

**How can we trust our
(research and organizational)
praxes?
An Epistemology of Socioanalytic Methodologies**

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for the
Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations
Santiago, Chile
June 15, 2014

In this paper, I will set out a proposed theory of knowledge that underlies the various socioanalytic methodologies that have been developed for use in organizations, both as instruments of research and as consulting interventions. In this paper I try to demonstrate that our roots are broader than psychoanalysis, while at the same time deeply indebted to psychoanalysis. I will briefly introduce Socioanalysis and explain two sample methodologies, the Social Photo Matrix and Social Dream-Drawing. Then I will offer 3 concepts underlying an epistemology of Socioanalysis. I will end this presentation by offering a schema connecting Peirce's theory of abductive logic to these key epistemological concepts.

What is Socioanalysis?

Socioanalysis is an evolving social science that is based on the principles and concepts of psychoanalysis applied to organizations and society.

Susan Long (2001 in Long 2013d:307) has described it as "... a science of subjectivity, devoted to understanding how subjectivity works collectively in groups, organisations and society, recognizing that the collective comes before the individual and that subjectivity and mind are formed and shaped in the social".

Following on from Gordon Lawrence's discovery of Social Dreaming in the early 1980's (1991; 1998a; 1998b; 1999), various socioanalytic methodologies have been developed and continue to evolve.

The Social Photo-Matrix (SPM)

The Social Photo-Matrix was developed by Burkard Sievers (2007; 2008; 2013), beginning in 2004. Participants are invited to take photos in advance that relate to a pre-identified theme. These photos are sent directly to a technical assistant, whose role

it is to organize them into an archive and develop a system by which they are randomly shown during the workshop. We hosts never see the photos in advance. We work with the photograph, and not with the photographer.

The workshop has two key components, i.e. the matrix, where participants offer associations and amplifications to the photographs and a subsequent reflection session, where the task is to focus on the meaning of the photographs in relation to the chosen theme.

Feet on the Sign



This photo is from a Social Photo Matrix that Burkard and I recently held in Belgrade Serbia, using the theme “Who am I as leader and follower?” It depicts the feet of some students on a sign that says *From Vardar to Triglav*. These are the borders of the former Yugoslavia. In the 1980’s there was a popular song with those lyrics, considered the unofficial Yugoslav anthem. It celebrated the unity and diversity of the many nations who lived in the country, which since then has experienced a long-missing sense of solidarity along ethnic lines (Ristovic 2014).

Trust fall in park



Even though this methodology can be used in any culture or country, the photos themselves always have different connotations. For example, this photo of a trust exercise in a park, which, to me, as an American who has participated in this sort of exercise, would seem to say something positive about leadership, was instead associated to in a skeptical and somewhat cynical fashion in Serbia.

One cannot undertake a socioanalytic methodology with a theory already in one's head, seeking to confirm it by what emerges. Instead, one forms one's theories or hypotheses based on the data that is generated in the matrix and later reflected upon in the smaller session.

Even the Serbians in the workshop were surprised at what emerged in the matrix, in relation to the theme, which were feelings of sadness and depression. In the small reflection groups, the participants gradually came to grips with the impact of so many years of betrayal by their leadership, whom many felt they cannot trust. Thus, it is difficult for them to identify with either the role of follower or leader, as both roles have been so contaminated.

Boys in the Gym



The theme for this SPM was chosen in collaboration with our Serbian colleague, who sponsored this event. We worked with a group of 48 participants, but only half of them sent photos. Many had difficulty taking a picture relating to the theme. For example this photo was taken by the young man who took us back and forth to the airport. He told us that he really struggled to find an appropriate subject relating to the theme. In this photo matrix workshop, there were many photos taken from people's personal archives. Other photos seemed to be pulled from the internet, such as this one of baby geese following their mother, which seems to portray an idealized version of leading and following.

Baby geese following their mother



It seems that many participants could only cope with this theme by looking outward, rather than inward to their own experience.

Social Dream-Drawing (SDD)

Social Dream-Drawing is a methodology in which participants work with the drawings of dreams relating to a particular theme (Mersky 2008; 2013). They are asked to start

drawing their dreams as soon as they learn the theme and to bring one of the drawings to the workshop. With each dream drawing, we offer associations and amplifications, followed by a reflection on the theme.

Losing Hair



This photo is from a Social Dream-Drawing workshop that I co-hosted in Chile in 2009. The theme for this workshop was “What do I risk in my work?”. In this case, each participant was from a different organizational context.

This drawing contains images from two different dreams, which the dreamer had three days apart. The first dream, which is on the left side, was about losing his hair. The second was related to erotic feelings towards students, who approach him after giving a lecture.

The associations and reflections were about being exposed and naked, which led to the discussion of the role of “masks as a characteristic of the Chilean society, specifically of the Chilean oligarchy, where one has the feeling of wearing masks since it is important -- in order to survive -- to have a certain social and family origin, to study at specific universities, etc. You must have what they call ‘social credentials’” (Social Dream-Drawing Transcript 2009:8).

Self Employed



This drawing by a self-employed consultant reflected another kind of anxiety, that of getting sick and not being able to support the family. The cross drawn on the bed turned out to be an important element that probably would never have been revealed in just the telling of the dream. This led to associations to the role of the crusaders and also the Knights Templar Trust, a charity which was then working in the San Juan de Dios Children's hospital in Santiago. The question of how much one could or should risk, how far one should go to help others was related also to the demands on a self-employed consultant. As was said in the reflection group: "You have to establish certain limits regarding risks. Templars, for example, gave their lives but you don't need to go that far" (ibid.:12).

Blue-Eyed Children



Lastly this is a dream drawing by a female human relations executive working in a private enterprise. Her boss had just called her into his office to tell her she must take care of his children and that she would recognize them "because they had blue eyes just like him" (ibid.:15). The theme of elitism in Chile returned, since "the most important corporate groups belong to two of the main Catholic Church collectivities: the Opus Dei and The Legionnaires of Christ" (ibid.:15).

Connecting all three dreams was the theme of the invasion of the boundary of the role holder in very personally vulnerable ways, leading either to exposure, sickness or humiliation. All the risks had to do with how strong a boundary one can set around one's work identity in a culture where one does not hold the elite position.

What is an epistemology and why is it important?

When we talk about epistemology, we are talking about the basic ways that we know what we know. One's epistemology or theory of knowledge is extremely important, because it is the basis upon which one undertakes research or intervenes in organizations. If one believes, for example, that all knowledge is rational, then one would not utilize social dreaming as a research methodology. At the same time, if one believes that knowledge is collectively generated, then one would not undertake an organizational diagnosis purely on the basis of individual interviews.

I will now offer three key concepts underlying an epistemology of socioanalytic methodologies. While they are distinct concepts, they exist integrally in relation to one another and re-enforce one another.

Concept #1: The collective unconscious is a source of thinking

Opposite: Thinking is a rational mental process undertaken by the individual and all that is known is empirical and conscious

Psychoanalytic theory and practice have demonstrated that individuals have an unconscious that strongly influences behaviour and thinking and that is a source of tremendous creativity and often deep conflict, especially when not made available to the conscious mind. Psychoanalysis has evolved to explain and work with problems with individuals that seem to defy rational explanation. From the beginning, it has been not just a theory but a practice as well.

The general field of studies and practice using psychoanalytic processes and concepts to understand and intervene in organizations takes as its basic tenet that not only do individuals have an unconscious but groups, organizations and cultures have what Susan Long (2010) describes as an “‘associative unconscious’... a matrix of thought that links members of a community at an unconscious level”. This “unconscious social field of thoughts can be articulated or utilized in thinking”.

This first epistemological concept also takes for granted that thoughts – even those of the individual – do not “belong” just to him or her. As Long and Harney (2013:7) put it: “‘thought’ is a social rather than an individual process”. One can be said to be offering one's thoughts on behalf of the group, or as an expression of the group.

Concept #2: Knowledge is generated collectively.

Opposite: Knowledge comes from the theorizing of the expert and consists of individual contributions building on the cumulative contributions of other individuals.

One basic philosophical stance in socioanalysis is that the practitioner is constantly engaged in a mutual learning process with the object of research and the client. One does not proceed on one's own to discover truths without the participation and collaboration of others. Thus, one could say, findings and insights "are not individually owned" (Alexandrov 2009:41), but collectively owned and discovered.

This is quite different from the idea that an organization could learn about itself from a consultant relying on his or her "specialized method and knowledge" (ibid.:32) This "privileged and detached perspective" (ibid.:35) is based on the epistemological assumption that one can have knowledge of a system primarily using one's own tools and insights.

The concept that knowledge is generated collectively is connected to the school of relational knowledge, which holds that knowledge "grows from interaction" (ibid.:37) and is based on relations with others. This is consistent with Polanyi's (1966) theory of tacit knowledge, which is embodied in experience and is developed in collaboration with others.

Concept #3: Systematically processed subjective experience generates knowledge

Opposite: Only what is observed or reasoned by researchers is valid for knowledge production

This concept underlies all socioanalytic methodologies and research, in that the methodologies themselves are designed as a way of generating knowledge through the subjective experience of participants and the subsequent processing in a contained environment. In this approach, the subjective counts as real (Olesen 2012).

One can say that at the subjective level one experiences "the truth" of a particular insight or finding. This is opposite to the position normally associated with quantitative data analysis, which is characterized by "defining, categorizing, theorizing, explaining, exploring and mapping" one's data, then grouping them into similar concepts and further formulating them into thoughts and theory (Ritchie 1999:176). From the socioanalytic perspective, truth, as in psychoanalysis, emerges from a subjective process. It is the internal working through that naturally follows an emotional insight, where everything naturally falls together. This work results in a dramatic reorientation to previous assumptions and defenses.

I propose here a form of coherence theory, which holds that truth requires a proper fit of elements within a whole system.

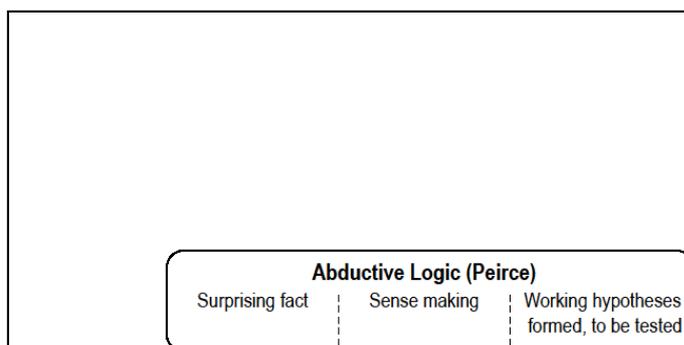
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/article-1G2-3446800385/coherence-theory-truth.html>. Freud (1927c:23) himself has described it as a situation where “a number of very remarkable, disconnected facts are brought together ... into a consistent whole”. It is deeply subjective, but somehow right.

Thus a statement or a finding can be experienced as true not only when it provides an explanation, but when it is experienced as encompassing these hitherto seemingly chaotic and unrelated facts (Polanyi 1966:21). It is a discovered truth that somehow “fits” the circumstances. Of course, it will need time to be integrated and further “worked through” into other experienced truths, just as a psychoanalytic insight is.

Integrative Schema

In this last section of this paper, I will introduce step by step a comprehensive integrative schema I have developed that links up many of the ideas presented today. My hope is that this schema, which connects my three epistemological concepts, socioanalytic theory and methodologies, and the practice of consultation in organizations, will demonstrate how strong a case we can make for our epistemological perspective.

First, I want to introduce another key underpinning of our work, i.e. the philosophy of abductive logic, developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, a 19th century American philosopher.



Peirce's abductive logic

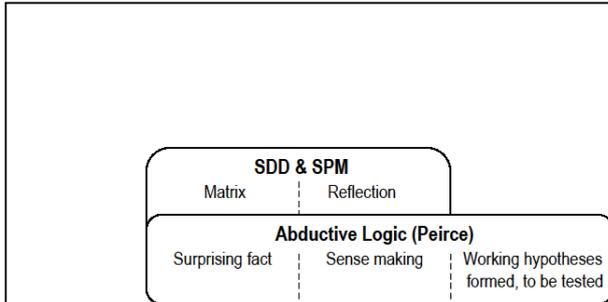
Susan Long and Maurita Harney, in the newly published book “Socioanalytic Methods: Discovering the Hidden in Organisations and Social Systems”, edited

by Susan Long (2013b), present an extensive case for this method of inquiry to serve as “a basic philosophical underpinning to the associative unconscious” and “an underlying concept for” (Long 2013a:xxiii-xxiv) socioanalytic methodologies. From their perspective, it grounds and sustains the process of making sense of the often surprising, disturbing and puzzling emanations from the dreams, drawings, and photos and provides a logical process by which they can be worked upon to provide meaning and understanding. This “method of inquiry” (Long and Harney 2013:13) starts with something surprising, something that cannot at first glance be explained, for example, the dream drawer’s bald head, the boss’ blue eyes and the cross on the hospital bed sheet. Peirce terms these surprising things as “the Strange Intruder” (Peirce, 1903, EP, 154 as cited in Long and Harney 2013:16). Making sense of such intruders, of course, is exactly the task of psychoanalysis.

Once the surprising fact surfaces, using abductive logic, one seeks to understand from where it might emanate. Using the example of the blue-eyed boss, we look for something that could explain what might have produced this image. For example we could formulate the working hypothesis that the influence of the elite class in Chile deeply influences organizational processes. With this temporary formulation, the blue eyes in the drawing now make sense, as an expression of a tension in the dreamer’s experience of her status in her organization. This is the sense making phase of Peirce’s logic.

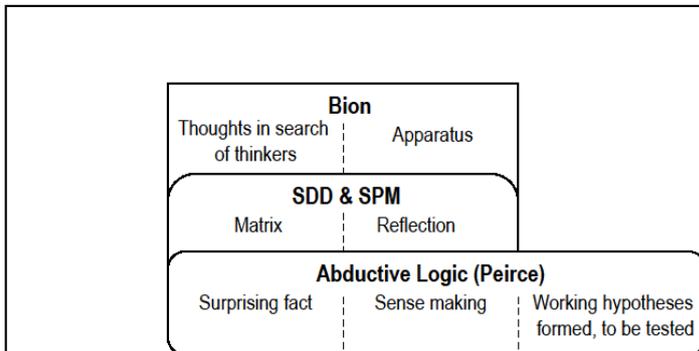
At this point, the surprising fact, although not proved, at least makes preliminary sense. After a period of time, from these first efforts to make sense, one may formulate more developed working hypotheses to be refined and tested. This could form the basis of research into the impact of class distinctions in Chilean organizations.

“Abduction presents us with *possibilities*: its conclusions give us something novel or different although not yet probabilities. These are established later through the work of normal science” (Kuhn, 1962 as cited in Long 2013a:xxiv). Using, for example, deductive logic, “which tests the hypothesis by applying it to further cases” (Long and Harney 2013:12), one could, for example, survey the ethnic makeup of senior executives in Chile to see if this confirms the hypothesis based on the dreamer’s experience.



SDD & SPM

One can easily see the connection between the first two parts of abductive logic and the matrix and reflection parts of socioanalytic methodologies. The surprising element (the blue eyes) emerges in the matrix and preliminary sense making (relation to elite management) is the task of the reflection session.

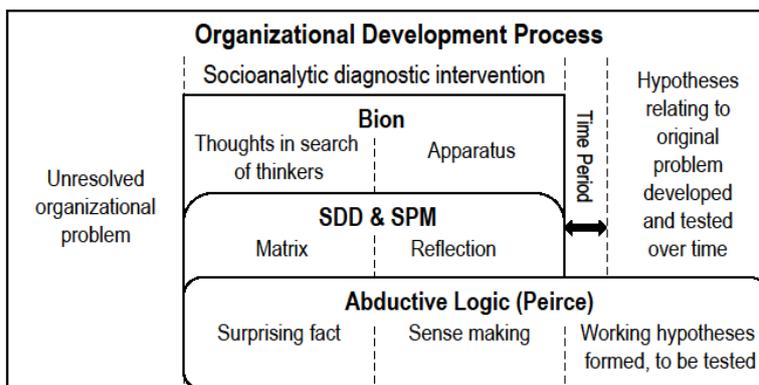


Bion

Bion's famous phrase "thoughts in search of a thinker" (1967) serves as a metaphor for his concept that we cannot call thoughts into being by the act of thinking. We can only think once thoughts arise. This notion is central to the matrix and is connected to Peirce's first step in abductive logic, the emergence of the surprising intruder.

Bion (1988:179) views thinking as the result of “two main mental developments. The first is the development of thoughts”, which I see as arising in the Matrix. The second main mental development in thinking is the “apparatus to cope with them” (ibid.), which I see as the reflection group. 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. In Peirce’s framework, this is sense making.

To further expand this line of argument, I want to note that Bion (1998) viewed these arising thoughts as not just random ones. He notes that they “contained or expressed a problem” (ibid:184) and are so undesirable that the psyche is forced to eliminate them somehow or another. Thus these emerging thoughts are clues to the problems underlying any system, for example, role boundaries of subordinates being invaded by a superior with an elite group identity.



Organizational Development Process

I now wish to broaden our perspective and also bring ourselves into the real world of organizational consultation. Here we can imagine that when an organization has a problem that simply won’t go away, despite numerous interventions, it may be agreed upon with the client to use one of our methodologies to help surface the underlying chronic issue, of which the presenting problem is merely a symptom. Using a theme relating to this problem, such as “Leadership Transitions” or “Where will we be in 10 years?”, which serve to ground and contain the process, the workshop is embedded in a broader consultation frame.

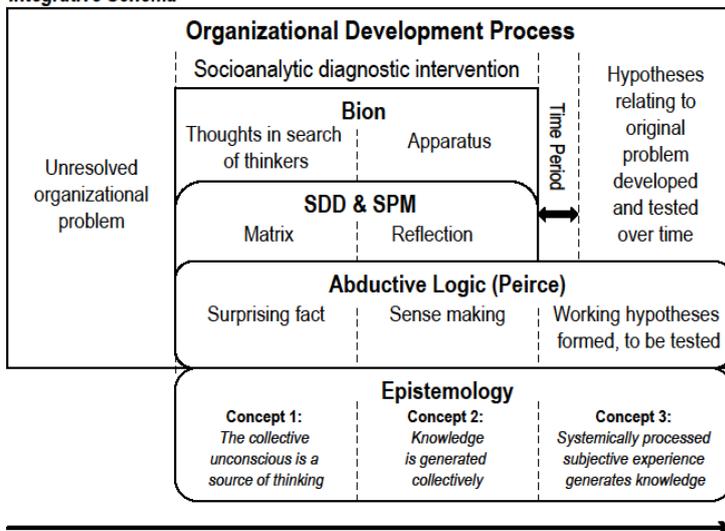
Surfacing the surprising fact and intruder and then reflecting on them in a Social Photo-Matrix or a Social Dream-Drawing workshop are, of course, just the beginning of a longer process of hypothesis formation and testing. Further steps are certainly required, in order for an organization to develop credible hypotheses to be tested and corroborated, using inductive or deductive processes. This relates to Peirce’s third and last phase, “Working hypotheses formed to be tested”.

The participant experience of a socioanalytic methodology requires much resources and energy. It is, as Peirce notes, just the beginning of a creative discovery process. Thus some time needs to elapse following the workshop for integration and planning to occur. Whatever is discovered needs to unfold gradually. We do not want to come too early to hypotheses and formulations.

Central to this work in organizations is its deeply subjective nature. As Long (2013c:311) notes:

[T]hese methods work by accessing, through the associative unconscious, the central emotional experiences to be found in a social system and its context and to open up the potential for their transformation, perhaps from a pathological to a more normal position, perhaps even to a position with creative potential. The reflective spaces created by these methods allow people to feel safe enough to reconnect with emotional experiences that lie at the heart of their work together and from there to think about how their work might be done more satisfactorily.

Integrative Schema



Underlying Epistemological Concepts

My last addition to this schema is to return to the 3 underlying epistemological concepts that I earlier offered:

1. The collective unconscious is a source of thinking.
2. Knowledge is generated collectively
3. Systematically processed subjective experience generates knowledge.

I have lined them up with the earlier categories.

Thus the first concept, that “the collective unconscious is a source of thinking”, is the epistemological assumption underlying the idea of the matrix in the socioanalytic workshop, where Peirce’s surprising fact always emerges and where those unconscious thoughts that are searching for thinkers, as Bion has formulated, become available for thinking.

The second concept, that “knowledge is generated collectively”, is the epistemological assumption underlying Peirce’s notion of sense making, which takes place in the reflection section of a socioanalytic workshop, which is the structure that functions as Bion’s apparatus for thinking.

And, lastly, the third concept. that “systematically processed objective experience generates knowledge”, is the epistemological assumption underlying Peirce’s notion of testing working hypothesis previously formulated in the reflection session and coincides with the follow-up work in an organizational diagnostic process.

Conclusion:

With this paper, my hope is that by bringing together a sound theoretical basis for the validity of what we do in our research and organizational practices, that we can truly trust that our work helps organizations broaden and deepen their capacities and creativity. I am hoping to bring to light what we must often keep in the shadows, our perspective of the unconscious and its possibilities for positive and effective change in the wider world.

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With special thanks to graphic artist June Blauvelt for the design of the schema.