Crafting Coincidence:

The Rhetoric of Improbable Events

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Abstract

This study develops a sociological approach to the study of coincidence. It uses real-life, textual accounts of coincidences sourced from the Cambridge Coincidence Collection to examine the ways in which events are constructed as coincidences and as non-coincidences in discourse. This is a direct departure from previous research in the field of coincidence studies, which has predominantly focused on ontological questions of coincidence. The aim of this study was to identify rhetorical devices people use in coincidence accounts. It draws on a broadly discourse analytical approach, examining the ways in which cognition, reality and identity are constructed in accounts of coincidence. An initial single case study identified possible rhetorical patterns, which were then identified, dismissed or fine-tuned in light of the data set. Four rhetorical devices have been identified in the analysis: 'mirror formulations', which narratively bind together the two story-segments that constitute coincidence; the 'discovery/departure' device, which manages stake and intentionality of the narrators; the 'but...still' device, which is a type of show concession through which narrators display an orientation to probabilistic reasoning; and coincidence disconfirmation, which discursively turns private matters public. The main finding of this thesis is that all rhetorical devices of coincidence construction identified in the CCC orient to an idealist notion of natural sciences, thus simultaneously adhering to – and perpetuating – its ideological influence. Thus, whilst often classed as ‘paranormal’ experiences, peoples’ coincidence accounts work hard at justifying their own existence in terms of mainstream scientific standards. This thesis provides an original contribution to knowledge by unpicking the consequential question of how a set of events is discursively constructed as a coincidence or the responsibility of agentic action.

Content

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Declaration

In accordance with the University regulations, I hereby declare that:

1. This thesis has been composed solely by myself

2. It is entirely my own work

3. It has not been submitted in part or whole for any other degree or personal qualification

4. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter 1

Towards a sociology of coincidence

Introduction

This study develops a sociological approach to the study of coincidence. A coincidence is 'characterized by the striking and unlikely conjunction of two or more events that seem strangely connected' (Beitman, 2011: 562). Notably, 'the incident strikes the person experiencing it as "weird" or out of the ordinary. The unexpected nature of the experience often generates some degree of emotion and with it the search for its possible meaning.' (Coleman, Beitman and Celebi, 2009: 265). Not surprisingly, coincidence research has focused heavily upon establishing the ontology of coincidence. In the pursuit of explaining the origin of coincidence, it was variably argued that it is a phenomenon in nature, 'a meaning which is a priori in relation to human consciousness and apparently exists outside man' (Jung, 1952: 118); in mind (Beitman, 2009); or a hybrid of both (Colman, 2011: 472).

The discussion of coincidence, even the one at hand, occurs in textual, discursive form. Coincidences need to be described to be shared. Coincidence requires interaction. However, coincidences have not been studied as discursive phenomena. Thus, the main concern of this thesis is to identify how coincidences are constructed in discourse, focusing on the tacit norms, patterns and practices that are evident in coincidence accounts. A discursive psychological approach is used to identify these. This chapter will trace previous research on coincidences in the areas of cognitive psychology, psychotherapy, statistics, literature, and one theoretical piece of work on the concept of coincidence from Sociology. As coincidence stories have seeped into popular culture, it is useful to illustrate the ways in which coincidences are perceived in public consciousness.

Two examples of coincidence

Two coincidence accounts will be presented. The following coincidence account comes from a collection of coincidences:

On the money

On his way to a date with new girlfriend Esther, Paul Grachan stopped at a sandwich shop in Arlington Heights, Chicago, to buy a snack. As he was paying he noticed that one of his dollar bills had 'ESTHER' scrawled on it, which seemed a funny coincidence so he kept hold of it. The following week, thinking it would make a cute gift, Paul bought a clear Perspex frame and positioned the dollar bill inside so that it looked as if it was floating. During their next date he proudly presented Esther with what he had christened the Immaculate Dollar of Arlington Heights. She was stunned – considerably more so than Paul had intended. He asked her what was wrong but all she would say was, 'Don't worry – I'll tell you another time.' Years later, when they were married and moving into a new apartment, Paul found the Immaculate Dollar at the bottom of a box. He asked Esther if she would finally explain her strange reaction to it. Esther revealed that, before ever meeting Paul, she had worked as a cashier in a shop. Bored one day, and wondering idly whether she would ever find true love, she had written her name on a dollar bill and told herself that the man who ended up with it would be her future husband. The note had then gone off into circulation and she'd forgotten all about it – until Paul gave it to her as a gift. 'We don't even wear wedding bands,' Esther commented on radio show This American Life after fourteen happy years of marriage. 'I mean: why? I know I'm stuck with him.' (Crompton, 2013: 196-197)

This story illustrates some of the key features of coincidence. The account conveys the sense that something profound is happening. The coincidence is portrayed as baffling. The coincidence evidently had an impact – it has been remembered, and was important enough to be shared, not just with other people in a conversational setting, but it initially appeared on a radio show and was then published in a book[1]. That is, there must have been something notable about this coincidence story for it to have been shared, but also to instigate the response it reportedly gained from Esther (the central character of the coincidence account), who is described concluding that she was 'stuck' with her husband. Esther seemingly interpreted the coincidence as a mystical or spiritual sign, or as caused by an unknown entity.

A few observations can be made about this story's discursive design. Up until the actual coincidence is revealed, the events are presented as innocuous events. This is notable because by the time the author described the coincidence, the author must have been aware of its outcome, and yet, the events are described as if they had no

[1] Originally it was from the radio show This American Life. Certain details were not included from the original phone conversation over the radio. In the transcript and radio recording, Esther tells the radio host that she wrote her name on 10 or 12 dollar bills, not one. In the book's version, this is omitted. Arguably, this points to the discursive design of the story in the book - the detail does not add to the coincidental quality of the happening because it increases the likelihood of the coincidence making it appear like less of a coincidence.

relevance to the coincidence. The events are presented in a chronological order with Paul noticing the dollar bill with his girlfriend's name 'Esther' on it, and, to her surprise, gifting it to her, getting married to her, moving in together and finally, after 14 years, being told that the dollar bill did not merely have the same name on it, but that Esther had brought it into circulation herself, in order to identify her future husband.

Even though Paul discovering a bill with his girlfriend's name on it is presented as a 'funny coincidence' (line 4), it is not the meaningful coincidence of the story. In the actual coincidence revelation (the denouement of the story), the word coincidence is conspicuously absent. Rather, the coincidence revelation emerges from the context of the story and is emphasised by the reported comments by Esther who implies the coincidence makes wearing wedding rings futile. The coincidence is presented as proof that they belong together. This constructs the coincidence experience to have greater meaning than the more usual symbol of wearing of a wedding ring. In this 'meant to be' narrative, no direct attribution as to a cause of the coincidence is given. The coincidence is neither attributed to Godly influence, or to randomness or to a paranormal cause. Rather, the coincidence is made to stand on its own, as a puzzling and surprising tale.

It is also notable that the events are described in conspicuously mundane contexts: Paul reportedly discovered the bill whilst paying for a sandwich. Esther's activities that ultimately led to the coincidence are equally presented as mundane happenings: she scribbled her name on a dollar bill whilst bored at work working as a cashier. The ultimate discovery of the origin of the bill and its symbolism to Esther is launched after Paul reportedly found it 'at the bottom of a box', in the mundane setting of moving apartments. The motives are carefully managed: whilst Paul reportedly intended to gift Esther the bill as a 'cute gift' and Esther reportedly intended to identify her future husband by circulating the dollar bill, her (vague) intention is portrayed as a mere folly, not conscious design to invoke the coincidence. The discursive construction of a missing cause makes the events seem coincidental.

In order to present another coincidence account, the following account is taken from

the Cambridge Coincidence Collection by Professor David Spiegelhalter, a statistician at the University of Cambridge who has built a significant public media profile appearing on television through his documentaries[2] and radio shows giving talks on risk and specifically understanding uncertainty from a mathematical perspective. On his website, http://understandinguncertainty.org, people are invited to post their own coincidence accounts. The collection has more than 8000 entries to date. The following account[3] was uploaded on 24 January 2012.

> **really weird**
> Since being made redundant, I have been through a bit of a challenging time and at times felt it difficult to motivate myself. One day I suddenly got to my feet and tidied out a cupboard, a job I have been meaning to do for ages. Feeling very satisfied with myself, I went to make a cup of coffee and while waiting for the kettle to boil, said out loud to myself "It's time to sow these seeds of change Liz". It really surprised me as it seemed such a strange thing to say and to say it out loud as well as there was only myself in the house.
> Whilst drinking my coffee, I thought I would keep my sorting momentum going and check the sell by date of some things which had been on my kitchen shelf for ages. I lifted down a pack of spaghetti and nearly dropped it as the label said . . .. .
> Organic Spaghetti - brand name SEEDS OF CHANGE. I must admit it stopped me in my tracks. I was so impressed with the synchronicity, I cut the label out and stuck it in my journal.
> (Also, who calls an organic pasta company Seeds of Change!)

Again, the coincidence is presented as baffling and meaningful, and as having made an impact on the narrator. This is evident in the fact that the coincidence was shared, the narrator reports surprise in multiple places e.g. 'I stopped in my tracks', and the narrator reports being 'impressed' by the synchronicity (the narrator has chosen to use the term synchronicity, rather than coincidence, which display's the narrator's knowledge of the study of coincidence) to the extent that she described keeping this piece of spaghetti packaging safe in her diary. That is, the coincidence seems to be

[2] He presents the following documentaries: The Joy of Stats, 2010; Tails You Win: The Science of Chance, 2012; various Horizon episodes, 2010-2014; Climate Change by Numbers, 2015

[3] It has been selected as an illustrative coincidence account because it demonstrates firstly, how meaningful coincidences are constructed to emerge in mundane everyday settings; secondly, the account constructs the meaningful coincidence as 'weird' and thirdly, outer events and inner mental life are negotiated in the account.

meaningful to the extent that a physical token of its occurrence is reportedly saved as a keepsake.

This exemplifies the mundane quality of coincidence in multiple ways. There is a striking emphasis on 'doing normal things' - the narrator describes clearing out a cupboard, 'waiting for the kettle to boil' and drinking coffee before the coincidence. However, these mundane happenings are intercepted with departures from these normal activities in that the narrator seemingly catches herself saying words to herself, which she terms surprising and which are a 'strange thing to say'. A further feature of this coincidence account is that the narrator describes being in an emotional low point due to being having been made redundant and the coincidence is directly linked with personal motivation and change. As such the implied personal meaningfulness of this coincidence is a factor for its mystical quality and links to the definition of coincidence as *'person's individuation — coincidence as a therapeutic agent' (Jung, cited in (Coleman, Beitman and Celebi, 2009:1).* It thus chimes in with previous studies of coincidence.

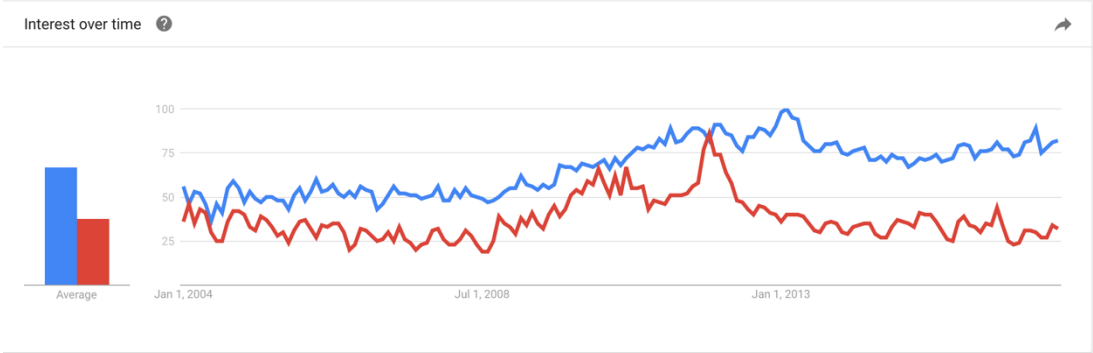
Coincidence narratives in popular culture

One of the previous coincidence examples was from a popular book, the other from a popular coincidence website. There has been steady interest in coincidences. The rock band 'The Police' released an album entitled 'Synchronicity' in the UK in 1983. It was inspired by Koestler's influential 'Roots of Coincidence' (1972). The album was critically acclaimed, reaching number one in the UK and US album charts; one of its singles in the album, 'Every Breath You Take' written by Sting and performed by The Police, topped the single charts in 1983, the year of its release[4]. The popularity of the album confirmed and simultaneously perpetuated the concept's reach.

As a topic, coincidence is still relevant in popular culture today. The following chart (tracing the occurrence of 'coincidence' as a topic search term between 2004 and March 2017) shows that 'coincidence' (indicated by the blue graph) as a topic has been a consistent feature in people's google searches (Google Trends;

[4] http://www.officialcharts.com/artist/17182/police/

https://trends.google.co.uk/trends/). If compared with 'causality' (red graph) it is evident that the popularity of 'coincidence' outweighs 'causality' in the same period at most points[5]. Whilst this may simply be a sign indicating how normative causality is compared to coincidence, it nonetheless exemplifies that the notion of coincidence has seeped into everyday life.



Indeed, the first and second most searched terms related to coincidence is the search term 'coincidence of callie and kayden', which relates to Jessica Sorensen's 'The Coincidence' series entailing seven books published between 2012-2015. 'The Coincidence of Callie & Kayden' was the most popular book from the series, and, published in 2012, became a New York Times Bestseller. It topicalizes fate, love and friendship. Other popular coincidence books include self-help books, fiction, popular science books, humour and ESP. Coincidence books are popular: The British Library has 14,266 entries containing 'coincidence' in the title, and Amazon.co.uk sells 5,322 titles containing the word coincidence, with 247 in the category of 'literary fiction' currently on sale. At the time of writing, the UK's most read newspaper *Daily Mail* had 305 entries relating to coincidence, though this may also include ironic uses of coincidence. It is safe to say that 'coincidence' is an everyday topic.

Despite its prevalence in literature, Dannenberg argues 'there has been no systematic poetics of coincidence, either in terms of a comprehensive definition and theoretical model or in terms of a full comparative historical survey' (2004: 400). However, Dannenberg (2004: 399) emphasises its importance as 'the coincidence plot is a literary strategy occurring in a variety of forms which can be traced from the

[5] Causality and coincidence are here used as opposites, as a vehicle towards comparison. Their relationship is of course more complex.

Renaissance romance right down to the contemporary novel.' She traces the use of coincidence from the Oedipus story (kinship reunion), to Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre', to Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and Jane Austen's 'Persuasion' and provides many more examples. However, despite its 'ubiquity', Dannenberg (2004: 403) remarks that 'to date no attempt has been made to study coincidence in an extensive diachronic framework', and it has not been considered an important mechanism in the literary constructions of texts (bar as a feature of nineteenth century literature). Dannenberg (2004: 430) argues for the recognition of coincidence and concludes that 'the narrative force of the coincidence plot lies in the representation of the mental processes of recognition in the characters involved and their power to affect the reader'. Dannenberg's (2004) analysis emphasises that coincidence is a textual, discursive phenomenon. Dannenberg's (2004) analyses coincidence as a tool for the literary plot rather than an enquiry in its own right, which is the endeavour of this thesis.

Academic studies of coincidence

Jung

Carl Gustav Jung brought the concept of synchronicity into academic consciousness, publishing his ideas of the concept of synchronicity in conjunction with the physicist Wolfgang Pauli in 1952, which was translated into English in 1955. Jung coined the term 'synchronicity' in the early 1920s and arguably is the founding father of the scientific investigation of this phenomenon. The term synchronicity denotes

> 'a coincidence in time of two or more causally unrelated events which have the same or similar meaning [and] the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state' (Jung, 1952: 36).

Thus, synchronicity denotes the occurrence of two unlikely events falling together, connected through similar meaning, but not causality.

Jung was inspired to develop this concept after co-experiencing a coincidence with his patient during psychotherapy (Jung, 1955: 31;33). She was, he claimed, suffering from exaggerated rationalism (animus):

> ‘My example concerns a young woman patient who, in spite of efforts made on both sides, proved to be psychologically inaccessible. The difficulty lay in the fact that she always knew better about everything. Her excellent education had provided her with a weapon ideally suited to this purpose, namely a highly polished Cartesian rationalism with an impeccably "geometrical" idea of reality. After several fruitless attempts to sweeten her rationalism with a somewhat more human understanding, I had to confine myself to the hope that something unexpected and irrational would turn up, something that would burst the intellectual retort into which she had sealed herself.’

In midst of a therapy session, she was just telling Jung her dream about receiving a golden Scarab beetle, when a golden beetle suddenly ‘tapped’ against the window and flew into Jung’s therapy room after he opened the window. Jung pointed out how the beetle flew into the dark, contrary to normative beetle-behaviour. As a scarabaeid beetle (Cetonia Aurata), it was the closest version of a golden scarab in Jung’s environment. This experience, a synchronicity where dream and outer reality fell together in a coinciding and meaningful way, marked a breakdown of the patient’s over-rationalised self, coinciding with the scarab as a sign of change or ‘rebirth’. Jung suggested these were due to archetypes and a collective unconscious. Archetypes build the structure for the collective unconscious, sets of common behaviour he argues humans are born with and carry innately. Archetypes make appearances in dreams and visions, delivering their messages through symbols. Thus, the synchronicity started the patient’s recovery process[6]

Experience and reality of niche-events

Jung had a list of three different forms of meaningful coincidences (1955: 145). The first is defined as occurring when a ‘psychic content’ corresponds with an ‘objective process’ at the same time, the second involves a ‘psychic state’ and ‘phantasm’ (dream or vision) to interact with an objective event that happened at a distance but

[6] As a side note, from a non-therapeutic, critical sociological perspective, when investigating the way in which Jung portrayed his ‘female’ patient, it reads as if her flaw was to be a rational female patient, whose thinking did not suit the time in which she was living. Given her mental illness seems to have involved ‘that she always knew better about everything’ and the pathway to improving her ‘condition’ required the need to ‘sweeten her rationalism with a somewhat more human understanding’, her flaw might have simply been to be a rational, educated woman in a time when this was considered deviant. It could be argued that the coincidence was merely Jung’s means to trump his patient’s rational perspective and shake her confidence.

at the same time and the third is where a psychic state or phantasm coincides with a future event.

According to Jung, natural law is not a total and universal certainty (Jung, 1955: 8; 144). Rather, it is a statistical truth, therefore allowing for occurrences outside the norm. This is because, when calculating mathematical averages, rare occurrences are eradicated from the data set, making them disappear in the process. However, he argues, this does not impair their existence in the real world, if perhaps in the statistical one. These events outside the norm, he argues, 'must somehow be experienceable, that is to say, *real*' (Jung, 1955: 144, emphasis in original). His argument is that synchronicity exists side-by-side to those experiences based on causality.

Therefore, in the first possible synchronicity a subjective state and objective event co-occur at the same time, in the second they do too however they are separated in space and the realisation arises post-occurrence, and in the latter case the psychic state occurs prior to the objective event with which it coincides, meaning the realisation arises post-occurrence too. In all but the first type, the synchronicity has to be detected relying on memory of the psychic state. The psychic state or inner experience and the memory thereof are key characteristics of the concept and are argued to be dependent on a person's psyche. The psyche is central to the phenomenon because synchronicity is experienceable through the psyche. However, Storm reads Jung's concept of synchronicity as meaning that noticing or not noticing a synchronicity does not influence its existence in the world (1999: 250). This feeds into the notion that Jung does not focus on subjective experiences but on theoretical ideas inspired by those. Jung was adamant to position synchronicity in an empirical domain rather than a philosophical one, arguing that 'synchronicity is not a philosophical view but an empirical concept which postulates an intellectually necessary principle. This cannot be called either materialism or metaphysics' (Jung, 1955:133). In his perspective, synchronicity points to the inadequacies of causality.

Synchronicity and acausality

Synchronicity experiences became part of the argument for acausality. Drawing on concepts of physics, Jung takes the behaviour of time in a coincidence further, making it a signpost for the exceptions of causality.

> 'But since experience has shown that under certain conditions space and time can be reduced almost to zero, causality disappears along with them, because causality is bound up with the existence of space and time and physical changes, and consists essentially in the succession of cause and effect.' (Jung, 1972: 42)

Normally, one event would follow another, one influencing the other. In a coincidence two or more events happen simultaneously and therefore cause and effect seem to disappear as the does the barrier (time between two events). There are two explanations that account for this line of thinking. The first is in line with the thought that a distinction can be made between the actual coincidence and its perception. It is this idea that consequently finds an explanation in the external world; if a coincidence does occur, then its very existence firstly contradicts our understanding of time as linear, and secondly our understanding of events following the pattern of cause and effect.

In this sense, Jung's research on synchronicity is not concerned with the experience of coincidence; on the contrary, the theory has gone so far that the coincidence itself is nearly forgotten in the pursuit of establishing physical truths. To Jung, the existence of coincidences points out a shortcoming of the current understanding of why coincidences happen, as they contradict the (physical) mechanisms of cause of effect. Because of a lack of time in between the two, which would point to a cause-effect relationship between two connected events, the theory of cause and effect is assumed to be incomplete. In short then, the missing time-gap of events in a coincidences are taken as proof for an error in our assumed theory.

Parapsychology

In regard to synchronicity, Jung linked synchronicity to extrasensory perception and psychokinesis experiments:

> The results of the ESP and PK experiments have provided a statistical basis for evaluating the phenomenon of synchronicity and have at the same time pointed out the important part played by the psychic factor. (Jung, 1952: 48).

Jung's view assumed a previously unrecognized link between mind and external world, which is fundamentally what parapsychology studies. Furthermore, Jung's ideas resonate with the hypothesized mental capabilities that parapsychology looks at. However, unlike Jung, parapsychology is exploring this link between mind/mind, and mind/world experimentally. Coincidence has been extensively studied in relation to ESP research (Hardy, Harvie and Koestler, 1973; Kammerer, 1919; Koestler, 1972). Coincidence and its relation to superstitious behaviour has been studied by Skinner (1977). Rhine has conducted numerous experiments on ESP (information that is presumed to have been conveyed through means other than the recognised five senses), using cards where the sender looks at the card and the receiver guesses them (Rhine, 1934). Notably, ESP ability 'may run consistently below chance expectation' if the participants have strongly held beliefs that it does not work or does not exist (Rhine, 1934: 164). Results were subject to substantive critique, as 'common problems are multiple end points, subject cheating, and unconscious sensory cueing' (Diaconis, 1978: 131).

Psychotherapy

However, trying to prove and capture psi through experimentation misses out an essential feature of coincidences: They are meaningful. The meaningful aspect of coincidence has been explored in psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic literature, but it has primarily been explored in relation to clinical and therapeutic issues. Research on coincidences in psychotherapy builds on Jung's work because it has been noted from a psychotherapy perspective that: 'rather than treating the clinical synchronicities he mentions as cases to be analysed, Jung generally uses them as passing illustrations of theoretical or phenomenological points (Main, 2007: 362).

Research has spanned widely, also including the study of meaningful coincidences in art psychotherapy (Rowland, 2015). An overview of clinical research on synchronicity and psychotherapy can be found in Main (2007). Marlo and Kline (1998: 22) argue that the use of synchronicity in psychotherapy is fruitful in four ways. Firstly, it helps by 'focusing therapy on core issues' and what they mean;

secondly, 'it validates the patient's subjective experience which, in turn, promotes psychological growth'; thirdly, it 'facilitate[s] a connection between patient and therapist and deepen[s] their work'; and ‘finally, by perceiving events and relationships as synchronistic, it conveys that life events, including the patient's symptoms and predicaments, are inherently meaningful and purposeful.’ As such, it can ‘directly address the despair, pain, and meaninglessness that frequently lead people to seek psychotherapy’ (Marlo and Kline, 1998: 22).

Recent, yet sporadic[7], work on meaningful coincidences has moved towards a phenomenological stance, investigating how experiences of coincidence are interpreted by those who experience it. An in-depth exploration of the experience of meaningful coincidences in the context of grief has been conducted (Hill, 2011). Recent research has investigated coincidences occurring to ‘nine practitioners who reported SEs [synchronicity experiences] in their therapeutic sessions’, which ‘can serve to strengthen the therapeutic relationship and are perceived as useful harbingers of information about the therapeutic process, as well as being a means of overcoming communication difficulties’ (Roxburgh, Ridgway and Roe, 2015: 144). In what is a progressive approach to the study of coincidence experience, they do not ‘attempt to engage with the ontology of SEs [synchronicity experiences]’ (2015: 158), as the meanings of coincidence as experienced and interpreted by the practitioners take centre-stage. The fact that such a disclaimer about the exclusion of ontological questions from this research on coincidences was deemed necessary, further indicates its prevalence in the field.

Whilst Beitman, Celebi and Coleman argue that the ‘everyday occurrence of meaningful coincidences provides a useful means of helping us to navigate the often troublesome waters of daily life and can add a vital transpersonal dimension to the practice of psychotherapy' (2009: 448), reports of coincidences from everyday life have not yet been qualitatively and discursively explored in research. Indeed, Roxburgh et al. (2015: 149) specify that their research is not ‘concerned with establishing the role of language in the construction of reality’. That is, whilst the

[7] It is argued that ‘there has been limited systematic research that has investigated the phenomenology of SEs in therapy’ (Roxburgh et al., 2015: 144).

usefulness of meaningful coincidences for the exploration of one's inner life has been explored in the context of clinical and psychotherapy settings, it is everyday accounts of coincidences that have not been explored. This is the gap that the thesis at hand aims to fill.

The instable meaning of 'meaningful coincidence'

Even though a large body of research has been built on Jung's work, a consensus about his definition of synchronicity has not been reached. Giegerich (2012) argues that it is important to point out that it is not meaning in the sense of meaning of life or meaning in a transcendental sense that Jung meant in his work. He points out that Jung uses the term 'sinngemäße Synchronität' to denote that the inner and outer events coincide to form a coincidence having 'roughly the same meaning' in his original writing (2012: 502). Synchronicity is not required to be meaningful by this definition. He argues that this faulty translation has shifted some parts of the study of coincidences into the realms of transcendental meaning, which is far detached from what Jung wanted to convey. Having the correct translation from Jung's writing is crucial because it builds the basis for the investigations of the phenomenon itself. In German, when a written or verbal statement is repeated, not word for word, but in its gist, then it is 'sinngemäß'. It thus corresponds in content but does not in the strict sense use the same words as the original account. This definition changes the definition to a synchronicity of similar meaning, rather than meaningful synchronicity.

Arguably if a person sees the correlation in two separate events, the meaning/message that they have in common is likely to carry some importance to the person experiencing the event because he/she might not have noticed otherwise. Key here, however, is that these events are 'sinngemäß' to whoever experiences them. This means that coincidences should not be studied in the context of researchers' definitions of it, but according to the definition of the person experiencing it because it is reliant on the observer making and finding the connection between events to be 'sinngemäß' or coinciding/correlating. By doing this, the phenomenon maintains its flexible and negotiable qualities; and essentially its personal significance for the person experiencing it. This illustrates that the language used for these coincidental

occurrences is as flexible as the events themselves. In this sense the now common term ‘meaningful coincidence’ is the result of a development of the phenomena itself born out of the flexibility of translation, language and meaning.

Giegerich (2012: 507) further argues that it was the ‘rational scientist Jung’ who ‘expanded the world-picture of modern physics by logically deducing (mind you: purely hypothetically) that an additional factor or dimension might have to be added […] to enable us to explain the empirically observed facts of synchronistic events’. He argues that this is ‘an additional natural explanatory factor, in itself no more (but also no less) metaphysical, numinous, or irrational than, say, Newton’s likewise merely deduced principle of gravitation’ (Giegerich, 2012: 507). On this basis, he concludes that synchronicity has nothing to do with people’s internal lives and it is not useful because ‘nothing can be derived from his theory for the benefit of our psychological experience of life’. This is because the question of the status of time being an absolute or relative, or the question whether the universe began with the big bang or not, do not have an impact on a person’s daily life, and are just as ‘psychologically irrelevant’ as the question of synchronicity (Giegerich, 2012: 507). He places the scientific pursuit of coincidence into the realm of science, because ‘our daily practical problems’ are unaffected by it (Giegerich, 2012: 507).

It is precisely this kind of debate over the meaning of coincidence that justifies the study of people’s own coincidence accounts. The debates over the origins of coincidence, as well as the debates over the usefulness of coincidences to people’s everyday lives neglect the cultural constructed meanings of synchronicity and therefore its impact on everyday life. As outlined at the beginning of the chapter, the concept of meaningful coincidence (synchronicity) takes on a life on its own, it is used and shared in popular culture and it is here that the meaning of coincidence evolves (Gergen, 1973). Its usefulness and impact should not be assessed from a theoretical perspective, but needs to be investigated empirically.

Human error as a source of coincidence

In previous academic endeavours to study coincidence, the focus has been on ontology, on explaining the existence of coincidence itself (Jung, 1952; Koestler,

1972). This has resulted in a tradition where coincidences have been explained in terms of a person misinterpreting chance (statistical explanations of the occurrence of coincidences) or in terms of people being oblivious to their own cognitive processes, which deceive them and create connections where there are none, or remembering selectively. Thus, the traditional perspective on coincidence is that they arise from human error.

Probability

Diaconis and Mosteller (1989) outline four reasons for the erroneous identification of coincidences in everyday life, summarised below:

1. Hidden causes: There are causes for events that we have not noticed, nor had we been looking for them. New patterns in the world and in our behaviour emerge all the time.

2. Psychology: Focusing on recall and recognition, psychology is important for the experience of coincidences. Our own unique psychology also determines what we consider coincidental and what we consider mundane.

3. Multiple Endpoints and the Cost of "Close": If close matches are considered coincidence, then there will be a larger proportion of ‘amazing’ coincidences, when they are not actually statistically remarkable. In a group of 23 people, there is a 50% chance of a two people having the same birthday, but if the definition of coincidence includes the ‘close’ hit of birthdays within a day, then 14 people are sufficient. If the near-match includes birthdays within a week, then a group of seven is sufficient for a 50% chance to produce two birthdays.

4. The Law of Truly Large Numbers: If the data set is large enough, the rarest occurrences happen frequently. "If a coincidence occurs to one person in a million each day, then [in the U.S., with a population of 250 million] we expect 250 occurrences a day and close to 100,000 such occurrences a year." (Diaconis and Mosteller, 1989: 859)

In the following, some of these ‘errors’ will be outlined in more detail.

The birthday problem

Common coincidental experiences can occur in gatherings where people discover similarities, for example a common birthday, or when people meet acquaintances far away from their usual location. These occurrences are argued to model coincidences with the added advantage of being statistically measurable and predictable. Versions of the birthday problem can be used for other statistical problems. The underlying statistical core question of the birthday problem searches numerical answers for 'placing *n* balls in *M* cells' (Mckinney, 1966). Diaconis & Mosteller discuss four different types of the birthday problems (1989).

The standard birthday problem is about calculating the mathematical probability of two people having the same birthday. It occurs with a likelihood of 50% in a gathering of 23 people and rises to 95% in a gathering of 47 people. In a social setting, multiple possible categories may produce surprise, and be labelled 'coincidence'. These 'coincidences' can include people having the same birthday, same job or having gone to the same school at the same time. This raises the likelihood of a coincidence being reported. In a medium-sized gathering, mundane coincidences are likely to happen and to be detected. Clusters of events, where not two but three or more people fit into the same category, are not seldom either. In order to, on average, find three people sharing one birthday a group of 83 people is required (Klamkin and Newman, 1967). Mckinney calculates that 88 people are needed for four people to have the same birthday with a probability of 55% (1966, cited in Diaconis & Mosteller, 1989: 857). Further increasing the probability of birthday matches is the fact that people's birthdays are not evenly distributed over the year, but arrive in clusters.

Gambler's fallacy

The *gambler's fallacy* describes a common human error in assessing the likelihood of an independent event (Esgate and Groome, 2001). The gambler's fallacy has its name due to its occurrence in luck games such as tossing a coin, or roulette. It is the belief a person has that previous losses or wins have an influence on the outcome of the next round. Indeed, the statistical investigation into coincidences was first conducted because of the game 'jeu de treize', game of thirteen, (Pierre Rémond de

Montmort, 1708:185, cited in Takács, 1980: 229). Until today, the connection of luck-games and coincidences remains. The advantage of these games is that they can be repeated when everyday coincidences often cannot, because they appear 'unexpectedly' at random times and places. However, Esgate and Groome (2001) explain that independent events have no influence on each other; the happening of one does not interfere with the other in terms of probability.

When a coin is tossed many times in succession, every throw has the same probability, regardless of any runs that happened prior to that throw in question. The likelihood for head to show is 0.5 or 50/50, and the probability for tail to show is equally 0.5. It might be argued that the likelihood of head coming up 20 times in succession would be very slim, however it only has a low probability when this event has been predicted *prior* to its occurrence. This is due to the fact that otherwise, there is no specification of what counts as a remarkable run, and if it has not been specified prior to its occurrence, the run itself is of equal probability to any other run and thus unremarkable. A reason why people misinterpret the probability is because they attribute the two events (the falling of dice or roulette) to something other than probability such as 'wishing' or divine intervention. The first means that they attribute a chance event to their own ability while the second is to God's.

Combined with 'confirmation bias', where the events that were successful or happened as had been wished for are remembered and the unsuccessful ones forgotten, this leads to a potential source of confidence for a gambler (Gilovich, 1991:11). Gilovich (1991:11) writes that the concept of the 'hot hand', one version of a wider conviction that "success breeds success" and "failure breeds failure", works in the area of investing where initial success creates more capital with which to invest. However, this concept does not work in gambling where every new attempt is statistically unrelated to the fist and yet people believe this is the case. The link to coincidence-events from this perspective is that coincidences are more complex versions of gambler's fallacy events. In a coincidence, the likelihood of one event to occur is not influenced by the occurrence of the other. Their combined likelihood, whilst appearing (erroneously) striking at the time of their occurrence, is not remarkable in terms of their probability. This is because the pair of events that has occurred, has not been predicted prior to happening. When people say that their

coincidence had a ‘one in a hundred million chance’ of occurring, this is not correct; the probability for the combination of the events has been assessed *after* they have happened, therefore artificially creating a dependency of two otherwise independent events.

Conjunctions

The following outlines how very simple multiplication indicates the probability for conjunctions of events. When people have to rate the likelihood of combined real-life events, the probabilities are often miscalculated. When two independent events are combined, the probability of the conjunction to happen can be calculated by the multiplication of each respective likelihood with the other (Esgate and Groome, 2001). If a coin is spun, the likelihood for head is 0.5 and for tail 0.5 as well, because there are two possible outcomes. When two coins are spun at the same time, there are four possible outcomes, namely head and head, head and tail, tail and head and tail and tail, leading to a probability of 0.25 for each combined outcome. The combined probability of two dependent events can thus be expressed as P(A and B) = P(A) x P(B). As a logical conclusion, the combined probability of two dependent events can never be larger than their respective probabilities. In other words, the probability of an independent event occurring is always larger than that event combined with any other, however people often misinterpret the probability of such conjunctions. When asked in an experimental setting whether a person is more likely to be either a bank clerk; a feminist; or both, people rate the latter as the most likely which goes against the logic of conjunctive events (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). This may be due to heuristics and stereotyping.

Law of truly large numbers/ Law of small numbers

A sample has to be large enough to be representative of a population (Esgate and Groome, 2001). The larger the sample is, the higher the probability for an event in general. Consequently, small samples are often irrelevant as they are far detached from probability. Esgate & Groome here use the example of a person who, in order to argue against the risk of smoking, claims that his uncle lived into old age, even though he was a chain-smoker (2001). In terms of probability, this uncle builds too small a sample and as such may likely divert from the probability of illness in

relation to smoking. The law of large numbers also means that in large populations, low probability events occur. A low-probability event was defined as an occurrence with the probability of one in a million (Littlewood, 1953; cited in Diaconis & Mosteller, 1989:859). In today's population sizes however, such rare events happen. Because they seem extraordinary, they will be reported and therefore seem more striking. Diaconis and Mosteller explain the phenomenon using the example of double lottery winners (1989: 859). Whilst a seemingly rare event, this occurrence has a probability of more than 1 in 30 in a four-month period in the US.

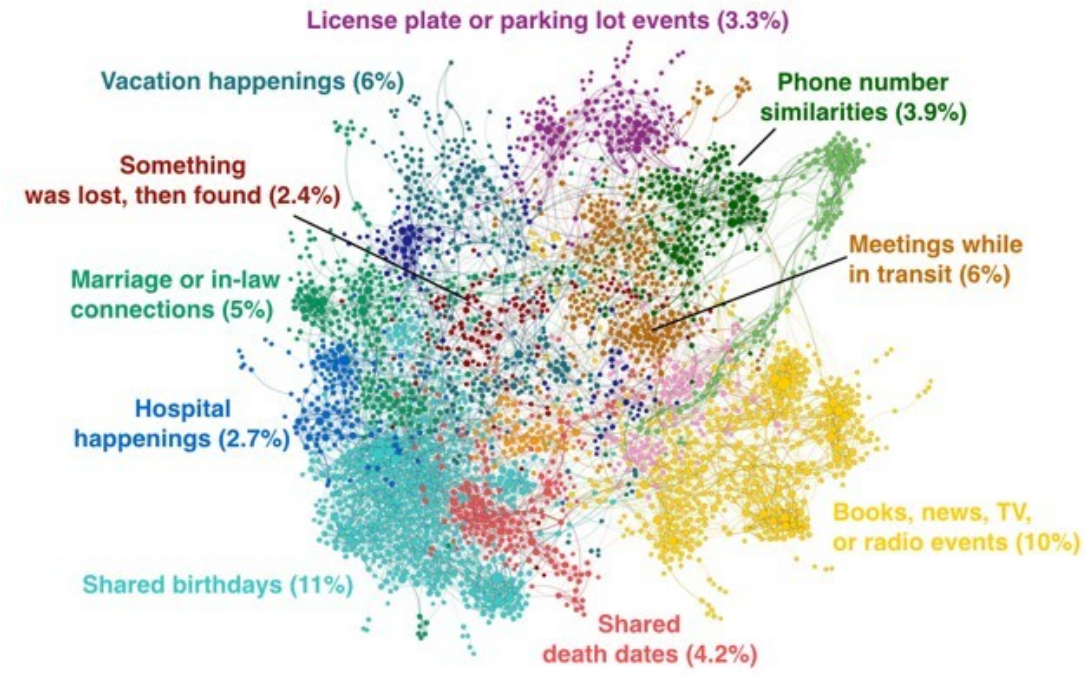
Coincidences and statistics

Davis discusses how common features in different and unrelated abstraction theories fall together (1981). He uses examples of these to highlight so-called 'mathematical coincidences'. One of nine examples that Davis outlines, involves the Formula of Pythagoras. The diagonal of a rectangle is $d^2=a^2+b^2$, a formula that bears a strong resemblance with the formula expressing the relationship of the diagonal of a three-dimensional box by $d^2=a^2+b^2+c^2$. The field of Mathematics, with a reputation for striving to be the ultimate logical science, has two opposing viewpoints on the matter of coincidence. Paulos (1992) asserts that 'in reality, the most astonishingly incredible coincidence imaginable would be the complete absence of all coincidences' (cited in Neimark, 1992: 4). He therefore implies that unlikely occurrences are likely to happen. Their absence would therefore be an improbable event, not their occurrence. Davis however is convinced of the existence of coincidences. He argues that mathematical coincidences are not value-free:

> 'This is not a question of mathematics as such, but a question in the history, psychology, aesthetics and application of mathematics, and ultimately it is answerable only in terms of a mathematical culture and certain values that operate in it' (1981: 311)

And whilst for some academics in his field there are no coincidences, just unsolved mathematical problems, in his view coincidences in mathematics exist, and are discovered and brought about by mathematicians themselves. In his understanding of coincidences, explanations and coincidences do not contradict each other, but are signs of a superstructure (1981: 311).

The fallacies outlined above are so abundant that they could basically negate the surprising quality of most coincidence. However, a survey conducted by Henry (1993) on a data set of 991 Telegraph newspaper readers (with an even split between men and women, but with a higher proportion of older people) found that 84% of people reported an experience of coincidence. In terms of their meaningfulness, 86% of respondents reported that they were 'personally meaningful'; 88% reported they were 'significant'; and 78% reported that they were 'useful'. People mostly attributed them to intuition, psi, and chance (Henry, 1993). A recent survey (Spiegelhalter cited in Beck, 2016) of 4,470 coincidences has also identified which kinds of coincidences people report. The following map was created by text analytics firm Quid in cooperation with Spiegelhalter, cited in Beck (2016):



It shows that coincidences can be quite varied. It also shows that the shared birthday coincidences form 11% of all coincidences reported, and therefore directly link with the birthday problem fallacies outlined previously. That is, even though the birthday problem is an often cited counter-argument to the existence of coincidences, birthday coincidences are not that common. Even when other number-based coincidence types are included, there are still many non-number based coincidences. Furthermore, it was also concluded that 58 % of coincidences 'included words related to family or loved ones, indicating that people are more likely to notice

coincidences involving people closest to them' (Jess McCuan, 2016, cited in Beck, 2016). That is, the coincidences modelled in the statistical research studies modelled mainly number based coincidences, when people report coincidences that are related to their closest friends and family. Statistics are unable to capture the meaning that coincidences have for people experiencing and sharing them.

Even in the face of plentiful explanations for coincidences that exist in the statistical realm, people report coincidences. It should be noted that the coincidences that built the data set for the map and the survey outlined were based on Spiegelhalter's Cambridge Coincidence Collection data set. Therefore, people would have encountered some of the fallacies regarding coincidences, as these are outlined on the website. Nonetheless, people still report coincidences and they seem to report coincidences that are related to people they are close to. As such, there are three questions that statistical perspectives on coincidences do not address. Firstly, coincidence 'stories are often so singular as to be hard to quantify' (Beck, 2016). Quantification arguably removes the individual character of each coincidence account. Secondly, Griffiths and Tenenbaum's (2007: 180) series of experiments indicated that 'people *can* accurately assess the strength of coincidences'. The discrepancy between people's intuition about chance, and probability theory can further be resolved through an investigation of the process that produces it (Griffiths and Tenenbaum, 2001). Thirdly, regardless of the well-publicised fallacies, some people still seem to report coincidences and 'use coincidences to help guide and support decision making in both positive and negative ways' (Beitman and Shaw, 2009: 280).

The ideas of social constructionism can help in understanding coincidences. Social constructionism 'came into the social sciences mainly in sociology in the 1960s'' (Locke, 2004: 10-11). Its origin lies in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) book entitled 'The social construction of reality'. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that everything we know is constructed in social interactions. Interactions are based on a commonly shared reality, but these interactions also reinforce the meanings of the knowledge discussed or acted upon. Thus, taken-for-granted knowledge is simultaneously used and reinforced in everyday life, in a constant stream of ongoing negotiation. The kinds of knowledge thus created, are presented as objective reality,

such that new members of society (and subsequent generations) perceive them to be objectively real.

From this perspective, 'reality is not some objectifiable truth waiting to be uncovered through positivistic scientific inquiry' (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010: 174). As such, a coincidence cannot be scientifically discovered, as its meaning is in constant flux. Locke explains that Gergen brought social constructionism into psychology in the early 1970s (Locke, 2004). In his critique of mainstream psychology's focus on experimentation, with the aim to identify objective truths, Gergen (1973:310) argued that science and society build a feedback loop. Therefore, it is not possible to have facts that relate to human behaviour, because any kind of social reality is in constant flux. It is also influenced by the findings of psychology, such that theories invalidate themselves over time. Thus, if applied to the phenomenon of coincidence, it is possible to argue that coincidence should be considered a social construct. As a phenomenon then, it is constructed in interactions between people, who refer to the meaning of coincidence and simultaneously reinforce its meaning, which thereby changes over time.

Psychology

Whilst research into the mathematical probability of events can uncover erroneous understandings of coinciding events, psychology builds on this research and focuses on the cognitive processes that cause people to perceive clusters of events as coincidental. Several studies explain coincidence occurrence in terms of firstly, (faulty) perception; and secondly, the brain detecting and manufacturing links and patterns between events. This function is understood as a side-effect of the way in which the brain learns new words for instance; it is 'prone' to seeing patterns.

An explanation for coincidences is human memory. In a study using nouns and making some nouns overlap to model a coincidence event, coincidences are found to be remembered selectively (Hintzman, Asher and Stern, 1978). Falk (1989: 478) argued that 'Kallai (1985) replicated that effect using events instead of nouns, because events, rather than objects, are essentially the building blocks of coincidences'. These experimentally created events were remembered selectively. It

follows, that events that are not part of a coincidences are more easily forgotten than those that are (Falk, 1989). Due to the meaningfully related events that are selectively remembered, people assume they happen too frequently to be explained by chance. People remember their own experiences better than stories from other people and they find them more impressive and surprising (Falk, 1989). Selective remembering can happen alongside other cognitive fallacies: Watt (1990) outlines how, hypothetically, a woman who believes she can will the phone to ring will remember the successful incidents, but is likely to forget the times where she was seemingly unable to make the phone ring. She may also accept multiple endpoints, namely a close match such as a phone ringing 30 minutes after she willed for it to ring.

Beitman (2009) argues that when remembering a coincidence, a 'hindsight bias' operates, resulting in subjects retrospectively believing predictions to have been stronger when they materialised in the present. He argues that 'new information changes the way we look at past events' (Beitman, 2009: 260). This means that a coincidence, the 'new event' would have the ability to change our cognition retrospectively and deceive our perception of what has been. 'Hindsight bias' is comprised of memory distortions, where what is remembered and the happening differ; 'impressions of predictability', where subjects believe to have the ability to predict; and 'impressions of inevitability', where subjects believe the events were inevitable and were going to happen regardless of a person's actions. This hindsight bias can also mean that, when compared to the point of occurrence, coincidences can gain significance and meaning as time elapses. Beitman also argues that the 'availability bias' can change a person's perception of the usefulness of a coincidence. An 'emotionally charged' coincidence that resulted in a personal success can influence the way in which a subsequent coincidence is received and acted on.

Diaconis & Mosteller (1989: 854) argue that:

> The brain processes and recalls information in ways that we barely understand. Clearly memory failure, selective attention, and the heuristic shortcuts we take in dealing with perceptions can sometimes deceive us into being surprised or lull us into ignoring rare events.

In a way exemplary to the cognitive work, the quote above shows how 'the brain',

the subject of the sentence, is formulated as if it were a separate entity to the human in which it lives, as if it were a control centre navigating its human host in ways unknown to him/her. The human is depicted as oblivious to the workings of the brain, as he/she can be ‘lulled’, ‘deceived’ and ultimately memory can ‘fail’, which can lead to a perception of coincidence. From this perspective, coincidence is therefore reduced to a by-product of human error and therefore non-existent in an a priori sense.

Individual traits associated with coincidences

Research in psychology has also been concerned with identifying the attributes of people reporting coincidences. Coleman and Beitman (2009) argue the increased interest in coincidences is partly due to structural factors, such as a turn to postmodern thought and a turn from a materialistic stance to one focused on relationships and spirituality (Clark, 1996, cited in Coleman and Beitman, 2009). They explain that high levels of affect and emotionality resulting from highly emotive events such as 'sickness, job loss, financial problems and grief' (2009: 277), are linked with what they call coincidence-detection. In these times, people pursue answers which can improve their understanding of their lives.

But they also assert that noticing coincidence is an individual’s matter; they argue that ‘coincidence-detection’ is 'impacted by an individual’s unique history, personality, and circumstances' (Coleman and Beitman, 2009: 1). And whilst they observed that coincidences are an everyday occurrence that is frequently noticed, they propose that there are 'high-frequency responders' who report experiencing coincidences very frequently and are excessively dependent on coincidences. The authors categorise people based on their coincidence-detecting habits, asserting the importance of 'place[ing] them on the continuum of normal and pathological traits’ (Coleman and Beitman, 2009: 2). Thus, for the authors, there is a distinction between normal coincidence-noticing and pathological coincidence-seeking.

Drawing on data derived from 681 individuals, they further argue that high-coincidence detection of coincidences of the interpersonal type (e.g. 'I think of calling someone, only to have that person unexpectedly call me') is associated with

negative affect, neuroticism, faith in intuition and vitality (such as self-reported 'positive feelings of energy and aliveness'). Specifically, within the vitality scale, they argue that coincidence-detection was particularly linked to self-actualisation and self-esteem but negatively correlated to depression and anxiety. Further correlations with high frequency coincidence-detection were found in the referential thinking scale (a scale identifying the scope to which a person thinks an outside event has unusual meaning to themselves), and search for meaning (assessed on a seven-point scale, identified through ten question such as 'I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful').

Costin et al., (2011: 572) argued that people who are high-frequency coincidence detectors are likely to score high on the scales measuring referential thinking, faith in intuition, vitality, negative affect, and 'search for meaning'. A relationship between highly emotional life events and coincidence detection has previously and consistently been reported, but when testing the relationship between positive (for instance marriage and birth) and negative stressful life events (such as deaths and divorces), they found a more significant link between positive emotional life events and coincidence-detection.

In short, coincidences are considered a 'function of human meaning-making' (Watt, 1990: 472). They are reduced to being a mere fluke. Considered an a posteriori concept, coincidences have no intrinsic meaning, but rely on the psyches' formation thereof: 'The meaning of coincidences is created in the mind of the beholder' (Beitman and Shaw, 2009: 282). This means that the source of coincidences is consciousness, and cognitive processes elicit them. As a consequence of this position, the mechanisms of coincidence-formation are considered to in the brain. In these studies, coincidences are experimentally created. They do not have much resemblance with actual, spontaneous, meaningful everyday coincidences.

This perspective is very cognitive and very experimental, both of which have been critiqued in range of disciplines, for instance, the Frankfurt School, where a dispute about 'scientific value judgments in economics' (1914) turned into a critique of positivism, where Adorno and Habermas were pivotal, and 'reached a wider audience' through the paper 'The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology' (Keuth,

2015).

Gergen's (1973) critique of experimentation led to the turn to discourse. Gergen argued that experimentation is deeply flawed when applied to the study of people. This is because testing human behaviour can change it; data may change after results have been published (Gergen, 1973: 310). For coincidence research this means that the way in which people report coincidences has likely already changed, influenced by the research that has been conducted on the psychological and statistical reasons that have been given to explain coincidences, and the current context. But it is also changing as I write and, socially constructed as it is, remains perpetually ethereal. Certainly, coincidence research is not value-free. Coincidence experiences are presented as cognitive or probabilistic misinterpretations, or as irrational; the coincidence research portrays experiencing coincidence as linked to certain character traits. As a person in society who encounters theories about coincidences, 'the recipient of knowledge is thus provided with dual messages: Messages that dispassionately *describe* what appears to be, and those which subtly *prescribe* what is desirable' (Gergen, 1973: 311). With the change in people's perception of how they might be perceived when reporting coincidence, there comes a change in the data that is collected. These studies effectively create a 'circularity […] where evaluative discourse (in response scales) is turned into underlying cognitive entities (attitudes), which are in turn used to explain actions (involving more discourse)' (Edwards and Potter, 2001: 4).

In DSP [Discursive Social Psychology] discourse is defined as talk and texts, studied as social practice (Potter and Edwards, 2001: 104). From a discursive psychological perspective, coincidences can be recast as discursive phenomena. With a focus on discourse, the 'internal' side of coincidences is included as part of the discourse:

> In contrast to cognitivism, DP has a very different way of conceptualizing psychological issues. Instead of treating discourse as dependent upon, and explicable by way of, cognitive objects and processes, it starts by studying the way things appear as participants' concerns. That is, it treats mind, personality, experience, emotions, intentions and so on in terms of how they are constructed and oriented to in interaction. (Potter, 2006: 132)

The advantage is that any social changes are reflected in the data itself, such that the phenomenon of coincidence grows with the change, because people *constitute* coincidence in their talk and texts. Coincidence is a member's accomplishment.

Becker's sociological conception of coincidence

There has been very limited sociological work on coincidences. Becker argued this is due to a discrepancy between everyday life and research. Sociological research takes causality for granted, whilst neglecting the role of coincidences in everyday life:

> When we talk as professional social scientists, we talk about "causes" in a way we don't recognize in daily life. That disparity would not bother a lot of sociologists, but it bothers me. And I think it ought to bother all of us. (Becker, 1994: 185)

Becker argued that whilst it is common knowledge that career and partner choices can happen accidentally, and be triggered by coincidence, social sciences seek '*determinate* causal relationships' (Becker, 1994: 183; emphasis added).

Becker argued that not only had chance influenced the topic he chose to study, and influenced his research interests through a complex sequence of events. Even his interest in coincidence was a coincidence: 'I became interested in the problem of the role of chance and coincidence in social life quite by accident' (Becker, 1994: 185). This, he observed, also applied to other researchers. He then reports relaying his story about meeting his wife to his friend Gilberto Velho, thus showing that two key elements in his life were influenced by chance and coincidence. However, he interjects that exactly because these events are important to people, people tend to follow the chain of events that led to them, in a way that they do not for other events:

> Events like careers and marriages are important. They give shape to our lives. We care about their results. We know that had they not occurred our lives would have been completely different. And so, not surprisingly, we want to know the exact explanation of how these important events happened. (Becker, 1994)

Becker argues that whilst Diaconis and Mosteller (1989) outlined some of the mathematical explanations for coincidences, such as the 'Law of Truly Large Numbers' – the idea that in a large enough sample even the rarest occurrences happen, whilst this has some merit, it does not satisfy his questions. This is because

he is not interested in the explanation of coincidence. Rather, he is interested in the way in which events interplay to bring about certain situations. And this is the point where he reconceptualises the problem of coincidences. Becker (1994: 187) argues 'it was not their presence I wanted explained, but the way events depended on the copresence of all these elements, however likely or unlikely that might be'. He critiques the social scientific language that exhibits its yearning for causation, namely phrases such as '"process," "emergence," and interdeterminacy' (Becker, 1994: 188). Becker wants to establish a 'conceptual language' to describe experiences of chance and coincidence. Borrowing from philosophy by Stephen Toulmin (from private conversations, not dated), Becker argues that different kinds of explanations are wanted for explaining physical events on the one side and human events on the other. He concludes that it is impossible to gather the amount of information we hold accountable for leading to an event in advance; explanations of such experiences are retrospective.

To conclude, Becker sets out to find a conceptual language to describe the influence of chance and coincidence on important life-events that operates outside the norm for deterministic causation. Becker problematizes the taken for granted language that is separate from everyday narratives accounting for how somebody met their significant other or how they found the field of their career. However, whilst Becker's calls for a conceptual language that takes into account the coincidental ways in which events occur, he does not actually provide this language. Therefore, this thesis follows in his premise and seeks to exhibit, firstly the everyday and taken for granted ways in which people talk about chance and coincidence in their lives that Becker recognizes they do. Second, by doing this, this thesis will also further add a discursive understanding of coincidences in an academic and social science based sphere whilst further honing the argument that it is crucial to study mundane happening not from a perspective imposed on everyday experience but one that can encompass such experiences and modes of narrative.

Coincidences and the construction of crime

In academic and everyday settings, the study of coincidence-discourse is at times met with amusement and its point questioned. However, coincidences, and

specifically their rhetorical construction, can be potentially consequential. The ‘doctrine of chances’ permits evidence against a defendant on the basis that repeated innocent involvement in similar and suspicious circumstances is unlikely. The ‘brides in the bath case’ has become a known example, also known as the Rex v. Smith case. The details of the case have been collated by Sullivan (2015), as follows.

On 2 February 1915, Smith brought attention upon himself when it was discovered that he had entered the false name ‘John Lyod’ into the marriage record alongside his late wife, Margret Elizabeth Lofty. It was subsequently discovered that his wife Lofty had been found dead in a bathtub on 17 December 1914. As the investigation proceeded, it was then discovered that Smith had been married previously to Alice Burnham calling himself ‘George Smith’. Alice Burnham had been found dead in a bathtub on 12 December 1913. In the context of the investigation, it was thirdly discovered that he had been married previously also to Bessie Constance Annie Mundy, his first wife, under the name of ‘Henry Williams’. She had been found drowned in a bath on 13 July 1912. Additional similarities were found, namely that each death occurred in a bath that had been furnished by Smith or that the couples had moved into within a week of the respective death of each wife. In each case Smith had access to the bathroom as it was unlocked. In terms of finances, each wife made her will in favour of Smith within a week of her death and Smith had gained or would gain insurance profits or property from each wife. Each wife’s debts had been realised, as had her savings. Sullivan (2015: 30) emphasises that ‘in even minor details, each marriage and bathtub drowning was eerily similar’.

However, the accused Smith, defended himself stating that 'I admit the two deaths form a phenomenal coincidence, but that is my hard luck. You may think it strange, but it was the irony of fate that my two wives died in that way.' (Sullivan, 2015: 3). His defence was based on the argument that the events were a coincidence. The implication was that he did not actively eradicate his wives. When it came to the trial, Smith was only tried for the murder of his first wife. However, as the list of similarities between the cases shows, the details of what Smith called coincidence were brought into the trial as evidence. These co-occurrences were the pivotal points in the case. It was generally agreed that the evidence brought forward against Smith accused of his first wife’s murder alone would not have convicted him.

Whilst the brides in the bath case is from a different era, a case involving similar questions for the decision by the court has occurred more recently. Sally Clark was a solicitor whose 11-week-old son Christopher died in December and was found dead in his cot whilst her husband was out. In January 1998 her second son, Harry, aged 8 weeks, was dead in his cot, and found 'slumped with his head forward' (Guardian article, 2007). Clark was subsequently arrested in February 1998. The trial against Sally Clark started in October 1999 at Chester crown court and by November she had been found guilty and was punished with two life sentences. As evidence was lacking, Professor Roy Meadow appeared as an expert witness, telling the jury there is a "one in 73 million" chance of two children dying from cot deaths in an affluent family. Sally Clark appealed against the conviction in October 2000. In January 2003 Mrs Clark's conviction was cancelled by the court after an appeal. Whilst Professor Meadow had to appear before the GMC in relation to his statement against Clark, he was able challenge the high court's decision and was not struck off. In March 2007 Sally Clark died after being released from prison.

What this clearly demonstrates is that coincidences can be consequential. In these cases, coincidence played a role in determining guilt and innocence. Admittedly the 'brides in the bath' case is exceptional, yet establishing whether coincidence had been at play or not was a matter of life and death for the accused, Smith. For neither of these cases was there the possibility of revisiting the actual events. The events were subject to interpretation and negotiation in court. Whilst there might have been physical evidence (such as the bodies), these do not speak for themselves. Even the physical evidence such as the change of names and the financial documents are presented through talk and texts. And in Sally Clark's case, evidence came in the form of a witness statement that was not based on any 'hard' evidence, but on probability (and miscalculated at that). This demonstrates that establishing events as coincidence is a matter of discursive negotiation and construction. This negotiation is situated firmly in the realm of discourse. This court case exhibits how the construction of talk about coincidence or non-coincidence becomes crucial in the forming of defence and accusation. Finally, the case brings to awareness the problem of chance and its calculation. For each case there was a tipping point where the events seemingly crossed the line from coincidence to non-coincidence. Precisely this is the topic of this thesis, where coincidence accounts will be examined to

identify what renders a coincidence account coincidental - or not. That is, one part of the analysis, the first three analytical chapters, are concerned with the way in which events are constructed as part of a coincidence. The last chapter looks at the way in which related events are disconfirmed as a coincidence.

Conclusion

In the two most active research activities on coincidences, the phenomenon is studied as if it were either a phenomenon brought into existence as a function of (faulty) assessments of chance, or due to cognitive shortcomings of the mind. In psychotherapy, coincidences are studied as a pathway into a person's psychology. In parapsychology, coincidences are studies as physical evidence for the claim that a different kind of external reality structures our world. However, each of these approaches lead the research away from the phenomenon of coincidence itself. The experimentally created coincidences tested mimic the spontaneous experience of coincidence. However, regardless of how sophisticated the set up can become, they contradict the essence of coincidence as a spontaneous, unexpected and truly baffling experience.

The two data extracts from the Cambridge Coincidence Collection as well as from the book exemplify that coincidence accounts in real life are far removed from coincidences created in experiments. They are impactful. It is in discursive form that they exist. That is, coincidences from everyday life are by definition retrospective, discursive accounts. Even if a camera were to follow a person through their everyday life, any coincidence would have to be described after the fact, because coincidences emerge from the meanings that events are given by people. And at the point that a coincidence experience is shared, it becomes an interactional phenomenon.

The two court cases outlined demonstrate that the negotiation of coincidences occurs in texts and talk. Studying accounts of coincidences is worthwhile, because people report them. It is also worthwhile because the status of events as coincidental or not can be consequential (which is further explored in Chapter Seven).

Coincidences are discursive phenomena. However, they have not been treated as primarily discursive accounts in academic research so far. The following research however focuses on coincidences as discourse. It is in these accounts that consciousness and inner experience and outer events are meaningfully connected. Accounts of real-life coincidence delivers rich data about consciousness, the interplay between inner ongoing and outer events and human everyday experience. What is more, accounts of coincidences contain a plethora of taken for granted assumptions about the world, how it operates and how it should be seen. Thus, accounts of coincidence are the products of the tacit understandings of how the world operates. Therefore, the original contribution to knowledge this study offers, is focused on the social and tacit practices that structure coincidence accounts from everyday life.

Chapter 2

Approaches to the study of unusual experiences in talk and text

Introduction

This chapter outlines the approaches to analysing discourse after, and as ongoing process of, the 'turn to language', which emerged from critiques of positivist experimental and cognitive psychology (Harré, 1999; Buttny, 2012; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). Different approaches to the study of discourse are presented. This includes conversation analysis (CA); discourse analysis (DA); discursive psychology (DP); critical discourse analysis (CDA); rhetorical psychology; and narrative analysis. Then, the application of a broadly discourse analytical approach is discussed in regard to the textual coincidence accounts that are studied in the research at hand. This leads the discussion to consider how cognition and reality are constructed in texts and talk, and how they have been in the past. Subsequently, research on reported thoughts in complaint stories; reported thoughts in paranormal descriptions of events; and constructed thoughts in extraordinary events will be presented. A discussion of the rhetorical construction of coincidence in literature will then follow. Previous work on stories will then be discussed. Finally, the research question will be provided.

Approaches to analysing discourse after the turn to language

Conversation analysis

CA emerged from the theoretical and methodological framework of the 'ethnomethodology movement' (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008: 9). The ideas and works of Harold Garfinkel played an important role (Heritage, 1984b). This is due to the way in which 'Garfinkel repeatedly stresses the *routine* nature of the implementation of 'seen but unnoticed' procedures for accomplishing, producing and reproducing 'perceivedly normal' courses of action (Heritage, 1984: 118). Furthermore, Erving Goffman was also essential in bringing about the study of CA (Goffman, 1959). This is because he studied how everyday life is socially structured. Schegloff (1988: 89) argued that 'in registering certain events and aspects of events as worthy of notice and available to acute and penetrating interpretation, Goffman

materialized almost out of thin air the realization that there was a subject matter there to study'. Ethnomethodology lay the groundwork for CA because it investigated the ways in which everyday interaction is implicitly, tacitly structured; they are interested in the 'social practices' of everyday life (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008: 9).

Sacks had access to telephone conversations between callers to a suicide helpline (Sacks, 1992). Due to new recording technology, he realised that these recordings could be repeated again and again, which meant that any analysis (that had previously relied on notes of observations made in the field) could be verified against repeated replaying of the recordings. It also allowed other researchers to investigate the recording. He noticed that callers to the suicide prevention helpline seemed to conspicuously avoid giving their names, and when he investigated a data set of instances he realised that this was accomplished by claiming not to have heard, when the initial greeting was uttered by the call-taker. That is, Sacks identified patterns in the talk-in-interaction (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008).

The main component of conversation analysis is that talk is considered action. Talk is seen as 'doing' things. This is possible because there are norms underlying social interactions, which people use. The next-turn-proof procedure allows people to exhibit their own understanding of the previous turn that was uttered to them (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). They respond to the turn, and in their own turn, there is material that allows the co-participant of that interaction to exhibit their understanding of the previous turn and so on. What this means for analysis is that the researcher is able to identify how the people who were part of that interaction understood their talk. As such, it is not an analysist imposing their interpretation on an interaction they did not experience themselves, rather they can analyse the ways in which people themselves orient to their interactional partners. Context is evidently crucial in the analysis of CA (Heritage, 1998). This is because words do not have intrinsic meaning, rather the meaning of 'turns' in talk depends on the interactional context in which it was uttered.

Whilst conversation analysis emerged from the turn to language that followed as a direct reaction to the critique of positivist pursuits of experimental research, it has itself been met with the critique that it has positivist features.

Discourse analysis

An central study was Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) study on a controversy for the scientific truth on 'oxidative phosphorylation'[8]. Gilbert and Mulkay used interviews and documents to establish the kinds of discourses scientists use to describe their own actions and that of their colleagues. DA is further associated with Potter, and Wetherell (1987a); Wetherell and Potter (1998); and Potter, 1997. It 'draws from the sociology of scientific knowledge tradition' (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008:10). It is distinct from linguistic 'discourse analysis', although it sometimes borrows from it (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008: 10). 'Discourse analysts often display an interest in the fine-grain detail of how accounts are constructed, and draw upon some of the terminology of conversation analysis to do this' (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008: 11). However, McKinlay and McVittie (2008: 13-14) argue that the difference between DA and CA is that CA investigates multiple turns and their 'sequential properties' wheras DA may investigate a single turn. CA would also normally use naturally occurring talk as data, whereas DA may use textual or verbal discourse.

They identified two repertoires, which are normative ways of talking about an issue: the 'empiricist repertoire' and the 'contingent repertoire' (1984: 40). The empiricist repertoire uses scientific explanations and 'speakers depict their actions and beliefs as a neutral medium through which empirical phenomena make themselves evident (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: 56). This repertoire is used in the formal contexts, such as academic publications (1984: 55). The contingent repertoire on the other hand, 'enables speakers to depict professional actions and beliefs as being significantly influenced by variable factors outside the realm of biochemical phenomena' (1984: 57). It is adopted in ordinary conversation or informal interviews (1984: 55). Because these two repertoires generally have their own contexts and are opposed, it produces 'apparent contradictions' and 'the potential risk of interpretative

[8] a detailed summary can be found in Chapter 6

inconsistency' (1984: 91) when they have to occur together as explanations for actions. Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) however, identified two ways in which scientists manage this. One of the ways in which such a contradiction is resolved is through the use of 'asymmetrical accounting for error', where the speaker 'identifies the views of one or more scientists as mistaken and provides some kind of account as to why' (1984: 67; 91). Another way is the 'truth will out device' or, as acronym 'TWOD'. Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) research instigated further research investigating variable and flexible versions of events. DA is about versions of events and how they are used to accomplish things in discourse; it is about 'language in use' (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008).

Discursive psychology

DP emerged from the theoretical and practical research framework of DA. To define DP, it is useful to borrow from Edwards and Potter, who have shaped it:

> Discursive psychology (DP) is the application of discourse analytic principles to psychological topics. […] DP begins with discourse (talk and text), both theoretically and empirically. Discourse is approached, not as the outcome of mental states and cognitive processes, but as a domain of action in its own right. (Edwards and Potter, 2001: 12).

Edwards & Potter's (1992) discursive action model (DAM) is relevant to the forthcoming analysis. The DAM is not supposed to be considered a model in the classical sense but a way of understanding discourse as doing things. Edwards & Potter (1992) propose a move from traditional views of memory and attribution. Discursive psychology sits within DP and proposes doing a type of empirical analysis where firstly, the emphasis is on action and not cognition; and secondly, recalling and ascription are to be found in 'accounts, description and formulations' and these are to be considered as interwoven with activities in social interaction such as 'invitation refusals, blamings and defences' (Edwards & Potter, 1992: 154). Rather than searching for one singular 'truth' or testing memory in reference to its accuracy, Edwards & Potter (1992: 154) argue that in their accounts people display stakes and interests. People can further construct these reports to be objectively correct using discursive techniques and discursive depictions which 'attend to the agency' and 'attend to the accountability of the current speaker […]'. Essentially,

versions of events depict and orient to different objectives (in a non-cognitive sense). Discourse is action and is constructed to accomplish things.

Critical discourse analysis

Fairclough writes that 'critical discourse analysis can in fact draw upon a wide range of approaches to analysing text.' (2005: 6). CDA's focus is power: That is, CDA's focus is to identify the ways in which power is constructed and negotiated in discourse. It questions how social and political issues, as well as ideologies, are constructed and reflected in discourse. Discourse is both adhering to norms, but at the same time also reproducing the power structures of society. It essentially identifies how the power of institutions, groups and hierarchies are enacted and renewed in talk and texts. The questions that are asked of data involves micro-level interpretation (how do grammar and word choices construct power); meso-level interpretation (who is the audience and which group or institution produced the text); and macro-level interpretation (which events that are current in the moment does the text relate to) (Talib and Fitzgerald, 2016). In short:

> Analysis has typically focused on political speeches, policy documents, textbooks, radio shows and newspaper articles. CDA attempts to identify the discursive structures, strategic properties and persuasive rhetoric that contribute to maintaining social inequality by exerting control over other groups, limiting their freedom or influencing their minds (Jenkins and Potter, 2012:1)

Discourse and cognition are treated as distinct but linked entities within CDA. The different theoretical and methodological approaches under the umbrella term of CDA focus their analysis on the role of discourse in reproducing and challenging the social power (access to resources) of institutions and groups (Wodak, 1999). This latter form of 'cognitive' power is enacted by strategies of persuasion and manipulation through text and talk (Jenkins and Potter 2012: 1). A prominent example of CDA research is Van Dijk's (1992) research on racism discourse.

Rhetoric psychology

Rhetoric psychology is based on Billig's (1987) influential book entitled *Arguing and thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology* (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008). In it, he traces the history of persuasive talk. He identifies the rhetorical skills

that are exhibited in everyday talk, especially in maxims and phrases. So for instance, he presents how attitudes are rhetorical constructs, rather than mental states. His perspective applies to the research at hand because discourse is made up of formulation and reformulation rather than due to inner mental processes. Billig's work was fundamental to DP and is intertwined with it, but (Billig, 2012: 414) himself argues that how it is linked is not easy to determine:

> One can ask about the relations of the three[9] 1987 books to each other, and about their relations to what has become known as 'discursive psychology'. The answers to these questions are not obvious. None of the three books was written as a text in 'Discursive Psychology', simply because there was no 'discursive psychology' when the books were written. None of the three books used the term, although it would soon be used.

Billig argues for seeing his (1987) work as a sub-discipline of 'antiquarian psychology', though he also discusses the problems associated with establishing such a sub-discipline (Billig, 2012: 421).

Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis is focused upon the analysis of stories. To be more precise, '"narrative analysis" is a place holder for different ways of conceptualizing the storied nature of human development' (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004: x), and the 'construction and use of stories in society' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). Stokoe and Edwards (2006: 57) argue that 'the majority of narrative research examines researcher-elicited accounts obtained in interviews', but different kinds of data can be used. Defining the concepts of 'narrative' and 'story' can be challenging. Eubanks (2004) argues that 'many theorists distinguish between a story and a narrative this way: A story is what happened, and a narrative is the way what happened is recounted in words.' (Eubanks, 2004: 34). He then argues that whilst researchers have seen narratives (involving stories) and non-narratives (argumentative in nature) as fundamentally different, there has been a shift towards seeing them as intertwined (Eubanks, 2004).

[9] The three books he authored and refers to are: Discourse and social psychology, Common knowledge, and Arguing and thinking.

The term includes sociological, sociolinguistic, psychological, literary and anthropological models of narrative analysis (Cortazzi, 1993). An exemplar of an analytical framework for narrative analysis can be found in Labov and Waletzky (1997). However, there is a fragmented and diverse understanding of what a 'narrative' is, as well as what constitutes appropriate data to be utilised to conduct narrative research. These questions have not been resolved. Thus, narrative analysis has been termed a 'historically-produced theoretical bricolage' (Andrews et al., 2013:5). A typology can be found in Mishler (1995). Another overview can be found in Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou (2013). Reflections on the 30 years post publication of Labov and Waletzky's article that set the scene of narrative analysis, and future directions of the field, can be found in Labov (1997).

Narrative research emerged from two strands: firstly, the post-war move to more 'person-centred' ways of conducting research with a view to counter positivist empirical pursuits (2013: 3), and secondly, an initially Russian and subsequently French structuralist approach where '[…] the storyteller does not tell the story, so much as she/he is told by it'. Narrative analysis has also been argued to have emerged from the narrative turn in the social sciences, as a critique of positivist research into human interaction, 'the "memoir boom" in literature and popular culture; identity politics'; and an 'exploration of personal life in therapies of various kinds' (Mishler, 1995: 1). Andrews et al. (2013) argue there is a lack of a cohesive and unified ontological and theoretical framework. It spans a wide area of research, and yet, they all entail a sequence of meaningful events:

> As nations and governments construct preferred narratives about history, so do social movements, organisations, scientists, other professionals, ethnic/racial groups, and individuals in stories of experience. What makes such diverse texts "narrative" is sequence and consequence: events are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience. (Mishler, 1995:1)

What unites the differing strands of research is an affinity to 'treat narratives as modes of resistance to existing structures of power' (Andrews et al., 2013: 4). This chimes in with the themes found in the literature. A contemporary example is a study on the stigma sex workers face, conducted on a data set of narratives from newspapers in Canada (Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008). Another recent example can be found in the analysis of 'online autobiographical accounts of non - suicidal self -

injury' (Sutherland, Breen and Lewis, 2013). This arguably makes it wide-reaching in scope.

Feminist discourse is a further area that focuses on narrative agency. From this perspective, women's disadvantages in the social structure are shown to be constructed and perpetuated in narratives. In order to illustrate the area of narrative analysis, an example will be discussed in detail. Reynolds, Wetherell & Taylor (2007) show how agency is negotiated in narratives in which women account for being single. However, each strategy for positioning themselves bears a difficulty for their own constructed identity, reflecting the societal expectation for a woman to be in a relationship. The first discursive strategy the authors identified is for the woman to adopt a 'I want to feel chosen' narrative accounting for her singledom. Through this, she discursively positions her singledom into the realm of male responsibility for picking her. This accounts for her being single. However, this narrative constructs her as lacking agency as it positions her as dependent on male affection.

The second strategy the authors identify is for a woman to adopt a 'I haven't felt the need' narrative to account for being single. Through this discourse, a woman constructs her identity as owning agency and being single as having been and being a choice, thus 'defending the speaker from appearing unsuccessful at a commonly shared goal' (Reynolds et al., 2007: 339). The problem for the identity that arises out of this narrative however, is that the woman adopting this narrative strategy can be seen to not be sharing or desiring that commonly shared goal (a long-term sexual relationship), which is a societal expectation. Thus, 'she has given the appearance of not having ordinary wants and desires' with the potential to be seen as an 'asexual spinster' (Reynolds et al., 2007: 340).

The third strategy identified by the authors is that of 'I want to be in a relationship'. This narrative strategy gives the speaker full agency. However, as this narrative gives the speaker full agency, she is vulnerable to blame in terms of having been unsuccessful in realising her goal. The fourth strategy the authors outline is that of attributing singledom to chance: 'It just hasn't happened yet'. This accounts for the woman being single (and blame is attributed to timing). However, this narrative strategy strips the speaker off their own agency and goes against the cultural

imperative to present oneself as possessing 'agency, power and control' (Bauman, 1998 cited in Reynolds et al., 2007: 347)

Because narrative analysis cannot be accurately portrayed using one example, a further example will be discussed in detail. A study on the discursive agency of prisoners was conducted by McKendy (2006). Through narrative analysis investigating how men in prison construct agency discursively, the author demonstrates that 'imprisonment involves not just physical confinement, but also discursive or ideological confinement'. (McKendy, 2006: 496). He uses data from interviews with 13 men in prison for crimes such as murder (five men), sexual assault (four men) and arson, incest, armed robbery and aggravated assault (one man each). He argues that prisons in Canada have followed and put into practice the perspective that humans are agents who chose to commit crimes.

This has the result that both in courtrooms and in the prison environment, there is no space for discourses explaining the social background and reasons for the person committing a crime. In this climate then, the 'cognitive skills programme' is utilised with the idea that criminals had 'misprogrammed thinking' leading to crime, which needs to be rectified and reprogrammed, teaching them to take full responsibility and agency for their crimes. Blaming other circumstances on their crimes from is banned and sanctioned for prisoners (because it is thought of as a 'thinking error'), whilst abiding to the idealised discourse of responsibility yields progress in the rehabilitation programme as well as transfers and consideration for parole (McKendy, 2006).

However, McKendy (2006) argues this creates a dilemma for the inmates. First, prisoners are in that moment in the prison. As such, this is evidence of their deviancy. Second, if they accept the programme suggesting 'their errors in thinking', they may internalise the deviant identity rather than reject it, which may mean that they could be committing crimes after being released. On the other hand, he argues that if they discursively blamed external circumstances for their crimes (such as violent parents or being abused in early years) they could 'sustain a normal identity' which would leave room for resocialisation and result in a higher sense of self-esteem compared with the former perspective of the self, advertised by the

government and the prison. In the narratives of the prisoners then, agency becomes a problematic topic.

Prisoners, McKendy (2006) argues, may relay happenings readable as reducing their own agency (such as actions of other people such as their parents of caretakers), and yet lapse into the trained discourse of 'owning their stuff' by for instance 'paying lip service' to their own responsibility (McKendy, 2006: 480). This is done by 'speaking of themselves as victimizer, never a victim' (McKendy, 2006: 481). The need to adopt the institutionalised discourse of responsibility then suddenly appears in long stretches of narratives about circumstances that have led a prisoner to commit such crimes, resulting in what the author calls ‘narrative difficulties’, which, he argues, also become evident in the abandoned sentences about external reasons for their criminal behaviour that can be aborted and half-spoken.

In short then, discourses of agency are discursively imposed on the prisoners who recite them, even in narratives that explain external forces that reduce their agency. The author makes the point that enforced narratives of agency thus build a form of imprisonment of their life-discourse, confining them in a particular way of speaking (and, he argues, therefore thinking too) about their crimes; the reasons for committing them; and ultimately, imprisoning their selves. Whilst some narrative analysts make links between discourse and mind, in contrast, this thesis will not offer a link between discourse and thoughts.

Notably, Andrews et al. (2013) argue that both in event and experience-oriented pieces of research in the area, narratives are understood to express the inner ongoing of the people that tell them and are not mere discursive constructs (Andrews et al., 2013: 5):

> What is shared across both event- and experience-centred narrative research is that there are assumed to be individual, internal representations of phenomena – events, thoughts and feelings – to which narrative gives external expression. (Andrews et al., 2013:5).

Additionally, Eubanks (2004: 34) argues that 'most scholars now see narratives, metaphor, metonymy and a host of rhetorical figures not as "devices" for structuring or decorating extraordinary texts but instead as fundamental social and cognitive

tools'. This places it at odds with the kind of research I want to conduct on coincidences. This is because the research at hand aims to move away from discussions of the inner experience of coincidence, and therefore, I wish to distance my research from the kind of narrative research that assumes that narrative 'gives external expression' to inner 'thoughts and feelings' and 'events'. This research on coincidence is a move away from assumptions about 'internal representations of phenomena'; it is interested in construction, not representation. It is also not interested in the way in which events are represented in discourse. Furthermore, whilst coincidence accounts could arguably be construed as narratives, the focus of the analysis is not on investigating how they are a 'resistance to existing structures of power' (although they could be seen as that).

Suitability for the analysis of coincidence accounts

These kinds of discourse analysis have similarities. Firstly, they all treat discourse in the form of texts and talk as things in their own right that are worthy of investigation. Secondly, discourse is not seen as merely reflecting cognition and external events, but as constituting it. Thirdly, they are all focused on the structures and organisation of discourse.

Initially, CDA did not appear useful to the analysis of coincidence accounts. This is due to three reasons: firstly, previous research in the area of coincidence studies did not suggest that power played a role in coincidence accounts in any way; secondly, coincidence accounts were thought of as individual and personal experiences and not at all as influenced by dynamics of power; finally, as each coincidence features a different set of agents/actors (which is part of the definition of a unique coincidence) it was not evident that any one person or institution or agent could have an influence over these very diverse coincidence accounts. As such, a CDA of the accounts was not at the forefront of the research goals of this thesis, which centred on identifying patterns in the form of rhetorical devices. Due to previous research centring on cognitive aspects of coincidence perception, discursive psychology was selected. As there had not been a discourse analysis of coincidence accounts prior to this thesis, the relevance of power could not be predicted in advance. The role of power and ideology in coincidence accounts only became apparent when the last rhetorical

device in Chapter 7, coincidence disconfirmation, was identified. This triggered an investigation of the three preceding rhetorical devices in terms of power and ideology. A pattern running across the devices exhibits the strong role of power and ideology in the coincidence discourse of this thesis, which will be further discussed in the conclusion. It was the research of this thesis, and the findings of this thesis that have shown the relevance of power and ideology in coincidence discourse.

As stated previously, narrative analysis, with its consideration of mental life, is not suitable to the analysis at hand. To bring about a complete departure from previous research that focused on the cognitive reasons for experiencing coincidences, it is important to investigate discourse about mental processes as discourse in a purely constitutive sense. There is, however, one area for which narrative analysis if useful. Narrative analysis is useful for the analysis of (complete) coincidence accounts, because it advocates that the respondent's sequential organization of meaningful events should be considered; that is, the entire narrative should be taken into account: 'Precisely because they are essential meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents' ways of constructing meaning and analyse how it is accomplished' (Kohler Riessman, 1993: 4)[10].

From DA, I borrow the research question that asks how one version of the world is established in the face of alternative versions. Reformulated, the question is how are coincidental versions of events constructed in the face of other versions of events (this question informs Chapter 6, and 7). And at the same time, how are events presented to imply they are linked, yet not linked through coincidence? From DP, I borrow the research question that asks how traditionally cognitive terms such as 'thinking', 'realising', 'deciding' and 'knowing' are constructed in talk (this question informs Chapter 5). From rhetorical psychology, I borrow the research question how discourse is made persuasive (this question underpins all of the analytical chapters,

[10] However, Stokoe and Edwards (2006) point out that narrative analysts often use oral, researcher-elicited narratives, where the natural narrative structure can be lost (by virtue of the interviewing structure). However, the research at hand uses naturally occurring accounts of coincidence, where no interview shapes the narrative.

but especially Chapter 7). Although my data is textual and therefore not usable for pure CA research, I borrow from it a focus on what people 'do' in their discourse. Indeed, the different approaches inform each other; for instance, Potter (2012) argues that 'the analytic power of contemporary conversation analysis can be used in the service of a discursive approach to psychology'.

Thus, for the analysis of the research at hand I draw on a broadly discourse analytical approach made up of ethnomethodology; conversation analysis; discursive psychology and rhetorical psychology. Not only do these kinds of perspectives work for the research at hand, this research also chimes in with where the future of discursive analysis (later DP) lies. In the conclusion of their book, 'Discourse and social psychology', Potter and Wetherell (1987b: 186-7) describe how they imagine the future directions of the field:

> The first is the painstaking examination of complex, worked-over, written text. […] The second likely expansion is the study of what has classically been known as rhetoric (Billig, 1987), the use of discourse to persuasive effect.

This study of coincidence is both – it examines *textual* coincidence accounts, and, investigates their rhetorical, persuasive properties.

The social construction of the mind

Coincidence research in the past has focused heavily on cognitive explanations, which is why I will borrow some ideas from Coulter to exemplify the perspective taken in my analysis. Coulter (1983) proposes a 'social constructionist' perspective on the mind. In his understanding this is not one single theory, as there can be no one theory of the mind. Instead he suggests exploring the topic using a 'basic principle'. This basic principle proposes to *'treat the 'mental' properties of persons as generated from situated, constitutive practices'* (Coulter, 1983: 128, emphasis in original). He specifies such practices to include instances in which people negotiate, tropicalize, and make relevant their own mental ongoings in interaction (Coulter, 1983). He argues that a researcher using such a principle would be a sociologist of cognition as distinct from a sociologist of knowledge. Such a sociologist of cognition would for instance shed a light into the ways in which remembering in court is performed in specific ways (te Molder and Potter, 2005: 237).

Nonetheless, he argues, such perspective leaves room for 'inner' private mental phenomena e.g. daydreaming and mental images, whose existence he does not deny. Similarly, this research on coincidence does not deny the mental phenomena that may occur in relation with coincidences. As an example, Coulter showcases data from an interaction between a person declaring the intention to commit suicide and a social worker. The social worker can be seen suggesting the person who declared the intention of suicide did not actually mean this. This, Coulter (1983) argues, exemplifies how what is said does not have intrinsic meaning; it is not necessarily a direct reflection of 'inner' mental thoughts. Coulter argues that it is designed to encourage a certain response and he argues that suicide intention avowals are geared towards eliciting attention from the social worker (and are treated as such). Suicide avowals are not routinely taken as announcements of suicide intentions but are adorned with other motives, in line with the belief that persons truly intending to commit suicide will not exclaim it (Coulter, 1983).

On the subject of remembering, Coulter (1979) argues that there is a distinction between actual remembering and displaying remembering e.g. when responding to a question as to whether one remembers, remembering is adjusted to fit the present interests and is 'part of […] conversational activity' (Coulter, 1979: 59). Notable here is the distinction between a display of remembering and remembering itself: 'A person's memory can deceive him, but this does not involve remembering *incorrectly*' (Coulter, 1979: 59, emphasis in original). This points to the subjective nature of remembering and also diffuses cognitive research's focus on finding a singular correct answer or a 'true' version of events. Therefore, it is useful for the research at hand, because it focuses on cognitive formulations in accounts of coincidence, with a view on understanding their interactional function.

Discursive constructions of traditionally 'external' and 'internal' phenomena

The theoretical framework of the research at hand broadly builds on ethnomethodology, CA, DA and DP. This approach treats routine and exceptional events (Edwards, 1994), as well as one-off and patterned events (Edwards, 1995) as being something that is constituted in talk and texts, rather than lurking 'outside' in

the external world. This approach treats experience (Potter, 2012); identity (Sacks, 1984; Attenborough, 2011); deficient identity (Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor, 2007); gender (Stockill and Kitzinger, 2007), as well as psychological states, for instance emotions generally (Edwards, 1999); mental health (Lofgren, Hewitt, and Das Nair, 2015); motive (Warson, 1983); mistrust (Garcia, 1999); rejection (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999); trouble (Jefferson and Lee, 1981); resistance (Jackson, Land and Holmes, 2016); embarrassment (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975); hysteria (Whalen and Zimmerman, 1998; Kidwell, 2006); surprise (Wilkinson, and Kitzinger, 2006); nervousness (Locke, 2003); empathy (Hepburn and Potter, 2007); sexual attraction (Korobov and Bamberg, 2004); desire (Korobov, 2011); and jealousy (Edwards and Potter, 2001) as being something that is constituted in talk and texts, rather than lurking 'inside' an individual.

An example of this perspective used on data is Smith's, (1978: 23) analysis of 'how K came to be defined by her friends as mentally ill'. She uses interviews and texts as data. She argues that the actions of K are attributed to mental illness to the extent that K being mentally ill is constructed to be a fact. Even K attributes her own actions and thoughts to mental illness. The 'fact' of her illness is so pervasive that she cannot attribute her actions and thoughts to normal behaviour. In the account about K, her character and behaviour are outlined in detail, and 'the reader/hearer is thus apparently given an opportunity to judge for herself on the basis of a collection of samples of the behaviour from which Angela *et al.* constructed the fact of K's mental illness' (Smith, 1978: 37). What Smith shows through her research, is that mental illness is constituted in discourse, it is a membership accomplishment.

Blurring the lines between cognition and reality

Potter (1998) builds on Schegloff's argument that social context should be used as analytical concern only if the participants orient to it in talk. Potter (1998) argues that this argument can be applied to cognition as well. He further argues that cognition and reality are a distinction created in concepts of social research but that this distinction does not hold in partaker's discourse where cognition and reality interlink fluidly (Potter, 1998: 35). In his data extract from a call between a husband and wife, the wife tells her husband of a man she saw outside their house,

constructing him as suspicious in the context of a burglary and subsequently reports having reported him to the police. He demonstrates how the outer 'reality' of the character of the man, her action of reporting him to the police and her cognitive orientations blend together, orienting to the sensitive nature of reporting a man to the police who has not been proven to have committed a crime. A point here is that Potter (1998:39) focuses on the wife's construction of her own lack of knowledge, as shown in his extract below:

> The upshot of the observation of the suspicious character is not *so I told the police about him*. It is
>
> 26 Leslie: So I thought ↑well I dunno I'll tell th'police about
>
> 27 him . . .
>
> That is, despite the rather elaborate working up of reasons to be suspicious of this person, there is a preface ("So I thought ↑well I dunno") that represents Leslie as having had doubts about taking the action (note the *well* dispreference marker) and as its having been based on uncertain or insufficient knowledge.

Importantly, the line containing '↑well I dunno' is not only a preface but also a reported thought that, it could be argued, further connects the descriptions of the outer world (the observations of the suspicious man and his actions) and constructions of her inner thought-processes. This blending of cognition and reality is important for the research at hand, because coincidence accounts exhibit orientations to both.

Reported thoughts

Haakana (2007) investigates reported thoughts in Finnish complaint stories, arguing that reported thoughts are not mere features in complaint stories but *construct* the complaint. That is, reported thoughts are not simply reflections of inner life but they are used to do things in interaction. He argues that a greater focus in research should be on the ways in which reported thoughts are constructed and what they do in interaction as well as how they are positioned.

Haakana (2007: 151) observes that in his corpus of complaint stories, reported thoughts occur as 'a silent reaction to a co-conversationalist's reported turn-at-talk'.

He argues that this creates a 'multi-layered picture' of the reported interaction where both what was said at the time and what the narrator thought at the time (in response to what was said) are constructed to the current co-interactant (Haakana, 2007: 153). The reported thought, a 'silent response', can have the function of portraying the complainant as having astutely withheld their critique at the time (Haakana, 2007). Reported thought is different to reported speech. A reported thought suggests that a specific thought was withheld at the time: 'Reported thought deserves special attention as something that was *not* said in the depicted interaction' (Haakana, 2007: 175, emphasis in original). Thus, Haakana (2007: 167) emphasises the interplay between 'surface and internal, 'mental' response' by which he means the difference of what was portrayed to have been said in the reported interaction and what was portrayed to have been thought, which constructs dimensions of inner and outer.

Constructing extraordinary events with reported thoughts

The phenomenon 'At first I thought X, then I realized Y' was initially discovered by Harvey Sacks but further developed and published by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson, 2004). Notably, Gail Jefferson developed the phenomenon from extracts in a folder entitled 'sequential ambiguity' 'under the general topic "Joke/serious"' sourced from 'newspaper clippings, excerpts from book, etc. all lumped together' (Jefferson, 2004: 132). This means that the initial discovery of the topic stems not from naturally occurring talk, but textual discourse from the mass media.

The two-part device 'At first I thought X, then I realized Y' consists of an erroneous first thought reported to have occurred at the time of an event happening. This thought (X) is an ordinary alternative to the extraordinary event that turned out to be happening at the time (described in 'then I realised Y'). Key here is the word 'realised', as 'in the use of 'reali[s]ed' the correctness of […] thoughts is proposed' (Jefferson, 2004: 134). It is not to be seen as a reflection of what the actual thoughts were at the time (Jefferson, 2004: 136) but rather, a construction of thoughts with interactional 'business' (Jefferson, 2004: 137). The erroneous reported thought is known to be erroneous at the time of it being reported (Jefferson, 2004: 133). The thought X itself can seem unlikely; key is that it is a thought that performs being ordinary in comparison with the extraordinary event that happened.

Specifically, this construction of erroneous first thoughts and accurate realisations is part of what Harvey Sacks termed 'doing being ordinary' (Sacks, 1984b). He suggests that it is a person's life task to 'do' the mundane, to think what many other people would, to see what most other people would see in a given situation and most importantly, to report what would ordinarily be reported. Key here is that the person 'doing being ordinary' is aware what is ordinary (1985: 415). It takes constant work:

> […] the cast of mind of "being ordinary" is essentially that your business in life is only to see and report the usual aspects of any possibly usual scene. That is to say, what you look for is to see how any scene you are in can be made an ordinary scene, a usual scene, and that is what that scene is (Sacks, 1984b).

And this, it will transpire, is key to the understanding of how 'coincidence' is constructed in discourse.

Doing memory in paranormal settings

Wooffitt's (1992) book focuses on analysis of paranormal accounts. In one of the data extracts from an interview a medium describes how she noticed a tune in her house. Wooffitt (1992) shows data from the medium's initial descriptions of the noise in which she constructs herself to be oblivious to the cause of the noise. However, at the point of telling her experience, she is already aware of the outcome and convinced of the source of the noise being paranormal. As Wooffitt (1992: 77) puts it:

> In this account, as in all the data, the speaker is reporting her memory of the events. Moreover, in the process of telling the story, she is recasting herself as innocent of the cause of the sound. That is, she is trying to capture and portray the sequence of events as they unfolded at the time. However, by virtue of her own knowledge of the subsequent dénouement of these episodes we may note that this report is, inevitably, a reconstruction. However, this reconstruction is not the outcome of declining cognitive facilities and distortions which have occurred over time, reporting effects, and so on; rather, it is the product of pragmatic work.

In other words, the account is a 'reconstruction' (in the non-cognitive sense of the word) that does work in the interaction at hand. In the instance here, Wooffitt (1992) shows how the participant portrays herself to be normal by reporting her experience in an 'ordinary' way. This includes not jumping to paranormal interpretations straight away, reporting having checked potential physical causes first, and marking

such a search as conventional procedure. It also involves reporting unexceptional and mundane first thoughts (Wooffitt, 1992). Given that the participant was a medium by profession, paranormal experiences should be normal for her; nonetheless, she marks them as unusual in talk in order to present herself as ordinary person (Wooffitt, 1992). Thus, her report of the experience is not a mere description of events, but orients to the audience and performs identity-work.

The rhetorical construction of coincidence in literature

To the author's knowledge, there is currently no research on the discursive construction of naturally occurring, real life instances of coincidences, and no DP research on the use of cognitive formulations in accomplishing coincidence.[11] There is also no investigation that investigates the way in which linked events are made to appear non-coincidental. This is why we will be borrowing from the field of literature to set the basic premises, specifically the analysis and theory of coincidence in literature. Dannenberg (2004) turned her attention to the ways in which coincidence is accomplished in narrative fiction. Her research chimes in with the data used in the research at hand: she uses coincidences in written stories, and the Cambridge Coincidence Collection coincidences are written instances of coincidence. Whether they have or have not happened is not the concern of this chapter (and as Dannenberg's analysis concerns itself with fiction, neither is hers). The focus is on the coincidence's rhetorical and interactional role.

Fiction is widely read, and has an audience that arguably depends on a variety of factors such as the kind of interest the book garners. Both therefore have rhetorical 'agendas' (in the interactional, not cognitive sense of the word); they 'do' things. As outlined in the introduction, Dannenberg (2004) initially consolidated a history of the occurrence of coincidence in works of fiction, which she argued is traceable to

[11] As stated in the introduction, whilst there has been recent research focusing on the way in which meaning is constructed in reports of real-life coincidence, building an interpretative phenomenological analysis of synchronicity in therapy, the authors of this research explicitly state that they 'were not concerned with establishing the role of language in the construction of reality' (Roxburgh, 2012, 149).

the Renaissance, and discussed its occurrence in prominent fictional works such as the Oedipus story, where the coincidence centres around 'kinship reunion':

> A thumbnail sketch of this plot is as follows: the paths of estranged relatives (characters with a biological connection) intersect in the space and time of the narrative world, in apparently random and remarkable circumstances, and through no causal intent of the characters involved. In the coincidence plot, narrative space and time are subject to remarkable conjunctions (or, *to expose the device: they are radically manipulated by the author*). (Dannenberg, 2004, 399-400, emphasis added)

That is, she exposes how coincidence is *accomplished* in discourse. She emphasises the rhetorical quality of the construction of coincidence by outlining how 'remarkable conjunctions' in space and time construct coincidence. Therefore, this shows that coincidence is not necessarily out there in the world to be perceived and merely reported. Rather, coincidences are *crafted* in texts.

The structure of the coincidence plot in narratives according to Dannenberg (2004) traditionally involved long-lost relatives meeting in extraordinary circumstances. This is where the analytic focus of coincidences differs from the one in the data set and analysis at hand, as, whilst some include reunions as a topic in a number of coincidence accounts, are not limited to this kind of narrative story-line alone. Dannenberg's research (2004) emphasises a key point of the coincidence narrative, the coincidence realisation. Dannenberg (2004) states that:

> […] the most crucial component in its [a coincidence's] realization is a cognitive one. The crux of the coincidence plot is the discovery of the previous relationship by the coinciding characters—the *recognition of identity*. The staging of the act of recognition often involves the portrayal of intense emotional states which, in the overarching (as opposed to episodic) configuration of the coincidence plot, constitute a climax in the narrative. (Dannenberg, 2004, 408; emphasis in original).

Specifically, when she refers to the *portrayal* of 'intense emotional states', this chimes in with research in discursive psychology where emotions are socially constructed (Edwards, 1999). Thus, in the absence of other discursive analyses on how coincidences are constructed in texts, this is a useful example. The main difference to Dannenberg (apart from her data, which is fictional, and the research at hand uses naturally occurring texts, although they of course have similarities), is

regarding the point of the coincidence story. Because Dannenberg is concerned with the ways in which the reported coincidence *contributes* to the plot of the story, she is not concerned with coincidence per se. From her perspective coincidence is a tool to create the story that is told. The research at hands studies accounts of coincidences in their own right. Coincidences are not seen to be contributing to some other story - they *are* the story.

Analysing accounts of coincidence as topic in their own right

Whilst in previous research, coincidences have been seen to be proof of a human mental inability to process chance (Griffiths and Tenenbaum, 2001; Beitman, 2009; Watt, 1990), and reports of coincidence experiences were seen as poof of shortcomings such as an illusion of control over events that are random (Blackmore and Troscianko, 1985), ‘‘loose’ cognitive control’ or inability to supress ‘irrelevant memory content’ (Rominger et al., 2011), the following analysis will investigate a coincidence account as a piece of data. This data will not be seen in terms of giving access to the narrator’s mental states or thought processes (Edwards, 2006). In line with Gilbert & Mulkay (1984: 13) the following analysis will ‘[…] treat participants' discourse as a topic instead of a resource’. The coincidence accounts at hand will be seen as discourse, as words that are actions that ‘do things’ and ‘are also not only done but *seen-to-be-done* (Edwards, 2000: 365). Wooffitt argues that:

> We now understand ordinary language, both spoken and written, to have a dynamic and pragmatic character: that is, social actions are accomplished through discourse. Moreover, everyday language is seen as constitutive of social life, rather than a detached commentary upon it. (1992: 6)

As such, a coincidence account is *constructing* coincidence. It is therefore seen not as a reflection or memory of events but as constitutive of the events that it describes. Proof of this is the fact that in Chapter Seven, events are described and a link between them established and yet they are styled as not being coincidental. These data show that it is the way in which the events are portrayed that constructs them as coincidences or not. The account of coincidence and disconfirmed coincidences will be analysed not as a pointer to occurrences in the past or a memory, but as a topic for analysis itself. The descriptions within these accounts, it will be argued, are not

neutral depictions of the world – they attempt to shape the ways in which the events and the identity of the narrator of the coincidence are seen by the audience.

Analysing stories

Stokoe and Edwards (2006: 64) examine stories, specifically 'speakers' formulations of, and orientations to, narratives or stories *as such'* (2006: 58, emphasis in original). They contrast to a narrative analytic way of studying stories:

> What we have done is to 'respecify' (Button, 1991) narrative researchers' focus on identifying common story structures and components and instead produce an ethnomethodological study of how members' sense of 'stories' is displayed in and for the interactional contexts in which they are put to use.
> Stokoe and Edwards (2006: 64)

The main difference is that in their analysis, they look at the ways in which people themselves orient to stories; they 'examine their action-orientation and the way they are shaped for the occasions of their production; how members' *common sense notions* of *stories* are displayed in the interactional contexts in which they are put to use' (Stokoe and Edwards, 2006: 56, emphasis in original). Their analysis of stories therefore investigates the social components of story-telling in interaction; '*how* stories are told — how they get embedded and are managed, turn-by-turn, in interaction — and *what* conversational actions are accomplished in their telling (e.g. complaining, justifying, flirting, testifying, etc.)' (Stokoe and Edwards, 2006: 57, emphasis in original)

One of the data extracts shows how Cindy, during a mealtime conversation with her mother and father, tries to end the dinner by passing her plate to her mother, who tells her she has to keep eating. However, it is here that she insists that she 'cannot continue eating, *because* she is in the middle of story-telling, where the story has something called "the rest" of it that is yet to be told.' (Stokoe and Edwards, 2006: 59). That is, the authors have managed to show how, when Cindy 'invokes the category 'story' for what she is saying' she is doing something (Stokoe and Edwards, 2006: 59). The authors further argue that participants themselves show an orientation to what a story entails. That is, 'stories' do not need a definition by researchers, because people orient to what an actual story is. Furthermore, Stokoe and Edwards (2006: 62) argue that people use the 'notion of "the story"' to accomplish

interactional work. The authors also present data in which 'story' is used to denote 'version of events' and therefore used as opposed to 'truth' or 'objectivity' (Stokoe and Edwards, 2006: 64). It is exactly this kind of analytic perspective that the research at hand takes on coincidence accounts.

Conclusion

This methodological discussion informs the research question for the research at hand. The data will be investigated from a place of 'unmotivated looking' (Sacks, 1984). The term is used in the idealistic sense, and it is important to admit that the concept of unmotivated looking might itself be a rhetorical construction of an ideal that cannot truly be. That is, without knowledge of language, without knowledge of culture, norms and tacit knowledge of what people do in their conversations there cannot be true unmotivated looking in research. In fact, I dare say that any kind of looking, listening or reading by someone who has grown up in and is part of a society, there cannot be truly unmotivated looking. Any looking is contextual and made meaningful by reference to the past, language that we speak, language that we see, comprehend and meaningfully digest in reference to what we know from the past. In light of the gap in the research of coincidences, the overarching research question is: what patterns can be found in accounts of coincidences and in accounts of events that are not a coincidence. This quest for patterns allows me to study accounts of coincidence in their own right, not as a reflection of cognitive, statistical, or macro variables. Thus, in the following chapter I will be outlining the data and analytical method of the thesis.

Chapter 3

Data and analytic method

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline how I collected, selected, and analysed the data. There are three sections; the first is concerned with the four areas of data sourcing and how these sources have been explored through conversational analytic/discursive psychology methods, the second section outlines data selection, preparation and analytical method, and the third section is concerned with the ethics of the project as well as discussing the potential impact it could have on society and research.

To set the methodological scene, in the coincidence 'collection' that was conducted, I have collected coincidence accounts, not coincidences per se. That is, the methodological endeavour is concerned with discursive description, rather than coincidences as 'a priori' events. Textual coincidence accounts were analysed as discursive constructions of coincidence[12] using discursive psychology (DP). That means that events that were described as part of a coincidence, were seen as discursive constructions.

Sourcing the data

Using people's own accounts of coincidence transforms the field of coincidence studies. It has been argued that 'a key challenge in the study of serendipity is obtaining accounts of serendipitous experiences that provide insight into the phenomenon' (Rubin, Burkell, and Quan-Haase, 2010: 1). I argue that the use of people's own accounts of coincidence is a marked departure from setting up coincidental moments in experiments, because a coincidence is meant to be unexpected and meaningful and an artificial set up cannot match everyday life situations. Instead, I collected a variety of textual coincidence accounts through

[12] In this chapter, I interchangeably refer to 'the thesis at hand', 'the analysis' and 'I' as the acting agents applying methods for the purpose of research. This is done in order to discursively suggest a unity between all three.

different channels with the main endeavour to examine these coincidence narratives from everyday life, and to investigate the structural design of these accounts. These different channels are explored below;

Researcher-instigated data:

Textual coincidence accounts were collected in the form of 23 coincidence accounts that participants volunteered upon hearing about my research via public engagement events, my university profile, word of mouth and snowball sampling.

Independently existing data:

Video-based data:

Nine coincidence accounts were sourced from YouTube and transcribed using Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Hepburn and Bolden, 2013).

Radio coincidences:

I collected 11 radio interviews discussing coincidences. This source was identified after a specific coincidence was mentioned in a book (Crompton, 2013), and tracing key words from the narrative led to the original source. These are an interesting data set because the radio interviews have been sourced from the public, and are, in terms of the research, naturally occurring data. Furthermore, the radio station has arguably selected the coincidences for their impact-value for their listeners, such that the data set contains very startling coincidence accounts. Notably, the radio host would tend to play a recording of a narrator describing a part of his/her coincidence, but then cut it off and summarise how it had concluded (or summarise other parts of the narrative), such that the collection did not contain *first-hand* accounts of coincidences. This can be interesting in itself, as it could be useful to examine which parts of the narratives have been summarised and how this is done. However, the aim was to examine the structure, and first-hand accounts were preferable.

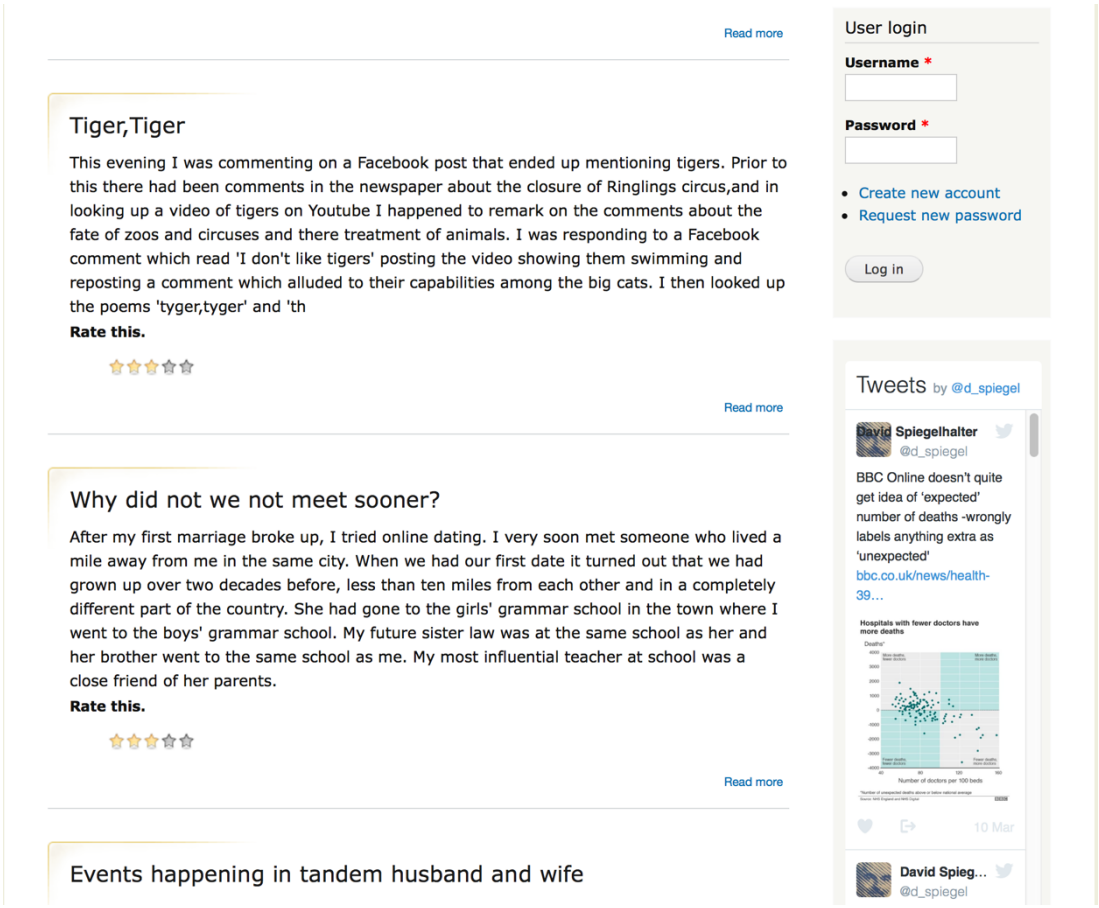
Cambridge Coincidence Collection:

The analysis has been conducted using the Cambridge Coincidence Collection (CCC) as the main source of accounts of coincidence. The Cambridge Coincidence Collection is a catalogue of coincidence stories that displayed 5080 individual, publically available coincidence accounts at the start of data collection (and the number has increased since then). Of the total, 981 individual accounts were sampled for this project. These accounts are uploaded by people themselves as part of a wider project of citizen led archiving (more information about the CCC can be found here https://understandinguncertainty.org/coincidences). The accounts come in the form of individual stories. An example CCC account is presented below:

These accounts have a title, then a main body of text and there is an option for readers to rate the coincidence underneath the main body. Each CCC account has a title below which are three links: one that leads to the CCC's first page, link to a place where the reader could post their own coincidence or the bottom one where the reader can read more coincidence stories. At the bottom of the story, readers are both able to submit a star rating from 1 – 5 as well as seeing the score and number of scores given to that coincidence. There is no explanation as to how a reader of the coincidence should score the coincidence story. In the analysis, these coincidence accounts have been reproduced using the copy and paste function. The links and ratings were deleted, and the rest of the page was not copied into the thesis chapters,

such that all that remains is the title and the coincidence accounts. The ratings were deleted because nearly all of the ratings came in at three out of five stars, such that the ratings did not add insights to the analysis. Of course, this is a possibly interesting research finding and it could be mirroring research that concludes that a person rates their own coincidence as more striking than another person's coincidence (Falk, 1989). The mains reason for the deletion of the ratings was that the focus of this study was the discursive construction of the coincidences, which the ratings did not further. Additionally, the website does not specify which qualities should be considered when giving ratings and the ratings did not include any written comments. The original formatting may have been altered in the reproduction of the accounts.

They are presented as a list of coincidences, where the title as well as the start of the story are visible (see below for an example list). To read the remaining narrative, a reader has to click on the title to open up the entirety of the account.



Notably, the website invites coincidence accounts, whilst setting a specific context (this context is explored in further detail in Chapter 6). This context is based on the public persona of the host of the site, the site itself, other coincidence accounts, their ratings, and the text on the site, shown below:

> Professor David Spiegelhalter of Cambridge University wants to know about your coincidences! Why? By recording your coincidence stories here, you can help him build a picture of what kinds of coincidences are out there and which ones seem to 'get to' us the most. Your coincidence stories can also help him explore the 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. (Spiegelhalter, n.d.[13])

That is, the website positions itself as a scientific repository; it collects coincidence accounts for the purpose of investigating scientific explanations for the existence of coincidences. The explanations that are already suggested are either cognitive ('workings of our brains') or statistical ('calculate the chances of a coincidence'). The inference is that by uploading a coincidence story, a person can contribute to this scientific pursuit of knowledge. Because it is framed in this way, a person indirectly signs up to this scientific framework through the act of submitting a coincidence account. Coincidence accounts have to adapt not only to the statistical orientation of the website, but also to the broader project for which it was created. That is, to contribute a worthwhile coincidence account to the CCC, the coincidence account needs to be sufficiently 'interesting', because whilst anonymous, it is rated by readers.

Textual accounts and Conversation Analysis/discursive psychology

Using CCC accounts I explored people's own descriptions of coincidence experiences, the reported impact of these events on a person's life, and their interpretation of these events. Along with data from YouTube accounts, this has the cumulative consequence of giving people's own accounts a voice in the context of coincidence studies mainly focused upon positivist data collection techniques.

[13] https://understandinguncertainty.org/coincidences; accessed 2 February 2016.

Discussing current developments in discursive psychology, Edwards (2005) emphasised the value of naturally occurring data over interviews:

> There has been a clear commitment in the work of Edwards and Potter, in particular, toward the use of natural data (rather than, say, research interviews) and toward grounding analysis in the principles of CA. This preference for CA and naturally occurring data follows the foundational principle that discourse is performative, or action oriented. Given that principle, it makes sense to find discourse at work doing the things it does, wherever those things happen. So we find ourselves analysing counselling sessions, mundane telephone conversations, newspaper reports, help-line talk, police interrogations, and so on, rather than interviewing people for their views on topics put to them, as it were, offstage. Research interviews remain thoroughly analysable, of course, but they are not the first resort when we look for data. (2005: 270)

Following this discursive emphasis upon the 'naturally occurring' as exposing the performative, this project focuses on the CCC accounts as the main source for the analysis. The CCC was a resource that could not be ignored.

The CCC offered more individual coincidence narratives and more material for the purpose of finding order in coincidence narratives

As Wood and Kroger (2000: 80) argue, the emergent data sets do not necessarily have to be large in terms of numbers of interviewees to yield valid research. They point out that (2000, 80):

> […] because the focus of discourse analysis is language use rather than language users, the critical issue concerns the size of the size of the sample of discourse (rather than the number of people) to be analyzed. For example, if the researcher is examining the structure of turn-taking, a single conversation might be sufficient in that it would yield a large number of instances of turn-taking (Potter & Whetherell, 1987: 161, cited in Wood and Kroger, 2000: 80).

Over the course of the research, and in light of a lack of previous research into coincidence accounts, it was of greater value to focus on the structural ways in which coincidences are produced in these textual accounts. The total data pool of the CCC however was very large, comprising 5080 instances at the start of the data collection, and additional instances were added on a continuous basis. Thus, the CCC yielded the number of individual coincidence narratives that were required to identify structural features of a coincidence account. Sacks (1984, 27), the founder of CA, argues that "giving some consideration to whatever can be found" can yield "strong payoffs"; he advocates selecting data based on the opportunities that are out there:

> Now people often ask me why I choose the particular data I choose. Is it some problem that I have in mind that caused me to pick this corpus or this segment? And I am insistent that I just happened to have it, it became fascinating, and I spent some time at it. […] When we start out with a piece of data, the question of what we are going to end up with, what kind of findings it will give, should not be a consideration. We sit down with a piece of data, make a bunch of observations, and see where they will go (lecture 5, fall 1967). (Sacks, 1984: 27)

Using CCC meant that the accounts were unsolicited narratives and thus not produced primarily for the purpose of a discursive analysis – as opposed to any researcher-solicited data that could have been used. The casual writing style (including grammatical and spelling errors) that is conventionally used in personal accounts online, such as the CCC, means that people who do not possess professional writing skills and could be excluded from more formal literary channels, are able to contribute their accounts online (O'Brien and Clark, 2012). Suzuki et al. (2007: 319) argue that sourcing data from the internet can result in 'access to unusually diverse samples (e.g., international audiences, homebound individuals, new mothers, etc.)'. Suzuki et al. (2007; citing Robinson, 2001) further argue that power discrepancies, both real and perceived, between researchers and participants (i.e. interviewers and interviewees) can potentially be reduced because of the potential (perceived) anonymity of online communication[14].

Robinson argues that 'unsolicited first-person accounts on the Internet can be extremely valuable sources of rich, authentic data' (2001: 714). This is a point underscored by O'Brien and Clark's (2012) work. They collected 161 terminal illness narratives online and in print, which they argue could not have been collected without the Internet as a resource. Narratives sourced online have the benefit of not needing the intervention of a researchers, which O'Brien & Clark argue is important because of the limited lifespan of the people reporting terminal illness. These unsolicited online narratives of terminal illness incorporate the accounts of a large variety of different people from different geographical locations and different demographical backgrounds, that could not have been accessed in other ways and

[14] Given the association of the Cambridge Coincidence Collection with Cambridge University and the professor of statistics who is its founder however, a potential power imbalance could be playing a role. Indeed, some of the rhetorical devices seem to be used to construct people's attempts at supporting their claims in an academic-statistical manner, which in itself creates the power imbalance – people submit coincidence stories that they tailor to fit the context. In some instances, Professor Spiegelhalter is directly addressed. However, this does confirm that people reporting coincidences are able to submit their accounts and do so.

which an interviewer presence may have altered (O'Brien and Clark, 2012). Further research by Brown explored the discourses in which white supremacists described people of African descent on white supremacist websites (Brown, 2009), which may not have been identified through traditional channels.

Using Internet Accounts of Coincidence

Eysenbach & Wyatt (2002: 76) argue that 'material published on the Internet may be a valuable resource for researchers desiring to understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live outside of experimental settings, with due emphasis on the interpretations, experiences, and views of 'real world' people'. Indeed, a continuation of internet sourcing has been applied to recent coincidence research that used hashtags on Twitter to identify Tweets about meaningful coincidences from everyday life (Bogers and Björneborn, 2013). They termed the instances they found 'micro-serendipity' because at the Twitter character limit of 140 characters they are shorter than detailed descriptions of meaningful coincidences. By purposefully omitting a definition of 'meaningful coincidences' for the purpose of their research, they managed to collect "a data set spanning both information-related serendipity as well as everyday occurrences" (Bogers and Björneborn, 2013: 207). Analysing the resulting Tweets qualitatively, they identified four 'key elements' that indicate serendipity: unexpectedness, insight, and value (three elements first identified by Makri and Blandford, 2012) and 'preoccupation' as a fourth element that they identified in their own research. They propose a distinction between '*background* serendipity', which 'is characterized by unexpectedly finding something meaningful related to a background interest, thereby changing that person's focus and direction', and ''*foreground* serendipity' (i.e. synchronicity), as it is characterized by unexpectedly finding something meaningful related to a foreground interest and preoccupation, thus confirming the person's focus and direction' (Bogers and Björneborn, 2013: 206).

This chimes in with research by Rubin, Burkell, and Quan-Haase (2010: 1) who used internet-based 'natural descriptions of serendipity' from social media to revolutionise previous research on serendipity accounts. They argue that this addresses the problem that 'much of the past research on everyday serendipity has

relied on elicited descriptions' (2010: 1). A keyword search of commonly used words describing serendipity in everyday settings and literature resulted in the collection of 94 serendipity accounts for their data set. Whilst definitions of coincidence and serendipity may differ, the keywords the authors selected appear to be words commonly used in coincidence accounts. Sample keywords included '"that made me realise"; "found OR discovered […] by accident OR serendipitously OR by chance"; "that's when I made the connection"; "wasn't actively looking OR searching for […] when * found"'. The three advantage of these data are that firstly, 'they are freely and publicly available online', secondly, they are 'created by bloggers independently of the study' and thirdly, they 'are written by self- motivated writers for an unknown audience' (Rubin et al. 2010: 2). Rubin et al. (2010: 2) use these accounts with the aim to develop 'a typology of serendipitous encounters'.

Such research shows how the internet provides opportunities for finding coincidence accounts, however, such coincidence accounts were ultimately seen as *textual* reproductions of the coincidental experiences, rather than representations or social constructions of coincidence itself, which is the way in which they were analysed in the thesis at hand. That is, whilst there are commonalities in terms of the data collected, the thesis at hand differs in the method of analysis, because it does not see the accounts as a *pathway* to the experiences, but explores coincidence accounts for their discursive constructions of the event itself. Indeed, the focus of social constructionism is on what participants mark as important themselves, rather than what researchers deem important (Locke, 2004). That is, what is focused on in the analysis is what emerges from the data – what the participants have themselves brought up or constructed as relevant. It is a determined move away from experimentally designed coincidences. It also is in direct contrast to other approaches such as content analysis, whereby the data is coded to pre-set analytical categories by the researcher to reflect their analytic concerns. To summarise, using textual internet-based coincidence accounts tackles the issues of artificially creating coincidences (as in a laboratory setting), and of soliciting accounts specifically for study in terms of pre-existing concerns (as in content analytic approaches).

Textual accounts are worthwhile DP data

Discourse analysis and discursive psychology embrace texts as valid sources of data. For instance, recent critical discursive psychological research used textual data gathered from national and international newspaper through a database in order to investigate discourse about a new baby-feeding technique, called 'baby-led weaning' (Locke, 2015). Te Molder & Potter (2005: 77) write that their argument is meant to 'apply to written as well as spoken discourse'. Potter and Wetherell (1987) define discourse in the following:

> 'We will use 'discourse' in its most open sense, following Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) to cover all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds. So when we talk of 'discourse analysis' we mean analysis of any of these forms of discourse.' (p. 7)

Wood and Kroger (2000: 55) similarly outline that 'the discourse that is the focus of analysis in discourse analysis does not refer to language in the abstract, but to discourse in use. That is, discourse refers to the words that were spoken, to the text that was written.' Texts, however, are different to spoken interactions:

> 'This means that even written texts are seen in interactional terms. Whereas in a conversation, participants in the interaction are co-present in time and space, with written texts there is temporal and spatial distance between them, and the text acquires a degree of independence both from the writing process and the reading process (the same is true of television programmes). Nevertheless, texts are written with particular readership in mind, and are oriented to (and anticipate) particular sorts of reception and response, and are therefore also interactive. (Bakhtin, 1986, cited in Fairclough, 2001: 239-240)

This means that as long the textual data are analysed in terms of what they are, then they can yield valuable insights, which supports the use of the CCC for this project.

Because the CCC coincidence accounts were not generated by interviewer questions, they therefore exhibit structural properties that are not influenced by interview questions. Rather, the narrative structures were determined by the voluntary narrators of the coincidence accounts. That is not to say that they were isolated from the context in which they were produced; people were uninterrupted by an interviewer, yet their accounts still oriented to the (scientific and statistical) context in which they were produced.

Participants would have encountered the same instructions on the CCC website, the same definitions and the same typology of possible coincidences that the website showcases, and yet they would be freer in the formulation of the events than in question and answer sequences over the course of an interview. Ultimately however, each of these data sources could have yielded interesting structures. This is because, as Sacks (1984: 22) proposes, 'order at all points' can be found in society, in interactions, and small segments of life, because society needs order to work, even when people themselves may only come across a limited sample size of experiences in their daily lives. This also means that a researcher can find order in many pieces of data. Indeed, Sacks (1984: 23) proposes that "given the possibility that there is overwhelming order, it would be extremely hard *not* to find it, no matter how or where we looked" (emphasis in original).

Using the internet in DP/CA

Using internet-based data for analysis is innovative and an up-and-coming new avenue for CA/DP research. Holtz & Wagner (2008) for instance, investigated nearly 5000 messages on an extreme right-wing Internet discussion board, identifying racist discourse online. And even in conversation analysis, where naturally occurring talk is normally considered the ultimate type of data (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008: 12; 230), there has been an analytic turn towards online interactions. The 'Microanalysis Of Online Data' network (MOOD) for instance, is concerned with the qualitative analysis of online data (Giles et al., 2014). Giles et al. (2014) argue for the expansion of digital CA, which is the application of CA methodology to online interactions. They justify this pointing to the untapped wealth of possible data online. They argue that there are challenges for CA application, but that:

> The academic community active in the field of interaction seems ready to further explore and develop CA for digital spaces. In the coming years, we envision the need for ongoing methodological discussions wherein scholars can share insights for their ongoing micro- analysis of online data, as we all work to refine the application of CA to online talk (Giles et al., 2014: 50).

Recent research activity shows that analysts utilise internet interactions for analysis: In her PhD, Meredith (2014) compared spoken and online written interaction between friends on Facebook chat. She concluded that there were differences in the interactions, which may be due to the technological constraints in this interactional

environment. In their analysis on the ways in which repair is conducted in a Facebook chat environment (Meredith & Stokoe, 2014), it was noted that the preference for self-correction is also normative in online interaction (Meredith & Stokoe, 2014: 202). The conclusion was that 'assumptions about differences between spoken and online interaction are premature. Rather, we argue that online interaction should be treated as an adaptation of an oral speech-exchange system' (Meredith & Stokoe, 2014: 181).

Selecting the data/first steps of analysis

A single case analysis was conducted to establish possible patterns (and it also formed the first analytical chapter). To find this single case, one instance was randomly selected from a sample of recently uploaded CCC instances. No specific research question was established before analysing the single case, as the principle of 'unmotivated examination' from conversation analytic methodology discussed above (Sacks, 1984: 27) was followed. The research question underlying the analytical endeavours, if it had to be identified in retrospect to this 'looking', would be: Which patterns can be found in the discourse of people reporting coincidences?

I analysed the single case by printing out the text, adding line numbers and identifying what each sentence part was 'doing'. That is, I went through the text asking myself at every stage 'why this, now?' I then looked at the composition on a structural level, identifying any emergent patterns. The ways in which time was constructed was analysed. Specifically, the ways in which the account was made to appear like a coincidence account was analysed. There was a repetition/slight variation of a particular phrase that subsequently turned out to be a feature for making events sound alike, and thus coincidental. These were noted because alternative formulations could have been used instead. The possible rhetorical reasons for picking the formulations that were chosen was investigated. The choice of words in these formulations was analysed. The narrative structure seemed to describe the events as if they were happening in real time. I identified any features that seemed 'odd'. Odd features included phrases that are not commonly used, sentence structures that sounded peculiar and parts of the narrative where something

seemed to be missing. Any instances of reported speech were further investigated. Cognitive formulations received analytic attention.

The single case analysis is a legitimate data analysis strategy. It had been argued that 'the analysis of single cases has been a long-standing feature of conversation analytic work.' (Wooffitt 1992: 72). Using CA methodology, Wooffitt (1992) used a single case of an interviewee describing her personal paranormal experience to investigate the discursive features in the account. Analysing a single case produces an array of features for further investigation, 'a general insight as to the range of interactional tasks and issues' (Wooffitt, 1992: 73). To borrow from Wooffitt (1992: 73) 'I am using a single case analysis as a form of pilot study to generate other areas for empirical research'. As in recent research on paranormal research groups, this first analysis resulted in the identification of a 'range of phenomena' (Ironside, 2016: 91).

This idea stems from Sacks, who wrote that:

> The idea is to take singular sequences of conversation and tear them apart in such a way as to find rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims (a collection of terms that more or less relate to each other and that I use somewhat interchangeably) that can be used to generate the orderly features we find in the conversation we examine. The point is, then, to come back to the singular things we observe in a singular sequence, with some rules that handle those singular features, and also, necessarily, handle lots of other events. (Sacks, 1984: 413)

And this technique for generating features has been used widely, and productively. Whalen, Zimmerman, and Whalen (1988) investigated a call to the emergency helpline (Dallas Fire Department), in which a man tried to call an ambulance to help his stepmother who he reported had severe respiratory problems and was 'out of it'. These two descriptions should, according to protocol, have ensured that an ambulance would have been dispatched immediately. However, the interaction broke down, the ambulance was dispatched with seven minutes' delay and the mother died, generating a large public reaction to the case. This shows that single interactions can yield rich analytical payoffs. A single case analysis was also conducted using the conversation of a person who has aphasia (a disease of the brain that leads to difficulties using language correctly) using CA in order to investigate grammatical patterns (Beeke, Wilkinson, and Maxim, 2003). Firth (1995) used a telex document

and a telephone call between a Danish export manager and an Indian wholesaler operating in Saudi Arabia to investigate the role of 'accounts' (i.e. justifications or excuses) in negotiations. His research suggests that both single-case analysis and textual data can be used for analysis. He justifies using both a written document and talk by arguing that 'Accounts are produced both in writing and in telephone talk' (Firth, 1995: 206). An offer is rejected in the telex message, and in the way in which it is constructed, 'some parallels can be drawn between the written communication and conversation analysts' descriptions of 'dispreferred' turns in spoken interaction' (Firth 1995: 207). This chimes in with the research at hand, because a textual document was used, and was considered worthy of investigation. The single case displayed a number of features (probabilistic reasoning, cognitive formulations) that built the basis of phenomena found in the corpus.

Sampling Coincidences/Constructing the sample

The sampling had three components. Initially, the newest coincidence accounts would be read and examined for potentially interesting design features. That is, I identified discursive patterns through 'unmotivated looking'[15] (Sacks, 1984). Once a specific feature of interest was identified, instances using the same formulation were identified through a search within the CCC, which is a technologically updated version to Jefferson's 'rummaging' technique (2004: 146), outlined in more detail below. New data sometimes showed that the features that had initially been identified did not apply to the wider corpus. The list of features was therefore revisited and altered to suit. There was an ongoing feedback loop between characteristics of a new pattern and data. This iterative process draws on the CA and discursive psychology approaches outlined above. From all the instances collected, the clearest cases were then chosen and used in the analysis, following an 'emergent opportunity sampling technique', which suggests the collection of 'information-rich'

[15] Unmotivated looking shall here refer to the idealised idea of unmotivated looking and not discount the many factors that have invariably influenced the data analysis. Rather, using this framework is an attempt at 'doing being scientific' in an academic context where this is necessary. Furthermore, the idea of 'unmotivated looking' chimes in with Sack's idea of 'order at all points'. If there is order everywhere, then unmotivated looking should result in the finding of structures in data. That is, using the term 'unmotivated looking' itself suggests that the data itself has these structures and they were not created by the research, but rather, 'found' 'come across' and 'stumbled upon' like a natural science phenomenon. It is also a way of suggesting that finding a rhetorical device in everyday texts is as much deserving of the term 'discovery' as finding a new animal in a hidden part of the planet.

cases (Mulveen and Hepworth 2006: 286). Three themes emerged in the process: probabilistic reasoning, cognitive formulations and strategies for narrative coincidence-enhancement.

In regards to a sampling technique for selecting instances, I used technology (Finder functions and keyword searches in the CCC) to trace instances. This is an innovative, but also established practice for finding further instances in the data set, as for example Sacks (1992, Vol. I) and Jefferson (2004) used newspaper clippings in order to elucidate phenomena they encountered. To widen his collections, Sacks did this by hand for his newspaper clippings on the phenomenon 'joke/serious', which later was developed as 'At first I thought, then I realised'. This is well recorded: Lerner (2004: 6) writes that:

> She [Jefferson] first traces Sacks' developing interest in this matter – based for the most part on reports found in newspaper stories. Then, using both newspaper reports and conversational data, Jefferson shows how people routinely select "first thoughts" to report, that […].

Jefferson (2004: 146) refers to her methodology and outlines how she 'came across two lovely instances' of 'At first I thought' "whilst *rummaging* through [her] own ever-increasing horde of newspaper clippings and hastily scribbled notes from news broadcasts". That is, using search features to find instances in the CCC is merely a technologically updated version to finding instances in newspaper clippings. Considering this emphasis on mundane publicly available data, it seems likely that early CA analysts would have made use of the internet's vast opportunities for sourcing discursive data in general, and specific instances for a new phenomenon if they would have had the chance.

The initial account was sampled randomly and used to identify initial patterns. The feature identified was then sampled through systematic sampling of all accounts to find those that exhibited the feature. I used purposive sampling to identify the cases that were clear. Out of the instances that could be used, I then conducted quota sampling until I had a sufficient number of cases in order to write up the analysis chapter. Whilst this method of sampling does not create a generalisable sample, for the discursive psychological analysis influenced by conversation analysis that I am using in this thesis, this is not necessarily crucial because there is 'order at all points'

(Sacks, 1984: 22) which permits people to understand meaning even when exposed to just a small number of situations of any given kind. Additionally, with exception to the single case analysis that is the basis for Chapter Four, all other chapters had very high numbers of cases, which suggests that genuine patterns were found and that these patterns were robust.

Data sampling/ selection by chapter

The method by which data instances were selected differed for each chapter, which is why this is described on a chapter by chapter basis.

Chapter 4: randomly selected single case analysis from Cambridge Coincidence Collection

Chapter 5:

I investigated the use of cognitive formulations in the data set. Both the cognitive formulations 'decided' and 'realised' had featured in the single case analysis. I used the search function on the CCC website to search for all instances of 'decided', and then I searched for all instances featuring the word 'realised' and the alternative spelling 'realized'. I searched for these terms with speech marks. I read each account belonging to the first 140 instances of the word. I discarded instances from the data set if they exhibited one of the following three features:

> 1. Accounts that were explicitly marked as not being accounts of coincidence experiences, but that were retellings of coincidences mentioned in books or other forms of media, such as radio stations, or 'historical' coincidences.
>
> 2. Accounts that were purely argumentative and devoid of a coincidence account (such as instances that were disguised arguments for the existence of God, or claims that there is a conspiracy, or the case in which the narrator claimed to be a witch). These were excluded because attributing the events to a paranormal or religious source deprives coincidence narratives of their coincidental quality – they become religious accounts, conspiracy accounts, or paranormal accounts, etc.
>
> 3. Accounts that were unclear or difficult to follow to the extent that they were unintelligible or their point was lost.

I selected accounts where the coincidence seemed to be 'clear', that is, instances where I could identify two (or more) interlinked events, and where the link was

described clearly. In the face of a lot of possible material, I attempted to select instances that seemed more extraordinary than others, that is, I selected instances that seemed interesting because they featured constellations of events that were more surprising than others; I discarded some of the repetitive birthday coincidences for instance. This was done in order to make the case that the structure that was identified was not simply a characteristic of a particular kind of coincidence telling (say, all coincidences involving birthdays) but rather, that the normative operating structure runs through a variety of accounts.

For the 'realised' cases the same procedure was applied. The 'decided' cases were analysed in a separate part of the chapter to the 'realised' section. However, there were instances where 'decided' and 'realised' occurred together. After analysing some of these accounts in depth, I identified possible features of the two cognitive formulations working together. This prompted a further search in the CCC. The instances where both 'decided' and 'realised' formulations occur in the same account were obtained through searching for '"decided" "realised"' in the search box of the CCC. There were exactly 60 instances containing both search words, which were each read and assessed for their suitability for analysis. Due to the analytical observations I had already made, I then went through the data set looking for instances where the 'realised' described the point at which the two events of the coincidence are 'revealed'. In short, the initial impetus for selecting cognitive formulations was due to the single case analysis. Initially, accounts containing either 'realised' and 'decided' were selected, but then accounts using both were selected from the total CCC. Thus, the data selection was intertwined with the evolving analysis, such that a further data search involved screening the CCC for instances containing both search terms in the same account.

Chapter 6:

A number of analyses of recently uploaded coincidence accounts from the CCC were conducted to identify patterns to do with the construction of probability. It was noticed that coincidence accounts featured sections that dealt with the probability of the coincidence described. That is, people seemed to produce assessments of the probability of the coincidence they were reporting. The reason this structure was

identified is because divergent versions of events would be presented in close proximity: a coincidence-weakening probabilistic argument, and a coincidence-confirming formulation after, both divided through 'but…still' formulation. The structure and the 'but…still' formulation were identified from this generative analysis, working in conjunction with other features. The probabilistic argument and the coincidence confirmation tended to be formulated in different ways and were seemingly only structurally related (but not in terms of the words chosen). This would make finding other instances difficult. However, the use of 'still' seemed to run across cases and was conducted using the internal search box in the CCC. A search of "still" identified 610 possible cases. Starting with the most recently uploaded one, cases were copied into a document for further selection. This resulted in 37 pages of a word document of possible data. Those cases were selected in which 'still' in the meaning of 'and yet' or 'nonetheless' is used to confirm the coincidence described is a coincidence. Further analysis of cases found that it was used after probabilistic description proposing it is not coincidence. It was only during the latter stages of analysis, that the structure was identified as resembling a 'show concession' (Antaki and Wetherell, 1999).

Chapter 7:

The last analytical chapter, Chapter 7 on coincidence disconfirmation uses a different data set. Namely, the data used for this chapter comprises a number of different sources, including newspaper articles and publically available transcripts from political meetings. These transcripts from political meetings were taken from the *Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe's* database of political hearings and meetings (https://www.csce.gov.) These texts are all explicitly produced for the public.

There was a conspicuous lack of the word 'coincidence' across coincidence accounts, which is not a quantitative claim, but a mere observation reading thousands of coincidence accounts over the last years: in coincidence narratives describing coincidental events ('literal' coincidences), the term 'coincidence' was often absent. That is, the events would be shown to interlink, yet this was accomplished in ways that left out and at times actively obscured the term

coincidence. This was motivation for a google search of texts in which the word 'coincidence' occurs. And the word 'coincidence' seemed to occur in contexts that were not readable as coincidental.

Thus, the initial identification of coincidence disconfirmation stems from an initial google search result for the word 'coincidence', which led to the observation that the phrase 'what a coincidence' commonly occurred in a selection of stories, blogs, headings and newspaper articles. Subsequent analysis identified that the phrase was often used in ironic contexts, and a sample of headlines was created. The analysis brought further evidence that non literal use of coincidence exclamation was systematic, and used for rhetorical purposes. Subsequently, the newspaper *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail* and the *BBC* were searched through google and through their internal search engines for any mentioning of the word 'coincidence'. An internal search for the word 'coincidence' was also conducted in the political meeting data set from the data base of the *Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe*. This resulted in a large number of cases, from which the clearest cases of non-literal coincidence were selected. That is, the cases were selected where the use of non-coincidence was clear and the two or more events that were marked as non-coincidence was obvious. Furthermore, those cases were selected where it was possible to quote a relatively short amount of text to show the reader how the device was functioning whist retaining enough context such that the data extract was meaningful. A further opportunistic collection of non-coincidence instances was collected over the course of a year from films, YouTube videos, newspaper articles, political speeches and so on.

Again, this way of finding instances is similar to using newspaper clippings to find more instances for a new discursive phenomenon. I think that selecting all cases and then reading each to identify whether it was a non-literal use of coincidence was an effective way to establish a data set of non-literal coincidence. The reason why the data is collected not from one data source but from several is that, over time, it became apparent that the phenomenon itself did not exist just in one context. That is the use of non-coincidence occurs across contexts and also across different types of data; non-coincidence is used in speech, in text and in dialogue as well as literature, as well as academic texts (I have collected a number of non-coincidence

formulations from discursive psychology/discourse analysis texts). In essence then, the search engine method identified cases that contained the word ‘coincidence’, whilst in the next step those instances were selected that were linking two or more events whilst disconfirming they occurred due to coincidence. From this sample instances that were structurally similar were grouped together and analysed. In terms of how these non-literal coincidence instances were identified: the context would describe two events, use a coincidence marker and then show or describe a reason that made the events readable as having been caused with intent. That is, the coincidence marker was at odds with the description (sometimes indirect) of the events as having been caused by a specific person or organisation.

Analysing the data

The analysis was conducted using a broadly discursive psychological approach. It was inspired by CA both in analysis and through some of the literatures used in the analysis. Of course ‘pure’ CA cannot be used, because the data does not feature verbal interaction. This means that there is no next-turn proof procedure. There was no direct interactional element either. The aim was to identify rhetorical structures were found in the coincidence accounts. Broadly speaking, the method of analysis adopted for the research in this thesis is grounded in the instructions outlined in Wood & Kroger's chapter on analysis (2000: 91-116). I also kept in mind what should be avoided, such that I was guided by what not to do by Antaki et al.'s , (2003) six analytical shortcomings of:

> (1) under-analysis through summary; (2) under-analysis through taking sides; (3) under-analysis through over-quotation or through isolated quotation; (4) the circular identification of discourses and mental constructs; (5) false survey; and (6) analysis that consists in simply spotting features.

Presentation of data in the analytical chapter mirrored the data-led methodology. In the analysis, data extracts are presented to enrich the analysis. The way that the data is presented is ‘doing’ specific things, namely, it is trying to depict the kind of analysis that underpins it. Because the analysis was based on a data-led approach, data is introduced first and its features are described subsequently. This is effectively a discursive construction of a method that is made to appear more streamlined than it is. It mirrors a conventional way in which a number of CA/DP articles present their

analyses, a data extract is shown and its features are then discussed (this is done in Hepburn & Potter, 2007; Pomerantz, 1980; Edwards, 1994; Korobov, 2011, to name a few). Edwards (1999: 273) for instance, begins his data analysis section with the following: 'I want now to introduce three short conversational extracts in which emotions are invoked, in order to gauge the kinds of discourse phenomena we are dealing with, and how we might start to analyse them.' It is also done to provide the reader with a chance to judge whether an account is read in the same way.

Presentation of the analysis

It is vital for me to clarify that by writing my analysis, and all other parts of this thesis, I am also producing discourse: my analysis is basically a discursive construction of other discourse. Wood and Kroger (2000: 91) argue that 'discourse analysis requires a particular orientation to texts, a particular frame of mind'. Even though I understood discourse to be action-oriented from the beginning of my PhD degree, and considered any references to mental states as 'doing' things rhetorically, it became apparent that my writing reflected more of a 'circular' meaning at points; it sounded as if I was referring to the actual state of affair rather than its construction. This showed me that whilst a specific mind set is needed for analysis of this discursive kind, it is another issue to convey it in writing. To circumvent this, I made lists of words that reflect the conversation analytic/discursive psychological character of my analysis. Terms include: constructed, displayed, 'doing x', presented as, exhibited, demonstrated and seems to be doing x. However, this did not fix all the problems. The word 'discovered' (used in the context of a person 'discovering' the coincidence for instance) sounds like it refers to a discovery within the mind of a person; it therefore seems to be describing an 'a priori' phenomenon. But this goes against the discursive psychological perspective from which the coincidence account is analysed. It is not an isolated issue: indeed, other researchers have identified the problems that the language we have seems to reflect mental processes:

> Part of the difficulty in performing this kind of analysis is because the available vocabulary of semi-technical terms such as 'cognitive state' or vernacular psychological terms such as 'realize' is so limited. The descriptive language that we ourselves have available as analysts is bound up with cognitivist assumptions. And if we abandon that language we often end up with language that suggests mechanical or causal processes. In CA the solution to this dilemma has been to use constructions for description and analysis of interaction such as

> 'orient to' or 'display' which suggest action and even intention but do not depend on a particular image of cognition. (Potter 2006: 137)

Describing coincidence accounts is not always straightforward. I argue this is only partly due to a psychological flavouring of available descriptive words. Coincidence brings its own difficulties due to the issue of causation. When describing coincidence accounts, it is evident that our descriptions rely on causal structures of events. And as Potter outlines above, 'if we abandon that language [the one that is 'bound up with cognitivist assumptions'] we often end up with language that suggests mechanical or causal processes' (Potter, 2006: 137). That is, it is challenging to escape the assumptions that underpin our language. However, it also emphasises the importance of this piece of research – if the language we have available is so inundated with causal and cognitive terms, then it seems to point to a set of norms. Coincidence descriptions are therefore a wonderful resource to investigate these issues. When I refer to coincidences, experiences, indeed any issue, I strictly refer to them as discursively constructed things.

Ethics

The CCC is 'publicly accessible (i.e., it did not require a username or password to view the discussion)' (Jowett, 2015: 291). Permission to use the CCC stories for this research was sought from both the CCC and the University of York Sociology Department. In the first step the host and founder of the CCC, Professor Spiegelhalter was consulted (the complete communication is in the appendix). Professor Spiegelhalter wrote that:

> 'I would in principle be delighted for you to make use of this resource - they are great stories. But I have an admission to make: we have collected this data just by putting up the website without any ethics approval etc - it is not a formal research study. So I am unsure of the position re use of the stories. Can you try and establish the situation about using the stories? I personally cannot see why there is a problem - the contributors know they will become completely public.'

Having received approval from Professor Spiegelhalter, the chair of the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS) committee, which is a sub-committee of the University of York's ethics committee, was contacted. The chair granted her approval:

> Thank you for the message below. This is a rather unusual case for the ELMPS committee. My view as chair of the committee is that Germaine can use the information posted on the web site hosted by the University of Cambridge because these written accounts are public, voluntary posted and anonymous. The site states that accounts posted may be analysed for academic research. No further step is needed, as far as ELPMS committee is concerned. I am cc the administrator of the Committee so that she can file this email. I hope that my email has answered your ethics query.

In short, the use of the publicly available CCC accounts was cleared without requiring further action from official university and department standpoints, as well as the director of the site, Professor Spiegelhalter. He has further confirmed that people posted their textual accounts of coincidence knowing they would be accessible to the public. In consultation with the guidelines for internet research from the Association of Internet Researchers (Ethics Working Committee, 2012), the key questions sourced from the Ethics Working Committee (2012) applying to the research at hand involve the following five points: firstly, whether participants perceive the context in which they post as public (p.8); secondly, whether other people could be included by accident through description of the participant giving consent (p.9); thirdly, whether there are any risks of harm; fourthly, how the data are being managed, stored, and represented (p.9) and finally whether there are any benefits of the study and who these benefits serve (p.8).

It is reasonable to believe that people posting their coincidence accounts to the CCC are aware that their stories therefore become public material. This is for four reasons: firstly, they have agreed to this before posting their stories; secondly, from the first moment on the CCC website, they likely will have seen other coincidence accounts that have been submitted to the website; thirdly, a link where other coincidence accounts can be read is also clearly visible on the web page on which a person posts their own story; and finally, these other stories include a 'rating' option on the bottom, which specifies the number of votes that have been submitted, clearly suggesting they are publically accessible and open to judgment. The text on the CCC web page outlining the requirements for posting a coincidence is shown below:

> **Title:** two or three words that give a simple description of your story, e.g. 'old friend' or 'birthday coincidence
>
> **Coincidence:** tell your coincidence story - and please include plenty of relevant detail (places, dates, numbers etc.) and include your first name if you want.

> **Email address (optional):** please leave an email address, as then we can get in touch to find out more!
>
> All of the information entered below except your email address will be published on this website when you press save. (Spiegelhalter et al., n.d.)

That is, a person visiting the CCC is aware that the CCC is read by other users and researchers. However, due to the public image of Professor Spiegelhalter, the title of the collection 'Cambridge Coincidence Collection' and the heading which is 'Understanding Uncertainty', people posting their accounts probably expect the analysis to be statistical. From an analytical point of view this is an advantage for the research at hand because it means the accounts can be categorised as 'unsolicited narratives'. In the cases in which participants 'sign' their accounts with their own names, these have been removed/altered to disguise the initial poster. This will in turn disguise any persons the poster might have mentioned in their story. In terms of the data, as I am not the owner of the website, I did not get in contact with any email addresses that are submitted alongside the coincidence story. I did not get in contact with the IP addresses and other electronic material collected by the CCC because I merely copied and pasted the text from the CCC. It has been pointed out that reproducing an exact text from the internet in the analysis can compromise privacy because it is possible to conduct an inverse search of the text in speech marks cited, which can recover the original post (Mulveen and Hepworth 2006: 287). Testing this, it appears that such an inverse text search within a general search engine does not reproduce the account in question, but inserting certain quotes within the CCC search box can reproduce the original instance. In some ways, this is accounted for by people willingly adding their coincidence stories onto a public forum. The removal of any 'signatures' adds a further layer of anonymity. This is because a specific search would need to be conducted for an account to be identified. There are no obvious risks associated with this study.

To return to fourth point in the Association of Internet Researcher's five points concerning ethics (Ethics Working Committee, 2012: 9), it need to be examined how the data are managed, stored and presented. In the first instance, these data are stored publicly on the CCC. That is, the storage of the bulk of the data is handled by Professor Spiegelhalter and thus not my responsibility. The data that I have collected are stored on my personal computer and on printouts on paper copies. As these are

public data, there should be no harm in the storage of these coincidence accounts in my personal collection.

To turn to the fifth point about whether there are any benefits of the study and who these benefits serve, it can be argued that the data benefit the area of discursive psychology as well as people reporting coincidences. Especially given previous research did not focus on people's actual accounts of coincidence, this piece of research gives reports of coincidence experience from people's everyday lives a voice.

On an analytical level it is important to consider the impact of the public stories in terms of ethics and how it might shape the coincidence stories. Speer and Hutchby (2003) have made these question the centre of their analysis, focusing on the way people orient to being recorded. Whilst this analysis involves voice recordings and the materials used for this thesis are stories submitted to a site, their analysis still offers valuable insights. They argue that:

> Instead of assuming that it [being aware of being recorded and being recorded] will act as a constraint on the production of 'natural' talk, we show how the relevance of a recording device is negotiated and used in situ as a participants' matter and interactional resource. (Speer and Hutchby, 2003: 315)

Speer and Hutchby's (2003: 334) main argument is that people orient to the fact they are recorded, which is analysable itself. They do not dismiss the fact that such an interaction may be influenced by being captured. Rather, Speer and Hutchby (2003: 334) invite researchers to treat participants' orientations to being recorded as another feature of the context that should be taken into account in the analysis of discourse.

In terms of the applicability of this thesis, people reporting coincidences to what they know is an open platform can therefore be classed as another feature of the discursive context in which the written accounts are produced. To assume that the public space in which they are placed is a hindrance to them being 'natural' is not supported. Given the relative anonymity of the people reporting their coincidences to this platform it could be argued that the CCC is a safe place.

Indeed, to reiterate points made by Suzuki et al. (2007: 319) – sourcing data online can allow 'access to unusually diverse samples (e.g., international audiences, homebound individuals, new mothers, etc.)' and potentially reduce power discrepancies due to the 'potential' and 'perceived' anonymity of online communication.

The ethics of the data used in Chapter 7 are also publically accessible online data. They consist of publically available newspaper headlines and articles as well as transcripts of political assemblies that have been made available to the public on purpose. As such, they can be used for analysis.

Impact

Impact on society and people interested in coincidence

At the start of the research, I considered coincidences to be paranormal phenomena. However, I discovered that they are not treated as other anomalous phenomena are: coincidences are unusual, but do not face being contested in the same way. Reports of coincidence do however, face the scrutiny of cognitive and statistical perspectives on coincidence. The research at hand neither argues for the existence of coincidences in the real world, nor does it deny it. It actively tries to move away from these ontological debates. This is not to say that the experience of coincidence does not exist, but simply that this thesis cannot, and does not endeavour to make claims about these experiences, but only their representation. It moves towards discourse as constitutive and action-oriented enterprise. That is, the analysis at hand is not about the phenomenon of coincidence, but about the phenomenon of discourse, specifically, text in use. If anything, it proposes that coincidences need discourse, verbal or textual, to 'exist' in a social space. Coincidence accounts thus *construct* coincidences. We therefore move away from the view of coincidence as an individual's internal experience and propose that coincidence accounts are social. The analysis of the ways in which people utilise cognitive formulations (Chapters 4 and 5), or probabilistic reasoning (Chapter 6) in their accounts, is not meant to be a judgement of their ability. The argument that coincidence accounts are socially structured is not a claim against the individually startling coincidences people report,

and in no way intends to diminish these. This means that there should be no negative impact on people reporting coincidences in any context.

Impact on coincidence research

Whilst this project moves away from ontological discussions about the existence of coincidences towards a discursive analysis of their accounts, the research does not intend to make claims or disprove any existing coincidence theory, be it in regards to the cognitive ways in which people are argued to perceive coincidence, the ways in which they assess a coincidence's probability, or any physics arguments in regards to causality/matter. My hope is that this idea of coincidence as a social construct and the normative ways in which they are described can, for instance, inform the ways in which coincidences are treated in psychotherapy settings (Marlo & Kline, 1998; Roxburgh et al., 2015; Beitman et al., 2009). I wish to enrich existing coincidence research by proposing a sociological view on what has long been considered a purely individual, psychological phenomenon. Discursive psychological analysis of CCC accounts transform our understanding of what coincidences are. All these accounts show that it is in discourse, both spoken and written, that coincidences reside. The broadly ethnographical, discursive psychological perspective used allowed me to search the data for structural patterns in the accounts. Whilst it is a feature of a coincidence to be constructed as a 'unique' experience, there are structural similarities in their accounts. This allowed me to investigate order within accounts that are conventionally perceived to be unique.

Chapter 4

Coincidence by design – a single case analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents a single case analysis of a randomly selected coincidence account from the Cambridge Coincidence Collection. The chapter identifies design features that are used to portray the coincidental quality of the account. The analysis begins with bigger structural features, including the sequence of the events, then identifies visible features such as punctuation, then the choice of words and then considers the constructions of time and finally the constructions of motive and interest in the account.

Target data

The coincidence account selected for the single case analysis was sourced from the CCC (http://understandinguncertainty.org/coincidences), where members of the public are invited to submit their coincidence stories. It was manually picked at random. That is, a pile of coincidence accounts had been printed out and evenly spread on a surface, then a single coincidence account was blindly selected. It had not been analysed before selection, and had not been printed out for the purpose of a single case analysis. Analysis was not guided by previously held ideas, but was data-led – any themes and features identified emerged from the data itself.

Extract 4.1

[Two siblings, same chance encounter]
A little while ago I went to Amsterdam to visit my boyfriend. While there, we decided to rent some bikes and go cycle outside the city. On our way to the lake we were headed, my boyfriend got a flat tyre, so we started to walk in a little village on the hunt for a bike shop. It was while we were walking that we chanced upon a film set, where they were shooting a cough commercial. While my boyfriend was busy sorting out his bike issues, I approached one guy on set and started asking questions about the shoot. I mentioned that my brother was trying to get into the film industry, and asked about his experiences. He told me that he was going to be moving to London soon, so I gave him my brother's details. Cue a month later, my brother was cycling to work in London when he chanced upon a film set. Eager to make contacts and find work, he decided to approach the team and start asking what they were filming. He then said he

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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!
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No gender is available for the narrator, which is why s/he will be used.

First designed features

The account will be interchangeably referred to as 'narrative' or 'story'. This is in recognition of its basic makeup – it has a beginning, a middle and an ending. Additionally, there is a 'point' to it as opposed to other kinds of written or spoken accounts such as 'shopping lists, road directions and treasurer's reports' (Sarbin, 2004: 6). The account exhibits designed features throughout, many of which do not overtly suggest coincidence. The first obvious designed feature is the overt omission of the word 'coincidence' in the entire account. Indeed, none of the events are explicitly described as coincidental. As Jackson argues, 'one resource for producing a thing as unspeakable whilst actually speaking about it is to withhold naming it overtly.' (2016: 22). Perhaps, 'coincidence' is cast as somewhat unmentionable in the scientific context of the CCC. The closest description to coincidence is the phrase 'chance encounter' in the title. This term has a more probabilistic suggestion. Taken at face value, a chance encounter does not necessarily imply coincidence- it merely suggests to the reader that the encounter was not engineered by either party. It is repeated in the final sentence of the account, seemingly building narrative circularity.

Following on from this, there is also no clear marker identifying which events constitute coincidence. The sequence of events that are is narrated in chronological order. That is, the events are portrayed in such a way that the coincidence appears to be unfolding in the narrative as if it were unfolding in real life. This is not to say that they did or did not happen in that order in real life, rather, the narrative structure makes the events appear chronologically ordered. There are two main events that lead to the description of a coincidence at the end of the account, but these are neither mentioned first, nor identified as relevant from the start of the narrative. The events are described as innocuous events. That is, there is no outline stating that the following is the first event of the coincidence, and the second part belongs to the

second event of the coincidence. This lends the account a ‘witness statement’ kind of quality.

As is typical for coincidence narratives, the coincidence account is constructed around two events that appear unrelated and are individual – the first event occurs to a person outside of Amsterdam at an undisclosed point in time, and the second happens to a different person in London. The second event is temporally positioned in relation to the first event through the use of ‘cue a month later’ (line 15). It is also connected to the first event by virtue of the relationship of the person experiencing the first event, to the person who is described to have experienced the second event. That is, the connection between these ostensibly unconnected events are the parallels between the events, most notably, that in each both the narrator and their brother find a film set and end up speaking to the same employee. These two events could just as easily have been portrayed not as a coincidence, but as shared experiences (‘my brother met him too!’) or shared objectives (‘we were both thinking how this might help his career’). Thus, these two stories had to be constructed in a way that makes them readable as part of an overarching coincidence narrative, rather than separate events.

In the absence of explicit descriptions of the events as coincidence and a chronological portrayal of the events, there is deeper evidence of the account’s coincidence construction. The coincidence revelation is a crucial locus of discursive design. In line 21 for instance, the phrase ‘And when he said his name’ is followed by three dots. These three dots, called ‘ellipsis dots’ (Chun Nam Mak, 2014), have been extensively studied in literature (Toner, 2015). They are also commonly noticed in electronic communication: there has been research identifying their use in 15.000 instant messages sent during work hours (Chun Nam Mak, 2014) and in chat interactions between librarians and students (Maness, 2007). Whilst ‘establishing the intent of a writer’s or a speaker’s use of any linguistic token is fraught with inherent difficulty’ (Maness, 2007: 3), Chun Nam Mak argues that in instant messaging ellipsis dots indicate ‘extensive surprise’, ‘speechlessness’ and being ‘dumbstruck’ when combined with exclamation marks (2014: 34; 41).

This function seems to apply to the case at hand, where the combination of the incomplete sentence part, followed by ellipsis dots, and then a revelation of the coincidence make the ellipsis dots readable as constructing suspense. Whilst Toner (2015: 12) argues that 'every punctuation mark […] has the capacity to be a carrier of feeling', the punctuation marks here *do* feeling, in a constructive sense. The ellipsis dots seem to work with the exclamation mark, where the dots indicate that something noteworthy is forthcoming, which is then highlighted by the exclamation mark. The ellipsis dots thus become a symbolic, visible construction of an imminent discovery. This comes in the form of the coincidence revelation 'realised that he was the brother I had mentioned' (lines 22-23), which is indicated by the only exclamation mark in the account (line 23), which also concludes the story. As the ordinary events are described with normal full stops, the moment just before coincidence revelation is marked with ellipsis dots, and then the denouement is marked with an exclamation mark, the punctuation gathers pace in the course of the account, alongside, but also constitutive of, the story.

By seemingly making the interpretation of the account the responsibility of the reader, the interpretation given by the narrator can avoid overt objection. This is also because the two events coinciding are reported as a realisation of the film employee. Through reported speech (Clift and Holt, 2007), the coincidence is portrayed to have received external validation; it is not the narrator reporting the coincidence revelation, but the unrelated (and impartial) film crew member. And the extraordinariness of the coincidence is conveyed in the exclamation mark, such that the narrator cannot be seen to have made an overt interpretation of events. It is certainly easy to disagree with someone's reported surprise, but it is harder to disagree with an exclamation mark.

In online chat, these ellipsis dots become 'nonverbal compensators' (Maness, 2007). Darics (2010, 847) argues that to be understood, written communication is contingent on 'a shared experience of spoken interactions' which helps create norms in computer mediated communications; consequently, if reader and writer come from different communicative contexts, then misunderstandings can occur. If this idea is applied to the account at hand, it is possible to imagine the punctuation to be a textual signifier of what would be rising intonation and gestures in naturally

occurring talk, as the coincidence unravels in the narrative. This symbolic transmittance of meaning seems to function in what could be compared to response tokens in verbal communication such as ‘oh’. These, in some ways, construct emotion more strongly than fully formed written words.

The exclamation mark at the end of the sentence containing the culmination point of the story, is arguably similar to such a response token in terms of what it does, yet found in a written format. In writing these could be what Goffman calls ‘response cries’, for instance ‘Oops!’, which he outlines are ‘exclamatory interjections which are not full-fledged words’ (Goffman, 1978: 800). (Please note Goffman’s use of an exclamation mark in his quote). Goffman argues that these ‘response cries’ invite a response from the listener; they essentially cry for a receiver to exhibit ‘fellow-feeling’ (Goffman, 1978: 800). In this context the ‘response cries’ are seen in an interactional perspective as ‘doing emotion’ rather than emotion ‘flooding out’, as Goffman understood it. However, the effects of the response cries that Goffman outlines are in some ways helpful for an understanding of what the exclamation mark does in the narrative at hand. Arguably, the exclamation mark is a non-lexicalised symbol conveying heightened emotion that also invites ‘fellow-feeling’– from the reader.

The symbolic use of the exclamation mark also structurally contributes to the upshot of the narrative. Like a ‘marker’, it pinpoints what the reader should take note of. It is the only use of an exclamation mark in the entire account, allowing the narrative to end on a ‘high’ point. The emotional element of this realisation could have been conveyed in words such as ‘and then he was very surprised’, yet this would not have had the same effect as the exclamation mark. The exclamation mark makes the emotional response the reader’s business. That is, the exclamation point does not express which emotion is invited. The exclamation mark is purposefully ambiguous about which emotion it conveys. It invites interpretation, and therefore requires interaction with the account. In the context of the CCC this is a key step, as it makes the interpretation of events the domain of the reader, and seemingly, not that of the narrator. In the absence of explicit coincidence markers (such as for instance ‘and that was the coincidence!’), the narrator can be seen to be staying relatively objective; their account is apparently made to be available for public consumption

and judgment. The narrator overtly orients to the role of research participant, whose account is judged and interpreted by the researcher and the public.

However, it has also been argued that textual communication in technologically facilitated communication develops its own 'new language', where punctuation plays a role (Varnhagen et al., 2010). The CCC account is both a text in the more traditional sense, and technological communication. Regardless of whether its punctuation is understood to be mimicking talk or constituting its own language, through the interplay of text and punctuation, suspense and discovery are constructed to work as a pair to craft coincidence. And this inexplicit way may be a feature of coincidence construction - after all, in reference to punctuation, Toner (2015: 5) argues that 'not saying something often says it better'.

Mirror formulations and narrative binding

Another method by which the narratives can be bound together is by formulating the events in similar ways using the same or very similar wording, or the same structure. The events that are presented with the same or similar formulations seem more alike by virtue of being described in the same, or conspicuously similar, ways. This is effectively narrative binding achieved through repetition of specific formulations. Notably, each crucial element of the coincidental events of this extract appears in a mirror formulation; this includes what the narrator and their brother decided to do, what they did, who/what encountered and their purpose and actions when encountering the film crew member.

There is repetition of the cognitive formulation 'decided'. The formulation is located in line 3 'we decided' to denote the narrator and his/her boyfriend renting bikes and it is mirrored in line 17; 'he decided', describing the narrator's brother's action of approaching members of the film set. This mirror formulation is used to portray similar points in the narrative of each event. Whilst in a chronological sense the narrator deciding to rent bikes seems further away from ultimately speaking to the film crew member, than his/her brother deciding to approach the film set, both these 'decided' formulations actually denote the same story segments. This is because they each describe departures from routine. The narrator and his/her boyfriend deciding to

hire bikes to ‘go cycle *outside* the city’ (line 4, emphasis added) is the narrator’s departure from the routine of their trip to Amsterdam (the city), as much as it is his/her brother’s departure from routine to approach a member of the film crew whilst cycling to work. And it is important for the brother to indicate that approaching a member of the film crew actually was a departure from routine, because if he routinely approaches the film set on his way to work the events do not seem coincidental anymore. Both these ‘decided’ formulations ultimately point to the ‘intentional, achieved outcome’ (Schegloff, 1988) that can be understood as having led to the coincidence, so are mirrored not only in formulation but also in their function for the reported events.

The second repeated formulation is located in lines 7-8 for the narrator’s part of the coincidence ‘we chanced upon a film set’ and in line 16 for the brother’s part of the account ‘he chanced upon a film set’. Both formulations mark the point at which the story has moved into the unexpected realm. That is, following the departure from routine which was indicated by ‘we decided’/’he decided’, ‘we/he chanced upon a film set’ describes the unexpected discovery that occurs during the non-routine activity. Indeed, ‘chanced upon’ seems like a peculiar formulation of saying one found or stumbled across something, if not old-fashioned and overtly stilted. It does however perform this discovery in a way that is congruent with the scientific and orientation of the narrative so far, including the title and final sentence’s references to ‘chance’ and the chronological presentation of events. ‘Chanced upon’ seems to orient to the statistical content of the website that emphasises probabilistic reasoning, but is also manages stake (Potter, 1996b). It conceals the narrator’s own interest and investment and portrays his/her account as a successfully coincidental one. That is, the repeated use of the expression ‘chanced upon’ manages to simultaneously orient to the statistical website and emphasise the coincidental quality of the events.

The description of the place that was unexpectedly found, the ‘film set’, is also noteworthy. This is because in the first instance (as reported to have been found by the narrator and her boyfriend) the ‘film set’ was not actually a film set but rather a commercial shoot (line 11) for a commercial for coughs, it is conspicuously termed in the same way. Of course the equipment may be the same regardless of whether a film or advert is filmed, however, there would have been ways to call the term each

setting with a different name. The formulation is not ‘we happened by a commercial shoot’ but ‘we chanced upon a film set’ which is then later mirrored in the brother’s reported account of the second event. It thus becomes evidence for the discourse’s designed ‘mirrored’ quality.

There are other similarities between the two ‘chanced upon a film set’ formulations that do not entail similar wording. Namely, the activities that the narrator and his/her brother were engaging in prior to finding the film set are conspicuously mundane: the first one reads ‘while we were walking we chanced upon a film set’ and the second one reads ‘cycling to work we chanced upon a film set’. This invokes a similarity to the ‘I was just doing X when Y’ structure that Wooffitt (1992) identified. This formulation, he showed, is used by people reporting paranormal events. The first part of the formulation allows the speaker to mark his/her activities as mundane, and the second part, the ‘Y’, allows the speaker to present the unusual happening. Because the unusual event is placed into the mundane prior activity, the speaker is able to construct a ‘normal’ identity thus avoiding the negative connotations of reporting the sighting of a ghost outright.

What positioning the discovery of the film set during mundane activity accomplishes, is to mark the discovery as unusual. That is, the mirrored structure of mundane activity followed by discovery of the film set means that neither the narrator, nor his/her brother are portrayed to have been actively seeking unusual events. The implication is that they were merely engaging in normal activities, they were ‘doing being ordinary’ (Sacks, 1984b). Indeed, the presentation of self in a Goffmanian sense (Goffman, 1959) applies to the online world just as it does to the offline world (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013). So far then, the structural mirroring in the account spans two departures from routine, two mundane activities, two discoveries of two film sets.

Next, there is a repetition of the word ‘approached’. In lines 9-10 the author writes ‘I approached one guy on set’ and, in the second part of the coincidence and referring to her brother, describes that ‘he decided to approach the team’ (line 17). That is, the repeated use of the word approached also describes the same story segment in the internal chronology of the story. Whilst the formulation is not an exact duplicate, the

formulations do mirror each other in terms of their grammatical construction: the personal pronoun is followed by the verb to make it an active sentence construction (rather than the alternative 'the team was approached', say). Notably, a whole host of alternative phrases could have been used to say 'approached'; a person can 'make contact', or 'talk to someone', 'start speaking to the guy on set', 'say 'hello'', and so on. The differences in the formulations are deliberate; as the brother has been described to be aspiring to 'get into the industry' he is seen to have a 'stake' in this encounter, whilst the narrator does not. So his approaching the team is marked with 'decided' to indicate a departure from previous activity, circumventing the possibility that it was a deliberate, planned action after (for instance) being told by his sibling that the film set would be in the area, which would negate the coincidental quality of the account.

The formulation of who was approached differs. This is done in order to strengthen the coincidental quality of the account of coincidence, as it manages who is known and unknown, and by extension, what is improbable and what is not. As it is revealed later in the account, the person who the narrator's brother approaches turns out to be the same 'guy' who the narrator had reportedly approached in Amsterdam. By the time the narrator is giving the account of the story, s/he must be aware of this feature of the events. This is because otherwise, s/he would not be describing and posting it on the Cambridge Coincidence Collection website. Nonetheless, the narrator portrays his/her brother to have approached 'the team', so not anybody specific or the guy s/he met or even one person. Even the number of people that were approached is altered. Arguably, this adds to the coincidental quality of the account for two reasons. Firstly, the brother is described as approaching 'the team'. This makes it sound more coincidental because the likelihood of hitting the very same person that his sibling approached appears slimmer. Secondly, by portraying the brother to have approached the 'team', this circumvents possible suspicions that the brother might have targeted a specific 'guy' after hearing his sibling's account of how s/he made contact with this man. So by using a mirror formulation yet changing certain details, the account can be made to appear coincidental, yet not coincidental by design. Thus, mirrored wording and designed difference work to enhance the account and delicately navigate the motives of the people described.

Following this mirror formulation about approaching the film team/the guy, the next step in the narrative is also portrayed as a mirror formulation, as chronologically in terms of the story time, the narrator '[…] approached one guy on set *and started asking* questions about the shoot' (line 10) and the brother reportedly 'decided to approach the team *and start asking* what they were filming. (line 18). This detail is not actually vital for the narrative, yet the formulation constructs a further similarity between the coincidental events. It is also a way to depict the interactional connection that was made between 'the guy on set' by the narrator in the first instance and his/her brother in the second instance. This portrays the reported exchange of details later in the account more plausible. It also marks approaching the film professionals not as a uncanny, questionable act, but as motivated by interest in the filming itself, as questions about the film are emphasised.

The actual motive for this interest is also presented in a mirror formulation, when in lines 11-12 the narrator reports 'I mentioned that my brother was *trying to get into the film industry*,' and in lines 18-19 the brother's explanation is mirrored in the formulation 'he then said he was *trying to get into the industry'*. The use of '*trying*' depicts a desired, but not an achieved outcome. Schegloff (1988) explained how 'trying' would not be used when a person had made it on time for an appointment, because for an achieved outcome the attempt goes without saying. Notably, the difference in the formulations of 'I mentioned' for the narrator and 'he then said' for the brother, make relevant the different agendas of both the narrator and the brother. Whilst the narrator portrays themselves as having sought out a contact for their brother, the brother is portrayed as the one actively seeking the contact, which explains a less directed 'mentioning' by the narrator.

A mirror formulation can be found on lines 13-14 'I gave him *my brother's details*' and lines 19-20 'he was trying to get into the industry and *wanted to leave his details*'. Again, there are subtle differences here and yet the formulation of 'details' is mirrored which rounds up the account, before it culminates in the realisation of 'the guy on set' that he had been approached by the sibling of the person he was talking to.

And whilst the formulation does not appear as a mirror, the mentioning of the bike as a starting point after which the subsequently coincidental events reportedly unfold, add similarity to the two events and tightens the link. As demonstrated here constructing this link requires work in the sceptical context of the statistical website on which it was posted.

In summary, specific words, or variations of words can be mirrored. Story segment can also be mirrored. Thus, narrative mirroring involved structural as well as well as more fine grained mirroring. All these mirror formulations bring the events described together, such that they seem to be more alike. In the knowledge that all these events could be described in a variety of ways, it is evident that it is not the events itself that need to be the same, in discourse it is the way in which they are described that needs to be similar to make the account appear coincidental.

Time constructions

To borrow from Kitzinger et al. (2013: 43):

> When a speaker in conversation refers to a person, place, time, event or object, the expression they use can be understood as having been selected from among a range of alternative formulations, and so the question for co- participants and analysts alike is 'why that one now'?

Time is considered something that can be quantified. As such it seems like an objective measure – if a person claimed to have objectively longer days than other people, this would be contested. However, in talk and texts, time can be described quite flexibly. That is, people have various options to describe time. The descriptions 'a little while'; 'a minute' and 'absolutely ages' can describe the same objective amount of time, just in different contexts. I do not imply that time is perceived differently depending on context, it is about references to time that people make in their discourse. In discourse, time does work. In Budds, Locke and Burr's (2016: 182) research on 'delayed' motherhood, they show how a couple describe the time they had been trying to conceive a child:

> The desperation for Chloe and her partner to have a baby at that time in their life is further evidenced by her description of the amount of time they had been trying for a baby, in addition to the amount of money they had spent on IVF

> treatment: ‘we’d been through three years and ... a lot of money to get pregnant, god it cost a lot to do IVF’ (lines 10–12).

The ‘three years’ construct the long wait that the couple are enduring. References to having limited time can also construct anxiety. For instance, the ‘biological clock’ running out suggests temporal shortness in relation to the goal of conceiving (Locke and Budds, 2013). In the data extract taken from Locke and Budds (2013), a woman describes how two years seemed so long for her goal to conceive a child that s/he and her partner started trying to conceive even though their relationship had not been long:

> Cos I was in a panic before I even got pregnant. That it just wasn’t gonna happen or it’d take two years or something. So that’s why, you know we hadn’t really been together that long (aside to baby: oh thanks, thanks darling). We hadn’t been together that long but we thought if it’s going to take two years then we need to start that now. (Laura, aged 35)

For Laura, the time-reference ‘two years’ constructed her urgency. Thus, in the first context three years were portrayed as long and in the latter extract two years were portrayed as long, both in relation to trying to conceive a child. Both time references constructed anxious experiences. In a different context, a reference to two or three years might be used to construct completely different emotions associated with its passing.

Enfield (2013: 433) writes about reference to times, arguing that reference is a ‘matter of selection’:

> This selection is shaped by a number of factors specific to the speech event, including who the speaker is, who s/he takes the addressee to be, what the relationship is between the two, and what the speaker’s communicative purpose is – that is, the social action s/he wants to produce. (Enfield, 2013: 434)

He then provides an example from a telephone call in which the caller tries to be connected the call-taker’s son for business-purposes, who is not in. The father initially tells the caller to call back ‘tomorrow’ but then specifies this reference to ‘about midday’, which has the purpose of avoiding the caller to call in vain if she were to attempt to call back in the morning. The same temporal point (when the caller should call again) is also referred to as ‘this time tomorrow’ and ‘about lunchtime’ over the course of the call. And yet, the reference to time is not the most

specific it could be (say, '*12:37 p.m. and 43 seconds'*) as this 'unaccountable degree of specificity would evince surprise and would give rise to some kind of special interpretation' (Enfield, 2013: 435). That is, the time references used in the phone call are sculpted to fit the interactional needs of that conversational context. They make sense for the persons involved.

In a later part of the conversation, which occurs between the caller and the mother of the man the caller is trying to speak to, the mother refers to her son's girlfriend staying '*all over Christmas*'. This time-reference could have alternatively been '*over the last week*' or '*since December 24*', however, the mother is telling the caller the story of her son breaking up with his girlfriend during her visit (Enfield, 2013: 436). As such, '*all over Christmas*' performs a number of functions: it gives information about the time it happened, it makes available inferences about the visit and about her son and his ex-girlfriend's relationship and it 'helps to invoke and highlight a sense of protracted drama' of the breakup over Christmas, the 'level of seriousness of the relationship' and the stress involved for the mother (Enfield, 2013: 437). As such, a reference to time accomplishes things; 'reference is central to constructing social action with talk' (Enfield, 2013: 453).

Referring to a (literary) coincidence stories' designed quality, Dannenberg (2004: 400) argues that 'in the coincidence plot, narrative space and time are subject to remarkable conjunctions (or, to expose the device: they are radically manipulated by the author).' Time is similarly used as a device in the single case's construction of coincidence. The data exhibited mirroring of words and phrases, sometimes with variations. But mirroring was also evident in thematic parallels one of which is time. There are three aspects to time in this account. The first aspect is that coincidences are traditionally thought of as coincidences *in time* (Jung, 1952: 25). The second aspect is that time plays a role in the experience of a coincidence and the narrative. Coincidence narratives are retrospective. That is, the coincidence would have happened at a point in time and the narrative would be too. Stories are generally situated at points in time, and they are also narrated at a point in time. The time in the story is the story time. Events are also temporally related to one another. The third aspect is about time references in the narrative. Given that the research focus is about the way in which the account is constructed, the emphasis is on the explicit

references to time in the coincidence account. This is because direct reference to time can be studied, and by directly referring to them the narrator has made them relevant. There are three time references in the account:

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'A little while ago'(line 2)
'Cue a month later' (line 15)
'not 4 weeks ago' (line 23)
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The first two each launch a story segment and are thus an example of narrative mirroring. The first one launches the start of the narrator's story, and the second launches the brother's story in relation to his/hers. The third time-reference describes the denouement of the story. Each of the three time references exhibits a tacit orientation to the requirements for making the account readable as a coincidence account. The first time reference 'sets the scene' of the entire account, and positions the initial story segment of the narrator at a point in time in the past. Notably, there is no specific temporal reference to a month or week. The 'little while ago' is unspecific and is relevant for both the narrator and the reader. It positions the events in the undefined past.

All three formulations are what (Schegloff, 1972) calls 'landmark dates'. Landmark dates are formulations such as 'a week before the election', 'the day of the storm' that make sense for the interactants involved in the interaction (if the selection of the time-reference was correct). According to Schegloff's (1972: 116-7) analysis, there is a preference for certain time-references in conversations, namely those that convey a time in reference to the conversation about that time. The three time-references in the coincidence account fulfils all three. The 'a little while ago' is in reference to the time the account was written or, possibly, submitted. The time-reference 'cue a month later' uses the initial meeting of the author of the coincidence account with the member of the film crew in Amsterdam as a reference point. And the 'not 4 weeks ago' is a time-reference that suggests the film crew member is looking back at his encounter with the narrator. As such, the references to time here refer to each other in such a way that consolidates the events, links them together. Thus, the events are bound by their references in time to each other. On a further note, by referring to the timings in ways that the reader understands (due to the shared meaning created by the account itself) discursive rapport is built between the

reader and the narrator. The events' timings are now referred to in relation to the events that the reader has been informed about, and this discursively constructs the events to be part of the reader's discursive experience.

This temporal vagueness signals that the time of the event is not relevant for the narrative and to not have been remembered specifically. It is thereby also constructed to not have been important for any reason beforehand. This depicts the narrator as not having expected anything exceptional from the events that will follow the positioning in time in which the account begins. In contrast, this would be different if the narrator was reporting an unusual or prominent event, in which case a specific date would be provided in the narrative. Generally, specific dates are provided for significant life events such as significant travel, birthdays, or (retrospectively) for catastrophes such as the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in the USA that become historic dates in peoples' narratives of events. As it stands, the narrator invites the reader to see events as innocuously positioned in the past. This is because at the start of the narrative, there is no reference point for the story; the first story segment of the narrator finding a film set is the first reference point.

Yet, at the end of this narrative, at the culmination of events, the coincidence, another time reference is given: 'the guy he was talking to realised that he was the brother I had mentioned in our chance encounter not 4 weeks ago in Amsterdam!' This time-reference is readable as having occurred in the same/similar time as the initial outset. However, the formulation 'a little while ago' refers to the narrator's visit to Amsterdam with an emphasis on having been motivated to 'visit my boyfriend' (line 3). The final time reference refers to the encounter during that time in Amsterdam. Whilst there is no indication of the total time the narrator spent in Amsterdam, the formulation of 'visit' seems to suggest the normal length of a 'visit', possibly more closely aligned to a short holiday rather than a significant stay. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the two time references refer to more or less the same time, yet they are presented in vastly different ways. The narrative explicitly outlines how the encounter with the 'guy on set' occurred during the visit to Amsterdam in the context of a cycle ride. In contrast to the initial time reference at the beginning of the account, the time reference at the end is much more specific. The formulation 'not 4 weeks ago' puts the events into a specific timeframe. The

narrator's meeting with the 'guy on set' that his/her brother later also met in London is situated to have been less than four weeks ago, so mathematically could be anywhere between the time it takes for the 'guy on set' to have travelled from Amsterdam to London and to find himself back at work at another set, but more likely is formulated to be somewhere between three and four weeks' time. Arguably however, the time passed could have been presented as having occurred as either 'more than three weeks ago' or 'nearly a month ago'.

This shows that formulations (of more or less the same time) are not neutral. Here, temporary shortness has been created by virtue of the references to time used. The formulation also makes relevant the occurrence of one thereby significant moment in time (the encounter) rather than a general time. The use of 'not 4 weeks ago' constructs the timespan to have been short. Firstly, the time is presented in weeks, not months, discursively presents a shorter amount of time to have passed. Secondly, the formulation of 'not 4 weeks' is used, suggesting the timeframe was actually undercut. And thirdly, the four weeks are written as the number '4' making it shorter on paper in terms of the letters it took to write and to read. This is in contrast to the title where the number 'two' is written out in full as a word.

These constructions of time through different formulations accomplish interactional business. First, the initial time formulations in the first sentence work to circumvent inferential issues. The formulation avoids connotations associated with giving an exact moment in time for the narrator, such as having expected something exceptional to have happened, or having sought out a coincidence in this case. With the final time formulation structurally positioned after the two events making up the coincidence have been shared with the reader, the shortness between the two events is invoked by virtue of the time formulation. The formulation further emphasises the specificity of that moment in time and therefore also the significance of that encounter. However, the varied time-formulation's greatest achievement is its contribution to the 'coincidentalness' of the coincidence, the striking quality of the two interlinked encounters.

The rhetorical force of the title

The title in itself mirrors a coincidence where two events happen and interlink. The words 'two' and 'same' are contrasted. This accomplishes a 'setting up' of the scene for the coincidence to unfold in the narrative in that there are 'two' of the same category, that then culminate in '*same* chance encounter'. The category 'sibling' constructs the link between the two people involved, yet the two emphasises a divide so that the use of 'same chance encounter' consolidates the initial division crafted by the emphasis on 'two'. In the context of the CCC, where the account was posted, in some ways the title already has an agenda. As the CCC is a space where it can be anticipated that the coincidences are viewed with a critical, statistical perspective from the originator of the website and its audience, the title already has to perform work. Here coincidentalness is emphasised with the 'two' entities and the 'same' chance encounter, which is not called a 'similar chance encounter' but the word same is specifically chosen. It is not strictly speaking 'correct', which further shows the work done. As it is each sibling meeting the same person in different places and through different circumstances, it is not objectively the same encounter, yet for the agenda here it is beneficial to present it in this way.

The label chosen is also worth pointing out in that the word coincidence is not used, but 'chance encounter' is used. The latter does not have the same connotations as the term coincidence in this context. Rather, using 'chance encounter' as a title to frame the events indicates the narrator's orientation to the statistical perspective of the website. Using the word *chance*-encounter further portrays the narrator's awareness about chance playing a role in the perception of coincidences, rendering the account as that of an 'informed' and logical person. Nonetheless, the account is structured in subtle ways to emphasise the coincidentalness of the interlinked events.

The rhetorical force of the ending

Below is an extract from the single case analysis showing the final four lines of text:

```
20                                              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 account ends with the revelation of the coincidence in the narrative – the story's culmination point. The completeness is reached when the coincidence is discovered not by the brother or the narrator but by the film worker who had reportedly met both the narrator and the brother. This further emphasises the importance of the coincidence as the key feature of the narrative as it ends when the coincidence is told. This makes sense in the context of the narrative, given that the account is posted on the CCC website. This is because Professor Spiegelhalter requests coincidence stories, he does not ask how the stories have impacted on people's lives. However, it also further emphasises the point of the story being just that, an account of coincidence.

Perhaps some coincidence stories end with a summary of its consequences. In this case, a reader might wonder whether the narrator's brother managed to 'break' into the film industry. However, there would be risks involved when reporting the 'outcomes' of the coincidence. If the brother is described as not having managed to break into the industry after the coincidence, then the coincidence appears less impactful. If the brother has managed to find work in the film industry, then the events are in danger of being perceived as contrived with the aim of bringing about that break into the industry. As such, ending the account at its culmination point could be a way of implying the coincidence itself was extraordinary. It did not need further 'outcomes' to evoke surprise and wonder. It makes the account of coincidence appear more mystical and puzzling for the reader. It could also be because the reader is effectively taken on a discursive journey of realisation. The narrative starts from a naïve perspective, as naïve as the narrator reportedly was before the events reportedly unfolded. In that sense, the reader has been guided through the events with increasing awareness of how they coincided. However, the final revelation of the coincidence is described from the external, film employee's perspective. As such, the account is legitimised in its concluding sentence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the single case analysis yielded one main observation: namely, that the coincidence account exhibits clear designed properties. Notably, mirror formulations were used to make the two story segments seem alike, which increased

the overall coincidental quality of the account. Mirror structures were achieved by using the same or slightly varied formulations for describing each story segment. Narrative binding was further achieved by using mirrored structures, that is, repeating structural features of the two story segments. In the single case analysis, there were cognitive formulations. These were crucial for the development of the coincidence story, because they helped portray the narrator as not having deliberately caused the coincidence. There were also references to 'chance'. These occurred in the title, but also as mirror formulations. These appeared to be orientations to the context of the CCC as statistical, scientific website. There were time references in the account. The same time span was described in different ways in order to portray the time between the coincidental events to have been short. This makes the coincidence seem more improbable. In the following chapter, Chapter 5, the analysis investigates the details of the cognitive formulations found in this single case.

Chapter 5

The departure-discovery device in the organisation of coincidence accounts

Introduction

Recurrent cognitive formulations in coincidence accounts have led to the detection of a 'departure-discovery' device. It fuses analytical points from the previous chapter's single-case analysis into an organisational structure across the data set. In the previous chapter, the single case analysis uncovered diverse strategies used to make a coincidence appear to be a logical interpretation of the events described. Mirror formulations actively homogenised events presented as part of a coincidence. The analysis uncovered the account's orientation to factuality by reporting events as though they were happening 'in real time', and omitting details the author already knew at that point, such that the reader could 'experience' the coincidence unfold in the narrative. This was also designed to have positive implications for the portrayal of self of the author by virtue of her discourse. By negotiating the usual and unusualness of different events featured in the narrative, in order to emphasise the final coincidence reveal, the author is seen as someone who simply happened to have weighed up all the evidence to come to the conclusion that coincidence is the interpretative repertoire in which the events should be seen in. It is the aim of this chapter to follow a lead from the previous single-case analysis and to show how it runs across a number of instances. The single-case analysis focused attention on the reference to states of mind/cognitions. A notable feature was the use of cognitive formulations in key places within the account:

> we **decided** to rent some bikes and go cycle outside the city. On our way to the **...** And when he said his name.... the guy he was talking to **realized** that he was the brother I had mentioned in our chance encounter not 4 weeks ago in Amsterdam!

In another coincidence account also taken from the Cambridge Coincidence Collection , and shown in full, we notice a further two cognitive formulations. The narrator reports having recently moved to London and describes going for a swim in the ladies' ponds in Hampstead. It is here that she describes encountering her old

university friend from New Zealand. She also reports a further 'accidental' encounter with another former university friend on the streets of London at 'about the same time' (line 8).

Extract 5.1
Hampstead Ponds

```
01   Years ago back in the 1980's I spent a couple of years
02   living in London. I had been there a few months when I
03   decided to go swimming at the ladies ponds in Hampstead.
04   In the pond a woman came swimming up to me and I
05   realised she was a good friend from University in
06   Dunedin, NZ. I hadn't seen her for a couple of years and
07   didn't know she was in the UK. It was a great meeting.
08   I had a similar encounter about the same time –
09   wandering through one of the London markets in my lunch
10   hour I bumped into another old Kiwi University friend –
11   again I had lost touch and didn't know where she was
12   living. Despite being such a big city I found two good
13   friends quite by accident.
```

Notably, this account also contains 'decided' and 'realised'. These are both cognitive formulations. There is another cognitive formulation, 'didn't know' (line 7). If the account did not contain these, we would have something like this:

```
I went swimming at the ladies' ponds in Hampstead. In the
pond a woman came swimming up to me. She was a good friend
from University in Dunedin, NZ. I hadn't seen her for a
couple of years. It was a great meeting.
```

The account suddenly sounds entirely mundane and unspectacular. The events do not seem coincidental at all. It could even be argued that there is no 'story' in the account anymore. It reads as if the narrator merely planned a meeting with an old friend and had that meeting. Devoid of cognitive formulations, the account does not convey the surprise at the meeting that the first one did. This suggests that the cognitive formulations are crucial for the account to be an 'account of coincidence'. Thus, the cognitive formulations seem to be doing something in the account. We will now borrow from previous research on cognitive formulations in order to show why analysing cognitive formulations is a useful idea. Then, literature will help understand what cognitive formulations are doing in the contexts in which they are used.

Mental states in past research

The inner mental process is not the focus of research in DP, as it has been in cognitive psychology. In DP cognitive formulations are studied not as reflecting inner mental processes but as topics in their own right. This is because researchers do not have access to the inner life of people, but do have access to the discourse on thoughts and cognitions. This analytical focus on cognitive formulations, rather than cognitions, is a direct critique of cognitive psychology: 'Discursive psychology rejects the approach to 'cognition' as a collection of more or less stable inner entities and processes' (Potter & Edwards, 2003: 93) and rejects 'the traditional cognitive explanations of psychology' (Potter, 1996: 133). In the discursive psychology literature, cognitive formulations and their functions have received much consideration (Edwards & Potter, 2005; Harré, 1999; Wooffitt, Holt, & Allistone, 2010; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter, Edwards, & Wetherell, 1993; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 2012). Discursive psychology is action-oriented:

> Discursive psychology provides an alternative theorization of both language and cognition. Instead of considering 'language' an abstract object with systemic properties, the focus is on texts and talk in social practices (discourse). Instead of considering 'cognition' as a collection of more or less technical inner entities and processes, the focus is on how mental phenomena are both constructed and oriented to in people's practices. Discursive psychology starts with action and understands the use of words, modalities, metaphors, and so on in terms of the way that talk and texts are oriented to action. Likewise, it treats the huge thesaurus of mentalistic terms that people have available to them as a resource for doing action: persuading, justifying, accounting, flirting and so on. (Potter & Edwards, 2003:95)

This does not mean that cognitions do not exist, or that people who report mental processes did not actually have them. DP simply makes no assumptions about cognition. Potter & Puchta (2007: 113) argue that: 'the DP approach here is to bracket off any putative referential specificity of these terms – they may or may not refer to mental objects of some kind, in more or less technical or everyday practices. Instead it is concerned with the practical use of terms from the mental lexicon.'

Allistone & Wooffitt, (2007) investigate the social organisation of mental states during interactions between experimenters and their participants in the context of parapsychology experiments. They were not concerned with the participants'

experience or inner mental dialogue, but focus on the ways in which such interaction follows normative practices. As another example of practical work, Hepburn & Potter (2007) analysed helpline calls to a child protection helpline. They investigated what the recipients of crying do in interaction, and found that call-takers do 'empathic receipts', ERs in short, in which they construct the mental states of the callers. Hepburn & Potter (2007: 109) argue that 'ERs are made up of two key elements: 1. A formulation of the crying interactant's mental state. 2. A marker of the contingency or source of the mental state formulation'. Examples of such descriptions of mental states are 'worried', 'upset' and 'frightened', each doing specific work in their respective contexts. In general, the mental state descriptions are used to 'do' empathy.

Notably, because the objects of study are cognitive formulations, which are part of both every day and academic language, analysts are themselves constrained by the cognitive words they have available in their language:

> In making this argument I have been attempting to highlight the difficulty for even the most sophisticated of interaction analysts in moving from the organization of talk to the existence of cognitive states. Part of the difficulty in performing this kind of analysis is because the available vocabulary of semi-technical terms such as 'cognitive state' or vernacular psychological terms such as 'realize' is so limited. The descriptive language that we ourselves have available as analysts bound up with cognitivist assumptions. And if we abandon that language we often end up with language that suggests mechanical or causal processes. In CA the solution to this dilemma has been to use constructions for description and analysis of interaction such as 'orient to' or 'display' which suggest action and even intention but do not depend on a particular image of cognition. Potter (2006, 137)

'Decided' in past research

Schegloff (1988) investigated the formulation 'I decided', concluding that: "'I decided that my body didn't need it' marks the non-bringing as an intentional, achieved outcome". On the topic of 'doing' intentionality, Edwards (2006: 44) outlines how, in the context of crime and culpability in everyday life, intentional damage is more blameworthy than unintentional damage and thus avoided. In reference to an interaction between a police officer and a suspect, he argues that:

> What we have in example (1) is a collection of mutually implicative descriptions of actions and their intentionality, where what is intended, foreseeable, known, accidental or incidental, is defeasibly assembled in and for the performance of

> police work, and with regard to the action categories of relevant law. (Edwards, 2006: 45)

Potter & Edwards (2003: 99-100) investigated an interaction between a suspect who is accused of having started a fight, and a police officer, in which the suspect constructs the unintentionality of the first strike ('just clipped him') and the police officer's version ('punched'). In their discussion of the theoretical perspective they take on intentionality and argue that:

> Yet we are treating causal inferences as an activity done, and oriented to, in discourse - an activity done in the first instance by participants. It is handled and managed, as a participants' concern, through circumstantial descriptions such as 'just dancing around', 'just clipped', the narrated apology 'oh sorry mate' (lines 1-3), and the direct causal invocations 'by accident' and 'on purpose' (lines 4 and 5). Thus we are committed to the implications of intentionality that follow from the identification of activities in discourse. (Potter & Edwards, 2003: 100)

What this shows is that constructions of intentionality do different things in discourse depending on the context in which they are used. In Potter & Edwards' (2003) research, non-intentionality is used to divert blame for actions. I suspect that 'decided' formulations are used to show that narrators did actions on purpose, in order to imply that they did not bring about a coincidence intentionally. This in turn allows narrators to be surprised at the coincidence, which they would not have a right to be if they had crafted it themselves.

'Realised' in past research

This section is concerned with the function of 'realised' formulations. Reiterating that discursive psychology 'focuses on cognitive issues in terms of how they are constructed and oriented to in interaction', Potter (2006: 131) discusses the term 'realise' in the following way:

> 'What is a 'realization'? The vernacular term 'realize' has a range of practical and interactional roles. It did not become established in the language for the abstract scientific work of psychological analysis (although it can of course be pressed into such service); rather it evolved in and for the practices of talking and writing. Note, for example, the way in the following example Skip constructs a failure to realize as an account for destroying the fingerprints that might have helped identify a burglar […].'

As can be seen from this excerpt, the 'realise' formulation does work, here acting as a feature of an account for an action. Potter (2006: 138) emphasises how 'vernacular

psychological words such as 'realize' or 'understand'' can be analysed without understanding them to point to any cognitive, internal states. Potter (2006: 138) concludes that 'they can be pressed into analytic service without importing a full scale cognitivist metaphysics'. This will be the framework for the analysis of 'realised' formulations used in the analysis at hand.

Work from conversation analysis, specifically, the device 'At first I thought X, then I realized Y' (Jefferson: 2004), will clarify the analysis of realised in the analysis at hand. The device 'At first I thought X, then I realised Y' was developed from a collection of joke/serious formulations Jefferson (2004) found in Harvey Sack's documents, and preliminary analyses Sacks had mentioned in his lectures. People use this device to describe extraordinary events (Jefferson: 2004). In this structure, the reported thought X describes a normatively and context appropriate, mundane 'first thought' that turned out to be wrong, whilst Y, marked by realised, is what turned out to have been correct. The function of realised is described in an example below, which explains a person's utterance "At first I thought it had been stolen (referring to a car)":

> That is, in the use of 'realized' the correctness of his thought is proposed. Were the report to be delivered at the time that he did his considerations about where the car is, we wouldn't get "I realize the car has been taken by police." What we would likely get is "I (guess, bet, wonder if) the car has been taken by police" or "Maybe the car's been taken by police", and things like that. So what we have is something like: 'Realize' stands in the opposition of 'thought' by reference to the fact that 'thought' is used when it turns out to be wrong. (Jefferson, 2004,136)

The first thoughts are thus understood to have 'an obscure relationship with – and not necessarily giving access to – what people are actually thinking'. (Jefferson, 2004, 136). They are chosen first thoughts, selected for their appropriateness for a specific membership category (a famous footballer might report thinking applause was for him, whilst a novice actress may assume applause is not meant for her). (Jefferson, 2004, 136). People do not constantly mark every utterance with 'I thought', and particularly not their erroneous thoughts, but it is in the context of very extraordinary events that such 'wrong' reported thoughts, as unlikely as they themselves may seem, are contextually normal and plausible (Jefferson, 2004, 137). Jefferson (2004) argues that these reported thoughts are a designed feature, an 'ordinary alternative to an extraordinary actuality' (Jefferson, 2004, 137). After

further analysis, Jefferson adds that '[...] 'thought' is used when it turns out to be wrong but is pursued as in-principle correct, reasonable, right.' (Jefferson, 2004, 145).

Heritage (1984:299) outlines the properties of 'oh' as a 'change of state token': 'The particle "oh" [...] is used to propose that its producer has undergone some kind of change in his or her locally current state of knowledge, information or awareness.' Through the analysis of where 'oh' is placed in interactional sequences, Heritage (1984:337) is able to deduce its function, concluding that:

> [...] the particle participates in a wide variety of "language games": noticing; having one's attention drawn to something; remembering; being reminded, informed, or corrected; arriving at discoveries and realizations of various kinds, and many more. "Oh" is perhaps as deeply implicated in the behaviors of "coming to see something" as "Ouch" is the domain of pain behaviors.

Thus, the use of this change of state token shows that discourse can 'do' realisations and discoveries; in interactional contexts these are constructed in and through talk. That is 'oh' is a discursive manifestation of the *action* of discovery and realisation. In a case on presequences and repair, Schegloff (1988) also shows that 'realisations' can be done through the use of 'oh'. In a conversation between mother and son, where the son is asked by his mother about an upcoming meeting 'Do you know who's going to that meeting?' and he replies with 'Who.', there is an evident misunderstanding. In saying 'who' in his turn, the son displays having understood his mother's turn as a preannouncement. When the mother says 'I don't kno:w.' she shows in her turn that she was asking a question, and was not doing a preannouncement. Schegloff (1988: 59) writes that this 'realisation' is indicated in the utterance 'oh::'. That is, what has been realised is what turned out to be correct, and is here indicated by 'oh'. Indeed, 'oh' has been called a surprise token (Wilkinson, and Kitzinger, 2006); 'oh' does a receipt for new information. And in these pieces of research, 'oh' indicates the new information that has turned out to be right. These 'realisations' whether accomplished through the word itself or through a surprise token, indicate that the information is new to the speaker, and comes with surprise.

The pervasiveness of 'decided' and 'realised' formulations

The analysis will focus on the ways in which the occurrences of 'decided' and 'realised' operate together as an organising structure. However, first, I would like to show that they are prevalent in accounts of coincidence. Some examples extracted from the data are presented in the following:

- I **decided** to go swimming
- I **decided** to send an e-mail
- I **decided** to sell a few of them on
- and **decided,** on a whim, to take her on an outing
- We **decided** we wanted to have live music
- we **decided** not to join a guided tour
- we **decided** to have dinner in the basement café

The particular contexts in which these 'decided' occur will be analysed in more detail later. The aim of presenting these cases without their contextual homes is to show that they occur in both singular and plural forms; both individuals ('I') and collectives ('we') can be said to have decided something.

In the following, examples of 'realised' will be presented.

- I **realised** she was a good friend
- I **realised** it was my friend
- I **realised** there was no dialling tone
- we suddenly **realised** that he was the teacher that […]
- I suddenly **realised** I had not completed all paperwork required
- we **realised** that we had a mutual mate
- we **realised** we had met before
- we **realised** that we had worked together
- they **realised** they were sitting next to each other

And whilst the following data set of American 'realized' contained fewer instances, perhaps because the Cambridge Coincidence Collection is based in the United Kingdom, they do indeed feature in the accounts. Again, these cognitive formulations occur both in their first person singular and first person plural forms as well as in second person plural forms (they).

- All of a sudden I **realized** how beautiful the day was
- they **realized** that nobody was interested
- That's when I **realized** it was genuine**:**
- we **realized** that we had lived on the same street

The function of 'decided'

The following section will focus on the use of 'decided' in the coincidence accounts. In the first example, the author Anne describes how she researched the questions of a quiz on music, however she got stuck on one particular question. Just after contacting the club who had disseminated the quiz in order to check whether there had been an error in the question (which contains the 'decided' formulation), she describes coming across the answer on the radio, which forms the coincidence.

Extract 5.2
Radio and competition coincidence

```
01   I am a member of a cross stitching club. Every quarter
02   the cross stitching company 'hold' a competition for
03   members. This particular competition involved solving
04   cryptic clues with regard to famous Operas, Operettas
05   and Musicals. I spent some time researching the subject
06   in order to solve the clues, however, there was one clue
07   which I was having some difficulty in solving. I decided
08   to send an e-mail to the company to confirm that there
09   were no mistakes in the wording of the clue.
```

The 'decided' (line 7) is placed before the author describes contacting the organisers of the quiz. As such, the 'decided' marks two departures: first, it marks a departure from the previous, long-lasting activity where she 'spent some time researching the subject', and second, it also marks a departure from normal procedure when solving a puzzle. Inability to solve a quiz might more normatively instigate reported feelings of lacking knowledge, result in terminating the search for an answer perhaps, but questioning the makers of the quiz is an unusual action to report. The implied presumption that the quiz is erroneous to the point of making contact is not normally associated with the kind of membership category one might associate with the activity of solving a quiz, in which one is by implication the 'quizzed' whose knowledge needs testing/improving and not the author of the questions to solve, who would by implication know all the answers by having authority on the subject. Contacting the club is not presented as a routine activity in the formulation of the account either, in fact, the quiz's topic is framed as a specific case, as it is termed 'This particular competition [...]' (line 3), with the use of 'this particular' indicating a non-routine and non-generic competition. The use of the term 'decided' indicates an achieved outcome that, in this case, is different to the normal activities, because routine activities do not have to be 'decided', they would simply be reported as

actions conducted. Thus, not being a normative response and designed to be read as a departure from the author's normal activity, the 'decided' indicates a break from the normal.

Departure from routine

The following case, where 'decided' is coupled with 'on a whim', emphasises the previous observations about departure. Below, the author describes taking his daughter on a trip in a steam train, texting his sister once he got in, and it then turns out that she had also embarked on a ride of a steam train, neither reportedly having been on one before in their lifetime.

Extract 5.3
Steam trains

It was Sunday 2nd June 2013. I live in Bristol, and had been working away for the past week. I wanted to catch up with my daughter (4 years old) and decided, on a whim, to take her on an outing to Avon Valley Steam Railway (about an hour's cycle ride away) and have a trip on the steam train. This is not something I've ever done before or even really considered before, and I have no particular interest in steam trains. Anyhow, we get there, buy a ticket, get on the train, and suddenly it seems like quite a funny thing to be doing. I decide to send a text message to my sister, as I think she might find it funny. So I send her a text: "I'm on a steam train!x" She then texts back to say "no way, that's ridiculous!" She is a musician and happens, at this time, to be on tour round Europe, and is in Utrecht. She had woken up early, gone for a walk, passed the Railway Museum, gone inside, and had LITERALLY just climbed up into a steam train when she got the message. I am 30 and my sister is 27. I am pretty certain that neither of us have ever been in a steam train before [possibly as a very young child, in either case]; neither of us have any particular interest in steam trains. Yet possibly our first times going inside a stream train happened within maybe a minute of each other. What are the chances?

The 'decided' exemplifies the way in which this formulation launches the subsequent coincidence reveal. There are two 'decided' formulations, one 'classic' 'decided' formulation in the past tense form (line 3), which describes the activity of going to the steam train locations, which later turns out to have brought about the coincidence. This 'decided' is framed in conjunction with an impulse-marker: 'and 'decided', on a whim' marking the following activity as non-routine and based on an unexpected, impulsive urge or idea; without careful planning or because of a

capricious inclination. Regular activities are not usually described as having been ‘decided’ on a whim. To give an example, if someone were to say that 'on a whim, I decided to go to work today', this would sound peculiar as whim is not associated with regular activity, that is already scheduled and planned, with no additional spontaneous decision needed. Rather, it makes the sentence sound as if going to work were actually non-routine in this instance. There is a further 'I decide' formulation (line 10) in the account, describing the author messaging his sister. Whilst occurring in present tense (to place it within the activity of steam-train riding) it follows a similar function as the first ‘decided’ formulation. This text message is the implicit vehicle to coincidence-discovery, as without the message the author and his sister would not have noticed their coinciding activities in cities far apart (author in Bristol, sister in Utrecht). The initial 'decided' formulation then clearly marks a departure from usual activity. First, the ‘on a whim’ suggests spontaneous departure from routine. Second, contextually, the narrator described wanting to 'catch up' with his daughter after an absence from home due to work (lines 1-3), such that the outing can be understood as a departure from the routine of the working week just past. Second, describing being on the steam train as ‘This is not something I've ever done before or even really considered before’ the author marks steam-train riding as a novel activity as well as a novel idea.

The next two accounts include both ‘decided’ coupled with ‘on a whim’ formulations. The fragments have been edited to clearly exhibit their design. To briefly recount the coincidental happenings described in the first account: the author describes how he and his friend organised an event together, for which music was required. When the author sent a song to the guitarist and then to his co-organiser and friend so he might be acquainted with this song, it transpired that the narrator's friend had only recently discovered that very song and had been loving it, singing it and playing it repeatedly that same day, which constituted the coincidence. The fact that the friend is explicitly described as ‘new friend’ also adds to the mystery – it is less likely that the narrator would know of his music tastes. The ‘decided’ formulation is positioned in line ten, and contextually, it describes the action that leads to the coincidence happening:

Extract 5.4
King of the Road

```
01   On a whim, I decided to send the You Tube on to the new
02   friend with whom I was creating the event, telling him I
03   had requested this song which he might not know (he is
04   in his 20s) so I wanted to introduce it to him.
```

The second account's coincidence involves the author describing how she had made an unplanned trip to her local museum, and on the off chance, tried to find information about her husband's deceased ancestor. She was lucky to encounter the staff working there (as they reportedly are only in on specific days of the week). Initially this was to no avail, but then one of the two ex-soldiers reportedly found her relative's name on a list that contained a huge number of names (amongst different lists from various Regiments) at that very moment. The 'I decided, on a whim ' formulation is situated in line three, and launches the description of the activity that eventually lead to the coincidence:

Extract 5.5
Tracing dead relatives

```
01   One of the biggest coincidence, and the spookiest, was
02   many years ago when I was just starting out on the
03   family history. I decided, on a whim as I was passing,
04   to call in to the local museum which also housed the
05   Essex Regiment Museum.
```

In terms of contextual position, the 'decided/on a whim' formulations are placed at the relative beginning of the accounts they are housed in. Contextually they both build the foundation of the subsequently unveiled coincidence. The functions of the 'decided/on a whim', are as follows:

1.The decided formulations mark accomplished activities (that are known to have been accomplished as they have a later role in the occurrence of the coincidence, so they must have been accomplished).

2.The 'decided'/on a whim formulations mark the activities as a spontaneous and unplanned departures from routine.

In the first account, this is supported by further detail from the account. The author justifies sending the song to his friend citing his friend's age and the implication that he has thus been exposed to a different musical era: 'which he might not know (he is

in his 20s)'. So the very fact that the author justifies sending it, suggests it is not routine. Sending this song to his friend to introduce it, seems to harbour inferential risks - such as being perceived as patronizing. The 'on a whim' formulation addresses these risks, marking the reported action as something that was done spontaneously and without much thinking. In the second account, the formulation is accompanied by an account for why the action was done. The formulation 'on a whim *as I was passing*' counters possible alternative interpretations of the visit, for instance, that it was pre-planned for the purpose of finding genealogy information. The author also negotiates the name of the museum for this purpose: it is termed 'the local museum which also housed the Essex Regiment Museum', which implies that the author saw it as a general 'local museum' first, only to find it also housed the more specific 'Essex Regiment Museum'. The description of the interest having been only recently started, 'when I was just starting out on the family history', further adds to the sense that the author did not go into this museum for research (although it certainly offers the interpretation that this could have been the reason).

Thus, the 'decided/on a whim' formulation counteracts possible accusations of active purpose, especially that of causing a coincidence. By describing the activity as if made on impulse without pre-determined plan either on paper or in mind, the coincidences are seen as having been coincidental rather than forced through the active design of the author.

The function of 'realised'

The aim of this section then is to first show how the use of 'realised' formulations is used to emphasise the correctness of the interpretation of events as coincidence and show the organisational structure applied through the use of a 'realised' formulation. In the following account, the narrator described being on a work trip in London when she spotted a long lost friend from Singapore on the underground, which forms the coincidence.

Extract 5.6
Flying Visit

```
01   I was on a work trip to London which is unusual when I
02   was changing trains on the underground. I saw a woman
03   standing at the bottom of the escalators and thought how
04   similar to my friend that I'd lost touch with who lived
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05   in Singapore. As I walked past her and heard her talk in
06   her Danish accent I realised it was my friend from
07   Singapore who had flown in that afternoon. I hadn't seen
08   her for 5 years and she hadn't been to UK for over 10
09   years.
```

The function of 'realised' in the above extract is to permit the author to demonstrate that the item that was 'realised' was a form of discovery. Here, it describes realising that the woman the author saw was an old friend rather than a mere stranger. The construction of discovery adds to the sense that the coincidental event was unplanned and unexpected and thus warrants the label of coincidence. Due to the 'realised' reframing the interpretation of the actions/objects that have previously been introduced in a neutral form (here, introducing the old friend as a stranger), the 'realised' permits the authors to describe the person/actions/objects of discovery before their role in the coincidental events is revealed. That is, through a description of what later turned out to be details of the coincidence as if they were unconnected and anonymous to the author, the 'discovery' can later be constructed. It is not about a discovery of something that was not there and then appeared, rather, it is a discovery of what had already been there. The use of 'realised' then conveys discovery without actively seeking, and finding amongst the details already present. As such, the 'realised' actively constructs a discovery of the mind – where the author 'comes to see' connection.

In the context of 'realised' marking what has turned out to be correct, the account has to directly or indirectly offer alternative, incorrect versions of the events that would render them non-coincidental, which can be dismissed later. In the above extract, these are offered in the form of a series of reported thoughts launched in lines 2-3 'I saw a woman standing at the bottom of the escalators and thought […]'. This permits the author to offer alternative versions of what she describes to have seen, and these details are carefully managed and portrayed as if through the eyes of the author's former self, pre-coincidence. There is no suggestion that these were actual thoughts, rather, they provide the author with a means to portray her logical, 'normal' first thoughts, which make the coincidence that has later come out appear even more spectacular as well as believable (because they were apparently described by a person of reason). Three mechanisms are used in conjunction with the later adopted 'realised' to convey discovery: the description of the anonymous stranger,

the construction of location to the person, and constructions of distance in time and place.

Initially describing the discovered friend in an anonymous way suggests the author saw her as a stranger from that moment until the discovery. A number of details construct initial non-awareness that permit later discovery. First, the formulation 'I saw *a* woman […]' (using the pronoun 'a', rather than 'the' which expresses specificity) conveys that the woman the author reportedly saw could have been any of a number of women who would have been, to the author, all the same in their anonymity. Second, the use of 'woman', a general category not used for people one is acquainted with, renders this woman a stranger to the author. Third, noting the similarity of this random woman to her old friend further emphasizes that the author did not in fact 'see' the random woman as her old friend – by reporting that she compared her to her old friend, the random woman is further removed from that old friend because comparison implies the existence of at least two objects of comparison. Also, the description of this random woman reminding the author of the lost friend suggests that there were similarities but that the author saw and did not initially identify the lost friend as who she really was – thus, the formulation suggests firmly that upon first look she was certainly not recognized by the author.

This changes upon the use of 'realised', after which the author terms (reveals) her to be 'my friend from Singapore' (lines .6-7). This description makes available the relationship between author and the lost friend through the personal pronoun 'my', which has then substituted the anonymous 'a' woman previously adopted. In the lines below, the use of third person singular 'she' points to the reader's understanding that the specific 'she' refers to a known 'she' to the author and now, via description, also known to the readers. The author describes the mundane activity of walking past the unknown woman, thus evoking similarities to the 'I was just doing x when y' construction before she reportedly 'realised' it was her old friend, which emphasises its unusualness and the sense of discovery (much like the discovery of a ghost is discursively placed into the 'unusual' place, the 'y' part of the construction). This discursively crafted discovery produces the coincidence of the narrative as without it, the account would merely be about meeting a friend.

A number of items mirror ‘physical’ discovery to emphasise the discovery launched by the use of ‘realised’: First, the author frames the work trip to London as ‘unusual’ (line 1) thus implying being an ‘outlander’ in the space the author describes being in at the time, second, the description of where the woman she has spotted is positioned, namely, placing her at the ‘bottom of escalators’ (line 3) discursively creates physical distance between the author and the gazed-at woman. Whilst the exact location of the author in relation to the woman is not described, the description suggests that the author was possibly at the top of the stairs, which would make describing the woman to be at the bottom of the stairs make sense, as it then forms a contrast. This description makes relevant certain implications about what can and cannot be seen, namely, that the woman was not visible in detail, that she was located in the distance where only her mere outline was discernible. This description of position also implies something about the author’s attention: being engaged in her task of changing trains, her attention was focused on the physical surrounding and space she was in and not the people in this space. This formulation has implications for where her ‘gaze’ (both in terms of vision, but also attention more generally) was directed suggesting her focus was on the physical space, she was not seeking old acquaintances.

The formulation suggests that the discovery then is accomplished not by vison, but through audible cues, as the author described finally recognising the old friend through hearing her ‘Danish accent’ (line 6). It further suggests that the author did not ‘see’ or pay enough attention to see her friend in passing such that recognition took place via sound not vision. However, the Danish accent is, by implication, a reference to a place. The emphasis on the Danish accent further highlights the unusualness of the encounter. Further references to places are made by mentioning this friend was living in Singapore, and that she had not been in the UK for 10 years (and who had only arrived that afternoon – which accentuates the small time frame in which this bumping into one another was possible). The title of the story submitted is a condensed reflection of this: ‘Flying visit’ suggests a place (a visit invariably must be to a place of some sort) and the ‘flying’ visit makes it brief in the context of a longer ‘other’, which the readers can now understand as the context of not being in London (both for the author and her lost friend) and not seeing each other for a prolonged stretch of time. Thus, the descriptions of place in conjunction

with just a short possible timeframe to where it is possible to meet create the sense of coincidentalness and heighten the descriptive lens of discovery crafted by the author.

Thus, the cognitive formulation 'realised' constructs a version of a mental journey of discovery. Through the formulations of distance, the thoughts of the author are implied to be far away from expecting such coincidence. This includes that when changing trains thoughts are at the task at hand which is also located in a busy distracting environment that the author is not used to given her description of the work trip in London being unusual thus the task of changing tubes is even more difficult and the author arguably suggests that she needed to pay attention to the task rather than absentmindedly changing trains as one would with a commute one is used to and does on a daily basis. Suggesting that the discovery took place, the author implies that meeting her friend in the London underground was not something she could have deduced from reasoning, and definitely not from prior commitment and thus the 'discovery' produces the very notion that this meeting was not expected, to the extent that it took 'double takes' for the realisation to even take place.

In short, the 'realised' formulation performs a number of functions for the coincidence account. 'Realised' implies that what has been realised is correct, and new. It negates the opposing, and incorrect, non-coincidental version of events. It marks a discovery of something already present, but unnoticed (people as strangers, clothes one actively put on as surprise). It negotiates agency – it does 'discovery' of something that the author 'caused' herself (but for a different purpose).

The following account emphasises more strongly how the discovery is accomplished in the face of an object/person already present. The narrative described how the author was working as a 'singing gondolier' in Miami, had his possessions stolen, but was helped by Ron Biederman at a backpackers' in Miami Beach who gave him an 'Israeli shirt' with 'dull red stripes'. The author described applying for a cruise ship and leaving the area straight after, storing his belongings at his father's home in the UK for two years. After returning from the cruise work, picking up his belongings from his dad's home and checking into a hostel in London, he described meeting two girls who had just returned from Israel. The extract describes the point at which they discover they are both acquainted with Ron Biederman. The

coincidence involves discovering their mutual acquaintance and in that moment wearing matching items of clothing they were both given by him – the author wearing a shirt, and the girl wearing trousers.

Extract 5.7
Ron Biederman's Trousers, key fragment

Ron Biederman……big Jewish guy from New York?" "That's right! Oh my God!" I looked down and realised for the first time, that I was actually wearing the shirt Ron had given me. "You're not going to believe this, but Ron gave me this shirt…I can't believe it, it's the first time I've worn it in years!" "No ******* way", she replied. "No ******* way! He […]

The use of 'realised' permits the author to demonstrate that what he reports he realised (that he was wearing the shirt given to him by Ron Biederman, the common acquaintance with the woman he had just met) was in fact a discovery. The realised formulation then permits him to construct discovery of something that he arguable had access to, and agency over, all along: wearing the shirt implies he must have put it on and the shirt has also been described as having been packed at an earlier point in the account. To keep such that a discovery plausible, specific details earlier in the account convey an absent-mindedness towards the shirt. First, the author does not describe packing his belongings carefully, rather, the packing of the shirt is framed as follows: 'Needing some temporary clothes to wear, with the intention of discarding them before long, I grabbed Ron Biederman's shirt from my dad's attic'. The grabbing suggests unintentional, fast-paced, possibly last-minute, unconsidered packing, a random stuffing into bags that might lead to surprises when opening one's luggage at the destination. The attic being the place from which it was retrieved suggests it might have had a similarly unspectacular mental home in the author's consciousness. The plan of discarding these clothes later further emphasised their unimportance at that moment in time, details which makes absent-mindedly wearing them plausible.

This permits the shirt to be discovered on the day where it forms a coincidence – this shirt, the formulations suggest, was constructed as having been absent-mindedly packed, and then discovered by the author on his own body to give the sense as if it had been retrieved from the attic in that moment. The 'I looked down and realised for the first time, that I was actually wearing the shirt Ron had given me' crafts an

alternative version of his awareness of what he was wearing that day: namely, that the realisation occurred after looking down at his own chest, and this being described as the first time he realised, marks this moment as the moment of discovery. Thus, the 'realised' formulation positions the wearing of the shirt as a discovery in the author's consciousness, regardless of its physical presence on the body of the wearer that presumably lasted the entire day. The formulation manoeuvres the presence in mind to follow long after the physical presence, and to have occurred after the acquaintance had been mentioned, which elicited realisation of its presence. The sense conveyed then is that 'seeing' the shirt the author was wearing at that moment truly was a discovery: the shirt-coincidence was not deliberate.

The references to locations that are far away from each other further emphasise the sense of discovery launched by the realised formulation. From the Miami location in which the author described having been given the shirt (and having met Ron Biederman), to the undisclosed, though implicitly moving location of the cruise ship work, to the father's house in the UK to the London location where the author meets the two girls who have reportedly just returned from Kibutz in Israel, the sheer number of disparate locations highlight the unlikelihood of the author and the girl meeting, and their mutual acquaintance, as well as their mutual wearing of Ron Biederman's clothing. The sense of constant flux of the author moving around from one place to another highlights the small timeframe in which the meeting could have taken place, and an even slimmer likelihood of the author wearing the shirt he was given (not having worn it for two years and planning on discarding it not long after). The location of the trousers on the girl the author described meeting as under the table as she had been sitting, negates the possibility for the author to be accused of speaking to the girl because she was wearing the matching trousers. Thus, the careful construction of time and location of the people involved in the coincidence as well as the objects that form it contribute to the sense of unlikelihood of them all falling together in place and time in that London encounter.

In the following extract, the narrative describes the author losing an earring in the female bathroom of a pub when out with her old university friend, but only realizing when encountering a woman at the Cambridge train station who had found it and brought it with her (having 'hooked it onto her hair').

Extract 5.8
Favourite earring returned

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[…]  lines 1-13 omitted
14   After a brief conversation around the reasons for our
15   visit to Cambridge that day, she looked at me and said
16   'you have lost an earring'. I felt my ear and realised
17   that I had indeed lost one of my earrings. She then said
18   'I have it!'. The amazing thing was that she had also
19   gone to
```

The use of realised occurs in line 16, after the woman met randomly is described as saying to the author that the author had lost an earring. The use of 'realised' then permits the author to demonstrate that her loss of the earring was a form of discovery in that moment, prompted by the stranger. Rather than having planned and searched for the earring, or having inferred its loss in some way (i.e. by seeing it attached to the woman she met), the loss is presented as a cognitive discovery, that is also described as physically checked and confirmed. Through the formulation 'I felt my ear' the author tests, then validates the stranger's statement with proof. Notably, the lack of the earring had been an ongoing state from its loss in the ladies' lavatories, but it was constructed as not having featured in the author's awareness. Thus, this account conforms to the previous ones where discovery features circumstances, objects and people that are already physically present, but absent in the author's mind until the point of coincidence.

The Departure-Discovery device

Returning to the first example about the woman who met her old friend in the Hampstead ponds, and then another friend in the London streets, we can now make some observations based on the literature on cognitive formulations as to the function of 'decided' and 'realised' formulations.

Extract 5.9
Hampstead Ponds

```
01   Years ago back in the 1980's I spent a couple of years
02   living in London. I had been there a few months when I
03   decided to go swimming at the lady's ponds in Hampstead.
04   In the pond a woman came swimming up to me and I
05   realised she was a good friend from University in
06   Dunedin, NZ. I hadn't seen her for a couple of years and
07   didn't know she was in the UK. It was a great meeting.
08   I had a similar encounter about the same time –
09   wandering through one of the London markets in my lunch
10   hour I bumped into another old Kiwi University friend –
11   again I had lost touch and didn't know where she was
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12   living. Despite being such a big city I found two good
13   friends quite by accident.
```

The two formulations are used together. In terms of the narrative, the two formulations are ordered; ‘decided’ is used first, ‘realised’ follows. The phrase ‘decided’ is used at the point in the narrative that leads to the action of the narrator that forms part of the first event of the coincidence. ‘Realised’ is used at the point at which the first coincidence is discovered, to be more precise, the ‘realised’ marks (and thus discursively creates) the first coincidence.

What ‘decided’ implies about the narrator going swimming

The use of ‘decided’ portrays the author to have had agency over going swimming, thus making it readable as deliberate. A lot of daily actions are deliberate, but many are not referenced as such. Checking the time is deliberate but saying ‘I decided to check the time’ opens up questions, or marks this instance of checking time as special. ‘Decided’ suggests that the action was somehow noticeable and non-routine, indicated by the mere fact that it was reported. Subsequent events (the accidental meeting) are therefore already set in the context of unusual activity. Further to this, the use of ‘decided’ conducts motive-management; it implies that the narrator went swimming deliberately, but that meeting a friend (and causing a coincidence) was not the motive for going to Hampstead ponds.

This decision to engage in the swimming activity is placed in the backdrop of not having done it before, as can be seen from the phrase positioned directly before the ‘decided’: ‘I had been there a few months when I decided […]’. Therefore, the activity of swimming is set in the context of not having been swimming in the months previous to this, the temporal starting point of which is the move to London. Thus, taking into account the contextual time constructions, the activity of swimming is readable as a non-routine activity that is, in the context of being done in London, a first. The narrator does not imply that she had never been swimming in her life, rather, this swimming activity she reportedly ‘decided’ to engage in is new for her new life in London. Not each instance of activity is marked with a ‘decided’ formulation in this account. In line 9 for instance, the narrator reports ‘wandering’,

which is not marked with a ‘decided’. This shows that swimming is marked as a deliberate departure from routine in comparison with other, more routine, activities.

What ‘realised’ implies

The use of realised acts as a tool to indicate that the narrator was not seeking out anything extraordinary, and did not expect a coincidence. The use of realised implies a scenario where the narrator was so deeply busy at ‘being ordinary’ (Sacks, 1984b), in this case specifically engaged in swimming, that she needed a few moments to recognise she had bumped into a long lost friend from her university days in New Zealand. The ‘realised’ used here also negotiates the sequence of activities. The inference is that while the narrator was swimming, her attention was on the activity of swimming (which she, after all, ‘decided’ to do), such that her attention is not focused upon other people in the pool, or trying to find friends, or making eye contact with other swimmers etc. That is, the ‘realised’ permits the narrator to indicate that there has been a shift in awareness from one activity/aspect to another aspect. This attention shift that the ‘realised’ formulation constructs, has physical and mental elements. That is, the recognition of her old friend is physical in that, in the sequence of events described, the author outlines that ‘a woman came swimming up to me’, that is, the physical presence of the woman is described as preceding the mental one, thereby making available the inference that her swimming up to the author had an impact in the author recognising her. So a physical appearance is described as activating mental recognition, leading to a discovery of the mind.

The detail of the place is key, as the setting of the events described is London, yet the friend is reportedly from a different and, crucially, previous life in distant New Zealand, which renders the meeting unlikely in terms of geography and time, marking it as unusual. It is also made to appear extraordinary against the backdrop of usual activity of going swimming. Further to this, by the time the narrator is reporting this occurrence, she has already recognised the friend, yet the story is recounted as if it were happening in real time, and the reader is taken through the discursive journey as if it were happening for the first time. This is accomplished through the use of realised, as it indicates that the narrator took some time before she noticed – and this is important for motive management. The formulation portrays the

meeting as not having been sought, but rather 'discovered'; this makes it readable as an unplanned and unexpected. This paints a discursive picture of what was going on in the mind of the narrator: The formulation constructs the old friend to not have been on the narrator's mind – and this construction is strengthened by displaying the context in which they were acquainted to be far away in location and time, suggesting there would be no reason for the narrator to even think of her old friend. The use of 'realised' then is pivotal in constructing the old friend to have been far from the narrator's mind. This formulation suggests that nothing extraordinary was sought by the author, in line with 'doing being ordinary', as well as 'doing thinking ordinary'.

This notion of 'finding' (not seeking) connection is mirrored in the last part of the narrative where the narrator reports: 'Despite being such a big city I *found* two good friends quite by accident' (line 12; emphasis added). This sense is also strengthened by the discursive construction of who approached whom, and here, the narrator is rendering herself the 'receiver' of contact by being approached, which makes her appear passive: 'a woman came swimming up to me' (line 4). This discursively solidifies the coincidence as coming (or here, 'swimming') to the narrator. This discursive formulation suggests by implication that no active agency should be assigned to her. This is vital to the coincidental quality of the story as it could be seen differently, namely, as an expatriate having just arrived in London, seeking to meet old friends anywhere she goes as she adjusts to life far away from home (lines 1-2). And this implication is implicitly fought through the motive management accomplished through the cognitive formulation of 'realised' that portrays her mind to have been on mundane things, and far away from people from past times and places.

The account, and specifically the decided/realised formulation act to persuade the reader of the veracity of the interpretation that a coincidence has taken place. In the account, the word 'coincidence' does not feature directly, neither in the body of the text, nor in the title. The narrator does allude to the coincidence by referring to a 'similar encounter', reporting that 'I *bumped* into another old Kiwi University friend' and acknowledging she 'had *found* two good friends quite by accident'. The phrase 'bumped into another' implies that the encounter in the swimming pool is

meant to be understood as a 'bumping into' kind of encounter also, which constructs the unplanned, non-routine nature of the encounter. 'Bumping into' one another in a swimming pool context sounds a bit strange, and is therefore more subtly managed, in a way that implies this very kind of meeting, yet does not use the phrase directly. The 'quite by accident' further alludes to coincidence being the preferred interpretation for the account, with the 'quite' acting as a strengthening precursor to the implied accidental encounter.

The persuasive capacity of the design of the account is currently tentative, as its alternatives are not directly articulated, but implied. There will be cases where the alternatives are more clearly articulated however.

Given the nature of the blog the account is understood as being a coincidence account, and yet, it is not openly termed a coincidence. This has the benefit of providing a piece of data for the blog whilst not being culpable to misinterpreting chance to the extent of seeing coincidences when there aren't any (which is the statistical position on coincidences made available in the content of the blog). Thus, the account is a coincidence narrative, but a tentative one, and a non-coincidental version is still possible. After all, the narrator reports her own surprise and non-design of her own actions but does not declare that she has knowledge of the other people from her coincidental encounters not having designed such meetings, unlikely though they are.

These cognitive formulations are crucial to the story being a coincidence story. The cognitive formulations 'decided' (line 3), 'realised' (line 5), and the two occurrences of 'didn't know' construct the author's actions specifically as not designed to bring about meeting her lost friends, but as surprising. Without the discursive management of the author's lack of knowledge regarding her friends' whereabouts, there would have been no plot to the story. The 'decided' marks a new occurrence, as the author seemingly describes the first time she had gone swimming in her new city of residence, London. That makes the activity, swimming, non-routine. And that means that the subsequent coincidence was not brought about by the narrator's routine, or plan. The 'realised' formulation seems to mark the point of coincidence discovery. It constructs a discovery of the mind, a discovery of a person, and a discovery of

coincidence. The discursive navigation of intention and motive develops and ultimately *accomplishes* the story.

The following extract has been presented in both the preceding 'decided' and 'realised' sections and will be coming together here, which is why it is displayed in full. The extract describes how the author tries to solve a quiz of a stitching company, is unable to solve a specific question and therefore 'decided' to contact the stitching company to ensure that the formulation of the question was accurate. Upon walking into the kitchen where the radio is playing, the author hears the answer to the question sought in that very moment.

Extract 5.10
Radio and competition coincidence

I am a member of a cross stitching club. Every quarter the cross stitching company 'hold' a competition for members. This particular competition involved solving cryptic clues with regard to famous Operas, Operettas and Musicals. I spent some time researching the subject in order to solve the clues, however, there was one clue which I was having some difficulty in solving. I decided to send an e-mail to the company to confirm that there were no mistakes in the wording of the clue. After I sent the e-mail, I walked into the kitchen, where Radio 4 was 'airing' the music quiz programme "Counterpoint". As I entered the kitchen, the chairman, Paul Gambaccini asked a question regarding a musical and I suddenly realised that this was the answer to the clue that I had been struggling with!! Problem solved!! The date of this coincidence was 28/4/2008. Thank you, Anne.

Here, the decided/realised formulation forms a departure-discovery structure that upholds the coincidence plot. The 'decided' marks the description of an unusual action. Contacting the makers of a quiz the author cannot solve, to confirm it is right, forms a departure from routine. A usual reaction would be to question one's own knowledge when facing a quiz. The 'realised' marks the discovery of a solution to the problem. It also forms the coincidence itself. The 'discovery' discernible through the use of 'realised', is further emphasised by the use of suddenly: 'I *suddenly* realised' marks the events as unusual and astounding. The use of two sets of two exclamation marks in line 15, the first after the culmination of the coincidence, the second placed after the exclamation 'Problem solved!!', add to the construction of surprise.

The narrative demonstrates that the formulations decided/realised are used together. Both components are crucial to making the story a coincidence story. Without the use of 'decided', and the departure from the current activity of searching for an answer, the story would merely read like a sequence of events that fall into place perfectly. It is specifically due to the use of 'decided' that discovering the solution through the radio makes sense in the narrative. The 'decided' implies about the author contacting the cross stitching company that she has used every resource possible to find a solution to the quiz, such that the final resource is to contact the club (which she has accomplished and completed). It may also imply that the author holds a specific confidence regarding the topic area, that justifies contacting the maker of the quiz. The 'decided' thus marks a departure: a departure from routine, and a departure from the current activity that the author was engaged in. The realised formulation unfolds the coincidence-revelation. The 'realised' implies about the author that her previous views of events had been wrong. The 'realised' also marks the discovery of something already physically audible being discovered in the author's consciousness. With the activity of searching completed, finding the answer (the coincidence) is constructed to be a spontaneous, unplanned outcome. This is required as listening to the radio could be seen to be related to the 'famous Operas, Operettas and Musicals' topic of the quiz, but the device counters any agency that the author could be accused to have had in making the coincidence happen (as each of her actions were caused by her).

In the below instance, the coincidence described how the author's equipment failed whilst windsurfing on open sea. The author had failed to fix it, and was about to attempt to swim back to the beach, when a stranger helped fix the broken pieces together. These two people reportedly met again, a long time after the first occasion, when the stranger from the first incidence was in need of help, and this time assisted by the author at his local beach The 'realised' is positioned at the culmination of the coincidence, and in terms of the story this is at the point where the author and stranger are back safe at the beach.

Extract 5.11
Lifesaving coincidence

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01   Whilst windsurfing on a remote reef break in the
02   Caribbean a few years ago my board and rig became
03   separated by equipment failures. I struggled in the
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04   waves/water for some time to reconnect the board to the
05   rig and had just decided to leave it and try to swim
06   back with the board on its own. The only safe option. At
07   that moment an English guy turned up offering help and
08   together we managed to effect a repair on the water some
09   500m out at sea. I was able to sail back safely to the
10   beach (there is no rescue cover in these remote places).
11   I never saw the guy again until one day whilst
12   windsurfing at my local beach two years later (on the
13   south coast) I passed on the water a guy that needed
14   some assistance and stopped to help. I thought I knew
15   him from somewhere but not from where. When we both
16   returned to the beach we suddenly realised that it was
18   from the above incident. He was on holiday and happened
19   to be at my local beach!
```

The departure, marked by 'decided', occurs in line 5: '[…] and had just decided to leave it and try to swim back with the board on its own'. It builds a departure from the current activity of trying to provisionally fix the equipment (lines 3-5), and also literally describes departure – namely, departure from that part of the ocean back to land ('sail back safely' line 9, as it is described by the author). The use of 'decided' marks the activity of departure as unusual – the 'decided' suggests that this action was accomplished, was somehow noticeable and not routine. The use of 'realised' occurs in line 16 in the third person plural form 'we': 'we suddenly realised'. The realised formulation thus pinpoints and emphasises the coincidence-revelation spot in the narrative as communal conscious awareness, whilst at the same time marking what turned out to be correct. The 'realised' then marks the discovery of something that had already been present (it was during the ongoing activity of the author helping his old acquaintance who had helped him that that recognition is described to have taken place). It is notable how the 'we realised' formulation includes the surprise-marker of 'suddenly' thus emphasising the surprise and wonder.

Thus, the 'decided' –realised formulation builds a discovery-departure structure that ties in the first happening with the last. It primarily manages the coincidental quality of the account: the departure pre-empts a future unusual occurrence, acting as a foreshadower of the pinnacle of coincidence. The 'decided', constructing departure from routine, is depicted as the cause, instigated for a different reason than to bring about a coincidence – the purpose of the departure of the current activity was to arrive at the safe beach, made necessary through the failure of equipment. Thus, explicitly marking what the author's purpose was and showing it to be unrelated to

the coincidence that turned out to have happened, indicates the unexpectedness of the account.

In the following coincidence account, the author reports straying from his work routine by going to a toy store between meetings whilst on a business trip and thus finding his friend at the same store who was described as also digressing from his routine, only to discover that his friend's wife (who his friend was talking to on the phone) was in the company of the author's wife, also at the same shopping destination.

Extract 5.12
On the phone to my other half

```
01   A couple lived up the road from us in Northampton. We
02   were friends, and both men had jobs that took us to
03   London from time to time, but we didn't work together or
04   go to the same places. I was on a business trip and
05   found I had time to spare between meetings, so decided
06   to wander into Hamleys' toy store in Regent St. On one
07   of the upper floors I saw my friend, who had
08   spontaneously decided to do the same thing. As I
09   approached him, I realised he was on his mobile phone,
10   and found he was talking to his wife, who turned out to
11   be sitting in a cafe in Bicester with my wife.
```

There are two 'decided' formulations placed before the one 'realised' formulation, as well as one instance of 'found' which marks one of two described departures. The initial 'decided' (line 5) marks the author's deviation from routine to go to a toy store between meetings, whilst the second 'decided' reports the thought/action by his friend (line 08), met randomly in the same toy store: 'who had spontaneously 'decided' to do the same thing'. There are two discoveries: in terms of the content, the author describes discovering that his friend was on the phone to his own wife and then there is a second discovery – finding that his wife's friend is in the company of the friend's wife he had just bumped into, also in a shopping centre. This amounts to a double coincidence: both the husbands leaving their routine (work) to go shopping and bumping into one another, whilst both their wives engage in the same activity at a different location, yet connected through the friend and his wife being on the phone to one another. Structurally, it can be broken down as follows

I decided

[friend] Had decided –

I realised

And [I]found

The formulation to note is that the second discovery (here also the more striking one that is set into the last part and thus the high pinnacle of coincidentalness) is actually formulated as 'found' which more directly emphasises the 'discovery'. Finding implies discovery. In short, the decided/realised device fulfils a number of functions in this account: they are used together to craft coincidence, the decided forms a departure from routine (both the author's and his friend's), decided implies about the author going to the shops that his activity was to kill time, and 'wander' (thus refuting any possible accusation that the activity was geared to induce coincidence in any way). The 'realised' marks what turned out to be correct. It also marks something already ongoing/present as newly discovered in the author's consciousness. This specific extract includes a 'decided' for both the author and the friend, and two discoveries, one marked with 'realised', one with the word 'found' thus emphasising realised formulation's construction of discovery.

Producing coincidence – undermining non-coincidental versions of events

However, in the following encounter, the alternative interpretation is made explicit in the form of indirect reported speech (lines 4-6).

Extract 5.13
Coincidence about a scientific article on coincidences

```
01   I was struggling to descend from a snow bound Scottish
02   Summit when I bumped into 2 mountaineers who helped rope
03   me down. It was only as we descended that we realised we
04   had met before at University. Relating[16] this story to my
```

[16] This should be 'relaying' – but somehow the narrator got it wrong in a way that is quite topical to coincidence.

```
friend he remarked that of course mountaineers will meet
on mountain tops. When I got home and read that very
weeks New Scientist it contained an article on
coincidences including a cartoon of 2 mountaineers
meeting on snow bound mountain top saying "Haven't we
met somewhere before?" A coincidence about
coincidences.
```

In this account, the narrator's (first) coincidence is quashed by a reported listener when the sceptical friend reportedly stated that 'of course mountaineers will meet on mountain tops'. The use of 'of course' thus renders the meeting mundane, usual and not at all a surprising coincidence, to the ridicule of the narrator. People normally avoid reporting how their stories have been dismissed as mundane and insignificant by others, unless perhaps, there is a message to this 'failure'. In this case, the second coincidence brings a 'last laugh' kind of scenario to the account: namely, it suggests that whilst perhaps the initial coincidence could be dismissed as a likely occurrence, this first coincidence together with the article and picture of the same situation constituting the related second coincidence, cannot. Notably, the narrator has not given an alternative or any kind of interpretation by this point in the narrative. Reporting the friend's dismissive interpretation of the events upon hearing the story, allows the author to firstly, construct the opposite interpretation of the events, and secondly, to introduce 'hedging' by incorporating the alternative interpretation into her narrative and invalidate it. So the argument has moved – it suggests that whilst perhaps mountaineers meet on mountaintops, it is improbable to then find an article on this topic straight after, and the two events happening together transcend usual circumstances.

Departure/discovery's robust organising structure

The discussion has so far centred around cognitive formulations, specifically focusing on cases where decided/realised are coupled to work as tandems in the same narrative, in order to build a departure-discovery device. The structure is systematic and the past analysis presented the kinds of work that decided/realised does. However, the overarching departure/discovery structure can take on other forms also, and can be achieved through alternative formulations, indicating that departure/discovery is a robust structure that can be accomplished in a variety of

ways. In the following instance for example, the ‘decided’ is further elaborated, confirming the ‘departure’ quality of it.

Extract 5.14
Steam trains

It was Sunday 2nd June 2013. I live in Bristol, and had been working away for the past week. I wanted to catch up with my daughter (4 years old) and decided, on a whim, to take her on an outing to Avon Valley Steam Railway (about an hour's cycle ride away) and have a trip on the steam train. This is not something I've ever done before or even really considered before, and I have no particular interest in steam trains. Anyhow, we get there, buy a ticket, get on the train, and suddenly it seems like quite a funny thing to be doing. I decide to send a text message to my sister, as I think she might find it funny. So I send her a text: "I'm on a steam train!x" She then texts back to say "no way, that's ridiculous!" She is a musician and happens, at this time, to be on tour round Europe, and is in Utrecht. She had woken up early, gone for a walk, passed the Railway Museum, gone inside, and had LITERALLY just climbed up into a steam train when she got the message. I am 30 and my sister is 27. I am pretty certain that neither of us have ever been in a steam train before [possibly as a very young child, in either case]; neither of us have any particular interest in steam trains. Yet possibly our first times going inside a stream train happened within maybe a minute of each other. What are the chances?

The case above contains a 'decided' formulation, but withholds the ‘realised’ from the departure/discovery device This case has been analysed as part of the 'on a whim' cases in a previous part of the chapter. However, the departure marked by ‘decided’ is further elaborated on in the account. The 'trip on the steam train' that was marked as ‘decided’ upon (lines 3-6) is further and explicitly explained as a departure from routine action and also routine thinking: 'This is not something *I've ever done before or even really considered before*' (lines 6-7, emphases added). In fact, the negation of riding a steam train being any regular or plausible activity for the author to be engaged in comes in the form of a three-part list: 'not *done* before, or *considered* before, no particular *interest'*. Whilst the last part of the list ‘interest’ does not come in the form of a verb as the first two, it nonetheless completes the list of reasons for why the steam trains are ‘unusual’ for the author. It is this departure from routine that sets the scene for the upcoming coincidence-reveal, marked as a discovery, albeit without the use of ‘realised’ as in some of the other accounts: 'She then texts back to say "no way, that's ridiculous!"'. The exclamation 'no way' as well as it being

'ridiculous' highlighted with an exclamation mark construct the surprise and wonder at the coincidence, accomplishing a sense of discovery. Thus, the above example has demonstrated the ways in which departure is accomplished by the use of ‘decided’, but also by explicit formulations that mark this departure from routine. In the following section, a number of instances where the ‘decided’ formulation does not feature, but departure is still accomplished by other means will be analysed. In the section following that, instances (like the above) where the cognitive formulation ‘realised’ is not included, but discovery is constructed will be presented.

Alternative departure formulations

In the following, synonymous cases are presented, falling under the alternative departure/realised category. The cognitive formulation ‘decided’ is withheld but substituted by alternative formulations of departure, followed by ‘realised’ within the narrative.

In the following case, which has been analysed in regard to the use of 'realised' in line 6 in the previous section on ‘realised’, the departure/discovery structure still holds, even though ‘decided’ is absent from the account.

Extract 5.15
Flying Visit

```
01   I was on a work trip to London which is unusual when I
02   was changing trains on the underground. I saw a woman
03   standing at the bottom of the escalators and thought how
04   similar to my friend that I'd lost touch with who lived
05   in Singapore. As I walked past her and heard her talk in
06   her Danish accent I realised it was my friend from
07   Singapore who had flown in that afternoon. I hadn't seen
08   her for 5 years and she hadn't been to UK for over 10
09   years.
```

Although missing ‘decided’, departure from routine is accomplished through two formulations. The author spells out the departure from routine specifically through emphasising that the London work trip 'is unusual' (line 1). The very formulation ‘unusual’ makes relevant a straying from the usual routine. Reading the account without this crucial sub-clause, results in a narrative that seems to lack a point and the astounding meeting merely reads like a build-up of another highpoint in a story that hasn’t yet been developed. It is not readable as a coincidence at all. The unusual, arguably, indicates a departure from routine which marks the subsequent happenings

coincidental because they cannot be said to have occurred as part of the normal happenings of everyday life. By default, the author has already strayed from normal, and as such the happening occurring within the context of the unusual becomes unusual itself (and the surprise adds to this sense). Thus, this departure in the first line sets up the coincidental highpoint of the account to be in tandem with the 'realised' that occurs in line 6.

The following case, albeit lacking a 'decided' formulation, includes two constructions indicating departure from routine:

Extract 5.16
First and last days of work

```
01   At the end of October '11 after 27 years in the library
02   service, I was working my last day prior to retirement.
03   On that afternoon there was an MP's surgery, something
04   never held before at the branch. There was a lady
05   waiting who introduced herself to me and we realised
06   that we had worked together when we were teenagers.
07   After she had gone, it occurred to me that we had
08   started our first job together on the same day and she
09   had come into the library on what was the final day of
10   my final job. I had seen her once, several years ago,
11   in another branch where I was working at the time, but
12   we had never kept in touch apart from that.
```

The first involves departure from the author's routine 'I was working my last day prior to retirement' (line 2). This formulation marks the day as non-routine and special for the author and positions it as being on the brink to an entire break with the working life routine the author had reportedly followed for the past 27 years (line 1). This is a major departure from the author's routine, and a major departure from working life. The second construction of departure is a departure from the library's schedule and routine: 'On that afternoon there was an MP's surgery, something never held before at the branch' (lines 3-4). Marked as a first occurrence, it by default is not routine. Both the 'last day' line 2 and the implicit 'first time' in line 4 (which is implied through the formulation 'never held before) build a discursively compelling contrast structure. This contrast structure is explicitly spelled out in the title: 'First and last days of work', mirroring the content.

Alternative discoveries

The following section will introduce instances where the ‘realised’ part of the device is absent, but replaced by alternative formulations of discovery or recognition. In the following account, the author describes a departure from routine that involves straying from the ongoing activity, driving along a route to a specific destination, whilst on holiday in South Africa when they are described as having 'on impulse ‘decided’ to stop and have a walk' (lines 3-4). This departure builds a departure by virtue of being marked so through the use of 'on impulse' and 'decided', and also because it literally is a departure from the ongoing route (on the way to Cape Town from Port Elizabeth), as well as the ongoing activity (from driving to walking).

Extract 5.17
Holiday meeting

```
01   About 10 years ago we were holidaying in South Africa.
02   We were driving from Port Elizabeth to Cape Town and saw
03   a sign for a small remote nature reserve so on impulse
04   decided to stop and have a walk. It was a Sunday and
05   there were a lot of people there. Whilst walking back
06   from a view point we bumped into a colleague of my
07   husbands' who taught at the same school as him in
08   Oxfordshire, she was on holiday as well. Then 3 years
09   later we were on holiday in China and on our first night
10   there we were having dinner in an extremely large
11   tourist hotel when in came the same teacher also on
12   holiday. We haven't met her again in any unusual or
13   strange places but you never know they say things come
14   along in threes.
```

The discovery ‘Whilst walking back from a view point we bumped into a colleague of my husbands'’ is readable as a discovery as it is set in the mundane, yet previously marked non-routine activity 'whilst walking [...]', but also because this later transpires to be the coincidental element of the account that involves meeting the husband's colleague in far-away holiday destinations such as Cape Town (first meeting, first coincidence) and China (second meeting, second coincidence). Indeed, a further meeting is anticipated 'but you never know they say things come along in threes' (lines 13-14). It is a discovery as the formulation 'we bumped into a colleague' conveys surprise - the construction suggests a surprising discovery of the known in an unknown land, on an unknown and unplanned climb to the view point. The 'bumping into' formulation obviously does not mean an unexpected, physical collision of the bodies, but rather, is a metaphor suggesting the unexpectedness of the meeting. I argue that it is used for a reason. It constructs surprise to a greater

extent than the hypothetical alternative 'we saw his colleague from miles ahead standing on the viewing platform' might achieve. The turn of phrase ‘bumping into’ someone, is telling in itself: It seems to construct a scenario where the people involved are so absent-mindedly engrossed in their activities, that they ‘collide’, in the metaphorical sense of the word. The metaphor marks the moment of meeting, of recognition, as a renewed contact with reality, as a ‘coming into consciousness’ invoked by ‘bumping into’ the acquaintance. That is, the use of ‘bumping into’ constructs recognition and discovery in an alternative way to ‘realised’, whilst upholding the same sense of surprise and wonder (and the structure of the device).

This departure-discovery formulation then implicitly wards off a host of other explanations of the non-coincidental variety: for instance, that her husband and his colleague might share the same taste in holiday destination (being fascinated in foreign cultures by virtue of their professions and their cultural capital that involves curiosity in the world, say), that they chatted previously about their upcoming trips and ‘realised’ they might meet, or even that something more untoward might be happening (for instance, that these meetings have been pre-arranged). Thus, the use of the departure/discovery device – where the departure involves a rather mundane activity that is however not geared towards eliciting the weird happening that is described as having been discovered (the coincidence) – portrays a version of events whereby straying from routine for no apparent reason, and innocently too, has led to a coincidental outcome. In short, the account contains a decided/(alternative)discovery formulation that accomplishes the departure/discovery making the narrative readable as a coincidence account.

The following case contains three departures marked with ‘decided’ and one discovery, formulated without ‘realised’, which marks the coincidence. The author describes visiting the UK for a treatment of her knee injury and combining the visit with seeing her friend, who shows her around a stately home. This visit of the stately home is marked as departure through the use of ‘we decided on impulse to visit Chatsworth House’ (lines 10-11). A further departure from routine (namely not taking the guided tour, as one might normally do as a tourist, or as the author would usually do) is accounted for and marked by ‘decided’: ‘so we decided not to join a guided tour’ (line 13).

Extract 5.18
Chance Family Meeting

[…] lines 1-13 omitted
14 showed me around. To my shock, surprise and utter
15 amazement as we walked into one of the rooms I saw my
16 Brother and his Wife in a group being shown around by a
17 guide. We were speechless for a moment in complete
18 disbelief. At that time I had not seen or spoken to my
19 brother for several months and he had no idea I was in
20 the UK. He had decided to take a few days' holiday in
21 England and by an amazing coincidence had also decided
22 to visit Chatsworth House on the same day and at the
23 same time as me., neither of us had ever been there
24 before. Even then we could easily have missed each
25 other as Chatsworth House is a big mansion. Three years
26 on I can still hardly believe this coincidence.
27 Caroline

The discovery of her brother and his wife at the same place is not marked by 'realised', rather, it is expressed through a series of expressions of amazement: 'To my shock, surprise and utter amazement as we walked into one of the rooms I saw my Brother and his Wife in a group being shown around by a guide' (lines 14-17). Notably, brother and wife appear in capital letters, where no other nouns that are not names are capitalised anywhere else in the account. This capitalisation emphasises the surprise and wonder at meeting the two. The exuberant excitement is described in the form of a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of similar expressions of wonder: 'shock, surprise and utter amazement' thus rhetorically strengthening the surprise conveyed. The formulation 'by an amazing coincidence had also decided' (line 21) also marks astonishment.

The discovery is also implicit in the context of the brother's movements. Notably, he is described as working 'full time' (line 5) and contrasted to his sister's seemingly more flexible work schedule as a 'housewife' (line 6). This outlay of what his presumed usual life can be inferred as, thus makes his holiday a departure from routine and it is also marked as such through the use of 'decided' in line 20. Thus, whilst the initial departure describes the sister's departure from routine activities (visiting Chatsworth and not joining the guided tour), the third 'decided' marks the brother's departure from his schedule, thus building another departure. The coincidence of meeting unexpectedly, a 'discovery', is itself a departure from the routine where siblings do not meet often: 'We usually meet up once a year' and if so, then in 'Guernsey'. The departure from routine is further emphasised in its unusualness of party, having not previously been at their place of spontaneous

encounter: ‘neither of us had ever been there before’ (lines 23-24). This spells out how both parties are described to have swayed from normal routine. As such, departures and discoveries are intertwined, discursively building a net of coincidental happenings.

Inverse coincidence construction: discovery/departure

In the following cases, the departure/discovery structure is reversed to discovery/departure such that ‘realised x’ is followed by ‘decided x’ in the narrative. This suggests that the structure of departure/discovery is robustly coupled and can function in reverse order.

Extract 5.19
Gold in the compost

My parents gave me a gold bangle, engraved on the inside with my name and the date, for my 21st birthday. I wore it almost every day until, after a weekend at my sister-in-law's, I realised it was missing. My daughter, then aged about 4, liked to play with my jewellery box (sounds grand, but wasn't really), and occasionally would hide items under cushions or pillows. I grilled her, but she always denied having played with the bangle. My sister-in-law searched her house, to no avail. Eventually, I gave up looking, but always felt, oddly, that it would turn up, and so it did. Six years later my sister-in-law phoned to say they had found my bangle. Her husband, a devoted gardener, had suddenly decided that there must be some good stuff in the compost bin because he hadn't emptied it for years. Among the compost he found what he thought was one of those metal fasteners that used to hold the lids on pots of fish paste. My bangle had been sitting in the compost bin for 6 years having fallen off my wrist while we enjoyed a sunny afternoon in the garden and then been swept up with the lawn clippings. Their daughter-in-law worked in a jeweller’s so she had it cleaned and restored to its former glory, and I got it back on my 46th birthday, exactly 25 years after my Mum and Dad gave it to me. I'm 72 now and it's still on my wrist.

The discovery/departure structure encompasses the following parts: the discovery: ‘I realised it was missing’ (line 4) and the departure: ‘Her husband, a devoted gardener, had suddenly decided that there must be some good stuff in the compost bin because he hadn't emptied it for years’ (lines 13-15). Finding that the bangle is missing forms the discovery, and the ‘decided’ is the departure describing the action that leads to finding the lost bangle. The departure (emptying the compost bin) is framed as non-routine. This can be seen by the use of ‘decided’ itself (as routine actions do not need

to be marked as having been decided). Furthermore, the description of not having emptied the compost bin 'for years' (line 15) and the more specific six years later (lines 11-12) shows that emptying it was a form of departure (of the usual routine of not emptying it and letting it rot). In fact, its status of not having been emptied for so long is framed as the appealing factor making the husband want to discover its content: 'there must be some good stuff […]'. With the loss framed as discovery, and departure from routine leading to discovery of the bangle, losing and finding are two contrast structures doubly intertwined in the device within the account.

The following narrative describes how the author is put in touch with a friend's friend who shares her interest in music. They get in touch, speaking on the phone but do not realise the plans to meet up in real life. A year later they sit in each other's vicinity on a plane from Sweden, initially starting to talk until they realise they had spoken before, which constitutes the coincidence.

Extract 5.20
Swedish Flight Singer

```
[…]  lines 1-8 omitted
09   from Stockholm. About a year after the phone call I was
10   getting a late midweek flight back from Sweden on a
11   nearly empty plane, there were literally 5 people on it,
12   one of whom was a girl sitting just across from me
13   writing in a book. We got talking, I asked to look in
14   the book and saw they were song lyrics she was making
15   up, talked a little more and we both realised we'd
16   talked to each other before! She had decided to go to
17   Stockholm at the last minute on her own, just to have a
18   look for a couple of days. So we had to do some music,
19   and did a couple of songs together over the next few
20   weeks, then drifted apart. Haven't seen her since, but
21   it's my best small world story.
```

In this instance, the discovery 'we both realised we'd talked to each other before!' (line 15) precedes the departure formulation in the next line 'She had decided to go to Stockholm at the last minute on her own'. The mutual discovery, indicated by the use of plural personal pronoun 'we' is placed before the departure (described in third person singular 'she'). Grammatically, the departure is signalled to have occurred before the discovery (through the use of the simple past tense 'realised' and then the past perfect tense 'she had decided'). This makes sense in the context of this narrative: As the discovery that they recognised each other is portrayed as a mutual discovery, then the reason for the author's acquaintance to have been travelling to

Stockholm logically had to have been discovered after talking to her. This means that the discovery departure structure constructs what reasonably can be understood as the chronological accumulation of knowledge of the author. The motive to go to Stockholm that the author ascribes to her acquaintance ('at the last minute' and 'just to have a look for a couple of days') pre-empts any possible accusation of the author having sought out the former acquaintance in any form – the plan was spontaneous such that planning this meeting would not have been possible and the author (by presenting the events in this chronological order, where the talking to her comes before discovering what she was doing on her way to Stockholm) further show that the author had no access to the acquaintance's motives prior to talking to her on the plane, for the first time in a while.

The discovery of the two knowing one another marked through 'we both realised' carefully manages their meeting and presents it as a 'coincidental' one. This discovery presents their meeting as spontaneous, in a sense that they happened to sit within reach in the relatively empty plane, did not recognise one another, but got talking. This counters the alternative possible version of events where the author seeks out and approaches the old acquaintance having recognised her. Arguably, having never met in person (but just on the phone) recognition needed to be described as having occurred through talking to one another.

In the extract below, the author describes how his phone randomly calls a number through being pressed in its pocket, which results in the person calling back and turning out to be an acquaintance. The discovery sets the preconditions for realising the subsequent coincidental event.

Extract 5.21
Phone coincidence

About ten years ago, my mobile phone was unlocked in my pocket and it typed in a random number and called it. I only realised what had happened a few minutes later, when the person I had called by accident decided to phone me back to find out who I was and what I wanted. I was surprised enough to think that I had randomly typed in a working phone number in my pocket and then called it, but as I was speaking to this person, I also recognised the voice and realised that it was somebody I knew - an old school friend of my sister. There was never any point when I had her number, and I could see from my call record that the number had been inputted accidentally via the keypad, not accessed from my

15 contact list.

Alternative departure in inverse coincidence construction

The following instance, contains a discovery/departure structure, where the departure is alternatively formulated and only subtly marked as a ‘departure’.

Extract 5.22
Favourite earring returned

On 27th September 2013, I visited Cambridge to meet up with a dear friend who also did her PhD at Cambridge almost 20 years ago. After a relaxing day enjoying the sights and reminiscing about old times, we went to the ladies loo at Lion Yard in the centre of Cambridge before heading back. My friend took the bus towards Babraham Road and I went to the rail station. When I reached the platform a charming lady, whom I had never met before, pointed towards an empty train on the adjacent platform, and asked if we were standing on the correct platform for the train to London. I said that we were, and that we would have to stand outside in the cold and wait for our train. We then decided to sit in the empty train until our train arrived. After a brief conversation around the reasons for our visit to Cambridge that day, she looked at me and said 'you have lost an earring'. I felt my ear and realised that I had indeed lost one of my earrings. She then said 'I have it!'. The amazing thing was that she had also gone to the Ladies loo at Lion Yard noticed the earring and had hooked it onto her hair. She explained that she took the earring because she felt that the person wouldn't know where they had lost the earring and so would not come back to the Lion Yard to search for it. What’s the chance of losing something in the centre of a small city, then meeting and talking to a stranger in a busy railway station, who has picked up the item and then returns it to you? Renuka

The coincidence is described as the author being reunited with her earring she had lost (but not yet realised to have lost) at a lavatory in a shopping centre in Cambridge whilst meeting with her friend for the day. The author described meeting a stranger, a woman, on the train station platform who makes her aware of her loss and also has her lost earring, having found it in the lavatory in Cambridge on the same day. The discovery, marked with ‘decided’ is the discovery of the loss of the earring: ‘she [the stranger she had started talking to] looked at me and said 'you have lost an earring'. I felt my ear and realised that I had indeed lost one of my earrings’ (lines 16-18). The departure is the stranger offering the earring back: ‘The amazing thing was that she had also gone to the Ladies lavatory at Lion Yard noticed the earring and had hooked it onto her hair.’ The actions of the stranger are described as ‘the amazing thing

was', but this does not very strongly suggest the unusualness of the actions of the lady. In terms of circumstance it is of course amazing that the woman had been in the same shopping centre and lavatory that day and was also on her way back to London. However, the unusual action is reportedly hooking a lost earring into her hair. The standard procedure might be to report it missing to a member of staff at the shopping centre. Why this was not done, is accounted for (lines 21-24), as the author describes the woman saying she thought the person who had lost the earring would not know where so would not come to the shopping centre for it. But this does not address the strange aspect of being described as having hooked it into her hair. First of all, it is an earring, so it would be more normal to hook it into one's ear (it would be even more conventional to put a stranger's earring it into one's bag). Second, it is considered more normal to put it into one's pocket, say. Thus, this description of the 'amazing thing' that includes being at the same place to find and store the earring in her hair, builds the 'departure' part of the inverse departure-discovery device that has been identified via other instances in the rest of the chapter.

Conclusion

The publishing of one's personal coincidence account makes one vulnerable to a host of social risks: being perceived as gullible, illogical, or simply as recounting untrue events. The departure/discovery device exposes an orientation to, and avoidance of, such dangers. Through the use of the cognitive formulations 'decided' and 'realised', or alternative ways discovery and departure are accomplished, the events can be presented as factual, and the coincidence-interpretation as plausible and true. This is because the initial departure from routine brings the subsequent events into unusual terrain. It discursively forms expectations. The subsequent discovery then appears even more extraordinary in its newly formed context. The discovery is placed at the coincidence-revelation point in the narrative, whilst in turn constructing this revelation itself. Departure and discovery thus build a robust link. The dual structure ensures that the narrative has a 'plot' around which the coincidence develops. Without a departure from routine, or a discovery, there would be no narrative fuel with which to launch the account, and no culmination point to give it extraordinariness.

As varied as the coincidence accounts are, they are geared towards the same agenda: to convince the reader that coincidence is a plausible interpretation of the events described to construct surprise. The aim of the narrator of a coincidence is to be believable, and to be seen as a normal person with sound mental ability. The departure discovery device shows how the narrators of coincidences from this data set, exhibit and negotiate their understanding of what is usual and unusual, far removed from research suggesting that coincidence believers can be neatly contrasted with those subscribed to statistical explanations. Instead, this data shows that they negotiate extraordinariness and routine for the purpose of their own accounts.

The departure/discovery device has further shown that the organisational structure that on first glance appears to be tied to the formulations of ‘decided’ and ‘realised’, can transcend the realm of cognitive formulations to accomplish the structure in other ways. The ways in which the structure is systematically used, displays it to be a robust feature of coincidence accounts. In the face of the variety of seemingly unique coincidence accounts, there is orderliness.

Chapter 6

‘But…still’: a device for chance management

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the ways in which people orient to probabilistic reasoning in their written accounts of coincidence. It builds on the single-case analysis in the foregoing chapter, Chapter Four, which demonstrated a coincidence account’s designed quality. To recapitulate, until the coincidence is revealed in the narrative, the events described in the account were presented as if they were innocuous events. This permits the author to present them as if they were being discovered for the first time at the end of the narrative. The use of parallel formulations, where the distinctive but coinciding events were described using strikingly similar formulations, was a further tool for constructing ‘coincidentalness’ rhetorically. Active motive management through the use of cognitive formulations such as ‘decided’ were shown to depict the person described as having experienced the coincidence as innocuous in its design. This circumvented the coincidence’s origin appearing engineered or routine, thus allowing the coincidence to be presented as surprising. And finally, the use of the term ‘chance’ pointed, and tacitly yielded, to the unique context of the Cambridge Coincidence Collection (CCC), invoking notions of probabilistic reasoning as well as happenstance. Analysing the way in which people construct the coincidence rhetorically using displays of probabilistic reasoning is this chapter’s endeavour.

The overall aim of coincidence studies in the past was to establish the source of coincidence, and previous studies in the areas of statistics and cognitive psychology explained the occurrence of coincidence by pointing to people’s natural perception processes resulting in misperception of events. That is, people were seen as inadequate observers of the outside reality they inhabit. In previous studies paranormal believers, fittingly termed ‘sheep’, were contrasted with statistical advocates called ‘goats’, who were presented as having the ability to assess chance logically (Blackmore and Troscianko, 1985; Blackmore and Moore, 1994); whilst a lack of ability to think probabilistically was associated with problems and risks such as being prone to misinterpret events and even fall victim to ‘scams' (Nickerson,

2004). People were essentially claimed to be 'fooled by randomness' (Taleb, 2007). Much work has been devoted to uncover everyday fallacies that can happen to anyone (for an overview of some misinterpretations commonly made, see Gilovich, 1991). the following biases as contributors to the perception of (he argues, not objectively existing) coincidences: the confirmation bias (new information is taken as a confirmation of previously held beliefs), the egocentric bias, the hindsight bias, and the availability bias. It is no surprise that accounts of coincidence would in some ways reflect these scientific endeavours to uncover coincidence perception.

Of course the study of how people process and understand statistical chance and probability has a cognitive side (Coleman, Beitman, & Celebi, 2009). Generalising, in this literature people reporting coincidence are portrayed as either naïve/credulous or knowledgeable/rational. These categories in which they are placed, are meant to dictate their behaviour and ultimately, shape their experience of coincidence (or the absence of such experience). In the rhetoric of these studies, I argue that the degree of complexity of the events forming part of a coincidence were presented as exceeding the capacity of human perception; that is, whilst probabilistic reasoning can be worked out mathematically, it is portrayed as not intuitively understood, which is then given as the reason why people report being surprised by coincidence. The overall endeavour to uncover the origins of coincidences have meant that naturally occurring accounts of coincidences, and the explanatory work done within them, have so far been ignored.

In the following analysis, 'coincidence' is not being assumed to be or not to be an 'a priori' phenomenon (Jung, 1952). Rather, the analysis is geared towards studying the instances in which participants themselves make references to probability. As such, the investigation of references to probabilistic reasoning are analysed in regards to their rhetoric properties, and not their mathematical properties.

Addressing the demands of the Cambridge Coincidence Collection

Especially in the context of the CCC, it is reasonable to assume that people uploading coincidence accounts have encountered some of the ideas of the website, and the host of the website, through his many public appearances during which he

has lectured on the statistical and psychological factors contributing to the coincidence experience. These people may reasonably be expected to have an interest in the scientific ideas related to coincidence perception. Even if not directly through the CCC, probabilistic reasoning that diminishes coincidences is widespread through popular statistics books, for instance Taleb (2007). It would be unsurprising then, if some arguments derived from probabilistic reasoning seeped into the coincidence accounts of the CCC and people oriented and made reference to these kinds of knowledge about the origins of coincidence. Indeed, Gergen (1973) famously argued that far from being an objective science, social psychological knowledge alters the very facts it produces. This is succinctly outlined in the following quote:

> The scientist's task is also that of communicator. If his theories prove to be useful decoding devices, they are communicated to the populace in order that they might also benefit from their utility. Science and society constitute a feedback loop. (Gergen, 1973: 310)

This, I argue, applies to the data set at hand: When coincidence accounts are submitted to the CCC, authors have to resolve a difficult dilemma in their accounts. Participants are most likely aware of probabilistic arguments that undermine and demystify coincidences and render them unsurprising, as they found the CCC website in the first place. This makes submitting an account of coincidence problematic from the outset. Moreover, the CCC invites people to share their coincidence accounts in a particular, contradictory framework:

> Professor David Spiegelhalter of Cambridge University wants to know about your coincidences! Why? By recording your coincidence stories here, you can help him build a picture of what kinds of coincidences are out there and which ones seem to 'get to' us the most. Your coincidence stories can also help him explore the 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.
> (https://understandinguncertainty.org/coincidences, accessed 17/2/17)

That is, the mere introductory text, specifically, 'you can help him build a picture of what kinds of coincidences are out there' constructs the existence of coincidence and marks it as observable phenomenon *out there* in the world. However, the justification for the request for people to put forward their coincidence is the explanation that this will 'help' Professor Spiegelhalter 'explore the scientific

explanations which may *account for* them [coincidence]' (emphasis added), which simultaneously constructs coincidences to be phenomena that can be explained away. Specifically, the introductory text suggests that these would be either due to statistical chance or the 'wonderful workings of our brains' (suggesting that coincidences are actually illusions in the brain). Thus, people choose to submit coincidence accounts even though they are described as both being, and not being, observable phenomena in the world. The status of coincidence is contested from the outset.

Preliminary observations

The following account has been reproduced in full, to exhibit the structural features that shape its design. To summarise, the coincidence involves the narrator describing how his sister lost her favourite stuffed toy, 'tigger', watching him play touch rugby, which they could not initially find again. It is when they move to a small town six years later, and they meet their neighbours, that it transpires that the toy was now owned by the daughter of the family who is of the same age as his sister, as it was in fact not just a toy that looked like the one that had been lost, but the same one, as it had been acquired at an auction for lost toys.

Extract 6.1
The curious incident of the lost tigger

When I was 6 or 7 years old I used to play touch rugby near where my family lived in Surrey. My younger sister used to come along to watch and always brought her soft toy- a Tigger from Winnie the Pooh.
One day, very sadly, she left the teddy bear behind at a rugby game, and while we came back later and spent a long time searching for it- it couldn't be found.
Fast forward 6 years or so, and we have moved house to a small town in West Sussex. We go to visit our next door neighbours, who have a daughter the same age as my sister, and she sees a Tigger soft toy and remarks she used to have one like that. Our neighbours say they bought it at a lost toys auction at a rugby club in Surrey, and it turns out to have been the same toy, and my sister is reunited!
It's hardly uncommon for a family to move from edge of London suburbs to a more rural setting, particularly once they start to have children. Sussex and Surrey are not so far away from each other. But it still seems an amazing coincidence that they should be our next-door neighbours!

One could imagine that in a coincidence account, a description of coincidental events and how they interlink to form a coincidence might suffice, and the narrator could have submitted it at the point where the link between events are revealed. The link between events is marked by the expression 'and it turns out to have been the same toy, and my sister is reunited!'. It is readable as a 'coincidence revelation' because it is at this point where the two narrative strands (the loss of the toy during the rugby game and meeting the new neighbours) come together. However, the events described as interlinked are not directly termed 'coincidence'. This uncovering of the 'link between events' is positioned in lines 14-15, yet the account continues until line 21 without providing any further details about the coincidental events. And notably, it is only in line 20, the last sentence of the entire account, that the events are explicitly labelled as 'an amazing coincidence' for the first time. This narrative point, the 'link between events' will interchangeably be called 'coincidence revelation' in the subsequent chapter.

The description following the implicit coincidence-revelation will be investigated in this paragraph. So, from the beginning until the revelation of the coincidental the coincidence is relayed in the account as if it were unfolding in chronological order. After the coincidence revelation, something curious happens in the account. Namely, the narrator seems to 'undo' his own argument. Namely, he provides reasons that weaken the coincidental quality of his account. In lines16-18 he argues that the circumstances that led his family to move (specifically, to be moving from an urban to rural setting once children join the family) are not unusual. This is done with a particular formulation, 'hardly uncommon', which is an odd way to say something is normal. It does however play into the statistical orientation of the site. The phrase 'hardly uncommon' allows the author to present considerations that go against the overall argument of the account that the circumstances are, overall, striking and unusual. That is, the author exhibits the knowledge that his account should comprise extraordinary and unusual events, and admitting that an aspect is 'hardly uncommon', displays this orientation towards making it appear unusual overall, whilst retaining objective judgements to assess each part of the coincidental events individually. The next sentence, which follows in a similar vein, 'Sussex and Surrey are not so far away from each other' mitigates the unusualness of the circumstances also, this time by suggesting the distance between the two towns his family moved

between means the move from urban space to rural space resulted in a move that was somewhat expected.

This perspective is overturned in lines 19-21 however, and the overall premise that the events do indeed constitute coincidence, is emphasised. This is done in a particular way; the construction 'But it still seems an amazing coincidence', marks the coincidences not just as a mere coincidence, but as a striking, 'amazing' one. 'But it still' orients to the mitigating aspects, whilst seemingly concluding that the events were weighed up to be in favour of coincidence. Thus, the two mitigating parts make it seem that the author is willing to accept, indeed outline himself, that certain aspects of the events are not unusual, but the particular constellation of the events as they happened, in particular the aspect that exact same toy turns out to be owned by the neighbour's family, actually are. Therefore, these last lines of text seem to be an assessment of the events described that the narrator provides to his account after revealing the coincidence; it is depicted a bit like a post-mortem, just here, it is an examination of the coincidence.

In short, rather than ending on the culminating point of the coincidence, coincidence accounts can continue with a comment-like assessment of the events[17]. Within it, the author seemingly weighs up some of the components of the coincidental events, referring to an aspect of the events that could be seen as common and plausible occurrence, but then comes to a close emphasising its coincidental quality. I argue that this back-and-forth between presenting the coincidence as a remarkable phenomenon in the world and a mere statistical normality attends to the requirements of the website that itself constructs and perpetuates the existence and non-existence of coincidence in the world. The author is able to portray himself as an astute member of society. There is another aspect to it: To some extent, the narrator is able to remove his account from the imminent assessment of Professor Spiegelhalter, by

[17] A small sample produced the recurrent feature discussed in this chapter. A subsequent search for all the instances from the data set of 8000+ instances featuring one of the words used to launch the device was conducted. 600 narratives contained the word 'still'. After reading each instance, 17 usable and clear instances were selected for this analysis. Whilst this is not a statistically significant number of cases (and doesn't need to be), the three-step pattern is systematic and strongly linked with the two opposing repertoires (that of amazement and statistical explanation) and the portrayed identities that each repertoire offers: that of being perceived as a logical and astute person and that of a coincidence-believer, not easily amazed and deceived by normal everyday occurrences.

making that assessment himself. The narrator aligns himself with the scientists. Mitigating the coincidence allows the narrator to present himself as not invested in the account's status as a coincidence.

We thus observe three features in the account, occurring in the following order:

1) Coincidence revelation (the revelation of the 'link between events')
2) Coincidence mitigation
3) Coincidence confirmation (with the use of 'but…still')

Accounting for different versions of events without undermining a commitment to one objective reality

From the area of discursive psychology, we borrow from Gilbert & Mulkay's (1984) milestone research, in which they analyse the discursive strategies scientists use to fight their particular corner in a controversy for the scientific truth on 'oxidative phosphorylation'. They argue that the discourse sourced from these scientists about their work and their scientific positions does not allow for conclusions to be made about the actions or beliefs of these scientists, they do not consider it useful to aim to 'find the truth'. Rather, as the discourse itself is their topic of investigation, they explore the social and performative functions of that discourse, firmly viewing it as a social achievement. They argue that:

> We will not be opening Pandora's Box in order to reveal how various supposedly disreputable, non-cognitive influences are actually at work in the field we have studied. Our reference to Pandora's Box is not a way of referring to a supposed gap between an orthodox view of science and the social realities revealed by sociological research. It is, rather, a way of drawing attention to some methodological analytical weaknesses in previous sociological work on science. [...] One of our central claims in this book is that sociologists' attempts to tell *the* story of a particular social setting or to formulate *the* way in which social life operates are fundamentally unsatisfactory. Such 'definitive versions' are unsatisfactory because they imply unjustifiably that the analyst can reconcile his version of events with all the multiple and divergent versions generated by the actors themselves. (pages 1-2 emphases in original)

Repertoires are collections of commonly adopted and generally normative and acceptable ways to talk about an issue, that are drawn upon when the topics are in some ways sensitive. This is not to say that all talk is scripted, rather, the repertoires allow speakers to communicate unusual issues in their own ways. The overall interpretation is situated in a repertoire, but the formulations can vary. In their data

set of scientific discourse data, Gilbert & Mulkay (1984) identified interpretative repertoires, based around the professional and private, that the scientists use and flick between in their discussion of the controversy in interviews, documents and publications.

Gilbert & Mulkay identify the 'empiricist repertoire' and the 'contingent repertoire' (1984: 40). They argue that the empiricist repertoire centres around scientific explanations, where 'speakers depict their actions and beliefs as a neutral medium through which empirical phenomena make themselves evident (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: 56); it is commonly used in academic publications (1984: 55). The contingent repertoire however, 'enables speakers to depict professional actions and beliefs as being significantly influenced by variable factors outside the realm of biochemical phenomena' (1984: 57), and mostly features in ordinary conversation or informal interviews (1984: 55). Thus, these repertoires are contradictory, and kept separate; that is, whilst the opposing repertoires are normally used in their respective contextual homes (formulations from the contingent repertoire are normally absent from academic literature (1984: 90), they can co-occur, but separation is achieved through pauses or by being used to describe different aspects of a scientist's actions (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: 90-91).

Gilbert & Mulkay (1984: 90) pose the question how accounts featuring these two opposing repertoires could stand, without constantly creating 'apparent contradictions'. They argue that using these two repertoires alongside one another harbours the potential risk of interpretative inconsistency (1984: 91). One of the ways in which this conflict is solved is the use of 'asymmetrical accounting for error', where the speaker 'identifies the views of one or more scientists as mistaken and provides some kind of account' why (1984: 67; 91). Another way is the 'truth will out device' or, as acronym 'TWOD', which they argue manages to bring together the two interpretative repertoires, both the contingent as well as empiricist repertoire (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: 92). It allows them to describe the same issue using the two repertoires alongside each other. Gilbert, & Mulkay (1984: 92) refer to the TWOD as 'one of a family of 'reconciliation devices' arising from scientists' movement between interpreting perspectives'.

An example of the TWOD is in the following data excerpt, where an interviewee said: 'I think ultimately that science is so structured that none of those things are important and that what is important is scientific facts themselves, what comes out at the end.' (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: 93). By arguing that the truth will come out in the end, the two opposing versions are momentarily allowed to coexist in the same narrative, without undermining a commitment to one objective reality. The TWOD has three features. Firstly, the TWOD emphasises the element of time, and secondly, it suggests that evidence will emerge with time and finally, it is used to marry the two conflicting repertoires. It suggests that in time, science will succeed in bringing to light what is correct, while 'social factors, personal judgements, intuition, charisma and so on are all allowed to play a part in science', though only in a limited space of time (1984: 94).

To return to the first example where the coincdence was revealed, then seemingly probabilistically mitigated and then concluded by 'but…still' followed by a coincidence confirmation, Gilbert & Mulkay's (1984) research advances the analysis in three ways: it shows that in the context of scientific research, the discourse can be contested, and thus, be a topic for research in itself. This is key point because scientific research in the area of coincidence research has focused on explaining the phenomenon, but not how people accommodate differing explanations of coincidence in their discourse, whilst sustaining the rhetorical construction of one objective reality. Secondly, it shows that conflicting versions of events can exist in the same narrative. Thirdly, it shows that an account does not need to provide a definite argumentative side – the TWOD allows people to leave two different explanatory versions together unresolved, for now.

Perhaps this can be extrapolated to the structure found in the coincidence account. It seems to permit the narrator to distance himself/herself from taking one side of the arguemtn. The structure may allow the narrator to evade some of the risks that arise from aligning with two contradictory explanations, or divergent repertoires. In short, the organising structure found in the first extract, which contains a 'but… still' feature, exhibits similar functions.

Establishing the 'but…still' device

The two following cases contain the same organising structure found in the first extract discussed in the introduction. These two coincidence accounts topicalise birthdays. Accordingly centred around dates by default, and being a topic on which there is a lot of work from statistical research, i.e. on the birthday problem (Mckinney, 1966; Diaconis and Mosteller, 1989), and for which likelihoods can apparently be established, they exhibit careful management of statistical chance.

Extract 6.2
Gay Birthdays

About 12 years ago I got together with my partner Christina, whose birthday is 6 March, and introduced her to my two best gay friends in Winchester. Turned out one of them had the same March birthday as Christina, whilst it turned out her partner shared my birth date of 27 May. We're all born several years apart but it still seems an odd coincidence and means we can never forget one another's birthdays.

Extract 6.3
Birthday Coincidence (first lines omitted)

Last year I went to dinner with a friend for her birthday. She had invited 3 other women, none of whom I had ever met. Since it was a birthday dinner we were talking about our birthdays, and we found that 3 out of the 4 of us invited shared the same birthday. Not year, only month and day, February 1st, but it was still very coincidental! Angie

The foregoing two cases show a recurrent organisation. Extracts 3 and 4 both contain a part in the narrative within which the coincidence is 'revealed'. Namely, extract 3 unveils two coincidences discernible by two 'turned out' formulations, marking coinciding birthdays (l.3-4). Both 'turned out' and 'we found that' point to a discovery, and construct a change of knowledge of how the events were intertwined. In extract 4, the birthday coincidence is revealed through the formulation 'and we found that […]'. Whilst recounted as if it were one coincidence, extract 4 actually describes three coinciding same birthdays. Following the coincidence revelation, both accounts contain what we shall call a coincidence-mitigation part. These coincidence mitigations call attention to a detail that makes the coincidence less striking, by pointing out that the birthdays were not the same year, written in variations ('born several years apart' l.06 for extract 1; 'not year, only month and day' lines 5-6 in extract 2). On first glance, pointing out that the matching birthdays

do not align to the same years weakens the coincidental quality of the accounts. The mitigations are designed to do that, placed in that position. Through this, the authors carefully exhibit that their own statistical awareness and impartiality towards their own experiences, that they thus communicate, is coming *before* the agenda of reporting a striking coincidence.

These mitigations are interwoven with 'but…still' in conjunction with coincidence confirmation: 'but it still seems an odd coincidence' lines 6-7; 'but it was still very coincidental!' lines 6-7. Through the 'but still' and the explicit use of coincidence ('odd coincidence'/ 'very coincidental') thereafter, a lack of low probability in the events described in the previous mitigation is explicitly contrasted with coincidentalness. Indirectly, high statistical probability is contrasted with coincidence in these two parts. What we have here then, are contrast structures inbuilt into single sentences. The 'but…still' structure is a contrast structure, which has strong rhetorical functions; it is a tool used to convince the reader of the account. This can be seen in the 'I was just doing x, when y' structure adopted to report unusual, sometimes paranormal occurrences (Wooffitt, 1992). This does two kinds of work: firstly, the narrator/speaker is able to present a normative identity through the use of presenting a mundane activity (x), avoiding appearing odd for reporting such an extraordinary happening. Secondly, the strangeness of the y is emphasised in the contrast of the mundane activity the speaker reports to have been in when interrupted by y (Wooffitt, 1992). 'But…still' exhibits similar functions:

We observe three features in the accounts, occurring in the following order:

1) Coincidence revelation/proposition (C)
2) Coincidence retraction/mitigation (not C)
3) Coincidence confirmation/reaffirmation and 'but…still' (But…still C)

The table below showcases the three-step order with the specific parts from the extracts.

Step	Extract	Extract
Coincidence	Turned out one of them had the **same** March birthday as Christina, whilst it turned out her partner **shared** my birth date of 27 May.	we found that 3 out of the 4 of us invited **shared** the same birthday

Not Coincidence	We're all born several years **apart**	**Not** year, **only** month and day, February 1st,
But still Coincidence	**but it still** seems an **odd coincidence**	**but** it was **still very coincidental!**

This chimes in with recent research on the discursive construction of ageing and age references and the 'discursive management of notions of change and continuity' (Nikander, 2009: 863) from a Finnish data set of interviews with 50-year-old people. Nikander identifies a three-step device, where participants initially state that they are not affected by age, then produce a softener suggesting that they could have these in future, or already have some problems due to age, and a 'but' plus restatement of the initial statement. In the author's own words:

> The intriguing commonality in the arguments made in these three extracts is that notions of continuity (in the present day) and of possible future change and decrement were built up using a three-step 'A, B, but A' formulation that can be called a 'provisional continuity device'. At the first step, the significance of ageing to one's personal identity is down- played, often by using an extreme case formulation of the type, 'nothing has changed' (Pomerantz 1986). The second step typically has an element that softens the implications of the previous claim by acknowledging either the impending possibility of change or that some change has happened. The third step reiterates the initial claim. (Nikander, 2009: 872)

Nikander (2009) further argues that this structure may be found in other contexts. She cites a data extract from Widdicombe and Wooffitt's (1995: 168) study on young people in subcultures. She argues that the 'A, B, but A' structure applies when the punk rocker describes his own dress, outward style and self-presentation and explains how he can't imagine 'being straight' in attire (A), says he might in future wear such straight attire (B), then says 'but I-I-at the moment I can't imagine it at all' (but A).

This three-step structure Nikander outlines seems to be similar to the 'but…still' structure found in these coincidence accounts. The similarity is due to 'A, B, but A' structure that can be found in these instances too, just here it is related to coincidence rather than age, attire or style. Nikander however makes the point that age and attire are both aspects of self-presentation and it could be argued that the occurrence of the device has properties related to self-presentation. This makes sense: the way in which a person presents their thoughts and ability to process chance, and interpret

the events in their lives is clearly connected to ‘who they are’ seen to be in the world. Perhaps the way in which a person presents a coincidence is just as much related to the construction of identity as age or clothing.

In terms of the mitigation part of the structure, where mitigation is married with ‘but…still’ in conjunction with coincidence confirmation, can be seen as similar to other defensive formulations found in contexts such as racist statements, which are formulated as 'I have nothing against blacks, but ...' (Van Dijk, 1992). Potter & Wetherell similarly argue that ‘the typical form of a disclaimer might be ‘I am no sexist, but …’ followed by a negative comment about women’ (1987: 77). They argue that speakers and writers use such formulations when the actions they report could likely be interpreted as coming from a person with a specific, correlating identity – here a sexist, which the formulations counteracts from the start by producing the negative interpretation and refuting it (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 77). Thus, such disclaimers are conducting facework (Goffman, 1959). As such, the use of the coincidence-mitigating disclaimer can be seen to counteract a correlating identity of someone reporting coincidence lightly. The negotiation of this identity then exposes the risks of the associated identity of ‘coincidence believer’.

In fact, this is no surprise given that both statistical research on coincidence and psychological research of coincidence, where the way in which people understand coincidence is seen as an indication of their ability to be ‘logical’ and safe from being ‘fooled’. It is therefore not surprising that in terms of ‘face’ (borrowing from Goffman, 1959) there is a lot at stake for people reporting coincidence. Whilst coincidences may be presented as outside events, they are actually presentations of self. In the particular context of the CCC the ideal presentation of coincidences is about presenting an informed, critical, and sceptical front about one’s own perception of the events one describes. Nikander (2009) also argues that through this device, people are able to transcend the numerical basis of age. It may be the case that the three-part ‘but…still’ structure allows narrators to transcend the numerical basis of coincidence.

To further establish the recurrence of this structure in other coincidence accounts, the following extracts will be briefly deconstructed to exhibit their structural design.

Topically departing from the first two birthday coincidences (where the coincidence was number-based), the first extract showcases how the various similarities and differences between two families are presented to have been weighed up in the three-part structure. The topics of the coincidence is not the focus of this analysis, however, the following example is shown to make the case that the 'coincidence, not coincidence, but still coincidence (c - not c - but still c)' structure is also evident in coincidence accounts describing different kinds of coincidence.

The structure C – not C – but still C is a simplified version, that makes the structure obvious, yet obscures some of the detail of the device. The use of C – not C – but still C implies that C remains constant. The first C entails an implicit coincidence revelation (in actual fact the first C mainly describes how two events are alike, they are not identified as a coincidence at all at this point). The 'not C' part backtracks on the commonality previously identified. It does not strictly speaking nullify the commonality, it merely weakens its unusualness, it *mitigates* the commonality. The C in the 'but sill C' part is different to the initial 'C' in that it describes a (now) strengthened 'coincidence', which is additionally directly referred to as a coincidence. When all the three features work together, the first C is readable as a coincidence revelation. However, in the absence of the rest of the structure, the initial C material is not actually readable as a coincidence. Rather, once all parts are accessibly and read together, the parts can indeed be described as C – not C – but still C structure, and yet in terms of what each part does (independent from the whole structure) the terms revelation, mitigation, coincidence confirmation are more accurate.

On a less acute note, the use of r, m, c also helps distinguish this structure from the show concession structure Antaki and Wetherell (1999) identify and mark with A-B-A, which will be outlined subsequently (and with which it shares similarities, but from which it is also distinct). Of course it could be argued that using these two ways of presenting the structure makes it confusing. However, each description points to a different aspect of the structure: C-not C- bust still C emphasises the contrast, whilst r, m, c shows how there is a progression to C, that is C is not immediately identified, but worked towards. Letters will therefore be used in the data to mark what

particular lines are doing; ‘r’ will denote a coincidence identification/revelation, ‘m’ will denote mitigation and ‘c’ will denote a coincidence conformation sequence.

The narrator describes having two houses, and each house is described as situated next to a neighbour named Jutta, married to their respective husbands that are each called David, with each couple described as having a daughter the same age and a cat. In the context of the locus of coincidence, which is described to be Cornwall (the location of the narrator’s other house is left unspecified), the coinciding German name, which the narrator describes as ‘not a particularly common German name’ appears to be rare.

Extract 6.4
Catherine H

```
01    In 1986 we moved house and already had a cottage in
02    Cornwall. Our neighbours in both houses were named David
03    and Jutta. Jutta is not a particularly common German
04 r name. In both cases they had one daughter and a cat. The
05 m daughters were much the same age but called a different
06    name! Jutta still lives next door to us at home, sadly
07    her David died. The Jutta in Cornwall took her daughter
08    and went back to live in Germany and a divorce ensued.
09 c Still quite a coincidence.
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The three-part structure here includes listing multiple aspects that make the respective Jutta and David neighbouring couples appear to be alike (the names of the couple, having a daughter the same age and a cat), emphasising the coincidence, then a section that lists attributes where the two Jutta’s family constellations differed, thus mitigating the coincidental quality of the account (different names of the daughters), and also how their lives turned out to be different (death for the husband of one Jutta and divorce for the other), and then culminates in a ‘but…still’ formulation in addition to a coincidence confirmation (‘Still quite a coincidence’). In this short example, the entire account seems to be structured around the three-part structure, with coincidence revelation, mitigation and coincidence confirmation. That is, each sentence is ‘doing’ one of two actions: it is either emphasising the coincidental quality of the account, or diminishing it (see for instance the section marked ‘m’ for mitigation). However, this is what these sections merely seem to be doing at face value. I argue that the section that points out non-coincidental aspects of the account, placed between the coincidence-emphasising sections, within which it is embedded to form the ‘coincidence – not coincidence - but still, coincidence’ structure, actually

strengthens the coincidentalness of the account. The following section will explain why, by borrowing from previous research findings.

Structurally, 'C - not C - but still C' corresponds with Antaki & Wetherell's (1999) research on 'show concessions' where they argue that a three-part structure is used by participants in order to defend their claims, which they identified in 160 instances from five different conversational contexts. They term the phenomenon a 'show concession' because the speaker will make a show of conceding or 'giving in' to a position they previously opposed. That is, the authors argue that these concessions are, specifically, *displays* of concessions, which align with the position that certain cognitive references are *displays* of cognition with 'interactional business'. Antaki & Wetherell's (1999) argue that:

> 'The basic conversational structure we have uncovered makes a show of concession by (loosely speaking): (i) saying something vulnerable to challenge; (ii) conceding something to that challenge; then (iii) qualifying that concession and reasserting what one first said.' (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999: 9)

Antaki & Wetherell (1999: 9) introduce the structure with the following example about home-brewed beer, where the speaker proposes something, makes a 'show' of conceding with evidence against the original point, and then reaffirms the original position:

(2) S.17 p 178.LL

01	A	you can really get used to the home	
02		brew (.) [no additives just sugar	
03	B	[( )	
04	A	and malt (.) and hops (.)	
05		the *only thing I ever vary (.)*	
06		you can vary is really	*[proposition]*
07		**well you can** vary anything	*[concession]*
08		**but** the *only thing I'm (.) the thing*	
09		*that you really vary is* (th-) hops	*[reprise]*
10		(.) you know and instead of putting	
11		two ounces which is what they do in	
12		these kits I put three to four	

In relation to the extract they argue that the initial proposition is liable to challenge due to its use of an extreme case formulation, 'the only thing'. In the 'concession', the speaker draws attention to his awareness of this difficulty in the initial statement by acknowledging and guarding against the hazard that this extreme statement

proposes. The speaker then restates the original proposition, but it is now hearably stronger:

> Our argument, then, is that making a show of conceding bolsters the speaker's case and weakens its counter, and is to be heard as an alternative to other ways of conceding, which do not. Making a show of conceding fire-proofs something in the speaker's own position, making it less liable to challenge, upset or rebuttal. (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999: 10-11)

In the section specifically devoted to alternative concessions, they argue that this three-part structure that makes a show of conceding is rhetorically stronger than merely a concession without the three parts. The example they provide contains a sequence where a speaker simply agrees with the challenging statement of the other conversational partner (simply saying they were wrong) and then reiterates their initial point, which does not make the speaker's original argument stronger. The authors compare it to a manufactured instance of the same material where the extract where the concession that was not a 'show concession' within the three-part-structure, is turned into that very structure. It is immediately hearable as defusing the challenge.

They argue that 'it is important to be clear that it is the participants in the interaction, by virtue of their orientation to the talk, who show us that the three-part concession structure is operative and not the analysts' interpretation or idealization' (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999: 13), and provide two kinds of evidence. Firstly, going into the detail of the design of the three-part structure, they suggest that it includes these three parts:

> 1. Material that could reasonably be cast as being a challenging proposition, or having disputable implications
> 2. *Okay/allright/of course/ you know* or other concessionary marker, plus material countable as evidence against the challengeable proposition, or its implications
> 3. *But/neverthelss* or other contrastive conjunction plus (some recognizable version of) the original proposition
> (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999, 13)

The concession markers ('okay' or 'you know' for instance) show the participant's orientation to what has come previously and mark it as debatable; they work retrospectively, because they refer to the original statement that came before.

The reprise or contrast marker ‘but’ indicates that what was said before in the concession part is complete and what comes subsequently is in opposition to it. The reprise or contrast marker needs to work in conjunction with material that is hearable as opposed to the points made in the concession. The closer it is to the original statement, the stronger it is rhetorically. These markers then, show that speakers orient to the structure within their own talk.

Secondly, they provide evidence by showing that in interactions people seem to orient to this three-part structure and sometimes more than one speaker constructs these three steps. They give an example where speaker one provides the ‘proposition’ and the ‘concession’, but speaker two completes the structure by provoding the ‘reprise’. They also show how this structure is used not only to defend, but also to attack, and they use war terminology to term the three rhetorical structures with which this is accomplished. Firsty, ‘Trojan horses’ contain a caricature of the opposing argument, scondly, through ‘stings in tail’ the speakers are 'amplifying the negativity of the original proposition when the reprise slot opens up' (p.21), and thirdly, through ‘cheapeners’ a seemingly positive concession can still be essentially ‘dismissive’.

Antaki & Wetherell’s (1999) research is enlightening for the ‘C - not C - but still C’. Firstly, it shows in two ways that the three-part structure is oriented to by speakers in live interactions – they themselves orient to the structure, and multiple people orient to it as well. That is, because people orient to show concessions in their interactions by completing it together, it is evident that there is a ‘norm’ underlying it. Perhaps this is not surprising, because three-part lists are also powerful rhetorical tools (Jefferson, 1990); perhaps the three-part structure adds completeness to this type of concession. The chapter at hand can borrow from Antaki & Wetherell’s (1999) conversation analytic research suggesting that this structure is jointly completed (the data in this chapter does not provide evidence for this due to its textual nature and therefore has to borrow from this previous research). However, the other way in which it is oriented to by speakers is through the concession and reprise markers. The reprise markers are especially prominent in the coincidence accounts exhibiting the three-part structure. Specifically, the ‘but…still’ orients to the coincidence

mitigation that was preceding it and the coincidence confirmation returns to the original proposition (namely, that a coincidence has occurred).

To put it more straightforwardly, the 'C - not C - but still C' structure is arguably a *variation* of a 'show concession'. It is a variation because in the accounts of coincidence, the original proposition does not directly spell out that a coincidence is proposed, as opposed to the classic show concession where first and last statements are the same. In the coincidence cases, events will normally 'fall together' at the coincidence revelation point, the mitigation with statistical evidence against it follows thereafter, and then the 'but…still' formulation is added with a direct form of coincidence confirmation. This direct coincidence confirmation, however, is a more direct expression of the coincidence revelation than was initially stated. What we have then, is a device that indirectly shows how the events are similar, then mitigates this proposition, and then explicitly confirms it. And this is the key point – the mitigation, the second step, mitigates a coincidence that had not actually explicitly been identified as a coincidence. Thus, the very fact that the mitigation part after the coincidence revelation gives arguments against it being a coincidence actually constructs its very coincidental properties. This is because if it were not a coincidence, then its coincidental properties could not actually be questioned. And thus, questioning the coincidence statistically, is to advocate its existence rhetorically.

Research on show concessions informs our understanding of the use of 'but…still'. In the following coincidence has two coinciding events. The first coincidence consists of the narrator telling her colleague she is moving to a new area. Her colleague then tells her she used to live in that very same area, in a pub. When Ruth is subsequently described visiting with the narrator with her fiancé, Simon, it turns out that the coffee table that narrator has in her living room (which had been handed down by the narrator's parents in law) had actually been built by Simon, as he had been working for his uncle one Summer. The account has been shortened and begins when the narrator describes speaking to Simon's uncle.

Extract 6.5
The coincidences just kept coming

```
01   About a fortnight later I was talking to Simon's father
02 r (the landlord of the pub) and he was laughing about the
03 r chances of Simon having made a coffee table in Bucks and
04 r it ending up in a house just up the road from them in
05 m Devon completely independently. I told him that both
06 m Neil & I originated in Bucks but that it was still quite
07 c a coincidence. He asked where and I said "Dunsmore" and
08   he looked at me as though I had gone mad and said - that
09   is where my brother lives and makes furniture and where
10   Simon made the coffee table.
```

In the show concession material, one of the key identifiers of a show concession was that its 'proposition' and 'reprise' parts were linked; namely, the 'reprise' was meant to be 'some recognizable version of the original proposition' (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999: 13). In this instance, the original proposition is somewhere in the description, as there are multiple points of coincidence revelation (the point where the narrator and collegue realise that the collegue once lived in the area, finding out that the coffee table they acquired as a 'hand-me-down' was made by her collegue's fiance and then the narrator 'laughing' about the events with the uncle. That is, there is a proposition, which suggests coincidence, but not explicitly so. The reprise forms such a 'recognizable version' of the initial proposition, only because of the interpreation of the reader. That is, the original proposition basically describes interlinked events, and the reprise explicitly states 'coincidence'. They are recognisably linked, but this is exacerbated through the three-part-structure. Rather than the reprise being a recognisable version of the original proposition, it is the three-part structure that makes the original proposition and the reprise seem to go together. That is, I argue that the 'show concession' is a norm that works to consolidate the two versions – a description of interlinking events and a coincidence marker – to be one. I therefore argue that the three-part 'but still' structure is an integral part of what makes the account hearable as a coincidence account, because the three-part structure that is effectively 'tagged onto' the coincidence account afer the revelation point turns the description of interlinked events into a coincidence.

In the following instance for example, we have a narrator who describes seeing her first two helicopters during a lunch break and then subsequently describes 'seeing' a helicopter on the news. At this point, these are merely two interlinked events.

However, the three-part 'but…still' structure is what, subtly, defines the events as a 'pure coincidence'.

Extract 6.6
Helicopters

```
01    In the second half of this maths lecture I was getting
02    really bored, so started looking on SkyNews app, and one
03 r  of the top stories is a picture of two helicopters
04    colliding (and may I add the same colour helicopters I
05    had seen like 1 hour before seeing this image, one blue
06    and one white.) it was about a collision with some
07    French celebrities in Argentina. I read the feed, and
08 m  realised that the event had happened way earlier on in
09    the morning, but still, I hadn't known that and this was
10 c  pure coincidence to read about this when for the first
11    time in my life I had just seen two civilian helicopters
12    in the same air space, (and commented on it!)
```

In short I propose that the three-part structure marked with 'but…still' is a structure that not only produces a type of 'show concession' with its rhetorical qualities, but one that is an active feature of coincidence construction in an account. The coincidence revelation is marked through a number of formulations, so far these have included connectivity indicators ('shared', 'same' for instance) and discovery indicators (for instance 'turned out', 'we found that' and 'it ended up'). The three-part structure allows the narrators to define the interlinked events directly, though subtly, after the narrators have displayed their own critical and scientific perspective on the events first. This allows the narrator to circumvent the norm which goes against simply stating that events are a coincidence outright. And in the foregoing instances it would be quite odd if the accounts simply ended at the point where the events' link is described. This three-part 'but…still' structure however, allows the narrator to submit their 'informed' assessment of the events as 'coincidence', rather than merely describing the coincidental events.

Alternative 'but… still' formulations

So far, instances that exhibited the following three steps have been presented:

1 coincidence revelation without mentioning the word 'coincidence'

2 (statistical) evidence diminishing the account's coincidental quality (mitigation)

3 coincidence confirmation using 'but still' plus coincidence confirmation

These three steps seem to form a structure across instances so far. The following instances follow the same structure using slightly different formulations.

The following instance uses an alternative formulation of coincidence-confirmation (without explicitly using the term coincidence) and an alternative formulation for the 'but still' part of the coincidence, and yet it performs the same kind of work as the others and retains the three-step structure of the foregoing instances. The three steps of the device are positioned at the end of the narrative.

To summarise the narrative, many years after they knew each other at university where they had a relationship, the narrator describes finding her former romantic partner by hiring a private investigator and making contact with him. Three coincidences are then described: on a date with this former romantic partner, the narrator describes bumping into the very friend she used to discuss this relationship with whilst they were at university. Secondly, also whilst on this date, the narrator then describes meeting someone who turns out to be her colleague's former romantic partner. She recognised him because her colleague had explicitly told her about her wish to reconnect with him. Thirdly, in the course of this date she reports having been introduced to a screenwriter. A few years later a successful film with a plotline similar to the narrator's own story of meeting her old flame again is publicised (which she interjects, could have been due to telling the story to this Hollywood screenwriter, but she reportedly forgot his name).

Extract 6.7
Old flame ignites two stunning coincidences in one day
(lines omitted)

Now, I've taken several statistics courses, and I pride myself on being a lifelong atheist. I know people tend to travel in the same circles, and that could explain some of what happened. Still, it seems almost beyond the realm of possibility to have not one but two of life defining coincidences occur within the span of a few hours. That's why I'll always regard this story as an extraordinary, once-in-a-hundred-lifetimes event.

The two coincidence revelations are stretched over three paragraphs that will not be replicated in full due to space constraints (but, key elements have been included in the table below).

Step 1 – C (revelation)	**Step 2 – not C (mitigation)**	**Step 3 – But still C (confirmation)**
"I'm surprised to see you here." I had no idea who she was. Then she addressed me by name and added, "I knew you in college when we sometimes ate together in the dining room. Lois even sent me one of your wedding photos." **My jaw dropped.** The screenwriter laughed and confessed he had an old flame, too. He then told me her name, an unusual name -- it was my best friend from work. **I was dumbfounded, and so was the screenwriter when I said I not only knew this woman but she had already told me he was her long lost love.**	Now, I've taken several **statistics courses**, and I pride myself on being a **lifelong atheist**. I know **people tend to travel in the same circles**, and that could explain some of what happened.	**Still,** it seems almost beyond the realm of possibility to have not one but two of **life defining coincidences** occur within the span of a few hours.

The focus will instead be on the mitigation material of the account. Here, the evidence provided to support the position that goes against the coincidence revelation is formulated in an alternative way. That is, in the foregoing instances the evidence was statistical – a reason would be given for why the coincidence is not as rare an occurrence as it initially seems. In this instance the mitigation is accomplished in a slightly different variation way. The narrator reports having had statistical training and an absence of religious belief, before providing the mitigation material, which is admitting that people travel in the same circles, which weakens the coincidental quality of the previous coincidence revelations. But the mitigation is not actually a 'full' mitigation, it is readable as a support of the coincidental quality of the account because what the narrator is doing is asserting her knowledge of scientific views of coincidence, providing one such reason that might have contributed to the occurrence of the coincidences she described.

However, in this instance the coincidence mitigation is done through three kinds of evidence: firstly, by displaying statistical training, secondly, by arguing that people

travel in the same circles, and finally through the author self-identifying as an atheist. So what we have here is a variation in that the 'evidence' bit (out of the concession bit if we use the terminology from the 'show concession' research). The 'not atheist' formulation is a rebuff of the coincidence on the basis of the narrator's characteristics rather than based on the characteristics of the coincidence itself. That is, the structure also seems to work with mitigation that alludes to a propensity to probabilistic reasoning.

The author displays her statistical qualification ('Now, I've taken several statistics courses') legitimising her statistical assessment of the coincidental events she reported. She mitigates the coincidental quality of the film coincidence by reporting a possible statistical/sociological counter-argument ('I know people tend to travel in the same circles, and that could explain some of what happened'). Notably, the statistical mitigation is described as able to 'explain *some* of what happened', which leaves room for the unnamed other explanation, coincidence. But by describing the possible counter version of events, the author displays her statistical knowledge thus increasing the legitimacy of her assessment.

The author concludes by emphasising the unusual quality of the other coincidences and her experiences in general ('Still, it seems almost beyond the realm of possibility'). This coincidence-confirming 'but still' part, shortened to 'still' emphasises 'not one but two of life defining coincidences', thus rhetorically decreasing their statistical likelihood and increasing their coincidental quality. The formulation abandons assessing the likelihood of each event individually, by rhetorically amalgamating them both. The author also emphasises the short time between the events: 'to have not one but two of life defining coincidences occur within the span of a few hours'. Beitman (2011: 562) argues that short time spans between events of a coincidence increase their 'potency' and that 'coincidental events occurring closely together without an explicable cause evoke surprise and wonder.' In this case, the short time-span is rhetorically constructed to emphasise the increased rarity of the combined coincidences, such that the account culminates in the author's (statistical-sounding) assessment that it was a 'once-in-a-hundred-lifetimes event' which marks it as unique and rare occurrence.

The author points out rejecting religion (‘and I pride myself on being a lifelong atheist’) and therefore, by implication, denounces a tendency to believe in extraordinary occurrences light-heartedly. The use of ‘atheist’ to describe herself, functions to portray the author and by implications her experiences as factual and objective. Potter (1996: 15) argues that 'categories of persons are often closely connected to their epistemological rights (doctors know about medicine, people with good memories can be trusted to give accurate accounts, and so on), and building a category entitlement for the producer of a description can be an important way of building up its factuality'. The category atheist pre-empts the implication that the author might be a believer of paranormal events and miracles, such that her assessment of the coincidences as extraordinary are seen to be coming from a place of scepticism towards wondrous happenings, which in turn emphasises their surprising quality. The statistical perspective in which the coincidence is narrated creates distance from the events the narrator is reporting. Because the narrator portrays herself to be an ‘atheist’, her highly personal and significant story (based on the fact she wrote a book on it) counteracts possible accusations that she might have a stake in portraying her story to be interesting. That is, by portraying herself as atheist, she is implying that her story is not just extraordinary because she experienced it, but because it is objectively extraordinary.

The alternatively formulated but still device (BS) occurs in the following extract, which is also structurally a BS, but with the coincidence-confirmation is formulated differently, as the word ‘coincidence’ is not explicitly used in the coincidence-confirming part. The coincidence-revelation is introduced by the use of ‘we could not believe what we saw’ in line 6 in conjunction with the exclamation mark in line 9, whilst the statistically informed mitigation takes place over a number of lines (‘these karaoke machines are fairly standardized’; ‘probably appears on many such machines’ lines 9-12). The mitigation is accomplished by giving possible reasons for why the coincidence might not have been such a rare occurrence, statistically speaking, (namely that of standardized machines showing a well-known and by implication often-used image of York indicated by the phrasing of ‘tourist shot’, with the explicit conclusion that the photo features on a large number of such machines). The account ends on the amazement display in l.13: ‘but it was still very bizarre!’. In this coincidence, the striking quality emerges from encountering a

depiction of 'home' in a foreign and far-away location and language. But whilst the reconfirming of coincidental quality is not done through the term coincidence, the reported surprise makes it readable as coincidence (especially in light of the website).

Extract 6.8
Photo of home town York appears on karaoke machine in Arctic Circle when friend sings Finnish song!

My girlfriend & I are currently on holiday in Finland visiting her parents (my girlfriend is Finnish). Over the weekend we took a 1500KM round trip North to visit a friend in Rovaniemi (the "official home of Santa" & boarder of the Arctic Circle). Last night we went to a karaoke bar in the city. We could not believe what we saw when the lyrics to the Finnish song our friend sang appeared on a large screen with a background photo of my **r** home town in England, York! I guess these karaoke **m** machines are fairly standardized and this photo (a popular tourist shot taken from the City walls looking towards York Minster) probably appears on many such **c** machines but it was still very bizarre!

Sometimes, coincidence confirmation is not explicitly stated, but done implicitly. Here, it is implied through the exclamation 'very bizarre'. The use of the device here adheres to previous instances because the device is positioned after the coincidence revelation and at the end of the narrative. It also has three steps. The device carefully manages what is usual and unusual. It is possible for the device to convey the sense that the picture of York may often occur in karaoke machines, yet this instance of its appearance is unusual.

In the following extracts, further non-direct, alternative coincidence confirmation is achieved through alternative constructions of surprise, though it is internally different to previous instances. The narrator of the coincidence account describes having an unusual word 'come into' his/her head, and then reading the exact same phrase in the newspaper he/she had just bought for his/her train journey.

Extract 6.9
Inexplicable prompting

Some years ago, hurrying to catch a train to visit friends, and without paying attention to what I was doing, I bought the only newspaper left on the stand. It was a broadsheet that I don't normally read as I'm not keen on its politics (never mind which!). As I sat down in the train an apparently random phrase came into my head that I knew I hadn't heard since school history lessons at least 20 years earlier: "The Albigensian

```
10   Heresy". It seemed a quirky set of words, I thought, as
11   I started to read the newspaper, for no good reason,
12   at page 5. In the very first news story I started to
13 r read was the phrase "The Albigensian Heresy". I can
14 m think of no statistical explanation whatever for this
15 c and it still freaks me out to think about it!
```

In this instance the variation to the 'but…still' structure as the other instances exhibited is that where the mitigation material should be, the writer claims to be unable to do 'mitigation'. That is, mitigation is addressed in the slot where it should be positioned, but is marked as not accomplishable.

The foregoing extract initially appears to exhibit the three steps of BS: first, the coincidence-reveal is done in lines 12-13, with the reappearing phrase "The Albigensian Heresy" in quotation marks, second, statistical mitigation is addressed, but it is here that the structure is different to previous instances. This is because, whilst statistical considerations are displayed, the reported thought is described not to have yielded mitigation for the coincidence at all: 'I can think of no statistical explanation whatever for this'. The explicit rejection of a statistical alternative to the coincidental version of events seemingly adheres to the 'statistical explanation repertoire'. However, because no invalidating argument could be found, it simultaneously draws on the 'amazing coincidence repertoire'. Arguably, through the mention of the endeavour but inability to find statistical explanation, many of the same benefits are bestowed upon the narrative and its author: due to attempting to find scientific explanation, the author can be seen to have a logical mind, yet describe the surprise the coincidence brought. Crucially, this is the only coincidence account where one of the coincidental events is described to have emerged from the author's mind, whereas other coincidences consist of two external events.

BS device with insertions

The following instances will include slight variations to the structure identified in the foregoing instances, because they have insertions. These are similar to the initial structure, but the initially outlined structure is stretched over the narrative (most often with an insertion after the coincidence-revelation part of the narrative). That is, the three steps of the structure are there, but other material is inserted between the steps.

Wooffitt (1992: 2005) identifies how in some of the instances of the device ‘X when Y’, used to relay paranormal experiences, where the X positions the current activities of the interlocutor as mundane and the Y introduces the exceptional occurrence interrupting ordinary activity (and by connection, presents the narrator of such account as reasonable and normal too), there were insertions, which he described in the following way:

> Speakers begin the first part of the 'X when Y' device, but do not then move directly to the second part. Instead, either they extend their state formulation, or introduce new material, before completing the device with a reference to the paranormal phenomenon, or what turns out to be an anomalous event. So, these are occasions in which speakers disrupt the device by inserting material between the 'X' and 'Y' components. (Wooffitt, 1992: 161)

Wooffitt (2005) argues that the space within the device is used for insertion of details that subtly counter the implication that the account is not objective. This subtle method is used because ‘[…] overt attempts to make the strongest and most plausible case for the truth of an account could itself be taken to imply that the account is, in some ways, intrinsically weak or unreliable’ (Wooffitt, 2005: 220). Overall, there are four goals that insertions orient to (Wooffitt, 1992: 161): firstly, they make the events seem paranormal; secondly, they present the circumstances to have been conducive to observing the events, thirdly, they give an account for why they, the speakers, were in that place at that time which allowed for them to 'observe' the events, finally, they display their alertness and capacity for sentience in contexts that may be seen as not allowing for sentience (such as describing to have been sitting upright in bed, which implies alertness, rather than drowsiness). Insertions in the BS structure exhibit similar properties.

The following coincidence account is about a narrator who intends to read a specific book on holiday in Marrakesh, but fails to download the entire version on her digital reading device. On her birthday, she finds the very book she was hoping to read in the book collection in her hotel reception. Thus, the coincidence consists of finding the book she was hoping to read on her birthday. The device encompasses the previously outlined three step method of coincidence: the coincidence revelation (‘I picked up a book and much to my surprise it was the book I had been trying to download’ lines 4-6) statistical, mitigating counter argument (lines 9-11: the book Hideous Kinky, is set in Marrakech so I expect this lowers the odds of the book

being there slightly) and then still plus amazement display ('I still think it is a strange coincidence' lines 11-13). The two insertions are inserted between the coincidence revelation and the mitigation parts. Thus, the second part of the device occurs not directly following the first one, but rather, it is set after lines 6-8 that contain details about the book. This means that even though there are insertions, the 3-part structure arguably still holds.

Extract 6.10
Finding a book (lines omitted)

```
01    The day after I arrived was my birthday and I noticed a
02    small collection of books in the reception area of the
03    hotel that had been left by other guests. Only a few
04    were in English, they were mainly French. I picked up a
05 r  book and much to my surprise it was the book I had been
06 i  trying to download. It was printed over 20 years ago so
07    by no means on the best seller list. Did someone leave
08 i  me an unexpected birthday present, I wonder? I will add
09    that the book Hideous Kinky, is set in Marrakech so I
10 m  expect this lowers the odds of the book being there
11 c  slightly but I still think it is a strange coincidence
12    that I should find it before someone else did and it was
13    the very book I wanted to read on my holiday.
```

What makes an insertion an insertion is that they are placed in the slot for 'mitigation', but they do other work. Roughly speaking, the first insertion emphasises coincidence, and the second insertion 'does' joking, and points to a mystical power (but this also emphasises the account's coincidental quality).

The first insertion, 'It was printed over 20 years ago so by no means on the best seller list' emphasises the statistical rarity of the book being in the reception of the hotel in Marrakech. That is, the description of the book having been 'printed' a long time ago, constructs the book to have been old. The narrator specifically writes 'printed' rather than 'published'. The use of 'printed' circumvents the inference that the book might be a reprint of a classic. A popular classic may well be reprinted, and its reprinted status would be taken as evidence of its popularity. The book's lack of popularity is further emphasised through the formulation that it was 'by *no means* on the best seller list', making it readable as impossible that it would be on a bestseller list. This styles the book to have been niche, and rare, the kind of book that is not mainstream, and that, in fact is far off mainstream as is indicated by the formulation 'by no means'. It is, therefore, more of a surprise to find it in a hotel reception, where one might infer that books ought to cater to the relatively mainstream taste of

the hotel guests. That is, it may well be less of a surprise to find an unpopular, obscure book in the house of a like-minded friend with similar interests to one's own, but it is relatively unexpected to find it in the reception of a hotel. Additionally, the term 'hotel reception' counters the possible argument that there are lots of books in a 'hotel library' say. The category 'hotel reception' styles the room as passage way without specific literary function. Finding a book already seems a rare occurrence by that token. This notion of rarity is further intensified through the time-reference, 'over 20 years ago', where the use of the word 'over' marks the length of time as long. This is a construction, because 20 years could equally be seen as 'modern', if this book were compared to a 100-year old first edition, for instance. Here, 'over 20 years ago' makes the books existence seem even less likely, as it would indicate the book to have had to physically survive for that length of time without getting lost or being discarded. Thus, the first insertion emphasises the statistical rarity of the coincidence.

The subsequent insertion, 'Did someone leave me an unexpected birthday present, I wonder?' (lines 7-8), emphasises a different kind of rare quality of the coincidence. By 'wonder[ing]' whether 'someone' left the author an 'unexpected birthday present', a mystical agency is invoked. That is, the author wondering about a mystical gift-giver constructs the eerie possibility of someone watching over the narrator, because what is described is not a normal 'gift'. The 'gift' was *found* in the reception of the hotel, there is no gift-wrap, there is no indication that the narrator specifically requested the book to a living person, or that the book was actually for the narrator. Rather, the question seems to attend to the paranormal character of finding the book. Leaving open who that 'someone' was who may have 'left' the narrator the present, adds to the mystical quality of the account because by leaving the gift-giver unspecified, it is possible, by implication, to have been any kind of deity, or guardian angel, or paranormal entity. But the key is that it is not a statement, nor is the gift-giver specified, such that the author does not suffer the implication that attributing the finding of the book to a specific, say paranormal entity, might entail. It could also be understood as a humorous question, but points to an eerie agency nonetheless. Ultimately, the question marks the circumstance as lacking an attributable cause. Rather, the question, marked with 'I wonder' presents the circumstances as eerie, whilst being balanced by the two surrounding statistical

details, the statistical point emphasising coincidentalness preceding it, and the statistical mitigation following it.

These two insertions chime in with Wooffitt's (1992) analysis of insertions into ‘X then Y’. As summarised previously, he identified four goals that the insertions he found oriented to, one of which was ‘to constitute the 'paranormal' character of the event’. In the following example, Wooffitt argues that the insertion makes the speaker associate herself with her psychic friend who is able to hear the noise, which in turn makes her appear to have clairvoyance too. The example and explanation below, extract 22, is one of these cases (taken from Wooffitt, 1992: 161-162):

(22) EM A 286 The speaker has been trying to differentiate between forms of mediumistic powers, drawing a distinction between 'mere' psychic abilities and 'true' clairvoyance. To illustrate her argument she is reporting her experience of a recurrent noise, which only she had been able to hear.

1		one night however a friend was with me (.)
2	x	and we're just sitting watching the tele
3		(.3)
4	ins.	and she was also very psychic
5		a:nd urm
6		(1.3)
7	Y	its (.) th-the s:ound started
8		the litt(le)m musical (s) tu-
9		s::ound started again (.3) and uhm: (.)
10		>she said what's THaghT<
11		>I said OH (.) have you heard it< (.)
12		ah(s) >oh that's wonderful
13		you're the first person who's
14		heard it besides me<

To return to the insertion into BS that we have here, the insertions also function by emphasising the kind of characteristic that the account is. That is, whilst insertions in the paranormal accounts from Wooffitt (1992) functioned by emphasising the paranormal quality of the account, the insertions in the coincidence account function by emphasising coincidentalness. And in these accounts they emphasise the coincidental quality in two ways – by making the coincidence seem statistically rare, and by invoking an unknown cause or agency as bringing about the coincidence.

In the following coincidence account the narrator was in Sydney and described ‘wanting to walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, [I was] searching for the way to

get up onto the bridge walkway. He described going into the crowded souvenir shop below the bridge to ask for directions, where he approached a woman who turns out to be an old friend from the UK, which is marked as the coincidence. The following extract contains a one-sentence insertion with two parts that emphasise the coincidental quality of the account, and another insertion in the form of a question. The account contains all three BS parts: The coincidence revelation (lines 1-3) is the first part of the device; the second, mitigating part of the device (lines 6-12) is comprised of two possible mitigating aspects that go against the coincidental quality of the narrative, and the narrative culminates in the third part of the device, in the form of 'but, still…' plus coincidence/amazement confirmation (lines 12-14). There are three insertions, the first one is located between the revelation and mitigation parts, and the second insertion is located between the mitigation and confirmation parts.

Extract 6.11
Meeting a friend abroad (lines omitted)

```
01    Are you ... by any chance... Jamie D W, she asked? I was
02 r  astonished to suddenly recognize her as an old friend
03    from the UK who I had not seen for two years. I had no
04 i  idea she was in Australia, and the extreme nature of the
05 i  coincidence was the fact that I had gone up to ask her,
06    rather than another assistant, my question. However,
07 m  there may be some explanation, in that it is probable a)
08    I chose a pretty girl to ask the question of (narrowed
09    my chances of actually knowing the person, though still
10 m  very remote) and b) it's just possible I had some
11    subliminal recognition although my conscious mind did
12 i  not recognize her. What do you think?
13 c  But still a coincidence, and has not been repeated in a
14    life of 50 years.
```

The first insertion 'I had no idea she was in Australia, and the extreme nature of the coincidence was the fact that I had gone up to ask her, rather than another assistant, my question' works to emphasise the coincidentalness of the events in three ways. Firstly, declaring that 'I had no idea she was in Australia' constructs the author to have been unaware of his old friend's location, such that the possibility that the events might have been brought about by design are counteracted. It thus works against the possible vulnerability of the account by rejecting causality as a reason for the coincidence. The part of the insertion is itself comprised of two parts. Randomness is constructed by the second part of the sentence, in that the selection of customer assistant is depicted as an unsystematic pick, rather than the possible, yet

less coincidental alternative, where the author could have seen his old friend and approached her, which this random version thereby counteracts. And thirdly, this 'fact', a choice of word that presents the author's version of events as 'scientific' truth, is marked as the 'extreme nature of the coincidence'. Defining the coincidence as 'extreme' in nature explicitly emphasises its coincidentalness. That it, it is not a mere coincidence, but an 'extreme' one.

This coincidence-promotion of the events' coincidental quality is balanced with the second part of the three-step-device, where scientific or statistical mitigation is introduced. Physical attractiveness is given as a justification for approaching the sale's assistant. The suggestion that by approaching 'a pretty girl', the author discursively limits his pool of possible people to approach. That is, unless he actually implies that all his friends and acquaintances are good looking. So whilst this could be read as humorous or as a 'brag', it contains a statistical mitigation, because the pool of possible people has been made smaller. Whilst, if taken at face value the mitigation seems to present a possible limitation to the coincidentalness, because the narrator describes purposefully picking a specific sales person, the sentence does other work. By stating that the approach was made based on physical attractiveness, it suggests that the narrator looked at his old friend, did not recognize her at all, judged her based on her looks as if she were an object. This helps make the account seem like a coincidence again because he therefore implied he did not approach the old friend on purpose, but based on a different criterion.

In a similar vein, the insertion 'I had no idea she was in Australia, and the extreme nature of the coincidence was the fact that I had gone up to ask her, rather than another assistant, my question' (lines 3-6) counters the possible vulnerability of the account that the narrator may have known where the friend was located (and sought her out on purpose, or loosely wandered where he knew she might be). The narrator introduces the alternative 'rather than another assistant' in the account to introduce a random element to the selection of who he approached. This actually works in tandem with the second part of the device (where scientific or statistical mitigation is introduced) where physical attractiveness is given as a justification for approaching the sale's assistant he reportedly approached.

The insertion between mitigation and coincidence confirmation (BS), is in the form of a question: ‘What do you think?’. Although not officially tagged onto the previous sentence, through the use of a comma for instance, it is arguably readable as a tag-question. This is because the question is not a stand-alone question; ‘What do you think?’ has to refer to something specific to make sense. However, in this case, it is not specified what the question relates to; it could be referring to the last sentences that were performing mitigation firstly through the reduced sample size by the narrator describing consciously picking a ‘pretty girl’ or secondly, bringing up the possibility of a psychological reason for approaching his old friend (‘subliminal recognition’). Alternatively, it could be questioning the coincidence as a whole, and encouraging the reader to pick one of the explanations, from ‘extreme’ coincidence to ‘subliminal recognition’. However, even if such an answer fell into the category of unconscious recognition, this would not negate the coincidental quality of the entire account. This is because the accidental meeting itself, ‘subliminal recognition’

The following instance has a number of insertions.

Extract 6.12
Perfect place to run out of petrol (lines omitted)

```
01    Several miles later, far from anywhere, my engine began
02    to cough, then the whole car began to hop, and then it
03    cut out altogether. No petrol. It was a fairly hilly,
04    windy, lonely, country road and, not knowing whether the
05    nearest help would be behind or in front of me, I
06    decided to just let the car roll on under its own
07    momentum until it came to a natural stop ... down a
08    slight hill, round a bend at the bottom of it ... and
09    there on the left hand side was one of those tiny,
10 r  independent, family-run petrol stations that you hardly
11    ever see any more!
12 r  But there's more. My car, having just rolled down a
13    hill, had JUST enough momentum to bring me EXACTLY to
14    the first petrol pump on the forecourt, at which point
15    it ran out of momentum and stopped, without my even
16    having to touch the brake!
17 r  (And there's STILL more. I got there at about 5.50pm.
18    If I'd been 10 minutes later, the garage would have been
19    shut.)
20 i  It's not a story I tell very often because I know that
21    if anyone were to tell it to ME, I'd suspect them of
22 i  having embroidered it. But I haven't: it really
23    happened.
24 m  I should add that I don't attribute it to anything but
25 m  plain old-fashioned amazing good luck. But that there
26    should be a petrol pump EXACTLY on the spot where my car
27    ran out of momentum, having first run out of petrol, is
28 c  still a coincidence that makes me laugh whenever I think
29    about it!
```

The coincidence revelation itself seems to have a number of insertions, in the form of ‘add-ons’. These are additional pieces of information that seem to emphasise aspects that mean that the events had to happen exactly the way they were described to bring about the coincidental events. So for instance one could argue that the time ten to six might actually leave the author with a window of about 10 minutes in which the arrival could have happened and led to the same result, however, because putting gas into the car involves steps such as putting the pump to the car, letting it fill up the car and then leaving the car to go pay, the ten minutes are actually needed for the timing to have been perfect and exact. It plays into the narrative of ease, that the narrator did not arrive at the gas stop a minute before they closed and had to beg to be allowed to fill up her car. Instead the coincidence allowed her to accomplish it all with ease. Furthermore, through the specificity of the reported timing (‘5.50 pm’) the reader gets the sense that the events were indeed very memorable (to the extent that she remembers years later).

The material ‘It's not a story I tell very often because I know that if anyone were to tell it to ME, I'd suspect them of having embroidered it. But I haven't: it really happened’ constructs the author’s reluctance to share the story. By describing her expectation that the event descriptions would be doubted, she is in turn constructing its inherently extraordinary quality. This is because by discursively projecting that if she were the recipient of the story she too would be sceptical and believe it was made up, the narrator accomplishes two goals. First, she constructs the account to be so unusual that is was unusual even to herself. This shows her off to be a ‘normal’ member of society who is able to know how a normal audience may react (because the inference is that they would react like she would). This is the reason this part has been classed as an insertion, not a mitigation. By marking this as an unbelievable scenario she is thereby constructing a mentally sane identity. But in turn, by constructing her own scepticism had she not experienced it herself, she is also adding to the mystical quality of the coincidence. The ‘But I haven't: it really happened.’ Formulation rhetorically ‘confirms’ the coincidence to have been true. It allows the author to include a possible counter argument and respond to it as if it were really a critiqued voiced against her account.

The insertion ‘I should add that I don't attribute it to anything but plain old-fashioned amazing good luck’ works to emphasise the coincidental quality of the account. This is because attributing the coincidence to ‘plain old-fashioned amazing good luck’ pre-empts any counter arguments that may suggest that the author attributes the coincidence to an anomalous or Godly cause. And this is crucial because any discernible cause nullifies coincidence. Thiry-Cherques (2005: 591) argues that ‘when we refer to good or bad fortune, good or bad luck, we want to say that the causes for what happened are unknown.’ Therefore, attributing events to good luck marks them as having no specific cause or origin, which is in contrast to saying that a mystical identity or God brought about an event. The term ‘old-fashioned’ makes the attribution generally acceptable, because to be characterised old-fashioned means to be tried and tested and generally accepted. Thus, the author is able to present herself as aware, if not of the exact reason for the coincidence, then at least of the ‘logical’ and generally accepted reason for coincidence, which in this case is that it is unknown. This thereby forms the mitigation part of the device. This is because attributing the events to luck or chance constructs the mitigation for the events: if it is ‘just’ chance, then the suggestion is that it could happen to anyone at any time. However, through the formulation ‘amazing good luck’ the mitigation is styled as an unusual, ‘amazing’ kind of chance. And because there is no specific cause (just chance in general) the original character of coincidence is kept intact. That is, the coincidence is not linked to any specific kind of statistical chance, or particular cause. This lends the description a ‘TWOD’ character, as the cause remains unknown.

The insertion within the ‘but still’ reiterates, seemingly summarises, the coincidental events between the ‘but’ and ‘still’. The word exactly is written in capital letters, stressing the ways in which the happenings neatly slotted together.

Countering other-scepticism in the BS device

This three-part structure of BS is still in place when the statistic mitigation is presented as reported by others, through direct and indirect reported speech. The extraordinariness of the coincidence being reported is maintained by ‘but still’. In the following case, the letter ‘o’ denotes reported scepticism from an ‘other’ person.

Extract 6.13
Safari Photos Extract (lines omitted)

```
01    In a supermarket in Maun somebody shouted across the
02 r  aisle "Hi Martin!". It was the tour guide from the trip
03    the year before. I remarked to somebody later "isn't
04    that amazing - it was probably the only supermarket
05    within 200 miles and we were both shopping there". They
06 o  responded "well, if it's the only supermarket within 200
07    miles, then where do you think they would be doing their
08 m  shopping?". I guess that does narrow the odds a bit but
09 c  still quite a coincidence. Finally, just on general
10    coincidences please work this one out for me. […]
```

Extract 6.14
Of all the books in all the libraries in all the world, she picks mine. (lines omitted)

```
01    At which point a member of the group piped up in
02 r  stupefaction, 'I wrote that book!'
03    I want to know whether the probability for this
04    coincidence might be worked out - if you knew the number
05    of books in the library, and the numbers of people being
06    trained in any one day, and other crucial data. A friend
07 o  of mine who is a mathematician didn't think this was a
08 m  particularly startling coincidence. But I still think
09 c  it was. Amazing!
```

Notably, the two foregoing instances contain direct and indirect reported speech at key points. In both accounts, direct reported speech is used to mark the coincidence, the climax of the story. In the first instance, the exclamation '"Hi Martin!"' marks the point at which the author bumps into their tour guide from a previous year. In the next instance, coincidence revelation is made via the reported exclamation of one of the people reportedly present: 'I wrote that book!'. To borrow from Conversation Analysis, Holt (2010) outlines how direct reported speech does not necessarily reiterate actual speech, rather it is a construction; she cites Tannen (1989) who terms it "constructed dialogue". Holt (2010) argues, based on empirical evidence, that direct reported speech can be used for a story's climax because it allows for the teller of the story to convey it 'neutrally' and seemingly free from interpretation:

> Thus, one reason that so many formal jokes and humorous anecdotes climax in a directly reported utterance might be because the device allows the teller to "show" the recipient the amusing locution apparently without shades of interpretation, assessment, or rephrasing. The recipient is not explicitly told why an utterance is funny (or even usually that it is funny) but is enabled to find it so. (2010: 447)

This has relevance for the coincidence stories to hand, where the coincidence revelation is 'done' by an 'other' who is not the author. Notably, the readers are not recipients of talk, but readers of text, and yet, this idea applies. The author is able to

let the reader come to the conclusion that the events were coincidental, whilst portraying to have had minimal involvement in the interpretation.

The mitigation part of the device is reported through a third party assessment. In the first instance, lines 5-8, a counter version to the coincidence events is offered through direct reported talk of an unknown 'somebody' first mentioned in l.3. This direct reported talk, marked by speech marks in the excerpt, suggests that the coincidence was inevitable because the supermarket was the only one in the area, as the author had previously reported saying. Holt (2010) further argues that explicit assessment of the reported talk follows in the next turn. In the present data with an absence of a conversational partner, the assessment is here conducted by the author themselves, through the BS. In instance one, direct reported speech is used for the counter-coincidence part, which chimes in with Holt's (2010: 427) assertion that whilst indirect reported speech 'blurs the distinction between the current speaker's point of view and that of the original speaker' the direct reported speech used here emphasizes the divide between the two, such that the contrasting interpretation of events become clear.

Arguably, it is no coincidence that the second instance's mitigation is done using indirect reported speech – the author has a stake in not contrasting too much with a mathematician's assessment, and indirect reported speech permits the author to do that. However, this mitigation is only partially accepted by the author himself who concludes that 'I guess that does narrow the odds a bit', where coincidental quality and high statistical likelihood are opposed. However, the use of 'I guess' indicates what turns out to be wrong (Jefferson, 2004, 136), and the 'a bit' indicate that the author does not agree that the mitigation covers the entire experience. This permits the BS used thereafter to confirm the coincidence. For instance, in number two, mitigation is done through the reported talk 'A friend of mine who is a mathematician didn't think this was a particularly startling coincidence' lines 6-8. The category membership of mathematician that the author attributes to the person reportedly doubting the unusualness of the coincidental events, lends them credibility.

Nonetheless, the 'But I still think it was. Amazing!' where 'it' refers to coincidence (l.4) confirms the coincidence. The BS structure in these two accounts permit the authors to present two versions of the events, one statistical and one about the unusualness of the coincidence. This means that the discussion of whether the events were or were not coincidence is brought into the realm of statistical probability and as such, the author cannot be blamed to have reported coincidence from a place of emotion, or a belief in miracles, for instance. And by questioning the probability of the events, the authors mark the events as surprising, because rhetorically questioning the likelihood of events, or soliciting them from a mathematician or an 'other', suggests that the authors were confident in the rare quality of the events. These two versions applied to the events also indicates that their status is contested, but their ambivalence adds to their allure. This is because if they had been straight forward, their statistical likelihood should be established easily, and specifically. A lack of consensus on their statistical assessment renders the coincidences described additionally mysterious.

Conclusion

The conclusion will comprise a section recapitulating what the 'but…still' device is, and how it works. The second paragraph will indicate the ways in which each section of the chapter added to the understanding of the device. The third section is concerned with the way in which probabilistic reasoning informs the BS device. This is theoretically analysed in the subsequent section. The last paragraph will fuse the arguments together into the specific observations this chapter has provided.

To summarise, the rhetorical design of the foregoing coincidence accounts is signalled by the use of the 'but…still' device, which consists of three parts: firstly, coincidence revelation, secondly, mitigation on the basis of (high) statistical probability (though it is not limited to this kind of mitigation), and thirdly, coincidence confirmation using the preface 'but still'. Part one and two therefore build an internal contrast structure, whilst the three steps together create internal completeness. The BS device normally occurs at the end of the narrative it refers to, or the end of the particular coincidence account if there are several in one narrative. BS exhibits the author's rhetorical business of aligning with a scientific, logical way

of presenting coincidence, whilst at the same time conveying the mysteriousness of the coincidences described. This orients to the particular context of the Cambridge Coincidence Collection, whilst at the same time creating it also.

The structure of the 'but…still' device was discovered in a coincidence account and this structure was traced through other accounts that had alternative formulations (marking coincidence through the use of displays of amazement, for instance). To return to the statistical and mainstream psychological work on coincidence introduced at the beginning of the chapter, this 'but…still' device has shown that far from being easily confused by the events of a coincidence and fooled by randomness, people seem to exhibit delicate awareness of the polarised sides. Evidently, they carefully manage their affiliation with both the statistical arguments against certain aspects of their coincidence account, whilst displaying amazement at others. They evidently carefully manage their identities and are presenting themselves as knowledgeable in the arguments counting against coincidence. The 'but…still' device allows them to combine the two diverging repertoires. The specific rhetorical structure of BS suggests that narrators competently craft their coincidence accounts using probabilistic reasoning in order to persuade readers of the scientifically informed coincidentalness of the account. I argue that experimental tests of probabilistic reasoning do not yield insights into the complexity of coincidence accounts that people produce. They carefully manage presenting coincidence amazement and coincidence scepticism based on statistical reasoning and fit it to the context in which their account is made public. And this problematizes the binary categorisation of coincidence accounts as belonging to either a coincidence-believer or a logical person.

It is useful to return to Gergen's ideas discussed earlier. Gergen (1973) argued that social psychology's status as a science is flawed because its knowledge is influenced by the context of the time in which it was created, and because the knowledge of its 'facts' may actually invalidate them as people alter their behaviour in response to research, due to the 'feedback loop' between science and society. I argue that this phenomenon is at work in the coincidence accounts of the CCC. Gergen, (1973: 310) wrote that:

> Indeed for many social psychologists, commitment to the field importantly depends on the belief in the social utility of psychological knowledge. However, it is not generally assumed that such utilization will alter the character of causal relations in social interaction. We do expect knowledge of function forms to be utilized in altering behavior, but we do not expect the utilization to affect the subsequent character of the function forms themselves. Our expectations in this case may be quite unfounded. Not only may the application of our principles alter the data on which they are based, but the very development of the principles may invalidate them. (Gergen, 1973: 310)

I argue that the very research into the fallacies of human perception, or the human struggle (and documented 'failure') to apply probabilistic reasoning to coincidental events in everyday life, has possibly contributed to accounts of coincidence discursively orienting to these studies. This is supported by Wood & Kroger (2000: 95) who succinctly argue that 'Discourse analysis is not like studying rocks. Rocks do not change under the gaze of the investigator in the way that people do under the scrutiny of the social scientist.' That is, the very fact that people refer to these explanations in their coincidence accounts means that they arguably are moving away from the binary categories of 'coincidence believer' and sceptic that the scientific investigation of coincidence has suggested exists. The very fact that these studies proposed people were in these binary 'camps' has in turn constructed them.

The robust 'but…still' structure exhibited how coincidence accounts are designed to accomplish the balancing act of portraying coincidences simultaneously as interesting experiences that are 'out there' in the world as either emerging from erroneous cognitive processes, or from miscalculated chance. The forgoing data analysis has also demonstrated how contrasting two versions of the same coinciding event is used as a tool to strengthen the coincidence-narrative portrayed. Coincidence-narratives then are the locus in which the traditional lines between opposing coincidence explanations blur, as in discourse they can reside within the same story. Thus, it is in this study of coincidence-discourse, where both statistical probability and amazing coincidence come to co-exist; there, it becomes clear that displaying the ability to assess chance and the display of amazement at a coincidence can inhabit the same narrative. In this radical departure from the binary explanations for the existence of coincidence, the BS device has shown that the authors of coincidences actively negotiate statistical chance. They use displays of their knowledge of probability not to invalidate their own coincidences, but to strengthen

them. Thus, chance becomes a resource, which is used to produce seemingly factual coincidence accounts.

Chapter 7

Deconstructing Coincidence – The use of coincidence in attributions of covert agency

'Evaluation is the engine of persuasion.' (Partington, 2007: 1549)

Introduction

The last three analytical chapters have investigated the ways in which coincidence accounts are designed to appear factual, and the events they describe extraordinary. The initial single case analysis in Chapter Four identified features such as mirror formulations, which are used to heighten the coincidental quality of the events the coincidence is comprised of by making the events seem more alike, and thus, more connected. Chapter Five focused on the ways in which the device 'decided/realised' operates to introduce an action that departed from routine, whilst 'realised' marks discovery or recognition of an aspect that had not previously been noticed. The coincidence revelation thus marked as discovery is thereby presented as more astounding. From these cognitive formulations in Chapter Five, Chapter Six then turned to the use of statistical references, identified in the 'but still' device, which is employed to strengthen the coincidental quality of a coincidence account by displaying the author's understanding and appreciation of statistical chance, whilst ending on, and emphasising, a coincidental interpretation of the events described.

Both the cognitive and statistical chapters were in response to longstanding traditional work conducted in the area of coincidence research, which explained away coincidence as a misinterpretation of chance (Gilovich, 2008; Blackmore and Troscianko, 1985; Blackmore and Moore, 1994; Taleb, 2007) or people's naturally occurring tendency to mis-perceive everyday events as connected when they are not (Beitman and Shaw, 2009; Coleman, Beitman and Celebi, 2009; Beitman, 2011, 2009; Griffiths and Tenenbaum, 2001).

In essence, these three chapters have explored the ways in which extraordinariness and routine are negotiated in discourse. All the devices mentioned in the previous chapters that occur in the context of coincidence accounts do not explicitly refer to 'coincidence' – the word 'coincidence' tends to be conspicuously absent. And yet,

the coincidental quality of the accounts is emphasised. In contrast, this chapter investigates a collection of cases in which events are explicitly termed 'coincidence', which, incidentally, do not describe coincidental events.

Having analysed the discursive ways in which coincidence accounts *are* constructed, this chapter is concerned with one way in which coincidences are *de*constructed. Through this pathway, the makeup of a coincidence is analysed. The data in this chapter are a case in point exemplifying that it is not the events themselves that create a coincidence, but rather, that it is their discursive construction that produces or destroys its coincidental quality. As such it lies at the heart of the overarching argument of this thesis, that the construction of coincidences is not about their being in the world, but in the way they are told.

Coincidence disconfirmation, which involves implicitly or explicitly describing events as not being a coincidence, exemplifies how events are styled as not being coincidences. It has been found to be a discursive tool in itself and has two functions: doing critique and doing promotion of the underlying message by turning a single event into part of a wider pattern, yet ruling out coincidence, thus protecting its evaluative meaning against disagreement.

Coincidence disconfirmation in action – a first case

The following excerpt showcases an interaction where coincidence is proffered and disconfirmed as a possible explanation for events. The purpose of adding it here is to give an example of what coincidence disconfirmation is, how it is used and to show that it can be found in naturally occurring (here institutional) talk.

In the following interactional piece of data taken from a transcript from the political congress of the Bern Human contacts experts meeting that took place on 18 March 1986, which will be analysed in more depth at a later point in the chapter, the final question revolves around the question why the Soviets resolved something that they had not resolved for a while at that particular point in time.

Extract 7.1
TRANSCRIPT: BERN HUMAN CONTACTS EXPERTS MEETING; Tuesday, March 18, 1986 (political congress; lines omitted)

Either one of you may answer this: What do you think prompted the Soviets to resolve those cases at the last minute as they did? Do we perceive that it was a direct attempt to influence the adoption of the document? Or ***c*** was it simply a coincidence that the resolution of those cases, pursuant to the summit, occurred at that time? Have you analyzed that? Do we have any opinions on that?
d **Assistant Secretary RIDGWAY.** I certainly don't think ***d*** that it was a coincidence, Mr. Congressman.

There are three opening questions by the first speaker in this extract: a question asking 'what do you think prompted the Soviets to resolve those cases at the last minute as they did' and two possible responses to that question, formulated as questions, asking whether their actions were 'a direct attempt to influence' or whether 'it was simply a coincidence'. The underlying question appears to be about whether the Soviets intentionally resolved the cases for a specific gain, or whether it happened by accident (coincidence). However, the three opening questions are already suggestive of the Soviets doing their actions intentionally for an advantage (the adoption of the document).

This is because the questions already accomplish a number of actions: firstly, they point out that the Soviets did in fact resolve the cases in the last minute (thereby drawing attention to this fact); secondly, they mark the timing as suspicious; and thirdly, the very question what 'prompted' the Soviets suggests that there was something that prompted their actions. The formulation seems to 'pose a puzzle' where the puzzle is presented as due to the lack of knowledge of the person asking the question, which is a technique interviewers use to convey (here, critical) opinion in the guise of neutrality (Clayman, 2006: 184). But these questions make the possibility of the actions having been designed to manipulate the public forum appear likely.

The contrast between the last-minute timing being indicative of 'a direct attempt to influence the adoption of the document' and being 'simply a coincidence' tells us about the properties of coincidence disconfirmation – to reject the coincidence is to suggest actions could have been manipulative, conducted for an agenda.

So far then, the coincidence question (l.8) by one person was met with coincidence disconfirmation by the respondent (lines 11-12). Crucially, Ridgway rejects coincidence, but does not explicitly side with the initial option of the timing being an indication that the Soviets aimed to 'influence the adoption of the document'. As such, coincidence disconfirmation appears to be a discursive halfway house, suggesting covert agency whilst not committing to a full (and specific) accusation of manipulation. Thus, in this instance, coincidence disconfirmation (even in the form of coincidence questioning) is persuasive, indirect and points to covert agency. It is used to suggest actions have potentially been done for a possible motive, yet leaving the exact or singular motivation for the action open.

Events that are described as being disconfirmed coincidences do not adhere to 'normal' cause and effect relationships. If coincidence disconfirmation were simply the opposite of coincidence (ordinary events falling together in an extraordinary way), then coincidence disconfirmation could be used to describe a lot of situations – but it is not. It is used only in key instances and places. That is, where a coincidence is disconfirmed for a set of events, it does not follow that they are merely 'normal' events. Rather, events for which 'coincidence' is ruled out as description retain the uncanny character of coincidence, whilst losing the unintentionality of coincidence.

This is linked to the kind of 'first thought' somebody might report in the face of catastrophe – instead of immediately accusing somebody/an institution or a group of having stake in a current situation and having brought it about, reporting coincidence disconfirmation suggests that the speaker describing two events as linked through coincidence disconfirmation presents herself to not have had 'suspicious first thoughts' (Jefferson, 2004). Instead, the thoughts assumed coincidence, but it turned out not to be coincidence. Or coincidence could be a rhetorical device used by elites to obscure suspicions? The forthcoming analysis will focus on the most direct form of coincidence disconfirmation in order to investigate 'coincidence disconfirmation'; coincidence disavowals.

In the next case, these three features can be observed. The following excerpt, taken from a political congress on the topic of human rights and police reform a 'Mr. Smith' refers to earlier mentioned statistics that seem to indicate that there had been

a reduction in the 'allegations of use of force', as well as batons, use of live fire by police officers, and a reduction of complaints about the use of live fire by police between 2001-2003. The excerpt begins where Mr. Smith uses the statistics to question the reasons for the reduction in these numbers, provides some reasons himself in the form of questions ('police force is improving' lines 1-2 'deterrent impact of her office' lines 2-3 'accountability' line 3) and then opens the floor to anyone who would like to answer. It is within the respondent Mr. Mageean's answer, that the direct coincidence disconfirmation occurs.

Extract 7.2
Developments in Northern Ireland: hearings before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, One Hundred Eighth Congress, second session, March 16, 2004, May 5, 2004.

Do you think that is because the police force is improving? Is it because of the deterrent impact of her office that there is at least some accountability where heretofore there has not been? To what do we attribute this?
Whoever would like to go.
Mr. MAGEEAN. Perhaps I can address this, Mr. Chairman. I mean, I think those figures are very encouraging I think that probably the reason for the figures is slightly more complex. I think one of the reasons certainly is the fact that the Police Ombudsman's office exists I certainly think it is no coincidence that we have seen a massive reduction in the use of plastic bullets, for instance. The Ombudsman referred to that earlier. The fact that they have not been fired in a year and a half is probably, I think, an indication of the fact that police officers now know that if they do fire plastic bullets that they will be subject to investigation.

The respondent accepts the positivity of the figures from the statistics, calling them 'very encouraging' (line 08) but indicates that the underlying reason 'is slightly more complex' (lines 9-11). He then makes a reference to the new Police Ombudsman's office, which is an external institution that, since its establishment in 2000, 'provides independent, impartial investigation of complaints about the police in Northern Ireland' ("Police Ombudsman For Northern Ireland"[18]). The 'massive reduction in the use of plastic bullets' is then linked to the establishment of the Police Ombudsman office, using a direct disconfirmation of coincidence. In this context, the use of this coincidence disconfirmation is to provide a different statistic (about

[18] Please see the reference list for the website address.

the reduction in the use of plastic bullets by police officers) to the accountability provided by the Police Ombudsman office.

That is, the coincidence disconfirmation provides a case in point for Mr. Smith who outlined the question, but whilst it can be seen to agree in regards to the new statistical figure on plastic bullets, it disagrees with the 'single cause' that the questioner provides, to instead argue for a more complex set of reasons. Crucially, multiple events (there is a reduction in questionable police intervention; an office has been established to oversee police offers and and hold them accountable for their actions) are linked to a wider structure (that there is a reduction in questionable police intervention due to an overall improvement). This is how the coincidence disconfirmation responds to the questioner, in that it suggests that the very specific reduction in the use of plastic bullets is due to plastic bullets being monitored, such that officers are avoiding them to avoid investigation, but indirectly arguing that this is not simply due to an overall improvement.

The deconstruction of coincidence informs our understanding of coincidence

Coincidence is constituted by people through discourse; it is a member's accomplishment. Coincidence disconfirmation is equally constructed by people through discourse. Whilst the data presented this coincidence disconfirmation chapter are clearly and explicitly marked as non-coincidence, they have certain similarities with actual coincidence narratives. In coincidence accounts the events are presented as having no discernible cause. In accounts of coincidence disconfirmation, this is similar in some ways. Even though it is explicitly terming the events a non-coincidence, no definite agency is attributed to the outcome. In both coincidence and non-coincidence a hidden, unknown agency could be the cause of coincidence.

Additionally, it is notable that non-coincidence is constructed even in accounts of coincidence. Because accounts are often presented as 'neutral' coincidence narratives, even the 'actual' coincidence accounts feature points that seem to be undermining the coincidental quality of the account as seen in Chapter Six. Arguably, in some instances, the events are presented as being exceptional whilst at

the same time scientific arguments for why they would have been perceived (through statistical chance or even psychological processes). Analysing these accounts, it seemed as though sometimes the accounts were presented to be judged by someone else other than the person narrating them. That is, the events were described as if to let the reader be the judge of whether the events actually constituted coincidence. This then seems to indicate that real coincidence and non-coincidences are not that easily distinguishable.

Coincidence disconfirmation accounts are also important because they show us which characteristics make events seem coincidental. Because non coincidence is constructed when a person seems to be both directly benefitting of the coincidence and being seen as having means to bring about the beneficial situation, we can say that having a stake and having the means to actualize the situation to advantage are detrimental to the construction of actual coincidence. So whilst actual coincidence may have instances where the person reporting the coincidence appears to be profiting from a coincidence (and this is often the case and it is what contributes the extraordinariness of the coincidence that it can actually benefit a person) it should not also be presented as something the person reportedly experiencing the coincidence might have brought about themselves. We see this in actual coincidence narratives where the author will go through lengths to show that they were not actually responsible for the coincidence, that they did not know about that the person they coincidentally met again was in the area, with the implication that they did not make direct contact. That is, they did not intentionally cause the coincidence. Their surprise and the surprise described by those reporting non coincidence is similar; Thus, the construction of non-coincidence has enlightened us of the features of coincidence.

Explicit coincidence disavowal

To show that these instances where events are marked as not being a coincidence are a pattern, two further examples of explicit coincidence disavowal will be presented with very brief analysis. The following three extracts are from transcripts of naturally occurring interactions from institutional settings.

The following two examples are transcripts from political congresses, the first one is sourced from the 2nd session of the 113th Congress, entitled 'Briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe' and took place on 6 May 2014, whilst the second one is sourced from a transcript of the 112th congress, entitled 'Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe', that took place on 15 July 2011.

Extract 7.3
GEORGIA 2008, UKRAINE 2014: IS MOLDOVA NEXT?

01 Moreover, historically the conquest and incorporation of
02 Ukraine has been the basis from which Moscow has then
03 proceeded to launch all of the imperial gambits it has
04 launched in the Balkans, going back to Catherine the
05 Great. Today that is—there is no difference. We look at
06 the pattern in Ukraine. The territories that are being
07 threatened are precisely those that would allow Russia a
08 ***d*** direct landline to Moldova. I don't think that's a
09 ***d*** coincidence.

Extract 7.4
The U.S. Champions a Rights-Based Approach to Global Internet Freedom

01 ***d*** It is no coincidence that authorities who try to
02 restrict the exercise of fundamental freedoms by their
03 people, impede the work of human rights defenders and
04 civil society organizations, control the press and
05 obstruct the flow of information, tend to be the same
06 authorities who try to restrict, impede, control and
07 obstruct their citizens' peaceful use of these new
08 connective technologies.

Whilst the instance in extract 14 (lines 8-9) is formulated more cautiously ('I don't think that's a coincidence, versus 'It is not coincidence that' l.1 in extract 15), they will be treated as doing similar work. There are three key points to consider. Firstly, each coincidence disconfirmation links two aspects/events to one another: in the above instance this includes a) territories being threatened (event), and b) being the territories to Russia's advantage (aspect), whilst in the second instance this includes a) authorities 'restrict[ing] the exercise of fundamental freedoms (event) that also b) constrain 'their citizens' peaceful use of these new connective technologies' (aspect). Secondly, a pattern is constructed. This is done via describing a pattern in time ('historically' line 1, first instance; 'Today that is—there is no difference.' line 5 first instance), a pattern in type of authority/behaviour (line 5, latter instance, 'tend to be the same authorities who […]'). Thirdly, in each of the two instances, the coincidence disconfirmation allows the singular event to be attributed to the pattern,

which makes a motive or 'stake' tacitly or explicitly available ('The territories that are being threatened are precisely those that would allow Russia a direct landline to Moldova' lines 6-8 for the first instance, an implicit motive, i.e. control and power for the second instance).

Literature – attributing stake through coincidence disconfirmations

To illuminate the way that coincidence disconfirmation operates, the analysis will borrow from Potter's (1996) concepts of 'stake' and 'interest' in the discursive construction of reality and factuality. Stake and interest are used to 'undermine claims and accounts and the way such accounts are resisted' (Potter, 1996: 122). Potter argues that:

> At their strongest, these notions [stake and interest] are used to suggest that the description's speaker, or the institution responsible for the description, has something to gain or lose; that they are not *dis*interested. They have a stake in some course of actions which the description relates to, or there are personal, financial or power considerations that come into play. Descriptions may be broadly inspected in relation to a backdrop of competences, projects, allegiances, motives and values. (Potter, 1996: 124, emphasis in original)

Potter (1996: 125) explains how stake operates through the example phrase, 'they would, wouldn't they'. There are three reasons, firstly, this phrase portrays the things it describes as expected, secondly, this phrase constructs the actions it describes as characteristic for the kind of person or institution that did them ('it is the sort of thing that people with that background, those interests, this set of attitudes *would* say') and thirdly, it 'formulates this predictability as shared knowledge' (Potter, 1996: 125). But this phrase does not need to spell out exactly what that stake encompasses in that case for that perosn or institution, by alluding to a gain without detailing it.

He provides the example of a newspaper article in which the journalist discusses the ethics of making fur garments, and in which the journalist quotes a representative of the British Fur Trade Association in regards to a charity deciding to take in donated fur. This representative obviously has a stake in voicing her support for fur. However, the formulation 'while she obviously has a vested interest' seems to forestall a possible accusation that the representative speaks in favour of fur and thus

nullifies it (Potter, 1996: 130). Potter (1996: 131) further argues, that it takes attention away from the journalist herself who may or may not be pro fur.

The negotiation of stake is important in the analysis of coincidence and coincidence disconfirmation as a repertoire. This is because 'actual' coincidence has no explicitly named actor; describing something as a coincidence (which often happens through other means than using the word 'coincidence') implies it had no directly identifiable cause, and any outcome that happened by pure coincidence is styled to be accidental and unexpected. This is not to say that a cause might not be implicit: meaningful coincidences can hint at a transcendent agency. The situation that arises from actual coincidence may or may not be beneficial to the person reportedly experiencing it, but it is fashioned as an unexpected outcome that the person did not bring about themselves. As an example, a genuine coincidence account might describe meeting one's soulmate, or stumbling across something one has lost. The person benefitting from the outcomes of coincidence may be lucky to have gained them, but coincidence implies that they have not brought them about themselves. This is why actual coincidence narratives seem to diminish (human) stake. However, coincidence disconfirmation does the opposite in that it seems to suggest the situation described was brought about by active design for advantage, whilst in actual coincidence, the outcome is merely un unexpected side-product described to be happening in the context of a person going about some other business. In short, coincidence disconfirmations retain the sense of events being interlinked, but challenge the source of how they came to be.

The issues of stake, stake inoculation and interest as well as attributions of interest are all relevant to the chapter at hand. Coincidence disconfirmations link a singular event to an overarching structure. They insinuate that there was a possible gain (financial, political) self-serving interest in the actions that led to the situation at hand, which directly resonates with Potter's quote above. In a similar vein, the actions that are made responsible for the situation as it is are sometimes outlined, (as is the case for the 'Zika' extract) but they don't necessarily need to be. This is because implicitly, the coincidence disconfirmation invites the reader to see the event as part of an overarching pattern, rather than explicitly pointing this out. As such, coincidence disconfirmation is a very sophisticated form of attributing stake,

because, as Potter argues 'effective stake management is probably best done implicitly rather than explicitly, because this makes it both harder to undermine and allows the speaker to the possibility of denying that this is what they were doing' (Potter, 1996: 148). In the case of coincidence disconfirmation, the link is activated by the coincidence disconfirmation, but has to be 'conducted' by the reader.

Coincidence disconfirmation is a particularly neat repertoire for stake attribution. To refer back to the example about the fur representative in Potter's analysis outlined above, dealing with the stake the fur representative had in saying what she said, allowed the journalist to draw attention away from her own stake in the matter. The same applies to the use of coincidence disconfirmation. In coincidence disconfirmations, the author of the text or the speaker of the utterance directs the focus away from the agenda underlying their own discourse. That is, their discourse could be seen as motivated to bring about a specific situation that might be self-serving for the author or speaker, but by putting the focus on the situation described, focus is diverted. It is done very implicitly, for four reasons. Firstly, as the concept coincidence is drawn on, coincidence disconfirmation avoids the mentioning of specific actors. Omitting who did an action means the actions are left unattributed. Secondly, the author cannot be accused of having attributed stake to a specific person or institution, because they did not. On the face of it, they have merely insinuated something was not a coincidence. This can avoid possible accusations that they defamed a person (which, in the context of newspaper articles for instance, which is one context in which coincidence disconfirmation occurs) is a real risk that goes beyond the discursive threat. Thirdly, the 'link' is left to be done by the reader or listener. That means by the time the recipient of the discourse deducts the who might have caused the non-coincidental state-of-affairs they have worked it out themselves and are culpable for that critique. The person who termed the state of affair a coincidence disconfirmation did not.

The evaluative functions of 'It is no coincidence that x' formulations

This section will focus upon explicit coincidence disavowals, concentrating on the ways they construct the relationship between people and events. Specifically, the first three instances will showcase the way in which a coincidence disavowal

delivers negative evaluations, while the subsequent two instances will exemplify the use of coincidence disavowals to promote situations. The following distinction between these cases will establish the structure of the remaining chapter.

A specific formulation of coincidence disconfirmation can be seen in the following example from *The Guardian*. This article reports the ways in which racial aspects of hate crimes are obscured from the crime data in the UK. The article reports how, according to experts, an unwillingness to recognise racist motivation, the redefining of racial criminal cases in alternative ways, and an 'overstrict interpretation' of the law in regards to what constitutes racially motivated crime, results in the outcome that 'half of reported hate crime is not prosecuted and judges underuse heavier sentences'. It is in this context that the chair of the European commission against racism and intolerance (Ecri) is directly cited, in whose quoted words the coincidence disconfirmation occurs.

Extract 7.5
Extract (news)Racial elements in hate crime cases being 'filtered out' in UK

```
01    The experts say that hate speech continues to be a
02    serious problem in tabloid newspapers, and online hate
03    speech against Muslim people has soared since 2013. They
04    say this is particularly evident in the targeting of
05    Muslim women online on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.
06 d  "It is no coincidence that racist violence is on the
07    rise in the UK at the same time as we see worrying
08    examples of intolerance and hate speech in newspapers,
09    online and even among politicians," said the Ecri chair,
10    Christian Ahlund.
11    "The Brexit referendum seems to have led to a further
12    rise in 'anti-foreigner' sentiment, making it even more
13    important that the British authorities take the steps
14    outlined in our report as a matter of priority."
```

The coincidence disavowal makes the rise in racist violence (lines 6-7) and the 'intolerance and hate speech in newspapers, online and even among politicians' (lines 8-9) readable as a correlated issue. It implies that the former could be a consequence of the latter. The 'non-coincidental' quality of the situation is constructed as evident due to timing; the link between the 'racist violence [being] on the rise' is constructed as happening 'at the *same time* as […]' the 'worrying examples' of hate speech. The hate speech apparently emitted from the sources quoted in lines 8-9 are also readable as a pattern in themselves, discursively conflated into one group in the three-part-list of sources: 'newspapers, online […]

politicians'. This grouping makes them appear to utter their hate speech in unison, and the hate speech endemic. The coincidence disavowal launches an implicit critique – the hate speech emitted from these sources is readable as responsible, perhaps to blame, for the undesirable 'racist violence' (which is marked as undesirable to the extent that 'steps' are meant to be taken by the government, lines 12-14). This is one of the ways in which the coincidence disconfirmation constructs connection between separate 'actors' and situations.

Coincidence is disconfirmed through the use of the formulation 'It is no coincidence that […]'. The third person singular, neuter personal pronoun 'it', that is left unspecified, indirectly refers to the situation of racist violence being on the rise (lines 6-7), but it is also readable as including the hate speech emitted by the newspapers, online, and politicians. What this 'it' then does, is to combine and conflate the two separate situations into one, crucially singular 'it' – thereby strengthening the interpretation that the situation is in fact one correlated issue. Thus 'it' makes the two situations sound as if they were the same situation. And even though they are explicitly marked as coincidence disconfirmation, they are constructed as one connected item. This means only one part of the commonly held coincidence interpretation of 'events linked in meaning but not causation' is unfulfilled: the coincidence is rejected in terms of what brought about the events that have reportedly happened, but not in terms of whether the events link or do not link; the 'it' within the coincidence disavowal clearly implies that they do. Consequently, coincidence disconfirmation in this context is not necessarily meant as the opposite of coincidence, rather, it is to be taken as an interpretational sub-set, where connection between events and situations exists, but one event may have influenced the existence of the other.

The next extract is taken from a 'Comment Is Free' article published on the online version of *The Guardian*, on the role of inequality in the spread of the Zika virus in Brazil. The title makes the link of inequality and Zika explicit, and the sub-title, reproduced below, contains the first of two coincidence disavowals occurring in the article.

Extract 7.6

```
01 d It's no coincidence that most Zika-related microcephaly
02   cases are found in the poor north-east of the country,
03   where access to water and contraception is limited
```

Again, the coincidence disavowal is phrased in the particular formulation: 'It is no coincidence that x'. This consolidates the two separate events/factors of Zika cases and 'the poor north-east of the country'. Therefore, the coincidence disavowal is readable as once again connecting two events or situations, here poverty and cases of illness, into the one personal pronoun 'it'. The one situation is implicitly constructed as responsible for the other, which is emphasises by the explanation provided in line 3 (the 'access to water and contraception' is readable as a direct consequence of the 'poor north-east of the country' and at the same time as one of the causes for the 'most' Zika cases having been found there). The 'non-coincidental' situation is not readable as neutral, there is a critique, which becomes evident in the context of the article, and especially the title. The use of a coincidence disavowal is a political intervention into a taken-for-granted narrative. The correlating factors making coincidence disconfirmation accessible, are timing and structural inequalities. Crucially however, the first extract on racial elements in crime statistics does not explicitly give explanations for why the link between hate speech in the media, online and from politicians would result or impact the crime statistics. The instance on Zika however gives two explanations for the link between the majority of Zika cases being in the poor north-east of the country, namely limited access to water and contraception.

The next coincidence-disavowal, sourced from the same article, seems similar to the foregoing one that constituted the subtitle, albeit adding more detail. The foregoing subtitle seems to be a tagline for the main article, which is why some sections appear to be repeated.

Extract 7.7

```
01 d And it's no coincidence that most Zika-related
02   microcephaly cases were found in the north-east of the
03   country: of course, the weather there is hot, which is
04   prime breeding ground for the Aedis aegypti, but it is
05   also where most of Brazil's poverty is concentrated. The
06   country still has one of the highest rates of income
07   inequality in the world, and basic sanitation is worse
08   in the north and north-east: only 51% of households in
09   the north-east and 20% in the north had access to basic
10   sanitation in 2012. In fact, a study in 2014 revealed
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11   that access to water can be heavily gendered: around 30%
12   of women in these regions have no direct access
13   to water, having to make do with waterholes and buckets.
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The coincidence disavowals have so far appeared in comment pieces or as part of recommendations to the government and thus had highly politicised agendas with the aim to influence. Thus, and in short, the coincidence disconfirmation's function, broadly speaking, is to connect two previously unconnected situations/events/structures, pointing at the agency of one situation in bringing about (or at least influencing) the other. This connection is made for an argumentative point. A very subtle form of blame is implicit. The use of 'it' to combine the two different situations is crucial in correlating the disparate events into one coherent, merged one.

In the forthcoming pair of cases, the coincidence disavowal has a different function. The first one is an excerpt from David Cameron's speech acting as United Kingdom Prime Minister at an assembly in Hamburg, Germany.

Extract 7.8
PM speech

```
01   And it was the merchants of Hamburg who won the right to
02   sell their wares across England when they were granted a
03   charter by King Henry III in 1266.
04   If you like, they created one of the world's first trade
05 d deals. And it is no coincidence that 750 years on, it is
06   Britain and Germany leading calls for the completion of
07   the world's biggest trade deal – between Europe and
08   America.
```

Here, the coincidence disavowal links two situations once more, specifically, the trade deal between Hamburg and Britain in 1266 and the trade deal they are reportedly working on at the time of the speech, that Britain and Germany are reportedly heading. Crucially, the actors are not the same in each of the linked 'situations' – in the first event, Hamburg is described as having been in a trade deal that involved one-way trade of Hamburg selling goods in Britain, whilst the second situation involves 'Britain and Germany leading calls' for a trade deal between Europe and America. This shows the discursive work that the coincidence disavowal does in uniting rather dissimilar situations. The coincidence disavowal constructs these trade deals to be part of a pattern, which suggests this specific non-coincidentalness, which includes coincidental appearance, yet where one situation is

responsible for the other. In the context of the Prime Minister's speech addressing a meeting in Hamburg, the function of this formulation is to promote Hamburg/British relations. The promotion is implicit also through the extreme case formulation 'world's biggest trade deal' in l.7, which is used to describe the present-time deal. A similar function can be seen in the next extract, taken from a news article published in *The Guardian* on the topic of US presidential elections in 2016.

Extract 7.9
01 ***d*** "It is not a coincidence that we have a [high] number of
02 Democratic women running in competitive Senate races in
03 the same year we have Hillary Clinton at the top of the
04 ticket," according to Muthoni Wambu Kraal, the senior
05 director for state and local campaigns at Emily's List,
06 which has been helping elect pro-choice women since
07 1985. "She was a powerful recruitment tool."

Here, a coincidence disavowal marks the link between Hillary Clinton's success and the high number of female Democrats running for Senate positions. In line 7 the author calls her a 'powerful recruitment tool', emphasising the coincidence disavowal's function of promotion. In this case, (non-)coincidence is detectable through timing – 'in the same year as […]'.

Thus, these five instances have shown certain characteristics:

1) The formulation takes the form of 'it is no coincidence that x'
2) The formulation discursively unites two events, discursively creating a link between them
3) This link is marked either by suspicious *timing* 'it is no coincidence that x, at the same time that y' or
4) by a discernible *pattern*
5) or both
6) The coincidence disavowal makes one event implicitly readable as having had agency over the happening of the other
7) 'No coincidence' is meant literally and its (inferred) double negative formulation 'not not causally related' points to a relationship of two previously not explicitly linked factors, yet not necessarily a causal one
8) The coincidence disavowal is adopted in the context of such a link already being implied (via the title of an article, or other surrounding text)
9) It is a springboard for further, and subsequent subtle and tentative 'allegations' of causation
10) This 'covert agency' is not neutrally described, it is presented as either
11) an implicit critique of the situation that brought about the other or
12) As promoting the situation that brought about the other

13) The coincidence disconfirmation is subtle, which heightens its persuasive force

The following section will develop and expand upon the examples of critical coincidence disavowal, which are used to deliver a critique of a situation. In the section after that, it will showcase instances where coincidence disconfirmation is used as a tool to promote the state of affairs described in the account.

Explicit coincidence disavowals: critiquing states-of-affairs

This section will address the ways in which explicit coincidence disavowals are used to critique states of affairs, and argues it does so in the following five ways. Firstly, coincidence disconfirmation can highlight structural inequalities (through use of double negative and insinuation of causal correlation). Secondly, coincidence disconfirmation can operate to make visible the historical context/pattern. Thirdly, coincidence disconfirmation conducts 'political' intervention. Fourthly, coincidence disconfirmation forces evaluation into the hands of the reader. That is, coincidence disconfirmation is argumentative or defensive in function. Finally, Coincidence disconfirmation links an individual issue to a wider structure, such that the evaluation of the issue cannot be rejected without also rejecting the wider structure that it has been linked to

In all four of the instances of the data set that point to structural inequality (instance on riots, obesity, Zika virus, Tory slush fund), are exemplified through suggesting that a geographical pattern exists for the issues outlined. Three of those instances (the ones on riots, obesity and the Zika virus) have in common that deprivation is implicitly blamed for the issues described, while the Tory slush fund case blames the political elite. The instances have been ordered in terms of increasing explicitness and categorised by who is blamed/critiqued. This results in the following structure: Structural inequality, specifically the effects of deprivation are made accountable in the first three cases, structural inequality, specifically the actions of elites, are blamed in the next case, and finally, an angry mob of sore losers is critiqued in the last example. The first three cases also explicitly give an explanation for how deprivation leads to the issues described, making causation relationship more explicit.

The following extract is taken from an article published as a comment piece[19] in the online version of *The Guardian* on 14 July 2010 in response to rioters burning a stolen car in the Ardoyne area (northern Belfast), written by Mary O'Hara. The piece has been shortened for clarity. The following extract contains two coincidence disavowals, creating a strong link between the events. Extract 5 illustrates the way that the coincidence disconfirmations, one directly following the next, insinuate a relationship between two factors: in the first instance between riots and areas of deprivation, and in the second, between affluent areas and a lack of riots.

Extract 7.10
Poverty is the backdrop to the riots in Northern Ireland
(lines ommitted)

```
01    It is impossible for someone like myself, who grew up in
02    one of the worst-affected areas during the Troubles, not
03    to notice that the areas now reeling from riots, burning
04    cars and confrontations with the police are the very
05    same ones that suffered most in previous decades. This
06 d  is no coincidence. It is no coincidence either that
07 d  these riots are not taking place in more well-to-do
08    parts of the province, just as they didn't in the past.
09    I watch these youngsters and, all but for a change of
10    fashion, they could be the same people who were on the
11    streets in the 70s and 80s. It is soul-destroying to
12    observe. There are considerable and complex reasons why
13    the current generation are mimicking the last one, but
14    one factor that is all too often ignored in the coverage
15    is their life circumstances. The thing is, that for all
16    the progress – and boy, has there been much to celebrate
17    in recent years – districts such as the Ardoyne and
18    parts of west Belfast remain areas of incredible,
19    entrenched deprivation. For all the admirable work by
20    individuals, local groups and communities at large to
21    turn things around, sectarianism remains and poverty and
22    social exclusion are its willing partners in crime.
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This instance has similarities with the earlier example on Zika viruses in that it points to structural issues of inequality. If unpacked and formally noted, the coincidence disavowals create a double correlation between the situations described.

[19] The data search was conducted searching in all parts of *The Guardian* for instances of 'coincidence' using their own, internal search engine/searching Google for instances in *The Guardian* mentioning coincidence. From these, instances of coincidence disconfirmation use were selected, and the clearest used for the present analysis. A tacit finding was that a high number of *The Guardian* articles in which coincidence disconfirmation was used were published under the 'comment' or 'opinion piece' headings in their website. Of course both comment/opinion pieces and news articles convey evaluation and opinion. Perhaps coincidence disconfirmation as a rhetorical device is used in articles that present 'contrary', opinion, or opinion expected to be met with resistance, and the relative indirectness of coincidence disconfirmation coupled with its convincing rhetorical orientation may explain this.

What the formulations are expressing is as follows: It is no coincidence that there are x [riots] where the place is y [deprived] and it is no coincidence that there are no x [riots] where the place is not y [not deprived, formulated as 'more well-to-do']. The excerpt's two coincidence disavowals, are linked because they build an internal contrast structure. Heritage, Clayman, & Zimmerman (1988: 97) argue that 'A contrast is the most fundamental and commonly used rhetorical format. It usually comprises two juxtaposed sentences that are opposed in words or sense, or both […]'. They further argue that contrast structures are formulated to achieve the two goals of indicating a completion point (to generate applause) and to 'highlight their content against the surrounding background of speech materials' (Heritage et al., 1988: 96). The internally contrasted coincidence disavowal heightens the link between the riot (the event) and deprivation (the structure), and the reference to the past historical context intensifies it even more, such that this link is very firmly established. Multiple rhetorical methods style the singular event as part of a society-wide systematic inequality and imbalance of wealth and a lack thereof. The coincidence disavowal's doubled link delivers an evaluation: they implicitly critique the link that they suggest, such that the deprivation that is proposed to have been a factor in the riots becomes the 'object of complaint'.

The 'no coincidence' formulations function by rejecting happenstance, and by rejecting the notion of coincidence in the situation it describes; they effectively reject the link being merely similar but not causal. By rejecting coincidence then, a double negative operates – the correlated events are not not linked through causation. This does not necessarily mean that actual causation is suggested, rather, because a lack of causation is the crux of coincidence, explicitly saying that the relationship between two events is not coincidence, some kind of relationship between the two factors is introduced when it was inconspicuous before. The function of this formulation (rather than a more explicit version 'it is not not causation') lies in its subtlety, which makes for more convincing rhetoric. In the same way that irony works best when indirect (Nuolijärvi and Tiittula, 2011), this formulation lets the readers 'come to the conclusion' themselves and is thus more resistant to counter-arguments, as it is not concrete and engages the reader in the evaluation.

There is a sense that these areas of deprivation triply suffer – not only have they been described as having had riots now, they are also described as the areas that 'suffered most in previous decades' and they were also where the author describes growing up (and they are described as 'the worst-affected areas during the Troubles'). The coincidence disconfirmation bridges the two situations from different eras. Implicitly, the lack of attention that had been on the deprivation then and now thus becomes another point of critique. The coincidence disconfirmation is implicitly saying that the link between deprivation and the riots has been overlooked, twice. Thus, the coincidence disavowal points to inequality, and critiques it.

The author self-identifies as a person who has access, due to being a specific type of person: 'someone like myself, who grew up in one of the worst-affected areas during the Troubles[20]'. The author's growing up in the area legitimises her expertise in the matter, strengthening her assessment. Gubrium & Holstein (2009: 212) argue that for researchers, a narrator's position in relation to the story told can add to the credibility of the information presented, and referring to Gubrium & Holsteinn (1997) they argue that 'being there' lends description to what they call 'strong rhetorical footing for narrative adequacy'. '"Direct access"' (which the journalist constructs here) can thus make a storyteller's position robust as it combines 'access, privilege, and authenticity' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009: 212).

The author has to manage the implication that being from that area, she might be protective of it, and thus consciously looking out for any patterns (or even crafting them herself, with the use of her imagination). This may be why the two coincidence disconfirmations are positioned after a formulation that manages the author's awareness: the author describes unescapably noticing ('It is impossible for someone like myself […] not to notice') the falling together of the areas that are the cites of riotous incidences ('now reeling from riots, burning cars and confrontations with the police') with their implied and continuing deprivation ('are the very same ones that suffered most in previous decades'). The noticing is formulated as a double negative – 'impossible [=not possible] not to notice'. This brings the emphasis away from the

20 Northern Ireland conflict, from late 1960s to 1998, began in the late 1960s and is usually deemed to have ended with the Belfast "Good Friday" Agreement of 1998.

author actively noticing and styles it as though noticing was inevitable for the author, and would be inevitable for anyone else in a similar position. Thus, the author normalises 'seeing' the link, which discursively positions it as 'out-there' in the world, rather than being constructed through her perspective.

It is after that that the author uses the two coincidence disavowals. Referring to the link between the areas of deprivation and the areas with the most amount of trouble, the author states that 'This is no coincidence.' The formulation 'this' points to the previously described link between poverty and riots. No coincidence rejects the possibility that these might simply happen to coincide. To further emphasise this implied correlation of poverty and rioting within the same area, the next coincidence disavowal 'It is no coincidence either that these riots are not taking place in more well-to-do parts of the province, just as they didn't in the past' links the opposite scenarios (wealth and no riots) together also. Crucially, the author emphasizes that this has been the same in the past, thereby insinuating the correlation is not a fluke, but a strong link. These two coincidence constructions build an internal contrast structure, which rhetorically strengthens it.

Coincidence disconfirmation lays the groundwork for a discursive intensification of the relationship between the two events, and this is evident in the following ways. Notably, the title of the news article merely describes poverty as a 'backdrop to the riots'. However, the use of the two coincidence disconfirmations allows for causation to be introduced, if tentatively. Structurally, the two coincidence disconfirmations are the first place where this causation is insinuated, and they allow for the author to intensify this relationship in the following sections, such that when the author describes that 'There are considerable and complex reasons […]' she is able to refer to 'life circumstances' and in the sentence thereafter explicitly cites how the two areas of the riots also 'remain areas of incredible, entrenched deprivation'. She also states thereafter that 'sectarianism remains and poverty and social exclusion are its willing partners in crime', which further establishes their link. This figure of speech, 'partners in crime' points to causation, as crime is readable as requiring a 'criminal' actively executing the crime. As 'poverty' becomes personified here, this emphasises its active, person-like 'behaviour', such that causation is made even more explicit. So by putting this discourse together in a way that incrementally

increases the link between deprivation and riots (rather than stating it from the outset where it could be rejected), the stepwise transition makes the overall claim more easily acceptable.

To conclude, the analysis of this excerpt contributes the following three points to the argument. Firstly, it shows that coincidence disavowals occur in key places in the narrative. This is indicated by the internal contrast structure that is used. Contrasts are used in order to highlight the message they hold within their midst against the backdrop of the rest of the speech or text. Thus, in this case, the internal contrast structure within which the two coincidence disavowals are situated, highlights the content that is described within it as important. The key argument is emphasised by the conjunction of the contrast structure and coincidence disconfirmation, but that it is also constructed by them. Secondly, the internal contrast structure quite neatly intensifies the link between structural inequality and the riot, because the opposite scenario is also linked (no riot, in areas of wealth). Thirdly, the added formulation 'partners in crime' in reference to poverty and social exclusion being sectarianism's associates, emphasises that the coincidence disavowal crafts a non-causal link (which seemed to be implied, but is thereby made explicit).

Published on the 3 November 2009 in *The Guardian* online, the following extract is taken from an opinion piece written by Neville Rigby and is concerned with creating awareness for tackling childhood obesity. This extract brings the argument further by supplying a case where, after the coincidence disavowal, the causal link is made explicit by giving an explicit cause between obesity and deprived areas (people being forced to eat cheaper foods in times of material lack, which contributed to the issue).

Extract 7.11
No room for obesity complacency Neville Rigby

'Good' headlines about revised projections mustn't distract us from the work that needs to be done to tackle childhood obesity [sub-headline]
Comforting forecasts do not allow us the luxury of relaxing efforts to counteract childhood excess weight and obesity. We have yet to scale up from the "toe in the water" approach of pilot projects to a wide-scale approach to tackling the problem. We need give far more professional support to obese children and their families throughout the country in properly managed interventions, such as the Mend programme, which has delivered remarkable results so far. At the same time, we must fine-tune the mass-communication programmes that rely on the questionable notion that most of us respond sensibly to simple health messages.

11 [one paragraph omitted].
12 What should be clear is that changing trends can be correlated to some extent with
13 the consequences of previous socioeconomic policies. The original rise of obesity in
14 the 80s and 90s corresponded with an era of "rolling back the frontiers of the state"
15 and free-marketeers, who enjoyed a free-for-all to promulgate a self-indulgent
16 d culture hardly shared by everyone. It is perhaps no coincidence that the highest rates
17 of obesity in the UK are found in the areas where traditional industries collapsed
18 during that period, and impoverished communities were driven to cheaper foods in
19 times of recession.
20 The generation born then is already on the way to being the parents of today, but
21 they too face a new era if not quite of austerity, then of the economist's "rational
22 choice" of consuming cheaper foods. The latest recession may well change the
23 trend's direction again and not for the better.

The article explicitly correlated, and implicitly blames, the UK government's lack of action for the obesity of children in a previous time: 'The original rise of obesity in the 80s and 90s corresponded with an era of '"rolling back the frontiers of the state" and free-marketeers' (lines 13-15). The former quote is a reference to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's political era, which involved the privatisation of state-owned industries. The coincidence disavowal refers to the 'current time' in which the article is written. The coincidence disavowal further links the localities that have the 'highest rates of obesity' (lines 16-17), to the areas that experienced their 'traditional industries collap[sing] line 17. The collapse of the industries is constructed to have been in the period in which the initial link (described at the beginning of the paragraph) between government action and obesity was mentioned, namely the rise in obesity, the focus on free markets and a retraction of government influence in the free market economy. Thus, the coincidence disconfirmation marks the high obesity levels as an economic, governmental issue from the past, with consequences in the present time. Within the sentence of the coincidence disconfirmation, an additional sub-clause adds explanation to the link between obesity and the collapse of the industry in that '[…] impoverished communities were driven to cheaper foods in times of recession' (lines 18-19).

What this coincidence disconfirmation does then, is inexplicitly mark the current record areas of obesity as a consequence of Thatcher's retraction of government control to the benefit of privatisation and free market control. This is readable as having resulted in collapsing industries, which is implicitly presented as having caused the areas affected to experience recession, which is, in turn, readable as having meant there was a dependence upon cheaper foods. Thus, the current high levels of obesity are presented as a consequence of political policies in the 80s and

90s; crucially, the 'original' rise in obesity as well as the current one is implicitly blamed on government withdrawal at the time that made free market trade more influential. What the coincidence disavowal is implicitly suggesting is that the areas of society suffering from obesity need protection from the free markets and they need intervention from the state. Thus, obesity is styled not as an individual matter, but as a public issue. This is supported by the title that invites the reader to reject 'obesity complacency'.

What this tells us about coincidence disavowals is that they are highly dependent on, and work to, strengthen the context in which they occur. This again is an opinion piece arguably working to bring forward a slightly new/unusual opinion. The coincidence disavowal helps to make it convincing, and helps elicit a reaction. This is because the coincidence disavowal requires the active interpretation of the reader to understand the link, especially in this case where the Thatcher-era is left unmentioned, yet a direct quote from her political leadership, as well as the description of the pro-free-market policy in conjunction with a lessening of state intervention is implicit for an informed reader. The coincidence disconfirmation is a highly 'political' rhetorical tool in that it implicitly blames an unnamed, yet identifiable source as responsible for the complainable situation. This particular coincidence disconfirmation is itself shrouded in caution, and hedged through the use of 'perhaps'; 'It is perhaps no coincidence that […]'. Thus, the tentatively suggested correlation is further tentatively proposed, strengthening the implicit message. It can hardly be directly doubted with as the implicit message relies on the reader to be deciphered.

Extract 7.12
Zika's spread in Brazil is a crisis of inequality as much as health
It's no coincidence that most Zika-related microcephaly cases are found in the poor north-east of the country, where access to water and contraception is limited
Nicole Froio

Given Brazil's population of 200 million, the number of confirmed cases is relatively low: only 270 cases of microcephaly have been confirmed to be caused by the Zika virus, and 3,448 other cases suspected. But for any pregnant woman, the mere possibility of her baby being born with microcephaly is terrifying. And it's no coincidence that most Zika-related microcephaly cases were found in the north-east of the country: of course, the weather there is hot, which is prime breeding ground for the Aedis aegypti, but it is also where most of Brazil's poverty is concentrated. The country still has one of the highest rates of income inequality in

09 the world, and basic sanitation is worse in the north and north-east: only 51% of
10 households in the north-east and 20% in the north had access to basic sanitation in
11 2012.

The coincidence disconfirmation in the forgoing extract links Zika cases and the deprived north-east areas of Brazil, making the poverty readable as responsible cause for the frequency of those cases in that area. The coincidence disavowal is positioned towards the end of the article. It launches a list of reasons for why poverty could be a reason for the higher frequency of Zika cases in those poorer regions: citing the higher temperatures, poor sanitation, the related and gendered issue of women's lack of direct access to water, a lack of access to contraception in the face of advice to use contraception, and a lack of money to access illegal abortion. Thus, the coincidence disavowal launches an implicit critique on inequality. Structurally, the coincidence disconfirmation is positioned in the midst of more explicit links between Zika cases and inequality – the title spells out how Zika has more to do with inequality than health or how health is related to inequality. The concluding sentence of the article warns that a cure for the Zika virus would not stop another similar illness from emerging if the problems of inequality are left unaddressed. Neither the title, nor the ending sentence propose that inequality is the actual cause of Zika cases (which is why the title reads 'Zika […] a crisis of inequality as much as health', without a direct reference to causation. Rather, reasons are cited that support the correlated, only implicitly causal, link between Zika and inequality merging from the coincidence disconfirmation. There is a good reason for this: by suggesting, through the indirect coincidence disavowal, that inequality is responsible for Zika befalling these deprived areas, the facts and list of causes are readable as pieces of evidence for the implicit argument. This strengthens this implicit argument with what are presented as facts, making the initially implicit argument stronger. The initial argument remains within the interpretation of the reader as it is not spelled out, making the overall premise very difficult to counter.

A theme seems to be emerging, where structurally, the coincidence disconfirmation builds the foundation for the overall argument of the rest of the discourse. That is why the coincidence disconfirmation is placed at a point that builds up the concluding section. As such it is important for the text to be most convincing at the end, and the coincidence disconfirmation helps with that. It also builds a bridge

between the title and the ending, making the article come full circle. As with the other cases, the coincidence disconfirmation is proposed based on an overarching structure: here, it includes an area of deprivation once more.

The shortened extract was an open letter published in the section of 'local government' in the online version of *The Guardian* on 12 September 2016. It comprises four public responses to the announcement of closures of libraries in certain localities. It argues that the £300 million Conservative government fund to aid Liverpool council is to be used to support Conservative localities to the disadvantage of Labour-run localities. The following is written by Joe Anderson, the Mayor of Liverpool, a Labour politician, and was published as the first of four comments:

Extract 7.13
Hard-hit northern councils hit back over Tory slush fund

I, together with the core cities group of councils, have lost no opportunity in lobbying the government, and the coalition of the past, pointing out its scandalous, inequitable method of imposing budget cuts upon councils which face the harshest levels of deprivation – which it is no coincidence are labour-controlled – in comparison to the generous settlements afforded to the Conservative-led shire counties. This is why the £300m slush fund which is overtly weighted towards Tory councils in the south of England is not just a kick in the privates to Liverpool and the five other most deprived northern cities which won't receive a penny of the grant, but is a breathtaking abuse of power, with striking similarities to the scam which saw the disgraced Porter branded politically corrupt. It appals me that the government's austerity measures are hitting hardest the worst off, yet the prime minister can blatantly appear to buy the silence of critics within his own party using a massive pot of taxpayers' money, as we head to the May elections.
Joe Anderson; Mayor of Liverpool

This instance of coincidence disconfirmation is another 'area' case, that is, the pattern that warrants coincidence disconfirmation due to one geographical location allegedly receiving different treatment to the other. The coincidence disavowal correlates budget cuts imposed on the councils 'which face the harshest levels of deprivation' to being labour-controlled, while 'generous settlements afforded to the Conservative-led counties. The title, calling the fund whose distribution is called into question a 'Tory slush fund' (implying a fund used for dishonest purposes) frames the comment in a light that suggests that the fund is used for pleasing the Tories' own members and followers. As the Conservatives are presented as allocating settlements to their own counties, this makes the political nepotism explicit. So we have a two-way correlation: deprived, Labour-led councils get funding cuts, while

wealthy Conservative counties receive generous settlements. In other words, it is fitting the 'the poor get poorer and the rich richer' narrative.

However, the critique on the unjust actions are implicit: 'shire counties' are areas of the country, located in the South of England and known to be rich, yet are here called by their locality, rather than by wealth. This of course makes sense in the context of a complaint regarding the way in which funding is allocated by region, but it is also a way to make the wealth of the 'shire counties' seem united. It also plays to the narrative of a North-South divide – emphasising the regional (and political) dispute, cementing the coincidence disavowal as a 'political' formulation because it addresses political motivation. The coincidence disavowal implies the kind of motivation for action that the doer of the action is engaged in.

This letter is a political act of the Mayor, an explicit political account from the perspective of politics of the left in relation to public services and the welfare state. The coincidence disavowal manages to balance quite a difficult rhetorical act. Because the writer of the comment is a Labour politician, the Mayor of Liverpool, he is likely to be accused of being directly opposed to any Tory policy, regardless of what it may constitute. He could be accused of having a stake in critiquing any political actions by his political opponents who also are in power. That is, at any one point it is possible to infer a number of reasons for why he might be opposed, and which would nullify the validity of his argument. Any critique of the current leadership could be seen to have been uttered by him because it is the opposite political perspective, because he is a sore loser, or because he cannot accept the political elite of an opposing government, or because he wants to be seen to 'fight' for his followers and so on.

It is the coincidence disconfirmation that allows him to fulfil the task to present his complaint to be a genuine issue, transcending 'normal' political disagreement. That is, rather than merely being seen to be contrary for the sake of it, as might be expected of a left-leaning politician in this context, the coincidence disconfirmation allows the Mayor to emphasise the issue's validity; pointing out how he had also lobbied 'the coalition of the past' presents his argument as ongoing pursuit transcending time and governmental boundaries. Explaining his ongoing campaign

('have lost no opportunity in lobbying the government') as having been in unison with 'the core cities group of councils' shows his actions to have been supported by other important players. His motivation is presented as motivated by the unjust situation he terms a 'breathtaking abuse of power'. The coincidence disavowal permits him to present the link between the support for the already wealthy, Conservative-governed areas in a neutral manner, formulated as 'It is no coincidence that x', and thus lending it a semblance of objectivity. His depicted expertise as mayor and activist means that the coincidence disconfirmation needs no direct proof.

The following extract is a passage from an opinion piece written by Piers Morgan published on *The Daily Mail* online website, in which he argues that Olympians winning gold should be celebrated as true winners, whilst second and third places should not.

Extract 7.14
What Michael Phelps teaches us about winning (and why coming second doesn't count) (Lines omitted)

01 This is not a theory which endeared me to the frenzied
02 Twitterati this morning, who lined up to abuse me for
03 daring to suggest that Gold medals are all that matter.
04 Most of the more insulting responses, I noticed, came
05 from Olympians who had never won Gold themselves. This
06 is not, I would argue, a coincidence.

To summarise the most evident points for this instance, the explicit coincidence disavowal correlates two variables, insulting responses and non-winners of gold medals [losers]. The key point of this instance is the way in which the coincidence disavowal is clearly marked as argumentative – and thus cements its rhetorical function. What brings the argument further in this extract is the clear negotiation of stake in this instance of coincidence disconfirmation. Stake is used to discredit the critique the author had launched at him, and coincidence points to the expected backlash of the sore losers who cannot accept his point that true winners bring home gold medals.

Their hostility is subsequently readable merely as a consequence of being sore losers and, as is outlined later, a consequence of a culture of praising undeserved second, third (and so forth) runners up in competitions. The critical element of the Twitter writers is thus negated.

The analysis of this extract is similar to the other cases in that it turns one event (the author being attacked by Olympic 'losers') into a pattern (there is a culture of praising runners-up to not hurt their feelings who can now not handle failure). It differs from the other extracts because the structure that is being constructed is not a commonly acknowledged 'group'. That is, whilst in the other cases 'deprived areas' would be a recognisable pattern of an area with structural inequality, this 'group' of people has no specific 'name'. Rather, the very use of the coincidence disavowal constructs a group that is made up of people who are a group of runner up winners, who live in a culture where, to not hurt people's feelings, runners up are celebrated as winners from a young age. Thus, this excerpt shows how the very use of coincidence disconfirmation forms a grouping and a pattern based on common ideology and practices, thus turning one action into part of a structure.

Explicit coincidence disconfirmations: promoting states-of-affairs

As was observed in the initial section on explicit coincidence disavowal, formulations with the construction of 'It's no coincidence that x' are used to evaluate states-of-affairs. Specifically, situations are critiqued, or promoted. The previous section analysed cases of explicit coincidence disavowal used for implicit critique. The following instances have a number of commonalities. They promote one way of doing things/a specific state-of-affair, to the cost of a structural pattern that underlies the opposite way of doing things. That is, the first instance promotes anti-corruption to gain economic success (which implies the structural pattern of corruption goes against economic success), whilst the second instance promotes democracy and freedom of the internet to drive innovation (implying non-democracy would not foster innovation) and the third instance promotes Hillary Clinton's candidacy in the US presidential election as an impetus for other women running for senate positions (in the context of critiquing structural inequalities for women in politics). They also each contain extreme case formulations.

Each of the instance adds a specific analytical nuance; the first exemplifies how direct coincidence disavowal permits the author to promote anti-corruption whilst not presenting it as the single cause for success, the second instance exemplifies the way in which the explicit coincidence disavowal intersects with another discursive

strategy to craft a persuasive speech, and the final instance exemplifies how the coincidence disavowal permits the author to promote an individual by portraying the situation as a structural issue. This shows the flexibility of direct coincidence disavowals as they negotiate, construct and evaluate structural patterns for the unique purpose of the discourse in which they occur.

The following extract is sourced from a United Kingdom Prime Minister's speech delivered in Singapore on 28 July 2015 by David Cameron, where he detailed his plans to tackle corruption. The topic was 'Government transparency and accountability and Singapore' and part of the Anti-Corruption Summit.

Extract 7.15
Tackling corruption: PM speech in Singapore

01 One of the most under-stated, but most important
02 elements of a rules based world order, is a commitment
03 to transparency and to tackling corruption.
04 No-one understood that better than Lee Kuan Yew. It was
05 his commitment to tacking corruption that helped to give
06 people confidence to invest in this incredible country.
07 ***d*** And it is no coincidence that Singapore's climb to the
08 top end of the global indices for anti-corruption and
09 for ease of doing business have gone hand-in-hand with
10 its great global economic success.
11 And that goes right to the heart of the argument I want
12 to make today. I believe world leaders together need to
13 show the same leadership in tackling corruption that Lee
14 Kuan Yew demonstrated here in making Singapore so
15 successful. Let me explain why.

Through the coincidence disconfirmation, the case of Singapore being at the top of anti-corruption tables - as well as the 'ease of doing business' there - and Singapore's economic success are interlinked. The coincidence disconfirmation permits the Prime Minister to present this economic success as a direct consequence of anti-corruption moves, and to thereby praise and advocate anti-corruption actions. This is made explicit when the Prime Minister says that 'that goes right to the heart of the argument that I want to make today […] world leaders together need to show the same leadership in tackling corruption'. This summarises the overarching agenda of the speech, as well as the agenda of the coincidence disconfirmation: the coincidence disavowal connects Singapore's leadership in tackling corruption with laudable economic growth and therefore styles Singapore's actions as role models. Implicitly, the promotion of Singapore is done with the agenda of promoting more of the same anti-corruption stance, such that Singapore is encouraged to keep in line,

and other, still corrupt countries are meant to follow suit (and to reap the benefits of better economic success and the praise of the British Prime Minister). Thus, the coincidence confirmation accomplishes a subtle compliment and a subtle warning.

If explicit coincidence disavowal may be analytically considered as involving a rejection of 'accident' and 'surprise' then we should expect to find a case that orients to coincidence disconfirmation as such. The following case is such a case. In the following extract, David Cameron, United Kingdom Prime Minister at the time, addresses the Australian Parliament in Canberra on 14 November 2014 with a speech on the topics of 'the affection between the 2 countries, ISIL, protectionism and democracy'. The coincidence disavowal is nestled between two similar formulations, together they build a three-part list: 'It is no accident that […] is followed by 'It is no coincidence that' and 'Nor is it surprising that […]'. They build a list, as each formulation begins with a variation of 'what did not happen accidentally'. Each part links a feature of democratic, free society with an advantage for the society as a result of it.

Extract 7.16
Australian Parliament: David Cameron's speech

Of course that can make life difficult – but it helps drive out the corruption that destroys so many countries. Our governments – your government, my government – we lose cases in court, because we don't control the courts.
But that's why people invest in our countries because they have property rights, and they know that they can get redress from the rule of law and that we have judges who are honest and not on the make.
a It is no accident that the most successful countries in the world are those with the absence of conflict or corruption and the presence of strong property rights and institutions.
d It is no coincidence that the big ideas – like wifi invented here or the world wide web invented by a Briton – they all come from open societies.
s Nor is it surprising that many of the world's leading businesses refuse to set up their headquarters in places where their premises can be taken away from them.
These attributes – our rule of law, our democracy, our free press – these aren't weaknesses, they are our greatest strength.
In the great sweep of history, sometimes freedom is on the offensive, sometimes on the defensive.
Of course, there are market economies in closed political systems. But the best way, I believe, to ensure that an economy delivers long term success, and that success is felt by all of its people, is to have it

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29   overseen by political institutions in which everyone can
30   share.
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The coincidence disavowal marks the inventions (the World Wide Web and Wi-Fi) not as products of chance but 'products' of the right environment (namely, that of an 'open society'). The coincidence disconfirmation is nestled between two similar formulations all of which link successful, open societies with features of democracy. The three formulations each connect two situations/events and start with 'it is no accident that […], it is no coincidence that […] and 'nor is it surprising that […]' (lines 10; 14; 17). The three-part list, makes a case for democracy's positive outcomes. It is often used in political speeches; it is inviting applause because lists of 'adjectives, nouns, or phrases' tend to come in threes, such that upon hearing the third, the list sounds complete (Jefferson, 1990). This makes it 'safe' for members of an audience to give applause, as the clear, collectively understood end-point as the list forms three, means one is less likely to clap when no one else does (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986).

The imagined problem that the coincidence disavowal addresses could be how to legitimise implicitly Western countries' success in the world whilst persuading non-democratic countries to provide their population with online freedom. What this three-part-list and the coincidence disconfirmation do, is to mark the advantageous aspects of societies (success, inventing new things, attracting business) as a pattern that is brought about by the specific kind of action that David Cameron aims to facilitate in countries that do not yet abide by this kind of democratic governance. This extract brings the argument further by showing how coincidence disconfirmation negotiates expectation – here, it describes these three linked aspects as unexpected, and the rewards deserved, which in turn makes the receivers of these rewards, here the successful countries, readable as having had influence over their success.

The following excerpt is sourced from an article in *The Guardian* published on the 5 November 2016 authored by Lauren Gambino. It is set in the context of the 2016 US presidential elections. To summarise, the article reports people arguing that they are happy for the presidential candidate Hillary Clinton to be female, but question why it had to be her, implying they would rather have another female candidate. Making the

point that as a pioneer (of a disadvantaged group) breaking into a field for the first time requires excellency, the article quotes the director of a relevant foundation: "There's a saying, the first into battle needs to wear the most armour". Idioms are used in discursively hostile environments where disagreement is anticipated (Drew and Holt, 1998). The very use of this idiom in this article thus marks the issue it is used to support as contested. The article then gives the example of racism, where the first person to break boundaries, here the first African American baseball player had to be exceptional (and 'remain[ed] one of the best players of all time'l.17). It is this latter point that is formulated as a coincidence disconfirmation, but not in the full version. Instead, the coincidence disconfirmation is formulated in a sub-clause of the sentence. Arguably, this could be due to the coincidence disconfirmation of the first African American baseball player being one of the best ever players merely supporting the main argument of the article, that revolves around legitimising Hillary Clinton's candidacy for presidency.

Extract 17.17
Did it have to be Hillary Clinton for president? Yes. Here's why

Some voters have met Clinton's campaign with skepticism; they want a woman, just not this woman. But the gender gap explains why she makes perfect sense

[…] [section omitted]

Experts say there is no predictable route to the presidency for a female candidate, not least because the trail is still being blazed. But there is a case to be made that the first woman to get this close to the presidency would probably look a lot like Clinton: a nationally recognizable figure with an extensive résumé and close proximity to power.

"There's a saying, the first into battle needs to wear the most armor," said Adrienne Kimmell, executive director of the Barbara Lee Family Foundation, which studies women running for executive office.

She continued: "Because women have higher and harder barriers to clear the path to executive office, the women that win need to exceed expectations – so by comparison they tend to be more qualified than their opponents."

A 2011 study identified what the researchers called the "Jackie (and Jill) Robinson effect", a reference to the first African American player in Major League Baseball. Robinson broke baseball's color barrier in 1947 and by no coincidence, according to the theory, he remains one of the best players of all time.

The study found that female lawmakers outperform their male colleagues, introducing more legislation and delivering more financial projects to their home districts. This, the researchers suggest, is the result of underlying gender discrimination, which narrows the prospective pool of female candidates down to only the most qualified, talented and politically ambitious.

[…] [section omitted]

"It is not a coincidence that we have a [high] number of Democratic women running in competitive Senate races in the same year we have Hillary Clinton at the top of the ticket," according to Muthoni Wambu Kraal, the senior director for state and local campaigns at Emily's List, which has been helping elect pro-choice women since 1985. "She was a powerful recruitment tool."

Citing ‘experts’ the article counters this position by arguing that ‘there is no predictable route to the presidency for a female candidate, not least because the trail is still being blazed’ (lines 3-4). This emphasises that the environment in which Hillary Clinton managed to get on top is sexist and hostile to women. The second, full coincidence disconfirmation (lines 23-27) permits Hillary Clinton to be presented as such a ‘trailblazer’ – someone who makes a track through wild country, where the wild country is meant to be the US political field controlled by male dominance. This is because the coincidence disconfirmation reports how a ‘record number’ of female candidates for Senate have started to run, concurring with Clinton’s candidacy for presidency. Thus, her being on top is indirectly presented as an achievement. This directly counteracts any arguments asking why it had to be her. She got there first, which means she must have been excellent. Thus her very position justifies her being there; it is testament to her extraordinariness. More explicitly, the article argues that ‘the first woman to get this close to the presidency would probably look a lot like

In this context, given that Hillary Clinton is portrayed as a pioneer, implying her excellence, because she is described as having been the impulse that made other women follow suit. Crucially, the article’s annotation says that the wording had to be factually corrected from ‘record number’ to ‘high number’. This might have been a simple flaw in the authorship of the article, but it could also be seen to do the kind of work that this device seems to do. Namely, it appears to be pointing to the tendency for this device to use an extreme case formulation to promote.

In short, the coincidence disconfirmations, and especially the one linking other women politicians with Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for US presidency accomplishes a very subtle, indirect promotion of her having the position she has. Rather than explicitly saying that she is excellent, the coincidence disconfirmation implies that she had to be excellent to get where she managed to be. This means that the article did not need to add evaluation itself, because the valuation is delivered by virtue of her position itself. On a further note, the coincidence disavowal also implicitly says that Clinton has a use for other women too, suggesting that even if you don’t like her she will have eased the path for other female candidates that you might prefer.

In some ways, even this instance, which is so much about promotion, is also dealing with inequality as was the case with a number of coincidence disavowals that functioned as critiques. As was the case in the riots extract, or the case of obesity, or Zika, the direct coincidence disavowal makes a singular issue a structural one. Consequently, it is difficult to reject the issue, whilst not also rejecting the structural inequality that is portrayed as having caused it. That is, in this case, Hillary Clinton is 'promoted' by styling her position a matter of tackling structural inequality – her position is portrayed as a testament to the underlying gender-inequality and her presence presented as fostering other female politicians' pathway into politics. Thus, the direct coincidence disavowal permits the author to promote the individual Hillary Clinton, by making her a case of structural inequality, which makes it hard to reject her, without also rejecting progress in eradicating gender inequality.

Conclusion

> Coincidence […] carries a suggestive power; the discovery of the forces working behind it seems to promise the possibility of insight into the deeper systems underlying life (Dannenberg, 2004: 430).

The ways in which coincidence disconfirmation is used emphasises which main elements construct the coincidental quality of an account of events as a coincidence: Firstly, events need to be attributed to a pattern and secondly, they have to be constructed as innocuous. That is, even if the coincidence is described as benefitting the person experiencing it, the events should not be seen as having been brought about by the person on purpose, for a gain. Coincidence requires the lack of agency. Consequently, the disconfirmation of coincidence as an interpretation of events that form a pattern *suggests covert agency*.

This chapter explored types of coincidence disconfirmation and their rhetorical properties. It thus departs from previous work in the area of coincidence studies in psychology, psychotherapy, and statistics as well as sociology that have analysed coincidence, as it places coincidence *de*construction at the centre of analysis. Examining how coincidence disconfirmation is done, it identifies the rhetorical functions of negating coincidence, whilst building on work on attributions of agency and stake. An exploration of instances of direct coincidence disavowals in the form of 'It is no coincidence that x', showed that the overarching function of coincidence

avowals is to link singular events to a structure, to produce evaluations of events. Crucially, the coincidence disconfirmation turns singular events into a pattern such that it cannot easily be dismissed.

Coincidence disconfirmations tell us about coincidence as a discursive repertoire. Coincidence disconfirmations play on agency and stake; it is a stake in the outcomes of the actions that constructs coincidence disconfirmation. The very markers for genuine coincidence - a pattern or timing - are here used to point out coincidence disconfirmation, specifically, what makes the situations appear coincidental when really they are designed. The key difference is that in coincidence disconfirmation the motivation for the actions having been conducted are insinuated, whereas in 'genuine' coincidence a motivation for the actor having brought about the situation forming part of the coincidence is not implicit. This is why coincidence disconfirmation is at the heart of discourse analysis and conversation analysis, the two branches of ethnomethodology: coincidence disconfirmation permits its user to attribute stake subtly and to evaluate imperceptivity.

There are seven notable uses of coincidence disavowals:

1) To [causally] correlate two situations previously not linked to one another
2) To draw attention to a suspicious link in the timing or a pattern of the events described
3) To attribute an event/situation to a structure
4) To thereby strengthen the evaluation
5) To propose an underlying cause for the interlinked situations, without spelling it out
6) To highlight the existence of a hidden agenda in the actions that brought about the situation
7) And imply a possible motivation/stake for the actions

The users of this device were engaged in several types of activities, with the overarching theme of evaluation. Instances presented here fell under the category of either promoting or critiquing states-of-affairs (and by implication, the actions that brought them about). Spelling out (and thereby constructing) a pattern in the actions, be it in current or historical timing or any other pattern, brings home the point that the action that is attributed to the group/society or person is not a singular event and not surprising. Rather, coincidence disconfirmation permits it to appear in its own

structural context. This legitimises the success that was reportedly achieved, by emphasising that this did not occur due to a fluke, but is instead based on direct action and ability. The rejected notions of 'accident' and 'surprise' (see extract two here operate similarly to the coincidence disavowal in indicating a rejection of the arbitrary, haphazard and random. Presenting the state-of-affairs as coincidence presents the states-of-affairs to be unexpected, because such (positive) outcomes are (implicitly) expected of whichever group can be inferred to have agency over it.

Coincidence disconfirmations can also be used to promote states-of-affairs through attributing actions to a group or an individual and insinuating they had a stake in this action, the group or individual is seen to have stake and motivation in the matter which means any counter critique or disagreement is made less effective. Multiple motivations and thus possible causes are implicit, but not one is specified, diffusing a possible direct counter argument outright. That means, the critique the device delivers (especially in its rhetorical question form, or in its ironic coincidence forms) is indirect, to the extent that it is difficult for the person or group who has been critiqued to protest. Coincidence disconfirmations therefore rather neatly manoeuvre stake - they attribute a situation's occurrence to a pattern. That means it cannot be easily discounted, because whilst it may be easy to discount the assessment of one situation, it is difficult to discount the entire pattern in which the coincidence disconfirmation has situated it. At the same time, this focus on the stake underlying the described action, results in disguising the author's stake.

In short, coincidence disconfirmation is used as a repertoire to turn individual issues into structural issues, thereby protecting them against disagreement. My empirical work shoes that coincidence disconfirmation can be formulated in varying amounts of directness, but nonetheless functions in similar ways, namely, by fusing previously unconnected situations and attributing it to a hidden cause. Direct coincidence disconfirmation, often formulated as 'It's no coincidence that x' works to evaluate situations, by either critiquing or promoting situations. There are three characteristics of coincidence disconfirmation. Firstly, coincidence disconfirmations bring together previously considered unrelated events, and they invite more investigation and attention into the matter. Secondly, evaluation requires the reader to actively make inferences. This is because the motivation is not directly spelled

out, but insinuated. This makes the device actively, yet subtly, engage with the reader. The last step in the evaluation is therefore done by the readers, such that the device 'forces' the reader to make an evaluation, which thus become their own. Thirdly, direct proof (beyond insinuating possible motivation) is not always needed when using a coincidence disavowal. This makes the device resilient to disagreement, as non-existent proof cannot be discounted, the coincidence disconfirmation's function of not specifying one direct cause, whilst at the same time acknowledging a cause or at least influence makes it difficult to counter because no singular direct cause has been spelled out and because the correlation (that could be causation – it is never more than insinuated) is left largely undefined, such that possible disagreement meets an obliquely constructed link. In short, coincidence disconfirmation functions by operating in the rhetorical shadows of evaluation, which adds to its effectiveness. Coincidence disconfirmation manoeuvres structure and agency, discursively turning a single event into a pattern. Thus, I argue that coincidence disconfirmation becomes a case in point for the sociological imagination- it is a rhetorical device for turning private matters public (Mills, 1959).

Chapter 8

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter has three sections. First, I provide a summary overview of the key empirical findings. It places the findings into three contexts, analysing their contributions to firstly, coincidence studies, secondly, discursive psychology, thirdly, sociology. More broadly, it also assesses the societal value of these findings, and their broader implications. Second, I then present an evaluation of the method and analysis used. Finally, opportunities for further research are suggested.

The purpose of this thesis was to develop a sociological approach to the phenomenon of coincidence using people's coincidence accounts and to thereby move away from the ontological questions on coincidences, which have dominated the field of coincidence studies in the past. Unsolicited coincidence accounts sourced from the CCC for Chapters 4, 5, 6, and other Internet sources for Chapter 7, have been collected. Using discursive psychological analysis, four rhetorical devices have been identified.

Empirical findings

The first analytical chapter analyses a single case, the 'Two siblings, same chance encounter' coincidence sourced from the CCC. This account was examined almost as a pilot study, in that the analysis identified key empirical themes that were then developed in subsequent empirical chapters. The coincidence involves two events: the narrator riding a bike with her boyfriend in Amsterdam, but due to having a faulty tire ending up in a village where she chances upon a film set and the narrator's brother chancing upon a film set in London when riding his bike to work four weeks later. It turns out they ended up meeting the same member of the film crew, which is relevant because the brother is reported to be aiming to break into the film industry.

The analysis shows how even though the narrator must be aware that a coincidence has taken place (which is evidenced by her uploading the narrative to the CCC

website that specifically seeks to collect coincidence experiences), the narrator describes the events as if they were innocuous events. The coincidence is later presented as if it had just been 'discovered'. This is done to present the coincidences from a seemingly objective perspective, and to let the reader 'experience' the coincidence through the description. That is, the order in which the events are described in the narrative adds coincidentalness to the account. Furthermore, the account exhibits 'mirror formulations', where features of the description of the first event are used in the description of the second event, but in reverse order. This has been shown to have some characteristics found in the *chiasmus,* a rhetorical structure found in religious, literary and advertising texts. In this case, the mirror structure helps to make the coincidental events seem more alike, striking and ultimately more coincidental.

In this case, there was also motive-management at play. The events were described as non-routine, and not engineered towards the coincidence that occurred. This is because a coincidence narrative ceases to be coincidental if the events are seen to have been set up for the specific purpose of invoking a coincidence. The coincidence account also orients to the scientific demands of the CCC. The title omits the word coincidence, but instead uses the word 'chance encounter' which seems to display awareness of the kinds of scientific theories that account for coincidence experiences. It is also used to denote the coincidental happening at the end of the account through the formulation 'chanced upon'. Furthermore, the uses of the cognitive formulation 'decided', mark actions that ultimately lead to the coincidence happening and they were the impetus for Chapter 5. In short, pragmatic work is conducted to present the narrator as not having had any motives or expectations in regards to bringing the coincidence about herself – it is thus presented as a surprising, external occurrence.

The departure-discovery device presented in Chapter 5 has three functions: firstly, it upholds the coincidence storyline, secondly, it adds coincidental quality to the account, and thirdly, it manages the motives of the narrator, thus doing identity work. The departure/discovery device is a two-part device that is made up of two cognitive formulations: 'decided' introduces an 'intentional, achieved outcome' (Schegloff, 1988), such that the actions that are described to have been 'decided' are

presented as an (often spontaneous) departure from the narrator's routine, and 'realised' marks the discovery of the link between the coincidental events. The departure from routine proposes that the actions that form part of the coincidence were not planned to cause the coincidence. In the device 'at first I thought x, then I realised y' the word 'realised' marks what turned out to have been correct (Jefferson, 2004). In the departure/discovery device 'realised' marks the events having been identified as coincidence to have been correct. The use of 'realised' further acts as a tool to indicate that the narrator was not seeking out anything extraordinary, and did not expect a coincidence, rather, the narrator had to come to see that a coincidence had happened. Both formulations work together: the departure from routine places the happening in an unusual context, and therefore emphasizes the coincidence's extraordinariness that is later revealed. The departure/discovery device has been shown to be robust for three reasons. Firstly, it operates in a number of instances; secondly, it can also occur in inverse form (discovery/departure); and thirdly, it is shown to operate through formulations other than 'decided/realised'. It is used to exhibit the narrator's understanding of what is usual and unusual, such that the coincidence account appears truthful, plausible, and extraordinary. It is a counter-point to research that suggests that coincidence accounts are a result of faulty cognition, because it emphasises the action-orientation of discourse.

In chapter six I examined the 'but…still' device, which consists of three parts: firstly, coincidence revelation; secondly, mitigation (conducted through probabilistic reasoning); and thirdly, coincidence confirmation using the preface 'but...still'. It is a device from the class of 'show concessions' (Antaki and Wetherell, 1999). Its function is to present the narrator as astute member of society who rationally comes to the conclusion that a coincidence has occurred. It is also designed to account for differing versions of reality, namely, the dichotomy of coincidence as surprising, extraordinary occurrence, and coincidence as a misinterpretation of probability or an error in perception. This device has exhibited its robustness by operating through alternative formulations, working also through reported other-mitigation (accomplished through the use of reported talk), and occurring with insertions. It is a counter-point to research that suggests that coincidence accounts are a result of miscalculations of probability.

The final analytical chapter introduces the coincidence disconfirmation device, which, in its most explicit form is phrased: 'it's no coincidence that […]'. It fuses previously unconnected situations by attributing them to a hidden cause. It works to evaluate situations, by either critiquing or promoting them. Because singular events are thereby discursively connected to a wider structure, this protects the version of events described in an account against disagreement. This coincidence deconstruction has a place in this research on coincidence construction because a data search has indicated that this is one of the ways in which people use 'coincidence'. That is, people constitute the idea of coincidence (often without the explicit use of the word *coincidence*) and they also, paradoxically, constitute the idea of non-coincidence (with the explicit use of the word *coincidence*). They have some similarities: in both coincidence and coincidence disconfirmation cases, the events are presented as innocuous events and later revealed to be connected (here by *not* being coincidental). While actual coincidence can point to the universe intervening, coincidence disconfirmation points to humans intervening. In both cases, human affairs are being manipulated.

The coincidence disconfirmation device is used as a subtle, indirect device to point to covert agency of a person or a group. A number of cases pointed to the covert agency of people or institutions in power. The outcomes of the events are inferable as being beneficial for a person or group – they seem to have stake in the outcome. If they are seen to have had a means to manipulate the situation, they can be inferred to have had influence over the events. There is a moral component to this device – because the agency is portrayed as covert. Coincidence disconfirmation is used to transform individual issues into structural issues. It is, arguably, an interactive device. This is because the evaluation is merely inferable; the reader has to identify that a benefit could arise from the situation occurring, the reader has to identify who the situation benefits and who had the means to manipulate the situations. This makes the device actively, yet subtly engage with the reader. The last step in the evaluation is therefore done by the readers, such that the device 'forces' the reader to make an evaluation, which thus become their own. But because the coincidence disconfirmation has not actively accused, the risk of repercussions for the narrator (for defamation for instance) are minimized.

The coincidence disconfirmation device further shows the practical application of coincidence rhetoric, and its pervasiveness across contexts. It has therefore established 'coincidence' to be a mainstream phenomenon.

Thus, this research proposes that although coincidence is seen as an individual's unique experience, the ways in which coincidences are narrated appear to be patterned. This suggests that social practices order the coincidence accounts. When people report coincidences, these become social. That is, regardless of what that experience may or may not have been, a coincidence *account* is under scrutiny by the readers of a coincidence narrative. As such, a coincidence account becomes a place where the narrator's identity has to be managed; this is evident in the ways in which a narrator manages their identity through their discourse.

So what? The value of finding rhetorical patterns in coincidence accounts

> As long as human existential needs for meaning, agency, and connection persist, and individuals are having personal experiences that can be attributed to synchronicity […] it is likely that synchronicity will be popular for some time to come. (Hocoy, 2012: 476)

The ongoing popularity of the concept of coincidence and the intrigue that surrounds it warrant the need for research on the way in which it is constructed in discourse. Previous research in the area of discourse analysis and CA has shown that events are constructed in talk in texts, that is, constructed to be successful (Locke, 2004), taboo (Jackson, 2016), deviant (Whittle and Mueller, 2011), abnormal (Smith, 1978), paranormal (Hayward, Wooffitt and Woods, 2015) and so on. The study of discursive coincidental event construction is therefore relevant from an academic point of view and slots in well into previous research.

Coincidences are social

The rhetorical devices found in accounts of coincidence and accounts of deconstructed coincidence show that rather than individual, unique experiences, coincidences are produced in and through discourse. That is, it is not the events per se that produce coincidence – discourse produces coincidences in interactions. Chapter Seven on coincidence disconfirmation proves this by showing how events

can be built up as if to be coincidences, and then disconfirmed in the last minute. Mirror formulations, the departure discovery device and the 'but, still device' are all devices that imbue the narrative (and in turn the person reporting a coincidence) with a 'scientific' appearance. That in turn tells us a little bit about the societal climate in which coincidences are told, namely, that rational approaches to everyday life are favoured and that unusual events need to be framed in a scientific way to gain credibility. Of course one could argue that the three devices in the first three analytical chapters might have to do with the context of the CCC, however, that is in itself a notable point: the events are described to fit the context in which they are reported, and not, as has been assumed in mainstream psychological research, depending on the events themselves. The social element in coincidence accounts is notable. This is because coincidences have traditionally been seen as individual and unique experiences (Jung, 1952; Coleman and Beitman, 2009; Falk, 1989). As such, the patterns in the way in which they are reported emphasises the pervasiveness of the social into coincidence, which has previously been understood to be a personal, private experience.

The rhetorical devices found in the coincidence accounts point to specific norms in society: the norm to report events through a scientific lens, to present a sane mind, to be critical when interpreting events and to adhere to the norm for indirectness in persuasion. In that sense, the analysis of the patterns found in coincidence accounts tell us some things we already knew. But, the patterns found show us how these things are done[21]. As such, they rhetorical devices provide the mechanics of coincidence-reporting in everyday life.

Contrary to popular belief, reporting coincidences is not so much an act of rebellion against the scientific ideal, but conforms to the scientific ideal. As such, coincidence accounts may be thought of as paranormal, yet the way in which they are told exacerbates this scientific ideal. The rhetorical devices I have found construct 'scientificness' of coincidences reported, and the 'scientificness' is in turn constructed by it. Thus, and surprisingly so, rather than seeing coincidences as opposites to 'ordinary' experiences and normal events, coincidence accounts

[21] This point is taken from Dr Clare Jackson's discussion of the value of qualitative analysis on 23 June 2017 in the context of the viva voce for this thesis.

construct ordinariness themselves. In some ways, the extraordinariness of events is constructed through its ordinariness.

Extraordinariness is constructed in relation to normal events

The three patterns found in coincidence accounts are different to one another. However, upon closer investigation they share one common variable. Each rhetoric device is in some ways concerned with making the events appear normative and truthful by natural science standards. Whilst at first I assumed that coincidence accounts are paranormal accounts, the data showed that coincidence accounts exhibit an intense effort towards making them legitimate from a positivist perspective. The very fact that the three rhetorical devices (mirror formulations, departure/discovery and but still) exist, speaks of the hold of the ideology on mainstream science and its impact on coincidence accounts. If coincidence accounts were accepted without much rhetorical effort (because they were considered 'normal' for instance), there would be less of a need to use rhetorical devices to strengthen them. The existence of these discursive coincidence devices is proof that coincidence accounts do not adhere to what is ordinary (Sacks, 1984b). Adhering to and justifying coincidence accounts in terms of the natural scientific ideology means perpetuating the ideal of natural science. And at the same time, the very existence of the positivist ideology underpinning our understanding of the world is what helps make a coincidence account extraordinary.

Coincidence accounts are sites of critique

Coincidence accounts have been a good case in point for a critique of mainstream psychology research because actual coincidence reports from people were lacking. A sociological-empirical perspective on coincidences was needed. This perspective was required to point out the underlying ideology in coincidence research. Because coincidence research has been dominated by mainstream psychological research it was a fitting phenomenon to study and a rich source of discourse for DP analysis:

> '[…] discursive psychology […] is now a well-established movement within, but critical of, the discipline of psychology. Its main focus has been to engage with mainstream psychology and critique the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of its underlying cognitive framework (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996).

This research was initially begun to fill a gap in the field of coincidence studies dominated by mainstream psychological and statistical research. However, the analysis of this thesis has identified that the ideological hold of positivistic science is not only pervasive in coincidence research, but also in the way people report coincidences in everyday life. Of course, the CCC is a platform that itself forms a positivist kind of context for any coincidence submissions and arguably invites people who subscribe to this kind of explanation for events. Nonetheless, the orientation towards naturalistic science these accounts and the rhetorical devices found within these exhibited was very clear. Returning to Chapter Two, which outlined how CDA was initially dismissed, the rhetorical devices identified in this thesis point towards the need to reconsider coincidence accounts as sites *in which* ideological power structures are produced, perpetuated and possibly challenged and as a vehicle *through which* inequalities are laid bare (in the case of Chapter Seven).

Accounts of coincidence, their structural properties and the patterns across instances make available a similar imbalance that was identified in the academic literature of the topic: Namely, that ideology is at play in these accounts, which is available in the discourse – even in those passages that actively purport that the coincidence reported happened and is legitimate and real. That is, the act of reporting a coincidence appears to be an act of rebellion against the ideological ideal of reporting only 'rational', 'usual' experiences; and yet, the status quo is challenged by using instruments that borrow from the ideological toolkit of positivist, naturalistic science, statistics and psychology. Thus, firstly, coincidence accounts are sites of inequality in terms of the predominant discourses that are used to tell and justify them, secondly, they are constructed in relation to and also through this ideal, and thirdly, coincidence as a concept is also used to reveal inequalities through coincidence disconfirmation.

The discourse of coincidence: from ontology to construction and function

The main purpose of the thesis was to collect and to give analytical attention to everyday accounts of coincidence, in a bid to move away from the artificially constructed coincidence scenarios in experimental work. The purpose was also to

provide a counterpoint to explanations of coincidence occurrence that seem to sweep people's experiences of coincidence to the side, explaining them away. This study has developed a sociological approach to the phenomenon of coincidence by identifying four robust rhetorical devices that people use in their coincidence accounts, and thus discovering structure in their coincidence narratives. Therefore, the purpose of the thesis has been achieved. In terms of the data, people's own coincidence accounts sourced from the Internet were the focus of this research. Analytically, the research used a discursive psychological framework in order to identify rhetorical practices when reporting coincidences. As such, it is a move away from the ontological focus of coincidence research dominating the field of coincidence studies. This thesis has filled coincidence research gaps in methodology, analysis and theory.

I have endeavoured to identify devices that speak to the two dominant notions of coincidence as cognitive fallacies (Coleman, Beitman and Celebi, 2009; Watt, 1990) or miscalculations of probability (Diaconis and Mosteller, 1989; Griffiths and Tenenbaum, 2001) and have shown that people's reports of coincidence are not binary; coincidence accounts exhibit complexity and their rhetoric displays an orientation to the delicate balance needed when reporting coincidence as a scientifically contested phenomenon. The coincidence disconfirmation (CD) device shows the practical application of coincidence rhetoric, and its pervasiveness across contexts as well as its use in attributions to covert agency. It has also opened up many more questions, and new avenues of research to be explored in future discursive and sociological research on coincidences.

The move away from the ontological questions - the quest to determine whether coincidences really exist - has brought with it the potential to focus upon the *function* of coincidence.

Coincidence accounts have increasingly been a topic in psychotherapy (Shaw, 2009; Marlo and Kline, 1998; Roxburgh, Ridgway and Roe, 2015; Maina, 2007). Perhaps the research at hand can inform the ways in which coincidence accounts are understood and used in such psychotherapy contexts. For instance, Marlo and Kline (1998: 20) suggest that two different processes are needed when working through

coincidences with a patient. Namely, they contrast two types of patients and argue that 'some patients with more primitive structures are more apt to analyse synchronistic experiences because of their heightened access to unconscious, primary process material, and less rigid ego defences', whilst 'higher-functioning and less-primitive patients may feel that synchronistic events are illogical, irrational, and ethereal, and therefore, find them meaningless to explore' (Marlo and Kline, 1998: 19-20).

The findings of this thesis suggest that the apparent classification of individuals based on their perceived acceptance of coincidence, terming those who reject coincidence 'higher-functioning and less-primitive patients', is unsupported by the research at hand. Whilst the research conducted has not attempted to assess the 'functioning' of patients in therapy, the 'but...still' device has shown that people may use probabilistic reasoning *alongside* descriptions of a coincidence, making a binary classification of people futile. That is, in people's coincidence accounts people may seem to both embrace a coincidence they describe, as well as seemingly reject parts of it. This mirrors other DP research that shows people can say opposing statements in the same account (i.e. Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984). Indeed, in the first three analytical chapters, people's accounts of coincidence have been shown to be socially constructed, and designed for rhetorical purposes. Thus, the way in which they are narrated may well reflect social norms, rather than actual cognitive ability or individual disposition.

Methodological reflections on method and data

Using coincidence accounts sourced from the internet, specifically the CCC, has been a fruitful methodological choice. This is because of the sheer volume of coincidence accounts that could not have been collected in a different way. As the focus has been on the rhetorical structure of coincidence accounts, the fact that these accounts were not influenced by interviewer questions has meant that the structures they exhibited have been naturally occurring. This is not to say that the demands of the context of the CCC has not had an influence on the way in which these accounts were written, rather, the structure of the accounts has not been influenced by the structure of an interview.

Indeed, the internet is a suitable fit for the sourcing of coincidence accounts. This is because reporting a coincidence experience is not the preserve of just one category of people. This is different to other enquiries, such as research on sport talk, where athletes' accounts are the focus of investigation (Locke, 2004); only select people can speak of such a topic. However, coincidences seem to be reported from a wide variety of people. Whilst the research at hand did not investigate the demographics of the people submitting coincidences to the CCC, it can be argued that the reach through the internet is superior to the reach that the researcher of this research could have had. Of course, barriers to entry include that people submitting a coincidence account to the CCC need to have the internet, have to be able to write, and have to have heard about the CCC and be willing to contribute to a website that appears to be affiliated with the Cambridge University institutions (which may reach some demographics more than others). However, due to technological advances such as Google, and the dissemination of the 'call for coincidences' that Professor Spiegelhalter has managed to disseminate through his appearances in radio and TV as well as his website, it is safe to say that the reach of the CCC has allowed this research to be based on a larger variety of coincidence accounts from a larger demographic of people, than could have been collected through interviews in York. Moreover, this internet search function collection strategy has also been the basis for the identification of the coincidence disconfirmation device. The net has however been cast even wider for this chapter, because the Google search engine has been used to identify instances from many places.

The data collection strategy I have adopted borrowed Sack's newspaper clipping strategy (Sacks, 1992; Jefferson, 2004) and translated it into a technologically enhanced, present-day version. Sacks was a proponent of using technology – indeed, without his use of the then novel recordings of suicide helpline talk (Sacks, 1992), there would not be conversation analysis as it has been developed. The newspaper clipping strategy is still used today of course, and researchers collect instances for a device of interest. However, using the search functions on websites allowed me to search for exact phrases resulted in finding instances for devices across the CCC data set that spans macro proportions. Thus, using speech marks on particular words (i.e. "decided") shows just those instances in which this word occurs. And this method also allows for searching multiple words in the same account, using the search

function with two words (i.e. “decided” “realised”). Of course, this method does not automate the whole process. After the initial search, which I called ‘screening one’, the instances would be read individually and compared to the initially observed characteristics of what would at that point be a ‘device’ in progress. If there was a difference, the new instance would either not be added to the collection, or invoke a change in the characteristics. This mirrors the method that is used for newspaper clippings, as they too would be compared to the initial observations.

Whilst some might argue the method employed is ‘cherry-picking’, the basic premise that underlies this claim is incorrect. ‘Cherry-picking’ occurs ‘when only select evidence is presented in order to persuade the audience to accept a position, and evidence that would go against the position is withheld’ (Bennett, 2012: 88). In the research at hand however, the process involves a back-and-forth checking between new data and the characteristics derived from it. It is basically a data-device feedback loop. And this feedback loop strictly starts with data. Firstly, a single case or a small number of instances would be screened for any patterns, though without the intention of finding anything specific. Secondly, the principle of ‘unmotivated examination’ from conversation analytic methodology was used and informs the entire process (Sacks, 1984: 27). Thus, the initial findings were data-led. And finally, because the technologically identified further instances would be compared to the initial characteristics of the device, and if found mismatching, the device’s characteristics would be changed, or the entire endeavour aborted, the process merely captured structures that are ‘out there’ in the data, rather than manufacturing patterns. ‘Evidence that would go against the position’ (Bennett, 2012: 88) is *not* withheld, it informs, or rather, *forms* the basis of the characteristics that make the device (but only if there was one). In sum, the ‘search function method’ to source instances is merely a novel, practical, but legitimate data collection strategy.

One of the key problems for discourse analytic work informed by a broadly social constructionist position concerns how empirical claims are warranted and supported. This problem is articulated in the following quote (taken from Wood and Kroger, 2000, 167):

> The basic premise for the discourse analyst is that the “social” world does not exist independently of our constructions of it, so it does not make sense to ask if

> our analyses are valid in the sense that they are true, that is, that they correspond to an independent world. But discourse analysts do not reject altogether the notion of validity. Rather, we attend to other meanings of the term *validity* that are more closely related to its origin in the Latin *valere*, to be strong. Thus, we are concerned to show that our analyses are "sound; well grounded on principle or evidence; able to withstand criticism or objection" (Webster, 1976: 2017, cited in Wood and Kroger, 2000: 167)

I will borrow from both Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Antaki et al (2003) to address this issue with respect to the empirical work in this thesis. This will allow me then to consider the wider contribution of this research to DP more generally. Potter and Wetherell (1987: 169), who, in the context of assessing Gilbert and Mulkay's analysis on discourse of scientists (1984), argued that their explanation accounted for both the broader organization of the discourse as well as the more micro details, which is what gave it 'strength'. This explanation for the patterns they identified was superior to the explanation that the 'scientific world simply is like this' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 169). This is the case for the research at hand, which has identified patterns across diverse coincidence accounts: the explanation that people orient their coincidence accounts to the social demands seems more plausible than the idea that accounts merely reflect the experience, or perception, of coincidence in the real world.

What is crucial to keep in mind in assessing this kind of discourse analysis (later termed DP by Edwards and Potter, 1992), is

> […] that there is no analytic method, at least as this term is understood elsewhere in social psychology. Rather, there is a broad theoretical framework, which focuses attention on the constructive and functional dimensions of discourse, coupled with the reader's skill in identifying significant patterns of consistency and variation. (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 169)

Potter and Wetherell (1987) then outline four ways to corroborate analysis, which is part of the analytical process. These are firstly, 'coherence' (does the explanation 'give coherence to a body of discourse', account for 'broad patterns' or 'micro sequences'?); secondly, 'participants' orientation' (do the participants orient to the inconsistencies themselves?); thirdly, 'new problems' (do the findings solve and pose problems? The 'Truth Will Out Device' (TWOD) for instance, is a solution to the problem, which emerges due to the two opposing repertoires); and finally,

'fruitfulness' (does it 'make sense of new kinds of discourse' and does it 'generate novel explanations'?).

All of the devices are coherent in the sense that they each account for 'broad patterns' as well as 'micro sequences'. The explanation that the mirror formulation brings the coinciding events together rhetorically, making them seem alike, accounts for both broad as well as micro sequences; the 'but...still' device accounts for larger patterns, spanning the length of an account, as well as more micro sequences and the chapter traced cases with alternative formulations as well as insertions; the departure/discovery device works in inverse order and with alternative formulations; and the coincidence disconfirmation device occurs in a variety of discursive contexts, whilst the explanation that CD is suggesting 'covert agency' explains each case.

The 'but...still' device fulfils the criteria of 'new problems' in that it is a solution to the opposing demands of the CCC to both report an interesting coincidence, and align with scientific explanations for their occurrence (i.e. statistics). The data clearly shows that people provide description that is coincidence confirming, and material that mitigates the coincidence they describe, whilst the BS allows them to present both sides. Indeed, the use of 'but...still', a concession marker, clearly shows that people orient to the mitigation part of their accounts, in order to emphasise contrast with coincidence confirmation. The departure/discovery device generates novel explanations for how coincidence accounts present coincidental events as surprising. Indeed, each chapter is 'fruitful' in the sense that DP analysis on coincidence discourse is novel, as coincidence accounts have not been studied in this way before.

The analysis has been guided by Antaki et al. (2003) who identified 'six analytical shortcomings' that can befall discourse analyses, which are:

> (1) under-analysis through summary; (2) under-analysis through taking sides; (3) under-analysis through over-quotation or through isolated quotation; (4) the circular identification of discourses and mental constructs; (5) false survey; and (6) analysis that consists in simply spotting features.

Antaki et al. (2003) argue that if an analyst merely presents their data as a 'prose summary' and leave it to the reader to 'see a trend or pattern', then this does not constitute analysis. Each analytical chapter describing a device (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) has identified a pattern and traced it in a number of instances, and identified the structure in alternative formulations, in inverse form, and with insertions. Thus, the analysis does not suffer from shortcoming one.

Antaki et al. (2003) argue that 'sympathy and scolding (either explicit or implicit) are not a substitute for analysis' and that if the analyst is 'primarily engaging in positioning themselves vis-à-vis their data' then this does not constitute analysis. The analyses of this chapter do not take sides; indeed, Chapter 6, actively emphasises how the problem of the two sides of coincidence presentation (coincidence confirmation and coincidence mitigation) is addressed using the 'but...still' device, which allows narrators to orient to a statistical perspective on coincidences and construct their coincidence as a surprising occurrence. The analytical chapters are also free from over-quotation or isolated quotation. Thus, the analysis does not suffer from shortcomings two or three.

The analyses in this research actively avoid the 'circular identification of discourses and mental constructs'. The analyses do not propose that discourse is a pathway to the mind in any way. This has been addressed in two parts of the thesis: firstly, in Chapter 2, the researcher outlines that formulations have been specifically used to *circumvent* cognitive and causal notions and describe the kind of formulations used, such as 'constructed, displayed, doing x, presented as, exhibited, demonstrated and seems to be doing x', in order to prevent it from appearing so. To reiterate, in the research at hand, formulations 'such as 'orient to' or 'display' […] suggest action and even intention but do not depend on a particular image of cognition.' (Potter 2006: 137).

Secondly, the research devotes one analytical chapter to show that cognitive formulations ('decided' and 'realised') are used for rhetorical purposes, in order to achieve a discovery/departure structure. This shows that they are not seen to reflect actual states of mind. This is also shown in Chapter 7, where the particular kind of coincidence disconfirmation (i.e. 'what a coincidence I thought, but is wasn't') is

shown to ‘do’ things. This is supported by the fact that at the point that the account is written, the events have already turned out not to be coincidence – reporting a thought that turned out to be wrong is doing rhetorical work. And in the ‘but...still’ Chapter (6), the statistical mitigation is strictly presented as part of a ‘show concession’ (Antaki and Wetherell, 1999) – it is for ‘show’, it is doing pragmatic work. Thus, the research does not suffer from shortcoming four.

The shortcoming of ‘false survey’ occurs when an analyst ‘uses demographic categories to refer to the people in their data’. In the research at hand, the coincidence account was normally referred to as such, or as ‘the narrative’ and the person who described the coincidence was referred to as the ‘narrator’ or the ‘author’ of the coincidence account. Any patterns were strictly referring to patterns in the discourse, not patterns/demographics of the people reporting them. This was the case for all analytical chapters. Indeed, whilst some analysis on coincidences made distinctions between people based on whether they were (paranormal) believers or sceptics (Blackmore and Troscianko, 1985); or put them into categories based on their beliefs gathered from a survey (Coleman, Beitman and Celebi, 2009), the research at hand actively moves away from this dichotomy. Instead, it showcases instances that display both coincidence confirmation and scepticism, such that the research at hand actively counters such dichotomies. Thus the analysis does not suffer from shortcoming 5.

argue that ‘[…] research does not, and should not, consist principally of feature-spotting, just as analysing the history and functions of the railway system cannot be accomplished by train-spotting.’ The problem of merely spotting features does not apply to the analysis at hand. The single case analysis (Chapter 4) showcases features of the account, but links them to specific functions. Chapter 5 on the departure/discovery device describes a pattern, traces it through accounts and links it to rhetorical functions, Chapter 6 on the ‘but...still’ device again identifies a pattern and shows how it functions as a form of show concession, Chapter 7 on the CD device shows how attributions of covert agency are conducted by disconfirming coincidence. In all chapters features in instances are identified as belonging to a pattern, they are not merely ‘spotted’ but placed into the context of the pattern that

they belong to. In sum, these patterns do things, and their functions are outlined in the chapters. As such, the research at hands does not suffer from shortcoming six.

To summarise, my original contribution to knowledge comprises:

1) A sociological perspective to the area of coincidence studies, which has so far been dominated by research questioning the ontology of coincidences as a priori phenomena
2) A novel and useful data collection strategy (akin to Sack's use of newspaper clippings)
3) Analyses of real-life, naturally occurring (in terms of the analysis at hand), written accounts of coincidences
4) Discursive psychological analyses of coincidence accounts that treat cognitive formulations as action-oriented and social, rather than as inner, mental processes
5) Analysis of probabilistic discourse on coincidence, rather than the probability of coincidence
6) And thus, a theoretical move away from the binary categories of coincidence believer and coincidence sceptic, towards an appreciation that in discourse they can occur within the same account
7) A first consideration and analysis of coincidence disconfirmation
8) A consideration of how identity is constructed in coincidence accounts
9) Discoveries of four new rhetorical devices: mirror formulations, departure/discovery device, 'but...still' device coincidence disconfirmations
10) An identification of further gaps in the area of coincidence research, and the need for further research on the social reasons for sharing coincidences, on the meaning of coincidences in other cultures, and on the discursive construction of time in coincidences

Implications for further research

This research has contributed a first data-led sociological account of coincidence using coincidence using narratives unsolicited for the research at hand. That is, this thesis has brought innovation in three ways: methodologically, through the use of data in the internet-sourced coincidence accounts, and through the analysis of people's own coincidence accounts; analytically, by focusing on the ways in which coincidences are rhetorically structured and discursively constructed; and through identification of four rhetorical devices. Firstly, the mirror formulation brings together events such that they appear alike and more coincidental; secondly, the departure/discovery device is a solid structure that introduces an action as departing from routine through the cognitive formulation 'decided', which allows for the description of the discovery of the coincidence through the use of 'realised' to seem

surprising; thirdly, the 'but...still' device is a three-part device containing coincidence revelation, mitigation and confirmation. It is produced to bolster the coincidental account through a form of a 'show concession'. And finally, coincidence disconfirmation has been identified as a widespread, multi-contextual device to allude to a person's/institution's hidden agency in an outcome.

Two factors could yield variation in terms of coincidence research. Firstly, it should be noted that the CCC data set comprises English language accounts of coincidence. It is plausible that the devices found in the data have emerged from a specific cultural context, further narrowed by the affiliation with statistics that the website has. As such, it would be interesting to investigate coincidence accounts in other cultures. Indeed, there are reasons to believe that the meaning people attach to coincidences in other cultures may differ to Western ideas on coincidence. Secondly, the accounts are all retrospective. Whilst a number of 'live' coincidences have been collected (these are from the Youtube data set and involve Vlogs, where narrators are capturing their everyday lives and come across a coincidence as they record their everyday lives), the retrospective coincidence data is unsurpassed. Furthermore, sharing coincidences experiences occurs in discourse, and even when a person is co-present and can 'witness' the coincidence happening (as is the case in Youtube videos for instance), it still needs the person experiencing the coincidence to explain that and how the events coincide. Perhaps this indicates that coincidence has to be shared through discourse retrospectively.

Further research on a DP/CA level could investigate whether mirror formulations are used in other contexts. Likewise, departure/discovery devices may be operating in other kinds of stories. And it is possible that the 'but...still' device occurs in other contexts too, such that the work on 'show concessions' could be widened into more contexts. Finally, the chapter on CD has opened up a whole host of coincidence disconfirming formulation types, such as the ironic coincidence maker and the coincidence question. More research could delve deeper into the details of these other CD type formulations, and they could be investigated in other contexts, such as naturally occurring and institutional talk (of which I have a few instances, but am confident more exist).

In terms of discursive research on coincidence, there is scope to investigate time-references – how is time constructed in coincidence accounts. These are known to exist in the data, because a first small collection of time constructions has been collected: It has been detected that people use devices to discursively shorten the time between events. A larger collection of these instances may reveal more patterns of interest. This chimes in with a gap in CA – even though place constructions have been studied (Kitzinger et al., 2013), there is a gap in the literature regarding time constructions. Coincidence accounts are a good place to find what could be termed 'time references'. Thus, it could also contribute to the field of a sociology of time (Adam, 1995).

In the present times, in some parts of the Western world, it is a norm to rationalize one's actions, and in the workplace there is the sense of presenting previous actions as if they had been geared towards a definite end goal. This speaks to a society that values individual agency and forward planning. However, Bright, Pryor and Harpham (2005: 561) conducted a survey with 772 high-school and university students and found that 'chance events were reported as influencing the career decisions of 69.1% of the sample'. Bandura, (1982) also argues chance can change or even instigate career paths. Bandura, (1982: 748) extended this argument, stating that 'chance encounters play a prominent role in shaping the course of human lives.' He argues that 'people often intentionally seek certain types of experiences, but the persons who thereby enter their lives are determined by a large element of chance' (1982: 748). An example of this that Bandura provides is the role of chance encounters for life partners, etc. More recent research in psychotherapy even traces emotions to this ideal of agency: 'Guilt allows us to maintain some sense of omniscience in an uncertain world' (Shaw, 2009: 9). These areas, the ways in which occupational and life choices are informed by coincidence, present opportunities for further research.

Bandura does not trace these ideas in actual, everyday life accounts of coincidence. In the interviews I conducted, coincidences were presented as directly influenced by, or even instigating, how people found life partners, cheated on a partner, quit a secure job for a more precarious job, or decided where to live and so forth. It is not possible to tell whether these are ontological real or whether they are discursive

constructions, used to justify life-choices. Indeed, the kind of DP perspective my research takes does not investigate the ontological side. Sociologically, it would be fruitful to further examine the role of coincidences in any of these areas. From a CA/DP perspective, it would be interesting to examine the ways in which coincidences are used rhetorically to justify actions. Research could investigate the following possible research questions: what role do people attribute coincidence in their choice of romantic partners, in their choice of work, and in their lives in general. DP research could investigate the discursive strategies for attributing actions/life events to coincidence. As has been argued by Gergen (1973: 310), science and society constitute a feedback loop.

The question remains whether this kind of research would appeal, because it goes against the current societal pursuit to predict actions, trace movements in society to distinct causes, and identify clear factors as influencing people's lives. Becker introduces his discussion of coincidence in social life by detailing how a string of events led to him being in Rio de Janeiro for the third time, on a Fulbright Scholarship, and his recent marriage. What added to this was noticing that other academics provided him with explanations of how chance events had influenced their life events. He identified a lack of a 'conceptual language' for coincidences in social life, even though they are prominent in everyday life. He outlines how the notion of coincidence goes against social research's pursuit of causal explanation:

> Everyone knows that most of the things that happen to them happen "by accident," and this is particularly true of the things that are most important to us, like our choice of a career or a mate. Yet social science theory looks for determinate causal relationships, which do not give an adequate account of this thing that "everyone knows." If we take the idea of "it happened by chance" seriously, we need a quite different kind of research and theory than we are accustomed to.

Beitman (2011: 561) writes that 'one-third of all people notice coincidences with some frequency', which is supported by Coleman, Beitman and Celebi (2009). This suggests that coincidences should not be ignored. Perhaps if research promoted the importance of the role of the unexpected in life events and the life course simply by studying it, and thus giving it a platform, this might change the ideal of depicting stringent trajectories in the life course.

As Shaw (2009: 3) writes,

> The problem is that people are deeply endowed with a psychological propensity to impose order, to find patterns of connections in their surrounding[s], to conceptualize events as being related in order to ensure some sense of empowerment and feelings of agency and control. People are discomforted by the "idea of a random universe" (Belkin, 2002, cited in Shaw, 2009: 3).

And, crucially, this 'propensity' to report events as interconnected (which may or may not exist) could be studied as a topic in itself, from a sociological point of view. That is, the role of agency and coincidence could be explored in greater detail and from a sociological point of view.

Conclusion

Wood and Kroger (2000: 166) make the point that the analysis of discourse is discourse itself, which *does* things. It is as much action as other discourse is action:

> […] discourse is action. Thus, we need to consider what we, as analysts, are doing in our discourse (e.g., how we are constructing versions of people) and what we are doing through our discourse (e.g. what the consequences of such constructions might be). From this perspective, it is not possible for any scientist – natural or social – to claim that his or her work is value-neutral. But the implications are even stronger for the social scientist, because people care what is said about them and are directly affected by it, whereas rocks do not care and do not feel the effects. (Hacking, 1992, cited in Wood and Kroger, 2000: 166).

What does the discourse of this thesis do? At the most fundamental level, the discourse in this thesis gives coincidences importance, by centring the analysis on coincidence accounts. This, in itself, helps legitimise coincidence accounts' status as worth investigating, as worthy of analytical attention. It makes a case for coincidence accounts to be seen as socially constructed. For people describing coincidences, it is my hope that this research shows that the meaning of coincidences is constructed in discourse and that therefore a coincidence account does not need external validation to be 'out there' in the world; talking and writing about a coincidence experience itself achieves this. People establish the idea of coincidence; it is a member's accomplishment. My hope is that people will not hesitate to share their coincidence stories in the future, especially as this has been shown to have positive effects. It has been found to be 'significantly associated with meaning and purpose in life, positive psychological attitudes and well-being, and reduced stress-

related symptoms' (Palmer and Braud, 2002: 29); helpful in the context of grief (Hill, 2011); helpful for the psychotherapy relationship between therapist and patient (Roxburgh, Ridgway and Roe, 2015), it can help researchers find new information (Makri and Blandford, 2012) and is 'central to the process of making new discoveries' (Griffiths and Tenenbaum, 2007: 41).

Coincidence research is useful. But whilst coincidence research is sometimes perceived as frivolous, the status of events as coincidental can be consequential. To reiterate an example from the introduction, this has been shown in the Brides in the Bath case (Sullivan, 2015) where Smith was finally convicted and hanged for the murder of his wife, Rex, (after his three wives had expired in bathtubs), whilst he defended himself in court saying the 'deaths form a *phenomenal coincidence*, but that is my hard luck'; and more recently in the conviction for murder, imprisonment, and later acquittal of Sally Clark, whose two babies died one after the other in their cot, which was, after the witness statement of Professor Roy Meadow, classed as 'beyond coincidence' (Hill, 2004: 320). Thus, whether linked events are seen as coincidence or whether they cross the (perceived) threshold to be seen as acts of agency can be potentially consequential. Crucially, this status of 'coincidence' is negotiated in discourse. Therefore, this study of the ways in which coincidence accounts are made to be convincing, the ways descriptions of events are 'weatherproofed' against being challenged, and the way in which coincidence disconfirmation is conducted, matters. And it is why this thesis has made a case for investigating the construction of events in discourse.

Most coincidence accounts are recounted as happy experiences, attributed with the impetus for change, and often reported as bettering the lives of the people who reported and acted upon them. However, in communicating such improbable events lies the risk to identity that is evident in the careful rhetorical construction of these accounts and the four devices identified in this thesis. This followed in the footsteps of Wooffitt's (1992) research on 'I was just doing x, when y', which people use to construct mundane identities when telling their paranormal experiences. And in cases where the coincidence disconfirmation is used, identities of the speaker, as well as the group/person being attributed with covert agency are at stake. Thus,

through the identification of four devices, this thesis has shown the social side of coincidence accounts.

Finally, this focus on discourse has been a move away from the question of whether coincidences exist as an a priori phenomenon. This move away from ontological questions towards the question of *how* coincidences are communicated, has uncovered some of the social practices that are evident in the sharing of coincidences. The findings of this thesis thereby contribute new knowledge in three ways: firstly, to the field of coincidence studies by providing evidence that coincidence accounts are socially structured activities; secondly, to the field of DP by supplying four new rhetorical devices; and finally, by opening up the discussion and thus encouraging further research into coincidences.

Appendix

Permission to use the Cambridge Coincidence Collection data for analysis

Permission from the host of the site, Professor David Spiegelhalter:

Germaine Stockbridge <germaine.stockbridge@york.ac.uk>

Cambridge Coincidence Collection

4 messages

Germaine Gunther <gmg502@york.ac.uk> 17 October 2013 at 14:55
To: D.Spiegelhalter@statslab.cam.ac.uk

Dear Professor Spiegelhalter,

I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of York studying how people describe their experience of coincidences in their everyday lives. My approach is broadly discourse analytic, in that I am interested in identifying through qualitative analysis the characteristic socio-linguistic features of how people talk and write about their coincidences, and their impacts on their lives. I am currently embarking on my second year and am in midst of my data collection and analysis phases.

Two professors have individually pointed me to your Cambridge Coincidences Collection and emphasised its unique value. I really enjoyed it, and it gave me many ideas for my future research. The data you have managed to gather is incredible rich. It is exactly such accounts from people who experience coincidences in their everyday lives that you have collected that form the basis of my research. I hope you do not mind my getting in touch, but I would like to inquire whether you would allow me to draw a small sample of the coincidence accounts you have gathered as part of the data for my research? This would provide me with a comparative basis for analysis of my own data, which I will be collecting mainly through interviews.

If there are any questions please do get in touch with me. I would greatly appreciate hearing from you.

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

--
Germaine Maria Günther
Doctoral Researcher
University of York
http://www.york.ac.uk/sociology/our-staff/students/germaine-guenther/

david spiegelhalter <d.spiegelhalter@statslab.cam.ac.uk> 17 October 2013 at 15:42
To: Germaine Gunther <gmg502@york.ac.uk>, "david@statslab.cam.ac.uk" <david@statslab.cam.ac.uk>

Dear Germaine

great to hear from you and thanks for your interest.

I would in principle be delighted for you to make use of this resource - they are great stories.

But I have an admission to make: we have collected this data just by putting up the website without any ethics approval etc - it is not a formal research study. So I am unsure of the position re use of the stories. Can you try

and establish the situation about using the stories? I personally cannot see why there is a problem - the contributors know they will become completely public.

best wishes

David
[Quoted text hidden]

--
David Spiegelhalter
Winton Professor for the Public Understanding of Risk
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Tel: +44 (0)1223 337945
Fax: +44 (0)1223 337956

www.statslab.cam.ac.uk/Dept/People/Spiegelhalter/davids.html
www.understandinguncertainty.org

Now available!
TheNormChronicles.com

Germaine Gunther <gmg502@york.ac.uk> 17 October 2013 at 16:23
To: Robin Wooffitt <robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk>

Hello Robin,

Prof Spiegelhalter responded very quickly and positively. He raises the issue of not having obtained ethical clearance for his collection of coincidences.

What do you think? Given it is available to the public, is it fine? Should I consult the department's ethics committee?

Thank you,

Germaine
[Quoted text hidden]

Robin Wooffitt <robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk> 18 October 2013 at 09:09
To: Germaine Gunther <gmg502@york.ac.uk>

Hi Germaine

Good news about the Prof's response! I'll talk to Ellen, who is Chair of the Dept Ethics committee.

Robin
[Quoted text hidden]

Permission from the ELMPS committee:

Germaine Stockbridge <germaine.stockbridge@york.ac.uk>

Fwd: Ethics query

4 messages

Robin Wooffitt <robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk> 20 October 2013 at 10:49
To: Germaine Gunther <gmg502@york.ac.uk>

See below - it's good news Germaine!

You might want to let Prof Spiegalhalter know

Cheers

Robin

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: **Lucia Quaglia** <lucia.quaglia@york.ac.uk>
Date: 18 October 2013 15:44
Subject: Re: Ethics query
To: Robin Wooffitt <robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk>, Debbie Haverstock <debbie.haverstock@york.ac.uk>, ELMPS Ethics <elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk>
Cc: Ellen Annandale <ellen.annandale@york.ac.uk>

Dear Robin

Thank you for the message below. This is a rather unusual case for the ELMPS committee. My view as chair of the committee is that Germaine can use the information posted on the web site hosted by the University of Cambridge because these written accounts are public, voluntary posted and anonymous. The site states that accounts posted may be analysed for academic research.

No further step is needed, as far as ELPMS committee is concerned. I am cc the administrator of the Committee so that she can file this email.

I hope that my email has answered your ethics query

Kind regards

Lucia

On 18 October 2013 11:50, Robin Wooffitt <robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk> wrote:

> Dear Professor Quaglia,
>
> I'm writing to you under the assumption that you are the Chair of the ELMPS ethics committee - if this assumption is incorrect, please ignore what follows!
>
> My PhD student Germaine Gunther is researching accounts of coincidence experiences. She has recently obtained approval from the ELMPS committee to begin data collection. Recently she came upon a web site

hosted by a team at Cambridge, led by a Professor David Spiegalhalter , called the Cambridge Coincidence Collection (http://understandinguncertainty.org/coincidences#coincidences)
which, as far as I can tell, is part of a broader statistical project on risk and uncertainty. This site invites members of the public to post their written accounts of coincidence experiences - precisely the kinds of data my student is collecting. These accounts are posted on the site and are available to the public. Germaine contacted Prof Spiegalhalter to ask if we could take a sample of his accounts collection to use as comparative materials to the original data she is collecting. He was very enthusiastic about helping. However, he raised an issue. In his words

'I would in principle be delighted for you to make use of this resource - they are great stories.

But I have an admission to make: we have collected this data just by putting up the website without any ethics approval etc - it is not a formal research study. So I am unsure of the position re use of the stories. Can you try and establish the situation about using the stories? I personally cannot see why there is a problem - the contributors know they will become completely public.'

I've checked the site and it is stated that the accounts posted there may be analysed, so it is clear that this is not merely a repository of stories, but may be used in academic research.

My question then, is how what further steps - if any - are required for Germaine to be able to make use of these accounts?

Best wishes,

Robin Wooffitt
Sociology

Germaine Gunther <gmg502@york.ac.uk> 20 October 2013 at 14:41
To: d.spiegelhalter@statslab.cam.ac.uk

Dear David,

Thank you very much for your quick and positive response. I am very grateful that you have allowed me access to a sample from the coincidence stories collected through your website. My supervisor, Professor Robin Wooffitt, has contacted our multi-departmental Ethics Committee who have given us the green light for the usage of the data, please see the email below.

I truly appreciate your help in this matter.

Best wishes,

Germaine

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: **Lucia Quaglia** <lucia.quaglia@york.ac.uk>
Date: 18 October 2013 15:44
Subject: Re: Ethics query
To: Robin Wooffitt <robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk>, Debbie Haverstock <debbie.haverstock@york.ac.uk>, ELMPS Ethics <elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk>
Cc: Ellen Annandale <ellen.annandale@york.ac.uk>

Dear Robin

Thank you for the message below. This is a rather unusual case for the ELMPS committee. My view as chair of the committee is that Germaine can use the information posted on the web site hosted by the University of Cambridge because these written accounts are public, voluntary posted and anonymous. The site states that accounts posted may be analysed for academic research.

No further step is needed, as far as ELPMS committee is concerned. I am cc the administrator of the Committee so that she can file this email.

I hope that my email has answered your ethics query

Kind regards

Lucia

On 18 October 2013 11:50, Robin Wooffitt <robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk> wrote:

> Dear Professor Quaglia,
>
> I'm writing to you under the assumption that you are the Chair of the ELMPS ethics committee - if this assumption is incorrect, please ignore what follows!
>
> My PhD student Germaine Gunther is researching accounts of coincidence experiences. She has recently obtained approval from the ELMPS committee to begin data collection. Recently she came upon a web site hosted by a team at Cambridge, led by a Professor David Spiegalhalter , called the Cambridge Coincidence Collection (http://understandinguncertainty.org/coincidences#coincidences)
> which, as far as I can tell, is part of a broader statistical project on risk and uncertainty. This site invites members of the public to post their written accounts of coincidence experiences - precisely the kinds of data my student is collecting. These accounts are posted on the site and are available to the public. Germaine contacted Prof Spiegalhalter to ask if we could take a sample of his accounts collection to use as comparative materials to the original data she is collecting. He was very enthusiastic about helping. However, he raised an issue. In his words
>
> 'I would in principle be delighted for you to make use of this resource - they are great stories.
>
> But I have an admission to make: we have collected this data just by putting up the website without any ethics approval etc - it is not a formal research study. So I am unsure of the position re use of the stories. Can you try and establish the situation about using the stories? I personally cannot see why there is a problem - the contributors know they will become completely public.'
>
> I've checked the site and it is stated that the accounts posted there may be analysed, so it is clear that this is not merely a repository of stories, but may be used in academic research.
>
> My question then, is how what further steps - if any - are required for Germaine to be able to make use of these accounts?
>
> Best wishes,
>
> Robin Wooffitt
> Sociology

--
Germaine Maria Günther
Doctoral Researcher
University of York
http://www.york.ac.uk/sociology/our-staff/students/germaine-guenther/

Germaine Gunther <gmg502@york.ac.uk> 20 October 2013 at 14:46

To: Robin Wooffitt <robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk>

Hello Robin,

Thank you for contacting the Ethics Committee and getting the green light regarding the data; I am quite excited. I have let Prof Spiegelhalter know and thanked him.

Have a good Sunday,

Germaine
[Quoted text hidden]
--
Germaine Maria Günther
Doctoral Researcher
University of York
http://www.york.ac.uk/sociology/our-staff/students/germaine-guenther/

---

david spiegelhalter <d.spiegelhalter@statslab.cam.ac.uk> 20 October 2013 at 16:18
To: Germaine Gunther <gmg502@york.ac.uk>, "david@statslab.cam.ac.uk" <david@statslab.cam.ac.uk>

Dear Germaine

this is great - I would have thought this would be the case, but good to get it confirmed.

So you can use the stories - I would be very interested to know what you might do with them. My own interest, which I shall pursue when I have someone to help me, is to try some retrospective coding and so obtain some quantitative measures of the types of coincidences that people consider remarkable enough to submit

best wishes

David
[Quoted text hidden]

```
--
David Spiegelhalter
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www.understandinguncertainty.org

Now available!
TheNormChronicles.com
```

Abbreviations

CCC Cambridge Coincidence Collection

CA Conversation analysis

CDA Critical discourse analysis

DP Discursive Psychology

TWOD Truth Will Out Device (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984)

Chapter Six

BS but still, referring to the *'but…still' device* identified

r realisation, referring to the first 'C' in the structure C-not C-but still C

m mitigation, referring to the 'not C' in the structure C-not C-but still C

c confirmation, referring to last 'C' in the structure C-not C-but still C

Chapter Seven

CD Coincidence disconfirmation

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