an introduction to psychoanalytic theory. We were influenced by Jung, who held on to the ideal of “educating the
personality,” arguing passionately against educational processes that foster automatism, an ever-present shadow in graduate psychology education that is moving in lockstep with market-driven trends toward increased materialism (e.g., in one-sided “evidence-based” emphases), while minimizing the value of subjectivity and intangible inner work. As a response, AULA created a Jungian-informed specialization within its graduate clinical psychology program called the Spiritual and Depth Psychology (SDP) specialization, a “wild-life refuge for the psyche” (Silverstein, 2013) in graduate education. Within SDP, we encountered a dilemma around the teaching of introductory psychoanalytic theory, which is saturated with Eurocentric, White, heteronormative bias. We determined that using social dreaming might be an ideal way to see past our own cultural complex, which leaves us perpetuating our “straight White (psychoanalytic) family values” even within a multicultural, social justice context. Experimentally, we used the SDM to consult the academic community’s social unconscious. We posed the dilemma to the community and asked, “What is on our minds, consciously and unconsciously, regarding this issue?” A daylong event of dream sharing and discussion followed. Out of this event, we began to develop pedagogical strategies to integrate the emergent community themes (e.g., we hosted a conference on nonrepresented voices in the psychoanalytic canon, a faculty roundtable, and an African American Women’s Circle, and we forged an ongoing process of SDM and community dialogue to enhance curricular responsiveness to the local, regional, and national levels of community as well as the global psyche).

- I planned to experimentally apply the SDM method at Occupy movement sites (Los Angeles), relying on the forward-edge function to facilitate more conscious formulation, articulation, and actualization of a future strategic agenda. We visited both the New York City and Los Angeles Occupy sites. However, after several collaborative conversations with the Occupy Wellness Center, just as I was going to implement, the Los Angeles site was closed down by the Los Angeles Police Department.

- I explored “Whiteness and the American Group Self” (SDM held in June 2013 at AULA): The emergent social dreaming narrative from this event provided an opportunity to apply the group self concept and discover the potential of the SDM to provide an approach to collective healing of trauma, a sense of belonging, and thus a communal home for unmourned, intergenerational trauma. (An extended description and summary of the emergent process follow in a later section.)

- An SDM was organized and held at a psychoanalytic institute; the focus was on “Psychoanalysis and Whiteness: An Exploration of the Social Unconscious Through Social Dreaming.” (A summary is provided in a later section.)
A SOCIAL DREAMING MATRIX: AMERICAN XENOPHOBIA

My first formal experiment with the SDM was a daylong workshop held at AULA in July 2011. The theme was on American xenophobia, with the goal of interrogating the American communal unconscious with regard to xenophobia. Participants (about 30) included mental health professionals, students in Antioch’s master’s in clinical psychology program, journalists, artists, two high school seniors, a substantial subgroup self-identifying as gay or lesbian, a Catholic priest and nun, and a couple of early childhood educators. The schedule included three SDM segments and a final dialogue. My personal experience as facilitator was complex: I was both challenged (puzzled by some participants’ “resistance”) and awed by the process and the outpouring of unconscious symbolization. For days and weeks afterward, I felt emotionally haunted by the evocative dream images and the affect they contained. After several weeks, I was able to begin to impose some meaning onto the experience, having received feedback from some participants. Following is my first attempt at a coherent statement of my impressions (via an e-mail exchange with a participant, who was recommending a longer SDM experience, more structure, etc.):

I agree re the fleeting impressions: I too have struggled over the last several weeks to bring some personal coherence to my experience. However, it is beginning to gather/cohere as a result of self-reflection, feedback from participants, and extended conversations with colleagues. I and others have had the intuition that it needed to be longer (perhaps two days, with an overnight dreaming opportunity).

I like your idea of the pause (it is a technique that was used by a Jungian analyst who presented at Antioch on children’s dreams). Several other folks had similar reactions to the process: needed more structure and guidance.

I realized almost immediately afterward that I should have repeated even more often than I did what the preferred way of contributing was, which was stated at the beginning and several times during the SDM, and written down on handouts (share your dreams in reaction to other dreams; assume that all dreams are your dreams as well; provide your personal associations—not analysis or interpretation; try to perceive the links and connections—similarities?—between the dreams and associations shared). Although I was initially puzzled by the participants’ difficulty in following the guidelines provided, I realized that I have to respect the power of the unconscious—that what happened is the only thing that could have happened given the ubiquity of unconsciously motivated perception, values, habits of mind, personal agendas, etc.

There are some obvious themes that emerged:

- The group’s search for a sense of effective goodness and fear of identifying/reacting with evil when confronted with social evil (images of angel with ineffective wings, associations to the Holocaust, invasions from the sky, envy of the Tea Party’s ability to organize, channel, and mobilize anger/rage, with associations to Nazi era)
- The culture war that was evident in the group’s dynamics and associations:
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The social/personal disorientation of being confronted with a different paradigm that seems to have its own truth and integrity (exemplified by the dream of the religious icon constructed in reverse from the traditionally accepted method): engagement with another culture—think Islam and the West!

The condensation of the personal and the social in dream images (shamanlike George Bush in the desert; Barbara Walters invading someone's bedroom)

The youngest participants’ associations to social media and technology—completely absent from the dreams and associations of the middle-aged cohort in the workshop

I'm sure there are many other themes and ways of organizing the dreams and associations, but these seem to have an obvious resonance for me and the overarching theme of xenophobia (fear of otherness or the stranger or foreign).

George

The puzzlement I expressed in that e-mail regarding “the participants’ difficulty in following the guidelines provided” was resolved by the realization that this “difficulty” represented what Gerson (2009) has referred to as defenses against moral witnessing and Layton (2006) defines as attacks on social linking—a refusal to connect with the other and his or her suffering and an active defense of decontextualizing. Examples of these “defenses” abounded: Some chose to interpret dream images as representing individual, private concerns of the dreamer; others intellectualized by applying the jargon of academic deconstructionism, emptying images of either personal or social meaning, or affective resonance. The most egregious example of the defense against moral witnessing was the following: Several dreams presented images of people and events in a desert (one dream narrative included the dreamer meeting President George W. Bush in the desert; another dream offered images of “aliens from outer space” invading the United States by landing in the desert in the American Southwest); no one developed the obvious association to the widely disseminated stories of undocumented immigrants (who have been referred to as “illegal aliens”) crossing the border from Mexico into the American desert!

After much reflection, I have come to the view that the core issue the xenophobia SDM grappled with was witnessing and acknowledging collusion with destructiveness or evil (represented by hope-filled encounters with a shamanlike former president George W. Bush in the desert, who offers the wandering dreamer “tea—actually peyote . . . human contact . . . warm feeling” that promises to relieve the loneliness and disconnection evoked by the desert imagery) and struggling to find efficacy and goodness (often represented by images of angels, particularly a striking image of an angel with enormous wings that were useless—“stalled”). In fact, the first dream offered in the SDM was the latter iconic image:
I’m in Boston, traveling on a train. I had recently bought a T-shirt with angel wings on the back. I fell asleep and dreamed I was an angel with huge wings, but cannot fly. Someone (a she) came down . . . looked like an angel. She painted an “A.” When I woke up I saw angels marching in a parade.

(Does the “A” stand for America?) Just as Lawrence (2003) hypothesized that the dreams shared in the SDM would have a fractallike pattern, a pattern of “visitation” with ambiguous (sometimes disappointing) outcomes is repeated throughout the SDM. The second dream shared was by a participant whose father was a Holocaust survivor (connected to the first dreamer’s train imagery?) and also contained visitation by an angel:

Your dream reminded me of my father dying; he suffered; he could not let go. He was a genocide survivor. I wanted to help but could not. I had a dream with his father—he was full-bodied, put his arm around me and said, “I wish my son could see how much I’ve changed.” My father would not let go. I then felt visited by an entity—an angel. The wings seem to ground me, but trains displace us. There is a panic with the displacement.

The first dreamer responds,

The wings give capability to move, but I’m stalled. The angel who comes to me give me a name, “A”? I must find out the meaning. It gives me hope to transcend. I see angel as energy to help me move on. In the midst of travel, the angel comes with security—potential is there.

This pattern of visitation continues in dream images reported later:

- A dreamer describes an alien invasion in the desert with plans to colonize our planet—it’s a recurrent dream where “there is no safety. I’m caught between a sense of beauty and destruction. Reminds me of the Star Wars Missile Defense proposed by Reagan.” This is followed by associations and attempts at interpretation: “reminds me of current state of America . . . the desert represents our depression. The wings are grounded, stalled. America has what it takes to move through this transition . . . We can transcend. Lots of movement: trains, ships, wings—sometimes not moving.”

- Two dreams are narrated involving encounters with former president George W. Bush, who seems to initially offer hope to dreamers wandering in the desert and then turns out to be a shamanlike “trickster.” The first dream was as follows:

I’m wandering in the desert feeling alone. I finally arrive at a hut. George Bush is inside dressed as Carlos Casteneda’s Don Juan. He never speaks, hands me
tea—actually peyote. I’m walking to east coast to meet my mother. I asked lots of questions of Bush but he never responds.

The second dreamer said, “I have George Bush dreams too . . . always silent, giving me Kool-Aid to drink.” This is followed by the following association: “Shamans used to dress as your worst nightmare . . . what in him scares me? . . . How am I like him? . . . How sociopathic?”

Lawrence’s prediction of a fractal-like progression in the dreams of an SDM seems borne out in this sequence: encounters with entities connected to other realities with promise of hope, safety, and human contact, but resulting in disappointment. Even the alien invasion is associated with beauty and imagined military defense (Star Wars Missile Defense system).

A remarkable development occurred during the dialogue segment of the SDM workshop: As the participants focused on reflection and meaning creation, there was the emergence of an inchoate longing to counter the Tea Party political movement with a progressive countermovement (recall the foreshadowing of this in the tea–peyote image in the first George Bush dream). It seems to me in retrospect that the SDM dialogue’s inchoate longing foreshadowed in embryonic form the development of the Occupy Wall Street movement—which emerged two months later! This emergent longing appears to be an example of a social dreaming forward-edge process that we hypothesized: The SDM process gives birth to innovative future directions (shared projects in Karterud and Stone’s, 2003, view and shared ambitions and ideals in Kohut’s, 1976, and Wolf’s, 1988, perspectives) for the dreaming community—the group self. This assumption, a developmental process active in social dreaming, has guided us in applying SDM to curricular development at AULA.

**A SOCIAL DREAMING MATRIX: WHITENESS AND THE AMERICAN GROUP SELF**

In June 2013, I organized a two-day social dreaming event focused on Whiteness and the American group self. I invited members of the academic community of AULA (faculty, students, administrators) and members of the surrounding community. My hope was that there would be a mix of Black and White participants; however, only a handful of Whites participated—the majority of the 35 to 40 participants were Black, with a tiny sprinkling of Latinos and Asian Americans. This lack of White participation on a campus that is predominantly White, with faculty and students who pride themselves on their commitment to social justice, was both startling and completely understandable: The persecutory anxiety in the White group self in relationship to issues of race and Whiteness have been amply documented (Altman, 2006).

Despite this disappointing sociopsychoanalytic reality, the emergent process was
extraordinarily moving and healing. At some point (second day), the realization crystallized for me that the Whiteness SDM had created a matrix with the emergent properties of a “communal home” for healing a traumatized group self—primarily a Black American group self suffering from both intergenerationally transmitted trauma (with many allusions to the Jim Crow South) and more contemporary racial microaggressions and assaults directed at Black Americans. The Black group self through its “social dreams” initially displayed what I would call a reparative ambivalence: Dreams of nurturing, healing actions were followed by dream images and narratives of persecution, terror, loss, and dissociation. Here is a representative sample:

- A Black woman dreams that she is caring for a baby (changing diapers, etc.) who is not hers. She happily chooses to do so.
- This is followed by another Black woman sharing a dream with images of assaultive seven-foot-tall White women.
- Then a Black male narrates a dream in which he teaches meditation to a White client who is dying of cancer.
- This is followed by a Black woman (who later reveals that she was raised by a mother who was very active in the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s and who has tried all her life to put Black resentment and rage behind her) who describes a dream in which something is hidden; there is something she has to do, but she can’t quite find the clarity.

On the second day, apparently feeling safer with the emergence of an intersubjective field that I call a communal home (serving a selfobject function) for the collective trauma of the Black group self), participants began to associate more freely, with fewer dreams shared and more narratives and memories concerning the search for safety, desires for resolution of Black rage, and integration of lost parts of the self (Karterud and Stone, 2003, call this emergent selfobject function of groups a discursive selfobject function: “We contend that when people feel strengthened after a group session, this is partly due to participating in a kind of discourse, rich in cognitive and affective perspectives and nuances. . . . It is a supraindividual discourse event” [p. 12]):

- A Black woman reveals that during the first day of dream sharing, she felt nauseated and wanted to run to the bathroom. (This seems to be a psychosomatic metaphor for the unwell, damaged, perhaps poisoned, Black group self.)
- A Black male, who says that he is often characterized in group contexts as the Angry Black Man, avers that the anger—the Black rage (substitute Kohut’s narcissistic rage)—is destructive to Black people. “Black rage is killing young Black men.” He further states that he does not want his daughter to carry this anger and is grateful for this social dreaming process, which has created a safe place.
Two Black women seek to recover and reintegrate dissociated Blackness and also resolve anger:

- A Black woman, who had earlier shared a dream of searching for something hidden, now reveals that she was raised by an angry mother engaged in the Black Power movement and that she wants to put her anger behind her. She reports finding the SDM process thought provoking and asks rhetorically, “How do we get over it?” alluding to the intergenerationally transmitted trauma of racial oppression.

- A young Black woman, who had been adopted by a White family and raised in a White community, begins to cry. She has not been feeling Black; she is ignorant of Black history and culture. She does not understand and fears Black anger.

SOCIAL DREAMING, WHITENESS, AND THE PSYCHOANALYTIC INSTITUTE

A social dreaming matrix was held at a psychoanalytic institute (April 2014); the SDM focused on eliciting and interrogating the organizational and social unconscious relating to Whiteness at the institute. The institute had developed a Diversity Task Force to address racism and homophobia; its explicit mission was to ensure that the institute addressed these issues in its training curriculum and culture. The task force sponsored and organized the two-day SDM, inviting all members and candidates at the institute; the framework relies on the “Zeigarnik effect” (Mazur, 1996; Weisbord & Janoff, 1995; Zeigarnik, 1967) to generate social–communal dreams related to the theme of Whiteness, its invisibility for Whites, the social unconscious, and implications for psychoanalysis.

In its discussions and preparations for the event, the Diversity Task Force demonstrated a surprising level of anxiety (it seemed like a great deal of anxiety!). Members would repeatedly ask, “Will anybody actually share dreams?” “Will there be enough safety?” “We shouldn’t concern ourselves with safety!” “Should we come prepared with dreams, if no one shares?” “Aren’t psychoanalysts going to be concerned about other psychoanalysts interpreting their dreams and become resistant to exposing themselves?” I constantly reassured the task force members that attendees would share dreams and all would go well. (Privately, I held the conviction that whatever happened would provide an opportunity to learn about the institute’s organizational unconscious and its relationship to the larger, ecological social unconscious.) Eventually, the SDM was held in spring 2014: Sixteen members and candidates registered and attended (several who had registered did not attend—a very small number of candidates [perhaps two] and four people of color: one Black Latino, two Black women, and one Japanese American).

Despite the group’s anxiety, I was authorized to facilitate the SDM. Initially, my impression was that the first day’s dreams and associations seemed shallow, reflecting
both anxiety and unfamiliarity with the social dreaming process. However, on further reflection, after reviewing my notes, I discerned a more complex and nuanced pattern: There seemed to be, as the first day progressed, several “movements” or phases organized around core organizing themes.

**Movement 1**

Initial dreams were full of imagery related to empty, isolated houses, with affects related to ambivalence, envy, persecutory anxiety, lack of trust, and abandonment. There were very few references to race and similar topics. Here is a typical dream from that phase: “This is a repetitive dream I have not had in a while. I was a child, verbal, walking in a huge house with lots of rooms. I was alone. I stumbled and couldn’t get out, nobody, no sound.” Here is another: “I was visiting daughter and family. It was unfamiliar, chaotic; lots of people walking around, but nobody I could trust. I asked a man whether I could board a plane. He said no.”

**Movement 2**

The dreams in this segment repeated the theme of movement (flying, moving via trains, attempts at mastery, sometimes via magical means—telekinesis, for example). Here is a representative dream for this phase: “Image of Japan train station. Trains come and go, but they are kind of empty. Three times. There are some people: One sits face-to-face on the train.” Here is another: “I was in an industrial area. There were aerialists practicing. I watched and worried that they would fall, but they were capable.” And still another: “I noticed something: It always involved my will—‘I can do this.’ I can turn this boat over with my will. I was then teaching a child how to do wheelies on a tricycle.”

**Movement 3**

This phase heralds the beginning of a tentative engagement with manifest themes of race, Whiteness, gender, social class, homosexuality, intergenerational relations, and heterosexual and interracial contact and intimacy. Here are several dreams from that third movement: “I was invited by the Obamas to the White House. We hung out in the lawn. We wanted to do it again. It was very formal—for a higher class”; “I was going to marry the Black baseball player Darryl Strawberry”; “I was Martina Navratilova’s therapist.”

**Movement 4**

Here there were increasing references and associations (fewer dreams but more conscious associations) to being raised by Black nannies and awkwardness associated
with those memories—more associations to anxiety related to interracial encounters. And then there was development and articulation of images of interracial support and care: “I was raised in Pasadena, California, and I was always afraid of Black women. I felt so uncomfortable around a Black cleaning woman.”

I worked at a Head Start program in Watts, California. I was the only White person. I wasn’t scared until a Black woman said to me that she felt I was not safe. She accompanied me and stayed with me to wait for the bus.

A White male therapist reported,

I have a patient, a Black man, who happens to be a train conductor. He is full of rage. I have been so moved by what he has been through. He's afraid to go to work. Although I often feel lost in how to help him, I look forward to seeing him. He's much younger than me: a different generation.

Clearly the group movement has been from states of isolation, anxiety, and disorientation to attempts at psychological mastery over the paralyzing anxiety, with a final arrival at cross-racial encounter. This first day set the stage for the second day—the second act, so to speak.

On the second day, there was a flurry of dreams and associations, following an initial complex dream of a group of men (construction contractors) trying to fit a white sink into a bathroom in an upscale apartment building. The white sink would be a temporary replacement, substituted for the original sink, to pass the necessary inspection and comply with government building regulations. This dream became a focal dream leading to multiple, complex associations and analyses: examination and comparison of the oppression of gays versus the oppression of Blacks; the role that capitalism and greed play in systemic and institutional racism. This led to more transparent associations and narratives about the anxieties and shame related to cross-racial encounters. The final movement left me feeling that a third act was needed. There were two forward-edge dreams (the last two dreams shared late on the second day)—dreams that seem to suggest solutions and future resolutions. In the first of these two forward-edge dreams, the board of the institute had found the “solution” to a dilemma related to two electives in the institute’s training curriculum, but the dreamer could not remember what the solution was! This led to a discussion about how the institute needs to resolve its ambivalence concerning diversity issues, the two electives in the dream representing a double consciousness, a split; will the group self remain in a static, repetitive, developmentally arrested state or choose a new developmental path?

The second forward-edge dream, the final dream, was the following (dreamed by a White woman):
I had to change my doctor. A new physician was assigned to me at UCLA Medical Center. To my utter surprise it was Josephine Baker, but she was not dressed like a doctor. She had a fruit basket on her head, and dressed colorfully. In the dream I was critical of myself. Why this image? She was sharing fruit, healing me. I said to her, “I think you’re dead but it’s amazing how you use your sexuality. What are you doing here?” She said, “I’m a doctor.” I realized she had changed careers. I also realized I was an hour late for my appointment.

This remarkable dream left us tantalized: We had run out of time! However, the manifest content suggested a challenge to the cultural script that constructed Blacks as entertainers and containers of animal-like sexuality and a psychological movement of the group self to the acceptance of Black competence and goodness: Josephine Baker develops but integrates presumably discrepant elements—sexuality and professionalization; entertainment and physicianly healing.

There were a number of other patterns, some confirming the theory and expected process of social dreaming; other patterns were unexpected and surprising:

- There was a fractal pattern to the emergence of dreams, although the fractal quality seemed to be contained within each movement. The overall arc was remarkably similar to that of the first Whiteness SDM held at AULA: increasing transparency and healing. After the SDM at the institute, there were a series of e-mails congratulating me on the success of the workshop, with many of the White attendees reporting transformative experiences of truly understanding how “Whiteness” had shaped their subjectivity and experience and how they had anticipated a scary process but had been able to face and engage with the difficult issue of race and racism.
- Most of the dreams shared were by attendees who were White.
- Identification with dreams (“witnessing”) across racial identities was often resisted.
- The Black members seemed to take up a position of educating White participants.

**IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Encouraged by my experiments with the SDM method, theory, and perspective, I propose several potential avenues for continued explorative application:

1. There should be creation of a “communal home” serving a selfobject function for community-level processing and mourning of collective trauma (either man-made or caused by natural disaster). In this regard, see the psychoanalytic focus-group-like dialogues concerning environmental sustainability facilitated by Lertzman (2008, 2012) and the concepts of “chosen trauma”
The Creation of a Selfobject “Communal Home” for Collective Trauma and “biosocial degeneration and regeneration” in reaction to collective trauma developed by Volkan (2003). This would add another strategy to the current repertoire of “community psychoanalytic” interventions, which Rudden and Twemlow (2013) refer to as “Type II Social/Therapeutic Mind” (“psychoanalysis of the community” in contrast to “psychoanalysis in the community”; pp. 199–200).

2. SDM workshops should be held at psychoanalytic institutes to avoid the trap of institutionally blinkered perspectives, integrate the collectively disavowed, and create self-reflective space for emergent, previously unformulated insights regarding the institute’s organizational unconscious. In this regard, see the work of Rubin (1998), who details the authoritarianism and blindness present in the psychoanalytic community throughout its history. Kurlioff (2014) describes the remarkably inhibiting impact of collective trauma on American psychoanalysis after the Holocaust.

3. We need experiential training in the understanding and clinical application of dreams for psychoanalytic candidates. Blechner (2011), using M. Ullman’s (1994) approach to group dream interpretation, as well as occasional application of Lawrence’s (2003a, 2003b) SDM, suggests that, in addition to the training benefits, “group dream interpretation” may facilitate resolution of dyadic impasses and enhance the analysis of dreams in individual dream work.

4. SDM workshops should continue to be applied in academic settings to provide a “social state” reading of the academic community and discover innovative paths for future curricular development, responsive to the emergent needs of all stakeholders (students, faculty, the society the university serves, etc.).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have provided an introduction to social dreaming and its implications for contemporary psychoanalysis (especially for the illumination of Kohut’s group self and what others have referred to as the political unconscious—a taboo area for traditional psychoanalysis). I have highlighted the usefulness for social dreaming theory and practice of such concepts as group self, social state dreams, forward-edge social dreaming, moral witnessing, and communal home for collective trauma. Moreover, I have argued for the relevance of both Kohut and a reintegrated Jung for the newly emergent fields of community psychoanalysis and social dreaming, particularly the usefulness of the concepts of the group self and cultural complex. And finally, I have summarized some of my experimental applications of the SDM in three contexts and adumbrated additional potential applications (community-level processing of collective trauma; psychoanalytic institutes benefiting from application to organizational development; renewal of training of psychoanalytic candidates in dreamwork; and as a method of group consultation for resolving
analytic impasses). Although I agree with Lippmann's (2000) formulation regarding the love–hate relationship between psychoanalysis and dreams, I am, in contrast, optimistic about a renewed marriage and potential for enhancing psychoanalytic training and psychoanalytic technique (Blechner, 2001, 2011) and expanding the scope and relevance of psychoanalysis for social phenomena and collective trauma (Alexander, 2012; Alexander & Eyerman, 2004; Rudden & Twemlow, 2013).

REFERENCES


