Exploring Collective Consciousness: Could There Be Some Implications for Paraunity?

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Do we share in a form of "collective consciousness" whenever we all focus our thoughts, feelings, and attention toward a common activity, event, or cause? There is a considerable amount of empirical evidence which suggests that we do, and it may have some implications for thinking about paraunity.

Within its most commonly adopted context, the concept of *paraunity* is meant to encourage cooperation, camaraderie, and a general sense of togetherness among members of the paranormal community. This doesn't necessarily mean that investigators have to agree on everything – they don't necessarily have to come from the same background, adopt the same approaches, or hold the same points of view. It simply entails the recognition that on a broad scale, many investigators in the field are in pursuit of a common underlying aim – namely, the exploration of ostensibly paranormal phenomena and experiences. Quite naturally, these mysterious phenomena and experiences can be a source of fascination and wonder, leading one's curiosity to be piqued and fueling a desire to know more about what they are and what they might mean. If that is the prime motivation which drew a particular person to this field, then it may not take much to realize that that could've been the motivation for many others, as well. That in itself is something which many investigators may share in common from the outset. Simply being mutually interested in, or even passionate about, the paranormal is another.

Of course, there are some who may scoff at the idea of paraunity, thinking that it has little potential for realization and may therefore be little more than an ideal pipe dream. But one should keep in mind that there's a big difference between merely thinking about how likely an idea will work, and actually taking steps toward making it work. Perhaps there is no greater lesson in this than the actions exemplified by the 70 to 80 paranormal investigation teams from around the world who come together each year to actively take part in the World's Largest Ghost Hunt, a massively-synchronized event which is held to observe National Ghost Hunting Day (which, in the calendar year of 2017, falls on September 30th). By effectively focusing their

collective thoughts, attention, and actions toward a common aim, these teams of investigators can be seen (in a sense) as sharing a kind of "collective consciousness" in rallied support of that aim. At its heart, this is something which can be seen as reflecting paraunity.

Certain ideas may also carry more potential if they seem to have a basis for consideration behind them. And so when it comes to thinking about paraunity, one might ask: Could there be anything to the idea of collective consciousness, or is it merely a nice social metaphor which happens to be fitting for the occasion? It turns out that there might indeed be something to this idea – something which happens to tie into the possible link between the inner minds of humans and the outer physical world in which they live. In order to be able to better understand this link and how it might tie into collective consciousness, we must briefly look at how it has been studied within the field of parapsychology. We might start off with the question:

Is There Really Such a Thing as "Mind Over Matter?"

The short answer is: Yes, there's a considerable amount of anecdotal and experimental evidence which suggests that "mind over matter" may be real. But in most cases, it's probably nothing like what we might expect it to be. Often when people hear the term "mind over matter," thoughts of spoon bending, starting fires with one's mind, and men staring intently at goats may be evoked. While that's how we tend to see the phenomenon depicted on TV and in the movies, the current evidence suggests that it's usually much more subtle (and much less dramatic) than that in real life. Take the following anecdotal account, for example, which comes from an extensive collection of spontaneous psychic experiences that was diligently compiled and surveyed by the late parapsychologist Louisa Rhine:

> Something has really surprised me. I was reading an article on Jimmy West, a crippled orphan who did so much for child welfare when he grew up. His experiences as a child were so appalling to me that it made a deep impression, particularly his having a tubercular hip, and being accused of malingering instead, and then the hospital discharging him later as incurable and refusing him readmittance. I don't know whether my mind has ever been so stirred and perhaps that is why it happened. At any rate, as I put the magazine down, we heard a loud sound from the living room. There was no one in there, not even the dog or cat, for I looked. The sound had been made by a book falling out of the book case *by itself*. When I picked it up, I was hardly able to believe my eyes, for it was a book on surgery for children. I wonder how that could possibly be explained.[1,p.337,italics in original]

Not a particularly dramatic display, as mentioned, but nonetheless intriguing. If the book found on the floor by the woman who'd had this experience wasn't knocked down by her pets or hadn't simply fallen off under its own weight, then what could possibly explain it? And was it just a coincidence that the subject of the book was rather relevant to the article that she'd been reading only moments before? Such considerations may lead one to wonder whether a sporadic display of *psychokinesis* (the technical term that parapsychologists often use to refer to "mind over matter") occurring in conjunction with this woman's emotionally pent-up state could've been responsible for the book falling.

To find out just how likely of a possibility psychokinesis (or PK, for short) could be in cases like this, parapsychologists began attempting to study PK experimentally by asking people

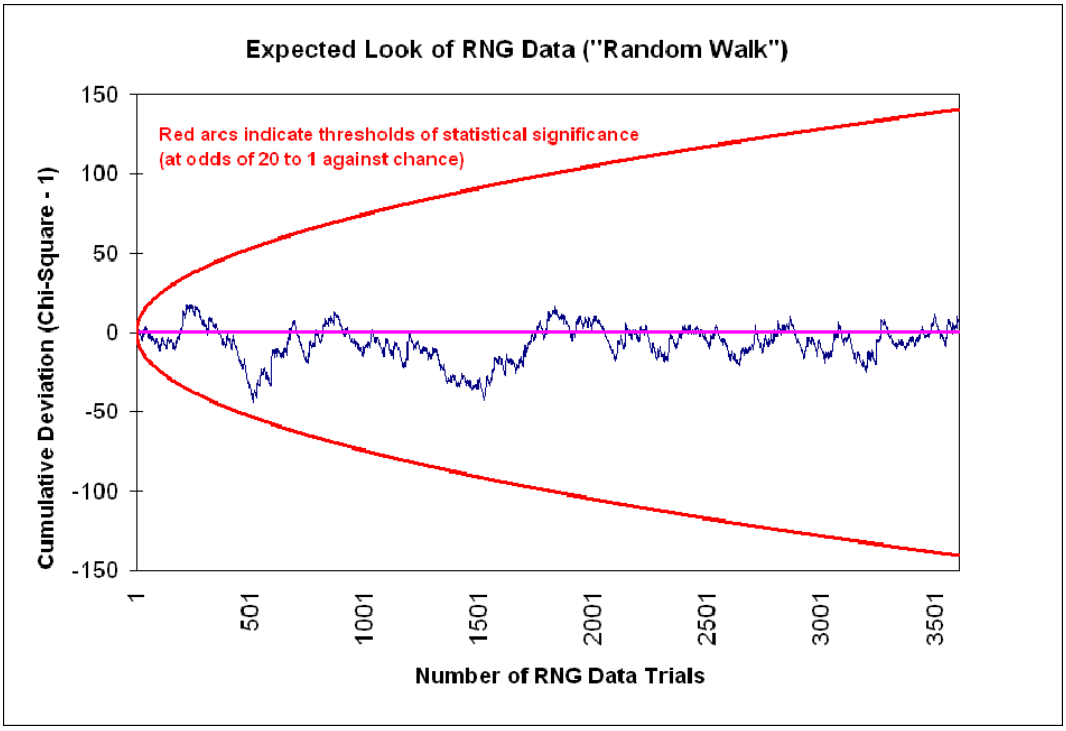
to try and mentally influence the roll of dice, such that a certain number would come up more often than chance alone would ordinarily call for.[1] Nearly 150 experimental studies, involving more than 2 million dice rolls, were conducted between 1935 and 1987, and when the results from them were collectively combined through statistical analysis, they seemed to indicate that the numbers the people were aiming for did indeed come up significantly more often than we'd expect them to, with the overall odds against chance being greater than a billion to one.[2]

Of course, one might figure: "Well, maybe the numbers came up because people were tossing the dice in a clever and crafty way. Or maybe they were blowing on them. Or maybe the dice were loaded." Certainly these are rational alternatives that one should consider, and in doing so, parapsychologists gradually took steps toward minimizing their plausibility by doing such things as rolling the dice out of a cup, having a machine roll the dice, enclosing the dice behind airtight barriers, and using many different types of dice across experiments. And so it doesn't seem likely that such alternatives can adequately account for these notable odds.

As technology became more advanced, steps were also taken to develop a PK test that was more automated, better controlled, and capable of producing lots of test trials in a relatively short time (since rolling dice was tedious and it often took a long time to produce enough trials for analysis). The biggest step in this direction was taken by the late physicist Helmut Schmidt in the 1960s, when he introduced the *random number generator (RNG)* as a device that could be used to test for PK.[3] RNGs typically consist of a electronic circuit that is designed (as its name implies) to generate a random sequence of binary numbers (i.e., a sequence of "1"s and "0"s) based on the unpredictable outcomes exhibited by certain ultra-microscopic physical processes such as radioactive decay and the noise produced by streams of electron particles.

To grasp this in a simpler and more relatable way, we can kind of think about this process of generating random binary numbers as being analogous to flipping a coin many times, and then noting which outcome – "heads" (which we'll arbitrarily associate with a "1") or "tails" (a "0") – comes up on each flip. An RNG can be programmed to do this very fast – it can electronically flip 200 virtual coins a second! Since the probability of getting "heads" or "tails" is 50%, we should expect to find approximately equal amounts of "heads" and "tails" coming up on average over a long series of virtual coin flips. When plotted as a graph, the series of virtual coin flips produced by the RNG would ideally be expected to look something like the image shown on the next page, with the RNG data trace (represented by the dark blue line) wandering back and forth along the expectation line (the pink horizontal line at zero, which represents the roughly equal balance of "heads" and "tails" that one should expect to find over the course of the series).[6] The goal of a person participating in a PK test is to try and upset this balance by mentally willing the RNG to generate more "heads" (or more "tails") than chance alone would expect.

One of the most extensive efforts to study PK using RNGs was conducted by the members of the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) program that was active at Princeton University from 1979 to 2007.[4] Over the course of 12 years, the PEAR researchers ran a long-term research project that focused on attempts made by ordinary volunteers to mentally influence the virtual coin flips being produced by the custom-built "benchmark" RNGs that the researchers had specially designed and tested to be optimally random physical devices.[5]

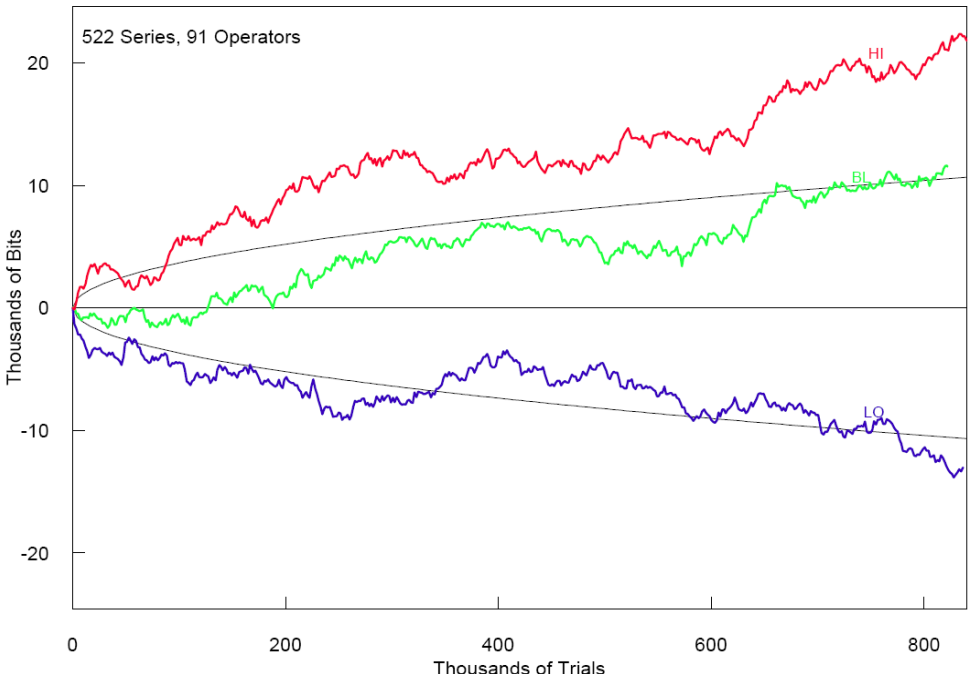


A graphical image of what the series of virtual coin flips produced by an RNG would ideally be expected to look like under most ordinary conditions, with no attempts being made to influence it via PK. The dark blue line represents the trace of the resulting RNG data, and the pink horizontal line at "0" represents the chance-expected outcome of 50%.[6]

In particular, the volunteers were asked to try and influence the RNG's virtual coin flips under three separate conditions:

- In the "HI" condition, the volunteers tried to get the RNG to produce more "heads" than chance would expect;
- In the "LO" condition, they tried to get the RNG to produce more "tails;" and
- In the "BL" condition, the volunteers simply focused on trying to get the RNG to act normally, producing a nominal baseline

In total, nearly 2.5 million individual test trials were collected from 91 volunteer participants over the course of the 12-year benchmark RNG research project. A graphical summary of all the RNG data collected by the PEAR researchers over the course of the 12-year period is shown on the next page, with each of the three mental influence conditions highlighted in separate colors. It can be seen that in each condition, a notable shift away from expected randomness was observed in the RNG data, in line with the mental influences that the participants were intentionally aiming for. (The shift can be most clearly seen if each condition shown on the graph on the next page is compared with the graph above on this page, showing the expected look of the RNG data.) When evaluated statistically, the overall shift from randomness was small but highly significant, with odds of about 2.9 trillion to one against chance!



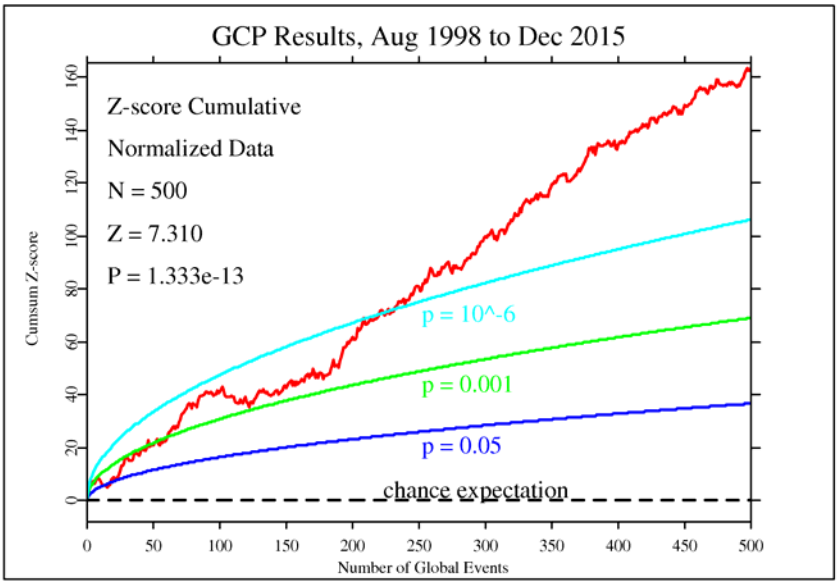
A graphical summary of the 12 years' worth of data collected by the PEAR researchers during the "benchmark" RNG research project, with each of the three mental influence conditions highlighted: "HI" (red trace), "LO" (blue trace), & "BL" (green trace). The thin black horizontal line at "0" represents the chance-expected outcome of 50%, and the thin curved black arcs represent the threshold of statistical significance (at odds of 20 to 1 against chance). Compare each of the three colored RNG data traces in this graph with the trace shown in the graph on the previous page. (Graph Source: Reference 7)

Apart from the PEAR researchers, a number of parapsychologists have conducted their own independent experiments on PK using RNGs since the 1960s. And like the PEAR results, statistical analyses that have been done of these other RNG-PK experiments over time have generally indicated overall shifts from expected randomness that, while being quite small in magnitude (typically in the range of about 1% over expectation), are highly significant by statistical standards, with conservative odds greater than several thousands to one against chance.[8-11] In stark contrast, long sets of RNG data collected when no volunteers attempted to mentally influence them via PK were found to be entirely random and consistent with chance expectation, having odds of only about seven to one against chance.[10] Taken together, these experimental findings seem to suggest that human minds can influence – to a very small degree – the virtual coin flips produced by RNGs, in line with the idea of "mind over matter." (For more extensive summaries of PK phenomena and the various lines of research that have been done in relation to them, see Refs. 12 & 13.)

Despite being as small and subtle as they are, could the PK effects that we see in these RNG experiments actually manifest themselves out in the real world? As a step toward finding out, the PEAR researchers began taking portable RNGs out into field and having them run silently in the background while group social events of various types were taking place.[14-15] Such events included parties, concerts, lectures, group workshops, ceremonies, religious rituals, and sports games. When analyzed later on, the data from these portable RNGs collectively revealed

notable shifts from expected randomness during the events that were overtly similar to those seen in the PK experiments, with odds of over 450,000 to one against chance.[15] This ostensible "group PK" effect seemed to offer the first hint of something akin to a "collective consciousness" being generated among the people in these groups, which seemed to be related to the degree of social unity, rapport, and focused attention that they shared in their group interactions.

These group-related PK findings later motivated PEAR researcher Roger Nelson and his colleagues to take the research to a broader scale by forming the Global Consciousness Project (GCP), a long-term study aimed at establishing and monitoring an Internet-based, worldwide network of RNGs in order to see whether these group-related "collective consciousness" effects might occur whenever a notable event takes place in the world that captures the attention, focuses the thoughts, and/or stirs the emotions of many people at once.[16-17] Hosted by volunteers living in various countries around the world, the 20 to 30 RNGs that are currently active in the GCP network are programmed to continually flip virtual coins day and night, with many of them doing so 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Since it first started back in August of 1998, the GCP has examined the RNG network data from 500 individually-identified events that have happened in the world (some examples include New Year's Eve, the funeral of Pope John Paul II, the inauguration of President Obama, the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton, the impact of "Super Storm Sandy," the Boston Marathon bombing, and global peace meditations held on the International Day of Peace). The overall result is shown in the graph below, and it can be seen that the combined RNG network data exhibits a clear shift away from expected randomness, with an odds ratio greater than a billion to one against chance.



Graphical summary of the RNG network data (represented by the jagged red trace) from 500 individual world events formally identified and examined by the Global Consciousness Project over the course of 17 years. The curved colored arcs represent the threshold of statistical significance at odds of 20 to one (dark blue), a thousand to one (green), and a million to one (light blue) against chance as the database grows over time. (Graph Source: GCP website – http://www.global-mind.org/results.html)

On the surface, the overall result of the GCP database would indeed seem to suggest that when the attention, thoughts, actions, and emotions of many people are focused on certain events, there is a tendency for the network RNGs to become significantly less random (and in a sense, more ordered) than we'd ordinarily expect them to – a finding which appears to be in line with the idea of a "collective consciousness." This may make one wonder: Could a similar type of thing possibly be observed when many paranormal investigators come together as one?

"Collective Consciousness" During the World's Largest Ghost Hunt?

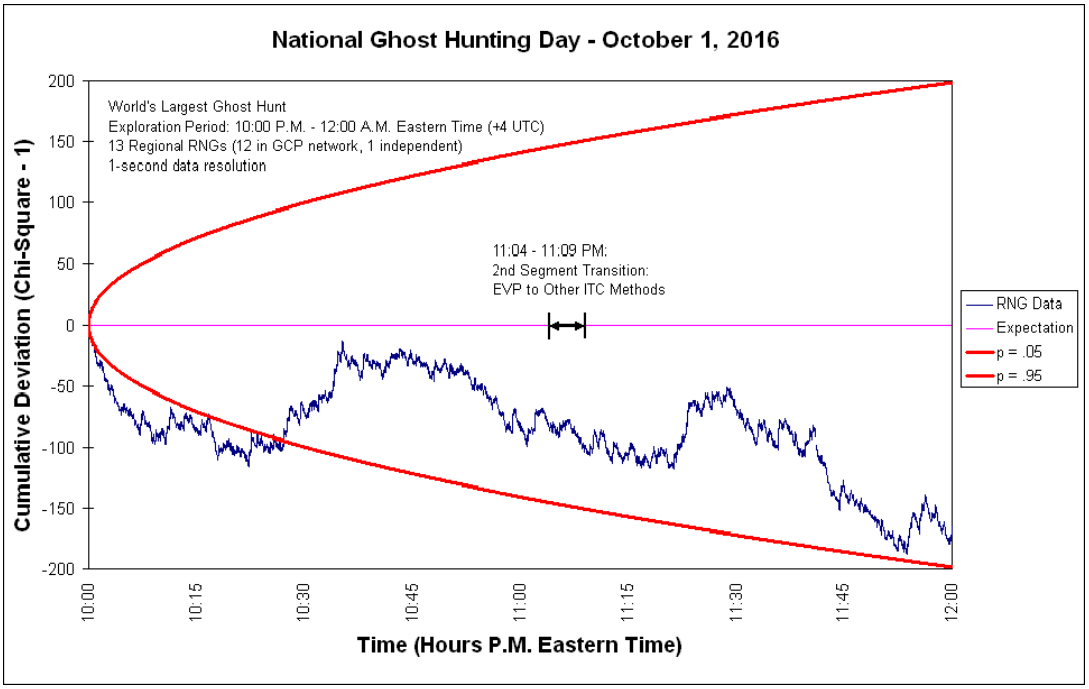
Late in September of 2016, several people with an interest in the paranormal who often follow the group-related PK work that I do had contacted me about the inaugural celebration of National Ghost Hunting Day that was planned for October 1st of that year. Each of my contacts notified me that many different paranormal investigation teams were coming together on that date to participate in the World's Largest Ghost Hunt, in which they would all be synchronously conducting investigations at allegedly haunted sites located around the world, and in effect, would be acting as though they were one large team. In light of this, all of my contacts basically wondered the same thing: "Do you think that this event might generate a group-related PK effect that could influence the virtual coin flips of RNGs?" Considering that the attention and actions of the participating teams would all be simultaneously geared toward a common aim, it certainly seemed to be a sensible question to explore, and so at their request, I agreed to do an exploratory analysis of the event, using the random data being collected on that particular night by the RNGs actively running in the GCP's worldwide network.[18]

Since most of the ghost hunts taking place that night were clustered in certain regions of the world (namely in the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Colombia, and Australia), I specifically decided in advance to examine the data being collected by any network RNGs which were running in, or fairly close to, those regions. And since at least one of the ghost hunts was being held at an allegedly haunted site located in my hometown of Albuquerque, New Mexico (USA), random data were also collected from an RNG that I set up to run on my home computer throughout the course of the two-hour event.

Later on, when I downloaded the data from the regional RNGs active in the GCP network and combined them with the data I'd collected from my own RNG, the resulting analysis had indicated that a modest shift from expected randomness had occurred in the RNGs (which can be seen in the graph shown on the next page). This shift was suggestive by statistical standards (having odds of about 12 to one against chance), and was somewhat similar to the kinds of effects seen in other group-related PK studies. Although one couldn't conclusively say that it was indicative of a "collective consciousness" effect occurring during the World's Largest Ghost Hunt, this apparent shift at least seemed to be suggestively hinting along the lines of that idea. This gives us some reason for thinking that it might be worth looking at other large ghost hunting events in the future in order to see if they might be able to provide clearer evidence of an effect.

With the participation of approximately 80 paranormal investigation teams, the World's Largest Ghost Hunt is set to repeat on September 30, 2017, providing another opportunity to collect RNG data with which to further explore the possibility of a "collective consciousness" in connection with the concerted effort of the participating teams. Based on the result obtained

during the first World's Largest Ghost Hunt, we might make a prediction for a downward shift away from expected randomness in the data collected during this next event for 2017.



Graph of the data from 13 RNGs running in (or fairly near) the regional locations where various haunt investigations were being conducted during the World's Largest Ghost Hunt, held on the inaugural celebration of National Ghost Hunting Day on October 1, 2016. Compare the data shown in this graph with the one on page 4 (showing what the data would otherwise be expected to look like under most ordinary, everyday conditions).

Conclusion

When considered altogether, much of the current empirical evidence we've looked at here seems to favor the likelihood that there may indeed be something to the idea of "collective consciousness" on a subtle scale. Among other things, these findings seem to suggest that when many people focus their minds toward cooperatively acting together as one, there is something in the physical world around them which also becomes "focused" to some degree, as well. They also suggest there may be some aspect of human consciousness which has a reach that extends broader than the individual self – perhaps at a fundamental level, there may be some degree of shared mental interconnection between individuals (particularly among those of a like mind). If that is so, then supportive group statements such as "We stand together" or "We are one" may carry a bit deeper meaning than might initially be realized.

Based on the implications that these findings have, one can begin to make the argument that the concept of paraunity may not be so farfetched, provided that individual investigators and teams are open and willing to put effort toward trying to make it a realization. Will clearer evidence in support of this argument continue to emerge over time, in the RNG study of the World's Largest Ghost Hunt? We have yet to see. As in the search for ghosts, the effort to explore concepts like "collective consciousness" takes time, persistence, and dedication. May both efforts one day lead to better understanding... ☺

References & Notes

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[6]It should be mentioned that the trace of the RNG data does not always look as ideal as it is seen in the graph; at times, random fluctuations in the coin flip outcomes can cause the trace to drift slightly from expectation purely by chance (as one can see at around the "501" & "1501" data points in the graph).

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[18]Additional details about the RNG exploration of the inaugural World's Largest Ghost Hunt in 2016 can be found in a note posted on the author's personal Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/notes/bryan-j-williams/field-rng-exploration-national-ghost-hunting-day/10153853124687050/