

**CRITIQUE OF WORD
ASSOCIATION REACTIONS:
AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY:
A DISSERTATION, PP. 1 - 43**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649245550

Critique of Word Association Reactions: An Experimental Study: a dissertation, pp. 1 - 43 by
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The University of Chicago
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Critique of
Word Association Reactions
AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND
LITERATURE IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY)

BY
ARTHUR HOWARD SUTHERLAND

MENASHA, WIS.
THE COLLEGIATE PRESS
GEORGE BANTA PUBLISHING CO.
1918

Journal of Psychology 5-14-73

PREFACE

The publication of the results of this experiment has been long delayed in the hope of presenting a more constructive program. Meanwhile the development of the problem has carried the suggested lines beyond the possibility of a single comprehensive treatment. The study of free verbal reactions involves a study of the whole individual and soon carries one into a maze of speculative theory. On the other hand, the dogmatic settlement of the whole matter out of hand is equally unsatisfactory since general discussions of the Freudian theories show wide disagreement. It has been deemed advisable therefore to present the subject matter in its present form as the framework for later studies and in the hope that a very general view of the problem may be suggestive.

To Professor James Rowland Angell, whose interest in and oversight of this work has been an unfailing source of stimulation, and who has given unreservedly of his time:

To Dr. Harvey A. Carr, who has generously responded with pertinent and critical advice and comment:

To Dr. Harvey Peterson, Dr. J. W. Hayes and the students of the Department of Psychology, who have, at considerable sacrifice but with persistent good will, lent their efforts to the investigation, the author takes this opportunity to express his appreciation.

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OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

The application of the word association tests to psychiatric diagnosis, backed as it was with the weight of authority and scientific monographs, commanded instant favor. Apparently the sentiments raised by popular comment upon this method were oversanguine. Whereas it seemed at first blush to present a standard of measurement for the associative process, and therefore of the command of the individual over the associative and dissociative functions, recent expressions have seemed to indicate that the use of the method has fallen somewhat short of the desired results. And the popularization of word-reaction tests in certain bizarre situations has distracted from the systematic search for reliable criteria of the real composition of such reactions. Notwithstanding the laments regarding the "hopelessness of psychology" and diatribes upon the "arm-chair psychology", a large number of alienists and psychologists agree as to the desirability of further and more precise information regarding the processes necessary to carry on the word-reactions, and the significance of the reactions themselves as a cue to past experiences.

In abnormal psychology, the contribution of scientific procedure should first be directed along the line of diagnosis—the isolation of such criteria as are indicated above. And since "accurate diagnosis is half the cure" such a psychological attack will contribute also toward a more satisfactory therapeutics—but if this is too much to hope for, then at least a clearer conception of the variations to be found in "Nature's experiments" will be afforded. Indeed it has been assumed in some quarters that this result has already been attained. Freud, in his Clark University lectures says "You may be surprised to learn that in Europe we have heard very frequently judgments passed on psycho-analysis by persons who knew nothing of the technique, and who had never practised it, but who demand scornfully that we show the correctness of our results It is not difficult to substantiate in our opponents the same impairment of intelligence produced by emotivity which we may observe every day with our patients."¹

¹ S. Freud, *Origin and Development of Psycho-analysis*. *Am. Jour. of Psycho.*, v. XXI, 1910, p. 205.

And Professor Bleuler, in criticizing Wundt for inconsistency asserts that "arm-chair psychology" is an aching void for the physician, its doctrines are worthless, and therefore the psychiatrist must invent a psychology of his own.¹ Accordingly a "practical" but unpsychological psychology has been devised, as follows: Sensations, Perceptions, Volitions, Hopes and Fears are conscious processes, but they are also unconscious processes, and since as unconscious processes they have the same functions as when conscious, it is useless to invent new names for them. The conscious quality, (the being-conscious) of a psychic process is accidental so far as its use by the Psyche is concerned, whereas the centripetal side of the Psyche is meaningful for the "I" only in so far as it is conscious. (We suffer only from conscious pains and enjoy only conscious pleasures). All processes which at any time lack associative connection with the I-complex are unconscious. The I-complex itself has the same duplex constitution. In other words, every conscious process is fundamentally physiological, but when the physiological process is the main nerve process of the organism, or closely associated with it, it acquires an additional quality,—consciousness.²

Disregarding the fact that the conditions are essentially different when consciousness is present, the actions observed in an individual are assumed to be "due to" Sensations, Perceptions, Judgments, Hopes and Fears whether consciousness is present or not. And in the reaction experiment this position leads to disregard of the subject's introspections, as stated by C. G. Jung "I call attention to the fact that it is quite indifferent what reason the test person gives for refusal (to react) * * * One must get rid of the idea that educated and intelligent test persons are able to see and admit their own complexes."³ "The differentiation of the conscious and unconscious processes is highly technical and he who denies their separate existence makes an explanation of the conscious processes impossible since the unconscious mechanism conditions and modifies the arousal of the conscious processes every moment."⁴ In the use of terminology therefore, it is as if in an

¹ Professor Bleuler, *Diagnostischstudien*, Vorwort über die Bedeutung von Assoziationsversuchen. *Jour. f. Psych. u. Neur.*, Bd. 3, H. 1, 1904, p. 49.

² Prof. Bleuler, *Ibid.*

³ C. G. Jung, *The Association Method*. *Am. Jour. Psych.*, v XXI, 1910, p. 227.

⁴ Prof. Bleuler, *Ibid.*

equation, x at one time represents the brightness and at another time the mass of a body.

One looks in vain however for any clear statement of this physiological mechanism. "Ideas" "complexes" "constellations" "fears" "subconscious ideas" "co-conscious ideas" and "unconscious ideas" linger about and function in relation to the "I-complex." But any demonstration of the nervous mechanism which is sometimes associated and sometimes dissociated, is lacking. All mental processes aroused and modified by these nervous mechanisms when the latter are dissociated, are "submerged." It would appear that the more vital problem is to understand the normal association of the physiological mechanisms, but so far as this attack goes no effort is made to utilize values which there may be in the introspections of test persons. This would seem analogous to an attempt to catalog the contents of a dark room after carefully extinguishing the candle.

It is not surprising that the medical man of ordinary attainments does not attempt this. It may be considered somewhat puzzling however that the medical man of scientific standing in this age of "claims" should not focus his attention upon the physiology of the process, rather than assume the cause of action to be a mysterious agent which works in the dark. And it is difficult to see how giving an unknown process the name of a conscious process can assist in the explanation of the abnormal mind.

GENERAL ORGANIZATION OF THE EXPERIMENT

In the hope of gaining a clearer conception of the processes as they actually function in the normal individual some fifteen thousand reactions have been taken from twenty-five supposedly normal people in the University of Chicago, during the school year 1908-1909. The subjects were drawn from the advanced courses in the university with one or two exceptions as noted and represent an educational and social status comparable with the normal subjects of Jung and Riklin.¹ Preference was given to advanced students in psychology in the hope that, under experimental conditions, introspective training and familiarity of orientation might call attention to those factors in the situation which are of special influence upon the reactions. A number of the subjects have had years of experience under such conditions, a second group with less training had completed one year of drill in the experimental training course, and the remainder were drawn from an elementary course and had no knowledge of the technical side of psychology. The ages vary from 20 to 45 years with an average age of 29. The subjects voluntarily undertook to serve as subjects in this experiment, partly as a means of studying their own associative processes, and partly in the hope of gaining more familiarity with a method which has been regarded as a successful application of laboratory psychology to practical work. In presenting results, this study pretends to no considerable advance. Rather is its purpose limited to an exhibit of the *status quo* of this method of diagnosis; an examination of some of the underlying assumptions, and a critical survey of inductions possible from free reactions of normal subjects.

THE EXPERIMENTAL SITUATION

In the discussion of influences bearing upon verbal reactions emphasis has heretofore been placed upon instinctive and experiential factors in the early history of the subject, while the complex experimental situation has been treated as a constant or neglected. In the research of Jung and Riklin² with which this study chiefly deals, the orientation of subjects under experimental con-

¹ Jung and Riklin, *Diagnostischestudien*, *Jour. f. Psych. u. Neur.*, Bd. 6, H. 8, 1905.

² Jung and Riklin, *Ibid.*