

# The relevance of social dreaming for action research: exploring jail workers' unconscious thinking of the changes in the prison organization

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Consent for publication: participants gave their consent for the use of data for research purposes. All documents, transcripts, and notes were anonymized before analysing them.

See online Appendix for Supplementary materials.

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## ABSTRACT

The contribution focuses on how dreams can be investigated as social phenomena in a manner which illuminates the role of the individual in a particular group and elucidates unconscious group processes in an organization. The article presents an experience of adopting Lawrence's social dreaming (SD) matrices in a new specific field: an Italian prison which has shifted in the last two decades from a punitive to a rehabilitative mission. The aim of the experience was twofold: i) to help jail workers, through a formative experience, gaining a deeper understanding of how the new prison environment influences their emotional experience and work functioning; ii) to collect the emotional climate, the feelings, and the critical issues among the prison staff, in order to gain insights for the authorities responsible for the regulation of correctional facility. The experience of SD included 4 matrices, involving a total of 12 participants: 7 prison officers and 5 educators. The main thematic areas emerged from the matrices are related to: trust, competence, professional identity, separateness and privacy, safety, and to the gender differences. All the themes are presented and discussed, along with dreams and free associations. The present work is, to our knowledge, the first attempt to apply the tool of social dreaming to the context of correctional facility all over the world. The described experience might serve as an example of the applicability of this mode of analytic exploration to institutions or organizations, and the contribution opens to reflection and some implications.

**Key words:** Social dreaming; field theory; social field; action research; work organization; prison workers; unconscious feelings; unconscious thinking; psychoanalysis.

## Introduction

The contribution considers the role of dreams as social phenomena in a manner which illuminates the role of the individual in a particular group and elucidates unconscious group processes in an organization. It is suggested that as such the dreams may serve as resources for investigating the unconscious functioning of social environments, and in particular institutions or work organizations.

Within this framework, this study offers an examination of the challenges of change in organizational philosophy using the prison as an example. In particular, we were interested in exploring both the group processes

and the individual's deep experience of prison workers belonging to the first prison that adopted a rehabilitation mission in Italy.

We propose to consider the transformation of the imprisonment culture that implied the rehabilitative mission and its work re-organization as a new social environment for the jail workers, who had to face new field phenomena. Within this perspective, one of the leading proponents of field theory, Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), offered a compelling framework for the study of the social field in a variety of settings.

Kurt Lewin described the individual's social role and behaviour emerging from a field of forces that constitute his/her social environment. These forces operate as social influences among group members that constitute the background environment. Lewin called this background collection of forces the social field, and it forms a 'life-space' for each individual. Lewin assumed that the life space of an individual represents a kind of potential that includes the total range of behaviours that are possible and not possible for a person in a given situation. Each change in a person's life space means either expanding or contracting the range of what that person can do or achieve (Lewin, 1936, p. 14). In this sense, the jail workers underwent a change in their life space, and we hypothesised that it implied not only a transformation of the conscious behaviours but also a possible change in the unconscious feelings and representations.

Therefore, we adopted an action research perspective, first outlined by Lewin in 1946 (in 'Action Research and Minority Problems'), that consists in 'an active moment-to-moment theorizing, data collecting and inquiry occurring in the midst of emergent structure.'

As stated by Lewin, action research is a method both for collecting data and for 'improving intergroup relations'. Within the perspective of moment-to-moment data collection, data analysis and data interpretation of the unconscious deep functioning of the jail workers who worked in the new social field of a prison with a rehabilitative mission, we chose to use the dispositive of social dreaming in order to explore the unconscious feelings and meanings experienced by jail workers as linked and emerged from the social field. The moment-to-moment theorization implies the formation of a new thought generated by the progressive reflection emerging with the contributions of each member of the thinking group. Social dreaming is a practice that is based on a structural methodology similar to the moment-to-moment of action research, where the reflection in progress can be replaced by the progression of dreams that appears in the matrix. The matrix itself (matrix is the name that Lawrence gave to the field in which the social dreaming event takes place), has the form of a background in many ways quite similar to the platform on which Lewin based his action on the group.

'Social dreaming' is the name given to a particular

method of sharing dreams and associations to those dreams in a group of individuals specifically gathered for that purpose. Social dreaming was 'discovered' by W. Gordon Lawrence (1934-2013) in 1982 at the Tavistock Institute in London (Lawrence & Daniel, 1982; Lawrence, 1989, 1991).

Lawrence's working hypothesis was that the shared dreams reflect a collective cultural product that contains reference to a social unconscious reality in its manipulated form that, depending on the operating defence mechanism, could be repress, displace or even dissociated or denied. And at the same time his working hypothesis was that shared dreams reflect something that is present in the living daily world, but that for many reasons that can be seen as resistances or expressions of some collective denial phenomena, it is not registered by the conscious attention of the community, and nevertheless could be important to underline. Lawrence explicitly stated that the social dreaming elaboration process 'gives shape to the echoes of the thoughts which exist in the space between the minds of individuals living in the social environment' (Lawrence, 2005, p. 14), with a direct reference to Jung's collective unconscious, archetypes, and the use of free association and amplification in working with dreams, particularly among people who shared a same cultural or social environment (Jung, 1969). Thus, Lawrence's social dreaming took up Jung's idea of dreams that are not only related to the individual but that may have a much broader meaning reflecting the collective unconscious. Moving from the classical Freudian approach to dream in a drive-causal perspective as a manipulated expression of a desire that should be interpreted, Jung considers the dream as a representation of the unconscious mind, with a prospective-function: the dream is something that could help the person come up with a solution to a problem faced in the conscious state of mind, a path towards an expansion of consciousness that transcends the individual consciousness and becomes universal consciousness. Lawrence shared this approach to dream conceptualizing social dreaming as a process in which the collective meaning is revealed allowing the unconscious thinking from the dream to emerge.

However, Lawrence's development and conceptualization of social dreaming was not limited to Jung's perspective and was grounded in the psychoanalytic theories, starting from John Rickman's (1891-1951) and Wilfred Ruprecht Bion's (1897-1979) work on Groups (the Northfield Experiments). The Northfield Experiments (Harrison & Clarke, 1992) referred to the two rehabilitation group experiences for soldiers suffering from neurosis that took place between 1942 and 1948 at Hollymoor Hospital, Northfield, Birmingham. In his experiences with groups, Bion elaborated his epistemological position on dreaming: while in considering the pair relationship of the participants in the group the focus is egocentric with the

vertex of Oedipus, a complementary perspective is to focus on how the group arrives at knowledge through experiencing both the inner and the outer world of the group. In this perspective, the focus of the dream is socio-centric, the aim is 'epistemophilic' (dreaming as the pursuit of knowledge), that in some way is close to the Jungian prospective function of the dream.

Lawrence took from Bion's though the idea that to deal with the transaction between the known and the unknown is crucial thinking of our experience of the world as an object that is capable of being known. Lawrence's proposal of social dreaming originated from this Bionian position: 'Whereas Freudian dreaming is egocentric in orientation, social dreaming is socio-centric because it is concerned with individuals relating to their social world, with all the complications of political and economic realities. The idea of Sphinx was central to the discovery of social dreaming because the focus was on dreaming as thinking' (Lawrence, 2003, p. 615). Thus, Lawrence drew the equivalence between dreaming and thinking from the work of Meltzer (1984) and outlines the relevance of Bion's alpha function as the process of thinking that transform Beta elements in conscious thinking and reasoning; in this sense, the function of the dream was to synthesize fragmented elements of emotional experience into a whole. We could say that social dreaming is an attempt to invent a new alpha function by connecting dreams that otherwise, as far as they remain single ones, cannot be useful to explore social reality.

Moreover, Lawrence's concept of 'matrix' was drawn from Sigmund Foulkes (1898-1976) who first developed the concept of the 'group matrix' (Foulkes, 1964): the group is a whole, a living organism that has own moods and reactions, that owns one characteristic spirit and generates specific atmospheres and affective climates.

Further, there are interesting parallels between Lawrence's framing of the group matrix and the psychoanalytic development of Field Theory, as introduced by the Barangers (Baranger & Baranger, 1961-1962) and further developed by Ferro (Ferro & Civitarese, 2015). This conceptual path shows in a particular ex post way the psychoanalytic nature of the first experiments during the war with the soldiers and how a unique and very new way of looking at groups present in psychoanalysis must merge to a dramatic event that was occurring in those times.

Beyond psychoanalysis, Lawrence's work was profoundly influenced by Charlotte Beradt's (1968) *The Third Reich of Dreams*, a book reporting the dreams of ordinary German citizens during the period of the Nazi rise to power. The dreams reflected the citizens' intuitive but unconscious foreknowledge of the Nazi regime's intentions (Manley, 2014). The examination of dreams of Jewish patients living in Germany at that time seemed to have the same direction as Lawrence himself wrote 'All the dreams show a tropism, or direction (Bion, 1992: 35)

towards the object of persecution and annihilation' (Lawrence, 2003: 616). The Beradt's compelling research inspired Lawrence's early work with the Tavistock psychoanalyst Patricia Daniel on Social Dreaming groups.

In this sense, social dreaming has been applied at different social contexts (*e.g.*, institutions, work organizations, ethnic groups, political dilemmas located in geographical critical or war zones, hospital's reorganization, *etc.*) both with a heuristic and a transformative purpose; and it has also been applied in the universities with a pure research aim. The application of social dreaming to institutions and organizations was gradually developed by Lawrence and other researchers from the idea that to better understand an organization, it might be necessary to take into consideration the dream life of the people who are part of it. They therefore employed the technique of social dreaming in various situations: business consultancy, refresher courses, conferences. These experiences of using social dreaming to understand groups, institutions, or organizations lean on some principles, which are clearly identified by Neri (2002). First, the conception of dream as a 'container'. At certain stages of an organization's life, tensions and conflicts might arise. In these phases, often, a large amount of energy is used to find 'answers'. Instead, it could be more profitable allow the 'questions' present in the institution to develop. To do this, it is crucial to have a suitable container in which questions can develop, and that allows people to relate to them and process them. Dreams can represent such a container and social dreaming the suitable technique (Tatham & Morgan, 1998). A second fundamental idea is related to the existence of different levels in social and mental institutions, one of which is the level of the dream. Third, social dreaming might offer a new and different perspective to approach conflicts in groups, as it favours not to 'understand each other', but to 'understand'. That is, to see the same dream (or the same question) from perspectives that can be different and even opposed.

The utility of social dreaming in gaining new understanding in consultation to businesses or organizations has been widely highlighted (Biran, 1999; Caldironi, Ghedin, & Marogna, 2015; Lawrence, 2001; Long, 2013). However, as for our knowledge, social dreaming has never been applied to the prison context yet. Social dreaming experiences gave often expression to issues known in the organization which had never been publicly stated. Dreams illustrated what was taking place in the organization's life at the time and highlighted the current group emotional climate. Therefore, the function of adopting social dreaming among work organizations is to help participants make a creative use of their unconscious awareness to find new ways of thinking about their work environment.

Within this complex framework, we decided to use social dreaming among prison workers belonging to the

first prison that adopted a rehabilitation mission in Italy.

The aim of the present work was twofold: i) the social dreaming was used as a formative experience for jail workers to help them to gain a deeper understanding of how the new prison environment influences their emotional experience and work functioning, especially regarding their roles and professional well-being; ii) the experience was also used to collect the emotional climate, the work dynamics, and the critical issues among the prison staff, in order to gain insights for the authorities responsible for the regulation of correctional facility.

The present work is, to our knowledge, the first attempt to apply the dispositive of social dreaming to the context of correctional facility all over the world.

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## Materials and Methods

### Social dreaming: theoretical and methodological insights

The primary task of a social dreaming experience is to share dreams and to associate to one's own and other participants dreams, in order to produce links, find connections, and eventually create new thoughts. These new thoughts are supposed to arise from a shared social unconscious that is made available during the social dreaming experience.

The methodological assumptions for the social dreaming sessions were: the dreams generated in the matrix are the shared property of the dreaming community; the focus is on the dream, not on the dreamer, which facilitates development of a safe 'mental space'; and ascertaining dream meaning was approached with the attitude of a 'working hypothesis'.

A session of social dreaming is usually composed by 2 moments: first, the dream-sharing event (called 'matrix'), followed by a post-matrix event.

During the matrix, participants freely share their night dreams but also images and associations that come up to their mind, without any active intervention (*e.g.*, any interpretation or clarification) by the matrix convenors (called 'hosts') (Lawrence, 2003).

One aspect of the work, which strongly characterizes Social Dreaming, is research social elements that emerge in dreams. It is about figuring out if dreams and dreams associations provide useful elements to understand some aspects of the social and/or organization environment to which the participants belong and highlight the images and other social elements of dreams. The work related to this aspect like the others, it always happens through the identification of patterns and not through the interpretation of content. The hosts take care that the setting rules are respected. The hosts leave to participants the task of associating, finding meanings and identifying allegories and symbols. They intervene to facilitate the work, but do not propose interpretations that concern

group dynamics or the formation of subgroups. The hosts interventions are always based on what is evident.

### Context: the transformation of the imprisonment culture from a punitive to a rehabilitative mission in an Italian prison

The punitive philosophy of correction is grounded on the idea that the offender is guilty for a crime and that he/she has to be punished for it, without considering the degree to which the person himself/herself can know it or notice it or be sorry for it and consequently without particular attention to how to set the penalty so that it can favour the elaboration of the specific criminal conduct. In terms of objectives, it implies putting the offender within the confines of a close cell in order for one to think about the crime he/she committed; in this perspective, incarceration is only a way to serve the sentence, to be punished, without any purposes of improvement of skills or competencies, or personal growth. Prisons with a punitive mission have strict and rigid rules, confined spaces, and few activities to do; in these organizations, jail workers are supposed to adopt controlling and severe behaviours with a military-like style ('You get what you deserve' mindset) as their task is to control the prisoners, keeping calm and avoiding aggressive behaviour, with little attention to the prisoners' wellbeing.

By adopting a rehabilitative mission, the primary goal of incarceration becomes to reduce recidivism. Rehabilitation offers the chance to reflect on one's own crime, to learn about his/her debilitating problems, and provides the opportunity to learn how to change one's own behaviour in order to not commit crimes again and to become a productive member of the society. In terms of objectives and effective new practices, this different basic framework implies a daily life more spent in group situations than in cell situations; it implies the institutional condition of the 'open cells', very different from the classical condition of the closed cells: the space of freedom within the prison situation is the ward, the corridor and no longer the cell. The transformation in spaces implies a greater and lasting exchange with the prison operators, that is, the possibility of walking in the corridors and meeting agents, social workers, psychologists, and exchange walking words, instead of seeing these people only in protected and safe situations. This change produced a transformation of the work the jail workers: it involves working outside the first walls of the prison, in open spaces, fields, vegetable gardens; it implies being able to work in factories inside the prison or managing or co-managing the canteen, the restaurant; it implies contributing to a certain extent to the construction of a common project within a certain section of the prison.

The philosophy of correction varies across countries all over the world.

In Italy, the landscape of prisons is complex and

diversified across regions and cities. Despite the Italian law in the 1986 declared to foster a re-educational and re-socializing logic of incarceration, actually very few institutions have implemented in their organization a rehabilitative mission and the majority of institutions still adopt a punitive, custody-oriented perspective and organization.

The prison that first adopted a rehabilitative mission in 1994 is an institution in the northern Italy. This institution represents a new perspective in the Italian prison system for its rehabilitative culture and administrative choice compared with more conventional punitive prisons. The prison life is therefore organized to pursue this goal: detainees benefit from respectable life conditions (*e.g.*, open cells), numerous rehabilitative activities (*e.g.*, possibility to study in order to take a diploma or a degree, possibility to learn skills), and excellent possibilities of a working and social re-insertion, with the chance of developing or discovering some kind of social feelings, like the sense of guilty and the sense of reparation (*e.g.*, possibility to go out of the prison for working). In turn, prisoners are expected to give value to this 'trust' with their active participation in prison life, that is mainly lived in an open-cells reality. This kind of rehab path implies the detainees' subscription and a recurring assessment by educators and specialists, and psychotherapists among them. For example, prisoners are encouraged to develop occupational skills and to resolve psychological problems (such as substance abuse or aggression) that might interfere with their reintegration into society. These inmates' management practices obviously involve strong consequences on the work of the people in charge of their custody and detention, who are asked first to perform this strong routine change in their daily work practices. How do the jail workers feel the change in prison culture, that implied a change in their work mission and work activities? Are there any inner unconscious consequences for the work functioning and dynamics?

In trying to answer to these questions, we found that combining the principles of Lewin's action research with a psychoanalytic perspective might be a way for investigating the unconscious deep functioning of that sample of jail workers. In doing this effort, we found that the theoretical and methodological device of social dreaming fitted with our purposes.

### Participants and data collection

Data collection took place in a local prison in an urban setting in northern Italy (the prison 'Casa di Reclusione di Milano Bollate'), the first prison in Italy that adopted a rehabilitative philosophy. The prison is a category B prison (medium security), with about 1200 prisoners and 430 jail workers (of whom 94% are prison officers). We gained permission to hold social dreaming encounters within the jail workers from the prison governor. The experience of social dreaming was offered, with an open formula, to all

prison workers (prison officers, educators), through various announcements (both on paper leaflet and email remind) send by the prison governor office. It included 4 appointments in the period between April and May 2018.

The participation was on voluntary basis and each person could freely decide to participate to one or all the encounters; participants gave their consent for the use of data for research purposes. The experience of social dreaming included a total of 12 participants: 7 prison officers (all males), of which one was an inspector, and 5 educators (one male and four females). The participants were all Italian, coming from different Italian regions.

Each encounter was conducted following the methodological assumptions of social dreaming. It lasted around 90 minutes: the first part was occupied by the matrix, the second by the post-matrix discussion. Two hosts facilitated the encounters (CC and EM) and a researcher (LB) took verbatim notes of all contents.

### Data analysis

Lawrence explicitly stated that the SD elaboration process 'gives shape to the echoes of thought and the thoughts which exist in the space between the minds of individuals living in the social environment'; Lawrence, 2005, p. 14). As written by Mersky (2019) 'By offering hypotheses linking dream material, hosts seek to illuminate the collective unconscious of the matrix, which may either prompt new dream material or free associations and amplifications connected to these hypotheses'. Thus, through the use of free associations and amplification, researchers elaborated the proposal of themes emerged from the matrices. Each matrix and post matrix discussion were detailed transcribed. Researchers (LB and CC) discussed and shared impressions, thought and opinions at the end of each encounter. The analysis process proceeded during the course of each matrix and post-matrix event. Moreover, in order to come up with 'themes' of unconscious thinking that emerged from the social dreaming experience, the hosts discussed their hypotheses before the final stage of data collection (third and fourth matrices) and then tried to verify if the themes that have emerged from the interpretation process were also present in the last matrices. At the end of the four encounters, the emerged themes were then discussed in depth adopting a triangular approach (a third researcher - EV- was involved), to reach an agreement on the themes.

In this context of three-level opening of reflection and interpretation, the use of dreams by the hosts remains a use of a psychoanalytic perspective where the manifest content is looked at in its functions as a mask of a latent content, both by looking for its metaphors and using the symbolic view, either by looking for a thread that links the dreams that emerged one after the other. The particular task with regard to this use of a psychoanalytical perspective on dreams in the context of a social dreaming matrix, is to transform classical interpretations of dreams

addressed to one person into ideas that can favour a relational and social interpretation addressed to a community of people in the framework of an institution.

## Results

In the Supplementary materials the whole first session of social dreaming event (matrix and post matrix events) is illustrated, in order to provide a repeatable example of the whole process. It was attended by 9 participants (5 male agents and 4 educators, 1 male and 3 females).

The main thematic areas that emerged from the first matrix and social dreaming session were expanded and repeated in the other three sessions, and the following themes emerged: trust, competence, professional identity, separateness and privacy, safety, and to the gender differences. Table 1 shows an overview of the main themes and the associated aspects and feelings.

### The theme of trust

The theme of trust emerges as related both to the relationship with prisoners and with colleagues.

With regards to the interaction with the detainees, the problem of how to move with prisoners who betray trust and trust pacts emerges.

The following dream is the first told by a participant at the beginning of the first matrix: *'I am taking part in a public competition for educators with colleagues, in 2004 ... after the test there is a refreshment with a plate of defrosted meat, a tray, the taste is bad ... the tray is full of pieces of meat, at the sight they look beautiful ... but they went bad'*.

During the discussion, this though emerges: *'You are asked to trust the criminals ... but ... if they were good people they would not be here'*.

As for the relationship with colleagues, sometimes the issue of trust can spill over the effort to feel colleagues as allies and not as people to look at.

*'When I was young I dreamed that a dog was chasing me ... I jumped the hurdles, I was afraid, like a phobia ... then a friend of mine took a dog ... and I took it too ... and now everything is different ... In fact, now I'm too confident, I risk to put my hands in the dog's mouth and making me bite'*.

This dream is very powerful and we hypothesize it related to the new prison environment, in which jail workers are supposed to trust prisoner: the image of the dog, with its unconditional love and fidelity, represents a symbol of loyalty and reliability (Hillman & McLean, 1997), but in the dream the excess of trust was seen as dangerous.

### The theme of competence and weakness

This theme is articulated and emerged along with the fear of not possessing the knowledge necessary to face this new type of prison, which includes new tasks for which participants do not feel competent and prepared.

Along this line, the experience of *conflict and weakness* emerges. For example, the group has discussed about the participation, noting that there was no willingness to participate in events like this: participating in events on emotions were seen as risky because colleagues might consider this choice a weakness: emotions could be a weakness. After this discussion, the following dream appears: *'I still work at the previous department, I look for an inmate, I ask another department if they know where he is, but nobody answers me on the phone, then I personally go to ask for him; I find all the inmates in a meeting with the doctor ... behind them there are all my colleagues sprawled on comfortable*

**Table 1. Overview of the themes emerged from the social dreaming matrices, along with associated aspects and feelings.**

Emergent themes	Associations and feelings that emerged as linked to the theme
Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In relation with prisoners</li> <li>- In relation with colleagues</li> </ul>
Competence and weakness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflict and weakness</li> <li>- Incompetence</li> <li>- Relationship with the new prison culture (demilitarization process)</li> </ul>
Professional identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Crisis of the professional identity</li> <li>- Sense of job confusion</li> <li>- Afterlife and sense of orphanhood</li> <li>- Sense of horror vacui and a fear of emptiness (<i>i.e.</i>, how to occupy the time in a way that is meaningful; lack of the task of solving problems)</li> </ul>
Privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Desire for separateness and privacy</li> <li>- Nostalgia</li> <li>- Missing a physical place</li> <li>- Claustrophobia</li> </ul>
Safety	Not feeling safe in prison
Gender	Relationship between feminine and masculine

*chairs that laughed and behind them there is the sea ... I think I'm worrying and they are at the beach ...*'.

A thread runs through these data: a new way of conceiving imprisonment, no longer based on punishment, but on rehabilitation, can provoke a feeling of *incompetence* towards new tasks and, consequently, a disappointment both towards prisoners, who do not respect pacts based on trust, and towards colleagues, who are less supportive with their peers and sometimes more supportive with the prisoners.

Moreover, participants told some dreams that seemed to reveal a sensation of unpreparedness, of strange situations which they were not able to understand, and a sense of danger. The following dreams appeared: *'I was with a friend, I had to throw myself from a building, and he said to me 'come on, you can glide' ... I threw myself but on his shoulders ... then another, an elderly colleague, threw himself with a board and glided to the first floor but he missed it ... this was a habit ... I thought that I could not always be so afraid. ... and I said to the inspectors 'Why don't you give us a parachute, or a wingsuit!'*'.

*'I was in the barrack, there were the family members of the agents as guests... they took a swim in the pool and I thought 'here only people who need to come should be admitted'*'.

*'When I was a child I had nightmares, I dreamed cemeteries, or I dreamed I fell from the trees, or I was chased by a person, and the door did not open, and this person put his hand on my shoulder ... it's a trauma'*.

These feelings seem to be connected to the theme of the *relationship with the new prison culture* and of the change from a militarized structure, to the new demilitarized structure; in this new structure the prisoner is no longer a problem ... and the agents are no longer a military body.

This culture of rehabilitation that replaces the culture of punishment, although it is not new from the historical point of view, preserves an aspect of innovation that is not easy to absorb, because of the consequences it produces in daily life inside the prison, and for the manner in which one perceives one's professional identity.

### **The theme of professional identity**

A sort of crisis of the *professional identity* seems to be connected to the new mission of the rehabilitative prison: within the new prison culture, agents did not feel anymore a military body, they have difficulty relocating them in the new professional role, they got lost, no longer knowing who they are.

Dreams like *'rushed into empty'* emerged. *'I did not fall into the abyss, but I dreamed that I was moving further and further away, in a horizontal line, and nothing could be seen anymore, I was getting smaller ... my figure was gradually fading'*.

In the free associations, the impression of some agents is not to be recognized in their role as operators with

complex tasks and no longer only devoted to control; and the impression of educators is that they have not yet been distinguished, for now, by the historical tasks of religious figures and psychologists.

A sense of *job confusion* also emerges, due to the greater indefiniteness of the new roles, with respect to which the need for more precise objectives and competences is perceived; this change of job, associated with confusion of tasks and the undefined professional identity (which also has an impact on personal identity) scares. On this line appears the following dream *'I go to the mountains, in a huge store of objects made of wood ... the clerk is one of my former college mate, a very ambitious person who wanted to assert herself... she was a lawyer, then she went to a small city in mountain because she married a man from there ... then this marriage went wrong but she remained there ... as she was telling me her story the owner of the shop arrives and treats her badly because she drops an object. ... I try to defend her but I understand that I cannot do anything, I'm very sorry for her; I think, knowing her, that she was a rebel, but she suffers and does not say anything ... I leave the store ... I think people change a lot and that this woman was all different ... now she is terrified'*.

Along this line, associations were made regarding the *afterlife* and a *sense of orphanhood* also emerged from the dreams: the dearly departed return frequently in dreams (*'a whirlwind of white light, the grandmother who died at the bottom of the light, tells me 'come with me', I say no I'm afraid'*). These dreams evoke an impression of working in an afterlife, in relation to the external world of free men; at the same time, dreams about the dead may concern the feeling of orphanhood, the fact that in a new prison atmosphere one feels orphans of the old atmosphere and old knowledge.

Along this line, a sense of *horror vacui* and a *fear of emptiness* emerged: this feeling presents itself with different facets: *'being suspended in limbo'*, *'wondering what to do and how to occupy time in a way that is meaningful'*, the fact of no longer having problems to solve, enemies to fight. In response to these feelings, an agitation to action emerges, a sort of action as a response to *'not being able not to do'*.

This is a point of formidable scope that struggles to appear in all its evidence, but nevertheless works on these people's psychic hold. Prison is a firm place, it is the most stable place in the world, it must be still, one must know that the prisoners do not move, they remain in that place. And for this reason, it is a closed place, it is still and closed, forever.

Within this perspective, the prison is pushed into the field of things that have no development, and that cannot change their nature, and this dual physiognomy ascribes to this place a highly disturbing characteristic and throws it into the field of non-meaning understood as the field of non-direction. There is no sense here because there is no

direction. This is not going anywhere. And therefore, in this context of meaning the theme of horror vacui is certainly exacerbated.

The atmosphere of prison seemed to be felt in a strange way: the prison is no longer the hell and it is not the heaven, now it is a limbo where there is nothing to do except wait, with the feeling that you will have to remain forever to carry out this practice that looks like to an anaesthesia. *'I dreamed the fear of dying ... I was like dead and I dreamed it would last forever; I would be forever in that limbo, and I wondered how long it would last ...'*

The urgency of how to occupy the time in a way that is meaningful emerged: it seems to be related with more specificity to the agents, and in this regard an effective metaphor is the evocation of the film 'The Profession of Arms', in which the problem of the commander Giovanni de Medici and his soldiers is to invent an enemy to endure everyday life. Agents may feel they no longer have an enemy ... *'the point is that once we helped each other in prison because we have a common enemy, while now we are no longer a military body'*.

For example, a task previously assigned to the surveillance agent was that of the continuous administration of evasion attempts, while now the prisoner no longer needs to escape, since it is sufficient to wait for permission to leave. In a demilitarized regime, the crucial task to which the agent was dedicated failed. This has implied that, on one hand, agents may feel their skills are useless in the new context of work, and, on the other hand, they should perform new tasks and should have new skills for which they have not been trained, feeling that emerged from the recurrence of dreams of having the maturity.

In the new prison culture, the concern regarding how to occupy the professional time is linked to the lack of the task of solving problems.

*'Another thing that happens in dreams is having a problem that I cannot solve during the dream and I want to solve it while I'm sleeping ... once I resolved during the dream, while now I wake up and I feel bad because it is as if to solve the problem I had to unplug, like with computers when they do not work'*.

*'In a shop I met a shop assistant who was once a colleague (educator) of mine, a capable and authoritative woman, and now she bends without vitality and reactivity to the bullying that the manager gives her following a clumsy gesture that determines the breaking of an item for sale, due to the fact that she is not competent in that new activity as she was in the previous activity, but also due to the fact that she is now unmotivated, while at one time she had passion and motivation to act, to provide, to solve clear and precise problems'*.

### The theme of privacy

The theme of the desire for *separateness and privacy* of the place emerges (the place of today which is a sort of

'non-place' and the place of the past, which is the place of return); the theme of nostalgia, the theme of the place and the theme of claustrophobia are linked to it.

The theme of *nostalgia* is particularly evident in association with the workplaces of the past, like a sort of idealization of the past that has turned into a kind of lost paradise: the regret of not having a place, a desk in those past places, reflects the inner experience of not having a proper precise place even now (*'I went to work in the morning, it was nice, I drove in the woods ... I arrived at the block house of this prison, where I saw an agent of the previous prison ... everything was different ... I arrive at my office but it's like the one in the other prison, which was smaller than the current one ... and besides being smaller it's very crowded, there are so many desks, my desk is busy'*).

Within this associative chain the theme of the *place* also emerges (*'I dreamed of going back to the old institute ... but it was all out of place, and all the furniture had changed .. a wall that divided the room now in the dream was gone'*). This theme reflects, in the comparison with the past, the current experience of missing a physical space that is private, separate and secure (*'In the new prison culture the clear separation and distinction between prisoners and workers has disappeared, so that we live side by side with the inmates ... the cells are open, we can be held hostage in our own office'*).

Place and separateness were associated with another emotional experience we have verbalized as *claustrophobia*: from dreams and associations, the inner experience of a sort of claustrophobia emerges, along with feelings of isolation and disorientation; participants seem to refer to the lack of a private place and to the impossibility of a temporary way out, as can be inferred from a film that is remembered in the associative flow of the matrix (In this film they were on an island and could not leave with a ship).

Along this line, the theme of the sense of double confinement inside the prison has been identified, as there is no longer any way to have moments for themselves, there are no more pauses as they could have in the past.

### The theme of safety

In connection with these new fears, new skills, and the feeling of claustrophobia due to the lack of a reserved place, the issue of *safety and not feeling safe in prison* also emerges: in the new open cell system *'you can always find an inmate in office'*. The new concept of 'dynamic security' may seem paradoxical because an increase in responsibility does not correspond to greater protection, activating the sensations of exploitation, insecurity or threat in the prison workers. *'If I hear a scream on the 4th floor; I have to go away from the first floor, and then the first floor is unguarded ... and then you cannot close the door on the first floor because if you need help your colleagues could not help you if the door is closed.'*



### The theme of gender: the relationship between feminine and masculine

This theme was expressed speaking about the *relationship between male and female operators* in the prison. The female perspective expressed the sense of fatigue to be a woman working in the new prison, a place in which, with the advent of open cells, the presence in prison environments, corridors, departments is always marked by constant physical coexistence, accompanied by the sensation to be always watched (*'I was on duty, I looked out of the window and there was a girl doing the striptease ... I was looking at her... she's a colleague's sister ... she's a dark complexion ... and I was wondering? She is the sister of a colleague and she is dark? Probably from Sardinia ...'*).

Moreover, the theme also emerges at a more abstract and symbolic level: beyond a formal acceptance, the shared feeling seemed to be that in prison the atmosphere can only be regulated by the masculine code, the canon of the authority and the rude force. It seems that there is no way to be regulated by the respect of the relational pacts, as if there was little space for the Feminine within the prison institution (feminine associated with the care of the other, relations, the emotional world) (*'... I went with a colleague in the women's department because something strange happened, I do not remember what ... but it was a special situation because usually we (men) do not enter the women's department'*).

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### Discussion

In the present contribution, we would like to depict an experience of the use of social dreaming as a tool of action research in a context in which, to our knowledge, has never been used before: the prison. Moreover, our inquiry addresses a specific jail organization that, among the first in the Italian context, has undergone a radical transformation of its principles and its mission, in order to comply with legal obligations.

The experience conducted with jail workers included four meetings of social dreaming sessions in which participants gave free reign to their dreams and fantasies/images. Through this method, we tried to help the group members give form to their professional experiences, but also to get information valuable for the prison authority. Certain themes turned up, mainly circulating around feelings of insecurity, helplessness and exposure, and we briefly discussed them in relation to the change of imprisonment culture, but also in relation to the new (and possibly 'odd') experience of being in a group discussing dreams.

The new asset of prison, along with the modification of the 'culture of prison' that has moved from punishment to rehabilitation reductions, has led to various consequences in the jail organization.

The new culture of rehabilitation might be seen as a new form of mind, a new perspective that prison workers are supposed to spouse and to behave accordingly to, despite it has been in some way imposed from the outside (that is from a law).

The elaboration of a new thought depends on how ready the context is to embrace it. The ability of an organizational context to survive, evolve, or succumb to a new thought depends on the quality of the context, the emotions that permeate it, and, ultimately, on the capacity to elaborate it and introject it.

Adopting this perspective, the culture of rehabilitation might be seen as a sort of Bionian beta element, an 'undigested fact' stored in the form of sensuous and affective impressions in which psychic and physical are yet indistinguishable (Bion, 1962: 7). As such, they can only be dealt with by projective identification as a form of primitive communication. They are unavailable for thought and consciousness until they are transformed by alpha function that is by the interpretation of the selected fact in order to become recycled as genuine memories which can then acquire the possibility of re-transcription and be forgotten or recalled. The experience of social dreaming for prison workers who decided to participate might have represented an occasion of learning from an emotional experience that is indeed a re-transcription so that 'the mind builds itself, bit by bit, by digesting experiences' (Meltzer, 1984: 42).

In this light, the themes emerged from the four matrices seem to be related to an underlying identity issue.

The experience of social dreaming might promote an elaboration process, like a re-transcription of participants' affective sensations related to the new rehabilitative mission of their work organization into a more conscious way in which they perceive themselves, their transformed professional role and their identity.

In this sense, Gordon Lawrence's 'social dreaming theory' and 'social dreaming matrix' (Lawrence, 2003; Lawrence & Daniel, 1982) offer not only a way of accessing the social unconscious through communal dream-sharing, but may also serve, in its group-as-a-whole (Bion, 1961) method, as a 'container,' in the Bionian sense, for enhancing professional identity of jail workers by facilitating insight into work and its value. This point could be further elaborated in future researches, for example measuring the outcome (in this case, the professional identity) before and after the matrices in order to evaluate the transformative process through the social dreaming experience.

Moreover, the experience presented, as an action research, provides a great number of insights and information that might be discussed with the jail director, in order to improve the functioning of the organization. As highlighted by Neri (2002), the social dreaming experience could serve as a 'container' of conflicts that might arise in the organization and at the same time could

provide a way to find an answer in a creative manner, by contemplating different (and even opposite) perspectives within the same group or organization.

A further dimension of this experience should be highlighted, starting from a theoretical datum concerning social dreaming, a datum that takes its cue from the conceptual tradition of the 'here and now' which psychoanalysis has gradually relied on for its construction of a clinic theory. Social dreaming originated in a conceptual context, in a time frame, and in a place, London, in which the Kleinian culture prevailed and Bion's new language emerged with vigour. In this light, the social dreaming describes not only the feelings that the matrix shares, but at the same time describes the feelings that the matrix is feeling with respect to itself. The group of people involved in the ambition to share dreams and associations are also invested by fears, hopes, perplexities, disorientations related to the very fact of being there at that moment to do that strange thing. And if for a group of psychologists, it may be less bizarre to find oneself at a certain point sharing dreams in a room placed in chairs in a strange way, for a group of prison workers, it can be very bizarre, or even scandalous or a bearer of shame. Then, all the themes that have been highlighted might also be seen as themes linked to the feelings that gradually emerged linked to that strange experience of sharing dreams. The incompetence, trust, weakness, privacy, orphanhood, emptiness, security, can all be seen as emotions in the field while experiencing that situation: 'Am I able to bring sufficiently good dreams (competence)? What will be done with my dreams (trust)? Are they safe, or will they send - the staff of this prison - me away after interpreting and discovering my hidden world (security, privacy)? And what do we do with dreams? Which are completely ephemeral elements (the emptiness of meaning)?

But just at this level, and returning with a note that was made at the beginning of the work, the social dreaming can be constituted as an experience that in itself proposes to the people who perform it, and in particular to people engaged in a prison, a type of contact 'with me' and 'with me in my work' and 'with me in my relationship with my colleagues' that otherwise is not given to them, it is not possible for them. Dealing with dreams and discovering that dreams can have a value, become a chance to access an unusual consideration towards one's own psyche, and towards one's own sensibility, that, in a place like the prison, are frequently kept apart, or, more precisely, considered as a danger, the expression of a weakness, or the expression of being one unfit to live in such an environment.

Participants during the social dreaming have suddenly done the experience of dreaming together: nothing diminutive happens to make it, and, on the contrary, common themes are discovered, and a new type of training to practice their psyches has been experienced.

This type of practice, when it becomes shared and extended to a work group, immediately favours the quality of relationships within the team, the ability to express oneself and not only to protect oneself, to admit one's moods and not to deny them, to say their own thoughts and not just their own uniforms, to get in the field with their own ambivalences and their own differences and not only with flags or with the popular mentality linked to their respective professions.

In this particular respect, we can hypothesize that events of this type favour, using Bion's metaphor, the passage from a culture based on the basic assumption to a culture based on the work group (Bion, 1961).

Finally, we can assume that the social dreaming experience might help the participants to become familiar with the meaning of their work, with the cultural framework and not only the contingent matter on their work. This is a largely invisible function that involves every profession and has a high value from the point of view of making doing work a valuable activity. However, many working practices are carried out as if they were habits to perform, rituals to be fulfilled to obtain the reward at the end of the day. This lack of a cultural framework, this lack of a frame of meaning assigned to 'doing everyday' ends up configuring it as an intrusion into one's life rather than an aspect of it. In particular, we can assume that this emotional destiny, in which everyday life is restricted, is valid for professions whose functions and meaning within the imaginary social scenario are less visible, less spectacular, more tiring. This is certainly the case, as we will be able to see, among others, of professions that take place within the prison.

We believe we have faced an important topic, like the change of prison strategy and the related experience of prison workers from an innovative psychoanalytic perspective through the method of social dreaming.

Indeed, the application of social dreaming to the jail context is the first attempt to explore how a change of imprisonment culture might have implications for both the group dynamics and the individual's professional identity from a psychoanalytic perspective. The use of social dreaming in action research seems to facilitate what Lewin (1946) refers to the 'active moment-to-moment theorizing, data collecting and inquiry occurring in the midst of emergent structure'.

Moreover, we believe that social dreaming is a reflective and potentially changing experience in itself for participants as it was a way to get at shared rich unconscious materials, reflecting deep internal concerns, in an environment like prison felt as inscrutable and inaccessible.

Finally, it was possible to see how the dream, if seen as an expression of the person, can become a way to help that person to gradually become more familiar with the way in which his/her mind works, and with the fact that emotions are related to judgments and facts and are not a

separate field from them; that is, the inside and the outside are closely connected and are not two split dimensions, for example split according to the prejudice that the inside is female and the outside is male.

It has been possible to see, that carrying the dream within a traditionally male institution manages to modify the culture of that institution, making it capable of losing its aptitude to perceive the male and the female as two opposite emotional alignments, and helping her to perceive them as two complements of a complex emotional unity, that is, two aspects, two declinations of the same sensitivity.

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