

The extended unconscious group field and metabolization of the pandemic experience: dreaming together to keep cohesion alive

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ABSTRACT

Working with dreams in groups allows an understanding of phenomena that characterise the unconscious as a total unity. The dreamer becomes the vehicle of emotions, fantasies, and anxieties that dominate the group at a given moment, allowing them to be understood and processed. The analysis of shared dreams can further our understanding of emotional concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its psychological repercussions. Six sessions of social dreaming were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Our aim was not to investigate differences between and within groups: the analysis was performed by identifying the core themes encompassing the contents of dreaming sessions, as products constructed by and within groups that are informative of society's collective unconscious more broadly. The narratives were transcribed and thematic analysis was performed with the support of Atlas.ti software. Three main themes were identified: i) nightmares' descriptions and the links with the COVID-19 pandemic; ii) loss of control within the unexpected outbreak: the pandemic as a learned helplessness context and environmental mastery as an emergent psychological issue; and iii) recalls of the child-past as continuity-makers within the continuity-breaking pandemic present. Through the qualitative analysis of dream narratives, we identified the links between individuals and the shared field. It is arguable that, by sharing dreams, the members of the group develop meanings useful to process the painful experience that unites them, as the three main themes show.

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Introduction

In the last two years, we have found ourselves facing a social reality that has never occurred before: we have been obliged by law to keep a distance from each other and live in loneliness, not only in public places but also in our own homes. Social distancing has distressed individual and group psychological stability: inculcating that careful check must be made, paranoia has gone, over time, from being psychological clinical suffering to being a rule of suspicion (Sikali, 2020). Most social activities, such as school and work, have been suspended, as have many sources of general life satisfaction and happiness; meanwhile, a substantial body of research shows that loneliness, anxiety, and depression have increased during the pandemic (e.g., Asmundson & Taylor, 2020; Salari *et al.*, 2020). Psychic suffering involves intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbances, negative reactions in feelings and

emotional responsiveness, as well as alcohol, drug, and food abuse (e.g., Borghi *et al.*, 2021a; Fränkl *et al.*, 2021; Marogna *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2020;). Loneliness experienced during lockdown has exacerbated symptoms of depression and anxiety (Killgore *et al.*, 2020; Palgi *et al.*, 2020) and it has been associated with insomnia (Kokou-Kpolou *et al.*, 2020; Voitsidis *et al.*, 2020).

In the past two years, considerable research has been produced on psychological experiences connected to COVID, both in the clinical setting and in the non-clinical population (Acenowr & Coles, 2021; Brusadelli *et al.*, 2021; Mariani *et al.*, 2021; Rek *et al.*, 2022, Parrello & Sommantico *et al.*, 2022), but research on the experience of the group, as an extended social field, is still limited. This kind of research can make us understand the complex perspective of what we have experienced as a human group.

The associative chain of dreams in the group can help us to understand the thought that is being formed in the wider society (Lawrence, 2003). In that way, by identifying the themes encompassing the narratives of dreams shared within groups, we aimed to highlight the most representative emotional concerns characterizing the experience of the pandemic within groups as informative of the emotional experience of the broader society.

The dream as an individual and group creative process

In tribal cultures and ancient civilizations, dreams - like myths - were told and debated in collective meetings. Members of the tribal group shared the keys to 'read' the meaning of a dream as an alternative to a tale or traditional story. Even today group discussion of dreams and symbolic images illuminates the meaning of the dream and creates connections in the field of the group (Vacheret & Zurlo, 2008). The dream exchange was useful to obtain information to make decisions for the community; moreover, it had the ability to connect the members of the group, thus promoting cohesion.

Today the sharing of dreams continues to stimulate affiliation and interdependence, the dream becomes the bearer of a message that concerns not only the individual but the whole group (Neri *et al.*, 2002). Dreams, as shared cultural objects in the group, cause a feeling of elation when they allow different members to suddenly become aware of their similarities.

The ability of a group to order in narrative sequences what happens in the field is a central moment in the acquisition of awareness. Hence, the narration built and shared by the participants in the experiential group, including dreams, becomes an element of extreme importance in the process of 'learning from experience'. This modality can belong to any participant and performs, as the intermediate object, the function of linking experiences, emotions, fantasies, and thought processes, helping to create the 'common space of the group'. Within this

framework, the dream is positioned as a fundamental moment in the creation of a common space. Bion (1965) talks about thoughts in search of a thinker, where the thinker makes himself available to receive thoughts that are not the exclusive property of an individual. Thoughts that manifest through a member promote a process of evolution in the group as a unit. Kaës (2002) highlighted how the dream produces a space based on interconnections between psychic areas composed by dreamers.

Dreaming in the group as the main route for the collective experience of the unconscious

'Matrix describes the space from which everything that exists in our Universe, indeed the cosmos, has its origins. Matrix exists before mankind developed groups. And it may well be that the group is a defence against the experience of the formlessness of matrix. The social dreaming matrix, purposely convened in the here-and-now, is a reflection of the primordial matrix of humanity' (Lawrence, 2003, p. 3).

The dream told in a group matrix captures the implicit qualities of resonance and polyphony; the language is used both in poetry and in an optimal balance between symmetrical and asymmetrical logic (Matte Blanco, 1988).

The matrix in the group becomes evident when the bond is activated as the elements of each member appear and harmonise with those of the others, creating a common psychic space - or participation in psychic phenomena and processes that belong to several subjects - keeping them together. We must consider not only how members project their psychic reality into the group, but also how the group structures, fixes and organises these projections in its space. The group enjoys a specific psychic apparatus and participates in the formation of the subject of the unconscious and its dream space (Kaës, 2001, 2002, 2012), not as a set of several psyches but as their harmonic integration within a specific structure.

Matrix and free associations: the creation of the cohesion field

The conceptualisation of the field as a mental state contains Bion's (1965) formulations, according to the concept whereby the mental state shared by the members of a group influences their emotional and affective expression through mutual attention. The feelings of the participants, immersed in the mental state of the group, can be recognised allowing them to develop this mental state, or reject it, posing a risk to the cohesion of the group (Correale & Neri, 1999; Neri, 2017).

Gaburri (1999) understands the field as a primary function of the group that guarantees the interaction and relationship between the members on an emotional and affective level. The elements that make up the field, cre-

ated through free associations, are interdependent and synchronic because they are linked in generating a significant meaning for the whole group, here and now (Neri, 2017). In this awareness, the dream narrative is a social, intersubjective, and relational event that contributes to the evolution of the individual and of the group in the process of change (Marogna & Caccamo, 2015; Penna, 2013). We can therefore understand social dreaming as a single dream produced by the intersubjective unconscious of the group field, in that way free association promotes cohesion in the group.

Through the free association of dreams, unconscious alliances are created (Kaës, 2010, 2016) and cohesion as a common psychic space is present. Psychic processes are formed through the joint action of the subjects, who are bonded with each other, contributing to the construction of the unconscious psychic reality of the group. Lawrence (1998, 2003) takes up the formulations of Foulkes (1948) about groups: the matrix is the relational and interactive network that is created within a group and corresponds to the common ground which allows meaning to be given to the events that concern the group itself. Lawrence's (2003) proposal is revolutionary: through the evocation of dreams, here and now, by the group and through the sharing in the matrix, the social thinking appears.

In the group process, the social dreaming session is divided into two moments: the moment of the matrix, where dreams are reported and the free association is promoted; and the post-matrix moment (Borghi *et al.*, 2021b, Baglioni & Fubini, 2017), where the return to a state of consciousness allows to identify the message and the content of the matrix.

We hypothesise that each matrix repeats the same process, but only when we consider a series of matrices as a pattern manifesting something that can be consciously perceived and described by the participants. The matrix reveals itself as a living process that creates its own

language and, at the same time, accesses a pre-existing language (Fitzpatrick, 2003).

Within the psychoanalytic framework described, we considered the dream narratives of each group session as an expression of the psychic field generated by the group. In relation to this, we analysed the matrices with the qualitative method of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). According to the principle of isomorphism (Moritz & Watson, 1998), we believe that the themes identified in the matrices of this qualitative study could reflect society's broader thinking in terms of intrapsychic and interpersonal issues, as evidenced by studies investigating social suffering as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Clemente-Suárez *et al.*, 2020; Demirtaş-Madran, 2020).

Materials and methods

Six sessions of sharing dreams in group were casually selected within six different experiential groups conducted during the pandemic period for analytical purposes by the first author. The groups were composed of Italian-speaking participants from various backgrounds of the non-clinical population. The participants were about 10/15 per group, the dream-telling process lasted one hour. The first session was conducted in March 2020 and the last was in January 2022. The matrices were analysed employing the method of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This method allows for the identification of core themes emerging from the qualitative data. Themes are patterns of meanings organised by the researcher around a central concept or idea (Braun & Clarke, 2021b) and are identified following six phases, presented in Table 1. The table was constructed accordingly to the table presented by Braun and Clarke in their article of 2006 (p. 87).

The identified themes result in both a 'bottom-up' process, with themes emerging from qualitative data and

Table 1. Phases describing the thematic analysis, proposed by Braun and Clarke in 2006 (p. 87).

Phase	Description
1. 'Familiarizing yourself with data'	Transcription and recursive reading of data; annotation of initial ideas and codes
2. 'Generating initial codes'	Identification of the basic segments of data - the codes - that, within the data set, present interesting features. Multiple codes can be associated with the same excerpt
3. 'Searching for themes'	Identification of combinations of codes that, within the data set, constitute a theme. Each theme is defined within an overall thematic map, through the relationships it has with the codes and sub-themes composing it and with the other themes
4. 'Reviewing themes'	Definition of the relevant themes and verification whether the identified themes capture the generated codes by re-reading the whole data dataset
5. 'Defining and naming themes'	Identification of each theme's essence, describing and naming them, and organizing the more complex ones in subthemes
6. 'Producing the report'	Identification of relevant excerpts, linking the identified themes with the research question and the literature with the aim of generating a scholarly report of the analysis

The descriptions of the phases in the above-presented table reformulate the information provided by Braun and Clarke both in their original table and paper (2006).

deductively identified, and a ‘top-down’ process, with themes inductively identified referring to the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021b). This analysis is reflexive to the extent that it assumes the coding process as inevitably involving the subjectivity of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

In this paper, the themes identified are the result of the collaborative interpretative work of the authors (Blasi, 2010; Byrne, 2022): within the analysis process, the researchers jointly reflected on and accounted for their theoretical backgrounds, training, and insider and/or outsider positions concerning the participants’ experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021b). Specifically, the first author is a psychoanalyst, group psychotherapist, and university professor in psychoanalysis; she has clinical and research experience in dream analysis, with previous research expertise in the qualitative analysis of dreams within the Italian lockdown. The second author is a Ph.D. student in social sciences with knowledge of qualitative methods; she has university training in clinical psychology and previous research experience in the psychological impact of COVID-19. The third author is a psychotherapist and university professor of family psychodynamics. The fourth and the fifth authors are psychotherapists. They have clinical and research expertise in group psychotherapy.

The six group sessions were transcribed verbatim by the first author. The transcripts were then shared separately with the second and fifth authors, who recursively read them and noted the initial ideas (phase 1).

The first and second authors combined their knowledge respectively on dreaming during the COVID-19 pandemic and on the impact of COVID-19 on psychological well-being to produce the first coding (phase 2), which was jointly discussed with the fifth author. Afterward, the second author identified the initial themes (phase 3) and generated the initial thematic map associating the themes to the excerpts coded (phase 4). The first and the second author recursively re-read the transcripts and checked the thematic associations. Finally, the second author initially named the themes and revised them with the first and the fifth authors (phase 5).

Within this process, the research group reflected on the different grades of familiarity of the three researchers with the social dreaming sessions (Berger, 2015): the first author had the role of group consultant, thus she had an insider position within the groups, while the other authors had outsider positions. Nevertheless, they shared the experience of the pandemic and the phases it underwent in Italy with the members of the groups. These differences and commonalities between the authors contributed to their generative discussion within the analysis process up to the development of the final report (phase 6), which was finally revised by the third author and constitute the results section of this paper.

The analysis was performed employing the 8th ver-

sion of the software Atlas.ti, a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software designed to support the researcher’s interpretative work. The tool does not automatize the process of analysis: Atlas.ti supports the handling of coding and annotating activities generated by the researcher during the analysis, while leaving the creative and intellectual tasks of the interpretation to the researcher (Muhr, 1991; Smit, 2002). The data were collected and analysed by Atlas.ti and constituted a unique ‘hermeneutic unit’ within the software. Within a hermeneutic unit of Atlas.ti the data of a research project are treated as a single entity where collected and analysed data can be stored along the different stages of the research project. Besides, each hermeneutic unit provides the thematic framework of the user’s interpretation developed along the research process (Muhr, 1991).

The transcripts of the group sessions were collected and analysed in Italian, then translated into English and reported in this paper.

Results

Three core themes were identified: i) nightmares’ descriptions and the links with the COVID-19 pandemic; ii) loss of control within the unexpected outbreak: The pandemic as a learned helplessness context and environmental mastery as an emergent psychological issue; and iii) Recalls of the child-past as continuity-makers within the continuity-breaking pandemic present.

Nightmares’ descriptions and the links with the COVID-19 pandemic

Within this theme, we identified some excerpts as ‘nightmares’ on the basis of their life-threatening, frightening, and anxiety-evoking contents. This theme was mainly top-down-driven, bringing together and linking the contents of the social dreaming sessions with extant literature on dream content during the COVID-19 pandemic (Giovanardi *et al.*, 2022; Pesonen *et al.*, 2020). Two of the identified nightmares, excerpts of which are below, referred to COVID-19 and the pandemic situation. The first deals with persecution and bewilderment and cites the ‘Immuni’ app, a notification application used in Italy to map and send alerts about the contagion: *‘I dreamed that I got a notification from the Immuni app and I’m traveling between Rome and Milan and I don’t know where to go and I’m being haunted by my parents.’*

The second excerpt concerns COVID-19 contagion and the intense anxiety about infecting significant others: *‘I dreamed that my wife was pregnant and, when I found out, she was already at an advanced stage and I found that she had tested positive for COVID. I had anxiety and panic that she was infecting my baby and those around me, and I suddenly woke up!’*

The identified nightmares largely appeared to be re-

lated to 'chase-escape' (Pesonen *et al.*, 2020) scenarios with differently identified chasers. The first excerpt describes the bewilderment while escaping from one's parents experienced during a journey in northern Italy. Chase-escape content was also set in both familiar - and/or distinguishable - locations and unknown and confounding situations. For instance, the following excerpt is set in a familiar (one's home) and warlike (chased by Nazis) setting: *'I am at home in the mountains and the Nazis are harassing me [...].'*

In contrast, the following excerpt describes a scene of escape within an identified setting and from a non-identified chaser: *'I find myself in Lyon in a hotel room and I think, 'I hope I've run far enough away' and yes, far enough away for him not to find me and I don't know who I'm talking about; however, I have a concrete fear and so I'm afraid even to leave the hotel [...].'*

Other escape scenarios were described as taking place in unknown and confounding situations, such as the following:

'[...]we come out of the house and it's almost dark, someone is chasing us and we run, I'm afraid, distressed because I see a shady figure chasing us.'

'I was in an unknown house, but actually not, and we had to dig, I had to dig a hole for a dead body, it was a person who wanted to hurt us [...]. I don't know exactly why he had to hurt us, but it was like that, we knew it was like that [...].'

Beyond the anxiety-evoking nightmares dealing with the chase-escape scenarios, anxiety-related elements were identified in other nightmares. Of these, some participants described sensations of lacking air, suffocation, and disorientation:

'I'm in a glass elevator that's crushing my chest, I'm holding my head up but I can't hit the emergency button, and I'm just standing there with this overwhelming feeling.'

'Me trying to scream but my throat tightens and I can't make a sound.'

'It's all completely dark, and it's not like at night that you can see your way from the streetlights anyway [...] and I start to panic'

Other anxiety-related content identified appeared to deal with the forecasting of dangerous, tragic, suspicious events, as 'omens' that bad things were about to happen:

'I dreamed a terrifying cry, a terrifying sound, and inside I knew it was the sound of evil.'

'I'm on the other side of the world and I'm filming - I feel like something bad is going to happen [...].'

Anxiety-related content was also identified in nightmares dealing with the loss of personal freedom within dystopic and socially controlled scenarios, such as the following:

'I decided to go on vacation, to a resort [...]. But after the first day, I already feel very uncomfortable, I feel that something very bad is happening

in this resort. Then, I start to have a heightened sensitivity to some of the details, and I realise that somehow I am being controlled. I try to seize the opportunity [...] to escape and then all the people who work around the resort [...] turn out to be cooperating with this sort of cult who wants to keep me in that place, and I never make it out.'

The sudden occurrence of scary events can also be traced in the following nightmares describing scenarios of impending life-threatening tragedies: *'There is a very big plane flying over my city and it's getting lower. I get very anxious'; 'Lightning strikes the plane's wing and the light goes out.'*

In summary, the nightmares identified within the first theme are marked by the unpredictability of frightening events from which feelings of fear, anxiety, and distress emerge, which is consistent with previous research highlighting the presence of threatening content within outbreak dreams (e.g., Giovanardi *et al.*, 2022; Pesonen *et al.*, 2020; Solomonova *et al.*, 2021). Besides, anxiety-related content can be interpreted as descriptive of manifestations of panic (choking, chest pain, fear of losing control) and hypervigilance. Overall, these nightmares concur in picturing traumatic situations in terms of the settings and physical and emotional states described. These descriptions can be interpreted in light of the psychoanalytic proposal of the continuity between dreams and dreamers' emotional concerns (Domhoff, 1996). Indeed, the uncertain, traumatic, and distressing times that people have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic seem to be reflected in their oneiric descriptions, as supported by other studies exploring dream content within the pandemic from this theoretical perspective (MacKay & DeCicco, 2020). The following excerpt is considered representative of this interpretation: *'Lately, I have more nightmares when I am awake than when I am asleep.'* This excerpt does not describe a nightmare, as the others composing the theme do. Concurrently, it shows the interconnection of the teller's description of his/her oneiric and waking realities. Depicting the 'nightmarish' circumstances of being awake, this excerpt was considered representative of the continuity between oneiric and waking experiences, through which dreams' meanings can be interpreted (Domhoff, 1996).

Loss of control within the unexpected outbreak: The pandemic as a learned helplessness context and environmental mastery as an emergent psychological issue

Within this theme, we brought together excerpts that appeared to relate to control as a core unifying concept. The collected extracts were organised along two subthemes: 'helplessness' and 'environmental mastery'. The subthemes were created through a bottom-up first coding and subsequently linked to the extant literature on dream content during the COVID-19 pandemic and on the pandemic's

psychological impact. Subthemes' definitions of and connections with control as a core theme are provided.

The first subtheme identified is 'helplessness'. As highlighted within the first theme and by previous literature on lockdown dreams (e.g., Giovanardi *et al.*, 2022), feelings of helplessness were identified within the content of the social dreaming sessions and of descriptions of nightmares specifically. For instance, in the following nightmare, helplessness is explicitly reported: *'I dream that I am being attacked and I can't defend myself and I end up in jail. I wake up with a sense of helplessness.'*

Within nightmares, helplessness seems to emerge in regard not only to circumstances threatening one's own life, but also in contexts of helplessness in helping, saving, or taking care of various 'others' whose life in danger, as these excerpts show:

'I am on a boat that little by little becomes a half-ruined raft, and not far from me a person is swimming. I would like to help her but that person does not want my help and I feel bad [...].'

'I dream that my family and I are being chased by bad people, they take my family and I become invisible, they don't see me and I feel bad because I wasn't helping my family [...].'

Helplessness-related content was set in both everyday life and fantasy locations. Furthermore, these settings could concern different lifetime phases, including descriptions of helplessness during childhood. The following excerpts report the 'time and space' variety of helplessness-related content, with 'time' concerning the narrators' different life stages and 'space' relating to settings variously belonging to everyday life and/or fantasy and to the narrators' past and present:

'Here comes the witch taking me away from my grandma. We get to the door, and I can't make a sound to cry out for help.'

'I'm home and I'm alone. I'm little, I'm very little [...] and then they ring at the door and I crawl to the door, to the peephole, I can't see [...]. I try to jump to get to the peephole, but I don't get there and I'll never get there.'

'I fall asleep on the beach and wake up and see that I have nothing left, everything has been stolen from me.'

Overall, helplessness-related excerpts appeared to be control-centered, subtending helplessness within circumstances in which control is lost. Besides, the last of the above excerpts show the relationship between helplessness and loss of control, connecting 'control-losing' to 'control-leaving', as happens when falling asleep. Regarding control-related content, 'control-leaving' was also identified in a chain of associations that connected losing one's senses when fainting to control-leaving when getting drunk:

'In middle school, we had a huge soccer field and Sister Nelly [...] is coming toward me, a friend of

mine throws a really powerful kick and hits her and she falls forward // Losing one's senses or losing the sense, letting go of control // When you faint you lose control.'

Within the social dreaming session, these associations were followed by others that appear to link loss of consciousness (losing one's senses) to impressive sights and violent historical events:

'Years ago, I went to see a traveling exhibition on the human body and I almost fainted: sounds, heavy air; strange liquids// Clean air versus stale air // [...] I saw Marina Abramovic's exhibition. There were animal bones with ligaments still attached, the smell was strong, and she was cleaning the bones // In Otranto, the bones of a massacre // At the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the metal faces you walk on // Auschwitz, the corridor which houses what the Germans left: locks of hair; gold teeth pieces of people.'

This sequence seems to connect three topics: loss of control and control-leaving when fainting or getting drunk; loss of meaning, emerging in the excerpt 'losing one's senses or losing the sense', which we interpreted from an existential perspective, as loss of 'sense of direction' of one's own life; human body parts as representative of collective traumatic events, namely the Balkan War¹, the retrospectively identified Otranto massacre of 1480² and the Holocaust. The connections between these associations with the contextual COVID-19 pandemic were interpreted as referring to the construct of collective trauma (Hirschberger, 2018). The literature acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic represents a collective trauma (Stanley *et al.*, 2021), to the extent that it can be defined as a 'threatening episode in a group's history that affects not only direct victims but the entire community' (Canetti *et al.*, 2018, p. 4). Like other past events (natural disasters, terrorist attacks, wars), the COVID-19 pandemic has configured itself as a group-level cataclysmic experience with tragic social, cultural, and economic implications (Stanley *et al.*, 2021). Collective traumas are existential concerns that make the remaining community confront the need for meaning-making to process the events (Hirschberger, 2018).

De Jong *et al.* (2020) emphasised the risk of losing the meaning in life brought by the pandemic. The loss of meaning in life within traumatic circumstances is intertwined with the loss of control of one's own life: as high-

¹ Balkan Baroque is Marina Abramović's performance at the 1997 Venice Biennale. The artist sat on a heap of bovine bones, cleaning them. This was a denunciation of the horrors of the Balkan War. *Moma*. Retrieved from: <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/243/3126>

² On 28 July 1480, a Turkish fleet sent by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire besieged Otranto, a city in south-eastern Italy. A massacre followed: all the males were killed, and the women and children were enslaved. *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman_invasion_of_Otranto

lighted by Özcan (2008, p. 205) in work on the 9/11 attack, a traumatic event, being overwhelming and unexpected, 'renders its victim helpless and powerless'. This interpretation can be extended to the understanding of people's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, with additional context-specific considerations. Indeed, in addition to the feelings of helplessness elicited by the existential threat, the pandemic period entailed concrete hetero-established restrictions on personal freedom. To limit contagion, governments even implemented measures of enforced social isolation, depending on the spread in different contexts. In their study on the Pakistani lockdown, Khan and colleagues (2020) pointed out that depressive symptoms and loneliness were associated with learned helplessness in the context of the pandemic's forced social isolation. Learned helplessness has been investigated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Charbonnier *et al.*, 2022; Mahmud & Castro-Kemp, 2022) as it relates to the perception of having no control over the environment and the impossibility of changing the extant conditions (Khan *et al.*, 2020), suiting the investigation of the psychological impact of the contextual limits people have been facing.

The links with the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic as a learned helplessness context highlight the centrality of the theme of control in understanding first, the feelings of helplessness identified in the content analysed and second, the psychological impact of the pandemic from a collective perspective. Tracing back the emerging topics of the chain of associations analysed, we interpreted the reported associations as connecting the themes of control, helplessness, and traumatic experiences involving society more broadly; we thus provided links with the pandemic as a collective trauma within which these associations can be contextualised and interpreted.

The second subtheme is also control-centered and deals with 'environmental mastery'. Within this subtheme, we brought together content that, through a bottom-up process, emerged as related to control-taking. Specifically, within this subtheme, we collected content that, within the first coding, emerged as depicting 'powerful' situations in comparison with the 'powerless' content composing the subtheme of helplessness. Afterward, through a top-down approach, the subtheme was named by linking the codes with the construct of 'environmental mastery'. This is one of the dimensions of the psychological well-being model proposed by Ryff (1995) that appeared to comprehend the core idea identified as connecting the 'powerful' codes. Indeed, environmental mastery refers to one's sense of competence in managing and controlling the environment, effectively using and creating opportunities within the complexities characterising one's external activities (Ryff, 2014).

Similarly to the content related to helplessness, dealing with environmental mastery appeared to refer to both

past and present times, as well as various settings, including mastery beyond human possibilities. We identified content dealing with the ability to fly and breathe underwater. The following extracts seem to show mastery as a process of progressively controlling the environment and one's abilities within challenging activities:

'I live on the top floor of a very tall building, 15 stories high, and I start to go down the stairs and after a while, I realise and am amazed that I can go down two steps at a time, four steps at a time until I can jump the whole flight of stairs and almost fly by jumping from one foot to the other.'

'I dreamed that I was underwater and swimming and I can't breathe and I think 'come on, come on,' and I realise that I can breathe underwater.'

Environmental mastery was also identified in everyday life settings, highlighting successful control management within challenging circumstances: *'Once a friend took me climbing on a natural wall, I had never climbed before, he took me to 3000 metres, climbing to get to the top. With a big effort, I conquered it.'*

Finally, environmental mastery was also identified in childhood-related content, specifically in memories of childhood games recalling creativity, underlining the usage, as interpreted, of the external environment to make it suitable for one's aims as a child:

'I'm at the teacher's house [...]. I'm there with other little friends and we find out that from the terrace there is a window [...] and we manage to climb up through this very small window we are inside this theatre first in the dressing rooms, then in the corridors [...] it's beautiful'.

Past-child descriptions and interpretations of the role of childhood memories are further explored in the third theme. Finally, the identification of content related to environmental mastery allowed us to depict an overall view of control-centred content, including both control-losing and control-taking descriptions. According to the continuity hypothesis, the two subthemes seem to show that control, along with COVID-related social and existential issues, seems a concern of interest. Specifically, this concern was identified in both 'powerless' and 'powerful' descriptions within the social dreaming data. To the extent that the COVID-19 pandemic has represented a context fostering learned helplessness, social dreaming sessions appear as a 'field' where context-related helplessness is targeted, on the one hand, sharing matters regarding helplessness and loss of control, and on the other sharing matters of environmental mastery, with control over the external actively taken.

Recalls of the child-past as continuity-makers within the continuity-breaking pandemic present

The third theme identified was mainly created through a bottom-up approach, bringing together content that, within the data, seemed to relate to a core emerging

theme: past childhood memories. As the second theme showed, childhood-centred narrations mainly concerned childhood games. Descriptions of childhood games appeared to encompass the social dreaming sessions and depicted different settings: in the car, on holiday, at the kindergarten, and with other children and adults. The following excerpt describes a game between siblings, evoking feelings of enthusiasm and joy:

‘[...] I used to tell my sister [...] that I could fly. Since she was very small and totally trusted me, she believed it. one day, she was around 4, and she said, ‘Well, show me!’ And we went up high on the building where we lived [...]. And laughing, I took her by the hand saying, come on, let’s fly together, and clearly we went all over the terrace running and laughing [...].’

Moreover, this excerpt seems to evoke ‘a sense of lightness’ in the description of this game. The following extracts concern the ‘free-from-thoughts’ mindset when recalling childhood games and appear to describe the ‘lightness’ that we identified as characterising childhood memories:

‘Just playing like in elementary school, running and not thinking about anything.’

‘Childhood memories, running happily, playing in the meadows, running to my grandmother’s embrace, a reassuring hug.’

This last excerpt introduces grandparents as figures identified as part of childhood memories, appearing in everyday life descriptions of the past. As the above-reported excerpt shows, the grandmother is associated with care and protection; similarly, the following excerpts describe grandfathers’ care of now-grown-up grandchildren.

‘My grandfather was always old, [...] when he would give me the milk, I would touch his neck, which was full of wrinkles and very soft. I liked to touch it.’

‘I remember when grandfather gave me the rhythmic gymnastics ribbon; he did it with the green ribbon.’

Past-related descriptions appeared to deal also with the olfactory dimension, involving past perfumes connected to close others:

‘I remember a perfume my grandmother always wore. A while ago, I smelled that smell again: my mum had put on my grandmother’s perfume.’

‘Yesterday, giving my mother a kiss, I smelled my grandmother’s perfume for the first time.’

These excerpts seem to show how the element of perfume appears to ‘link’ generations, drawing a ‘line’ that places them in continuity with each other. The following excerpt is representative, emphasising a ‘continuity line’ uniting past and present generations:

‘My grandfather, my father, [and] my brother use the same aftershave and I fell in love with a boy who uses the same perfume.’

Similarly, but without reference to the olfactory sphere, the following excerpt centres on one childhood memory - having a haircut - that seems to connect a daughter and her mother by bringing an element of the past back into the present: *‘I am in the bathroom [...] and my mother asks me to do her hair colour [...] the more I do it, the more I realise that both the cut and the colour I am doing are the same as when I was a child.’*

Within the excerpts composing the third theme, the element of ‘continuity’ between past and present was identified in excerpts recalling ‘continuity between generations’ and in the descriptions of a recalled childhood, which appear to depict happy, ‘light’, and safe child-past images. These findings seem consistent with previous contributions on nostalgia as the emotion related to one’s past longing that promotes self-continuity between past and present (Sedikides *et al.*, 2016) and fosters psychological adjustment (Bluck & Liao, 2013). Specifically, the identified continuity between past and present was interpreted in light of the socio-historical context within which the childhood descriptions were provided. As highlighted within the second theme, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a traumatic and, thus, continuity-breaking time. From this perspective, we interpreted the excerpts on child-past composing the third theme as having a ‘continuity-making function’ within the continuity-breaking present. To the extent that recalling the past fosters the maintenance of self-continuity (Bluck & Alea, 2008), past-child memories in the context of the outbreak can be configured as ‘certainty-providers’ within the uncertain pandemic time. In this direction, we highlight the potential relevance of considering the emerging memories of past-life experiences in the light of the meaning-demanding socio-historical present. The identification of grandparents within this content can also be interpreted in light of the high death rate among the older population during the pandemic, with elderly people ‘to be protected’ by younger ones’ preventive behaviours.

Discussion

Several authors support the therapeutic value of the experiential group in the institutional and educational setting, since the group frame, if well conducted, allows the disposition and development of group processes with an analytical function (Marinelli & Neri, 2011). In the current study, we intended the group as a subject/object reality, not corresponding to the number of subjects, but rather as a third party which did not coincide with any of them. From this point of view, the group is an overdetermined and holistic subject, endowed with its own processes and representations. This is how a group field is expressed as a shared mental state (Neri, 2017) in several contexts, but it was united, in our case, by the experience of the pandemic.

Hence, the present work aimed to analyse the content shared within dreaming sessions conducted during the two-year COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. In identifying the core themes that emerged during the sessions we highlighted the associations shared, focusing on the subtended thematic areas, around which the groups' associations appeared to converge. We identified anxiety as a core emotional concern and control and self-continuity as potentially relevant issues of people's psychological experience during the pandemic. The findings were linked to the extant literature on the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic providing insights into the connections with a more comprehensive social context (Mariani *et al.*, 2021).

The present study highlights how, within dreaming sessions conducted during the pandemic, the narratives shared did not only deal with nightmares and/or bad dreams, as previous studies on dream content during the outbreak have observed. Indeed, control-taking descriptions and happy childhood memories appeared in our data. These results seem to show the emotional concerns shaping people's psychological experience of the pandemic appeared to develop, within the groups, both through 'negative' content - about nightmares and helplessness - and 'positive' content - about environmental mastery and happy past times. In this direction, it could be inferred that, when 'dreaming together' during the COVID-19 pandemic, people elaborated on their waking concerns, first by sharing COVID-related emotional issues identified as emerging in nightmares and bad dreams. This result is consistent with previous studies showing the traumatic impact of the pandemic as both reflected in and 'digested by' people's oneiric activity (Giovanardi *et al.*, 2022; Sommantico *et al.*, 2021).

Second, we identified environmental mastery as a thematic area addressing the concern of control-taking and childhood memories as a core theme targeting the issue of self-continuity and 'certainty-making' within the pandemic as an uncertain and continuity-breaking time. According with Sommantico *et al.* (2021) the continuity hypothesis of dreaming states that dream content reflects waking life (e.g., Domhoff, 1996; Schredl, 2006), and the subjective impact of traumatic life events, in our study COVID-19 pandemic, can be reflected in the dream content of people subject to quarantine-isolation measures.

Besides, the convergence of the 'dreamers' associations around this 'empowering' and positively connoted content provides further insights into both the literature on psychological well-being within the COVID-19 pandemic and the therapeutic effects of social dreaming as a group technique. Our results seem to support the assumption that, within the group dynamic, the group members develop meanings potentially useful to process the painful and breaking experience that unites them. According to Bryon (2021), dreams provide a valuable mechanism in working with atemporal emotional trauma, as metaphor

COVID can provide a transitional space that we can explore within the analytic framework.

Our study highlights how the traumatic intrapsychic issues of the pandemic have involved not only the clinical population but people in a general way (Sommantico *et al.*, 2021; Bryon, 2021). This relational and social reality must be taken into account, and we cannot avoid asking what psychic toxins the experience of the pandemic has created and what kind of injuries have been left in our minds and the relational perceptions of our groups.

Conclusions

The present work explored the content shared within dreaming sessions among experiential groups, conducted during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy. We analysed the core themes shared within this collective distressing time and we identified anxiety and helplessness as emerging emotional concerns. Moreover, we identified the convergence of the dreamers' associations around thematic areas dealing with environmental mastery and childhood positive memories. On one hand, our results are consistent with previous research dealing with the detrimental impact of the pandemic on individuals' psychological well-being and oneiric experiences, both in Italian (e.g., Giovanardi *et al.*, 2022; Favieri *et al.*, 2021; Marogna *et al.*, 2021; Rossi *et al.*, 2021, Parrello & Sommantico., 2022; Sommantico *et al.*, 2021) and international literature (e.g., Bryon, 2021; Charbonnier *et al.*, 2022; Khan *et al.*, 2020; Fränkl *et al.*, 2021, MacKay & DeCicco, 2020; Pesonen *et al.*, 2020; Silva *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, in our research, positive themes have been identified, around which the narratives of the groups appeared to converge.

We hope that our study will be a stimulus to develop new insights on the use of social dreaming as a tool for understanding collective traumatic experiences. Within groups, thoughts and information are shared and the group cohesion contributes to the members' socialization. This allows the interpersonal openness and traumatic experiences can be mentalized and metabolized (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Research in clinical settings (Marmarosh *et al.*, 2020) observed that within groups, not strictly therapeutic, the non-specific therapeutic factors develop accordingly to the group process and unrelatedly to the type of group, promoting group cohesion. According to Foulkes (1948) some factors related to the group process like: support, socialization, advice, and understanding, encourage the possibility of verbalization and emotional exchange between the group members. In this perspective, the experiential group highlights the value of institutional training as a laboratory of human relations (Lo Verso & De Blasi, 2011).

The topics and oneiric symbols identified in a single patient's dreams can be understood as an imprint of an extended unconscious, from a collective perspective (Jung,

1928). Thus, further research on social dreaming within experiential groups may be relevant to develop our study, which is a preliminary qualitative exploration.

From the point of view of clinical implications, it seems useful to underline that the results of this study could guide the planning of support interventions to decrease the anxious feelings related to the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we argue that our outcomes can be informative about working with the dream experiences of patients in clinical and therapeutic contexts, in the sense that within the analysis of the dreams of individual patients, the clinician can consider the most expanded social context as a reference for the comprehension and interpretation of dreams.

Although this study underlines the importance of reworking some social dynamics in group settings, it has limitations. First of all, the number of participants and sessions is small and not representative of the population. Second, we did not aim at confronting themes' differences between groups considering the pandemic's phases across time. Besides, this research followed Braun and Clarke's (2021a) indications which highlight that, when performing Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the developed themes represent the final situated result of a process involving the researcher's subjectivity. Byrne (2022) underlines that, when performing RTA, research teams should aim at collaboration between analysts to furtherly develop reflexivity through the achievement of a richer interpretation of meaning, not at 'attempting to achieve consensus of meaning' (Byrne, 2022, p. 1393). In that way, Byrne (2022) underlines that RTA does not include the expectation for the codes and themes to be similar between the analysts involved in producing them. Thus, during the analysis process, we did not use any statistical test to verify the agreement between the judges. Concurrently, we encourage future research to increase our findings through different research designs, possibly longitudinal, including quantitative and qualitative methods within clinical and non-clinical larger samples. In the words of Bryon: '[t]he tumultuous state of the collective continues to permeate our outer and inner world' (Bryon, 2021, p. 399) and dreams provide a transnational space for working with emotional trauma. We argue that studies on social dreaming within groups could deepen the knowledge of the emotional experience and psychological well-being in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring clinical insights based on a social and collective perspective.

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