

THIS ISSUE:

Coincidence Studies

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Guest Editor



While on a vacation in Alaska, a physician undergoing psychotherapy “heard” the reassuring voice of an ill, beloved mentor in Texas, speaking to her. A few days later, she was told that the mentor had died around the time she had heard his voice. She had been reluctant to tell her psychiatrist (or anyone) about this event, as well as about many previous similar extraordinary events.

This case report appeared in a recent lead article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*.¹ In the May 2009 issue of *Psychiatric Annals*,² my colleagues and I reported results of the Weird Coincidence Scale (WCS-2) study, strongly suggesting that such extraordinary experiences are far more common than is generally recognized by the scientific community. Schizophrenic and manic patients sometimes present with stories of odd and impossible connections between events, and psychiatrists usually (and often correctly) attribute these associations to the illness. However, patients who are less psychiatrically disturbed also report strange connections between their subjective experiences and environmental events. The analysis of these strange connections, if we do not dismiss them as meaningless, can some-

times prove useful. Jung formalized the description of these “acausal” connections as “synchronicity.”³ A rich theoretical and clinical literature on synchronicity has provided a basis for many of Jung’s speculations about the collective unconscious, archetypes and the *unus mundus* psychoid, from which both mind and matter are thought to emerge.

In the first paper of this issue (see page 561), I propose the development of the new field of Coincidence Studies, in which psychiatry has a crucial part to play through drug and brain science research, psychotherapy, and clearly defining the relevance of coincidences, in all their various permutations, to specific psychiatric disorders.

George Costin, MD, and colleagues (see page 572) also demonstrate that positive life events are associated with increased frequency of coincidence detection.

Robert Perry, BA, describes a survey study of an extreme coincidence subtype — conjunctions of meaningful parallel events (CMPEs; see page 577). His data confirm that CMPEs are a distinct phenomenon within the spectrum of synchronicity/coincidence and provide promising initial support

for what in time could prove to be one of its most testable forms.

Of what interest are studies of coincidence to psychiatrists increasingly focused on neurochemistry, genetics, and neural circuitry? Our brains seek order in the profusion of inputs that are daily life. The coinciding of events sometimes suggests hidden causes that may hint at more effective understandings of reality.

Psychiatrists who are willing to accept weird coincidences as possibly normative experiences will more readily encourage their patients to describe them and be more available to help patients utilize these experiences. As the history of psychiatry so clearly indicates, our patients’ reports help to broaden our clinical understanding and sometimes our understanding of the human condition. Their weird coincidences hint at new mind-brain-environmental connections that suggest new clinical approaches and expanded understanding of consciousness.

The research in this issue reflects a broader culture transformation. Once the province of Jungians and of New Age thinkers, synchronicity and serendipity are now established as regular occurrences in the lives of at least one-third of the general population.

guest editorial

Mary Kay Landon, PhD, demonstrates the possibility that certain levels of intention can influence finding unexpected money (see page 584).

Frank Pasciuti, PhD (see page 590), reviews the history of the I Ching and how it is used. His research methodology begins with an intake interview that defines the problem for which guidance is being sought. The participant then blindly throws three coins six times to create a hexagram of solid and broken lines that matches one of 64 hexagrams in the I Ching. In this form of controlled coincidence creation, the hexagram is believed to approximately match the problem brought by the participant and offer a possible solution. Pasciuti found a slight positive trend but no statistical significance, perhaps because of a small n of 60. He also found that a subgroup of participants fitting one Myers-Briggs subtype ($n = 10$) of introversion, intuition, feeling, and perception (INFP) picked the correct hexagram at a rate of 50%. People

who had been in psychotherapy for more than 50 sessions also had high hit rates.

Continuing the development of coincidence research, Mary Kay Landon, PhD, develops a strong rationale for challenging Jung's assertion that synchronicity cannot be formally studied. (This bonus article is available exclusively at PsychiatricAnnalsOnline.com.) Using theoretical concepts from both psi research and Jungian psychology, she reviews the literature on anomalous mind-matter interactions. She shows that psi research has neglected social science variables and that Jungians have not clearly thought out their beliefs that synchronicity was not researchable.

These pilot studies demonstrate that coincidences are amenable to controlled research.

Coincidences, especially synchronicity and serendipity, are commonly detected by people in medical centers, in universities, and in the general public, as suggested in the Costin article, and also in two online-

exclusive supplements available at PsychiatricAnnalsOnline.com: one written by Bruce Greyson, MD; the other by Sheryl Attig, PhD, MTS. Greyson discusses how people who have near-death experiences (NDE) become more aware of meaningful coincidences after their NDE; and Attig and colleagues link intuition and spirituality to coincidence.

This issue of *Psychiatric Annals* strongly suggests that coincidences commonly occur, can be useful, and are ripe for future study.

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3. Jung CJ. *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press;1973.
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