

# Coincidence Studies

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**W**e instinctively seek order because order helps us to survive by producing predictability. We also find pleasure in its discovery. We establish order, in part, through the detection of coincidences, which suggest connections between different events occurring closely in time. Connections can imply principles and laws by which to understand the past, to enrich the present, and to predict the future.

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Our perceptions of coincidence emerge from swirls of information in our minds that match events in our surroundings. Like two dials spun by separate hands, mind and environment briefly coincide and produce an unlikely correspondence. The correspondence strikes us because it is unusual, often surprising, and sometimes wildly improbable.

One-third of all people notice coincidences with some frequency.<sup>1-3</sup> Reports of coincidental events seem to be increasing. Many people,

especially people with scientific training, dismiss coincidences as simply a matter of chance: accidents or anomalies generated by randomness. This dismissal, however, assumes that coincidences are inherently meaningless or insignificant. Without supporting evidence, this assumption is hardly scientific. With data now supporting their common occurrence and many suggestions of their potential usefulness, I propose the establishment of the new transdisciplinary field, Coincidence Studies.

## COINCIDENCE DEFINED

Coincidence Studies focuses on “weird” coincidences characterized by the striking and unlikely conjunction of two or more events that seem strangely connected. The two primary variables involved in characterizing coincidences are the time interval between the parallel patterns and the degree of similarity between or among them. Secondary variables are degree of surprise and ownership.

### Significance of Time Intervals

Time intervals that characterize coinciding events vary greatly and may stretch over years. Short time intervals seem to increase the potency of a coincidence because short time intervals between two seemingly related events can suggest causation. Coincidental events occurring closely together without an explicable cause evoke surprise and wonder. They may also provide assistance, as suggested by a participant in a coincidence research study:<sup>1</sup>

*My abusive husband and I were separated. And while drunk, he wrecked the car with the children in it. But I had decided to reunite with him. After he had visited his father, he expected me to pick him up at the airport. Waiting at home because his flight was delayed, I received an odd phone call. A woman had dialed my number by mistake. She began to tell me how her boyfriend was abusing her. The fear in the stranger's voice made me understand that staying with my husband was a mistake. When I met him at the airport, I told him my thinking had changed and he could not live with me.*

Coincidental events occurring across great distances can also generate surprise and raise large questions. For example, I once found myself choking for quite a long time on something caught in my throat. A few hours later, I was told that my father on his deathbed — in a distant city — had been choking

at about the same time. Suppose I had not been told. Does a coincidence exist if no one notices it?

### Similarity of Events

The two or more events making up a coincidence must be somehow similar. The similarity between and among the



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events is based on the brain's ability to recognize patterns. The patterns of the coinciding events must resemble each other. For example, suppose a person attends a class about a film that focuses upon a specific scene in a specific movie. Later that day, the person hears from a friend about another class in another town in which the same scene is discussed. A pattern (focus on scene X) is repeated. Suppose later that evening, the person reads a passage in a book unrelated to film that refers to the same scene in the same movie. Three very similar patterns (focus on scene X) make up the coincidence.

Exactly how similar must similar patterns be? How completely do the patterns need to match to be called similar and to constitute a coincidence?

Coincidence reporters may allow themselves great latitude in addressing this question. The degree of similarity deserves further examination.

### Degree of Surprise

A friend arrives on time to meet you for coffee, as usual. Not surprising. Running into a high school sweetheart with whom you have had no contact for 25 years in a coffee shop 2,000 miles away from your home town could be quite surprising. The situation becomes even more surprising when you both mention that you had each been recently thinking about the other. Weird coincidences like this make us wonder. They are low-probability events that tend to stretch our sense of what's possible. The less likely the paralleling patterns, the more surprising the coincidence.

Degrees of surprise also correlate with the degree of personal relevance of a particular coincidence. When the coincidence seems to provide a relevant comment on our current personal situation, the degree of surprise is amplified.

The degree to which a coincidence surprises us influences the degree of attention we pay to it. The study of surprise, as a common human psychological state, should be part of the new science of Coincidence Studies.

### Ownership

Is it your coincidence or mine? “I” will usually find “my” coincidences more compelling than “yours.” Ruma Falk<sup>4</sup> concluded in a study that when a coincidence happens to “me,” “I” find it much more surprising (to me) than the coincidences that happen to “you.”

### FORMS OF COINCIDENCE

The three historical forms of coincidence are synchronicity, serendipity, and seriality. For reasons noted below, I have coined an additional term: “simulpathity”

## Synchronicity

Carl Jung invented the word synchronicity from the Greek *syn* (with or together) and *chronos* (time).<sup>4</sup> Synchronicity means together-in-time. It served as an umbrella for Jung, under which he grouped many anomalous events, including telepathy, precognition, and clairvoyance (collectively classed as “psi”). Other paranormal phenomena that Jung included under synchronicity were poltergeists, apparitions, divination (eg, the I Ching), and astrology. Jung and those who followed him have maintained that synchronicity can be an important tool in the quest for self-realization, for personal and spiritual growth, and for a deeper experience of human interconnectedness.

A first step in the systematic study of synchronicity requires that Jung’s catch-all term be repositioned to refer specifically to coincidences that involve similar, parallel patterns that usually — but not always — occur within a narrow time period. As a specific subset of weird coincidences, synchronicity is concerned primarily with psychological/interpersonal patterns rather than with action.<sup>5</sup>

## Serendipity

Horace Walpole, a British MP in the 18th century — and the acknowledged inventor of the gothic novel — recognized in himself a talent for finding what he needed exactly when he needed it. He called this talent “serendipity” (a name he borrowed from an old tale, titled *The Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Sarendip*). Walpole used serendipity to mean finding something both by informed observation (sagacity, as he called it) and by accident.<sup>6,7</sup> Today, its meaning has expanded to include discoveries produced by luck, chance, active searching, and informed observation.

Serendipity clearly strikes many observers as a form of coincidence. The right thing turns up at just the right moment. Serendipities can be helpful in many everyday situations; for example, career counselors regularly advise clients to make the most of chance events.<sup>8</sup> Job advancement may result from being in just the right place at just the right time. In such

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cases, the patterns being repeated involve a specific desire (I need a job in advertising) that overlaps with a specific event (at the gym I happened to bump into the head of a local ad agency who needs someone with my skills). Science too sometimes advances by serendipity,<sup>6</sup> such as Alexander Fleming’s “accidental” discovery of penicillin. At the crucial point in his research, the pattern in the petri dish matched a pattern in Fleming’s mind. The pattern had been established years earlier. While suffering from a cold, Fleming saw his nasal drippings fall onto a colony of bacteria. He later saw a “halo of inhibition” in the areas where the mucous had fallen. Following up on this observation, he discovered the bacteriocidal enzyme lysozyme present in mucus and tears. The penicillin mold that had also accidentally fallen onto a petri dish also created a halo of inhibition among the actively growing staphylococci.<sup>6</sup> Fleming’s mind had been prepared to recognize this pattern. Louis Pasteur said “Chance favors the prepared mind” — which we can interpret to mean that serendipities require a

combination of luck, observation, astute pattern recognition, the ability to match external patterns to patterns in the mind, and the willingness to act on the opportunity.

The study of serendipitous events requires a simplification and redefinition of Walpole’s exotic term. Whereas synchronicity focuses on the interpersonal and the psychological, serendipity is a form of coincidence based on action.

## Seriality

Seriality differs from serendipity and synchronicity in that it refers to a series of events in the objective world that the mind takes note of and remembers. Although a mind takes note, there is not necessarily a subjective element. The series could be verified like any objective data.

Few have described strings of similar events more thoroughly than Austrian biologist Paul Kammerer, who spent hours on park benches noting the people who passed by, classifying them by sex, age, dress, whether they carried umbrellas or parcels, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Kammerer was not particularly interested in meaning — only in repeated sequences. For example, on a train, his wife was reading a novel with a character named “Mrs. Rohan.” She saw a man get on the train who looked like their family friend, whose name was Prince Rohan. Later that night, Prince Rohan dropped by their house for a visit. The three Rohans creates an instance of seriality.

Kammerer<sup>9</sup> defined “seriality” as “a recurrence of the same or similar things or events in time and space”— events that, as far as can be ascertained, “are not connected by the same acting cause.” His book on seriality, *Des Gesetz der Serie*, helped Jung develop his own concept of synchronicity, although they emphasized very different theories of coincidence. Jung emphasized personal meaning, and Kammerer did not. Here,

Jung's emphasis seems generally correct. Any series of improbable but similar patterns can seem meaningful, depending on who takes note of it.

### **Simulpathity**

I coined the term "simulpathity" to describe a specific subclass of synchronicity: the simultaneous experience by one person of another person's distress. The experience occurs generally without conscious awareness and usually at a distance. One person is in pain and another person begins to feel the same pain without knowing why. Often, the two people share a strong emotional bond. The largest number of reports concerns twins,<sup>10,11</sup> although reports concerning mothers and their children are also prominent. Unlike classic synchronicities, the experiences of simulpathity usually do not carry personal meanings. Simulpathity suggests a more general meaning — the individuals are more closely bonded than current scientific thought holds possible.

Simulpathity — from the Latin *simul* (simultaneous) and the Greek *pathos* (suffering) — differs profoundly from the word "sympathy." The sympathetic person is aware of the suffering of the other but does not actually feel it. In the experience of simulpathity, one person is usually unaware of the suffering of the other person and actually experiences some form of that suffering. Only later is the simultaneity of the distress recognized. No explanatory mechanism is implied; the experience tends to defy standard secular explanatory systems. Sometimes, such experiences are described as "telepathic" or "telesomatic," evoking in certain quarters a psi explanation,<sup>11</sup> but one advantage of the new coinage is that simulpathity comes unencumbered by prior explanatory theories.

### **COINCIDENCE-PRONE PEOPLE**

People create coincidences by matching their mental-emotional patterns with patterns that they perceive in the environment. To notice a coincidence requires paying attention to one's own thoughts, mental images, and feelings while also monitoring surrounding events. Some people seem coincidence-prone: that is, they possess a penchant for noticing coincidences that is not shared equally by other people. Various characteristics seem to contribute to the meta-mental states conducive to creating and experiencing coincidences.

Research suggests that people who describe themselves as "spiritual" and/or "religious" report experiencing coincidences more often than those who self-describe as non-religious or non-spiritual.<sup>5</sup> Among undergraduate students studied as subjects, coincidence-prone people possess additional characteristics:

- Self-referentiality: the tendency to believe that the thoughts of others involve the self.
- High negative affect: emotions including sadness, anger, and anxiety.
- Vitality: an optimism and enthusiasm accompanied by the belief that events are unfolding in one's favor.
- Intuition: the tendency to bypass rational thought sequences to make connections on the basis of feelings and general impressions.
- Meaning-seeking: seeking clues to the meaning-of-life events.

These characteristics imply heightened emotional states likely to increase readiness to scan the environment and compare environmental observations with mental events.

Neuropsychology research adds another variable that tends to correlate to the degree of associative thinking. People who associate ideas easily are more likely to make connections

between mental patterns and contextual events.<sup>12</sup> However, some coincidence-prone people share none of these qualities. They may simply have had a personal experience of coincidence so powerful that it sensitizes them to consciously seek more of them.

### **SITUATIONS PREDISPOSED TO COINCIDENCES**

Increasing numbers of mind-context intersections and emotional circumstances<sup>2</sup> each can increase the frequency with which a person experiences coincidences. Mind-environment intersections can be increased by telecommunications, media immersion, unusual actions, and creative efforts. Emotional intensity is increased by births and deaths, marriage and divorce, severe sickness, moving, job changes, vacations and travel, psychotherapy, and personal problems that seem unsolvable. Major transitions tear the web of our habitual patterns, increasing the possibility that something odd can enter our reality.

### **THE SEARCH FOR MEANING**

The success of modern science has relied upon the objectification of reality by removing subjectivity from theories and experiments as much as possible. From this Newtonian perspective the world around us functions like a clock, with its rules and regularities unconnected to the mind of the scientist. However, in his theory of relativity, Einstein showed us that the position and speed of the observer influences measurement outcomes. For example, the faster the observer is moving, the slower time goes. In the very tiny world of quantum physics, the simple act of measurement, of observation, can change the state of what is being observed. The probable becomes real.<sup>13</sup> Relativity applies to large objects such as planets and stars and the huge distances between them, whereas quantum physics applies to very

tiny entities such as electrons, photons, and neutrinos. Should subjectivity, the act of observing, be included in the study of our in-between Newtonian world?

Subjective meaning appears to be an essential ingredient in the study of most coincidences. The act of observing a coincidence helps to create it because coincidences usually involve matches between mind content and context. The match must be observed for the coincidence to exist. As in quantum physics, the act of observation brings the potential coincidence into the reality. As in relativity theory, the position of the observer (whether the coincidence is mine or yours) influences its meaningfulness. Observers and their subjectivity make meaning possible. Principles of coincidence interpretation need to be developed, just as they have been developed for music, poetry, painting, and the narrative arts of literature, movies, and plays. Psychotherapy too is focused primarily on subjective meaning aided by interpretive principles. As in the arts and psychotherapy, the subjective experience of a coincidence remains primary. Subjective meaning can be applied to the past, present, or future. Future meaning emphasizes the practical: What do these parallel events imply about what I am doing or what I am about to do?

Perhaps the most famous instance of synchronicity occurred to a patient of Jung's who resisted Jung's ideas.<sup>4</sup> Before the pivotal session, she dreamed of a scarab, a beetle-like Egyptian insect, which she recounted to Jung. A moment after she told Jung about the scarab, he suddenly presented her with a scarab-like beetle that had been buzzing at his office window. The synchronicity between dream scarab and scarab-like beetle melted her resistance to Jung and changed her future interactions with him.

Past meaning seeks a cause, an explanatory framework. The same questions tend to follow every coincidence story: Why? How did it happen? Humans

are cause-seeking creatures; we want to know the reasons or explanation for why and how things happen.

Present meaning emerges in simulpathity when we come to know through unexpected personal experience how deeply we are connected to the people we love. Synchronicity can operate like a rip in the fabric of time that reveals a new and unknown reality — the eternal now as suggested by Main:

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*The act of observing a coincidence helps to create it because coincidences usually involve matches between mind content and context.*

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*...synchronicity disrupts our tendency to think in a manner oriented either towards the past, in terms of causality, or towards the future, in terms of teleology, focusing our attention instead on patterns of meaning disclosed in the present. In synchronicity, uniformly unfolding clock time is interrupted with moments of extraordinary timeliness, which in turn can open our eyes to a sense of present time as qualitative, filled with varying landscapes of meaning.<sup>14</sup>*

#### **THEORIES OF SYNCHRONICITY**

The most elaborate theories of synchronicity are those of Jung and his followers. Jungian theories share in common the belief that the collective unconscious and archetypes are major participants in coincidence creation. Archetypes are thought to be activated (or constellated) in high-emotion situations. Jungians support their theories with ideas drawn from sources ranging from mythology to quantum physics and have provided a

rich context from which to speculate about meaningful coincidences.<sup>4,15,16</sup>

Divine intervention is a widely accepted explanation among the general public for meaningful coincidences.<sup>17</sup> Among people who place high value on currently accepted scientific concepts, coincidences are explainable in statistical terms such as randomness, probability, and chance. Some people combine these two predominant explanations by suggesting that "God works through random events."

Freudians, meanwhile, offer accounts of coincidence that evoke unconscious processes, current needs, and early childhood experience.<sup>18</sup> Parapsychologists suggest the psi in one of its several forms (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis) help to create meaningful coincidences.<sup>19</sup> The theories today seem to be in direct conflict with each other. For example, in the coincidence phone call to the abused woman described earlier, Jungians might see the archetype of The Abusive Relationship being constellated (activated), whereas Freudians would suggest that the phone call activated her own unconscious conflict, which helped her to clarify the needed change. Parapsychologists could suggest that she psychokinetically triggered the needed message. Statisticians will see randomness, claiming correctly that in large populations, low probability events do happen. And like other people of faith, this woman believed the coincidence was created by divine intervention, which she said strengthened her belief in God.

The resolution of conflicts among coincidence theories could take three forms. One possibility is that a superordinate theory will encompass all others, explaining all instances of weird coincidence. A second possibility is that different theories may account for different types of coincidences. A third possibility is that each theory explains one aspect of a meaningful coincidence. Again, using the coincidence phone call to the abused woman:

1) Low probability coincidences do happen, and this is one of them;

2) She was seeking resolution of a conflict and simply used the empathic mirror presented by the highly improbable phone call to change her decision;

3) The mind-context match may have emerged from some form of psi or a hypothetical Jungian state from which mind and matter emerge; and

4) This psychoid or *unus mundus* state bears some resemblance to God, to whom all mystery can be attributed.

We then come full circle to probability, which is not an explanation but instead is a description of what happens. Given knowledge of all the variables, we should be able to predict a coincidence, but we do not have access to this knowledge and must currently be satisfied with statistical methods. However, as suggested by theoretical physics,<sup>13</sup> probability may be hinting at causal connections we have yet to understand, leading then to Jungian-like theories about other dimensions of reality.

### ESTABLISHMENT OF COINCIDENCE STUDIES

Coincidence Studies aim to develop theories accounting for the place of coincidence in human affairs and to expand our understanding about the uses of coincidence. This field would:

- Develop a taxonomy of coincidences — create sharper categories such as simulpathity.
- Clarify the importance of time intervals and degrees of similarity.
- Define methods to judge the strength and weakness of coincidences and the differing relevance.
- Develop and clarify interpretation principles.
- Expand the value and clarify the problems of coincidence use.
- Further characterize coincidence prone people.

- Address the positive correlation between intense affect and increased coincidence frequency.
- Test viable theories, recognizing that we may be expanding our understanding of causation.
- Develop methods for increasing the frequency of coincidence detection.

To establish the field, interest in coincidences must garner the energetic attention of sufficiently large numbers of people positioned to help it develop. The enthusiasm of the general public must coalesce sufficiently to motivate popular media to write, talk, and produce videos on coincidences. Public and popular media interest will drive the idea into the academic and grant funding arenas.

Many disciplines can contribute to this new field. These disciplines include but are not limited to Jungian psychology, statistics, neuropsychology, psychiatry, cognitive neuroscience, psychotherapy, parapsychology, vocational counseling, narrative arts, cultural anthropology, and theology and the mantic arts. Research publications and accompanying academic interest will add to growing support, leading to the establishment of formal interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary units in and outside of academic institutions to promote the study of coincidences.

The Yale SynchroSummit, held in October 2010, marked the first focused gathering for the study of meaningful coincidences that included the full spectrum of competing theories. More such summits would help to accelerate the field's development.

Citizen Scientists need to be engaged. Two leaders of the 2010 SynchroSummit at Yale University, James Clement van Pelt and Lesley Roy, initiated the Citizen Scientist approach (the process of relying on a network of volunteers to collect data) to studying coincidence centering

on an app on a smartphone that can be activated when the participant experiences a meaningful coincidence. The participant is then prompted through a series of questions to characterize the coincidence.

Life transitions need more systematic attention because coincidences regularly occur during significant transitional events.<sup>2</sup> The association of grief and coincidence, for example, was the subject of a doctoral dissertation.<sup>20</sup> Other conditions to be studied include sickness, pregnancy, childbirth, and job transitions, especially as compared with normal life situations.

Psychotherapy provides a controllable setting in which to study coincidences. How people show up in therapists' offices appears to be random — the timing of the initial contact, the day of the opening, the type of problem, the strengths and weaknesses of the therapist. Yet many meaningful coincidences regularly occur in psychotherapy. They involve three major types: the patient describes a meaningful experience from outside the office; the therapist finds a personal psychological mirror in the patient's struggles; like Jung's scarab, a meaningful coincidence takes place during the session. Because therapy increases emotional intensity, opens participants to the contents of their minds, and increases mind-context intersections, providing fertile ground for coincidence creation and detection, discovering how to mine this rich depository of meaningful coincidences is key to Citizen Scientists.

### CONCLUSION

One problem is clear from the outset: Multiple disciplines, each with its own distinct traditions, beliefs, and methods, will need to work together to find ways of sharing new findings under a mosaic of theories.

One of the biggest challenges in the development of the new discipline of Coincidence Studies is providing a systematic place in scientific research for subjectivity and for human consciousness. Meaningful coincidences depend upon the mind of the observer. The question of how to develop methods and an accompanying technical language that includes and respects the subjective element built into the fabric of coincidence needs to be answered.

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