

BOOK REVIEW

Connected: The Emergence of Global Consciousness by Roger D. Nelson. ICRL Press, 2019. 332 pp. \$24.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1936033355.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31275/2019.1557>
Creative Commons License: CC-BY-NC

Much has been written about the Global Consciousness Project (GCP), including in this Journal. *Parapsychology: A Handbook for the 21st Century* included a chapter about the GCP (Nelson 2015). The author of this book has been involved in the GCP since its onset in 1998.

... the way to get on with the research is to listen to the whispers of serendipity. Approach new experiments with a fully open mind and the intention to take hints and surprising suggestions. Coincidence is your friend. The GCP had its beginnings in a long series of coincidences ... (p. 39)

Nelson knows the origin story better than anyone else and relates it in the book. In the late 1960s, Helmut Schmidt (1928–2011), a physicist at Boeing Science Research Laboratories, developed quantum-based random number generators (RNGs) which he used in experiments; the participants were supposed to predict or influence their output: “. . . Schmidt never sought credit or glory. Years after Schmidt’s devices were in use in numerous labs, his design was patented by others who cited his work in the patent document but did not acknowledge him as the key inventor” (Schlitz 2011:353). Schmidt was aware of the possible influence of the experimenter and gave a presentation about it (Schmidt 1974) before parapsychologists started to review their extensive literature about experimenter effects. Schmidt’s (2009) worries about the GCP concerned the possible influence of the experimenter.

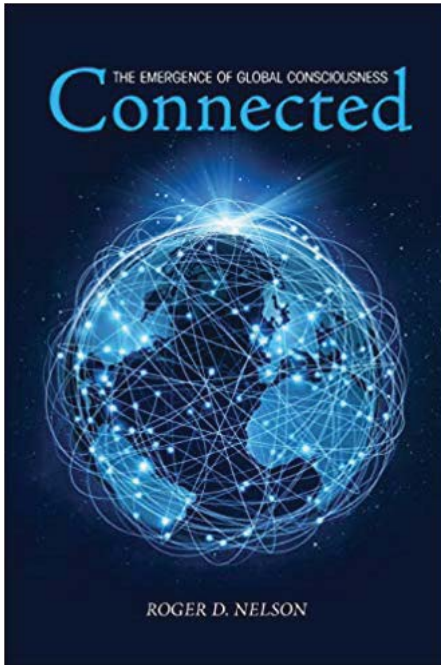
In 1979 Nelson was a professor of psychology when he read a job advertisement for the recently founded Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) laboratory. In short, Nelson got the job and his career took a new turn. Like the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research (1979–1985) and the Psychophysical Research Laboratories (1979–1989), the PEAR lab also came about thanks to the James S. McDonnell

Foundation. James McDonnell (1899–1980), the founder of McDonnell Aircraft Corporation, had an interest in parapsychology (Stevenson 1981). Nelson describes the PEAR lab and shares his recollections of founder Robert Jahn (1930–2017), Brenda Dunne, John Bradish, and York Dobyns. He also describes some of the machines that were built for psychokinesis (PK) studies. Some pictures would have been a welcome addition. The lab was located in the basement of the engineering school at Princeton University. Thompson Smith (2016) recalls that when she visited there was no sign on the door, just the room number C131. Presumably, some researchers were embarrassed by the lab, but its founder Jahn was Dean of the School of Engineering/Applied Sciences at Princeton University and a world-class physicist, and hence not easy to get rid of. Nelson left the lab in 2002, and the PEAR lab closed down in 2007.

The PEAR lab is best remembered for its PK studies, but the researchers there also conducted remote viewing (RV) studies. As if to cause confusion, an RNG was referred to as a Random Event Generator (REG) and RV was referred to as remote perception or precognitive remote perception (PRP). In passing, Nelson describes his “Wishing for good weather” study (Nelson 1997). He compared the weather on celebratory days to the weather on control days: “Amazingly enough, there was indeed a significant difference: The weather in Princeton was just a little better than it might have been” (p. 70). Although not mentioned in that study, it actually had a predecessor (i.e. Cox 1962). Of more relevance to the story about the GCP are the FieldREG studies (Nelson et al. 1996, 1998). As the name implies, the researchers studied the influence of groups on the output of REGs in the field, for example during rituals and operas. Nelson carried an REG with him to Egypt:

Group meditations and chanting in sacred spaces like the Holy of Holies in the temple ruins, or the interior chambers of the Great Pyramid reliably produced strong departures. Effects were on average a little smaller without the “ritual” activity. In contrast, there was little or no evidence for deviations during time spent in the chaos of the streets and markets. (p. 88)

The FieldREG studies led to the GCP. In 1997, Diana, Princess of Wales, died in a car crash—to many this was a real tragedy. Nelson asked colleagues to collect data from their REGs during her funeral, which was then analyzed to see if the funeral had an effect on their output. As a young man, Nelson had read Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Phenomenon of Man* and was deeply affected (judging by the number of quotes, he still is). Teilhard wrote about something he called the noosphere, and Nelson explains:



. . . the noosphere would be composed of all the interacting minds on Earth. What he encouraged us to envision is a trans-human consciousness emerging from our interactions to become a guiding intelligence for the planet. (p. 273)

. . . we now have substantial evidence that it is an actual phenomenal presence in the world. It can be likened to the mind that arises when neurons interconnect. But in the case of the noosphere, there are no chemicals in synaptic junctions. Yet there is an interconnection, and a mutual influence matrix that can be observed only indirectly (and rarely) by our rather primitive tools. (p. 306)

The GCP consists of a number of RNGs scattered throughout the world. The idea being that their output should be influenced by global events, such as 911 (this refers to the terrorist attacks that occurred 11 September, 2001), disasters, celebrations, events that affect a large number of people either directly or indirectly through mass media: “The results in the experiment show that what we’re calling global consciousness is linked to small, but ultimately significant correlations among the RNGs in the network” (p. 270). The formal database consists of 500 events, though reactions to more events than that have been analyzed. The inconsistent reactions to school shootings in America are curious (pp. 199–200). Nelson makes it clear that he and his colleagues do not know enough about the effects for any practical applications, such as using the GCP as a possible pre-warning system. The main controversy about the GCP is not about whether there is an effect but rather whether the effect is a result of ordinary people unaware of the GCP or due to the experimenters’ choices.

Nelson is naturally well-aware of the controversy, having debated opponents for years. Nelson displays a number of results and graphs, including reactions to 911, that is his own analysis, and a post hoc analysis by Dean Radin (who wrote the Foreword). What is troublesome in Nelson’s presentation of the results is that the experimenter effect is basically

dismissed, in passing, despite the fact that May and Spottiswoode (2001) argued that the interesting results were really due to fortuitous choices of analysis windows. In addition, after their own analysis they concluded that the network “. . . produced data consistent with mean chance expectation during the worst single-day tragedy in American history” (May & Spottiswoode 2001:1). At the time of 911, Nelson made a formal prediction about the reaction and also wrote:

I want to acknowledge that I like the idea of “Global Consciousness,” but that this idea is really an aesthetic speculation. I don’t think we should claim that the statistics and graphs representing the data prove the existence of a global consciousness. (p. 140)

Some people, such as Stephan Schwartz and Russell Targ, think that the results of parapsychology experiments show that we are all interconnected. I beg to differ. If taken at face value, the results show that, among other things, people can perceive scenes distant in time and space, react as if they were somehow entangled, and feel it when they are being stared at. It does not necessarily follow that we are all interconnected—if accepted, the results just basically indicate that we can connect.

Nelson addresses his opponents, including Bancel (2017a, 2017b), later in the book and explains why he is unconvinced by their arguments (Nelson 2017). Much of the debate is technical. Bancel has analyzed data from the GCP since 2002, originally as a collaborator of Nelson’s, but he eventually came to a different conclusion. My reading suggests that Nelson must dismiss his opponents’ arguments because he is using the results of GCP to promote a New Age philosophy (p. 258), which he believes the world desperately needs since we are (apparently) on the brink of disaster (once again). Judging by the blurbs on the book’s back cover from Larry Dossey and Stephan Schwartz, they agree with Nelson. He suggests that:

You will find what you need by simply having the intention—putting the question “out there” and waiting confidently for your connections to become clear. If you are ready, opportunity appears. (p. 296)

Radin (2018) and Horowitz (2018) have argued along similar lines. If one accepts psi phenomena as real, then it follows that one’s thoughts in addition to one’s actions may have an effect, perhaps one finds a nice job or love relationship thanks to a coincidence. However, less pleasant effects also are imaginable, if one accepts psi then the possible influence of hexes suddenly makes sense. Presumably, psi can be used both for good and bad. Perhaps some of the more extreme reactions parapsychology evokes come

about because skeptics realize that the results encourage a kind of magical worldview. Arguably, Nelson's main claim is the more provocative. Does the GCP really show that we are all interconnected and that the output of RNGs (for some unknown reason) change when we are shocked by the latest tragedy or when we celebrate New Year's Eve? Have we not grown used to bad news? Why did the death of Robert Jahn have such a large effect on the RNG network? The opponents argue that the results are actually due to the experimenters.

Nelson has written an informative book. I enjoyed learning more about the PEAR lab and the people who worked there. The controversy over the GCP will likely continue for some time. The reason is simple: Analyzing the reactions to global events is not at all like analyzing the results of a series of guesses on Zener cards. It is really an oversimplification to say that the network reacted or that it did not, because the result depends on the experimenters' choices, including whether to look at data from, for example, 14:00 to 20:00 or from 14:00 to 22:00. Presumably, skeptics believe that the interesting results are just due to data dredging (though the formal predictions are registered prior to analysis), but informed opponents believe the results are really due to the experimenters, though not due to fraud. Nelson naturally disagrees with both groups. His book is readable, and one does not need to be receptive to New Age philosophy to find it enlightening.

—**NEMO C. MÖRCK**
nemomorck@hotmail.com

References Cited

- Bancel, P. A. (2017a). Searching for Global Consciousness: A 17-year exploration. *Explore*, 13, 94–101.
- Bancel, P. A. (2017b). Response to Nelson's "Weighting the Parameters." *Explore*, 13, 106–107.
- Cox, W. E. (1962). Can wishing affect the weather? In *The Scientist Speculates* edited by I. J. Good, New York: Basic Books, pp. 172–173.
- Horowitz, M. (2018). *The Miracle Club*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
- May, E. C., & Spottiswoode, S. J. P. (2001). Global Consciousness Project: An independent analysis of the 11 September 2001 events. Palo Alto, CA: Laboratories for Fundamental Research.
- Nelson, R. D. (1997). Wishing for good weather: A natural experiment in group consciousness. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 11, 47–58.
- Nelson, R. D. (2015). Implicit physical psi: The Global Consciousness Project. in *Parapsychology: A Handbook for the 21st Century* edited by E. Cardeña, J. Palmer, & D. Marcusson-Clavertz, pp. 282–292.
- Nelson, R. D. (2017). Weighting the Parameters, a Response to Bancel's "Searching for Global Consciousness: A Seventeen Year Exploration." *Explore*, 13, 102–105.
- Nelson, R. D., Bradish, G. J., Dobyms, Y. H., Dunne, B. J., & Jahn, R. G. (1996). FieldREG anomalies in group situations. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 10, 111–141.

- Nelson, R. D., Jahn, R. G., Dunne, B. J., Dobyys, Y. H., & Bradish, G. J. (1998). FieldREG II: Consciousness field effects: Replications and explorations. *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 12*, 425–454.
- Radin, D. (2018). *Real Magic*. New York: Harmony Books.
- Schlitz, M. (2011). Helmut Schmidt: 1928–2011. *Journal of Parapsychology, 7*, 349–353.
- Schmidt, H. (1974). A new role of the experimenter in science suggested by parapsychology. In *Parapsychology and the Sciences* edited by A. Angoff & B. Shapin, New York: Parapsychology Foundation, pp. 266–279.
- Schmidt, H. (2009). A Puzzling Aspect of the “Global Consciousness Project.” *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 23*, 507–510.
- Stevenson, I. (1981). James S. McDonnell and the support of parapsychology. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, 75*, 321–324.
- Thompson Smith, A. (2016). *Remote Perceptions* (second edition). Boulder, CA: Triangulum Publishing.