Jung's view on myth and post-modern psychology

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Abstract: Post-modern psychology embodies two core themes, the social mind and the narrative self. Whereas the social-mind thesis seems diametrically opposed to Jung's position regarding human nature, the narrative-self thesis is associated with research and theorizing about personal myth and mythmaking in ways that could make contact with Jung's concerns. Jung's view is examined here with particular attention to McAdams' theory of narrative identity. It is suggested that the ostensible differences between Jung and post-modern psychology might reflect divergent interests, rather than necessarily irreconcilable worldviews.

Key words: archetypes, myth, narrative identity, post-modern psychology.

What is post-modern psychology?

The so-called post-modern 'turn' in psychology is associated with the rise of social constructionist, socio-cultural, narrative, and critical-psychological perspectives. Some of these are incompatible with each other, and some do not warrant the label post-modernist if we wish to be precise about it. But they have in common two core themes, which sets them apart from what came before in psychology, and this justifies talking about post-modern psychology in the singular (like talking about depth psychology), where the term post-modern could be taken historically.

The core themes are (a) the social mind – the idea that mental processes originate and mostly take place in language-mediated interactions between people – and (b) the narrative self, the idea that the self is either like stories or actually the stories we tell about ourselves. The social mind is often understood as the antithesis of the traditional view of human nature. For example, the social constructionists Varela and Harré (1996, p. 317) compare the traditional view with their own. About the old view they say: It is 'committed to the assumption of the primacy of individual being, human nature is [viewed as] biological, it is

lived psychologically, and therefore is social'. They describe their own view as 'a dynamic conception of human nature' which is 'committed to the assumption of the primacy of social being, human nature is [viewed as] cultural, it is lived socially, and therefore it is psychological'. We have no problem identifying Jung with the commitment to the biological primacy of human nature. But it's an odd thing to insinuate that only the commitment to the primacy of social being is a 'dynamic conception' – given that the contested view is the psycho *dynamic* standpoint. The crucial difference is where the dynamics are located: either in the interiority of the psyche, as traditionally in depth psychology, or in the internalization of exterior discursive practices, as in social constructionism and most other varieties of post-modern psychology.

The narrative self is usually understood as going hand in hand with the social mind. The stories we live by are cultural texts. But unlike the social mind it was imported into psychology from philosophy and narratology via sociology. Schrag (1997) sums up the philosophical thesis: he says that the post-modernists re-conceptualize the human subject as a *homo narrans*, 'a storyteller who both finds herself in stories already told and strives for a self-constitution by emplotting herself in stories in the making' (p. 26). For the psychologists who embraced this image, it changed psychology – but my contention is that the disciplinary migration also changed the *homo narrans* in some subtle ways. This creature now has to compete for survival against the old ways of theorizing and, above all, empiricizing the self. Enthusiasts of the narrative approach must show that they're nevertheless serious scientists. Consequently, exploring the narrative dimensions of selfhood is mostly reduced to the empirical matter of identifying and classifying people's life stories.

Autobiography seems to be the 'royal road' to self-knowledge. The allusion to what Freud had famously said about dreams – the royal road to the unconscious – is entirely deliberate. There is also an allusion here to a claim made by Marie-Louise von Franz (1998) that dreams are the hidden source of self-knowledge. Whereas Jungian investigations are oriented towards the imaginative, the fantastic, the mythological images that our psyche throws at us, post-modern psychology in general and narrative psychology in particular investigate almost exclusively people's construction of narratives that are reality-directed, and represent what people can consciously say about their life. Some narrative psychologists are at pains to defend this epistemological position. For instance, Freeman (1997) says defensively that 'contra those who suppose that narrative entails a kind of fictive imposition on experience . . . it is more appropriately seen as being woven into the fabric of life itself' (p. 175). The implications for studying mythology seem clear: there is no room for it – unless we can argue that the 'fictive impositions' of extinct cultures are somehow woven into the fabric of people's life in this culture and this time. This would not be true for everyone.

There *is* talk of myth in narrative psychology, but not mythology as such. Instead, there is talk of personal myths as the stories we live by, and of

mythmaking as a reflexive process whereby we gain a sense of self as individual. In the final part of this paper I shall compare this view with Jung's, but first a closer look at Jung's view would be apt.

Jung's view

There are two questions here: *what* did Jung say about myth and *why* did he say it, why did he theorize myth in the first place. Regarding the 'why' question, I do not mean personal motivations. Jung might well be someone fascinated by mythology since childhood, and wanted to link this passion to his professional interests. But the moment that he tells us that psychologists should study myth, answering the 'why' question becomes a matter of identifying the value of theorizing myth with a view to explaining human mind or behaviour.

According to Robert Segal, Jung articulated an understanding of myth that was new at the time: myth as being not about the world but about the mind. But psychology is about the mind anyway. As a psychologist, Jung did not set out to reform the scholarly understanding of myth, but psychologists' understanding of mind (more precisely, psyche). Jung theorized about the psyche partly through his unique 'take' on mythology along with fairytales, art, patients' dreams and hallucinations, and so forth; in sum, any kind of concrete symbolic productions. The genre of the symbolic production – whether it's myth, dreams, etc – is secondary or even trivial in that respect.

This can backfire: if it is trivial whether it is a myth, a patient's hallucination, or something else, it is difficult to persuade non-Jungian psychologists that they should study myth. It makes more sense to study the actual productions of living people, in whose case the conditions under which the symbols are produced can be investigated.

This is one of several obstacles that Jung's theory must negotiate in order to be taken seriously in academic psychology. In 'taken seriously' I do not mean that we should agree with his view, but that we should regard it as something worth debating, ideas to contend with. This has not been the case. Jung's presence in a typical psychology syllabus, if he is mentioned at all, tends to be by way of embellishing accounts of the psychoanalytical tradition or personality theories. Post-modern psychology inherits the indifference towards Jung. There are several reasons why the post-moderns should contest Jung's 'extreme modernist' approach; but they don't bother, because Jung did not have a voice in the mainstream. As a consequence, relating Jungian theory to post-modern psychology does not link to existing debates. Looking specifically at Jung's view on myth in this context is doubly isolated due to the absence of any other theorizing about mythology in psychology.

Another obstacle: Jung's account of mythmaking and myths – the process and its product – is inseparable from his theory of the archetypal configuration of the psyche. In effect, he is telling us that we need to study myth because it

shows the workings of the psyche as hypothesized by him. If we reject his hypotheses about the psyche, there seems to be little reason to study myth. He needs to convince us about his model of the psyche in the first place – and by and large, most psychologists are not convinced. Secondly, he has to convince us that mythmaking is a fundamental psychological process as opposed to mythmaking as a cultural activity that is driven by some other psychological need, such as the need to reduce the anxiety of the unknown or power. Thirdly, even if we concede that mythmaking is fundamentally psychological and that there might be a pre-formed psychic configuration, there is still the issue of how we get from that to the specific mythic stories.

According to classical Jungian theory, the conceptual route is via archetype. Jung regarded the archetype as instinctive, like 'the impulse of birds to build nests, or ants to form organized colonies' (Jung 1964, p. 58), but he was quite clear that the archetype is not an instinct. He argues for the existence of archetypes from *analogy* with instincts, about which he says:

> Instincts are typical modes of action, and wherever we meet with uniform and regularly recurring modes of action and reaction we are dealing with instinct, no matter whether it is associated with a conscious motive or not.
>
> (Jung 1948, para. 273)

He goes on to paraphrase this:

> Archetypes are typical modes of apprehension, and wherever we meet with uniform and regularly recurring modes of apprehension we are dealing with an archetype, no matter whether its mythological character is recognized or not.
>
> (Jung 1948, para. 280)

Positing cognitive modes as parallel to instincts might have sounded reasonable at the time: psychophysical parallelism was prevalent, especially in the German-speaking world, in the 19th century and into the first half of the 20th century. Today it might be less easy to accept. But in any case, Jung does not stay with the parallel. He proposes to view instinct and archetype as ontologically related. In the same essay he says that the archetype 'might suitably be described as the instinct's perception of itself' (Jung 1948, para. 277).

How do we get from instinct to mythology? First we have to get from instinct to archetype – explain how instinct can possibly perceive itself in an archetype – before going on to talk about how archetypes expresses themselves in mythology. Jung's theory implicitly sets up three discrete domains (body, psyche and culture) as represented in Figure 1. Setting up these domains as separate yet inter-linked in some way begs the question of what processes link them. The insistence on accounting for causal mechanisms is a traditional psychologist's obsession. In this context, a way to understand Jung's proposition that the instinct perceives itself is that the instinct is reflected in the archetype.
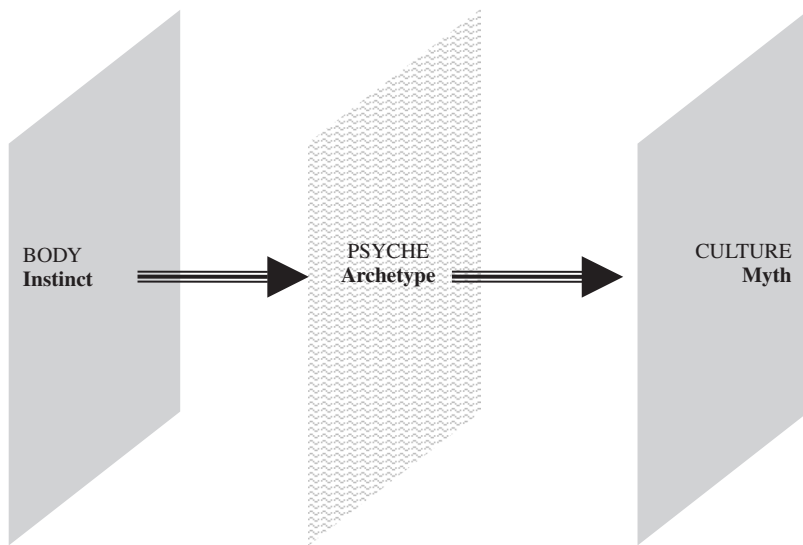
Figure 1: A causal-mechanistic interpretation of Jung's theory

Instinct is the source; archetype is its mirror-reflection, although it is a case of looking through a mirror darkly, so that it is difficult to reduce archetypes to specific instincts. Archetypes in turn give rise to the motifs that are expressed in concrete symbolic productions such as actual myths.

In other words, put conversely, myth could be said to *symbolize* the archetype. The point was made by Segal, and as far as I know not by Jung, though it is consistent with the causal interpretation of Jung's theory. The myth symbolizes the archetype in which the instinct perceives itself – but symbolizes it obliquely, darkly, so it is difficult to reduce any given myth to a specific archetype. Segal (1999) points out:

> Identifying archetypes is not easy. First, the number of archetypes is unlimited… Second, archetypes can take the most disparate of forms…Third, the same entity can be both a symbol and an archetype

(p. 94)

This depends on whether we are talking about archetypal images or archetypes-as-such. The distinction is traceable to Jung but is more explicit in the writings of his 'classical' followers. A convenient way to describe the distinction is by analogy with the painter's set of primary colours, which can be used to create an infinite number of different pictures. The primary colours are the archetypes as such, and they are used in the creation of archetypal images which take their concrete imagery from the world of the people in whose productions the images manifest, like different painters in different places painting what they see with the same colours. When we talk about

archetypal images – which could be viewed as generated at the culture-psyche interface – there is indeed unlimited number, disparate forms, and multiple functions. But when we talk about archetypes-as-such, which belong at the psyche-body interface, there is a limited range of them, according to Jung, because human anatomy and instincts govern our direct interactions with the environment in fairly limited ways. At this level there's a limited range of typical human situations (a point that is not uniquely Jungian, by the way).

Jung himself did not press the linear relationship across the three domains. The irreducible nature of the path from myth to archetype to instinct suggests that the picture might be more like Figure 2. We do not really know what is happening in this space between body and culture. We cannot reliably trace a myth or even a genre of myths, like hero myths, to any specific typical situation governed by human biology. Or, conversely, we cannot predict that someone's exposure to a certain typical situation would result in the production of certain mythic themes. We can only see the connections historically, after the fact, when we have the 'full picture' so to speak: we see that the dream makes sense in view of the dreamer's circumstances, for instance. Basically, it's a case of *understanding* as opposed to *explanation*, to evoke an old distinction; or intelligibility versus veridicality.

Viewed in this way, the causal-mechanistic model of Figure 1 seems inappropriate. Instead, we may talk of the psyche as a kind of field in which experiences as bodily lived and as culturally expressed come together. In this view, the transition from experience to expression is not a matter of cause and
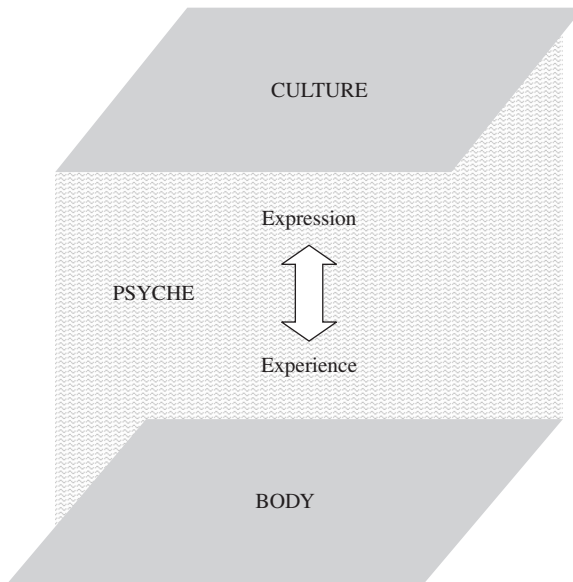
Figure 2: An alternative interpretation

effect. One way to think about it could be Kristeva's (1980) idea of the dialectical relationship between what she called the semiotic disposition and the symbolic disposition. The semiotic disposition is the actual organization of instinctual drives within the body, and this affects language and its practice in a dialectical conflict with the already established symbolic system of language. Another way to think about it would take after Merleau-Ponty. John Shotter – a key figure in the social constructionist movement – lately began to talk about the chiasmic interweaving between the phenomenological and the dialogical or discursive; he takes the idea of the chiasm from Merleau-Ponty (Shotter 2002).

It is debatable whether the model represented in Figure 2 requires the Jungian concept of archetypes at all. But it seems to me that we cannot do without the assumption of something like mythmaking or symbol formation, i.e., a psychological process that happens in this space between body and culture in the course of chiasmic interweaving or Kristeva's dialectical conflict. Social constructionist and critical psychologists are raising questions to this effect. It is rapidly becoming a 'burning issue' – and it is here that Jung's work on symbol formation could be taken seriously, as something to debate.

Personal myths

Whilst mythmaking might be a meeting place for Jungian and post-modern psychology, archetype theory is ruled out from the outset by a disparity between what Jungian versus narrative psychologists look at. To paraphrase Segal: to Jung, myth is about the mind not the world; to narrative psychologists, personal myth is not so much about the mind, but about being in culture.

The most prolific exponent of the personal myth idea is Dan McAdams (e.g., 1993), a personality theorist and researcher whose conceptual roots lie in Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. According to McAdams (2001), identity takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme. He cites Giddens in this context: 'A person's identity is formed ... in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*' (Giddens 1991, cited in McAdams 1999, p. 487).

In his early work (1980s), McAdams outlined the so-called imago theory. He defines *imago* as 'a personified and idealized image of the self that functions as a protagonist during particular chapters of the life story' (McAdams 1999, p. 486). His empirical research shows a range of such images recurrent in life stories by different individuals: his list includes warrior, traveller, caregiver, lover, healer, teacher, and more. Although people might be unaware that their narratives communicate particular self-images, those images are intrinsic to the person's conscious orientation towards the events being narrated. For instance, someone might not realize that she positions herself as a warrior when telling about her struggles, but this representation distinguishes her from someone who characterizes himself as a healer. In McAdams' conception, then, imagos constitute an exterior dimension of individual differences. It is a psychometric tool.

Contrast this with Jung's definition of *imago* as 'an image of the subjective relation to the object' (Jung 1921, para. 812). Jung defines archetype as a *primordial image*, which means 'not only the form of the activity taking place, but the typical situation in which the activity is released' (Jung 1954, para. 152). For instance, the child-mother relationship is a typical human situation. The related imago is not an internalized image of the actual mother in the child's mind. It is the psychic configuration – the groove, so to speak – that channels how the child unconsciously experiences her interactions with the actual mother. The experience becomes accessible to consciousness via its symbolic expression.

McAdams himself introduced his imago theory by distinguishing his concept from Jung's archetype. According to McAdams, imago is 'more specific' than archetype, for 'unlike Jung's structured components of the collective identity [*sic*], life-stories' imagos are by definition personified and exist…as highly personalized, idiosyncratic images defining how a person is different from others as well as similar to them' (McAdams 1985, p. 182–3). He points out that the archetypes catalogued in the Jungian literature include both personified and 'more abstract or conceptual' ones (ibid. p. 179). His examples: hero, wise old man, and earth mother, on the one hand; and birth, rebirth, death, and power, on the other. To me, Jung's concept seems not simply more general than McAdams' but radically different. I have not seen a catalogue of Jungian archetypes, if there is such a compilation, but my speculation is that the personified ones could be shown to concern ways of *being*, whereas the more abstract ones concern developmental change, ways of *becoming*.

McAdams' latest work moves away from classifying idealized self-images and towards describing the dynamics of emplotment, towards looking at ways of becoming. His recent research looks at how people connect the events of their life. For example, McAdams (2000) tells of a middle-aged woman, 'Tanya', whose account embodies the notion that good things turn bad. Her happy childhood deteriorated to turbulent adolescence, substance abuse and so forth. Tanya imposes this plot structure even on her high-point scene, the birth of her first child. Many people recall the birth of their first child as the high point of their life. But Tanya goes on to mention how the child's father was found stabbed to death in a motel several years later. Although several years separated the son's birth and the father's death, their juxtaposition in her narrative suggests a belief that when good things do happen, bad things ruin them. A contrasting example reported by McAdams is the life story of an African American man, 'Jerome', which centres on a redemption theme; that is, good comes out of bad. McAdams provided evidence for a correlation between these narrative styles and mental health (redemption narratives are better).

McAdams, like most narrative psychologists, is concerned with how we arrive at and sustain a sense of ourselves as unique and continuous individuals. Narrative psychologists propose that we achieve this through mythmaking, but equate mythmaking with the making of autobiography. Probably the most blatant difference between Jung and narrative psychology is that Jung was not

really interested in identity, and the term 'collective identity' (as McAdams put it) seems wrong. Hillman (1983) points out, 'Jung's psychology is less concerned with personality as individualism than with individuation as an *impersonal* psychic process' (p. 66). To take McAdams' case studies further than he does: Tanya's life story embodies an archetype of contamination and entropy, whereas Jerome's story embodies an archetype of redemption and rebirth. Jung's theory suggests that both archetypes and more are the legacy of any human, part of our impersonal psyche. Individual differences boil down to which archetype is more influential for whom and when. We can see the same themes in ancient myths.

To go back to the analogy of the painter's palette, Jung infers the primary colours by comparing different pictures, disregarding their contents. His inferences might or might not be valid – this could be something worth debating – but so far post-modern psychologists do not raise the question. It is the diversity of the pictures themselves that they find most fascinating and worthy of research. Put this way, the difference between Jung and post-modern psychology *begins* with what we choose to look at. Different questions are raised, and therefore the answers are different. Where we could go if we start looking at the same thing – and what is this thing we should be looking at – remains to be seen.

TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

La psychologie post-moderniste comprend deux principes, la pensée sociale et la narration du moi. Tandis que la proposition de la pensée sociale semble être diamétralement l'opposé de la position de Jung sur la nature humaine, celle de la narration du moi est associée à la recherche et au lancement des théories du mythe et de la création des mythes par des voies qui pourraient se joindre aux préoccupations de Jung. Une attention particulière est donnèe au point de vue de Jung en l'examinant au départ de la théorie de McAdams sur la narration de l'identité. Il est suggéré que les soi-disant différences entre Jung et la psychologie post-moderniste peuvent être le reflet de divergences plutôt que des idées globales qui soient nécessairement incompatibles.

Die postmoderne Psychologie verkörpert zwei Kernthemen, die soziale Psyche und das narrative Selbst. Während die These der sozialen Psyche Jungs Position hinsichtlich der menschlichen Natur diametral entgegengesetzt zu sein scheint, ist die These vom narrativen Selbst assoziiert mit Forschung und Theoriebildung über persönlichen Mythus und Mythenbildung in einer Weise, die Kontakt mit Jungs Anliegen herstellen kann. Jungs Sicht wird untersucht, und zwar hier mit spezieller Ausrichtung auf McAdams' Theorie der narrativen Identität. Es wird vorgeschlagen, daß die offensichtlichen Unterschiede zwischen Jung und der postmodernen Psychologie auf unterschiedliche Interessen zurückzuführen sind und nicht auf nicht zu versöhnende Weltsichten

La psicologia postmoderna abbraccia due temi fondamentali: la mente sociale e il sé narrativo. Laddove le tesi della mente- sociale sembra diametralmente opposta alla posi-

zione junghiana per quanto riguarda la natura umana, la tesi del sé-narrativo è associata a ricerche e teorizzazioni sul mito personale e sulla formazione del mito in modi che potrebbero entrare in contatto con le concezioni junghiana. Viene qui preso in esame il punto di vista junghiano con particolare attenzione alla teoria di McAdams dell'identità narrativa. Si ipotizza che la visibile differenza tra Jung e la psicologia postmoderna possa riflettere differenti interessi più che visioni del mondo irrimediabilmente inconciliabili.

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La psicología postmoderna encarna dos temas fundamentales, la mente social y el self narrativo. Como quiera que la tesis de la mente social parece diametralmente opuesta a la posición de Jung respecto a la naturaleza humana, la tesis del self narrativo se asocia con la búsqueda y teorización sobre el mito personal y la fabricación de mitos en tal forma que puede contacto con las ideas de Jung. El punto de vista de Jung es examinado aquí especialmente en atención a las teorías de McAdams de la identidad narrativa. Se sugiere que las deiferencias evidentes entre Jung y la psicología postmoderna puede mas bien reflejar intereses divergentes, en lugar de necesariamente irreconciliables visiones universales.

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