Contemporary Methodologies to Surface and Act On Unconscious Dynamics in Organizations: An Exploration of design, facilitation capacities, consultant paradigm and ultimate value

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ABSTRACT: Organizational Role Analysis, Social Dreaming, Social Photo-Matrix and Social Dream-Drawing are four examples of a growing number of methodologies that are being developed and used internationally. While used in different ways in different contexts, what they all have in common is the intent to access a group’s unconscious thinking, whether related to a pre-identified theme or a particular organizational or social issue. This body of methodologies makes use of a 3rd object, such as a drawing, a dream or a photo, that is created by the participants.

In this paper, I am presenting three conceptual frames:

1. An overreaching way of thinking about the design of these methodologies and the role of those who host or lead them. My main question is: What are the necessary and appropriate design elements and facilitation capacities for methodologies that seek to uncover and make sense of unconscious processes in organizations?

2. A theoretical argument for the fundamental value of these methodologies to organizations,

3. A suggested new paradigm for the role of consultant in bringing these methodologies to organizations.

In order to familiarize the reader who has not yet experienced any of these methodologies, I will first briefly describe four of them and give an example of their use in a system. I will follow that by an explication of the theoretical underpinnings of my suggestions for their facilitation and structure, which will be illuminated in a series of charts. I conclude by describing how I think these methodologies can help organizations.
“When the unthought known is surfaced in an organization it always makes a difference to its life and work because it can no longer be denied. It is what everyone knows, but has never thought of and articulated.”

(Lawrence2010: 4)

“So the thoughts have to be worked on to make them available for translation into action.”

(Bion1988: 184)

**INTRODUCTION**

Organizational Role Analysis, Social Dreaming, Social Photo-Matrix and Social Dream-Drawing are four examples of a growing number of methodologies that are being developed and used internationally. While used in different ways in different contexts, what they all have in common is the intent to access a group’s unconscious thinking, whether related to a pre-identified theme or a particular organizational or social issue. In this paper, I am presenting three conceptual frames:

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2. A theoretical argument for the fundamental value of these methodologies to organizations,

3. A suggested new paradigm for the role of consultant in bringing these methodologies to organizations.
This paper has two starting points. In developing my own methodology of Social Dream-Drawing, I realized how significant an act it is for a participant to bring into a group something generated from his/her own unconscious, such as a drawing of a dream. What makes a participant take the risk of exposing his/her unconscious “product” (for want of a better word) to a group? What are the elements of a design that would make this act easier? What would be the nature of the boundary between the private and the public domain?

The second major catalyst for this paper comes from my various experiences of hosting similar methodologies. Technical factors such as what kind of theme is the most productive, how recording is best done and the roles of hosts must be thought about and addressed every time a workshop takes place. Every experience has deepened my thinking about how they are structured and facilitated. As a result, I naturally began to think in a broader way about what can be theorized about this general set of methodologies.

In order to familiarize the reader who has not yet experienced any of these methodologies, I will first briefly describe four of them and give an example of their use in a system. I will follow that by an explication of the theoretical underpinnings of my suggestions for their facilitation and structure, which will be illuminated in a series of charts. I conclude by describing how I think these methodologies can help organizations.

**METHODOLOGIES DESCRIBED**

These methodologies have evolved over a period of time in consonance with one another. There is a general set of elements that all of these methodologies share, most notably free association and reflection components. All of them make use of what I call third objects (i.e. drawings, dreams, photos) that are brought into the event or created at the beginning of the event by the participants.

One could say that the central premise of these methodologies is that there are unconscious processes going on in organizations that, on the one side, have a strong influence on the organization’s operations and effectiveness, and – on the other side – are out of awareness of organizational role holders. These processes may include historic or founding events, changes in the external market that render the organization ineffective, lack of clarity in authority (who really is making the decisions?) and delegation, and unresolved tensions surrounding succession or merger.
Groups of professionals from different organizations can also be said to have collective out-of-awareness issues in their professional lives. They include, for example, stresses between doctoral students and their examiners, experiences of alienation of undergraduates, and difficult professional transitions in independent consulting practices.

In both cases – with organizations and with professional groups – these methodologies are being utilized.

At present there are at least seven methodologies that would be appropriate to include in this study. They are: Organizational Role Analysis (Newton, Long and Sievers 2006; Sievers and Beumer 2006), Social Dreaming (Lawrence 1991, 1998a/b, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005), Social Photo-Matrix (Sievers 2007, 2008, 2009), Organizational Observation (Hinshelwood and Skogstad 2000), Role Biography (Long 2006), Organizational Constellations (Hellinger 1998; Weber 2000) and my own evolving Social Dream-Drawing (Mersky 2008).

For this paper, I will focus particularly on Organizational Role Analysis (ORA), Social Dreaming (SD), Social Photo-Matrix (SPM) and Social Dream-Drawing (SDD).

**Organizational Role Analysis (ORA)** could be thought of as the first of these methodologies. It was originally developed by Irwin Borwick (2006) in the 1970’s in his work at Shell and articulated shortly after in a well-known article by Bruce Reed (1976; cf. Reed and Bazalgette 2006) and, more recently, in the book “Coaching in Depth: The Organisational Role Analysis Approach” (Newton, Long and Sievers 2006). This approach is based on the idea that role is what connects the individual to the system and the way one takes up a role is influenced, consciously and unconsciously, from both the personal and the organizational side.

The third object in this methodology is the drawing that each participant is asked to make, using the following general outline:
Table 1: Organizational Role Analysis Outline

After drawing this outline on a large piece of paper, participants are asked to draw the parts of their personal life influencing their role in the left circle and those from their organizational experience in the right circle. In the middle, they are asked to draw their role. Participants are encouraged to freely draw and even to modify the outline to suit their representation. They are asked not to use words. The content of the drawings, the colors chosen, the style and even the way the drawing is presented to the group, become the so-called “raw material” for the workshop experience.

Each drawing is worked on by the group for about an hour. After the drawing is presented, group member associate to it, while the drawer sits aside. After the drawer returns to the group and offers his-her responses, the group as a whole reflects on the experience.

The drawing below, by a university lecturer and skills trainer in the Netherlands, is a good example of the creativity inherent in this assignment.
The group’s associations to the pair of observing eyes in the top right hand corner of the above drawing led the drawer to realize that when his courses and trainings went well, he got no feedback. But when they didn’t, his superiors would be quite critical. Upon further reflection, he realized that this pair of eyes also represents the state’s policy that universities must clearly differentiate themselves from the “Hochschule”, which focus more on skills training than on research and academics. This helped him realize how a larger systemic issue was affecting his supervisors, which in turn influenced how they reacted to his work. About six months after this workshop, he decided to leave the university to pursue a private practice.

Social Dreaming (SD), developed by Gordon Lawrence at the Tavistock Institute (1998a), is based on the idea that dreams have a social meaning and belong not only to the individual. This is in contrast to psychoanalytic concept that dreams are the property of the individual, to be illuminated in the psychoanalytic dyad.

In this methodology the dreams of individual participants are the 3rd objects. Participants are invited to share recent dreams and to offer free associations and amplifications to dream material presented. Free Association comes from psychoanalysis and is anything that comes to one’s mind, for example an earlier experience related to the content of a dream, such as an accident or an exam. Very often associations are recent dreams. Amplifications are those cultural and political elements that come to mind, such as current events, music, literature and film. For example, at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations in Denmark, there were associations to a recent exhibit at the Tate Museum in London.
Lawrence terms the ‘container’ in which these dreams are shared and associated to as the Matrix. Rather than encouraging a group process, which tends toward consensus building and decision-making, Lawrence arranges the space so that participants do not make direct eye contact with one another and are presumably more available for unconscious associations. The facilitator of the SDM is called the host.

Following the Matrix, usually in another room or setting, participants reflect on the experience.

In a 2010 Social Dreaming matrix at a conference attended by many Ph.D. students, their supervisors and their examiners, a current doctoral student shared this dream fragment:

I had a dream last night, I was in front of a thesis committee, I don’t have one yet, and they were saying that you have been such a good student and have done everything we have told you and they said that they allow me to have this dream and they gave me the doctorate... and then it ended...

Reflecting later on this dream, the group became very aware of the powerful dynamics in the conference between current students and their examiners. This was evident both in the formal events and in the informal exchanges. This dreamer realized she was quite occupied with the feeling that, in serving her advisors, she was somehow betraying herself. The theme of service and betrayal in the doctoral process became a central insight in the group.

The notion that photographs of one’s organization may serve as material for free association and amplification was realized by Burkard Sievers (2007) in the development of the Social Photo-Matrix (SPM), beginning in 2004. Participants are invited to take photos of their own organization or that relate to a pre-identified theme, such as transitional spaces, women’s leadership or immigration. These photos are entered into an archive on a laptop in an anonymous way, so that photographers are not identified. Participants (including the hosts) offer associations and amplifications to the photographs, not to the photographer. The Matrix usually takes one hour, during which approximately six to eight photos are shown.

A reflection session follows after a break, usually in a smaller group. Its task is to reflect on the experience of the Matrix and to think about the topic, based on the work done there.
Sievers pioneered this methodology with his students at the Bergische Universität in Wuppertal, Germany. The photo below is rather typical of those taken by his students, i.e. impersonal, architectural, cold:

Table 3: Photo for Social Photo-Matrix on the University

During the reflection sessions, the students realized that they had taken very few photos of people and no photos of professors or members of the professional staff. This led to the association that “there is no relatedness among students and professors”. (citation?) They began to recognize their part in the cycle of contempt that existed between students and professors. In their view, because teachers did not seem to take their teaching responsibilities seriously, the students were free to be contemptuous of them, thus contributing to the lack of relatedness between them.

Being a prolific dreamer who often sketched her own dreams, I became quite interested in the idea of using the drawings of dreams in an organizational setting. In 2003, I began to work on this idea with colleagues in the Netherlands (Mersky 2008) Honey, can I cite Susan’s book here, since there will be a chapter on SDD in it and it will be better than the first article?). Calling my experiment Social Dream-Drawing, we brought drawings of dreams for association and amplification, using the theme “What do I risk in my work”.
Table 4: Drawing of a dream for a Social Dream-Drawing Workshop

This drawing was made by a 60 year old organizational consultant. The sorting of the papers in the drawing was related to an out of awareness process that he was undergoing of sorting through his past professional experiences and trying to decide what to keep and what to discard. The associations to the drawing by colleagues in similar professional dilemmas crystallized for him something that was hitherto overwhelmingly difficult to grasp – that in order to move on professionally, he must discard elements of his past professional identity.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Having briefly described these four methodologies, I will now articulate the theoretical bases for my analysis of their structure and facilitation. I am looking at these methodologies using two perspectives: Socio-analysis and Socio-technical Theory.

Socio-analysis (Bain 1999), is based on the principles and concepts of psychoanalysis applied to organizations and society. All of these methodologies aim to bring
unconscious thinking to light and involve groups or other social systems and not dyads.
The three key concepts from my perspective are:

1. Free association. Rather than the traditional psychoanalytic use of free association as a means to help the individual patient reveal repressed unconscious conflicts, this use of free association is based on the concept of the group or a system’s associative unconscious.

2. Christopher Bollas’ (1987) concept of the “unthought known”, defined by Lawrence (1999) as “that which is known at some level but has never been thought or put into words, and so is not available for further thinking.”

3. Containment: To contain and containment are concepts that describe the capacity of any entity to keep within itself parts that arouse anxiety (Nunkevitch 1998). These events are not designed to provide a retreat; we want participation. As they all deal with the infinite, it is not possible to know what will arise. So it is important that the event (which often includes unfamiliar experiences for the participants) is experienced as safe and sufficiently contained. That is the role of the host. We want participants to be able to regress sufficiently to associate, but also to stay to the task.

The Socio-technical perspective holds that there is interrelatedness between the social and technical components of organizations. The technical components that it most emphasizes are role, primary task, organizational structure and boundaries.

Originally developed at the Tavistock Institute in the 1960’s (Trist and Murray 1993), it has been adapted to look at issues such as work design, job enrichment and process improvement (Emery 1993; Trist and Bamforth 1993) and has, in a sense, fallen out of favor with Socio-analytic thinkers. Socio-technical thinkers based their view of the social aspect of organizations very firmly on psychoanalytic thinking, particularly that of Bion and Klein. Some of them (Miller and Rice 1967) went on to found the group relations way of learning from experiences in groups.

The drawing of clear time and task boundaries is essential in mounting these methodologies, in order that participants experience the leadership as clear, responsible and competent. One can say that there is a direct relationship between the confidence to safely regress during the Matrix, for example, and the experience of leadership as taking its role in a clear and competent way.

METHODOLOGY MODEL
What follows is a series of charts, designed to offer a template for mounting any of the above 3rd object methodologies. These charts are:

- Step 1: Preparation/Planning
- Step 2: Entry
- Step 3: Matrix
- Step 4: Reflection
- Step 5: Closure
- Step 6: Post-Workshop

At the end is Table 11: Key Tasks of Hosts and Experience of Participants

Table 5: Step 1: Preparation/Planning
This first simple drawing is designed to show that the actual event itself (in dotted lines) is embedded in a larger context (system as a whole). An organization’s authorized body decides to hold such an event and determines whom they wish to staff it and makes the invitation. Once the invitation is accepted, contracts are developed. The hosts develop a description of the workshop/event to be advertised by the sponsoring organization, which manages the ongoing marketing, application and registration processes, whatever they may be. At one point, either the event is sufficiently filled to take place or it is cancelled. Once the event is confirmed, the hosts often send a letter directly to the participants, outlining in more detail the purposes of the workshop and giving an assignment to create something (such as a dream drawing or a photo) to bring to the event. This is the first direct link between them.

These events may take place as stand-alone workshops or as offerings in professional conferences or training programs. Sometimes they are incorporated into group relations conferences. They may also be part of an organizational diagnosis or intervention when deemed to be helpful either to explore a key issue hitherto problematic or to deepen an understanding of an existing dynamic.

The relationship between the sponsoring organization and the leaders of the event is critical to its success (see for example Sher’s study “concerning the relatedness of group relations to its host organisation” 2009: 152.). In a sense, the sponsor needs to sufficiently authorize the hosts to undertake their work in good socio-technical fashion. On the other side, however, the workshop hosts need to take their leadership by sufficiently integrating the sponsoring organization’s hopes and needs to sponsor such an event. As Miller and Rice (1967) formulate it: “leadership … is required to relate what is inside the group to its environment; that is, leadership of the group, like that of the individual, is a boundary function that controls transactions between inside and outside” (ibid.: 20). These transactions need to have the quality of “consistency” (ibid.: 21).

Usually a key relationship between one of the leaders and someone in the organization forms around the various tasks associated with mounting the event. As goes this relationship, often goes the event as a whole.

Containment is everyone’s responsibility in mounting such an event. Sponsors need to be clear in their communications and in taking a role that supports the hosts and participants. Contracts and time boundaries, etc. are all elements that need to be clear.

Except for Role Analysis (which focuses on the presenter's particular role situation) these methodologies usually have themes. When such events are held in conjunction with conferences as part of a professional development offering, the theme can relate to the
overall theme of the conference. For example, for a two-day Social Photo Matrix at the 2010 Annual ISPSO Meeting in Denmark, whose theme was “The Angel of the Past; The Ghosts of the Future”, we chose as our theme “Where Angels and Ghosts Meet”. One important value of a theme is the containment it provides, which helps the system and participants contain anxiety relating to the regressive experience in the Matrix. In addition, the theme provides a focus for the learning and discussion in the reflection session.

One may assume that when such an event is held as part of an organizational diagnosis or intervention that this sort of methodology was hitherto unknown. Thus the decision to risk mounting such an event would be largely based on the existing relationship between the consultant and the client organization. I will elaborate on this situation at the end of this paper.

Table 6: Step 2: Entry

In these methodologies, participants are asked to create something (the 3rd object) either before the event (i.e. a dream), which they then bring into the event and is used as the raw
material for the work or at the beginning of the event (i.e. role analysis drawing), after the welcome and introductions. In either case, the way the boundary between the creation of these elements and the group experience is drawn and experienced is extremely important.

Once someone has registered for the workshop/program and is asked to take a photograph or draw a dream, they have already psychologically crossed the boundary into the event. One could therefore say that the boundary between the participant and the actual workshop is a permeable one, since the experience has already begun.

**Step 3. Matrix**

Table 7: Step 3: Matrix

For Social Dreaming and the Social Photo-Matrix, this step involves free associations and amplifications relating to dreams and photographs and includes the whole group together. It is generally one hour.
For Organizational Role Analysis and Social Dream-Drawing, drawings are placed on a table with others arrayed around the table in smaller groups.

In either case, in the matrix/associative part of the program, one does not focus on the identified theme.

**Step 4. Reflection**

![Diagram of Step 4: Reflection](image)

Table 8: Step 4: Reflection

For Social Dreaming and the Social Photo-Matrix, the Reflection Group takes place after each Matrix, often in smaller groups. It often takes place in a separate break-out room, in order to make clear that this is a separate activity with a separate task. The purpose of the reflection group is to think about the theme or the organization, in light of the experience in the Matrix.
The Social Photo-Matrix Reflection Dialogue Session is directed at finding the meaning and significance of the photos of the Matrix. We set out three tasks: First, the participants are asked for their immediate feelings about the experience of the Matrix. Second, they are asked to identify those photos that were most significant to them. Third, they are asked to think directly about the theme in the light of the experience of the Matrix.

While there is an effort not to focus on group dynamics issues, this is the place where experiences such as exclusion and anxiety can be talked about. Often at this point questions arise specifically about the methodology (how it is used, etc.), which we defer to the closing session.

With Organizational Role Analysis and Social Dream-Drawing, the reflection session is about 15 minutes long and takes place at the end of each hour-long session devoted to an individual drawing.

In ORA, I often add an additional element. For the last ten minutes we explore our own interactions and our own experiences as a group working on a specific drawing, under the assumption that in our work we have enacted issues related to the drawing. Invariably, and amazingly, we always discover a link between the dynamics in our work group and the organization we are working on through the drawing. This leads to an even deeper understanding of what we are exploring and an enriching further insight for the presenter.

In the Social Photo-Matrix, especially when working with a heterogeneous group, we sometimes create a space for pairs to meet and to discuss particular examples of the theme (e.g. transitional spaces) in their own organizations. We believe that pair work is often a relief from the demands of working in a group and an opportunity to link up with someone in a more intimate way.

In SDD, I have drawn the boundary between the Matrix and the reflection session by asking participants (including myself) to stand up and move to another seat. I want to make the clear distinction between the associative task of the Matrix and the more familiar task of the reflection group (therefore the rather dramatic vertical line with crosses between the two events.). This small change also offers physical relief from the stress of the associative task.
Table 9: Step 5: Closure

The closing plenary is an opportunity for participants to reflect with the whole group on their experience as a whole, to ask specific questions about the methodology and to solicit from the hosts and from one another examples of how they are using the methodology. This session is designed to give participants a transitional experience between the event and their return to their familiar worlds.
Table 10: Step 6: Post-Workshop

Administrative follow-up after the event may include giving credits or issuing certificates of participation, fulfilling financial obligations to the hosts and/or reporting to the larger system in which it is embedded.

I have found that distributing literature (both articles and bibliographies) after a workshop is more effective than doing it beforehand, because the participant now has his/her own experience to relate to the articles. In addition, one can then enter the workshop and participate “without memory and desire” and have one’s own unique experience.

For all of these methodologies, it is possible to create a document that, at a minimum contains photos of the various visual 3rd objects, and, more extensively, either written summaries or word by word associations and reflections. Such a transcript can be produced in many ways. Sometimes participants rotate the role of taking notes (SDD). Other times we ask students to take this as a special role (SPM; SDM), using their laptops to directly record what is said. Tape and video recording can also be used, but the task of
transcription is an enormously time-consuming one for the hosts and extremely expensive. And, in any case, one must receive the consent of all participants in advance.

Often transcripts are distributed after the event, but I am not sure how valuable they really are. Past participants have noted that the workshop in the document does not seem to match the one they experienced. When a workshop is held on a weekly basis, however, the transcripts help participants stay connected to the ongoing experience. A colleague has made the excellent point that producing a transcript might be quite inhibiting when used as part of an organizational diagnosis or intervention, where issues of confidentiality are paramount. In general, I see their value as a record of the experience and as a kind of containment, reassuring us all that nothing of value will be “lost”.

Table 11: Key Tasks of Hosts and Experience of Participants

With this chart, I am exploring the nature of the key tasks of hosts in relation to the experience of participants. Note that the hosts’ tasks for each phase are written above the
chart and the participants’ experiences are identified under the chart. Note also that for each phase, the participants are in different groupings, i.e. individual, whole group, small group or pairs.

As with any organizational role, hosts and facilitators of these events have both formal and informal tasks. On the formal side is writing the description, designing the event, preparing schedules, and – in general – managing and leading it.

As to informal tasks, one critical one is to lead the event keeping in mind the delicate balance between the need for clarity of task and boundaries and the fluidity and regression necessary for unconscious processes to emerge. In a sense, while facilitators/hosts have an expertise in running these events, they also – like the participants – are entering something totally new and infinite each and every time. They associate and amplify, as well as contain and lead.

Therefore, I would say – both for their own self-management and for the management of these methodologies as a whole – they need to maintain both clarity about task in each element and a capacity to contain, meaning to be able to absorb and live with the anxieties present in the group without being defensive or punishing.

Particularly in the Matrix phase, containment also means not being judgmental. One often may say: “there is no right or wrong association”. The trick is not to make this sound like a criticism of the last speaker. One realizes that whoever is raising questions or becoming anxious is being mobilized unconsciously by the group, and it is important to respect this anxiety.

This raises the question of the special influence of the host when seeking to elicit unconscious processes. When does one speak? The hosts, on the one hand, need to be careful not to be the first speaker, but sometimes – especially when a methodology is totally new to a group – that is necessary. There is always the risk that any association or hypothesis may be experienced as an attempt to guide the group, rather than a contributing thought (Eden2010). We have seen anxieties emerge in many different ways, such as interpreting a particular dream or drawing (or dreamer or drawer), the inability to allow oneself to learn and skepticism about application.

Through this process, participants begin gradually to take responsibility for the event and how it is conducted. But it is the nature of how the hosts themselves first take their role that matters. If done in a ‘good enough’ way, by the end of the event participants can allow themselves to make their own transition into this methodology. One could say, therefore, that the hosts begin in a highly containing and active way and gradually
become more and more passive, as participants themselves take on more of the experience, become more comfortable and proficient in free association and allow themselves to learn and think new thoughts.

**FUNDAMENTAL VALUE TO ORGANIZATIONS**

As these methodologies are being more and more utilized, the question becomes how can we do more to “make the case” for their value to organizations. It seems to me that we ourselves must first solidly understand what they offer.

In simple terms, I see the value of these methodologies – when implemented and used thoughtfully – as helping organizations increase their capacity to think about the difficult realities they are facing, rather than suppressing them or allowing them to be acted out in parts of the system – and to take actions and make decisions based on these insights.

My thinking begins with the work of Burkard Sievers (1999; 2006) and his concept of the psychotic organization. Sievers applies to organizations Bion’s concept of the psychotic and non-psychotic parts of the personality. He theorizes that psychotically-functioning organizations unconsciously project their psychotic parts into those departments, sections or environments with the most valency for introjection. Thus, either that section of the organization becomes the problem -- rather than a signal that there is something out of order in the system as a whole – or the ‘problem’ is displaced into the outer world. One example from my own consulting practice was the demonization of the director of the Leasing Department of a corporate rental organization. She was seen as incompetent and problematic, because she could not keep all the buildings fully occupied. In fact, the problem was in the external environment, not in how she was taking up her role. The organization could not face the reality of a drastically shrinking rental market.

Following Bion (1957), Sievers, like Lawrence (1999), posits that psychotic processes prevent thinking and also – for individuals and organizations alike – prevent entities from seeing reality, mourning losses, working them through and taking appropriate action. So the challenge is how to surface these suppressed psychotic thoughts in a way that they can be acknowledged and examined.

My thesis is that utilizing any of the described methodologies would be one means of doing so. It is in the Matrix sections of these methodologies that two forms of unconscious thinking emerge (Lawrence 1999). One form – dreaming as thinking – is made available in the SDM and SDD by the dream material brought in by participants. The other form – the unthought known – is made available, through associations and amplifications to the participants’ dreams, drawings and photos. The individually-created
third objects (ORA, SDD, SPM), along with the dreams in the SDM, function as catalysts for associations and amplifications, which themselves reveal the unthought known from the unconscious.

In my view, these methodologies are effective precisely because of and only with the combination of both the Matrix and the reflective session. I connect this to Bion’s notion (1988: 179) that thinking is the result of “two main mental developments. The first is the development of thoughts”, which I see as arising in the Matrix and in the associative processes in other methodologies. The second is the “apparatus to cope with them”.

As I see it, the reflection group is the setting for this apparatus of thinking to undertake its task of transforming the thoughts from the infinite into actual thinking relating to reality, i.e. the chosen theme or the organization itself. From Bion’s perspective “thinking is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts and not the other way around” (ibid.), meaning that we cannot call thoughts into being by the act of thinking, but we can only think once thoughts arise.

To further expand this line of argument, I note that Bion viewed these arising thoughts “as if they were objects that had to be dealt with” (ibid.: 184). This is because “(a)…they in some form contained or expressed a problem, and (b) because they were themselves felt to be undesirable excrescences of the psyche and required attention, elimination by some means or other, for that reason” (ibid.: 184). Here he makes two important points, I think. The first is that these thoughts are clues important underlying problems and secondly that they reflect what has been projected as unwanted from the rest of the system. One may transfer this insight to the world of organizations as well.

But what does it matter if these thoughts relating to a problem are made available for thinking? I believe Lawrence (1999) helps us here when he writes that when an organization is able to think, it is able “to maintain its viability in relation to a changing environmental market. Thinking is essential for its continuance both ‘out there’ as an objective, shared fact and ‘in here’ as a subjective experience”. Thus the capacity to think is necessary to survive and be effective.

So, to summarize, these methodologies – when utilized properly – help organizations think, survive and thrive. In the Matrix section, the unthought known arises, through the associations and amplifications. It arises in that section as seemingly random and chaotic (yea, infinite). But it reflects – even in this inchoate form – the collective anxieties of the group and the problems underlying these anxieties. In addition, the unconscious is also a deep source of other affects of group life – creativity, hope, desire, love – which can then have their own voice in the system. In these events, an as-yet unconceptualized but felt
frustration begins to be clear. The reflection phrase of these events is the place to cope with this and begin to sort it out. Thus, accessing the unconscious aspects leads to a better ability to think in a realistic way, to contain this frustration and later to act.

**CONCLUSION**

There are without doubt major challenges in bringing these methodologies to organizations (unfamiliarity with this way of working; complications regarding confidentiality; complexities about who should participate; anxieties regarding drawing and other creative forms, etc.). These methodologies are not for every organization and every group.

I recommend that they be used as a part of a broader organizational consultation process, rather than as stand-alone events with clients. I believe that they can be particularly helpful when a system has a deep-rooted and intractable problem that has defied ongoing efforts to resolve it. In fact, these methodologies may be unique in helping organizations cope with what cannot normally be faced.

The consultant must articulate how and why such an event could be of benefit to the system to address such a problem. He should evaluate which methodology (if any) is appropriate for any given need, explain why to the client and – most importantly – clearly communicate potential risks. In all the planning he should work closely with the sponsor in describing and designing the elements.

Both in terms of containment and as a focus for later organizational work, a theme relating to the presenting problem can be identified. The process of theme identification, in and of itself, is a consultative process. Hopefully, the theme does not take a position one way or another on the presenting problem. It must be focused enough to provide a direction, but open enough to encourage creativity. There is a very delicate line between a theme that stimulates unconscious thinking and one that feeds underlying splits or promotes someone’s organizational agenda.

Once all this has been accomplished and the workshop has taken place, what is next? I can imagine the next step would take the form of an application event a few weeks or months later, whose task is to apply the thinking from the workshop to specific organizational issues (followed perhaps by a smaller group developing action steps from there). This gap in time between the workshop experience and an application event is supported by Bion’s (1970) observation that it is necessary to separate thought and action, for each to be separately contained and “in a mutually exclusive commensal state” (121). So, using Bion’s terms, this application event would be the opportunity for the
thoughts “to be worked on to make them available for translation into action” (1988:184).

Here the consultant’s role would be to support the client in making this transition and, in Bion’s (1988:80) words, “to bridge the gulf of frustration between the moment when a want is felt and the moment when action appropriate to satisfying the want culminates in its satisfaction”. I think what Bion is saying between the lines here is that, while it may be tempting to immediately act once a frustration is felt or a problem is identified, the better course is to take time for this learning to be worked through. Here the consultant may help the organization bridge that gap by designing processes by which the client can take the thinking in the reflection phase to a focus on the organization itself.

Bringing these methodologies to organizations requires a different model of consulting than the series of steps we have come to know as organizational consultancy, i.e. entry, contracting, data collection, diagnosis, feedback, intervention, etc. Even when conceived as ever repeating processes, this way of working, as David Armstrong (2010:112) notes, is “too one-sided, too much the consultant’s property and too little the emergent property of a lived exchange” (112). What is paramount, in his view, is the joint “understanding that emerges out of the continuous, shared interplay with the client” (ibid.).

Working with methodologies such as the ones I have been describing puts us in the role of helping the client system come into contact with its own unconscious, through the thoughts of its role holders. As one reviewer of a previous version of this paper put it, these methodologies “invite participation in the linking of unconscious thoughts in order to collectively negotiate new insights to organisational and social experiences.” They help organizations find the voices and wisdom within their systems through “a kind of doing, a practical skill of becoming aware of something not yet fully grasped or known, in which the consultant and client gradually learn to collaborate” (Armstrong:113). This joint understanding is a product of trust, which must exist in order for any client to take the risk of using our methodologies.

How this may be taken up by consultants and researchers could be the next interesting step in this process:

REFERENCES


Sievers, B. (2008) ““Perhaps it is the role of pictures to get in contact with the uncanny”. The Social Photo-Matrix as a method to promote the understanding of the unconscious in organizations’, Organisational and Social Dynamics 8(2): 234–54.


