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Coincidence by design

Abstract

In this paper we develop an approach to coincidences as discursive activities. To illustrate the range of empirical questions that can be explored in the analysis of coincidence accounts, we examine one single written account, which was submitted to a website of a research project to investigate the statistical dimensions of coincidence experiences. Our analysis is broadly ethnomethodological in that we examine this single case to identify how structural and narrative components work to constitute the recognizably coincidental quality of the events so described. The analysis identifies a mirror structure that resembles chiasmus, a figurative device found in classical texts. The analysis also describes how the account is designed to address inferential matters related to the site to which it was submitted. In the discussion we reflect on the implications of this approach for other approaches to coincidence.

Introduction

We have three objectives in this paper. First, we establish the broader significance of studying coincidence accounts, especially in relation to their value as therapeutic tools in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, and in relation to the broader study of mystical experience. Second, we set out some methodological principles for the analysis of coincidence accounts. Finally, we illustrate our methodological approach via a single case analysis of an account of a meaningful coincidence.

Coincidence experiences can be defined as the 'conjunction between inner and outer

states: between thoughts, feelings, and images in one's mind and features of events in one's environment' (Beitman, Celebi and Coleman 2009:1). They are invariably fascinating: they suggest that everyday life can be surprising, or indeed uncanny, apparently guided by mysterious or even spiritual forces. They can be meaningful for the people who experience them, sometimes profoundly so, and can inform decisions about significant life events, such as careers or relationships. It is important to be clear that when we use the term, 'meaningful coincidence', we are not referring to confluences of thought and events that, though pleasing, are no more than happenstance. Rather, we refer to moments that can be taken to suggest the universe has a vested interest in our affairs and intervenes to bring about specific consequences.

The psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung reported one of the most well known instances of a meaningful coincidence (Jung, 1955). This concerned the appearance of a scarab beetle at his office window at the same moment that he was treating a patient who had just reported a dream involving a golden scarab. Jung identifies the clinical significance of this event: at the time, he had made little progress with this patient's case; however, the appearance of the scarab beetle at the time the patient reported her dream facilitated a significant therapeutic breakthrough. The coincidental event, therefore, was not just meaningful at the time it happened, but had an important role in the participants' subsequent relationship. Jung developed the concept of synchronicity to capture the paradox of meaningful yet ostensibly random conjunction of events. In this paper we use the term 'meaningful coincidence' to include those events that, following Jung, would be viewed as synchronistic, and evidence of the operation of acausal connectivity.

Although the concept of synchronicity has bled into popular discourse, Jung's initial investigations did not lead to sustained research on coincidence experiences. Recently however, academics from a range of disciplines have begun to research meaningful coincidences, and to call for sustained interdisciplinary research on coincidence (Beitman, 2011; Hammond, 2007; Leong, Vetere and Howard, 2012). The most sustained interest in coincidence, however, has come from academics and practitioners in psychotherapy. To an extent, this reflects a long-standing interest in meaningful coincidences between analysts and patients that border on the paranormal or telepathic. Freud wrote six papers on curious intersections between patient and analyst, although some were unpublished (Silverman, 1988). It is widely recognized that contemporary relationships between therapists and patients or clients routinely exhibit meaningful coincidences (Roxburgh, Ridgway and Roe, 2016). Consequently, and following Jung, some therapists have addressed how these synchronistic events can be incorporated systematically into therapeutic practice, and in the process of healing more generally (Allick, 2003; Marlo and Kline, 1998; Nachman, 2009; DePeyer, 2016).

A notable illustration of this is Beitman's monograph on the psychology of meaningful coincidences (2016). While aimed at a lay audience, this book develops many of the themes initially explored in academic publications (for example, Beitman and Coleman, 2010; Beitman and Shaw, 2009). A key focus of his argument is the way that coincidence-sensitive people can learn to increase their awareness of coincidence in their lives, understand their implications for their life trajectories, decisions and opportunities, and exploit their coincidence experiences for self

actualization, personal understanding, spiritual growth and so on. Beitman is an established academic, having held senior university posts in psychiatry. His account of the therapeutic or personal benefits of coincidences is rooted in a serious therapeutic concern with the psychological dynamics of human experience.

There is an ambiguity in Beitman's approach in that, while he focuses on the practical personal benefits from taking account of one's experience of coincidences, he does not deny that they may appear to be evidence of the operation of more mystical or paranormal agencies. Other psychotherapists have been much more explicit in their acceptance of the ostensibly paranormal implications of coincidences that occur with their patients, especially in the field of relational psychoanalysis (for example Burton, 2012; de Payer, 2016). It is clear that they can be taken to represent the play of a transcendent force in human affairs. As such, the examination of reports of coincidences can contribute to the study of more overtly spiritual or religious experience: they both entail a private subjective dimension, suggest the influence of unseen and perhaps transcendent forces, and the experiences may be deeply meaningful for those who have them.

There are significant methodological difficulties in trying to understand religious or spiritual experience. As Yamane wrote, social scientists 'cannot empirically study experiencing, thus understood, for it is a wholly private, individual affair inaccessible to any currently known methods of social scientific research' (2000:173). We are forced to rely on people's accounts of their experiences. Yamane argues that it is necessary to study what he calls the 'the intersubjective articulation of experience' (2000: 174), and calls for a broadly narrative approach to experience. This is a

position echoed more recently by Gokel, who explores how the tools of narrative analysis can expose levels of meaning of reports of religious experience (Gokel, 2013; see also the range of methodological responses explored in transpersonal psychology, for example, Braud and Anderson, 1998; Anderson and Braud, 2011). Reports of coincidences also invite qualitative and interpretive analysis of the meaning of the experience. However, prior to the application of what James has called the analytic imagination to reveal the meanings of peoples' accounts, (James, 2013), there is perhaps a more foundational set of empirical issues that need to be explored.

The analysis of accounts in social science has a long history (for example, Burke, 1945; Lyman and Scott, 1970). A common theme is the assumption that accounts can be examined to reveal more or less objective features of the world 'out there', or internal mental or cognitive processes. Discourse is taken to be an essentially representational medium. This view of accounts (and qualitative data more generally) has resulted in empirical work in which the goal of analysis is to identify broad themes in people's discourse, which are then taken to stand for objective features of their experiences or thoughts (for an example of this kind of research with respect to coincidences, see Roxburgh, Ridgway and Roe, 2015).

The representational view of language has been challenged by social scientists influenced by rhetoric, the later Wittgenstein, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Augoustinos and Tileaga, 2012; Edwards, 1997; Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Pollner 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Although theoretically and methodologically heterogeneous, a common assumption of this tradition is that accounts (both in the narrow technical sense, and the broader sense of narratives) are

examined as socially constituted and dynamic objects, the composition of which is underpinned by tacit norms and taken for granted cultural knowledge, and which perform interactional or inferential tasks in and for the settings in which they are produced. It is this view of the constructive and constitutive properties of talk and texts that sets our approach apart from, for example, most forms of narrative analysis, which are informed by more representational views of language and meaning (for example, Murray, 2003).

Our primary influence is Smith's (1978) single case analysis of a student's written account of the way that an interviewee's acquaintance began to display symptoms of mental illness. Smith examined the account to see how its structural organisation reflected culturally available but tacit assumptions about what constitutes noticeable departures from 'normal' behaviour. Her analysis identified how norms about mental illness informed the organisation of the account of a person's behaviour such that it came to be heard and read as a legitimate (that is, reasonable, factual or unmotivated) account of objectively real mental ill health. Her analysis showed that the fabric of mental illness as an objective state was taken to be isomorphic with the everyday descriptive practices for warrantable reporting of mental illness. Following Smith's approach, we examine a coincidence report to identify how socially organized descriptive components of the narrative work pragmatically and rhetorically to formulate a particular sense for the events in the world to which they refer. We focus first on the structural organization of the account, and then investigate specific descriptions that exhibit the author's tacit understanding of what constitutes for this website, a meaningful coincidence.

Methodology: the single case analysis

The use of a single case analysis has a long history in many forms of qualitative research, but it has particular relevance in the development of conversation analytic studies of ordinary verbal interaction. Often, studies of single cases are motivated by distinctive features of the interaction, or their consequences in the world beyond the talk (for example, Whalen, Zimmerman and Whalen, 1988). Not all single case analyses are motivated by the inherent public interest in the fragment of interaction being studied, or its wider consequences. For example, Schegloff has also used a single fragment of data to bring to light how various communicative competencies that intersect in any stretch of interaction. He describes this procedure as a “decomposition” exercise (Schegloff, 1987:101) whereby the resources of previous analytic work on a range of discourse phenomena are brought to bear on a single data fragment. (For other examples of single case analysis in this tradition, see Mandelbaum, 1987; Schegloff, 1988a; Woods and Wooffitt, 2014; Wooffitt, 1988). Following Schegloff, the objective of our detailed examination of one case is to establish the orderly organisational properties of a fragment of naturally occurring discourse, while at the same time sketching lines of inquiry for subsequent research.

Target data

The coincidence account selected as the target for this single case analysis comes from Spiegelhalter’s Cambridge Coincidence project (<http://understandinguncertainty.org/coincidences>), to which members of the public are invited to submit written accounts of their own coincidence experiences. The selection of this specific account followed procedures common to conversation analytic data sessions, in which analysis is not motivated by any specific empirical

questions, but which focuses on data to see what empirical phenomena those data may yield. It was not, therefore, selected because of any special features. It was part of a pile of stories from the site, which had been printed out prior to empirical analysis. This account was selected for a data analysis session simply because it was on the top of the pile. Until it was selected in this random fashion, it had not been subject to any analytic attention.

The account has been reproduced almost exactly as it was presented on the Cambridge Coincidence website. The only change is that the account has been numbered by line, including the title (provided by the author of the account), which is represented below as line 1.

01 *Two siblings, same chance encounter*
02 A little while ago I went to Amsterdam to visit my
03 boyfriend. While there, we decided to rent some bikes
04 and go cycle outside the city. On our way to the lake we
05 were headed, my boyfriend got a flat tyre, so we started
06 to walk in a little village on the hunt for a bike shop.
07 It was while we were walking that we chanced upon a film
08 set, where they were shooting a cough commercial. While
09 my boyfriend was busy sorting out his bike issues, I
10 approached one guy on set and started asking questions
11 about the shoot. I mentioned that my brother was trying
12 to get into the film industry, and asked about his
13 experiences. He told me that he was going to be moving

14 to London soon, so I gave him my brother's details.
15 Cue a month later, my brother was cycling to work in
16 London when he chanced upon a film set. Eager to make
17 contacts and find work, he decided to approach the team
18 and start asking what they were filming. He then said he
19 was trying to get into the industry and wanted to leave
20 his details in case they needed someone. And when he
21 said his name.... the guy he was talking to realised
22 that he was the brother I had mentioned in our chance
23 encounter not 4 weeks ago in Amsterdam!

The gender of the author is not available from the website, but we make the wholly heteronormative assumption that she is female, and use female pronouns to refer to the author accordingly.

Our analysis focuses on two issues: the structure of the narrative; and the way that it is designed to manage a tension between the personally meaningful dimensions of the events, and more rational, statistical explanation for ostensibly striking coincidences.

Mirror formulations and narrative binding

This coincidence account (like many coincidence accounts) is essentially a single story constructed around two discrete and ostensibly unrelated events; in this case, the author finding a film set outside Amsterdam, and a subsequent story about the author's brother happening upon a film set in London. It is easy to imagine how these two stories could be portrayed not as a coincidence, but as the basis for shared

experience ('and that happened to my brother too') or shared objectives ('we were both thinking how this might help his career'). Consequently, these two stories have to be produced so that they form constituent parts of the larger coincidence account. One method by which this narrative binding can be achieved is through the use of a form of structural mirroring in which specific formulations for events are repeated.

There is the repeated use of 'chanced': the author reports that she 'chanced upon a film set' (lines 7-8); later she describes how her brother also 'chanced upon a film set' (line 16). It is first used to portray the happenstance manner in which the author encountered the film crew outside Amsterdam; it is subsequently used to depict the equally happenstance manner in which her brother subsequently encountered a film crew in London. There are other examples. Both segments of the story begin with a temporal location. The author's story begins with 'A little while ago' (line 1); the brother's segment begins with 'Cue a month later' (line 15). There are also initial geographical locations, by reference to Amsterdam and London (lines 1 and 16). She characterizes the bike trip outside the city as something she and her boyfriend 'decided' to do (line 3); subsequently, when reporting her brother's encounter with the film set in London, she reports that 'he decided' to approach a member of the crew (line 17). Her encounter with the crew was as a consequence of going for a cycle ride in the country (lines 4-6); her brother's encounter with the film crew was while he was cycling to work (line 15). In her conversation with the member of the film crew she reports that her brother 'was trying to get into the film industry' (lines 12-13); later she reports that her brother told the member of the crew he was talking to that he 'was trying to get into the industry' (line 19). The author 'started asking' questions of the film crew (line 10), and her brother subsequently 'starts[s] asking'

questions of the member of the set he approaches. The author reports that she ‘gave...my brother's details’ to her co interlocutor (lines 13-14); later the brother is described as wanting to ‘leave his details in case they needed someone’ with a member of the crew (lines 19-20). It is this last set of mirror formulations that segues the narrative to its denouement as a coincidence.

These instances of mirroring are built out of the same words or variations of the same words; but the same mirroring effect can be achieved through more thematic parallels, for example, the reference to time. In one sense time, or the temporal ordering and sequentiality of events, is ubiquitous in this (and other) narratives, in that any reported activity takes place at some time in the past, or is explicitly or implicitly depicted as being contingent on a prior or future event. While these implicit temporal underpinnings merit investigation to explore how they work to ensure the account is produced as a recognizable coincidence account, we are here more interested in the explicit references to time. There are three:

‘A little while ago’ (line 11)

‘Cue a month later’ (line 15)

‘not 4 weeks ago’ (line 23)

The first two each preface a discrete story segment, and as such are an example of narrative mirroring. The third comes at the denouement of the story. It is an alternative formulation of the period described in ‘cue a month later’. Each reference to time displays the author’s tacit orientation to the specific design requirements of this coincidence story. ‘A little while ago’ and ‘Cue a month later’ reflect two very

different ways to reference time in narrative. The first is a formulation of time that is designed as an omni relevant formulation, in that it is unspecific, and anyone can identify with it: that is, the events to be recounted are ‘a little while ago’ for both author and reader. It is a formulation that also signals that the precise date of the event is, for the purposes of this account, of no relevance. The second temporal formulation, ‘a month later’ operates to a different set of criteria: it is relevant in relation to the story; so while there is no objective identification of time (for example in terms of year or month) it is inferably a month later from that point in time previously identified as ‘a little while ago’. This is a local temporal formulation in that its relevance derives from the internal structure of the narrative. The relative specificity of the time period so described (in relation to the omni relevant imprecision of ‘a little while ago’) inferably anticipates a key event for the narrative, a foreshadowing that is explicitly underpinned by the use of ‘Cue’ to highlight the apposite relation between events just reported and events to be reported.

Although reference to a month later is specific relative to ‘a little while ago’ it retains a degree of ambiguity. Because a month varies between 28 and 31 days, it can be used as an approximation of a length of time. Equally, it can be used to mark the change from one calendar month to the next. This ambiguity is subsequently exploited in the final temporal reference. In the internal logic of the story, ‘not 4 weeks ago’ is an alternative formulation of ‘a month later’, in that it also captures the length of time that passed between the author’s meeting with the film crew and her brother’s encounter. However, the latter formulation establishes that the time between the two events is notably short, and therefore significant; the negative formulation ‘not even’ emphasises the remarkable nature of the brother’s meeting.

In her analysis of an account of a young woman's apparent slide to mental illness, Smith (1978) noted that structural organization of the narrative provided for particular kinds of interpretations. For example, the implied contrast between 'normal behaviour' and what the young woman did facilitated the interpretation that her actions were not those of a 'normal' (that is, mentally healthy) person. Consequently the structural organization of the narrative indexed and made relevant 'common sense' understandings in such a way that tacit attributions of mental instability were more likely to be facilitated. The structural mirroring here similarly attends to a range of inferential work, in that it reinforces the symmetry of events that underpinned the coincidental event; that is, the way that the brother ended up talking to the same person with whom his sister had earlier discussed her brother's career ambitions. The symmetry of these events is reflected in the various structural and lexical symmetries around which this story is built. Collectively they discursively embody precisely the curious synchrony of events and that constitute this story as a story of a meaningful coincidence.

Chiastic properties of the mirror structure

In this section we wish to make some remarks on features of the broader organisation of the account. In a study of the organisation of introspection in psychological experiments, it has been noted that how reports of inner experience (thoughts, imagery, and so on), exhibited features that resembled classic figures of speech. For example, reports of discrete conscious experiences might be initiated and completed by words or phrases in which the same sounds were prominent. This resembles the

phenomenon of epanalepsis in poetry, in which a word or clause occurs at the beginning and end of a line (Author and Other, 2011).

Of the various figurative devices to be found in the introspective data, perhaps the most intriguing were cases of apparent *chiasmus*. In this figurative device sounds, letters, words, phrases or ideas are reversed to make a broader point. (The term *chiasmus* derives from a Greek word *chiazein*, meaning 'to mark with or in the shape of a cross'.) Everyday examples of *chiasmus* would be well known sayings such as 'It's not the men in my life, but the life in my men', and 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country', where the latter part of the phrase or sentence repeats many of the features from the first part, but in reverse order. In his lectures on everyday poetics in conversational interaction, Harvey Sacks noted a similar phenomenon, which he called reversals, in which particular sound or word sequences seem to be conspicuously inverted to achieve a form of acoustic mirroring (Sacks, 1992, vol. II: 308).

Examples of *chiasmus*¹ are usually investigated in formal, written texts. It occurs in Homeric Greek and in Latin in the works of Roman authors (Welch, 1981a). It has been found in the plays of Shakespeare (Davis, 2003), nursery rhymes (Welch, 1981b), the rhetoric of advertising (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996). It is commonly associated with the analysis of religious texts. Studies of *chiasmus* in classical literary and religious texts examine how ideas or themes may be reversed to achieve rhetorical ends. This reversal may take complex forms. The following example comes from Welch's (1981c) study of *chiasmus* in the Book of Mormon, and illustrates how key narrative themes can be repeated and inverted. It is found in a

speech by Benjamin in which he tells the nation that they will be spiritually empty until

‘They humble themselves and become as little children believing that salvation is in the atoning blood of Christ for the natural man, an enemy to God and has been from the fall of Adam and will be forever and ever unless he yieldeth to the Holy Spirit and putteth off the natural man and become a saint through the atonement of Christ and becometh as a child, submissive, meek and humble’

The following representation of this speech exposes the various embedded reversals around which it is organized.

[a] They *humble* themselves

[b] and become as little *children*

[c] believing that salvation is in the *atoning blood of Christ*

[d] for the *natural man*

[e] is an enemy to *God*

[f] and *has been* from the fall of Adam

[f] and *will be* forever and ever

[e] unless he yieldeth to the *Holy Spirit*

[d] and putteth off the *natural man*

[c] and become a saint through the *atonement of Christ*

[b] and becometh as a *child*

[a] submissive, meek and *humble*

This illustrates various ways by which echoic but inverted relationships are established: the repeat of specific words and phrases ('humble'; 'natural man'), alternative references to the same thing ('God'/'Holy Spirit') and alternative or contrastive formulations (such as the reference to temporality in 'has been' and 'will be').

Following this step, we can see that in the target data, the author's coincidence account display broadly chiasmic properties.

[a] *A little while ago...Amsterdam* [temporal marker + location]

[b] *film set*

[c] *approached* one guy...*asking questions* about the shoot.

[d] moving to *London* soon,

[e] *my brother's* details.

[e] *my brother* was cycling to work

[d] in *London*

[c] *approach* the team...*start asking*

[b] what they were *filming*

[a] *4 weeks ago in Amsterdam* [temporal marker + location]

The second part of the narrative is not a perfect reversal of the first; there are themes or segments in one part that do not occur in the other. But there does seem to be sufficient thematic and topical reversal to warrant the claim of some form of chiasmic organization. The mirroring effect is achieved in references to key features of the

story: when and where it happened; events which subsequently take on significance (happening upon a film set); agency and action (approaching the set to ask questions); discovery of potentially relevant information (the anticipated relocation to London); and the introduction of a necessary character (the brother). Broadly, these key nodes of the story are repeated in reverse in the second part of the account.

In the literature of classical studies, there has been discussion of the methodological difficulties in attempting to identify chiasmus over longer stretches of text (Welch, 1981b: 13); and we recognize that the chiasmic features of this account are not as clear or as neat as they are in the more well known examples we described earlier. However, our analysis leads us to conclude that it is at least possible that this coincidence account has a chiasmic structure.

We should not be surprised that classical rhetorical forms can be discerned in something as mundane as an account of the experience of a coincidence. Person (2016) has demonstrated that many features of ostensibly formal classic texts reflect the properties of communicative practices discovered in conversation analytic work on talk-in-interaction, such as turn taking, sequence organisation and storytelling. He argues that features found in classical texts are adaptations of everyday communicative competences. Of particular relevance to this paper is his examination of what is known as ring composition, in which the elements in classic narratives or stories are repeated in reversed form. He shows that this seemingly complex structure closely resembles the structures of stories told in mundane conversation. His work therefore provides support for the claim that the target account in this paper exhibits properties conventionally associated with classical texts. It also supports the argument

that what have usually been taken to be specialised or artful figurative devices may be generic, culturally available communicative resources.

Managing motives and mystery

In making a claim for striking coincidence, it is necessary to highlight those features of the story that make this particular set of discrete events more than simply two unrelated events that happen at the same time, or the same thing that happens to two different people, and so on. Moreover, a coincidence narrative loses its rhetorical power if the relation between discrete events is seen to be habitual or engineered in some way; that is, it's not much of a coincidence that you bumped into your sister abroad if you knew she was planning to travel to that location, and you went there knowing she was there. The story must be produced so that the relation between events is remarkable, striking, and almost beyond belief.

There are many popular texts and websites that provide examples of coincidences that suggest profoundly mystical or otherworldly agencies and forces operating on human affairs. Popular interest in the kinds of events is largely driven by their intrinsic mysteriousness. The Cambridge Coincidence project, however, has a different focus. According to the project website homepage, members of the public are invited to post their coincidence narratives to help identify the broad characteristics of coincidences, and to facilitate 'scientific explanations which may account for them - whether by doing the maths to calculate the chances of a coincidence, or speculating on the weird and wonderful workings of our brains'. The primary academic interest in coincidence accounts is explicitly rational: that is, these accounts are not invited to allow investigation of uncanny or spiritual interventions; the objective is to identify either

the probabilistic frequencies of events presented as coincidences, or to allow reflection on the ways in which mundane cognitive processes can lead us to attribute the status of coincidence to otherwise unremarkable events. There is, then, a tension: stories that conventionally lend themselves to mystical or paranormal explanations are recruited for a research project seeking to investigate rational and non-paranormal explanations.

There are various ways in which this tension is managed in the target data. The author has titled her account, 'Two siblings, same chance encounter'. The word 'chance' is also used in the final sentence of the story, the *dénouement* in which it becomes explicit that something conspicuously meaningful has happened. 'Chanced upon' seems curiously artful (if not slightly old fashioned); moreover, it has a reflexive quality, in that its repeated use is fitted to, and constitutes, its status as an account of a coincidental happening. But it may also be the case that the use of the word chance to title the story, and in the actual narrative, reflects the author's tacit (or perhaps explicit) appreciation of the website to which it is being posted, and, presumably, for which it was written. The use of the word 'chance' in this story works in two ways. First, 'chance' invokes probabilistic reasoning, and therefore explicitly acknowledges the site's origins in research on statistics and event frequency. Second, it is an explicit claim that the story is recognised by the author as one that could be attributed to happenstance, and may not be evidence that human affairs are ordered by supra normal or mystical forces. It is designed to fit with the rational or sceptical account of coincidences that might be associated with knowledge of statistical probabilities. An analogy could be made to the notion of recipient design in conversation analytic studies of talk-in-interaction: in the same way that an utterance will be designed with

respect to the intended recipient, so too has this account been produced with an orientation to the kind of site to which it was submitted.

Consider also the use of ‘decided’ to capture both the author’s cycle ride that led to the meeting with the film crew, and her brother’s rationale for approaching the crew on the set he encountered. As Schegloff (1988b:124) has observed, a course of action that is formulated as having been ‘decided’ upon is produced to be heard as an intentionally achieved outcome. In this case, each use of ‘decided’ reports intended actions that ultimately led to the coincidence happening. They propose a motive for the actions of the author and her brother. In the first case, it is perfectly normal to decide to hire bikes on a holiday; in the second, it is understandable that a person with a career interest in the film industry might decide to talk to someone already in that line of work. These are mundane motives, and work to show that the actor’s actions that led to the coincidence were not motivated by an interest in seeking or finding a striking synchronicity.

This is significant: studies of discourse in which people are reporting what might be termed unusual experiences have found that people do pragmatic work to show that they have no prior motivations or interest in the experience they report. For example, in his study of accounts of paranormal experiences, Wooffitt observed that people routinely do not use commonly available terms (such as ‘out of body experience’, ‘UFO’, and so on). He argued that not naming a phenomenon has inferential function. Being able to name a state of affairs or an object implies having knowledge about them. Moreover, being able to name some anomalous experience suggests a commitment to the in-principle existence of the object so named, and can be taken as

an indication of interest in the phenomenon. This might then be the basis for sceptical reassessment, for example, that the person wanted to have this experience, and was therefore inclined to misperception of an ordinary event (Wooffitt, 1992; Woods and Wooffitt, 2014). Other studies have also described rhetorical practices by which claims of unusual or paranormal experiences are established as robust, objective, factual and authoritative (Childs and Murray, 2010; Hayward, Wooffitt and Woods, 2015; Williams and Dutton, 1998; Wooffitt, 2006).

With respect to the coincidence account, the use of 'decided' then, performs two interpretive actions. It normalises the actors' motives in the story; their actions that led to the coincidence were quite mundane (Wooffitt, 1991). This reflects the overarching rationalist orientation of the website. However, it also reinforces the sense that something genuinely unusual occurred. The author and her brother were not seeking a striking coincidence, but were merely caught up in events the agency of which was not reducible to the relevant participants.

There is, clearly, an alternative formulation for this story which works to undermine its claim as a striking coincidence: that the sister told her brother of her meeting outside Amsterdam, and that she had mentioned him and his interests to a member of the film crew, who would be in London – where, it transpires, her brother lives - in the coming weeks. In this way, the brother's encounter with the same person is predisposed: he has a motive to seek out a film crew, knowing that his sister has already facilitated the possibility of an introduction into the industry he wishes to work in. The hint of this alternative formulation provided for by tacit knowledge associated with Membership Categorization Devices (Hester and Eglin, 1997;

Housley and Smith, 2011); in this case, the familial category pair of brother/sister. People in this relationship would be expected to be aware of the other's interests or ambitions, and disposed to help them realize those ambitions if the opportunity arose. The story could be recast, then, not as striking coincidence, but as a likely outcome given what is conventionally known about sibling relationships. There are various ways in which the account is produced so as to circumscribe this alternative reading of the account, and preserve the ostensible mystery.

In her account, the author describes how she approached 'one guy on set'; her brother is subsequently reported to 'approach the team'. While these separate episodes work to sustain the overarching mirroring between the two story segments, the subtle differences work rhetorically, in that they point to the management of alternative formulations that would undercut the claim of a striking coincidence. As becomes apparent, the person the narrator's brother approaches turns out to be the same 'guy' that the narrator had talked to in Amsterdam. At the time of writing this report for submission to the Cambridge Coincidence website, however, the author is obviously aware of this fact – it is the basic feature of the story that makes it relevant for submission to the website in the first place. In this light, it is notable that the author describes her brother as approaching 'the team' and not a specific individual. This reinforces the coincidental quality of the account in two ways. First, in approaching the team – an unspecified number of people, but inferably greater than one – she emphasizes the striking fact that the person he ends up approaching just happens to be the same person to whom she spoke. Second, portraying her brother to have approached the team recognizes and addresses the possibility that the brother might have targeted a specific person on the set as a direct consequence of hearing of his

sister's earlier encounter with the 'one guy' while visiting her boyfriend.

There are other moments in which the design of the story works to manage what might be delicate inferential landscapes. For example, there is a difference between the way the author formulates her motives for her actions, and her brother's motives. Her account suggests that she only approached the film crew because her boyfriend was preoccupied with repairs to his bike. Moreover, while conversing with a member of the crew, she 'mentions' her brother's career interests in the film industry. These two features of the narrative work to establish that her brother's career aspirations were not the motive for approaching the film set in the first instance. This contrast with the way that her brother's encounter with the film set in London is described. Whereas she is portrayed as incidentally approaching the film crew, he is reported as 'deciding' to initiate conversation; and where as she mentions his interests, he is reported as explicitly raising his career ambitions: 'he then said he was trying to get into the industry' (lines 18 – 19).

Finally, the author's report of her encounter with the film crew is clearly crucial in the narrative: if she did not talk to that specific individual, there is no coincidence to report. That event, however, is not just pivotal; it is also vulnerable, in that it can be recast as the outcome of her intention to help her sibling, which in turn makes the eventual outcome less striking as an example of a coincidence. There are various ways in which her production of her encounter anticipates and counters the less mysterious formulation of events. So, in line 3, the author reports that she and her boyfriend rented 'some' bikes. 'Some' is a strange way to report a number of bikes used by two people. While the use of 'some' here is conspicuous when viewed

logically, it works as a form of stake management (Potter, 1996): the contrived vagueness implies that the author was uninterested in precisely those events that led to the encounter with the film crew. The unanticipated (and inferably unsought after) contingency of just happening upon a film crew is further reinforced by reference to her boyfriend. That is, his preoccupation with the repair to his bike is explicitly raised just after the point where she has announced finding the film set, and just before she reports approaching one person on the set. The author's approach to the film crew is thus presented as opportunistic: it was not pre-planned, or motivated by her knowledge of her brother's career aspirations, but a way of filling the time while the boyfriend attended to his bike. Moreover, the warrant for this opportunistic action is inserted immediately prior to that episode of her story which is crucial to its subsequent unfolding as a report of a striking coincidence.

Conversation analytic studies of talk-in-interaction have demonstrated that '[s]tories told in conversation are not fixed recitations of a narrative' (Lerner, 1992: 268). They are interactionally produced, embedded in and emerging from particular sequential contexts, and designed in various delicate ways for the recipient(s) and in relation to the teller's understanding the recipients' anticipated stance and relevant knowledge (Goodwin, 1987; Jefferson, 19788; Sacks, 1992). They are designed for recipients. The design of a story may also reflect the teller's tacit inferences about wider cultural conventions. For example, Wooffitt's analysis of reports of paranormal experiences shows that accounts are routinely designed to address potential sceptical explanations of claimed paranormal experiences (Wooffitt, 1992). The target data for this analysis exhibits precisely this degree of recipient design. There may not be co-present others, as there are for stories told in conversation, but the anticipation of potentially hostile

culturally based responses to a claim of an extraordinary coincidence, and recognition of the nature of the online site to which the account is being posted, resonate in the fabric of the account.

Discussion

In this paper we have outlined one empirical approach to the discursive phenomenon of meaningful coincidence, and sketched the lines of inquiry that may follow. We have adopted a broadly ethnomethodological focus to identify the tacit language norms and practices that inform the text and provide for its sense *as* a striking coincidence, and through which a particular range of inferential concerns can be managed. There are other ways of analysing texts such as this one, but we are confident that this approach at least generates a range of tentative findings that warrant more sustained empirical inquiry of corpora of coincidence accounts. For example, the observations on the chiasmic structure of the account require further investigation of the extent to which this figurative form is a generic feature of coincidence accounts. Investigation of figurative forms in coincidence accounts more generally will contribute to the understanding of the poetic dimensions of everyday discourse. Some empirical findings are of course particular to this specific account; for example, the way that it has been designed to demonstrate awareness of the largely rational, statistical focus of the website to which it was submitted. But all accounts will be designed for the setting in which they are made public, be that everyday conversation, in a letter to a newspaper or in consultation with a therapist. Not all descriptions of coincidence will be designed in the way that we have said this account is designed, but they will be designed *in some way*.

This has implications for those who wish to draw from coincidence experiences as a way of understanding and perhaps shaping the trajectory of the life course, or as a psychiatric resource to develop therapeutic strategies. It is clear in this literature that coincidences are treated as unproblematic ontological events – as if a coincidence was an objective thing in the world that had core properties of a sufficiently fixed nature that an analyst can interpret their significance for the person reporting the coincidence. But the analysis has pointed to the many ways in which this coincidence account is produced to establish its character as a coincidence and, in various ways, to provide for its particular sense: as an account written for a particular public platform, for example. This suggests that what might be seen to be fixed properties of the account may be a feature of its production as a social, discursive object. This does not mean that it is not possible to use accounts of these experiences as therapeutic resources. However, the therapeutic focus may have to change. It may be that the *way* the story is told provides richer and more suitable materials for therapeutic interpretation than *what* is reported.

Accounts of meaningful coincidences reveal how human affairs may be interpreted as being subject to transcendent, spiritual or mystical interventions. Investigation of the way that the coincidental qualities of an experience are constituted through accounts may, therefore, provide insight to a range of other experiences in which human agency is taken to be matched, or even manipulated, by some other external agency. In the same way that Smith's analysis of an account of mental illness revealed the tacit reasoning through which behaviours can be warrantably described as pathological, so too can analysis of coincidence accounts tell us about the tacit

communicative practices by which people negotiate the tension between their own individual agency and external influence in the life course. And this may inform our understanding of a range of spiritual and psychological phenomena, such as the believer's assumption that they are realising a divine purpose, and the conviction exhibited by some people deemed to be mentally unwell that their thoughts are not their own.

Finally: the case for the systematic study of the discourse of coincidence offers a counterpoint to research in psychology that treats the appearance of significant coincidence as merely the consequence of errors of interpretation and incorrect probabilistic reasoning or which investigates the cognitive processes by which people come to see events as meaningfully coincidental (Johanson and Osman, 2015; Rogers, Qualter and Wood, 2016). A common approach in this research is to categorise people into rather arbitrary and fixed categories: believer or non-believers, with high suggestibility or low suggestibility, either inclined to see the world as a mysterious place or not so inclined. These crude binary distinctions are often supported by quasi-experimental research in which research participants are presented with artificial scenarios and asked to make probabilistic assessments that are then correlated with measures from other kinds of personality or belief scales. This conventional psychological approach seems curiously detached from the way that coincidences are actually reported. Analysis of coincidence claims will stand as a corrective to the more contrived approach currently in psychology. But more important, this kind of analysis may yield a more subtle understanding of the coincidence reporter. For example, it is clear that in describing her coincidence, the author of the target data is negotiating a tension between preserving the inherent mystery of the events at the

same time as exhibiting a recognition of the rational, perhaps sceptical, orientation of the website to which she is submitting the account. These normative and inferential tensions are handled in subtle ways in the detail of her descriptions. Crude personality classifications, such as believer or non-believer, do not capture the delicate management of competing interpretations of her experience. Analysing the discourse of coincidental events provides a more nuanced appreciation of the way that issues of belief or disbelief (and a range of other ostensibly psychological issues) are handled as a practical concern for reporters (Edwards and Potter, 2005), and emphasises the social dimension of coincidence accounts, and thereby, the social dimension of the phenomenon of meaningful coincidence.

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Footnote

1 Chiasmus is related to antimetabole, another figurative device in which words, phrases or themes are reversed. However, so as not to over complicate our discussion, and with apologies to classical scholars, we will use chiasmus to refer generally to any instance of narrative reversal.

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