

The Infinite Possibilities from the Ground: Social Dreaming at the 2013 NZAP Conference

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on the Social Dreaming Matrix (SDM) sessions which were held at the 2013 NZAP Annual Conference at Orakei Marae in Auckland. It describes the context of this conference and reflects on the preparation and role of the three conveners, representing the bi- and multicultural dimensions which were explored at the Conference. As a psychoanalytic discovery and development, social dreaming values the concept of “we-ness” as a means of reaching collectively-held unconscious meaning in the social domain. The article reflects on some of the most central dreams presented in the SDM sessions and on subsequent associations from each of the three sessions. The attention in the work is on broadening the ground of the material presented in the dreams and in the associations to the dreams. The SDM leaves it to the participants to energise around their own chosen figures.

Waitara

He whakaatanga tēnei tuhinga i ngā wāhanga riro i te Hāpori Tauria Moemoeā (Social Dreaming Matrix) i te Hui-ā-tau a te NZAP 2013 i Orākei i Tāmaki-makau-rau. E whakaatu ana i te horopaki o te hui, ngā whakahaere whakarite me ngā mahi a ngā kaiwhakahaere tokotoru, ngā māngai mō ngā āhuatanga tikanga rua tikanga maha i arotakehia ake i te hui. Hei tā te kaitātari hinengaro kitenga, whanaketanga hoki, he uara nui te ia o te “tātou-tātou” hei ara neinei atu ki te puringa-whānui o te tikanga mauri moe i roto i te huinga hāpori. Ka whakaaro te tuhinga ki ētahi o ngā moemoeā matua i whakaarahia ake i roto i ngā wāhanga moemoeā me ētahi wāhanga puta mai i te hui. Ko te aronga o te mahi ko te whakawhānui i te tūāpapa o ngā rauemi kōrerohia mai i ngā moemoeā me ngā whakapānga atu ki aua moemoeā. E waiho ana mā tēnā, mā tēnā e whakahihiko ake huri haere ake ngā āhua whakaritea e rātou.

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Conferences represent an important time in the life of a professional association. At a conference the participants speak, listen, engage, think, and discuss, jointly updating and co-creating their current understanding of their profession/s and of the Association of which they are part — and they also dream! (see Morgan, 2007)

The 67th conference of the New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP), was not any different. Under the bicultural title “Ko Rangitoto te maunga, Ko Waitematā te moana | Figure and Ground”, over two hundred psychotherapists of all modalities gathered for three days in April 2013. The conference was held on Orakei Marae in Auckland. In its 67 years, only one previous NZAP conference has been held on a Marae. The 2006 conference in Napier was the first to have biculturalism explicitly as the main theme, an experience from which some bi- or inter-cultural scars still seemed to exist. An in-depth reflection on this particular conference was provided by von Sommaruga Howard (2011). As Johnson (2012) summarised it, the NZAP “has made an ethical and relational commitment to tangata whenua and te Tiriti o Waitangi | the Treaty of Waitangi” (p. 237), signed by Māori elders and the British Crown in 1840, with its intention for equal partnership between Pākehā and Māori. Multiple betrayal and breaches of the Treaty have followed over the decades. In the 1970s the Orakei Marae was central in a Maori protest against the theft of their land, with violent repercussions from the New Zealand government, ending up with the arrest of mostly Māori activists for trespassing on their own ancestral lands! A memorial on the premise remembers this episode. Only in 1991 was the land title was formally handed back to the original guardians.

The decision was made by the Conference Organising Committee to host the conference on Orakei Marae, with a possibility for around 35 participants to stay overnight in the whare nui. The intention of equal partnership between Māori and Pākehā, as formulated in the Treaty, often creates confusion, and challenges the consciously or unconsciously held perceptions of dominance. The undercurrent of this historic dynamic is a mixture of the use (and abuse) of power, perceived submission, struggle for liberation, fear for oblivion and, of course, elements of chosen trauma and chosen glory (Volkan, 1999) felt in both cultures. The marae context creates — and created — its own dynamics as marae protocol is followed in detail, including opening and welcoming rituals (powhiri), rituals of inclusion (whakawhanaungatanga), prayers (karakia), singing (waiata), presentations, and a final closing session (poroporaki). A marae is a tribal home, where Māori have a place to be, where they belong, and have a right to speak. The conference was on Māori land, on to which Pākehā were welcomed. Arguably, in the bi-cultural power balance this gave Māori culture what might be described as “home turf advantage”.

Conference participants not only have free floating dreams, they actually also dream *into* the conference and with this conference being held on a marae, that part of the Aotearoa New Zealand context was quite explicit. There were also important other context markers such as the diversity within the profession of psychotherapy and the dynamics within the organisation about membership, not to mention the global context.

What might participants' dreams tell about the nature of the social, professional and organisational contexts — both observable and obscure — in which they found themselves at the Conference? The dreams shared by participants in the Social Dreaming Matrix (SDM) offered the opportunity to express and explore Shadow material, not restricted by morality, judgment or superego. Figure and ground, one of the Conference themes, provided a useful metaphor to explore the infinite character of these associations.

The Conveners

The Conference Organising Committee had planned an SDM over three sessions on three days. The conveners were myself, Servaas van Beekum, an outsider brought in from Australia, although my culture is much more Dutch-European than Australian; Hinewirangi Kohu-Morgan, a Māori artist, poet, and activist from Hamilton, and a *pai arahi* for the NZAP; and Margaret Bowater, a Pākehā psychotherapist from Auckland. The Committee informally referred to the conveners, as “the Dream team”. The projections that came with this title were probably related to what we represented: three different aspects of the multi-cultural landscape of the conference.

Co-operation among the consultants was particularly challenged as only I had a background in the SDM methodology, while both other dream takers came from a different background. SDM methodology, mainstream dream interpretation, and *marae* dream tradition and protocol: all represented different cultures. Hinewirangi was very familiar with dream work in the Māori tradition of the tribal sharing of dreams, including the sharing of family ties and links with ancestors. Margaret had extensive experience in working in a one-to-one frame with clients' dreams and had published extensively about her work. It took us several e-mail exchanges, some nightmare scenarios, and mutual confrontations in the lead up to the Conference to establish a working relationship, though we were only able to clarify details in meetings immediately preceding the Conference.

An important starting experience for the conveners was a *powhiri*, held especially for us, being welcomed by all who were already present. This created a bond which enabled us to start the work. Despite our different starting points, we worked out a way of convening the event in a containing way. We were aware that our differences as consultants also mirrored differences among the participants. The only way for us as a threesome to do the task was to be open to and for each other, to be willing to meet rather than to divide. As we went through the days, we grew in our task.

The Dream as a Collective Possession

Social dreaming has been researched and described at large since its development in the early 1980s (Lawrence, 1998, 2003, 2007; Friedman, Neri, & Pines, 2002; Van Beekum & Laverty, 2007). The SDM methodology has been applied around the world in social, corporate, organisational and political institutions.

Dreams delve into the totality of our existence, including our minds, bodies, and souls. They refer to our past, present, and future and to our existence as individual, as well as an

individual-in-community. In this context, Bion's (1961) distinction between the world of the egocentric and the world of sociocentric is important; it is the divide between narcissism and social-ism. The one-on-one container in individual therapy, focusing on interpretation of dreams, feeds into the narcissistic need for meaning of the individual. The dream is considered a personal possession. In *social* dreaming, focusing on associating to dreams, the matrix provides the container for dreams and feeds into the meaning for the collective: the dream is considered a collective possession. The matrix shifts the focus from the dreamer to the dream itself, thus allowing the possibilities of exploring the wider organisational, professional, political and social contexts. Lawrence (2003) used the metaphor of "the matrix as a womb" (p. 3), a place whence something grows, a place to question and associate, a place to move beyond the known and connect with the unknown. It is also a place where collective meaning can be explored, where dreamers dream into the context of the conference and where the dreams become part of the emerging life of the conference as a whole. By directing the focus of attention to the social systems in which the conference and its participants operate, we need to be aware that $1+1>2$ (one and one is greater than two). When two or more people engage, share lives, form a community to share dreams or gather for a conference, something comes into existence that is not exclusively the sum of the individuals involved: there is something extra, which is "a shared field, a common communicative home, which is mutually constructed" (Parlett, 1991, p. 75). It is the whole that is more than the sum of the parts. This can be referred to as "we-ness" (Tudor, 2006; Van Beekum & Laverty, 2007), an important concept in extending from the individual to the social. People are bound in relationships and communities, to which they contribute with their bodies, minds, and souls, and in which they meet others who contribute as well, thus jointly co-creating dynamics, parts of which are hidden and unconscious. Social dreaming refers to this sense of we-ness, the force that connects people consciously and unconsciously.

It became clear from the start that the experiences in the dream matrix could not be separated from the conference as a whole and vice versa. As the sessions evolved, their impact on the conference was observable. The SDM was often referred to in other events and in social contacts. On the other hand, the dynamics of the conference and even previous conferences flew into the Social Dreaming Matrix.

I had applied to be one of the 35 people to spend the nights in the whare nui of the marae, as I wanted to have a dream connection with the local ground, by being in the heart of the event. Both other conveners decided to stay overnight at private locations. The sessions were held in a canvas marquee, which was placed on the ātea, a sacred part of the marae territory. We therefore decided to apply marae protocols (such as an opening prayer) to the sessions and adapted, as we went along, the carefully built clarity about boundaries of time and territory usual to social dreaming to the protocol of the marae — a protocol of the SDM which did not go without engaging discussions among the conveners.

In the first session, two elders, living on the marae came in 20 minutes late, which represented a clash of cultures. From our agreed SDM methodological frame, a boundary was broken; from a Māori perspective, elders were entitled to go anywhere, anytime on their own territory. The terms and conditions by which this "ground" was given over to

the Conference did not change that perspective. Our exchange and discussions as convenors, in a spirit of engaging with and listening to the essence of these issues, built the working relationship that was instrumental for the containment of the work. Our hypothesis was that our bi and multi-cultural struggle as convenors had a double function: we probably both acted out and demonstrated the cultural exploits of the Conference as a whole.

The primary task of the SDM was described as: “To associate to one’s own and other participants’ dreams, which are made available to the matrix, so as to make links and find connections between private thought and collective meaning” — a description which was read out at the beginning of each of the three group meetings.

Dream Themes

When dreams are considered collective possessions and the SDM as a way of accessing the hidden collective meaning, reporting of the themes of the experience is beyond the usual ethical dimensions of individual consent. Moreover, any reporting of themes is inevitably a selection from the perspective and interpretation of the reporter — in this case I as the author of this article. For the purpose of this article, reflecting about the wealth of dreams and the meaning which entered the conference through the three sessions of the SDM, it is hard to make a choice about what to report. Every reduction of this richness feels like a betrayal of the images and input that will be left out as a result. However, I make the choice to take out and elaborate, using material from the sessions, on three dreams that were central on each of the three days.

Day one

On day one the following dream was presented:

I had a disturbing dream. I was on a journey, escaping a painful scene, where there was no appreciation for others or me. Instead, there were two authoritarian figures who told me what to do, in snippets. This ended in a bizarre image of a baby held in a microwave.

The painful scene reminded us of New Zealand’s painful journey of living with oneself and the other/Other, the bicultural challenge, with so many violations, highlighted by the Conference’s presence on a site with so much historic significance. Good experiences of making bicultural connections were overruled or even wiped out by an unappreciating reality. A wave of dreams, images and associations of home invasions followed after this dream; in the middle of this exchange two elders who lived on the Marae “invaded” the territory of the SDM, a moment which also had symbolic meaning. It triggered another dream about an image of a valued ancestral home, where one felt accepted, and where one could withdraw with the curtains closed. Tensions and fears were named: for keeping doors open, and for being available for activities that could be fertilising for cultures, also seen as couples. The marquee in which the sessions were held and where the temperature rose lightly with the climbing morning sun, was the metaphor for the microwave/

incubator, where life could be held, which would otherwise not survive — or would it prove to be a place that would kill off new life? Will the baby, which is definitely wanted, eventually be a love child or the product of violent rape? Can anything healthy grow from invasion? A story was told about an old woman who caught a young burglar after a home invasion. The woman asked him what he needed and eventually fed him before she sent him off. Can we engage with the other, let alone in a caring way, when fear for the other is so dominant, a fear of being robbed by the other of our sense of self?

The session ended with many polarities being named, such as having a boundary and still working together; the tension between the symbolism of dreaming and the harsh reality; being inbetween openness and closing off; between violence and care; and between what can be and what can't be.

Day two

On day two the following dream was presented:

I was at a BBQ, where a pig was roasted. On a closer look it seemed that the pig had the lively eyes of a man. Two people were cutting into the pig with knives, which was frightening. I stepped in and took the knives away.

The lively eyes were associated with the bright greenstone eyes in the carvings in the whare nui, looking intently, like an ancestry that never dies. Cutting meat came in another dream with the question: "Can one cut without doing harm?" Removing the knives reminded me of taking one's own authority to step into a situation and to be active or to shy away. Someone brought the image of a tooth falling out, which makes biting and stepping in so much harder. A large tree was transported on the back of a truck, to a place where it could be planted. The associations went out of the room as the doorkeeper opened the zipper of the Marquee to let someone out. Children (there was a children's programme at the Conference) became foreground for a while, with their presentation of large cardboard letters, spelling the word "YES", which was associated with the Conference hopes of finding connections and meaning, against all despair. The singing birds and the barking dogs on the marae were associated with the question whether one can speak with two different voices. Can we work with both sides of the presented polarities and take responsibility for the choices we unavoidably will make? The prefix "whaka", meaning "being in the process of ..." precedes many Māori words, but the way that some people pronounce whaka sounds like "fuck", which, when taken out of context, triggers denigrating connotations about Māori among Pākehā. In parallel, the creating and growing potential of "fucking" gets lost. This reminded me of the planting and growing of trees, especially the indigenous kauri tree of Aotearoa New Zealand. Kauri trees take 1,000 years to grow to adolescence only. How long does it take for a culture to grow or a new culture to develop? Through greedy colonisation and logging, kauri trees are now almost extinct in Aotearoa New Zealand. Is there time to grow them back? Can there be long-term development when the world is moving so fast.

The session ended with associations which returned to the image of opening doors and facing the fear of keeping them open. What happens then: invitation or violation?

Day three

On day three the following dream was presented:

I was in a large old house with many people mingling around. Someone opened a door to a room in which a young couple had a passionate embrace. Then people became furious, they came shouting while swaying sticks. A large man with a tattooed face terrified me so much that I had to leave.

This dream spoke to the essence of what the conference triggered: on the one side a wish for closeness, for passionate engaging, for creativity; on the other side the hardship or impossibility to hold this. When new life cannot be held, fear, violence and depression emerge and so, in this case, the fear was projected onto the (Māori) tattooed man. It called for people to wonder how much conflict to accept, before calling in the police as the third party authority. Internal violence within the NZAP about access to membership was mentioned in association with the metaphor of the open doors. How much easier is it to avoid conflicts and only remember nice feelings? Such polarity creates disturbance and sadness. The mention of sadness and loneliness triggered another dream to be told. It spoke about a visit to one's partner's family, where the father conditionally welcomed by handing a complicated wooden gift but the conditions remained vague. This also ended in feelings of depression. Associations were made to the conference experience on Orakei Marae where cultures got closer, where partners would be family, but also where old history and damage from history remained, as a complicated gift from the past, with no clues about how to repair the damage. The history of struggle and betrayal in relationships, including the history of Orakei Marae and Bastion Point, functioned as the metaphor for a war, which must be continued when peace is unbearable. Is there a more direct way to connect than through a complicated gift? The hope of growth is projected onto the pair in a passionate embrace who might create the hoped for offspring — but it may take a thousand years to grow to adulthood, so by now, as one participant put it: "We don't even have a driver's license."

This session, and the three sessions as a whole, ended with the image of "having had three great sleeps in the arms of my mother, who eventually pushed me away to meet the new day".

Knowing as a Defence Against Learning

The figure—ground dynamic is a *modus operandi* in social dreaming. The infinite possibilities from what is ground, hidden and unconscious can show themselves in dreams. What appears to become figure from a dream or an associating thought for a short time can quickly be deflected into other areas or directions, when other elements from the ground emerge. What is left is the ongoing oscillation between emerging and disappearing images of self and other, with questions attached about trust, vulnerability, and openness vs. distrust, toughness and being closed off. In the bicultural setting of the Conference, self and other were present and challenged both on an individual and on a social and cultural level. However, there is no self without other, nor is there other without

self; and the connector between the two is contact. Research has shown that being in contact with oneself and with the other are the two outstanding factors in finding autonomy (van Beekum & Krijgsman, 2000). Contact is a key concept in Gestalt psychology and considered the main initiator for change, in the sense that when we are really in contact with ourselves and in contact with other, change will occur (Polster & Polster, 1974). In her article, Johnson (2012) paraphrased Donna Orange (2012) from her keynote address to the 2012 NZAP Conference: “being open to the Other changes us” (Johnson, 2012, p. 242). Embracing the other firstly requires a strong self, a self which does not hide but engages; a self which can be hurt and can take responsibility for being hurting; a self which has boundaries and can let go; a self which stays connected and does not break the contact. Secondly, embracing the other requires openness to unknown territory and being willing to face one’s anxieties about that.

Participants obviously took very different experiences from the three sessions. The SDM functioned as the womb, the incubator, the arms of the mother which allowed participants to let their minds meander through the delta of intermingling dreams and associations. During the days of the Conference many spoke to us conveners, expressing the richness of the experience and the insights it stimulated. One person told me that she was grateful to have sat silently in the matrix for three days, contemplating her grief about a lost relative. I thought this to be a beautiful metaphor for the Conference as a whole: these two relatives, Māori and Pākehā, searching for each other, and then losing each other again, with an ongoing grief process as the outcome. Arguably, the figure-ground dynamic in the SDM did not lead to “closed Gestalts” and subsequent (and certain) knowing. This is because energy can switch before real contact with emerging meaning is made or before full meaning is established. As a result of all these unclosed images, the questioning and learning from what is stirred up continues after the sessions, even after the Conference. My personal criterion for a successful conference is when participants leave with more questions than they had on arrival. After all, knowing is often a defence against learning (see Raab, 1997). The focus in the SDM on the (under) ground leaves it to the participants to choose with which to connect, if any.

Postscript

As an outsider, I was fascinated by the bicultural awareness and struggle which came across during the Conference as a whole — and I, for sure, left with many more questions than I had when I arrived. My status as neither Māori or Pākehā allowed me to take up my role in the SDM and enjoy the many other events of the Conference. In ending I have a final observation about the dynamics of conflict which arose from from the proceedings of the Conference as a whole. It is a classic example of a divided community creating cohesion, when the external major boundary (Berne, 1963) is threatened. It happened at the closing of the Conference in the last large group, before the final ending with the *poroporaki*. The moderator of this large group session was Farhad Dalal, a UK-based group analyst of Indian descent, who earlier in the Conference had delivered a well-received keynote speech. He, probably unwittingly, made a paradoxical intervention which united the conference, even just for a short time. What Dalal did was to challenge

the ritual of singing at the start of the group. His open invitation to discuss this was ignored for most of the meeting, but received an attacking verbal rebuke in the last ten minutes. This attack gave the clear message that one — and certainly an outsider — cannot mess with Māori ritual protocol, which had at that time become New Zealand protocol. The subsequent and final waiata went off as a cannon-ball and was performed at the top of the participants' voices, loud and passionate by all present — Māori and Pākehā.

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