



This Longing - from an original painting by Susan Bostrom-Wong

Participation Mystique: An Overview

Mark Winborn

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Participation mystique has an interesting position in Analytical Psychology. It is a term rather ubiquitous within the Jungian world, however the definition of the term is somewhat opaque. At times, the term carries a negative valence within Jungian circles while also being used to describe experiences of depth and power.

Jung's Concept of *Participation Mystique*

Jung adopted the term *participation mystique* from anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl who utilized the term in a series of books published from 1910¹ onward. Jung was taken with the idea that the 'primitives' think differently than 'modern' people and adopted Lévy-Bruhl's ideas about the 'primitive psyche' as well as his concepts of *participation mystique* and *representations collectives*.

Jung's most extensive discussion of *participation mystique* is found in his essay *Archaic Man*.² This essay outlines his ideas about the mental activity of primitive peoples, i.e. that they function in a "prelogical state of mind", that they "were simpler and more childlike", and "unpsychological" by which he means that psychological experiences are perceived as occurring outside of the primitive in an objective way. These inferences about primitive thinking underlie Jung's central notion of *participation mystique* – namely that in *participation mystique* experiences there is a blurring of psychological boundaries between individuals, between individuals and their environment, and in some instance between individuals and objects. For example, if an indigenous group believed that a tree was also a dwelling for a spirit that provided protection for a nearby village, Jung would likely interpret this as a form of *participation mystique*. Similarly, in contemporary society it is quite common to observe *participation mystique* dynamics among fans in large sporting events. Jung defines *participation mystique* as follows:

Participation mystique is a term derived from Lévy-Bruhl. It denotes a peculiar kind of psychological connection with objects, and consists in the fact that the subject cannot clearly distinguish himself from the object but is bound to it by a direct relationship which amounts to partial *identity* (q. v.). This identity results from an *a priori* oneness of subject and object. *Participation mystique* is a vestige of this primitive connection.³

Jung addresses several areas with the term *participation mystique*; the blurring of subject-object boundaries resulting in an experience of *a priori* oneness, that *participation mystique* is regularly observed in people from cultures which Jung labels as 'primitive', and that it occurs in the mental states of early infancy. Jung also calls attention to the presence of *participation mystique* in analytic transferences and as an unconscious component of the 'civilized adult.' Although Jung discusses the psychology of primitive man in way that strikes the contemporary reader as an ethnocentric perspective, he is also using this contrast to draw attention to characteristics of the modern

psychological state which he considered problematic. Specifically, Jung believes that modern persons have become so overly reliant on rational thought that we are split off from vestigial or phylogenetic layers of psychic experience.

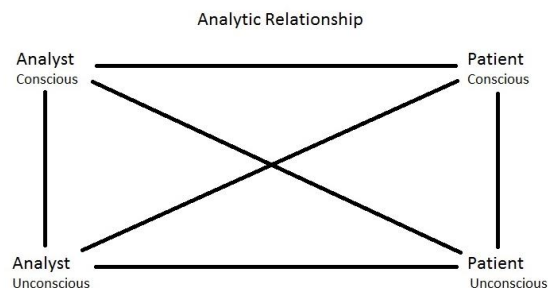
Developments Related to *Participation Mystique*

Having outlined how Jung came to utilize the term and the different ways he applied it, we can turn to developments and applications of *participation mystique* since Jung adopted it for inclusion in Analytical Psychology.

Projective Identification and *Participation Mystique*: Jung indicated that projection and identification are the two primary psychological processes by which *participation mystique* is activated. A number of analytical psychologists have highlighted the similarity between Jung’s utilization of the *participation mystique* concept and the concept of projective identification, first proposed by Melanie Klein,⁴ in which parts of the self and internal objects of the infant are split off and projected onto an external object. In Klein’s model, the object becomes identified with the projected split-off parts and interacted with as though the object has become one with the split-off objects, often evoking a feeling in the recipient of the projected element that is affectively congruent with the split-off part.

There are numerous passages in Jung where he refers to *participation mystique*, projection, empathy, and ‘feeling-into’ in ways which sound astonishingly close to Klein’s description of projective identification. Jung and Klein both conceptualize the analytic interaction as a situation in which the analyst will impact the patient and the patient will impact the analyst in nuanced but powerful ways, permitting the possibility for both to understand their interactions in new ways and facilitate the transformation of psychological experience.

Transference and *Participation Mystique*: Jung saw the process of *participation mystique* as being intimately tied with the process of projection but also with the transference dynamics of the analytic setting. Jung clearly understood the mutually influencing aspects of the transference relationship and he saw those influences as being based, in large part, on the presence of *participation mystique* in the analytic relationship. He recognized early on that, “It is not only the sufferer but the doctor as well, not only the object but also the subject.”⁵ This perspective is captured most fully in *The Psychology of the Transference* which returns frequently to the image of the alchemical bath as a metaphor for the mutual unconscious influences of the analytic relationship. This reciprocal unconscious influence is also readily seen in Jung’s diagram⁶ of the analytic relationship:



Similar Concepts from Analytical Psychology and Psychoanalytic Theory

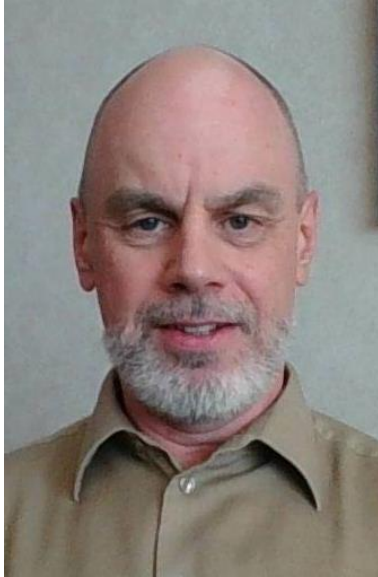
There are several conceptual developments that have emerged since Jung's original work on *participation mystique*, particularly his understanding of the application of *participation mystique* to the transference situation. For example, Erich Neumann's concept of unitary reality⁷; the bipersonal field as developed by Madeline Baranger and Willy Baranger⁸; selfobject theory as developed by Heinz Kohut⁹; intersubjectivity theory which developed among a number of authors, for example, George Atwood and Robert Stolorow¹⁰; the interactive field¹¹; and the concept of fusional states.¹² All of these concepts articulate elements of psychological experience which parallel *participation mystique*. These developments illustrate the similarities with Jung's hypothesis about the reciprocally influencing qualities of *participation mystique* experience and underscore the prescience of Jung's model for Analytical Psychology.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this survey provides insights into the concept of *participation mystique* - exploring it from a variety of perspectives. When broadly held, *participation mystique* offers an umbrella for a wide variety of intersubjective phenomenon. The concept is most useful when used to describe a class of interactive experiences. We are at a significant juncture in the development of psychoanalysis and analytical psychology; a time of convergence and cross-fertilization in which we have the opportunity to re-examine established or accepted theories and concepts based on cumulative clinical experience, developments in other fields, and shifts in our culture - all of which ultimately impact how we practice as analysts and analytic therapists.

Further Reading:

I recommend a series of interrelated articles by Robert Segal,^{13,14} Susan Rowland,¹⁵ and Paul Bishop¹⁶ which, as a group, comprise an intellectual-historical-literary-theoretical survey of Jung's views on 'primitive man' and his utilization of the concept of *participation mystique*. These four articles provide an excellent background to the concept of participation mystique. I also recommend a collection of essays which I had the privilege of assembling and editing, *Shared Realities: Participation Mystique and Beyond*,¹⁷ which surveys contemporary perspectives on *participation mystique* and related concepts.



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He has presented papers at the past four Congresses of the International Association for Analytical Psychology (2010, 2013, 2016, 2019).

His publications include *Deep Blues: Human Soundscapes for the Archetypal Journey* (2011, Fisher King Press), *Shared Realities: Participation Mystique and Beyond* (2014, Fisher King Press), and *Interpretation in Jungian Analysis: Art and Technique* (2018, Routledge) as well as journal articles, book reviews, and chapter contributions.

¹ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, translated (1926) from French as *How Natives Think*, London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1910.

² C.G. Jung, "Archaic Man," in *The Collected Works*, Vol.10 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1931).

³ C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, in *The Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971). ¶1781.

⁴ Melanie Klein, 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms,' *Inter. J. of Psycho-Analysis* 27 (1946): 99-110.

⁵ C.G. Jung, "Problems of Modern Psychotherapy," in *The Collected Works*, Vol. 16 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1929a), ¶173.

⁶ C.G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Transference," in *The Collected Works*, Vol. 16 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), ¶422.

⁷ Erich Neumann, *The Place of Creation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁸ Madeline Baranger and Willy Baranger, "The Analytic Situation as a Dynamic Field," *Inter. J. of Psycho-Analysis* 89 (2008): 795-826 [originally published 1961-1962].

⁹ Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).

¹⁰ George Atwood and Robert Stolorow, *Structures of Subjectivity*, 1984.

¹¹ Murray Stein, ed., *The Interactive Field in Analysis: Chiron Clinical Series* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron, 1995).

¹² Peter Giovacchini, "Fusion States, Collective Countertransference, and Mutual Dependence," *J. of the American Academy of Psychoanalytic Dynamic Psychiatry* 23 (1995): 411-423.

¹³ Robert Segal, "Jung and Lévy-Bruhl," *J. of Analytical Psychology* 52 (2007a): 635-658.

¹⁴ Robert Segal, "Response to Susan Rowland," *J. of Analytical Psychology* 52 (2007b): 667-771.

¹⁵ Susan Rowland, "Response to Segal's 'Jung and Lévy-Bruhl'," *J. of Analytical Psychology* 52 (2007): 659-666.

¹⁶ Bishop, Paul. "The Timeliness and Timelessness of the 'Archaic': Analytical Psychology 'Primordial' Thought, Synchronicity," *J. of Analytical Psychology* 53 (2008):501-523.

¹⁷ Winborn, Mark (Ed). *Shared Realities: Participation Mystique and Beyond* (Shiatook, OK: Fisher King Press, 2014).