

Weaving Voices Article (July-Dec 2004)

Contributions of the Members of the C. G. Jung Society of Sydney

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Jung and the Paranormal

BY LANCE STORM

Swiss psychiatrist, C. G. Jung is well known for developing a unique style of analysis that he called analytical psychology, but many will know that he was also interested in the paranormal. In the 1930s, Jung corresponded with the 'grandfather' of parapsychology, J. B. Rhine of Duke University, who gave us the terms ESP (extrasensory perception) and PK (psychokinesis). Jung was intrigued by Rhine's findings. But Jung was no newcomer to parapsychology at that time. Decades earlier, he had written his thesis on mediumship and occultism, which earned him his doctorate. By the 1940s, Jung had conducted his own parapsychological experiments to test his synchronicity theory.

Synchronicity is probably Jung's most controversial concept. Synchronicity theory posits that there are two types of coincidence—those that are meaningless, and those that are meaningful. The latter, the meaningful coincidence, is synchronicity, and it manifests when an inner psychic state corresponds or coincides with an outer physical event in a way that seems to defy reason. An example often given is the case of a client of Jung's—a woman whose analytical treatment was not progressing very well. She dreamed of a golden scarab beetle, and as she was telling Jung about her dream, a similar beetle landed on the window. Jung quickly caught this 'beetle of spiritual rebirth' and presented it to the woman. Her over-logical mindset was broken and her condition began to improve.

Jung felt that cases of synchronicity always had an acausal component to them. Like the 'dream' beetle and the 'real' beetle, there is no clear way that we can explain such correspondences in a scientific way—Jung, in fact, thought they happen as if by chance. However, the meaningfulness is clear regardless of the impossibility of the twofold event. Jung felt that ESP and PK were types of synchronicity, thus implying that there were other forms of synchronicity that are not necessarily paranormal. Whether cases of synchronicity are normal or paranormal, the meaningful component of synchronicity was always most important. It was of the utmost value, resulting in an increase in consciousness if the over-arching truth of the experience was realised—the truth being that our inner personal life, the psychology of our being, was enmeshed with outer-world events in ways that we may find truly remarkable. The acausal connecting principle that characterised this enmeshment is synchronicity.

Jung conducted an experiment with astrology to test his theory of synchronicity. He gathered many hundreds of natal charts belonging to married couples to see if the inner psychological state of the couple (their union in marriage) was synchronistically forecast in an outer physical event in the 'heavens' (specifically, certain planetary aspects that allegedly indicate marriage). Jung was surprised to find evidence of one such aspect in the first of three batches of natal charts (statistical evidence of moon-conjunct-ascendant indicating marriage), but watched that effect disappear only to be replaced by moon-conjunct-sun, and then moon-conjunct-moon in each respective batch. This three-fold effect should not occur if sampling was random. Naturally, the merging of the three databases produced overall non-significant results—all previous effects cancelling each other out. Jung concluded that his own subjective factor was involved.

Jung decided to test three different experimenters whose psychological characters were known to him. He was not surprised to find each of these three characters described perfectly by the dominant aspect in the corresponding batch of natal charts. Jung called this phenomenon the 'secret mutual connivance', which essentially boils down to a synchronicity effect, possibly of the most controversial kind. This effect is quite common in modern scientific parapsychology, and it is known as the

experimenter effect. It has been found many times to be, as Jung calls it, an “annoying incident,” but one which Jung thought could never be “proved scientifically to be anything more than that”. Jung had hoped to conduct further tests on synchronicity using the ancient Chinese system of divination, the so-called I Ching, but his earlier conclusion led him to discard the whole idea as fanciful because he felt that a pure synchronicity effect could not be identified statistically because of the secret mutual connivance.

However, in recent times, work at the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit (APRU), in the Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide, has endeavoured to uncover an ostensible paranormal aspect that might underlie the I Ching process. Using a coin-throwing method that generates an outcome ‘reading’ that serves as an answer to a specific question, researchers Dr Michael A. Thalbourne and Dr Lance Storm proposed that participants already ‘knew’ (unconsciously) what their outcome readings would be. As there are 64 readings, each participant was given 16 chances out of 64 to prove the researchers right. The first and second experiments produced above-chance (i.e., significant) results—amongst their 16 possible choices, participants seemed to be able to include the outcome reading more often than chance could explain. However, in a series of four experiments, researchers in the Unit have watched their significant effects decline to overall non-significance. Echoes of Jung’s astrological experiments!

It is too soon to be drawing conclusions about whether or not I Ching capitalises on a paranormal component of the human psyche, but we have at least shown that Jung was both right and wrong! APRU researchers now think it possible that a paranormal component (i.e., synchronicity) does underlie the I Ching process (something Jung did not think could be found), but this effect may not on occasion be statistically evident, thus supporting Jung’s conception that synchronicity was a chance-like phenomenon.

APRU researchers have also questioned the nature of paranormal phenomena. Results from the first two I Ching experiments support Dr. Thalbourne’s theory that Rhine’s ESP/PK nomenclature dichotomises what may be a single psi process—‘psychopraxia’, meaning the ‘self, or psyche, at work’. If the I Ching process depends on normal and paranormal processes, and there is no way of telling whether it is PK (i.e., knowing what the coin throws have to be) or ESP (i.e., knowing the future outcome in advance), then we might as well simplify the process and call it psychopraxia to cover all possibilities. This decision in no way reduces our knowledge. In fact, if our current models do not explain, but merely categorise, we cannot get close to understanding how the human psyche works. From a purely pragmatic point of view, it is probably more important that we start to find the causes of these phenomena. We can do this by finding new approaches - uncovering new ways of looking at things, rather than continue to test old conceptions that merely limit the way we think.

APRU researchers are currently involved in further work of this nature, much of which ultimately drags in synchronistic phenomena such as mutual connivance (i.e., experimenter effect) and the nature of chance. It can be seen that Jung continues to have influence on parapsychology, and his influence may well increase as time goes by since the depth of his remarkable insights are only now becoming more pertinent to modern parapsychologists.