

Investigating Synchronistic Events in Psychotherapy

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Abstract

According to Jung's original definition of synchronicity, psychotherapy can be considered as an outstanding field where synchronistic events can be expected to appear. Even though synchronicity has been discussed intensively in recent years, up to now there has been no attempt to observe and document synchronistic events in psychotherapy in any systematic fashion. There are several collections of reports of synchronistic events, either documented in a more or less anecdotal way or resulting from broader investigations of so-called anomalous phenomena. The psychotherapeutic setting presents the opportunity to observe synchronistic events systematically and prospectively, and to link them with other data concerning the patient, his/her psychodynamics, and interpersonal and other conditions. Moreover, it offers the option to test Jung's assumption that synchronistic events are connected to the patient's process of individuation. A systematic research frame is proposed for Jungian psychotherapy in order to collect corresponding data. First results from a pilot study are reported.

1 Introduction

A central theoretical product of the Pauli-Jung-dialog is the concept of synchronicity. Jung published his article "Synchronizität als ein Prinzip akausaler Zusammenhänge" (Jung 1952) together with a treatise by Pauli on Kepler in their joint volume "Naturerklärung und Psyche" (Jung and Pauli 1952) after a previous publication on the topic "Über Synchronizität" (Jung 1951). According to Jung, synchronicity was defined as a coincidence of an inner psychological state or event with an external or objective event without any causal connection between the two. Instead, their connection seems, at least for the experiencing individual, as meaningful. Both Jung and Pauli struggled to find a theoretical model for synchronicity based on analogies with quantum theory (see Gieser 2005 for more details).

Jung's (1951) classic example for a case of synchronicity occurred in the context of psychotherapy. A female patient of Jung's presented a dream in a therapy session in which she had received a golden scarabeus as a present. Right at that moment they heard a noise tapping at the window. When Jung stood up and opened the window a beetle flew into the room which was the closest relative to a scarabeus occurring in central Europe, a so-called rose beetle. The patient was deeply moved by this experience.

Before this event the therapeutic process had become difficult and made no progress. Through the synchronistic experience it became possible for the patient to change her inflexible identification with a rational orientation of her consciousness and to begin a process of psychological transformation. Jung saw the archetypal symbolism of the scarabeus beetle in relation to the mystery of death and rebirth and in analogy to the psychological situation of his patient. She had to give up a too one-sided orientation concerning rationality and control of the ego and move towards a new balance between consciousness and the unconscious.

The example makes clear that from the beginning Jung connected the concept of synchronicity strongly with both the process of psychotherapy and the individuation process. Individuation is here seen as a spontaneous process developing out of the unconscious psyche, moving the individual towards his or her potential wholeness. In this process the unconscious confronts the conscious ego with symbols, as for example in dreams, to foster a constructive dialog between consciousness and the unconscious.

In Jungian theory the situation of analytical therapy with its special interpersonal relationship is seen as an arena where this internal dialog is promoted. During the spontaneous production of symbols from the unconscious, the likelihood for synchronistic events to appear is increased. The reason behind this is the constellation of collective unconscious and archetypal material.

Archetypes, which structure the unconscious, are organized in opposites which can be related to the concept of complementarity in quantum theory.¹ Synchronistic events are meaningful and can be interpreted, in the context of psychotherapy, like other symbolic material as, for example, dreams, images etc. (Fordham 1957, Main 2007, Hopcke 2009). Several authors have developed methodologies for utilizing synchronistic events in psychotherapy (Bolen 1979, Kreutzer 1984).

¹Compare Atmanspacher *et.al* (2002), Walach (2003), von Lucadou *et al.* (2007); see also Fach (2011) for a detailed description of a generalized quantum theory as an explanatory model for the appearance of synchronistic and other anomalous events.

2 State of Empirical Research

Even though there have been many publications since the time when Jung and Pauli formulated the concept, there have been only few studies on synchronicity from the background of analytical psychology using systematic empirical research methods (Coleman and Beitman 2009). Most studies have been single case studies with no coherent methodology based on free interpretations in the sense of a general psychoanalytic approach (Williams 1957, Bender 1966, Keutzer 1984, Wharton 1986, Hopcke 1990, Kelly 1993, Guindon and Hanna 2002).

But there are also studies applying systematic scientific methodology: Hanson and Klimo (1998) conducted a systematic analysis of reports on coincidences with negative consequences where 56% of the subjects interviewed reported synchronistic events. Hill (2011) developed a study of synchronistic events in mourning and showed that these synchronistic experiences have a healing function for grief. Meyer (1998) investigated the correlation between the proneness to experience synchronistic events and personality factors. He found that synchronistic experiences abound for introverted feeling types, and that they occur especially frequently in stressful life situations.

Several studies conducted in Germany investigated the occurrence of synchronistic experiences and exceptional experiences in a descriptive sense. In a representative survey investigating the frequency of exceptional experiences it was found that 36.7% had precognitive dreams and 18.7% experienced extrasensory perceptions in relation to death or crises (Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche 2003). In another nation-wide representative telephone survey in Germany with 1510 participants, 40.3% stated that they had at least once the experience of a meaningful coincidence which was incompatible with chance expectations (Deflorin 2003).

Temme (2003) found 36.7% of interviewees in a representative study saying they had at least one precognitive dream. The same study also showed that the content of the dreams circled around a limited number of topics: especially death and existential crises as well as outstanding changes in the life of the subjects (e.g., first meeting of their spouse).

The most common form of synchronistic experiences (Sannwald 1959) are dreams and visions (47.9%), premonitions (26.7%) and dreams and visions of a rather symbolic nature (15.1%). Precognitive dreams are often experienced as especially clear, emotionally intensive and easy to remember (Schredl 1999). In a data base collected by the counseling department of the Institute Frontier Areas of Psychology (IGPP) in Freiburg, Germany, containing 1465 cases of exceptional experiences, 6% were identified as “mean-

ingful coincidences” (Atmanspacher and Fach 2013). The same percentage was found in a recent survey of the general population in Switzerland (Fach *et al.* 2013).

All these studies show that synchronicities are fairly well documented at a descriptive level. However, the small number of systematic empirical studies investigating the connection between inner and external events shows the need for more research connecting reports of synchronistic events with context data.

A key problem in studies of synchronicity is that chance expectations can never be exactly computed (or even excluded). The reason is that the base rate for the occurrence of single events is fundamentally inaccessible (Diaconis and Mosteller 1989). Similarly, causal connections between synchronistic events can hardly be excluded with certainty – they could just be too complex to be identified or hidden as common causes for the two events observed (Primas 1996). As a consequence, the difficulties of investigating synchronicities in an experimentally well-confined study design are extreme indeed.

3 Synchronicity in Psychotherapeutic Settings

This situation led the author to design a study on synchronicity using empirical research methods and placing it in the field of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy as a research field has several advantages:

- Psychotherapy is a highly standardized and reduced situation (referring to the setting, persons involved, time frame, space, topic, etc.).
- Context information (patient’s pathology and psychodynamics, biography, transference, course of therapy etc.) is available after and prior to the synchronistic event.
- Dreams are documented right after their occurrence (this is the case at least in Jungian psychotherapy where clients are usually asked to document their dreams regularly).
- The therapeutic relationship is usually stable over several years.
- Follow-up investigations of the development after the synchronistic event are possible.

This means that analytical psychotherapy is the designated field for empirical research on synchronicity. It allows the systematic documentation of synchronistic events and offers the possibility of interpreting the events in context, i.e. in relation to the biography and the psychodynamics of the

patient as well as with his life situation and his situation in therapy. In this way, the problem of a retrospective reinterpretation or manipulation of the original data can be reduced. Follow-up studies of the impact of the event on further developments are possible.

4 Design of the Study

The general idea of the study is to create conditions under which it is possible to collect data about synchronistic events in psychotherapy and corresponding context data in a systematic way. The goal is to interpret connections between individual psychological conditions and the occurrence of synchronistic events. A necessary step in this project is to establish a documentation scheme. We start with a selected collection of case reports from publicly accessible literature. The following sources have been exploited:

- Ryback and Sweitzer (1990): 23 cases of precognitive dreams,
- Tart (1990): nine cases of transcendent experiences,
- Demoll *et al.* (1960): two cases of spontaneous experiences,
- Bauer and Schetsche (2003): six cases of supernatural events.

This collection of 40 case reports concerning synchronistic experience was analyzed via *qualitative content analysis* (Mayring 2010), an interpretive method that seeks categories inherent in the empirical material. This analysis produced a system of categories presented in the following table.

context	change	1. general 2. crisis 3. growth
	stability	1. general 2. conflict
	specific	1. couple relationship 2. family 3. other social relationship 4. work 5. other
	psychological	1. hope 2. fear 3. personal affective relation

inner state	topic, content, symbolism	negative affect positive affect
	type of experience	1. dream 2. hallucination 3. vision 4. premonition (emotion, spontaneous behavior, physiological reaction, physical effect, information) 5. inner voice 6. illusion 7. statement
	focus person(s)	1. self 2. other: familiar, unfamiliar, anonymous
coinciding event	topic, content, symbolism	negative affect positive affect
	manifestation	1. psychological state 2. external event
	focus person(s)	1. self 2. other: familiar, unfamiliar, anonymous
coincidence	subjective explanation	1. god/higher being 2. magic causality 3. transcendental reality 4. unexplainable/anomaly
	consequences	1. topic/focus 2. subjective changes (world concept, self concept, social relations) 3. persistence (temporary/ongoing) 4. dynamic (beginning of, end of, part of development)
relations	time	1. synchronic 2. asynchronic
	space	1. coinciding 2. distant
	focus person(s)	1. participant 2. observer (w/o focus person) 3. representative (active/passive)

coincidence type		1. realistic 2. symbolic
	subtype	1. precognition 2. telepathy 3. clairvoyance

The results of this qualitative analysis show some first systematic structures inherent in the empirical material. As a first observation, synchronistic experiences occur under special conditions, especially in life situations that are characterized by rapid change, crises or even illness and death. Secondly, synchronistic experiences are typically organized around a so-called focus person which is connected with the change situation. This can be either the reporting person or a proxy person. In many cases the experience leads to changes in the world concept or the self concept of the person, or is part of a dynamic which changes psychological or interpersonal conditions.

5 Case Example

To illustrate the application of the category system, the following case example from Tart (1990) will be analyzed and put into the scheme.

My best friend, Mike, was in a car accident and for approximately a month was in a coma. One night I dreamed that he came to my parent's house. The dream was extremely vivid. We sat and talked for what seemed about an hour, about all kinds of subjects. Mike told me about the wreck, that his girlfriend had not died instantly (like the papers had reported) but that she was okay now, and that he was fine and would see me again one day. The odd thing about the dream was that it was completely real, but not surreal like most of my "vivid" dreams. It really felt like reality. When Mike got up to leave, he mentioned that he wouldn't see me again for a long time, but that I wasn't to be upset, because he was fine. As he walked out the door, he looked back and said that his mom was about to call, and to let her know everything would be okay. I awoke with a start from the dream, and sat up in my bed. About one minute later, at around five in the morning, the phone rang. I had a room downstairs that had been a family room, and it had a phone. I got to the phone before the third ring and answered it. It was Mike's mother. She simply said Mike had died earlier that morning. I was still quite groggy from my sudden awakening, and all I could think of to say was, "I know. He told me". She started crying and hung up the phone. The thing that struck me about this incident was

that at the time, it did not seem odd at all. It was simply a fact that Mike and I had talked prior to his leaving. It did not surprise me that Mike had died, because we had talked about that in our conversation, and Mike had told me that his mom would call, so the call did not even seem notable. I did notice a sudden change in my attitude after this event. Prior to Mike's death, I had been consumed by fear of death, often crying myself to sleep worrying about dying, even though I was brought up in a church environment that taught that death was not to be feared. After this incident, I lost my fear of death, but more than that, I gained a love of life, the absence of which had stifled my childhood. I never considered this a case of transcendental experience, in part because it was so normal and natural. However, had I not had this experience, I don't believe I would have had the courage to follow my creative scientific thoughts that lead to my leading an R&D team.

If we put the information from the case report into the category system the following description results:

context	stability	crisis: car accident
	specific	other social relationship: close friend
	psychological	fear of death
inner state	topic content symbolism	positive affect assurance about well-being of friend, goodbye, departing in hope phone call by mother
	type of experience	dream
	focus person(s)	self other: familiar
coinciding event	topic content symbolism	phone call by mother information about Mike's death
	manifestation	external event
	focus person(s)	self other: familiar

coincidence	subjective explanation	none (transcendental?)
	consequences	topic/focus: lost fear of death, gained love of life, courage to follow his creative scientific thoughts; subjective changes of self concept and emotions; persistence ongoing; dynamic: beginning of development
relations	time	asynchronic
	space	distant
	focus person(s)	participant observer (with focus person)
coincidence type		realistic
	subtype	precognition

This first step of the study was not primarily designed to gain insight into the conditions and consequences of synchronicities. A documentation scheme for further data collection, especially adapted to psychotherapeutic settings, has to be added. It is presented in the following table.

patient	psychopathology	e.g., depression, trauma
	biographical background	
	psychodynamics	1. complexes 2. conflict(s) 3. defense mechanisms 4. interpersonal relationships
	personality	1. typology: introvert/extravert 2. psychodynamics: anancastic/hysteric
	earlier synchronistic/ anomalous experience	
	external life situation	e.g., divorce, crisis

therapist	personality	1. typology: introvert/extravert 2. psychodynamics: anacastic/hysteric
	earlier synchronistic/ anomalous experience	
	external life situation	e.g., divorce, crises
psychotherapy	transference – countertransference	
	development	1. therapeutic goals 2. course of therapy 3. current issues, situation
	consequences	1. for life of patient 2. for psychotherapy 3. for therapeutic relation

The second part of this documentation scheme is designed for the psychotherapist to provide the necessary context data from therapy and diagnosis. Hypotheses about the meaning of the synchronistic event and interconnections with the psychodynamics and the course of therapy and the development of patient (individuation) are to be noted in addition.

In psychodynamic psychotherapy in general and especially in Jungian psychotherapy many context data should be available already before the occurrence of a synchronistic event. It is necessary to collect detailed data about the therapist and the patient because in Jungian understanding the synchronistic event occurs in an interpersonal unconscious sphere which is influenced by unconscious conditions from both partners of the relationship.

6 Future Course of the Study

The documentation scheme presented above will be circulated in the German Jung Society (DGAP) inviting participation. In Germany, psychotherapy is integrated into the legal healthcare system, and psychotherapists have to provide extensive information about diagnosis, biography and psychodynamics, and the personality of the patient. They have to develop a schedule for the therapy including prognosis in order to apply for funding of the therapy. This entails that most of the information required for the second part of the documentation scheme is available.

In a later stage we plan to circulate translated versions of the documentation scheme in the international society of Jungian therapists (IAAP) and invite participation there as well. This way it will be possible to create a corpus of cases over time which can then be analyzed both interpretively (qualitatively) and statistically (quantitatively). Based on such analyses, it is our hope to gain more insight into the structure and conditions of the occurrence of synchronistic events in psychotherapeutic settings. This should greatly help to move forward toward an empirically grounded theory of synchronicity.

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