

**Talking of transcendence: A discursive exploration into how people make sense
of their extraordinary experiences**

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of Transcendent Exceptional Human Experiences (TEHEs), with a particular focus on language. Three concepts effectively characterise the experiences of interest: a loss of time and space, connection with nature, the Universe or something Higher and a deep emotional affect. In considering the relevance of these experiences for sociology, it is argued that language is a social activity and TEHE accounts are therefore also social. However, this raises a paradox: whilst these experiences are often claimed to be ineffable, language is all we have with which to study them. Previous approaches to TEHEs in social science generally looked for explanations and tended to overlook this social aspect.

Interviews were collected and analysed using a set of methodological principles informed by Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology, but also by feminist and transpersonal research. These principles identify the important and relevant aspects from the influential methodologies and where possible, address perceived limitations, incompatibilities and criticisms of these approaches.

The analysis reveals the structure of the TEHE accounts and establishes the presence of some normative patterns. Reported thought is analysed as a discursive device. It is argued that reported thought works to negotiate epistemic authority and experiential responsibility (the agency of TEHEs and the rationality of the speaker faced with an extraordinary experience). Respondents' spontaneous accounts of self-transformation are also analysed and show how potentially sensitive issues concerning the discursive construction of identity, consistency and change are managed in talk. This research contributes to discursive psychology and linguistic analyses concerning reported thought and agency. It also contributes to discursive work regarding identity, whilst making links with consciousness studies and (tentatively with) sociology of spirituality. Finally, this thesis emphasises the importance of an empathic and respectful approach to TEHEs and identifies various pragmatic, intellectual and personal tensions faced during research.

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“There are those who don’t know that they don’t know,
there are those who know that they don’t know, and there
are those who know that they know.”

(Overheard at a meeting of dervishes in Healdsburg,
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Chapter 1

Setting the scene for a study of Transcendent Exceptional Human Experiences (TEHEs): Why consider these experiences sociologically at all?

1.1 Introduction

This thesis is a study of Transcendent Exceptional Human Experiences (TEHEs), in particular the language of these experiences. The term Exceptional Human Experience (EHE) was first coined by Rhea White (1990) in order to describe a class of experiences often considered extraordinary and profound. The addition of transcendence to this label aims to capture the way in which these experiences somehow surpass ordinary experience and ordinary boundaries (e.g. space, time, the self) and are subtly distinct from other exceptional human experiences. There are several issues concerning terminology, labelling and definition that require further exploration and these will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. Firstly, however, it is important to establish via illustration the kinds of experiences we are concerned with. Below are a few examples.

“One day as I was walking along Marylebone Road I was suddenly seized with an extraordinary sense of great joy and exaltation, as though a marvellous beam of spiritual power had shot through me linking me in a rapture with the world, the Universe, Life with a capital ‘L’, and all the beings around me. All delight and power, all things living, all time fused in a brief second.”
(Hardy, 1979: 1)

This experience is reported by Alister Hardy (1979) in his book *The Spiritual Nature of Man*. Hardy’s original request for reports, of what he, and others, termed ‘religious experiences’ has led to an accumulation of accounts by The Alister Hardy Society Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC), currently numbering 5, 716.¹ Here is another example.

“I was listening to the music and looking through the open window at a tree in the garden, when something strange happened. I felt that I had left my body and had become one with the tree in the garden, with the pebbles on the garden paths and with everything else in the universe. I felt some mild amusement seeing my body sitting there in the living room. I had a feeling of indescribable bliss, a feeling that everything was, is, and forever will be as it should be, and could not be any other way, and that time did not pass,

¹ This number was established through personal communication with Anne Watkins & Jean Matthews from the RERC in Lampeter, Wales on 17.05.06.

that the future was contained in the past and the past contained in the future, and there was only one time, time present.”

(Determinist, 2000, see Tart www.issc-taste.org)

This experience is an excerpt from one of the submitted accounts, available at Charles Tart’s website – The Archives of Scientist’s Transcendent Experiences. At the time of writing there are 94 archived accounts illustrating a broad range of transcendent experiences. In addition to the written examples above, the one below is taken from the reports collected for this research project.

“I could still hear sounds I could still hear the birds and I could still hear the animals but they were very loud...and everything around me seemed to just stop and I don’t know it was very strange and how do I explain this it was suddenly as if as if something had opened up in front of me and I suddenly I don’t know everything suddenly made sense like erm the world and everything in it suddenly just seemed to make sense and I suddenly realised that everything I knew all my everything I knew about science everything I had in my mind about the reason that we’re here and evolution I realised that that was just some small part of something much much much much larger much huger and I I don’t know I suddenly had no doubt that there was something much bigger I don’t know how long I was sort of in this weird state but I realised there was something much bigger something much more powerful than than anything I could possibly imagine.”

(Alice, 2005)

These three examples offer a glimpse into what might be meant by the term Transcendent Exceptional Human Experience (TEHE) and help to show the sorts of experiences, and therefore accounts, that this thesis explores. Whilst the content of the experiences appears to be different, the accounts are united by a supremely positive, somewhat intangible, emotional high or peak, coupled with a powerful kind of revelation of knowledge, about ‘life’ in its broadest sense. They also appear to describe unusual and special moments, in that these are not habitual life experience. In this way, we can begin to see that TEHEs are actually considered to be starkly different from mundane or seemingly ‘ordinary’ reality, and to many, there appears to be something radically and qualitatively different about them. As Eliade has suggested, these experiences have an ‘out of this world’ quality: a transcendent aspect.

“In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world.”
(Eliade, 1961: 11)

Additionally, Eliade intimates that, whilst somehow beyond our everyday reality, these experiences are also somehow embedded in our world. This is an important point, one we will return to several times both in this chapter and throughout the thesis.

According to both those who report them and many who have written about them (e.g. Bucke, 1905; Hardy, 1979; James, [1901-2] 1982; Laski, 1961; Maslow, [1964] 1976; White, 1990, 1994, 1997a, 1997b, 1999a, 1999b; Wulff, 2000) these experiences are fascinating, amazing and awe-inspiring. They have been pondered over, written about and reflected upon over centuries and across cultures. They have even been reported to be the most profound experience amenable to humanity.

This thesis is an exploration of the language of these experiences and this chapter outlines how these experiences have been characterised in previous literature including their main features and some of the reported triggers. Following this, we consider how prevalent they are in the general population and how significant they are often reported to be. This leads into a discussion around definition, noting that there are both practical and ethical issues to consider when selecting a suitable label for these experiences. Finally, there is an exploration of why language might be important in a study of this kind and the identification of various tensions that this thesis aims to address but cannot resolve. Firstly, the next section consists of a review of academic literature regarding TEHEs.²

1.2 Reviewing the academic study of TEHEs

TEHEs can be described as reaching ‘above and beyond’ the realms of habitual experience. In other words, they are not seen to occur within the realms of the ordinary, the normal or the everyday.³ One conceptualisation refers to these experiences as,

² Use of the term TEHE does not negate the need for a discussion about definition, but instead acknowledges that some label is required before the issue of definition and labelling is discussed later.

³ However, there is some interesting work which suggests that the ordinary is extraordinary and ‘everyday life’ (a phrase connoting humdrum normality) is a misleading conception (Sandywell, 2004). Such a conceptualisation, it is argued, conceals the specificity and contingency of material existence.

“A moment of extreme happiness; a feeling of lightness and freedom; a sense of harmony with the whole world; moments which are totally absorbing and which feel important.”
(Williams & Harvey, 2001: 249)

Across time, contexts and disciplines, various labels have been employed to articulate this phenomenon. These include, mystical experiences (Underhill, 1911; Wulff, 2000); the numinous (Otto, 1923); religious experiences (James, [1901-2] 1982; Hardy, 1979); spiritual experiences (Kennedy et al, 1994); ‘cosmic consciousness’ (Bucke, 1905); ecstatic experiences (Laski, 1961); ‘oceanic feeling’ (Freud, 1962); peak experiences (Maslow, [1964]1976); ‘minerva experiences’ (Otto, 1966); ‘transpersonal experiences’ (Grof, 1972); ‘transcendental’ (Neher, 1980) or ‘transcendent’ experiences (Williams & Harvey, 2001); ‘aesthetic’ experiences (Bourque, 1969); extraordinary experiences (Helminiak, 1984); wondrous events (McClenon, 1994); high holy moments (Van Dusen, 1999); and revelatory experiences (Williams, 1999).

This array of referents illustrates the diversity of description that these experiences have been afforded. Indeed, the above list is not exhaustive (see for instance Braud, 2002: 2 or Palmer & Braud, 2002: 5). This significant descriptive variability certainly warrants further consideration of the use of language and meaning in discussing, studying and understanding these experiences. Given the wide variety of descriptive terms, it would also be useful to explore the characterisation⁴ and historical context for these experiences.⁵

One of the earliest and most significant works on the topic is William James’ ([1901-2] 1982) *Varieties of Religious Experience* where he attributed four dominant characteristics to religious experiences. The first, ineffability⁶ or indescribability, pertains to the claim that the experience ‘defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words’ (p367). The second is that religious experience possesses a ‘noetic quality’. This suggests that religious experience provokes, ‘states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect’ - that is, knowledge, revelation, insight or illumination can be imparted during or in connection with the experience, which cannot

⁴ Because there is not always consistency between different works in the literature in terms of labels or definitions, the characteristics and features are gleaned from a variety of texts concerning mystical, religious, transcendent, ecstatic and peak experiences and cosmic consciousness.

⁵ There are others who have made significant contributions to this field, not all of whom can be acknowledged in great detail here including Rudolph Otto, Paul Tillich and R.C. Zaehner.

⁶ Ineffability will also be discussed later in more detail because as a characteristic it is of some importance.

necessarily be effectively articulated but can in some way be ‘sensed’ or ‘felt’ (p367). The two, marginally lesser characterisations according to James (p367-8) were, ‘transiency’ – which referred to the fleetingness of the core experience, though an ‘afterglow’ may persist for some time; and ‘passivity’ – to describe the feeling that one is ‘grasped and held by a superior power’, which is perceived as distinct from oneself or an external force.

Since James’ seminal work, many others have spent time studying and characterising these experiences (e.g. Bucke, 1905; Laski, 1961; Maslow, [1964]1976; Stace, 1960). Other characterisations include, an overwhelming emotional effect; somehow being lifted out of oneself (Greeley, 1975); losing one’s self or the ego (Maslow, [1964]1976); a sense of ‘oneness’ (the ‘unifying effect’ – Maslow, [1964]1976) with or a feeling of being connected to something greater⁷ (Wulff, 2000); awareness of a presence⁸ (Hay & Morisy, 1978); a loss of space and time (Maslow, [1964]1976); a deep sense of knowing sometimes combined with a revelatory understanding often about the mystery of life and death (Bucke, 1905).

Hardy (1979) noted that religious experiences are quite diverse in character. Firstly, descriptive accounts can include reference to different experiential contexts, a dream or a near death experience (NDE⁹), for instance. Secondly, the reported sensations and features of the experience can be wide-ranging.

“Some may describe their feelings in terms of trust, awe, joy, or bliss; exceptionally they may reach the heights of ecstasy. Others may have sensory impressions, see lights, hear voices, or have the feeling of being touched.”
(Hardy, 1979: 2)

Indeed, Hardy’s book divides the accounts that he collected into ninety-two different categories on the basis of their descriptions and features. Reported descriptions are wide-ranging and include references to extra-sensory perception, contact with the dead, feelings

⁷ Greater here is used in a dual sense to communicate something literally larger, but also in some sense superior or more powerful – sometimes conceptualised as God or a divine being, but also referred to as a form of ultimate energy or power as in, the Life Force, the Cosmos, the Source etc., and not reported exclusively as ‘external’ to the self.

⁸ This may be experienced as malign (e.g. see Jakobsen, 1999 and Singleton, 2001 for more on ostensibly ‘evil’ experiences), but the vast majority of reports convey a benevolent presence.

⁹ NDEs do not have a universally agreed definition but they are considered to be experiences that occur in close proximity to death – actual or threatened imminent. Experiencers commonly report some form of detachment from their physical body and sometimes being able to ‘see’ the dead or dying physical body, experiencing a blindingly bright light often at the end of a tunnel, experiencing a life review, meeting celestial beings and having predominantly strong, positive, and pleasant feelings of love (Moody, 1975).

of unity, and feelings of comfort or protection, a sense of wholeness, certainty, enlightenment, and joy, love and affection.

Stace (1960) (and Laski, 1961) are often seen as developing the work that James started in characterising these experiences and providing a yardstick for categorising religious, mystical and transcendent experiences. Indeed, Wulff (2000) suggests that Stace's (1960) first defining characteristic (unitary consciousness), captures the distinctive essence of transcendence. He describes it here.

“The disappearance of all the physical and mental objects of ordinary consciousness and, in their place, the emergence of a unitary, undifferentiated, or pure consciousness.”
(Wulff, 2000: 400-1)

This idea, that the transcendent in some way affects the consciousness of an experient, is a feature identified by others. For instance, Huxley (1963: 1) suggested that ‘for normal waking consciousness, the phrase, "God is Love," is no more than a piece of wishful positive thinking...[whereas]... For the mystical consciousness, it is a self-evident truth’. Bucke's (1905) work was also concerned with this shift. He conceptualised ‘cosmic consciousness’ as the highest level of consciousness that humans can reach, which incorporates the broadest notions regarding life and the universe. Thus, for many, what effectively characterised these experiences was that they enabled radical change in the experient's perspective. As Maslow proposes,

“In the peak experiences, we become more detached, more objective, and are more able to perceive the world as if it were independent not only of the perceiver but even of human beings in general.”
(Maslow, [1964]1976: 61)

Finally, whilst recognising that ‘mystical’ experiences have been characterised in numerous ways, Wulff identifies the shift in consciousness as a common aspect.

“Most commentators agree, however, that any experience qualified as mystical diverges in fundamental ways from ordinary conscious awareness and leaves a strong impression of having encountered a reality different from – and in some crucial sense, higher than – the reality of everyday experience.”
(Wulff, 2000: 397)

The distinction made is between arguably ‘mundane’ states of consciousness that people experience most of the time, and other more striking types of consciousness, which stand out. James proposed that these special and ‘potential forms of consciousness [are experienced as] entirely different’ (p374). One interesting observation is that many of the reported features are not unique to TEHEs (White & Brown, 2000a). These features are often physiological or psychological (e.g. goose pimples or excitement) and are just as likely to be reported during ordinary experience. The difference, however, is the reported sense that during a TEHE any combination of these components (plus some ostensibly intangible quality) is rarely experienced as ‘ordinary’ at all.

1.2.1 Mysticism

Previously, these experiences were interpreted as religious phenomena. Experiences were, by default, connections with the Divine and therefore automatically spiritual or religious (e.g. Bucke, 1905; Underhill, 1911; Otto, 1923; Stace, 1960). One of the dominant frameworks for understanding them was mysticism. Persistently dismissed by science, mysticism has been viewed by many with suspicion, distrust and scorn – and has been often misunderstood as magic or witchcraft (Underhill 1911). Definitions of mysticism, are numerous and variable, though its concern has been with moments of transcendence from the ‘sense-world’ to the ‘cosmic’ and a ‘non-individualistic’ activity seeking a connection with ‘Perfect Love’ and the spiritual (Underhill 1911: 85-87). Individuals writing about moments of transcendence were often revered as highly spiritual mystics who had accessed and explored the pinnacle of human experience (e.g. St John of the Cross, 1991; St Teresa of Avila, 1946; Dame Julian of Norwich, 1994). Mystics were those who pursued such spiritual heights, devoted their lives to such a quest and had a clear spiritual discipline.

As Schneiderman (1967) observed,

“The study of mysticism has been hampered by at least two circumstances: preoccupation with the indescribable contents of heightened spiritual consciousness, and a refusal to regard the mystic in relation to his social context.”

(Schneiderman, 1967: 91)

Here Schneiderman suggests that mysticism contained two problematic assumptions. Firstly, that indescribability automatically signalled spiritual significance. Secondly, that

mystical experience was assumed to be timeless and universal regardless of when and where it was reported. This meant that mysticism could only offer a limited academic view of these experiences. This is something we will return to at the end of this chapter.

Nonetheless, the way in which these experiences are understood has changed. They are no longer the preserve of religion or mysticism and are not only reported by mystics or highly spiritual individuals. They are much more widely reported (Back & Bourque, 1970; Hardy, 1979; Wulff, 2000). Indeed, Maslow ([1964]1976) surmised (on the basis of his own research) that peak experiences were egalitarian: that they could happen to anyone. Furthermore, whilst not all contemporary TEHEs have religious associations, many are still perceived as encounters with the sacred. But as White & Brown note, the way they are understood may have changed.

“It appears that exceptional or transcendent experiences, many of which were once associated with religion, are being experienced by more people in the midst of daily life. This may be not so much because these experiences are becoming secularised, but because the sacred is being found in the midst of daily life”.

(2000b: <http://www.ehe.org/display/ehe-pageab52.html?ID=72>)

They suggest that these experiences are still glimpses of the divine, but that they occur in different contexts because of our shifting relationship with formal religion in particular.

The contexts in which TEHEs occur are varied and it is sometimes the context that is considered a key factor, perhaps even a trigger for, the experience itself. Reported favourable environments include nature or natural environments, such as those of stunning aesthetic beauty, solitude, peacefulness or tranquillity (Laski, 1961). Indeed, TEHEs have been reported in settings with forests (e.g. Williams & Harvey, 2001), lakes, rivers, coastlines, mountainous landscapes, deserts, moor lands, countryside, gardens and parks (Marshall, 2005¹⁰). As Marshall (2005: 86) points out ‘subjects may be gazing at a tree, a plant, a crystal, a rock, a mountain, water waves, sunlight, clouds, birds in flight, sunrise, sunset, stars in the night sky’. Furthermore, experiences have been reported in urban and

¹⁰ It is worth noting that Marshall (2005: 82-85) distinguishes between predisposing circumstances (individual differences such as demographics or personality types) and antecedent circumstances (immediate contextual triggers and long to medium term factors such as relationships, reading and spiritual practices). However, we are interested only in the short-term antecedent circumstances here for their social content (some of the predisposing circumstances are also discussed in Chapter 2 as they have been cited as explanations for TEHEs).

rural environments, occurring at night and during the day, in upright or supine positions, whilst being still or moving and during both extreme and clement weather. Maslow ([1964]1976) found that peak experiences tended to happen when people were on their own, whilst others maintain that experiences can take place whether in solitary or collective situations (Marshall, 2005).

Contemporary triggers include sporting activity (e.g. Murphy & White, 1995), and computer use (Laarni, Ravaja, Kallinen, & Saari, 2004). Laarni, Ravaja, Kallinen, and Saari's (2004: 412) research tentatively suggests some similarities between transcendence and the 'intensity, absorption and engagement' reported by some computer users. Furthermore, there are instances of reported religious experience in response to media output such as Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ* (Gedicks & Hendrix, 2005). However, new technologies and digital media as potential triggers are still fairly controversial, as Gedicks and Hendrix point out,

“Can encounters with God really be evoked by something as mercenary and prosaic as a movie, a television show, or a rock cd? Many believers are put off by purported spiritual reactions to mass culture, thinking them vaguely vulgar, tainted by commercial and other spiritually dubious motivations.”

(Gedicks & Hendrix, 2005: 131-132)

Wulff, drawing on work by Greeley (1975), Hardy (1979) and Laski (1961), lists a variety of more widely accepted triggers.¹¹

“Religious services...impressive natural settings, flowers, scents, fine (or sometimes violent) weather, sunrise or sunset, breezes, light patterns, music, poetry, art, beautiful cities, sacred places, swift movement, creative work, sex, childbirth, watching children, illness, depression, the prospect of death, personal crisis and so on.”

(Wulff, 2000: 410)

Religious activity is listed first and is often considered the most common trigger for TEHEs. The National Spiritual Transformation Study¹² (NSTS) found that 50% of

¹¹ For a longer list of almost 200 triggers compiled from various sources (including, Greeley, 1975, Hardy, 1979, Laski, 1961, and others) see White and Brown (2000b).

¹² A module insert included in the 2004 General Social Survey in the USA on the nature of spiritual transformation and spiritual experiences in contemporary USA (Smith, 2006).

experiences were triggered by ‘participation in ordinary religious activities’ (Smith, 2006: 288). Additionally, many people (47%) report their experiences in the context of negative circumstances, such as illness, proximity to death, dying, or an accident and other problems including divorce, financial or job difficulties and drug and alcohol abuse.

Wulff also includes music, as a trigger for states ‘beyond the plane of the ordinary’ (see also Aldridge & Fachner, 2006). Reimer (1995: 12) suggests that TEHEs can be induced by any engagement with music from listening to conducting, though it would seem that music needs to be culturally familiar to an individual to precipitate a profound musical experience. Another trigger mentioned is childbirth (Laski, 1961). However, there does not seem to be widespread knowledge or ‘belief’ in the potential ‘high’ of childbirth, particularly in contemporary Western societies where labour tends to be dominated by medical discourse and expectation of pain (Fox & Worts, 1999). There are also reports of sex-related TEHEs. These differ from practices such as Tantra¹³ in their spontaneity (as opposed to cultivation), yet are seen to have the same spiritual content (Wade, 2004). Similar feelings and levels of significance are reported in sex-related TEHEs (when compared with other TEHEs). However, there tends to be a general reluctance to equate other profound TEHEs with those of a sexual nature.

These reported triggers are not explicitly explored in this study; nonetheless, they are interesting for they highlight experiential contexts as often social and interactional (e.g. childbirth, sex). They also point to the number of common contexts which many experiencers report. But just how prevalent are TEHEs (or how often they are reported) in the general population?

1.3 Incidence of TEHEs and related experiences

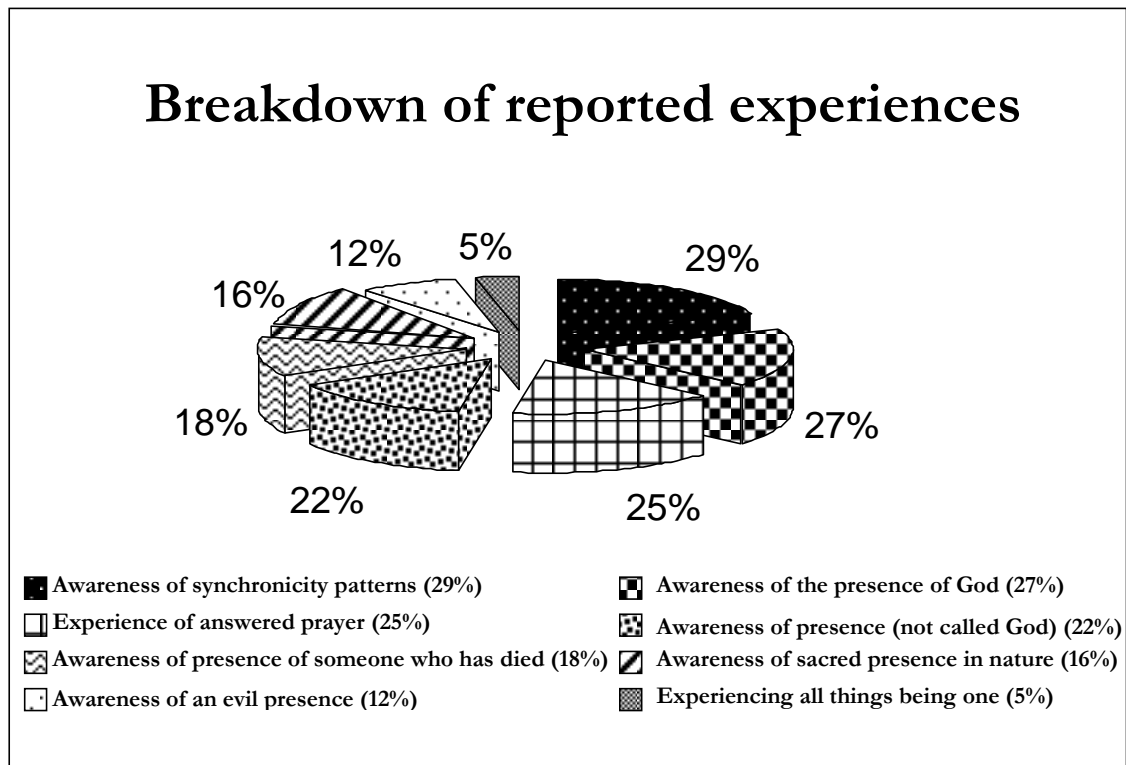
In depicting the backdrop for a study of TEHEs establishing reported levels in the general population would be useful. However, figures are often incomplete, begin with varying aims and purposes, and the last comprehensive collation of statistics (for the UK) was done

¹³ Tantra or Tantric sex is commonly misunderstood and misrepresented in the West and bears little resemblance to actual Tantric practices that originated in the East (White, 2003). Tantra evolved out of Indian practices known as ‘Kaula’, which were acts that sexualised ritual rather than those which ritualised sex. This evolution saw Kaula move from – “the production of powerful, transformative sexual fluids...into simple by-products of a higher goal: the cultivation of a divine state of consciousness homologous to the bliss experienced in sexual orgasm (White, 2003: xii).

in 2000 by Michael Argyle. Establishing the incidence of TEHEs has always been difficult, not least because people may not always report them. However, they are generally thought to be more common than expected in the population (Greeley, 1975) and there is some evidence (reviewed below) to suggest that many people report religious and mystical experiences.¹⁴

One of these sources, the British Gallup Poll, found that 48% of people responded positively to the question ‘[have you ever] been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?’ (Hay & Heald, 1987: 20). This 48% of respondents can be further broken down as shown in fig. 1. Fig. 1 shows that the highest numbers of people reported awareness of synchronicity patterns (29%) and awareness of the presence of God (27%). Whereas the least numbers of people reported experiencing all things being one (5%) – an oft-cited characteristic of TEHEs.

Fig. 1 Breakdown of the 48% of positive responses (Hay & Heald, 1987)



¹⁴ I am indebted to Anne Watkins and the Religious Experience Research Centre for providing me with some of these statistics – sourced by Anne from personal correspondence to Dr Peter Fenwick from Professor Paul Badham (2002) on mystical experiences and statistics.

Another source, which collated results from surveys conducted between 1983-9 by the American National Opinion Research Centre (total 5,420 respondents), provides an average positive response of 40%, whilst a review of research from 1962-1990 suggests a 35% average (Yamané & Polzer, 1994). Argyle also cites the work of Hay (1992), who reports a 31% positive response in British people surveyed. Hay (1992) also details how many times people report having had TEHEs: 17% once or twice, 9% several times and 5% often. As Badham (2002) sets out in his correspondence, the Alister Hardy Religious Experiences Research Centre (RERC) provides an overall summary of these findings, suggesting that ‘between a third and a half of people surveyed say they have had a religious experience...that would actually be between 31% and 48%...[from] the surveys...[Argyle] cites’.

However, in addition to these statistics there are a few more up-to-date figures from the UK (Hay, 2000, 2002) and the US (Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995a; Smith, 2006). In the UK, David Hay and Kate Hunt repeated the survey he originally conducted with Gordon Heald (Hay & Heald, 1987), and Hay took part in a BBC television series looking at the spirituality and religiosity of the nation. The survey suggested that numbers reporting these experiences has increased in recent times.

“In June of this year, we obtained the results of a repeat survey, which we did in conjunction with the BBC's recent *Soul of Britain* series. These suggest that more than 76% of the national population would admit to having had a spiritual or religious experience. That is to say, in not much more than a decade there has been almost a 60% rise in the positive response rate to questions about this subject. The great majority of these people are of course not regular churchgoers.”

(Hay, 2000: <http://www.martynmission.cam.ac.uk/BIAMSHay.htm>)

Hay (2000, 2002) and Hay and Hunt (2002) suggest that these higher levels may be indicative of an inherent spiritual disposition in humans and could be due to increased awareness of spirituality in the population and the possibility that some social changes have made the subject matter less taboo. However, it is worth noting here that the majority of positive responses about spiritual or religious experiences (55%) did not report a peak or transcendent moment as such, but instead ‘the recognition of a transcendent providence: a patterning of events in a person’s life that convinces them that in some strange way those events were meant to happen’ (Hay & Hunt, 2002: 13). In this sense, it is likely that

recognition of a transcendent providence and *experiencing transcendence* are different experiences, and that figures for the latter only, may not be as high. Nevertheless, the number of those reporting awareness of the presence of god (from 27% to 38%), of prayer being answered (from 25% to 37%) and of sacredness being present in nature (from 16% to 29%) were all higher than the original survey.

In one study about spiritual experiences in the US, there was a positive response of 60-72% (Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995a), though it is acknowledged that the sample was not representative, and was made up of people who have an interest in paranormal phenomena and those who take part in parapsychological work. The most recent statistics concerning TEHEs in the US are from the NSTS in 2004 (Smith, 2006). The basic findings show that just over half of the respondents (50.4%) reported some form of spiritually transforming experience.

Overall, these studies suggest that about half the current population will have some form of TEHE (though it is possible that less would report them). Even with a more conservative estimate – of a third – this is still a substantial section of the population who are likely to report a TEHE.

Placing this within a context of other surveys considering paranormal and anomalous experiences more generally allows limited comparison. Indeed, comparison is difficult for various reasons, not least because we are rarely comparing like for like in terms of questions asked and people surveyed. In other words, there is a distinct lack of representative and randomised populations surveyed in this field with many surveys focusing on more easily accessible and therefore cheaper university or college populations. The other issue is that many surveys are interested in paranormal belief as opposed to reported paranormal experience (e.g. see Irwin, 1993, for a review of some of this literature). And finally, as there are a range of experiences considered ‘paranormal’ or ‘anomalous’, there are often differences regarding how constructing measures has been approached (e.g. see Fox, 1992: 423).

Nonetheless, there have been a few representative surveys in Europe and the US detailing numbers of paranormal experiences. Firstly, Greeley (1975) reported that nearly a fifth of the general US population reported frequent paranormal experiences. Additionally, comparative cross-cultural studies (using the same measures as Greeley) produced similar

results in finding that paranormal experiences were fairly commonly reported though frequency and type of experiences reported differ across cultures (Fox, 1992; Haraldsson, 1985; Hay & Morisy, 1978; McClenon, 1990, 1994). Some of these results and others reported a 36% positive response rate in the UK (Hay & Morisy, 1978); a 50% response rate in San Francisco-Oakland area of the US (Wuthnow, 1976) and between 20% and 41% across three surveys in the US (Back & Bourque, 1970). We could conclude that in the context of anomalous experiences more generally, TEHEs are surprisingly widely reported in the general population, though when compared to less controversial experiences (e.g. déjà vu) we may expect numbers to be comparatively lower.

1.4 The significance of TEHEs

TEHEs regularly feature other ‘paranormal’ factors that do not fit within the archetypal ‘mystical’ experience and there are a wide variety of TEHEs that have been reported. Indeed, White (1994) devised five overarching experiential types to accommodate different EHEs. These five types are *mystical*, *psychic*, *encounter-type*, *death-related* and *exceptional normal* and each covers a range of experiences. So for instance, peak experiences, conversion experiences, revelations, stigmata, transformational experiences, kundalini¹⁵ and transcendental music (e.g. ‘music of the spheres’ or ‘celestial music’) all fall under the umbrella of *mystical* experiences. White observes that her typology for EHEs is provisional and that the experiences could be categorised and classified in alternative ways. She notes that some experiences may have more than one label or overlap in places. For example, while ‘transformative experience’ falls under the label ‘*mystical* experiences’, White (1994: 149) acknowledges that ‘sometimes [transformation] is associated with all types of EHEs’.

It is this element of transformation combined with transcendence that unites EHEs as moments of profound significance in people’s lives, despite experiential differences.

Palmer and Braud suggest that,

¹⁵ Kundalini is an Eastern term originating from Hinduism thought to be a form of spiritual energy often conceptualised as a serpent coiled at the base of the spine, which can be said to be ‘awakened’ or aroused through kundalini experiences (Sannella, 1987). The form that such an awakening takes can differ but often includes involuntary shaking and trembling of the body. Additionally, it may take place over a number of years and involve considerable mental anguish and suffering. Jung (1996) used the concept of kundalini to discuss a person’s accession to higher states of consciousness and the process of individuation.

“EHEs may serve as gateways to transcendent behaviours, freeing one, and allowing for the realisation of more of one’s true potential as a human being.”
(Palmer & Braud, 2002: 41)

Furthermore, White (1994, 1999b) suggested that this ‘transformative aspect’ can provide experiencers with the impetus to change their lives and themselves for the better. Here we will review some of the reported changes that make these experiences often considered profound and transformative.

TEHEs are, in the main, considered to be fleeting and transient (James, [1901-2] 1982), though there are reports of dramatic, lingering after effects on experiencers’ lives (Wulff, 2000). These changes range from alleviating difficult issues in an individual’s life to dramatic conversion testimonies (James, [1901-2] 1982). There are often reports of transformation in people’s beliefs, attitudes and outlook on life.

“Some experiencers report feeling an intensified love and compassion for others, and many say that life as a whole has taken on new meaning.”
(Wulff, 2000: 403)

Other reported after-effects include ‘an increased sense of well-being; remedial changes in health; increased sense of meaning and purpose; [and] spirituality’ (Palmer & Braud, 2002: 7). It has been suggested that TEHEs can bring about certainty that death is not the end for some experiencers. Bucke, for instance, saw cosmic consciousness as fostering ‘a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he [or she] shall have this, but the consciousness that he [or she] has it already’ (Bucke, 1905: 2). Some of these positive reported consequences have been charted, and are laid out in the table below (fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Table showing reported consequences from closed NSTS questions (Smith, 2006: 291)

Consequence	% of Respondents
Greater sense of meaning and significance in life	51.7%
Changed outlook on life	49.6%
Positive changes in relations with others	43.2%
Life changed overall	42%

It is clear from fig. 2 that just over half of the NSTS respondents report a ‘greater sense of meaning and significance in their lives’ as a direct consequence of their experience. The other changes mentioned concern their outlook, their relationships and their lives generally. These quantitative categories are fairly broad and do not indicate specifically what constitutes these changes. However, fig. 3 shows the open-ended responses from the NSTS survey.

Fig. 3 Table showing reported changes from open-ended section of NSTS (Smith, 2006: 289)

Consequence	% of Respondents
Becoming more religious/spiritual/closer to God	38%
Becoming a better person	17%
Increased appreciation of life	15%
Getting married/starting a family	6%
Ceasing bad behaviours	3%
Increased hope/love	3%
Becoming more open-minded	3%
Developing purpose/meaning in life	2%

Fig. 3 displays some different reported consequences from fig. 2, including ‘becoming more religious/spiritual/closer to God’ as the most commonly reported (38%). This is not entirely made up of new religious conversions but also points to deepening existing religious or spiritual sensibilities. Other reported changes to *outlook* include an ‘increased appreciation of life’ (15%) and ‘developing purpose/meaning in life’ (2%). Reported *behavioural* changes include ‘becoming a better person’ (17%) and ‘ceasing bad behaviours’ (3%) and *attitudinal* changes concern ‘increased hope/love’ (3%) and ‘becoming more open-minded’ (3%). The majority of these reported consequences are intangible. The only reference to a discernible life change concerns ‘getting married/starting a family’ (6%).

Overwhelmingly these reported changes are positive and many effects are considered beneficial or even therapeutic to people’s lives. This is a popular conception which is increasingly researched and reported on. For example, Williams and Harvey (2001: 249) note that, ‘interest in transcendent or spiritual experience may be motivated by the belief that these experiences are psychologically beneficial’. These perceived benefits are an issue of fairly recent interest but not completely new. Underhill (1911) noted the potentially therapeutic benefits of mystical experiences (e.g. as psychologically transformative). Additionally, some work suggests that TEHEs are correlated with positive affect and emotional well being generally (e.g. Greeley, 1975; Hay & Morisy, 1978). Greeley even

proposed that an experient's well being may be greater than those who do not have these experiences.

Furthermore, long-term beneficial therapeutic effects are commonly cited in relation to religious or mystical experiences (Wulff, 2000) – for example, in helping address distress as a result of, ‘threats to life (Noyes & Slymen, 1979), solitary ordeals (Logan, 1985), unresolved grief (Aberbach, 1987), and posttraumatic stress disorder (Decker, 1993)’ (Wulff, 2000: 413). In this sense, it would appear that there is great personal significance for people in these experiences and that the effects can be life-altering. Some suggest that this profundity and real effect on people is a reason in itself to study TEHEs.

“If such experiences improve the quality of life and the emotional wellbeing of the bereaved [and others], if they correlate with positive mental health (they do), then are they not worth studying?”
(Greeley, 1991: 370)

Here Greeley suggests that researchers have a responsibility to investigate experiences that appear to increase emotional well-being.

However, whilst the overwhelming majority of reported effects from TEHEs are positive, there are some individuals who report ‘fear, apprehension and misunderstandings’ (Palmer & Braud, 2002: 7). These reactions are thought to be fleeting effects associated with the onset of the experience (as unexpected and unusual events), as opposed to lasting impressions. However, there is evidence in parapsychology acknowledging those disturbed by psychic experiences and coverage of those who have required therapy as a result (see Coelho, Tierney & Lamont, 2008; Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995b: 250). Interestingly the opposite has also been proposed. Namely, that these experiences can prompt therapeutic effects which seem to alleviate trauma (e.g. in post traumatic stress disorder) in some cases (Decker, 1993) and may help circumnavigate some clinical conditions (if only because TEHEs are no longer automatically classified as mental illness).

This is a striking assertion but is one that may be gaining a stronger foothold in psychiatry, where there is increasing recognition that not all people reporting ‘delusions’ suffer from mental health problems (see for instance, Bell et al, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007, 2008). For example, practitioners in psychiatry have noted that some people who report ‘anomalous

experiences' show no signs of pathology, indeed, quite the opposite; they display healthy signs of mental well-being.

“There is increasing evidence [e.g. Johns & van Os, 2001] that a significant minority of the population hold strange and unusual beliefs and may have sensory experiences that would otherwise be considered as part of psychosis if it were not for the fact that they are rarely troubled by them. It seems that psychosis may not always be a sign of mental illness, but simply another way of constructing reality.”
(Bell, 2004: <http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2004/1/4/18195/51102>)

This is a significant acknowledgment within psychiatry as it suggests the shifting of boundaries between pathology and psychological health. This research will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 alongside other work about these experiences in psychiatry, psychology and parapsychology.

It would appear that TEHEs are often seen as significant, meaningful and positive events by those that report them. However, there is work that suggests this meaning requires cultivation and does not just 'happen' (e.g. Collins, 1991; Eugene Thomas, 1997). Furthermore, Palmer and Braud (2002) emphasise that these experiences provide a potential *opportunity* for positive outcomes and transformative effects. They conclude that telling others about TEHEs in a supportive environment appears to greatly increase this potential. Before their study, which explored disclosure in supportive and non-supportive environments, 79% of individuals reported that their TEHEs had positive life-altering effects. However, after the study, 96% of those that experienced some form of intervention or disclosure setting reported that,

“Their EHEs affected their lives by providing guidance, increased awareness, openness, connectedness, and opportunities for transformative change.”
(Palmer & Braud, 2002: 40)

These findings, as Palmer and Braud note, seem to be in line with those of Wickramasekera (1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1993) who found that integration and assimilation of these experiences into an individual's sense of self might contribute to a decrease in symptoms of disease and promote positive health and well-being benefits.

However, the benefits of disclosure could be culturally specific – a Western phenomenon – or reliant upon particular kinds of disclosure settings. For instance, Eugene Thomas (1997) argues that opportunities for positive transformation are dependent upon supportive cultural contexts and frameworks of understanding.

“I think we tend to underestimate the corrosive effects of our materialist and reductionist western world on spiritual matters. This one-dimensional view of reality tends to look on mystical-type experiences as aberrant at best, if not outright pathological. Thus it provides little help in making sense of mystical type awakenings [or TEHEs] other than labelling them as ‘crazy’.”
(Eugene Thomas, 1997: 167)

Whilst not everyone agrees that this framework should be religious, it is suggested that TEHEs should be valued to encourage positive outcomes. As we have seen, people report a diverse range of phenomena and they also report being affected in a variety of profound ways suggesting that these experiences can be of considerable significance to many experiencers. It also appears to matter how experiencers perceive the environment in which they share or disclose their experience, e.g. as favourable and supportive. These considerations have consequences in terms of developing an ethical approach towards researching TEHEs. Additionally, there are issues regarding what we mean by TEHE, and practical and ethical ramifications concerning terminology. Consequently, in the next section we discuss the problem of definition.

1.5 Definitional concerns

Clearly what counts as ‘transcendent’, ‘exceptional human’, religious, spiritual or mystical is sometimes problematic to gauge and defining these experiences can be tricky. Rigid definition can mean the shoehorning of experiences into ill-fitting labels for the sake of convenience and tidy categorisation. Indeed, Greeley (1975) has previously drawn attention to the absurdity of quantifying or categorising experiences that have been deemed ‘ultimate’ ones. This is worth considering as it may be difficult in some cases to (definitively) label an experience or establish distinctions between similar experiences. For example, near death experiences (NDEs) or out of body experiences (OBEs) may both be considered transcendent and exceptional and the distinction between them can be somewhat intangible.

Similar in some ways to NDEs, reported factors in OBEs include, a floating sensation, and of being in some sense outside of one's physical body, sometimes even 'seeing' the body during the experience (termed autoscopy) (Alvarado, 2000). White (1990) has noted that the differences between experiences are not as distinct as they are often considered to be. She suggests that in addition to NDEs and OBEs, there are close relationships between NDEs and reported UFO encounters¹⁶, between NDEs and mystical experiences, and between OBEs and lucid dreams¹⁷.

However, there may be some notable, and sometimes subtle, differences. For instance, those who report NDEs do not tend to report ineffability as a feature of their experience, whereas this is often a key feature of religious or mystical experiences. Additionally, experiences such as lucid dreaming are not generally afforded the same degree of profundity. What this illustrates is that there appears to be some distinction between a TEHE and EHEs more generally, albeit sometimes subtle, subjectively afforded and difficult to identify. Indeed, there are instances of NDEs with reported ineffability (see Moody, 1975: 25-6) and lucid dreams as potentially profound (see LaBerge & Rheingold, 1990) contravening the tendencies detailed above. It is worth noting that a range of experiences may be considered transcendent and profound by those who have them. Pertinently, in the NSTS, those respondents who mention an experience (by which they were spiritually transformed) report a wide variety of different phenomena such as OBEs, NDEs, crying, seeing visions, receiving signs and contact with the dead, angels or spirit of some sort (Smith, 2006). What this demonstrates is that experiencers apply different labels and different terms of significance to their experiences.

Whilst the issue of definition is complex and multifaceted, and a solution may appear somewhat arbitrary, some form of label is required to ensure clarity and consistency. EHEs generally are sometimes categorised by a broader term such as anomalous or paranormal within some academic circles (Cardena et al 2000a), and also supernatural, wondrous events (McClenon 1994), or NTEs (Nonordinary Transcendent Experiences,

¹⁶ UFO encounters vary from reported meetings or visitations from alien craft or beings, to differing levels of interaction with or intervention from (at the extreme, abduction and perhaps insemination or probing by) alleged extra terrestrials (Mack, 1994).

¹⁷ Lucid dreaming describes a form of dreaming where the dreamer is, in some sense, aware that they are dreaming. The lucid dream world is often reported to be more vivid and more 'real' than other dreamscapes. Some lucid dreamers are able to exert some control over the dream environment and will things to happen (LaBerge & Gackenbach, 2000).

Braud 2002). But I have selected the term ‘transcendent exceptional human experiences’ or TEHEs. The term EHE was first coined by Rhea White.

“I introduced the term exceptional human experience (EHE) because I wanted a general rubric under which all types of nonordinary, paranormal, mystical, supernatural, peak, and extraordinary experiences could be placed.”
(White, 1999a: 1)

Semantically, transcendence portrays these experiences as set apart from ordinary experience (see for instance, Tart, 1999). More than this though, it provides a term under which a variety of experiences can be studied or explored together with a common definitional core, instead of separately with strictly defined delimitations. In the past experiences were treated as distinct and certain experiences were the remit of discrete disciplines. So, for instance, mystical experiences were mainly the preserve of students of religion, parapsychologists studied psi¹⁸ experiences, psychiatrists studied OBEs and near death researchers studied NDEs (White, 1999b). Treating these experiences as radically distinct may mean that what unites them is sidelined and suggests that each experience is easily classified, which is not always the case. In this sense, the definition and use of TEHE aims to maintain a degree of balance between, on the one hand, the nebulous nature of the boundaries between these experiences whilst on the other, retaining the core profound focus which is of concern here.

This focus is centred upon **three** core characteristics. They are: *transcendence* (a loss of time and space/ordinary boundaries), *profundity* (being deeply moved) and *connectedness* (oneness with nature, the universe or something higher). In this sense, the experiences of most interest are those subjectively afforded personal profundity and significance and transcend the ‘mundane’ or ordinary aspects of people’s lives. Further to these three characteristics, the approach taken in this study assigns the primary responsibility of definition to the respondents. Therefore, if respondents identified their experience in the text of the advert and chose to respond, it is they who have subjectively classified their experience as aligned with these features. The advert¹⁹ read:

¹⁸ Psi is a ‘hypothetical construct relating to the presumed anomalous transfer of information or energy for which there is, arguably, objective evidential support’ (Targ, Schlitz & Irwin, 2000: 220) – see Bem and Honorton (1994) for a review of this evidence and Hyman (1994) for further discussion. Psi-related experiences include phenomena such as: telepathy (mind-to-mind communication), precognition (anomalous knowledge of the future), clairvoyance (anomalous knowledge of distant events) and psychokinesis (manipulation of the physical by the mind).

¹⁹ See appendix 1 for the full advert.

Have you ever had an experience where you

- lost a sense of space and time?
- felt at one with the universe, nature or something 'higher'?
- felt profoundly moved or deeply affected?

However, in the literature, there are numerous discussions and justifications regarding differing definitions. Within religious studies and philosophy some of the debate concerns how particular experiences may be defined as mystical, who is authorised to classify an experience and whether a particular label is useful. Indeed, Franks Davis (1989) and others (e.g. Brainard, 1996) have suggested that an individual does not have to see their experience as religious or mystical for it to be defined as such. Brainard (1996) suggests that the authority for determining whether an experience is mystical is often placed with the experient but that this deferral is misplaced. The term 'mystical' has been criticised for being too vague (e.g. Katz, 1978; Penner, 1989). It may also have the added disadvantage of appearing somewhat old-fashioned, too deeply religious and indicative of 'holy' individuals such as religious leaders or spiritual gurus. However, Brainard (1996: 365) argues that even though 'mystical' might connote 'culturally diverse phenomena' it can 'still be linguistically coherent and useful to scholars'. Indeed, it is the 'collective interest in a certain category of experiences' that allegedly provides this coherence (p365).

This approach upholds that researchers and scholars are better equipped to label, classify and categorise the experiences they are studying. However, this stance neglects the effects of labels and their social and cultural connotations in primary research. Labels and definitions are not merely an academic concern; they have practical and ethical ramifications.

1.5.1 Practical issues

One issue concerns terminology. It has been suggested that certain labels are off-putting to some experients. For example, there is considerable reported embarrassment with the term 'religious' (Hay, 2003), and this label can have negative connotations for people (Underwood, 2006). Additionally, the term 'spiritual' has 'New Age'²⁰ associations for

²⁰ The 'New Age' movement is not a coherent or organised body of knowledge or customs but is instead a loosely connected bundle of beliefs and practices pertaining to personal religion, meaning and spirituality. It

some experiences, which is not always perceived as a favourable connection (Underwood, 2006). Furthermore, folklorists and anthropologists have demonstrated that terms carry sometimes unexpected connotations for ‘informants’ and are invariably culturally specific (for more on cultural specificity see, Young & Goulet, 1994). For instance, professional folklorist Gillian Bennett (1987: 26) discovered that the phrase ‘supernatural’ elicited negative reactions in her research population – as ‘its connotations were wholly evil and taboo’ for them – and altered her line of questioning to be focused on ‘the mysterious side of life’. The importance of getting terminology right is also demonstrated by Kennedy and Kanthamani (1995a). They expanded their definition in response to feedback when they realised that the label of ‘psychic’ was insufficient for many of their respondents’ other experiences, such as communication with the dead or apparitions.

Furthermore, labels portray particular perspectives or positions towards experiences or phenomena (e.g. ‘sceptic’, ‘believer’ or ‘sympathiser’) and as Palmer and Braud suggest,

“The selection, wording and interpretation of these experiences are influenced strongly by the context and belief system of the author.”
(Palmer & Braud, 2002: 6)

Labels may therefore represent scepticism or hostility towards TEHEs, preventing people from identifying their own experiences with particular terms. Additionally, if experiences consider the possible reaction to their experience to be less than favourable they may be inclined not to tell others about it. Davis, Lockwood and Wright (1991) found, in studying peak experiences, that just over half of the participants cited their prior reluctance to report their experience. The reasons they cited for this reluctance included, that the experience was very special, intimate and personal; fear of being mocked; of having their experience trivialised or undervalued; and being thought of as ‘odd’ or ‘crazy’. Just under a quarter of respondents reported not having disclosed the experience to anyone else at all and just over half had only informed two people or less. This was also reported in work done by Hay and Morisy (1985) whose respondents cited fears of being seen as mentally unstable.

operates in a diverse set of forms from individual practitioners (such as Reiki or Crystal Healers) to New Religious Movements (e.g. Neopaganism) to self-guided spiritual quests (Heelas, 1996).

1.5.2 Ethical issues

Closely entwined with these practical concerns is an ethical dimension. People are less likely to disclose their experiences for fear of criticism or ridicule from others (Hay, 2003). Additionally, an ethical project is one that prioritises respect, awareness and sensitivity towards research populations (BSA, 2002). These are significant considerations. Without first-hand reports and accounts there is no way in which to study what people tell us about these experiences. If TEHE accounts are to be elicited, the research slant and context need to be presented as non-threatening, safe, supportive and non-judgemental.

In Western societies, and therefore Western research contexts, TEHEs are mostly viewed as ‘anomalous’ experiences. However, the association with ‘anomaly’ *can* be disadvantageous for furthering understanding. For instance, White suggests that sensitivity to meaning in studying these experiences is vital.

“It seems to me that if we hope to understand the phenomena of parapsychology, it is wrong to call them [these experiences] anomalous because that places them in a context devoid of meaning.”
(White, 1990: 8)

She suggests that the way in which anomalous tends to be understood - ‘as yet unexplained by science’ - and its focus on explanation and possible causality rather than alternative exploration is problematic. Searching for the social correlates (e.g. demographics, such as age, gender or educational attainment) associated with anomalous experience led to the construction of ‘plausible explanations’ for the reporting of these experiences; namely the *social marginality hypothesis* (also known as the deprivation theory) and the *cultural source hypothesis*²¹. The first of these refers to the idea that individuals in society who are socially marginalised (with poorer education, social status, minority ethnicity) will be more alienated and therefore more likely to be attracted to paranormal beliefs (and therefore experiences) as a form of escape from their deprivation (e.g. see Bainbridge, 1978; Wuthnow, 1976). Paranormal beliefs, and by inference paranormal experiences, are seen to be ‘caused by’ social marginality. The second tends to assume that explanations for these experiences can be found in the host culture of the individual reporting the experience and has often been the underlying assumption in scientific studies of the anomalous or paranormal (McClenon, 1994). One of the problems with these hypotheses is their focus on explaining these

²¹ These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

experiences, and their failure to consider the importance and meaningfulness of these experiences for experiencers. Furthermore, there is also a lack of any acknowledgement that it might be important to try and adopt a methodologically *respectful stance* in light of this reported significance.

As Campbell and McIver (1987: 42) note, terms such as anomalous, ‘all refer to a relationship of separation from, if not actual opposition to, normal or widely accepted culture’. This idea, that experiences or phenomena labelled anomalous rest upon claims that fall outside of ‘our generally accepted cultural storehouse of “truths” (Truzzi, 1974: 245) does highlight their ‘unusual’, ‘unexplained’ and potentially controversial status. Whilst the label anomalous stakes a claim for neutral and non-partisan grounds, it is rooted in a Western philosophical framework and a scientific framework viewing the unexplained as a scientific anomaly.

We only have to consider the distinction between Northern Europe and North American cultures when compared to Eastern Europe, Central and South America, South Asia, Africa and amongst various indigenous peoples where there is recognition of, value and often importance attached to TEHEs (Palmer & Braud, 2002). Indeed, as Greeley (1991: 367) has highlighted, for many non-Western peoples, ‘the extraordinary is ordinary, the astonishing is commonplace, [and] the wonderful is mundane’. So, if respondents report life-changing and significant experiences, we, as researchers, have a responsibility to be mindful of and respect this. The importance of conceptualising these experiences respectfully is noted by Bucke (1923: 12) who rejects labels such as ‘supernatural or supranormal’ insisting that experiences, such as TEHEs should be seen as ‘natural’ (i.e. not ordinary, but not abnormal).

Through selecting the label ‘transcendent exceptional human experience’ (TEHE), sensitivity to the experiencers extends into the scholarly context and allows for these experiences to be treated with respect and afforded import. This is because this term is embedded in a certain approach towards these experiences (Palmer & Braud, 2002). This stance prioritises meaning and understanding rather than seeking solely to explain (Young & Goulet, 1994). Braud argues that,

“An important aim, complementary to explaining, predicting, and controlling, is understanding.

Understanding has to do with a complete description, a complete experiencing and an appreciation of meaning.”
(Braud, 1994: 295)

This approach aims to be ‘much more hospitable to human experiences’ and to inherently acknowledge ‘the complexity, richness, pluralism, and multiplicity of the world’ (Braud, 1994: 295). Focusing on meaning allows experiencers to report how deeply significant their TEHEs can be.

Establishing and maintaining a respectful approach towards these experiences within academic research is not simple. On the one hand are the requirements of academic rigour and the way in which TEHEs provide data to be studied. On the other is an ethical concern regarding the need to treat respondents and their accounts as considerably more than merely a source of data. It is not known whether the balance that this demands is possible, only that it is important to acknowledge and aim towards it. In the next section we consider the key academic aspect to these experiences in this thesis – the language of TEHEs.

1.6 The language of TEHEs

There are various issues concerning language that it is important to acknowledge and consider when studying TEHEs. Firstly, that in researching experience what we actually have to work with are the accounts, the reflections, and the reports of experiencers not the experiences themselves (Wooffitt, 1992; Yamané, 2000). A similar conclusion has been reached by researchers in related fields; namely, religion (Yamané, 2000); the paranormal (Blackmore, 1988); and consciousness (Dennett, 1991). What this means, at the very least, is that researchers are reliant upon these descriptions (the experiential accounts) as data. These descriptions are by their very nature, linguistic, whether spoken or written, which means that a good place to begin exploration is in the language of this description. Evidently then, there are conceptual and methodological considerations to be broached regarding the status of these accounts, how they can be fruitfully studied and the nature of the relationship between language and experience. As Yamané suggests,

“It is in the nature of experiencing and its linguistic expression that the two are loosely coupled and therefore we do not study phenomenological descriptions of experiences but how an experience is made meaningful.”
(Yamané, 2000: 173)

Yamané suggests that the description of the experience is not merely a direct reflection of what objectively occurred but is imbued with social processes (e.g. meaning-making). As the quote from Eliade (1961) noted at the very beginning of this chapter there are ways in which these experiences are a part of the world around us. This observation – that reporting experience is tied up with the social – is one such aspect of this. Nevertheless, the conceptual and methodological issues this broaches are discussed in more detail across Chapters 2 and 3. At this stage, it is sufficient to recognise the emergent practical issue: namely, that our data is a form of language use. The second issue regarding language is one identified earlier that we return to in more detail below – the issue of ineffability.

1.6.1 Ineffability

This is a commonly reported characteristic of TEHEs, noted by all the key thinkers such as Bucke, James, Maslow, and Stace. It would appear that many TEHEs are perceived to be, and reported as ineffable. Being beyond words, the central tenet of this claim is that the language we use is inadequate or unable to capture the true meaning of an overwhelming and unusual experience. Indeed, it is suggested that because mystical states and related experiences are such a radical departure from ordinary forms of consciousness, they cannot effectively be articulated. As Stace has pointed out,

“One of the best-known facts about mystics is that they feel that language is inadequate, or even wholly useless, as a means of communicating their experiences or their insights to others. They say that what they experience is unutterable or ineffable. They use language but then declare that the words they have used do not say what they want to say, and that all words as such are inherently incapable of doing so.”
(Stace, 1960: 277)

However, Stace also highlights the seeming paradox in this claim. Indeed other scholars have also reported surprise at the claim of ineffability when there are many descriptions of these experiences that exist in the literature (e.g. Franks Davis, 1989; Robinson, 2000). It

has been proposed that the assertion of ineffability reflects the subjective sense that the essence of these experiences cannot effectively be conveyed.

“These experiences are essentially ineffable (in the sense that even the best verbal phrasings are not quite good enough), which is also to say that they are unstructured (like Rorschach ink-blot).”
(Maslow, [1964]1976: 72)

If we wholly accept that TEHEs are beyond language, then how can we meaningfully approach any study of these spontaneous experiences, when all we have is the description of the experience and not the experience itself to observe? Instead, it is useful to think about why experiencers might claim ineffability and what implicit reasons there might be for this assertion.

Franks Davis (1989) posits five possible reasons why experiencers claim ineffability in relation to these experiences. One: *‘poetic hyperbole’* – in calling an experience indescribable, the experiencer conveys a sense of importance and significance, of being overwhelmed by something out of the ordinary (p15). Two: *experiential exclusivity* – only those who have the experience can understand it. Three: the experience is *fundamental and all-encompassing* – the individual is overwhelmed by ‘profundity’ so that they are unable to effectively convey the experience (the perceived core of the ineffability claim). Four: the experience is *‘inherently paradoxical’* – the experience presents logical contradictions e.g. experiencing God as personal and impersonal concurrently (p17). Five: to connote *apprehension of the tremendous, the Ultimate or the Holy* – as the ultimate mystery, not amenable to language. However, Franks Davis rejects complete ineffability stating:

“The mystics’ descriptions may not be adequate; they may be inextricably bound up with models and metaphors, and the divine may remain ultimately beyond the grasp of human concepts, but that does not mean that the often eloquent attempts of the mystic to communicate his [or her] ‘vision’ are not intended to give us some indication of an ultimate reality beyond his [or her] own personal life.”
(Franks Davis, 1989: 19)

In other words, despite claims to ineffability, TEHE accounts exist and they represent attempts to communicate and convey the experience. Furthermore, Franks Davis’ (1989) exploration of ineffability suggests that it might be employed to some degree as a rhetorical

strategy or discursive resource that is drawn upon by experiencers to effectively share their experience. It would seem important then for a study of TEHEs to consider how these communicative resources are used and how the experiences are constituted via language, as it is through this medium they are made accessible. This is particularly important to draw attention to when a rigorous and empirically-founded consideration of what these are and how they are achieved remains absent from the work in this field conducted so far. In this sense, it is important to note how this discussion of ineffability highlights an issue overlooked in previous literature on TEHEs and related experiences (language and its' implications).

1.6.2 Disclosure of TEHEs

The third issue concerning language is that of disclosure. The literature has been focused on why experiencers might be inclined to disclose their TEHEs or not (e.g. Davis et al, 1991) and discerning the perceived benefits of sharing experiences. The latter is emphasised by Palmer and Braud (2002) in terms of helping the individual make sense of their experience. Braud (1994: 297) points out that there is evidence to suggest that recognition, ownership, sharing (in a supportive environment) and valuing one's experience 'is beneficial to one's physical health and psychological well-being'. Conversely, Palmer and Braud (2002: 8) have proposed that non-disclosure of TEHEs may lead to 'increased stress and may constitute risk factors for physical, psychological and spiritual health and well-being' in a similar way to non-disclosure of other significant 'traumatic, embarrassing and secret experiences'. The benefits of sharing TEHEs in a supportive environment is acknowledged by a variety of scholars including Wickramasekera (1986a, 1986b, 1987, and 1993) who found that integration and assimilation of these experiences into an individual's identity may be distinctly beneficial for well-being.

However, there is another aspect of disclosure that appears to have been overlooked thus far: that disclosure itself is a practical activity. When sharing or reporting an experience, experiencers provide an experiential account and it is precisely the existence of this disclosure which has allowed scholars to scrutinise, analyse and contemplate these experiences at length. Thus the identification of the act of disclosure as a descriptive activity allows us to introduce another insight into how and why TEHEs might be particularly interesting to sociology – namely their social aspect.

TEHEs though, have not readily been 'at home' within sociology. Indeed, Greeley (1991) noted that there was a dearth of investigative studies looking at accounts of this kind. Whilst this has changed somewhat in recent years, the situation has not radically altered. It is likely that one of the major reasons for their neglect is that TEHEs are not considered relevant to a study of society or the social world. From this point of view, TEHEs are private, internal and solitary experiences, which do not lend themselves to observation, nor are they interactive or public in any way. As such they are more naturally situated within subjects such as psychology, religion and philosophy.

However, this view fails to grasp that many of the reported triggers for these experiences have a social aspect e.g. collective settings such as religious services, interaction with others such as sexual relations, and culturally significant events such as childbirth. Additionally, when these experiences are shared, spoken or written down they are immediately projected into the social world. 'Because of the sense in which all experiences are private, we rely heavily on subjects' own descriptions of their perceptual experiences' (Franks Davis, 1989: 22). So our knowledge of TEHEs occurs in the domain of the social - we cannot know anything about these experiences unless experiencers articulate, communicate; and ultimately, tell people about their experiences. It was the social aspect which Schneiderman (1967) noted as absent from mysticism's contribution to the study of TEHEs. And this process, that propels them into public, social and interactional contexts, is of distinct interest to sociologists. As sociologists note, all human experience is inextricably tied up with the social. Wilson (1996: 11) succinctly suggests that, 'even experiences undergone in privacy or isolation have an inevitable social content'. What he means is that as human beings we often make sense of our experiences by talking or writing about them. This sense-making process is a social one and at the heart of it is language. As Taylor asserted,

"All experiences require some vocabulary, and these are inevitably in large part handed to us in the first place by our society, whatever transformations we may bring on them later. The ideas, the understanding with which we live our lives shape directly what we could call religious experience; and these languages, these vocabularies, are never those simply of an individual."
(Taylor, 2002: 27-28)

In doing so we draw on the knowledge we already have about the world around us to make contrasts and comparisons. Our previous experience in and of the social world informs

how we interpret and understand new experiences. Indeed, how else would an individual recognise, label or give meaning to an experience?

In this vein, language can be acknowledged as a vital part of the social aspect, as disclosure is the act which makes TEHEs present in the social despite their appearance as private experiences. Thus, it becomes clear how crucial understanding the use of language is in understanding *any* human experience. In other words, all accounts of experience, all interviews, are in the first instance, social. Any experience is construed and shared through language and it is this common territory that affords the first opportunity to access and explore these experiences in some way. Therefore, a study of TEHEs is as much about the language (and the social) as it is about subjectivity and consciousness. There is a perspective on language in the social sciences which informs our approach that it is worth introducing next.

1.7 The dynamic and action-oriented features of language use and description

As we have already noted, the reporting of an experience is not a straightforward 'factual' disclosure of events, and, in being inextricably bound up with social processes, it is also an activity. Contemplating this raises questions about what else is being accomplished by the experiencers when they disclose their experiences. At the very least this begins to identify accounts as practical discursive acts where things are achieved with that very telling, from meaning-making (Yamané, 2000) to other social actions (Wooffitt, 2005a).

Schrager (1998) identifies three things that are of interest in providing insight into various social phenomena that are evident in narratives. The first of these concerns the idea of the narrator adopting different points of view and speaking from different perspectives during the story. This is reflective of Goffman's (1981) notion of footing when the speaker, as it were, 'quotes' someone else or 'shifts footing'. However, Schrager does not really discuss footing in quite the way Goffman does. Instead he talks about how the use of different perspectives is an invocation of the social and social relationships. But it is also a way in which actions are performed within a social context. In other words, the inclusion of other voices in a narrative is used to achieve certain actions and convey specific things. Schrager alludes to some of the other things that are communicated in conversations, such as a

speaker's stance towards a particular set of circumstances, e.g. as 'ambivalent... antagonistic... neutral' (p288). Indeed,

“My point of view as teller registers various sorts of distancing not just by what I say but in intonation and other paralinguistic features - by the way I say it.”
(Schrager, 1998: 288)

The second element of the social that can be located in these accounts is the direct comparison and contrasting that can be done searching for similarities, differences, omissions and elaborations. This point of view maintains that,

“Experience...comes to make sense by being connected with others' experiences. These connections are not simply pre-established in events. They are recognised, forged, elaborated, and invoked in interaction.”
(Schrager, 1998: 288)

The third element of this is where Schrager suggests that experiences (or accounts of experiences) in a sense exist upon a continuum, from the individualised or 'unique' events to the multiple instances - which lend themselves to categorisation and generalisation. 'To become the subject of narrative, experiences are either individualised or generalised' (Schrager, 1998: 295); this refers to the way in which the teller constructs the experience or incident they are narrating, as unique or common events. But according to developments regarding language in the social sciences there is a little more to consider here.

It was James ([1901-2] 1982) who suggested that something about the quality of such profound experiences evades description. A variety of explanations have been offered to address this alleged gap in linguistic resources. One of these theories propounds that the language we currently employ in everyday interactions is inadequate for these purposes. Some posit that erotic or symbolic language was used to try and effectively convey concepts considered difficult to communicate (Fromm, 1951; Wulff, 2000). This kind of language consisted of metaphorical, mythical and analogous linguistic strategies that engaged the emotions and the imagination. For Bruner (1986), this language is the language of storytelling. He contends that whilst we are familiar with the language of science 'we know precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories' (Bruner, 1986: 14).

Further explanations for this linguistic gap include that TEHEs are too intense or overwhelming to articulate experience or that they somehow ‘fall beyond’ words. Yet people do describe, communicate and convey these experiences; they do attempt to put their experiences into words. But how we understand the relationship between language and experience is often philosophically defined.

“Does the experience itself dictate the language in which it is described or is it...entirely irrelevant to the linguistic clothing that the experiencer drapes about it?”
(Rorty, 2004: 87)

Within the social sciences, specific methods and approaches have been evolving towards the study of discourse²² (namely discursive psychology and conversation analysis) aiming to reveal how people make sense of the world and their experiences through their use of language. This work has consistently demonstrated that the language we use to describe our experiences is socially and interactionally produced (e.g. Schegloff, 1997). That is, the way in which an account of a TEHE is described will be informed primarily by the circumstances or setting in which the report is communicated (whether written or spoken). These, mostly ‘non-conscious’ processes of selection and construction perform social actions – we do things with our talk (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) – and can begin to inform us about some of the foundations of such accounts. That is, language is a site of sociality and a site for social action – things are done with and in talk. Language can have social and interactional effects and consequences; it assembles and constructs the social, and is not merely a straightforwardly representational medium.

In particular, studies have persistently revealed that language is context-dependent and is designed for the situation in which it occurs (Edwards & Potter, 1992a; Wooffitt, 2005a). Speakers make ongoing judgements, interpretations and inferences about what is expected of them in the setting they find themselves and orient themselves to these factors. In other words, language is first and foremost about the context for which it is produced. It also is social action; utterances perform actions and have effects, which are ‘played out’ in the interactive setting. This empirically-founded concept – the action-orientation of language – can help us to approach TEHEs differently because this approach to description has not been developed in previous work on TEHEs. Indeed, James ([1901-2] 1982) and others, did not consider the constitutive role of language when considering religious experience.

²² These approaches will be outlined in more detail in Chapter 3 on methodology.

Brockmeier (2002: 85) suggests that James' omission raises three particular issues which it is worth emphasising here. Firstly, 'he [James] aims to study the construction of the religious mind without taking into account one of the most important tools used at this construction site' – language. Secondly, 'ignoring language not only misses the interplay among experience, consciousness, and reality, it also – as a consequence – misses the crucial cultural hinge between society and the individual'. Thirdly, Brockmeier identifies 'the mystical paradox' (p86), which is the contradiction established via the claim of ineffability versus the existence of experiential accounts. Here, he identifies the puzzle that faces us in coming to study these experiences sociologically: how can we approach TEHEs if they are claimed to be ineffable, and language is *the* medium through which social scientists can study them? As the developments concerning language, action, interaction and description demonstrate, however, there are new ways of considering the concept of ineffability and therefore, ways of addressing issues concerning language and sociality not previously considered. Focusing on ineffability in this way allows us to see how it has been previously viewed as a substantive issue, but that actually it appears also to have rhetorical purpose. This has both illustrated the importance of language as an analytical consideration and centralised a concern with its practical effects.

However, Brockmeier also suggests that there is something 'extra-discursive' about these experiences even though they possess a cultural and discursive element.

“There are undeniable experiential realities that language cannot capture, not even touch. But there also can be no doubt that as soon as they are taken as representing or embodying meaning and, as in our case, transcendent values, that is, as soon as they enter a cultural discourse, they *do* take on a discursive form.”
(Brockmeier, 2002: 88)

In this sense, these experiences can be seen as having both individual and cultural significance. They are private and personal, but also public and social when thrust into discourse, whatever form that takes. Additionally, they are defined, interpreted and understood within cultural and historical bounds. However, across contexts these experiences do seem to be understood as atypical human experience: they are generally perceived as special, significant and profound experiences. They are afforded personal meaning and significance, they are seen as having life-changing potential, and they are

viewed as overwhelmingly positive, transformational, revelatory and extraordinary (Cardeña Lynn & Krippner, 2000b).

It would seem then that not only are there reasons for studying these experiences from a sociological perspective, but also because of their intrinsic human interest. Experiences so reputedly profound and life-changing perhaps have many ways in which to contribute to knowledge and understanding, though there are reservations about the extent to which academic study can effectively capture or represent these aspects. At this stage, it is sufficient to note that there is an inherent tension in this thesis between recognising and respecting the value of TEHEs and effectively conducting a rigorous academic analysis of these experiences in new and insightful ways.

1.8 Conclusion

The material covered in this chapter is extensive. We have reviewed the definition, characterisation, features and reported effects of TEHEs. Before moving on it is worth summarising the key points that inform the subsequent focus and effectively highlight the areas of interest for a sociological study in particular. After exploring the issues we are left with a paradox and a tension.

The paradox is that TEHEs are viewed as private and ineffable, yet we have access to the public accounts of them to study. That is, despite claims not to be able to describe these experiences, many experiencers do provide a description of their experience. So we are faced with the question of how we study them. We have highlighted the potential importance of language and communicative resources in a study of TEHEs. This focus is something that is missing from previous work looking at these kinds of experiences. Thus, at the heart of this thesis is a focus on the language of TEHEs.

The tension is that for the experiencers these are profound, possibly life-changing encounters which radically transform lives and selves. But for academics they are primarily a series of discursive acts – the reporting, the disclosure. This leads to an ethical issue – how can an empathic and respectful concern for the personal significance be reconciled with an analytic focus on discursive activity invited by the nature of the data provided by the accounts? Indeed, there are some reservations about the ability of any academic endeavour

to address or investigate these reputedly profound experiences. There is a sense in which it seems somewhat absurd to use intellectual tools to investigate and scrutinise phenomena not thought to be amenable to the intellect (James, [1901-2] 1982) at all. These are not dilemmas and tensions that can necessarily be resolved here but they can nonetheless be recognised as inherent contradictions for the researcher and the thesis presented here.

This thesis therefore explores TEHEs and how they are reported and communicated, focusing on the subjective accounts and meanings afforded to them by those who report them. Given that these experiences are often claimed to be ineffable (or indescribable) how do people talk about their experiences? These experiences are reputedly profound, ultimate and intangible, so how do people make sense of them? As White has pointed out,

“We must try to see how these experiences fit into the context of the person’s life, to ask what the *meaning* of the experience is for the person who has it.”
(White, 1990: 11)

White also advocates understanding or investigating meaning from a starting position of acceptance: that is, accepting that the experient views the experience as real. The priority is what is important for the respondents about their reported experiences, and the aim is to demonstrate their understanding regarding their experience (at one particular time, in one particular context).

Chapter 2

Seeking to explain: Previous approaches to TEHEs in Scientific and Social Scientific fields

2.1 Introduction

The last chapter identified the way in which TEHEs are suitable for sociological scrutiny. This chapter explores the many different approaches that have been taken towards TEHEs in the past. These various disciplinary strands have explored and researched these kinds of experiences in different ways. TEHEs have been extensively reflected on and written about from a religious or mystical perspective (e.g. St John of the Cross, St Theresa). Furthermore, the work of many scholars, including William James, Maurice Bucke, William Stace, Margaret Laski, Abraham Maslow, Alister Hardy, and Charles Tart has been extensive and wide-ranging. In some senses this corpus of work spans the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, religious studies, parapsychology, sociology and anthropology. Indeed, this subject is not confined to one particular discipline, though the more specific interests, emphases and concerns of researchers and scholars may be quite different.

What this indicates is that a vast literature spanning numerous disciplines could be drawn upon to discuss these experiences. In some cases this means that the approach taken to reviewing some bodies of literature is with a broad brush, focusing on pertinent issues. Essentially, it is more productive to focus on areas of research that this project speaks directly to and highlight the concerns within each particular field that are relevant. Consequently, the review discussion begins with a focus on research conducted and the approach taken in psychology, which includes, and has been informed by, work in psychiatry and neuroscience. Following this, work in parapsychology is examined, before a focused consideration of the previous approach adopted by the social sciences, and sociology, more specifically. Additionally this chapter considers the recent interest in the method of introspection from the field of consciousness studies. As the last chapter showed, the nature of language and profundity are at the heart of this project. However, whilst one of these issues – profundity – has been recognised (but not always respected) by some research, the other – the discursive aspect – has yet to be fully acknowledged by those who have studied these experiences.

2.2 How have TEHEs been studied in the past?

2.2.1 Psychology (and Neuroscience)

Within psychology there has been limited investigation of TEHEs and they are mostly treated as anomalous or paranormal experiences. Some psychological research has focused upon the identification of certain personality characteristics and individual differences associated with these experiences. There is some work which suggests that individuals reporting one type of experience, for example lucid dreaming, are also more likely to report others, e.g. NDEs, hallucinations, hypnagogia, transcendent experiences and out-of-body experiences (LaBerge & Gackenbach, 2000). Much of this work suggests that certain people may be more likely to have paranormal experiences (or a belief in the paranormal) than others (e.g. Auton, Pope & Seeger, 2003; French, 2003; Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995; Peltzer, 2002; Thalbourne, 1995). It is hypothesised that the individual differences associated with a disposition to these experiences and certain sleep-related²³ states, reflects flexibility in consciousness (Watson, 2001). From this perspective certain individuals can more easily manoeuvre different levels of consciousness. However, this flexibility is not necessarily consciously willed or determined. These individuals are more likely to score highly on tests of hypnotisability, creativity and fantasy proneness (for examples of the measures used to gauge these associations see Gallagher, Kumar & Pekala, 1994; Kumar, Pekala & Gallagher, 1994). It is possible that other individual differences such as 'extraversion, self-confidence, open-belief systems or a willingness to introspect' also affect the propensity to have such experiences, particularly psi (Holt, Delaney & Roe, 2004: 433).

One theory proposes that individuals who are prone to fantasy-based states have 'thin boundaries', which contributes to an easier flow or slippage between reality and fantasy (Hartmann, 1991). In line with this theory, individuals with 'thicker boundaries' would tend towards blocking or stemming this flow and adhere more closely to 'reality', preventing any leakage from fantasy-based phenomena. So individuals with thin boundaries (or more flexible consciousness, perhaps) would find the differentiation between 'reality' and 'non-reality' less clearly defined or concrete. In a similar vein, Thalbourne and Houran (2000) conceptualised the characteristics of schizotypy²⁴, fantasy-

²³ Such as daydreaming, nightmares, lucid dreams, visions and apparitions (Watson, 2001) also known as fantasy based states (Hartmann, 1991).

²⁴ Schizotypy is a psychometrically-measured trait including aspects which are found in the clinical spectrum of psychosis (Schofield & Claridge, 2007). Usually divided into positive and negative schizotypy, the former includes magical thinking and unusual experiences and has been correlated with 'paranormal' experiences and

proneness, absorption, creativity, and paranormal experiences as manifestations of the trait of ‘transliminality’. They defined transliminality as a ‘tendency for psychological material to cross (*trans*) thresholds (*limine*s) into or out of consciousness’ (Thalbourne & Houran, 2000: 853). The ease of transference between states of consciousness probably also relies on several mediating factors, such as the context (i.e. being in bed as opposed to driving a car) and perhaps the presence of other dispositional characteristics. Indeed, with specific reference to TEHEs, Wulff (2000: 408-9) suggests that there may be a ‘mystical trait’ of sorts, where experiencers possess a range of predisposing factors, adding that ‘set and setting are also significant factors’.

Whilst mainstream psychology has tried to discover which ‘characteristics’ or individual differences are strongly associated with TEHEs, it has however, generally neglected their potential implications for the study of consciousness. Since the discovery that these states can share some of the same features as neuropsychiatric syndromes without necessarily being pathological, anomalistic psychology has been more inclined to take an interest (Beyerstein, 1996). Anomalistic psychology, for example, has centralised its concern with studying and understanding phenomena considered extraordinary or ‘paranormal’ predominantly in terms of pre-existing physical and psychological explanations (see <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/> for more information).

The dominant conceptions of brain, mind and consciousness employed by psychology are primarily informed by research employing the latest neuro-technology. These techniques include brain scanning apparatus which has allowed neuropsychological research to explore various hypotheses concerning brain activity and ‘religious or mystical’ experience. The transcendent states suggested by TEHEs are seen to offer potentially fruitful avenues for furthering scientific understanding about the relationship between the mind and the brain. To this end, there have been several experiments conducted, with findings that have provoked some discussion and debate amongst scholars.

Some of these experiments have been conducted by Persinger (1983, 1987, 2002, and 2003) who sent a weak electromagnetic signal through individuals’ brains via a metal helmet and found that most people reported sensing a presence, sensations of floating, flying, leaving

beliefs (see Wolfradt, Oubaid, Straube, Bischoff & Mischo, 1999). Negative schizotypy is ‘usually measured in terms of physical and/or social anhedonia, [and] has been identified by several researchers as a stable and important indicator of risk for mental ill-health’ (Schofield & Claridge, 2007: 1909).

the body and other ‘mystical’ experiences. As a result, Persinger suggested that the root of these reported characteristics are located in the brain because these sensations are seemingly triggered by stimulation of the temporal lobe region. However, we might want to question the extent to which reporting such sensations can be seen as equivalent to a spontaneous mystical experience, and take issue with the idea that an individual’s description is equal to or unproblematically reflective of the experience itself.

Beauregard and Pacquette (2006; see also Beauregard & O’Leary, 2008) also found that this region of the brain (amongst others) was activated in their experiments with Carmelite nuns and brain activity during ‘Unio Mystica’ (transcendent union with God). However, their experiments were reliant upon the nun’s recall of the transcendent state rather than concurrent introspection (reporting the experience as it happens) as it is not a state that is considered accessible at will. Other experiments were able to study neural activity during meditative states. D’Aquili and Newberg (1993, 1998; see also Newberg & D’Aquili, 2000; Newberg, D’Aquili, & Rause, 2001a; Newberg, Alavi, Baime, Pourdehnad, Santanna, & D’Aquili, 2002b) monitored blood flow in the brains of monks meditating. When the monks reached a ‘transcendent high’ they pulled a cord which released a harmless dye into their bloodstream highlighting the active areas of the brain. The dye showed increased activity in frontal brain regions (associated with focused attention) and decreased activity in the back brain regions, such as the parietal lobe (associated with orientation). Newberg suggested that this is consistent with meditators descriptive accounts regarding reported loss of self and space and time. However, whilst many of these experiments are groundbreaking in providing information about brain activity in seemingly altered states, there are some limitations of applicability and ecological validity.

Spontaneous experiences are notoriously difficult to capture in the laboratory, so observing transcendent experiences in ‘real’ time is highly improbable. In this sense, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about spontaneous mystical ‘states’ from experimental research into induced meditative ‘highs’. Additionally, there are good reasons to question the use of descriptive accounts as direct routes to actual experiences.

Furthermore, there have been suggestions that because of observed activity in the temporal lobe (and some similarities in accounts) that there are links between temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) and mystical experience or religious ‘ecstasy’ (e.g. Cirignotta, Todesco, & Lugaresi,

1980; Devinsky & Lai, 2008; Saver & Rabin, 1997; Schacter, 2006; Waxman & Geschwind, 1975) and TLE and psychic experience (e.g. Fenwick, 1993). TLE is thought to be caused by unusual electrical activity in the brain's temporal lobes and many sufferers 'report that their seizures often bring on extraordinary experiences of transcendent wonder, luminous insight – or, at times, harrowing, uncanny fear' (Pickover, 1999: 1; also see LaPlante, 1993, for more on TLE and religious experience). TLE has often been cited as a retrospective explanation for some historic mystical visions, such as those of Mohammed, Moses and St Paul (Landsborough, 1987; Pickover, 1999), and Ellen White, co-founder of Seventh Day Adventist Movement (Peterson, 1988), amongst others (see Devinsky & Lai, 2008: 637; and Saver & Rabin, 1997: 501-2 for more extensive lists). However, such explanations are deduced from written accounts, composed in different historical and cultural eras, with little reflection about the mediated nature of the experiences and how accounts do not present the actual experiences themselves.

Nonetheless, to suggest that religious or mystical experiences have roots in the limbic system²⁵ (connected to strong emotion) or are 'brain-based' does not preclude them from being meaningful. Saver and Rabin (1997, 1998) argue that all experience is brain-based and that such a claim is not particularly exceptional as it is not directed at verifying or disproving the objective reality of religious experience. 'Brain activity does not contaminate or invalidate our mental experiences; rather, it makes possible, and shapes, our mental and spiritual life' (Saver & Rabin, 1998: 476). Nonetheless, despite this, they do try to distinguish 'normal' religious experience from that triggered by brain disorders; whilst others recognise that this distinction is hard to determine and culturally defined:

“How can we distinguish the physiology or validity of a religious experience in someone with epilepsy or psychosis from that of a religious sage? We can't. Disorders of spiritual-religious function could result in a relative lack of or excess of activity. Normal function is culturally defined and varies radically.”
(Devinsky & Lai, 2008: 637)

²⁵ Azari, Nickel, Wunderlich, Niedeggen, Hefter, Tellmann, Herzog, Stoerig, Birnbacher and Seitz (2001) compared neuroimaging for religious and non-religious subjects via the induction and sustained achievement of a religious state and found that limbic areas were not activated. However, these states were subjectively assessed by the subjects and no conceptual distinction was made between spontaneous experience and the states induced in the laboratory. Other work (Arzy, Idel, Landis & Blanke, 2005) has suggested a connection between altitude and mystical states. The authors suggest that many non-mystic contemporary mountaineers have reported similar experiential characteristics to those found in the accounts of religious figures in the three monotheistic religions. They consider some of the work in cognitive neuroscience regarding the effects of altitude on the brain in order to make this connection.

William James also noted that recognising organic brain processes as underlying mystical experience did not detract from their profundity, as *all* states of mind were underpinned by organic processes. He further warned against reducing such experiences solely to their material roots. Despite this, according to Wulff (2000: 405), although there is little direct evidence to support it, mystical states are ‘increasingly thought to be correlates of certain forms of activity in the brain’s temporal lobes’. Indeed, although not entirely in agreement with this perspective, Persinger, Koren and Lafreniere (2008: 269) note its dominance: ‘the intrinsic premise of modern neuroscience is that all experiences and capacities are derived from the function and structure of the human brain’.

This neuropsychological explanation has perhaps increased in popularity due to the rapid expansion of and advances in neuroscience and studies in consciousness. These experimental findings are certainly interesting and they are driving forward understanding of neural activity and blood flow in different regions of the brain. However, there are various limits to these contributions. Firstly, it is virtually impossible to capture spontaneous states in the experimental context and therefore neuroscience can only provide limited exploration of spontaneous TEHEs. Psychology has tended to look for the causes of these experiences in naturalistic areas. Explanations for *spontaneous* states include brain anomalies, such as neurological malfunction or damage, and for *induced* states, chemical levels and electrical activity in certain regions of the brain through meditation or indoctrination are seen as responsible. This perspective suggests that altered states derive from a universal brain system combined with certain culturally specific manipulations (Sargant, 1957, 1973; Beyerstein, 1996). In this vein, psychology has argued ‘that altered states of consciousness are altered states of certain brain systems’ (Beyerstein, 1996: 16).

Secondly, the confines of this field mean that findings come about in the laboratory, rather than in the ‘real’ or social world. Indeed, with the exception of Maslow and other humanist psychologists interested in peak or transpersonal experiences, psychology and neuroscience have tended to approach these experiences experimentally or rely upon brain scanning technologies for their insights. Whilst these methodologies are useful they fail to provide any insight into the lived experience itself or the occurrence of TEHEs in real world contexts. A related issue is that most of the approaches regard the accounts of experiences as offering a more or less acceptable substitute for the actual experience itself. Finally, there is sometimes (but not always) a neglect of how profound and significant these

experiences are reported to be. A similar perspective has been dominant within psychiatry, where many of these experiences have been considered indicative of delusion.

2.2.2 Psychiatry (and Psychopathology)

There has regularly been confusion between mystics and insanity. Up until fairly recently, it was assumed that people reporting unusual or seemingly inexplicable experiences were simply deluded or psychotically disturbed²⁶. Thus in psychiatry, the distinction between psychosis and spiritual experience has been somewhat hazy and the subject of disagreement. Sanderson, Vandenberg and Paese (1999: 608) argued that previous versions of the DSM (The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), the dominant diagnostic tool for psychiatry 'simply associated religiosity with severe psychopathology'. Furthermore, historically, EHEs and related beliefs have been considered hallucinations and delusional or false beliefs (Bell, Halligan & Ellis, 2003).

Hallucinations and delusions are viewed as potential indications that individuals are in some way 'out of touch with reality' (Young, 2000: 49). These indications form part of a range of symptoms that are used to clinically diagnose psychosis and mental illness, such as schizophrenia. The DSM – IV characterises delusions as false beliefs established via mistaken suppositions about external reality and which are contrary to that of dominant culture, and hallucinations as mistaken perceptions (APA, 1994). Within this conception, delusions are perceived to be notions that are not upheld or believed by significant numbers of the population, whilst hallucinations are viewed as anomalies and symptomatic of mental malady.

Somewhat problematically, these measures contain an assumption that discerning incorrect, false or bizarre beliefs is a straightforward process and that these are fairly self-evident (Bell et al, 2003). However, guidance for identifying delusional beliefs is sketchy and judgement is subjective and inconsistent. Yet as research has shown, spiritual or religious experiences, purported hallucinations and 'bizarre' beliefs are not particularly reliable measures of psychopathology (see Kroll & Sheehan, 1989). Furthermore, although Thalbourne and Delin (1994) found mystical experience correlated with measures of manic and depressive experience, others reached the conclusion that mysticism and psychosis actually have little

²⁶ It could be argued that this perspective is still fairly dominant in the lay population.

in common (Arbman 1970; Noll 1983; Austin 1999). Overall, research has generally concluded that mystical experiences and psychopathology do not correlate. Many (e.g. Tart, 1996) maintain that there is a qualitative difference between the mystical and the pathological, which is notably profound when a genuine mystical experience has occurred. And Marshall (2005) suggests that the association of mystical experience with pathology is a frequent misidentification.

“...it is a common mistake to assume that mystical experience is not genuine if it is associated with an organic (or psychological) disorder. Mystical experiences have often been dismissed as products of brain pathology, and even those sympathetic to the experiences may assume that the presence of an organic pathology detracts from their validity.”
(Marshall, 2005: 101)

Interestingly, many studies actually suggest the opposite of an association with pathology: that TEHEs correlate with positive affect (e.g. Hood 1974; Greeley 1975; Mallory 1977; Hay & Morisy 1978). This is re-iterated by Tamatea and Evans, (2002: 149) who suggest that ‘some anomalous experiences may not actually be indicative of mental illness, but rather possession of positive talents – even if [the experiences are] distressing’.

It has been argued that there are many individuals in the general population displaying ‘symptoms’ without necessarily developing psychosis (Maher, 1999). Indeed, as Johns and van Os (2001: 1131; see also Buckley, 1981) have noted, ‘people with intense spiritual or religious beliefs can have experiences similar to the positive symptoms of schizophrenia’. Furthermore, results comparing ‘normal’ populations with ‘deluded’ individuals have been mixed (see Roberts, 1991; Jackson, 1997; Jones & Watson, 1997; Peters, Day, McKenna, & Orbach, 1999, for more on this). Outside of a clinical setting many of the ‘symptoms’ of mental health problems are viewed and treated differently. Many of them can also be located *psychometrically* in the general population (Johns & Van Os, 2001). Schizotypy, as noted earlier, is a non clinical trait identified by psychometric measures and shares *some* features with schizophrenia, its clinical cousin. As fairly high levels of schizotypy are reported in the general population this appears to call into question the assumption that certain beliefs and experiences are necessarily pathological.

More recently within psychiatry it has been argued that not all conceptions labelled delusions are the same and that delusions are not necessarily the main indication (or

source) of psychopathology in those diagnosed with psychosis. Bell, Halligan and Ellis (2003: 422) advocate an approach towards delusions that is flexible and views patients as 'cognitive beings firmly situated within their social milieu', allowing psychiatry to comprehend what appears to be a continuum of beliefs. Indeed, it is possible that 'the distinction between normal beliefs and delusions is a matter of degree, rather than a qualitative difference' (Peters et al, 1999: 84). It has been acknowledged that one of the problems with current diagnosis is that many people without psychosis report belief in 'paranormal' phenomena, hold what might be termed 'delusional beliefs' by some, and experience 'hallucinations' and 'anomalous experiences'.

Indeed, the findings of Peters, Day, McKenna and Orbach (1999: 94) 'suggest that form may be more important diagnostically than content: it is not *what* you believe, it is *how* you believe it' (my emphasis). Thus the extent to which an individual is suffering, distressed or preoccupied by their experiences or beliefs seems to be a key factor in positive diagnosis. So for example, reports of hallucinations and delusions alone does not necessarily equal psychosis, which is more dependent on further aspects such as how frequent and disturbing they are plus how the individual copes and behaves both in reaction to them and generally (Johns & van Os, 2001). However, despite these difficulties, psychiatry continues to use the concept of delusion as a central indicator of pathology (Bell et al, 2006a, 2006b).

Clearly psychiatry has been concerned with assessment and evaluation of the extent to which TEHEs are (or could be) indicative of psychosis. This has sometimes had questionable usefulness or applicability. For instance, there have been attempts to retrospectively diagnose historical figures with contemporary clinical disorders, such as saints and artists (see for example, Otsuka & Sakai's, 2004, account of Haizmann's alleged schizophrenia). Again, similar to previous approaches, psychiatry has tended to take the language used to describe an experience at face value when there may be good reasons not to do this. Furthermore, the effect of confusion between mystical states and psychosis has resulted in a persistent view of TEHEs as psychopathological phenomena, a notion that may take some time to shift. This kind of approach has not, in the main, allowed for the significance of TEHEs to be respected or acknowledged, nor has it been able to effectively separate the experiences and the beliefs from the ability to cope or suffering. In parapsychology a scientific focus has resulted in a similar neglect of the personal significance of the experience.

2.2.3 Parapsychology

What are now commonly termed ‘paranormal’ and ‘anomalous’ experiences were originally investigated as psychic experiences by proponents of psychical research. The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was established in England in 1882 and was the first organised centre for research into a variety of phenomena including trance mediumship, hypnosis, clairvoyance and thought-transference (Alvarado, 1998). Research and interest in this field grew and spread. In 1885 the American Society for Psychical Research was established and William James produced various works aligned with clinical and general psychology (Cardena, Lynn & Krippner, 2000a), whilst J.B. Rhine’s parapsychological research emerged nearly fifty years later. Rhine’s work was less concerned with internal states of consciousness and more interested in objective phenomena, following current trends in behaviourism (Alvarado, 1998). Rhine is often cited as one of the main founders of contemporary parapsychology.²⁷

Contemporary parapsychology is generally viewed as a peripheral and controversial branch of psychology (see for example a recent article and response plus public comments in the mainstream media on the ‘worth’ of parapsychology in Radnofsky, 2007, and Watt, 2007). Parapsychology’s marginalised status is evident considering it receives both limited funding and limited opportunities to disseminate findings (see Alcock, 1987, for a further discussion regarding this). Despite this status however, it is a popular subject with students and the phenomena under study are also of fascination to the wider populace (Cardena et al, 2000a).

The discipline has been concerned with a variety of phenomena including psychic phenomena - telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition (generally called psi), OBEs, NDEs, apparitions, lucid dreams, past life experiences, anomalous healing experiences and mystical or transcendent experiences (for a comprehensive review of these phenomena see Cardena et al 2000b). As to whether such experiences are rare or more prevalent than is assumed, is perhaps difficult to accurately assess, but certainly some (e.g. déjà vu) are considered to be more widely reported (and accepted) than others (e.g. UFO-related). However, studying TEHEs has not been a core task of experimental parapsychology.

²⁷ For more on the emergence and history of parapsychology see Beloff (1993); Edge, Morris, Palmer and Rush (1986); Melton (2001); Irwin and Watt (2007); O’Hara and Harrison (2007) and Wolman (1977).

One key exception to this is the work of Charles Tart. Tart's work on altered states of consciousness²⁸ (ASCs) has spanned several decades and his anthology of ASCs research first published in 1969 rapidly became a classic in the field. Tart (1969) suggests that whilst ASCs can present semantic and philosophical difficulties, subjectively most individuals can discern a 'normal' state of consciousness from an 'altered' one. Parker (1975: 8) suggests that ASC be taken to mean 'any state of mind that differs markedly enough from that which we associate with our normal waking selves'. ASCs can be seen to include any number of different phenomena including mystical states, trance states, and lucid dreaming. Tart observed that ASCs were viewed with suspicion within mainstream society, and that, despite the psychedelic revolution (increased interest and experimentation with psychedelic drugs leading to more AS experiences) they were still equated with pathology. Slowly, however, a variety of works were published (between 1960 and 1990) which suggested that the field of parapsychology was expanding to include states of consciousness as part of its subject matter.

Parapsychologists, such as Tart, are less convinced that ASCs have a definitive explanation but work in this area does tend towards the experimental and scientific. The need to be scientific has prevailed – to the extent that parapsychology has stringent experimental protocols, higher significance levels than any other branch of science and has been subject to numerous discussions regarding methodology and replicability (for example, see Wiseman & Milton, 1997, for proposed guidelines on how to conduct more reliable psi experiments, and Zingrone & Alvarado, 1999, for a review of these guidelines). This desire for recognition from orthodox science has meant that parapsychology's approach has tended to be experimental.

Parapsychological research has been predominantly focused on three areas with a distinct emphasis on the first two. These are, establishing authenticity – revealing *whether* phenomena have actually occurred; revealing underlying processes – exploring or developing explanations as to *how* phenomena come about; and understanding paranormal phenomena from an experient's point of view – focusing on the *phenomenology* and experiential aspects (Irwin, 1999: 9). Whilst there has always been some parapsychological research that is not experimental (e.g. mostly that with a phenomenological focus), the predominant concern is experimental laboratory studies of parapsychological phenomena.

²⁸ It is worth noting that distinctions have been made between ASCs and anomalous experiences (see Cardeña et al, 2000a: 4).

Many have argued that this preoccupation has led to an ongoing (and fairly unproductive debate) between sceptics and believers as to the ‘reality’ of paranormal phenomena (e.g. Greeley, 1991).

Of late there has been much discussion and debate regarding the future of psychical research, parapsychology and particularly of parapsychology in its current form (see for instance, the edited collection by Thalbourne & Storm, 2005 or the papers listed for the Parapsychology Foundation’s conference, 2008: <http://www.pflyceum.org/265.html>). A focus on the experimental approach to parapsychological phenomena has, according to some researchers, meant that little progress has been made (e.g. Blackmore, 1988; White, 1990). Indeed, it has been suggested that to date the *only* real finding in experimental parapsychological research is the ‘experimenter effect’²⁹ (White, 1990). In this sense, it is notoriously difficult to pinpoint exactly what is being measured or produced in parapsychological experiments.

There are various researchers within parapsychology and related fields, such as transpersonal psychology and consciousness studies (including William Braud, Etzel Cardeña, Hoyt Edge, Charles Tart, and John Palmer) who recognise the benefit of experimentation whilst also endorsing and recognising complementary approaches. Rhea White (1990) went further and advocated an approach more interested in meaning and understanding than scientific experimentation. She proposed that the experiential and the internal aspects of phenomena should be explored as a potentially fruitful and insightful avenue regardless of their objective reality. This kind of approach is one that prioritises understanding and emphasises respect and sensitivity towards the experiences and those that report them. However, whilst this approach is commendable in terms of its ethics and sensitivity towards experiencers and their reported experiences, it has also tended to see experiences as accessible to a greater or lesser extent via the descriptions it studies. Additionally, this approach is still a marginalised one within parapsychology and predominantly the focus of research reflects the scientific and cognitive orientations of psychology – mainly because these kinds of experiences are categorised as psychological phenomena.

²⁹ The *experimenter effect* is the term used in relation to the discovery that successful results (those showing a statistically significant effect) in parapsychological experiments were more likely if researchers were psi supporters as opposed to sceptics. Some recent work has looked at the relationship between experimenter belief and experimenter effect (Watt & Wiseman, 2002), whilst other research has looked at the psychological characteristics of psi researchers in order to try and further understand psi-conduciveness (Smith, 2003).

2.2.4 Sociology and social science

It is conventionally assumed that TEHEs are private, personal and individual (mental or cognitive) experiences and are therefore psychological phenomena. However, there is much that might interest sociology. McClenon (1991) advises that phenomena need not be experimentally proven to qualify as legitimate for social study, indeed the experience itself is a justifiable subject for investigation; and Greeley (1991) notes that these experiences are reported by a significant number of people, and that they are meaningful.

“Whether parapsychological phenomena are real or not is notably less important than the sheer fact that experiences of such phenomena whatever their physical or metaphysical nature, are commonplace.”
(Greeley, 1991: 367)

However, most approaches within social sciences have tended to be more interested in ‘explaining’ TEHEs, and demonstrate what might be termed a reductionist approach, with little consideration of any phenomenological features, linguistic construction or the reported import of the experiences.

Within the social sciences much work has focused on explanations for, or social correlates of these experiences (Bourque & Back, 1968; Bourque, 1969; Bourque & Back, 1971). Studies have attempted to establish the individuals most likely to have these kinds of experiences on the basis of their social characteristics or demographics, e.g. ethnicity and class, in order to develop a theory to explain such phenomena. One of the most prevalent theories has been the deprivation theory/marginality hypothesis/compensation approach. This theory posits that marginalized individuals will be more likely to have anomalous experiences or paranormal beliefs because of their relatively poor status and disadvantaged circumstances in society (Bainbridge, 1978; Connor, 1984; Warren, 1970; Wuthnow, 1976). As Irwin explains,

“The deprivation and alienation associated with marginal status in society is held to encourage such people to appeal to magical and religious beliefs, presumably because these beliefs bring various compensations to the lives of their adherents. Under the social marginality hypothesis, the demographic correlates of paranormal belief should be those that represent indices of social marginality.”
(Irwin, 1993: 6-7)

Explanations for TEHEs from this perspective include wish-fulfilment, delusion, escapism or a coping strategy because of an individual's (relative) social destitution. However, studies that have considered the associations between TEHEs and demographics have tended to produce contradictory or conflicting findings, so it is worth reviewing them briefly here.

Most studies have tended to be interested in paranormal belief and demographic correlations rather than with reported experiences. Considering age, results seem to show that young adults report higher rates of paranormal beliefs with the exception of traditional religious beliefs (e.g. Blackmore, 1984; Emmons & Sobal, 1981). Irwin (1993: 8) suggests that this is actually 'at odds with the social marginality hypothesis' because in Western society it is youthfulness that is prized over maturity. Therefore it is the elderly who would constitute a socially marginal group. Other results concerning experiences and age showed an increased likelihood of TEHEs during childhood, especially between the ages of 3 and 10 years and even more likely in the over 40s or 50s (Palmer & Braud, 2002). Similarly, Greeley's (1975) study shows a fairly even distribution of experiences across the age groups, with the most experiences reported for those in their fifties (43%).

Studies considering differences between men and women regarding paranormal belief have generally found that women have higher rates than men (e.g. Randall, 1990; also see Irwin, 1993: 8, for more detail on these studies). However, rates vary depending upon specific phenomena – for example men report stronger belief in UFOs, women in ESP – and the social marginality hypothesis does not account for this variation. Results for socioeconomic status alone have been somewhat inconsistent and dependent upon definition and measurement. Emmons and Sobal (1981) used unemployment as a marker of social marginality and found fairly low levels of paranormal belief reported by this group. They also found no correlation between belief in astrology and unemployment whereas Wuthnow (1976) found higher levels of belief in astrology in the unemployed and those not able to work. And finally, considering ethnicity as a dimension of social marginality is also inconclusive. In the US, compared to the general population black individuals showed a lower level of belief in ESP (Emmons & Sobal, 1981), but black college populations reported higher levels of precognition than whites (Tobacyk, Miller, Murphy & Mitchell, 1988). Other cultural differences include higher rates of belief in ESP

in college students in China than the US (McClenon, 1990) and higher rates of belief in telepathy in Britain and Iceland compared to Sweden (Haraldsson, 1985).

Some studies have combined these demographics looking for patterns. For instance, Hay and Morisy (1978) compared trends between the US and the UK of reported 'religious, ecstatic and paranormal' experiences. They found in the UK results that women and those in 'higher classes' (social class brackets) more commonly reported experiences and the likelihood of a positive response increased with age. However, Back and Bourque's (1970) research found the opposite results in terms of social class. Bourque (1969) also found that there were differences between aesthetic and religious experience (aesthetic experience constituted a transcendent high devoid of any religious content). Those reporting aesthetic experiences were predominantly white, middle-class, well-educated residents of the suburbs, whilst those reporting religious experiences were more frequently from ethnic minorities, poorly educated, rural residents. However, these latter examples are US figures and appear to show 'class' and 'ethnic' differences in relation to language, education and religion rather than the occurrence of actual experiences being related to particular demographics. Indeed, Hay and Morisy (1978: 263) suggest that Back and Bourque's (1970) data is 'cognitively biased and skewed by age', arguing that, 'old people tend to have smaller incomes and to have had less years of education than others'. So for instance, if there is a correlation between lower levels of education, age and positive responses then this finding might be explained by this statement.

The most recent demographics obtained in relation to these kinds of experiences, were for the NSTS, a module in the General Social Survey of 2004 in the US looking at spiritually transformative experiences (Smith, 2006). These results did not find any significant differences in reporting for sex, age, marital status or socioeconomic status. Whilst there were also no differences in reporting for Hispanic ethnicity, more black Americans reported spiritual change than whites or other ethnicities. Furthermore, regional variations in reporting were also recorded – being highest in the South (59.7-61.2%) and lowest on the East coast in New England (24.1%). Smith (2006: 287) explains these regional differences in terms of religious differences – 'basically, spiritual/religious changes are much more common among those actively engaged in religion and among those in fundamentalist and evangelical denominations'.

As is clear from this brief review, empirical support for the social marginality hypothesis is patchy at best, and not consistent. Despite the overall results being inconclusive, it has been cited as a useful theory by some. For instance, there are those (e.g. Goode, 2000, Rice, 2003) who consider the theory to offer a fairly good explanation for 'paranormal religious beliefs' (e.g. heaven, hell, the devil and creationism). More recently, attempts to demonstrate this have been made by researchers (e.g. Rogers, Qualter & Phelps, 2007). This paper concluded that subjective social loneliness and attachment emerged as predictors of paranormal belief. However, the question as to whether social loneliness and other predictors were adequate equivalents of deprivation or social marginality, or consistent with other definitions, was not broached. This is one reason to approach the social marginality hypothesis or deprivation explanation with caution. That is, how is deprivation or marginality to be defined? Moreover, there are clearly difficulties associated with the assignment of individuals to socially marginal groups and measures of deprivation. Indeed, explanations and definitions are not consistent across different studies.

Furthermore, deprivation explanations tend to assume a causal relationship between the experience (and reported belief) and the notion of deprivation, but fail to explicitly show or address how this relationship operates (Wooffitt, 1989). Ultimately, the underlying theory is somewhat patronising – suggestions from an academic elite that individuals can be identified as 'marginal' or 'deprived' (in varying ways using different indicators) and that this is a satisfactory explanation for their reported experiences – which negates any possible attribution of meaning or significance by those who report them. Additionally, much work has actually refuted the marginality hypothesis and compensation or deficiency theories suggesting that there is little conclusive evidence to support these claims (e.g. Campbell & McIver, 1987; Greeley, 1975, 1991; Hay & Morisy, 1978; MacDonald, 1995; McClenon, 1994). For instance, Greeley (1975) suggests that those who report paranormal experiences are not deprived, they are normal people and these experiences are normal experiences. This point of view upholds that many different people, from differing social backgrounds with different social (and psychological) characteristics report these kinds of experiences. Such a diversity of experiences therefore cannot be adequately accounted for by a theory of deprivation or marginality. Nor can this reductionist perspective allow any room for meaningfulness.

2.2.4.1 Cultural source hypothesis

Another explanation, often implicit in mainstream social science, according to McClenon (1994) is the cultural source hypothesis (CSH). Also termed the contextual view, this position has asserted that tradition, discipline, culture and society are the defining factors of these experiences. Not strictly speaking a hypothesis, more a presupposition that the source of these experiences is in ‘social structures, stories and beliefs that stimulate the imagination and give rise to misinterpretations of everyday experiences’ (Cheyne, 1998: 5). This theory would purport that ‘paranormal’ experiences and TEHEs can, at least to a certain extent, be explained by the culture in which the experient is immersed. By way of illustration, Hufford (1982: 101) notes that ‘the difference between a hallucination and an objectively real experience is, at least on the face of it, a matter of interpretation, and we tend to consider such decisions culturally produced’. That is, these decisions are informed by ideas available in an individual’s cultural resources. According to Marshall (2005), the CSH is also fashionable for explaining religious or mystical experience. As he states,

“It has become popular to maintain that mystical experiences are thoroughly conditioned by the religious traditions in which they occur. Mystical experiences, it is asserted, are products of religious indoctrination and training.”
(Marshall, 2005: 2)

Whilst the CSH might assume that TEHEs are in some way produced by the host culture or context in which they arise, others would argue instead that culture affects or mediates TEHEs in a way that *any experience* is mediated by culture (e.g. Yamané, 2000). In this way, most social researchers would agree that we cannot access pure experiences and that they are constructed through and by the social. However, there are many researchers (e.g. Bailey & Yates, 1996; Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995; Fox, 2003; Hufford, 1982, 1995, 2005; McClenon, 1994) who have argued for an element of universality to some of these experiences (e.g. NDEs, transcendent or mystical experiences, ‘Old Hag’ or sleep paralysis³⁰). This notion is sometimes called the experiential source hypothesis.

³⁰ Sleep paralysis describes a state that is believed to occur mostly as the body is waking from the REM state. Characterised by reported features such as feeling awake, being physically paralysed apart from the eyes, which can move or open, a pressure on the chest, sensing a malevolent presence or figure, sometimes hearing footsteps and feeling fear perhaps due to the feeling one is about to be attacked or even killed (Hufford, 1982). The experient is often able to ‘break out’ of the state of paralysis by willing a limb to move or becoming ‘aware’ or ‘conscious’ and turning the experience into an OBE or a lucid dream.

2.2.4.2 *Experiential source hypothesis*

The experiential source hypothesis (ESH) advocates that there are core elements to these experiences, which transcend culture and context and are rooted in processes that are physical, physiological and psychological (Hufford, 1982, 1995, 2005; McClenon, 1994). The ESH does not deny that there are secondary cultural aspects which also inform an experient's account of their experience, but argues that there are universal features underlying any cultural specificity (McClenon, 1994). These universal features are an essential or deep part of the structure of the experience and allude to universality in both the human brain and personality.

The ESH is strengthened by the work of Hufford (1982), who took a then relatively unknown phenomena (old hag or sleep paralysis – see earlier footnote for a description) and elicited similar descriptions from experiencers in different cultural settings. Exploring what was then widely thought to be a folk tale, Hufford collected numerous accounts of people's experiences and found consistent patterns. The same features were found in accounts from people who had no contact with the cultural tradition from which the folk tale originated. Thus what emerged was a very convincing case that sleep paralysis contained a universal core, with stable features in cross-cultural descriptions.

Hufford demonstrated how the experience under study could be the central feature of research. He interviewed experiencers employing a respectful stance that honoured the experiences under investigation. Part of this was achieved by treating the experiences as really happening for those that reported them. Furthermore, Hufford was able to demonstrate that the employment of rigorous and systematic methods is not necessarily at odds with an ethical approach towards informants or respondents. By withholding judgement about the reported experiences (and their 'reality') Hufford was able to allow the respondents to report value and import where they deemed it relevant. In this sense, there are valuable principles to be gained from Hufford's work.

Other reported experiences are situated firmly in culturally-based narratives and beliefs and separating the 'pure' experiential from the cultural is a virtually impossible task. Indeed, Hay and Morisy (1978) claim that, phenomenologically speaking, TEHEs are not merely experienced passively for cultural meanings to be imposed on. Instead they are experienced by acculturated beings ready to interpret by drawing on relevant and available

cultural resources. So whilst the ESH has positive aspects (agnosticism towards the reality behind experiences whilst respectfully recognising the reality for the experiencers) there is an underlying assumption that objective features of the experiences can be identified by studying consistencies in peoples' accounts. This would suggest that the ESH, akin to other approaches, relies upon a naïve view of language and description: as more or less good representations of actual events or inner realities.

Feminist work considering women's experience has also tended to see women's accounts as a reflection of their experience. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider feminist perspectives on women's religious experiences as these tend to value the 'voices' and experiences of women. Therefore, a feminist approach to research is explored next for there are insightful and applicable considerations for this study of TEHES.

2.2.4.3 Feminism

Perhaps surprisingly there is not a body of work within feminism that has considered women's transcendent experiences. Indeed, feminist interest in this subject matter tends not to be concerned with TEHES per se (though see Raphael, 1994, for a philosophical discussion regarding feminism and numinous experience). Instead, feminists have focused on women's relationship with religion (or the spiritual), more often than not their exclusion from positions of power (hooks, 2000; Walter & Davie, 1998), their involvement in or departure from traditional religion (e.g. Hertel, 1995; Brereton & Bendroth, 2001) or the oppressive nature of religious or mystical establishments (e.g. Jantzen, 1994) rather than 'document the ordinary religiosity of millions of churchgoing women' (Walter & Davie, 1998: 640). Other projects prioritise women's spiritual practices; for instance, women's spirituality as personal development (e.g. Bogdan, 2003; Leonard, 1990; Rountree, 2002); spiritual pursuits as potentially politically emancipatory (Finley, 1991) or personally empowering (Zappone, 1987) and even the use of the spiritual as part of a research methodology (Bruce, 2008).

However, whilst Raphael's (1994) consideration of the numinous is concerned with the socially constructed nature of experience it is simultaneously railing against the patriarchal nature of mysticism. In this sense, Raphael sees both the language and the experience of the numinous as constrained and 'conditioned by a patriarchal conception of God' (p523).

Furthermore, whilst she effectively makes a claim for the constitutive nature of experience, it is not extensively explored and she does so with an emphasis on ‘the importance of gender difference in the study of religious experience’ (p525). Although there is undoubtedly real academic value in considering the gender within these experiential accounts, it is not a focus for this thesis. Additionally, there has been little critical engagement in most of these works with the constructionist perspective on language.

Whilst the introduction of feminism at this stage might appear (at least initially) to be of limited relevance, there is an interesting parallel between feminism and TEHEs plus various methodological and ethical insights to be gleaned from this literature. Feminist work has argued that women have historically been marginalised (e.g. Rowbotham, 1973), were often dismissed by the mainstream and not always treated respectfully. In many senses, TEHEs have received comparable treatment. However, there are other reasons why feminist research can inform the study of TEHEs.

One of the most relevant aspects concerns how feminist research has been prolific in its championing of subjective personal experience as a valid research focus (Graham Yates, 1983). Feminist research projects cover a vastly wide-ranging scope of topics with a tendency towards highly personal, sensitive, challenging and contentious subjects; from breastfeeding (Spencer, 2008), to rape (Gregory & Lees, 1999), to prostitution (O’Neill, 2000), to abortion (Al x & Hammarstr m, 2004). Research often has a collaborative, emancipatory or liberatory focus, and is interested in providing a public forum for women’s voices and their experiences (Beasley, 1999). Whilst the claims of this project are more modest and the accounts are not limited to those of women, there is a precedent within feminism for the collection and analysis of experiential accounts. Furthermore, there is a great deal of value placed upon this kind of research material and those who provide it.

The second important aspect regards ethics and the critique of traditional forms of knowledge (see for example, amongst many others, England, 1994; Deem, 1999; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Skeggs, 1994). Unpacking this aspect we find that it contains numerous sub-issues including:

- the consideration of the impact of this kind of research upon its participants, the treatment of respondents coupled with sensitivity and respect towards them and their experiences

- the way in which the relationship between the researcher and the researched is played out during (and after) the entire research process and a reflexive approach towards the researcher's role and involvement
- the way in which the respondents and their experiences are analysed, represented and written up in the process of research

All of these facets of a feminist-influenced ethics can be viewed as important to a project researching 'experience' that is keen to value respondents and treat them sensitively, ethically and with respect. This is not to suggest, however, that practical dilemmas do not arise nor problems emerge during research. Nor that any consideration of ethics is essentially more feminist than or morally superior to other research. Instead, this consideration of feminism follows in the footsteps of other research employing discursive analytic methods keen to also be reflexive researchers informed by feminist work (e.g. Guimaraes, 2007; Weatherall, Gavey & Potts, 2002), combined with an imperative to fairly represent people's reportedly meaningful and profound personal experiences. Firstly, in aiming to balance out the demands of ethics versus methodological professionalism, Guimaraes (2007) reflects about her experience of conducting research and how this clashed with methodological conventions in conversation analysis. Secondly, Weatherall, Gavey and Potts (2002) reflected on the extent to which their current practice as Pakeha feminist discursive psychologists was in sync with early feminist research ideals concerning ethics and politics and how to best represent an 'Oppressed Other' (p532). These issues are discussed further in the next chapter.

2.3 Summary

It is worth summarising the main issues from conventional approaches in psychiatry, psychology, parapsychology and the social sciences here as they inform our subsequent direction. Overall it is clear that the focus in these fields has been on experimentation, assessment, evaluation and correlation. Ultimately then, the pre-occupation has been with explaining TEHEs by reference to social correlates, personality characteristics or forms of mental pathology. The majority of studies (with a few notable exceptions) have therefore not addressed the meaning of these experiences or developed an appropriate and sensitive approach (and the ones that have, we need to learn from e.g. Hufford, 1982, 1995, 2005; and some of the work in transpersonal psychology plus some of the more general

principles from feminist work). In seeking to explain they have predominantly explained away, what are for some people, profound experiences. Additionally, these approaches have not adequately considered what is being explored by studying experiential accounts. They have neglected to see the accounts as produced or the experiences as ‘accounts’ at all.

2.4 Introspection and consciousness studies

These accounts of TEHEs are a form of introspective data and there is a precedent within psychology and related work within consciousness studies which has recently re-employed introspection as a valuable methodological tool.

Consciousness studies emerged only fairly recently (1990s) in its current form (Lorimer, 2001). It is a complex field, loosely held together combining work from various disciplines including neuroscience, philosophy, physics, psychology and other social sciences. Other bodies of knowledge are additionally drawn on intermittently by different researchers including the natural sciences, religion or theology, anthropology, and Eastern traditions. What this eclecticism demonstrates, is a diverse field of study where researchers, theorists and philosophers often hold fundamentally different views about the nature of consciousness and the way in which it can be studied.

Theories of consciousness could be said to exist on a continuum that ranges from the third-person approach, to the first-person approach. A third person approach is closely tied to a scientific model, concerned with objective, observable processes and phenomena. Third person methods in the field of consciousness refer to observations about ‘the study of...natural phenomena’ (Varela & Shear 1999: 1). These ‘phenomena’ would include neural and chemical activity in the brain and different psychological states discerned via brain scanning technologies. Because the phenomena of concern here are considered observable and objective they are also considered measurable, verifiable, and open to tests of reliability and validity. Science, with its emphasis on and establishment of the third-person perspective as inherently more reliable, testable, measurable and directly observable has meant that first person methods such as introspection have persistently been viewed as unreliable and of less value.

A first person approach can be seen as the investigation of individual subjective experience. ‘By first person events we mean the lived *experience* associated with cognitive and mental

events' (Varela & Shear, 1999: 1) (original emphasis). Introspection is considered one of the main routes to this lived experience. However, although introspection can be considered the quintessential method for a first person approach, there are those that argue that phenomenological investigations are more pertinent for a study of consciousness (e.g. Ginsburg, 2005; Petranker, 2003). Nevertheless, this distinction may merely be too philosophically nuanced for the current discussion and it is sufficient to consider that a first person methodology takes as its data the linguistic account or report of a subject(s).

A variety of theories drawing on differing philosophies have been developed regarding consciousness. The most dominant are termed 'productive' theories and suggest that consciousness is brain-based, brain-contained or brain-produced. More controversial and more marginalised 'transmissive' theories propose that consciousness is in some way filtered or transmitted through the brain and may be the result of a correlation between the brain and subjective experience (Lorimer, 2001). Nonetheless, the key debate is about whether the mind has qualities that are independent from the brain and whether all mental experiences can, in principle, be explained by neurological processes. Some scholars however, (e.g. McGinn 1991, Velmans, 2000) have suggested that the predominance of the third-person approach and productive (brain-based) theories tend to avoid the idea of consciousness and explain it away rather than addressing it. Indeed, Chalmers (1995) makes the claim that science is good at explaining physical mechanisms and the performance of functions (i.e. of consciousness) as it takes a reductive view and its underlying philosophy lends itself to this perspective. He notes however, that there is an '*explanatory gap*' (Chalmers, 1995: 4; originally coined by Levine, 1983) when theorising consciousness, between the explanations regarding the performance of functions, and experience.

In this sense, there is a clear distinction being made between the objective and subjective worlds of consciousness. Philosophical concepts of ontology and epistemology are traditionally employed when considering what consciousness is, as Velmans (2000) attests,

“Is the universe composed of one thing (monism) or are there two (dualism)? Does the world have an observer-independent existence (realism) or does its existence depend in some way on the operations of our own minds (idealism)?”
(Velmans, 2000: 3)

The conceptual distinction that exists between objective and subjective has led to a very specific conundrum for the study of consciousness, that is, how objective processes give rise to subjective experience. As Chalmers (1995:2) articulates, ‘it is widely agreed that experience arises from a physical basis, but we have no good explanation of why and how it so arises’; and this has been termed the ‘hard’ problem of consciousness. As yet there is still no neural location (Crick 1994) or material substance that has been found to be the stuff of consciousness.

It is this predominantly ‘objective’ scientific approach, which some researchers (e.g. Fenwick, 2001; Lorimer, 2001; Josephson, 2001) argue has led to difficulties in studying non-ordinary states of consciousness or ostensibly anomalous experiences. As Lorimer points out,

“If one is wedded to a materialistic brain-based philosophy that excludes the possibility of paranormal experiences, then one is very reluctant to accept the challenge that these experiences ostensibly pose to the established view.”
(Lorimer, 2001: 10)

Indeed, an increasing number of researchers have drawn attention to the limitations of materialism alone for fully understanding consciousness (e.g. Barušs, 2001; Braud, 2002; Fenwick, 2001; Lorimer, 2001; Josephson, 2001; Velmans, 1993, 2000; Wilber, 1997). Several researchers (e.g. Edelman, 1992; Fenwick, 2001; Josephson, 2001; Lorimer, 2001) acknowledge the place and relevance of scientific methods to a study of consciousness. However, many advocates of the scientific method view the first person approach with distrust and suspicion. Whilst the third person perspective is considered to be an established, objective measure of particular phenomena or processes, a first person method such as introspection has been considered immeasurable, unreliable, distortable, inconsistent and thus problematic by scientists (Cardeña, 2004).

In light of this rejection of introspection as a reliable scientific method, there has been a resurgence of interest by many attempting to transform the status and rigour of first person research within the study of consciousness. This has taken a variety of forms from attempts at standardisation and validation strategies (e.g. Vermersch, 1999; 2003) to requests for increased testing for error (Goldman, 2004), to calls for increased trust in subjective reporting, whilst acknowledging the inbuilt limitations in introspective methods

(Jack & Roepstorff, 2003), to adopting a pluralistic approach combining various different methods of introspection depending on the research question (Cardena, 2004). Others still, argue that subjective investigation should be more concerned with the phenomenological investigation of consciousness and conscious experience (e.g. Petranker, 2003; Ginsburg, 2005). However, many have actually claimed that the distinction between third and first person methods may be misplaced for both conceptual and pragmatic reasons.

Several researchers (e.g. Cardena, 2004; Varela, 1996; Velmans, 1993; Wilber, 1997) albeit in different ways, suggest that the distinction between first and third person methods produces an impasse and might be a misplaced distinction, whilst others endeavour to let the two approaches coexist (Cohen & Rapport 1995). Conceptually speaking, it has been argued that the distinction overlooks the way in which third person methods are employed by individuals who are as equally embodied and entrenched in the sociocultural world as the ‘creators’ of introspective accounts (e.g. Varela, 1996; Velmans, 1993). As Varela (1996) has famously claimed, there is no ‘view from nowhere’. Velmans concurs with this claim when he states,

“The observer’s experience does not change as he changes perspectives! All that changes is his focus of interest, and consequently, the relationships under consideration.”
(Velmans, 1993: 10)

In this sense, he believes that the distinction is irrelevant. As we are *always* grounded in the ‘phenomenal world’ it is only the focus of our attention and the emphasis we afford different elements at different times that alters. In other words, there is no privileged, observer-free, or neutral position from which to view and describe any phenomena. Additionally, in a pragmatic sense, some scientists recognise the importance of and quite often the reliance upon methods such as introspection in substantiating experimental findings, for example. Whilst third person methods, e.g. experimental psychology, are often framed as objective and first person methods subjective, as if in direct competition, in reality, so-called ‘subjective’ methods often complement ‘objective’ methods as an integral part of experimental practice. Many researchers have identified the reliance of experimental methods on first person accounts, for example in the post-hoc interview (e.g. Goldman, 1997, 2004; Jack & Roepstorff, 2003 amongst others). Post-experimental interviewing is commonly carried out in research to determine subject’s explanations,

clarifications or feedback about the experiment. However, the degree of reliance upon introspective accounts in experimental science is not universally agreed upon. Goldman (1997; 2004) has claimed that experimenters rely substantially on subjects' introspective reports³¹, whether in post-experimental interviewing or during experiments, for verification, feedback or clarification. He points out that this reliance is informal, often implicit in the design and not considered problematic by third person science. Within the experimental approach accounts are obtained by introspection, and they tend to be treated as a route (albeit a faulty or inaccurate one) to experience and states of consciousness. That is, this approach towards introspection assumes that language *can* capture an independent reality.

Yet, conversation analytic research has repeatedly shown that interacting parties construct their responses with reference to (their interpretation of) the interactional requirements of that particular setting. And approaches informed by discourse analysis (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987) have noted how language is socially produced; thus the construction of any subject's account regarding their conscious experience will be tied to and designed for the context in which it is produced. In this respect language cannot be viewed as an unproblematic or direct route to experience. Indeed the relationship between language and (actual) cognitive processes has been the subject of a fairly recent edited collection (Molder & Potter, 2005), which develops perspectives on this relationship by scholars broadly informed by ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. Therefore, as in other approaches to the study of consciousness, there has been little consideration of how introspective accounts are produced, nor is there any acknowledgement of the interactional and constitutive nature of description.

2.5 Conclusion

From the review it is clear that existing research tends to ignore key components of the TEHE: its meaning, the phenomenological nature of the experiences, and the social and discursive production of reports. With a few notable exceptions the bulk of the research has neither prioritised, nor focused upon these aspects, leaving some important and uncharted territory in this field.

³¹Dennett (2003) suggests that scientists are agnostic about the truth of subject's claims and take a neutral stance towards this issue. Dennett thus claims that scientists do not rely on introspective reports or depend on them for verification.

Additionally, as we have seen, whilst the experience is a private and occasionally significant period of an altered state of consciousness, it is also a psychological state which is made public through social practices of communication and description. What this means is that whilst the field of consciousness provided the method of introspection in order to study conscious experience and psychological states, it has thus far neglected to note that it is only the accounts of these experiences that we can study (and should study?), rather than the experiences themselves. And the kinds of accounts that are produced here lend themselves to analysis from two complementary perspectives, Discursive Psychology and Conversation Analysis.

It is also notable how the potentially meaningful nature of these experiences has been sidelined by the bulk of research. The work of Hufford (1982, 1995, and 2005) provides an illustrative example of how respectful work can proceed. However, there are other insights which can be gleaned from work in transpersonal psychology and feminism regarding the development of an appropriate methodology which respects these experiential reports and treats the experiences ethically and sensitively. These will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Researching and Analysing Accounts of TEHEs

3.1 Introduction

From the last chapter we have noted that previous approaches to TEHEs across a range of disciplines have tended to ignore the role of language and communication as important. Similarly, on the whole, there has been a lack of concern for the personal aspects of these experiences and the ethical issues for researchers that arise from them. This chapter thus outlines the analytic and methodological approach, which takes these issues into consideration. So, in addition to Conversation Analysis (CA) and Discursive Psychology (DP), transpersonal and feminist approaches have been methodologically informative to the research process. It is therefore important to acknowledge and outline the relevant aspects of these approaches.

The first part of this chapter details these methodologies, highlighting their varying strengths and suitability for a study of TEHEs. Secondly, some of the limitations and problems with these approaches are noted, not least the identification of possible conflicting or contradictory elements and attempts to rectify or address them. Thirdly, some common methodological principles are detailed which seek to present the integrated ethos and approach of this project. These principles aim to inform a sophisticated and rigorous approach, foregrounding the substantiation, accountability and validity of analytic claims combined with an ethos of equitability, respect and ethical reflection.

This chapter will also incorporate and outline the research process; research design, how data were collected and transcribed and how the analysis was conducted. Furthermore, the limitations of a solely linguistic, 'academic' or socially scientific approach to these kinds of experiences (due to their alleged profundity) are highlighted. Indeed, it is argued that crucial aspects of these experiences are overlooked by or missing from any academic analysis. These limitations highlight a tension between the academic and the personal, which has been consistent throughout this research and remains unresolved. Finally and in this vein, it is argued that this approach builds on previous work and ultimately advocates a pluralistic and integrated approach to the study of exceptional human experiences more generally.

3.2 Transpersonal Research Methods

There are various methods that have been used and considered apt for studying TEHEs (also paranormal or anomalous experiences, more generally). Perhaps the most relevant approach to researching these experiences is a transpersonal one. Initially this approach was specifically devised for ‘extraordinary or ultimate human experiences’ to provide ‘alternative modes of awareness and intuition’ not catered for by traditional research methods (Braud & Anderson, 1998a: ix). Traditional methods would include ordinary ways of conducting research e.g. focus groups, interviews, ethnography, surveys, experiments and the epistemological assumptions associated with these methods. Indeed, transpersonal methods are advocated for use in tandem with other methods (including traditional and quantitative approaches) and can be used in a complementary fashion. Their ‘complementary’ status to conventional approaches has been emphasised recently and approaches endorsed include,

1. “Nonverbal (art, image, symbol, movement) and story-telling approaches
2. Inclusive and multicultural research approaches and ways of knowing
3. The study and application of local, indigenous, and spiritual wisdoms and experiences that serve positive end goals
4. Re-conceptualization of ordinary, neglected, anomalous, or pathologized experiences in transpersonal terms.”

(Anderson & Braud, 2007: 1)

Invariably qualitative methods are employed as this is seen as the best way of representing the ‘idiographic and personal nature of transpersonal experiences’ (Braud & Anderson, 1998a: x).

Transpersonal methods were inspired by activities taking place in the field of transpersonal psychology – originally associated with a variety of names, the best known of whom are probably Abraham H. Maslow, Anthony Sutich and Stanislav Grof. Other influences to the field, theoretically and otherwise include, William James, Carl Jung, Erich Fromm and more recently, Ken Wilber. The whole nature of the transpersonal refers to its Latin, etymological roots, with ‘*trans*, meaning beyond or through, and *personal*, meaning mask or façade – in other words, beyond or through the personally identified aspects of self’ (Anderson, 1998: xxi). The focus, therefore, of transpersonal psychology has been the most profound and ultimate human experiences, for instance peak experiences, because our ordinary selves and usual states of consciousness appear to be somehow transcended

(Maslow, [1964]1976). Originally, this meant an exclusive focus on the scientific or empirical study of these phenomena. However, transpersonal methods have expanded often being used in and developed by researchers in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, parapsychology, consciousness studies, medicine and philosophy (Anderson, 1998).

Transpersonal methods are varied. However, there is a general ethos and approach that could be said to be indicative of a transpersonal approach, much of which concerns the behaviour of the researcher and the way in which the respondents or participants of a particular project, and their experiences, are treated. One of the key aspects is a respect for, and sensitivity towards the experients and their experiences – also termed ‘honouring human experience’ (Braud, 1994; Anderson, 1998).

“Honouring human experience is an ordinary human exploration practiced here in the focused context of research. It particularly requires approaching each research topic with *a beginner’s mind*, an attitude that feels wonder, enjoyment, surprise, playfulness, awe, and deep appreciation.”
(Anderson, 1998: xxvii, original emphasis)

This form of humility and open-mindedness towards others’ experiential claims does not necessitate complete agreement with or wholehearted acceptance of differing worldviews, beliefs, or experiences, however. Instead, respectfulness, a non-judgemental approach and agnosticism towards the ‘reality’ of these experiences is advocated. As James (1911: 101) has pointed out, ‘anything is real of which we find ourselves obliged to take into account in any way’. Thus, the concern is not to test the physical reality of particular experiences but instead to reveal the personal significance of those same experiences (Braud, 1998: 235-7).

Transpersonal methods encourage creative and novel approaches to research practice; additionally they require considerable personal involvement from the researcher towards the topic being studied, but are also viewed as potential sources of significant experiences for the researcher in the process of research itself.

“These transpersonal research methods incorporate intuition, direct knowing, creative expression, alternative states of consciousness, dreamwork, storytelling, meditation, imagery, emotional and bodily cues, and other

internal events *as possible strategies and procedures in all phases of research inquiry*. Both the topics of research inquiry and the methods employed are potentially transpersonal or spiritual in nature.”

(Anderson, 1998: xxx, original emphasis)

A transpersonal approach endorses and values any potentially transformative experiences for the researcher either prior to the process as an instigator or during it. However, as White (1998: 143) notes, although various different types of experiences might occur in this context, ‘few, I imagine, were honoured at the time of their occurrence or when the research findings were reported in technical journals...they are considered folklore, unscientific, unreliable, “lucky” – relegated to the underside of the research process’.

One other aspect that is central to transpersonal methods is the deployment of creativity and vitality in the entire research process. This might apply to research design, collecting data, analysis or writing up but generally encourages an intuitive approach, prioritising the applicability for each particular project, and the ‘feelings’ of the researcher and the feedback from research participants. Examples of this sort include the use of imagery and opportunities for participants to draw, paint or sketch for a project on dreams (Fagen, 1998); using observation of freeform movement as one aspect of exploring the phenomenological experience of ‘being-movement’³² (Fisher, 1998); and promoting flexibility towards the potential impact of the interview and considering innovative ways of feeding back to participants – e.g. that fostered supportive shared storytelling (Bushell-Spencer, 1998). However, having also established in Chapter Two that any study of experience is equally a study of language and communication, then it would seem pertinent to draw on methodologies with this as their focus. Because the data for this project are interview-based accounts, it is important that they are acknowledged as language or discourse.

3.3 Discourse Research

There are various approaches to the study of language relevant to this project. One of these is conversation analysis (CA) and the other is discursive psychology (DP).

³² ‘Being-movement’ is a particular expression employed by Fisher (1998: 184) to describe ‘any type of dance/movement practice that allows the mover to move in an undetermined, nonstructured, freestyle manner, with the attention focused inwardly and on the experience of the movement’.

CA and DP are methods for discourse research or discourse studies (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001). Other approaches under this broad heading include, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis and critical discursive psychology, though even within disciplines there are often quite significant differences (Wooffitt, 2005a). For instance, researchers may align themselves with different perspectives on key methodological issues such as language, cognition and how the social world can and should be understood. Therefore, it is the version of CA outlined by Wooffitt (2005a) and the version of DP detailed firstly, by Edwards and Potter (1992a; and re-clarified in various locations including, Potter, 2003a, 2003b; Potter and Edwards, 2001) that are used here. However, it is worth noting the significant contribution of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) now seminal text on discourse analysis, and the development of differing strands of DP, influential and relevant to many of the issues in this thesis (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998; 2003a, 2003b, 2007; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Firstly, some background detail about the development of CA as a research methodology and analytic practice will be provided. This will be followed by an outline of DP³³.

3.3.1 Conversation analysis

Developed originally by Harvey Sacks, and subsequently by Emmanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, CA examines talk as a socially organised phenomenon, with an order, a structure and various formal properties (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). Amongst these properties are aspects now taken for granted in many academic disciplines, including the turn-taking element to interactional exchanges and the sequential nature of talk (see Jefferson, 2004a; Sacks, 1992, 2004; Sacks et al, 1978; Schegloff, 1968). Sacks set about recording and collecting empirical, naturally-occurring spoken interactions whilst discovering and developing the notion that there was '*an intrinsic orderliness... [to] interactional phenomena*' (Psathas, 1995: 8, original emphasis).

CA's inception was influenced by ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, [1967] 1984), which attests that social action is achieved through the operation of implicit and pragmatic reasoning skills. Ethnomethodology tends to emphasise an interpretive approach, focusing on sense making in any given moment. However, ethnomethodology had no systematic or

³³ These discussions of CA and DP are relatively brief and introductory. More detailed discussions of specific substantive issues can be found in relevant parts of the thesis.

formal methodology and Sacks was seeking a rigorous and systematic method for studying action and interaction (Schegloff, 1992). Indeed, Sacks focused his analyses on instances of everyday speech and argued that no interaction was too minor or seemingly irrelevant an object of study and thus CA developed in ways seemingly antithetical to its interpretivist roots. For instance, according to some ethnomethodologists, as well as being an offshoot of ethnomethodology,

“...conversation analysis has also ended up becoming a technical study of language-in-interaction that in various ways supplants the methods of members with its own more technical lexicon.”
(Laurier, 2007: 4)

This focus on the minutiae of conversation meant that a meticulous and detailed transcription method was required; therefore Jefferson developed a system aiming to capture various aspects of speech (Jefferson, 2004b). This system includes transcribing or representing participants taking turns during conversation, any gaps or pauses in speech, simultaneous or overlapping speech, speech emphasis and intonation – speed, volume and length of sounds, incorporating breathing and sighs, when audible. However, as Wooffitt (2005a: 13) identifies, CA ‘is not simply the study of transcripts: it seeks to make sense of those events of which the transcription is a representation’. CA’s aim therefore, in part, is to reveal the structures, actions and sense-making processes involved in social interaction through close attention to talk.

Conversation analytic research has repeatedly demonstrated that talk consists of structured utterances; that interaction between individuals is not completely random, messy or disorganised - as was previously assumed in the social sciences (Heritage, 2001). CA demonstrates how speakers possess tacit knowledge about the structures and rules of conversation, which informs their interactional business. These rules are not immutable, but instead are locally managed and coordinated from moment to moment. That is, though general rules associated with interaction exist (for instance, the way in which we greet each other – see Goffman, 1971; Kendon, 1990) these are, to certain degrees, flexible and malleable. So whilst there are ‘rules’, CA has identified and shown the specificity and contingency of interaction, where an individual’s utterances are anchored to their tacit understanding of what is required from one moment to the next and not merely shaped by

an overarching linguistic system or universal grammar. The way in which a piece of talk is designed and produced is tied to talk that immediately precedes it: it has sequentiality.

“Talk is social action produced in the first instance for specific co-participating others, and is designed to attend to interactional and interpersonal matters relevant to the parties’ immediate ‘here-and-now’ concerns as interaction unfolds.”

(Wooffitt, 2005a: 178)

Therefore, within an interactional context, speakers employ linguistic resources, orientate to their understanding of the setting and produce utterances based on their interpretation of previous utterance. Utterances can be seen as, ‘accountable products of common sets of procedures’ (Heritage & Atkinson, 1984: 1) from this perspective.

This means that the language used to talk about our experiences (and talk per se) is socially produced and contextually driven (Schegloff, 1997). Discerning the purpose and function of language requires attending to the context in which it occurs – as talk performs specific tasks in the immediate interactional situation. And CA provides a way in which to both demonstrate these procedures and identify contingent and common properties in particular types of talk settings – e.g. talk about TEHEs or paranormal experiences, see for example Wooffitt (1992, 2001). Furthermore, CA provides a method to identify these processes *explicitly* in the data. CA’s analytic focus is the turn-by-turn basis of interaction and the organisation and design of talk which can reveal what the interactional parties interpret as the relevant features in the immediate context of their interaction. These features can be seen as devices that are selected and deployed by speakers in conversation in order to accomplish certain actions: as Sacks asked, ‘what are the properties of an object which permit it to do this or that task?’ (1995: 31). CA is interested in determining these actions and can be considered the study of talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 1987).

In addition to taking account of the interactional nature of language and communication, CA’s approach offers qualitative analysis increased validity and accountability. Firstly, this is achieved via the inclusion of longer, more precise transcription than conventionally used in social science. Secondly, any analytic claims are explicitly grounded in the verbal interactions and exposed to immediate critique and scrutiny by all readers, thus promoting analytic accountability. Thirdly, CA endorses deviant case analysis. This process can

enable more sophisticated and comprehensive analytic claims about all the instances obtained from the corpus. It is this rigour and increased validity through formality that provides further desirability about CA as a method for any analysis of language and interaction and thus a study of TEHE accounts.

3.3.2 Discursive Psychology

Another discourse methodology which has been influential in this project is Discursive Psychology (DP). There are several features of DP that can be considered identifiably relevant for a study of TEHEs, which will be discussed below. In many senses, discursive psychology can be seen as a distinct arm of discourse analysis (Potter, 2004). It emerged from both work in sociology and social psychology as a critique of traditional psychology's assumptions and methods. Particularly informative to its development was Potter & Wetherell's (1987) volume on discourse and social psychology, which is centrally concerned with reportedly mental phenomena in a discursive way.

It has been suggested that it is 'misleading to talk of DP as a method', as 'it is an approach embedded in a web of theoretical and metatheoretical assumptions' (Potter, 2003a: 784-5). Instead, it is more relevant to identify the features that characterise it as an approach. Especially as, since its inception, there have been a wide range of influences and inspirations for different branches of DP including Wittgenstein, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, narrative analysis, Bakhtin/Voloshinov and post-structuralism (Wetherell, 2007: 663). Discursive psychologists question the cognitivist assumptions that they consider to be inherent in much social psychological work.

“Rather than seeing...discursive constructions as expressions of speakers' underlying cognitive states, they are examined in the context of their occurrence as situated and occasioned constructions whose precise nature makes sense, to participants and analysts alike, in terms of the social actions those descriptions accomplish.”
(Edwards & Potter, 1992a: 2-3)

In other words, language is not treated as a direct route to internal or mental subjective events. Instead, discursive psychologists, such as Edwards and Potter, are concerned with the construction of factual accounts and speaker's descriptions of their mental states. It has been suggested that DP (and discourse analysis generally) provides 'for a somewhat

wider set of concerns and materials than those addressed by conversation analysis' (1992a: 28). More specifically, DP has an interest in the social organisation, content and subject matter of talk, the 'action, construction and variability' of talk, the rhetorical organisation of talk, and an interest in how any references to cognition and cognitive processes in talk perform interactive work (Edwards & Potter, 1992a: 28).

There are various substantive matters that could be of concern to an analysis informed by DP (in the same way that CA could be applied to any interaction regardless of its substantive content). However, DP does have specific interests related to psychology. These have been divided into three dominant strands by Potter and Edwards (2003; see also Hepburn & Wiggins, 2005). The first is focused on how *psychological topics* such as 'memory' or 'attitudes' are employed in talk or discourse more generally. For instance, how the use of reportedly 'remembered' events help to perform some interactional work – 'a memory is not a mere recalling, isolated and serene, but is related to communicative actions and interests' (Edwards & Potter, 1992a: 16). Secondly, *psychological terms* commonly employed within psychology are examined to understand their role in discourse. The third focus concerns 'the ways in which psychological matters including thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, are topicalised, handled, or implied' in talk (Edwards & Stokoe, 2004: 499). In other words, the invocation of, or reference to *psychological states* is studied as a matter of discursive interest. Thus any talk that is likely to employ 'recollection' of some description and include speaker's references to their 'thoughts' or 'beliefs', such as talk about TEHEs is a legitimate candidate for DP analysis.

"Through looking at how people talk about mental states, researchers can therefore study something which is hugely significant – the criteria and practices a community develops and through which it recognises and constitutes its psychological life."
(Wetherell, 2007: 664)

Talk about these matters is seen as both *constructive* and *action-oriented*. The term *constructive* captures the way in which each individual instance of talk provides 'a particular version of things, rather than any other', whilst *action-oriented* denotes the way in which any talk 'is always analysably doing something (e.g. countering, complaining, praising, justifying), and not merely being dumped from memory' (Edwards & Stokoe, 2004: 500). Talk concerning perception, for instance, does not mean that corresponding underlying mental (or cognitive perceptive) processes are being revealed. Furthermore,

establishing these processes is set aside in order to focus on the communicative and interactive implications of the actual talk (Edwards & Potter, 1992a; Potter & Edwards, 2003).

Whilst DP is often used for topics of interest to psychology, it is applicable for most other interactional contexts. Additionally, there have been movements to extend DP to topics of interest closely related to TEHEs – e.g. towards developing a discursive parapsychology (see Wooffitt & Allistone, 2005, 2008). Furthermore, Wetherell (2007: 673) notes the potential benefits of applying ‘more systematic empirical analyses’ to other areas of social science currently employing ‘vague and loose constructionist accounts of identity’. Wetherell (2007) also notes the differing paths, research foci and stances taken by different discursive researchers working within a broader definition of ‘discursive psychology’ than Potter and Edwards would accept. It is worth mentioning those here; for whilst the analytic methods employed in this work are, in the first instance, informed by the DP of Potter & Edwards, there are conceptual and methodological issues that are informed by a more critical approach³⁴ (e.g. that of Wetherell, 2007). These approaches in many ways are quite distinct.

Potter and Edwards’ approach to DP would not consider the integration of wider social theory as appropriate to an analysis, for instance, and would remain concerned with the immediate interactional context defined in quite strict terms (e.g. see Schegloff, 1997, 1999). Wetherell, however, has historically been much more sympathetic to the integration of wider theory and ideas in discursive analyses, such as the poststructuralism of Lacan or Mouffe (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). More recently, her stance has incorporated the idea of a ‘personal order’ (Wetherell, 2007: 661), which is the conceptualisation of a consistent self-identity via an accumulation of repeated ways of interacting. She explains this in more detail as an extension of earlier ideas she developed with Edley (e.g. the concept of psycho-discursive. For more on this concept see Edley & Wetherell, 1997).

“Over time particular routines, repetitions, procedures and modes of practice build up to form personal style, psycho-biography and life history and become a guide for how to go on in the present... A person or individual is [thus] a site

³⁴ This is evident in the reflective and critical appraisal of the analytic approach in Chapter Seven.

displaying...[a] kind of ‘open continuity’. In the case of personal order, the relevant practices could be described as ‘psycho-discursive’”
(Wetherell, 2007: 668).

The main ‘loose grouping’ of analysts and researchers has sometimes been termed ‘critical discursive psychology’ (Wetherell, 2007: 665). Critical discursive psychologists in general work to combine both micro and macro approaches to discourse in their analyses (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) but this is diversely accomplished. Approaches are sometimes informed by Rhetorical Psychology (RP) (Michael Billig), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) (such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun Van Dijk), but also narrative analysis, psychoanalysis and social identity theory in addition to conversation analysis and discursive psychology (see Wetherell, 2007: 665, for examples).

This myriad of influences have been discussed critically elsewhere (see for instance Wooffitt’s, 2005a, recent comparison of CA and DA for a discussion and critique of RP, CDA and FDA; see also Edley, 2006; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2003; Wetherell, 2003a, 2007 for ongoing debates about psychoanalysis and DP), however, there are also some general methodological points to acknowledge from this work. These include debates concerning how analysts can or should consider the wider context in which interaction operates and the way in which any ostensibly ‘extra-discursive’ or ‘non-discursive’ issues are analytically broached (including concepts of ‘interiority’ or ‘inner’ self). These issues are more fully discussed later in the chapter and in Chapter Seven.

3.3.3 CA and DP: similarities and differences

It is difficult to establish the differences between CA and DP because, in part, ‘discursive psychologists have developed lines of inquiry which overlap with those in conversation analytic studies’ (Wooffitt, 2005a: 129). In CA there tends to be more consensus towards method and approach than in DP. However, while DP is fervently anti-cognitivist and solidly constructionist in its approach towards mental state formulations and their correlation with actual underlying cognitions (Potter, 2004), CA’s approach to the role and nature of cognition in interaction is more diverse. It is also dependent on individual researchers (see for example the differences between discourse researchers, some of whom are conversation analysts and discursive psychologists, exemplified in the chapters of the

collection on conversation and cognition edited by te Molder & Potter, 2005).

Furthermore, some recent comment has emphasised the potential benefits of moving beyond a ‘post-cognitivist’ methodological era (see Kitzinger, 2006).

Despite differences in the concerns and particular projects of CA and DP, there is much convergence between them. They are both concerned with the use of language in a variety of different situations and contexts - predominantly those that are ‘naturally occurring’³⁵ or ‘naturalistic. Along with the majority of disciplines under the rubric of discourse studies or research, both traditions question the assumption that language is a ‘vehicle for getting to the real nature of events’ (Wetherell, 2001a: 16), as discussed in the previous chapter. That is, adopting a CA (or DP) methodology involves embracing a certain type of epistemological position: one that is anti-realist³⁶ (Edwards, 1997).

Thus, in adopting a methodological and analytical perspective closely informed by CA and DP, it is important to identify what I am taking from CA and DP and developing in my own subsequent analyses. Firstly, I am adopting a non-cognitivist and anti-realist view of language; occupying an epistemological stance that is social constructionist (following DP’s alignment with Wittgenstein’s philosophy, e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992a; Potter, 2001). It is Edwards and Potter’s DP that closely informs my analysis and Wetherell’s (2007) position which informed my subsequent critical appraisal of the analysis. In this sense, I am employing a CA-informed empirical approach with a detailed and closely grounded analysis of language in interaction. Wetherell’s (2007) position does not closely inform my analysis as it does not have a wholly satisfactory way of integrating the micro and the macro in an analysis and the notion of ‘personal order’ is too closely aligned with a possible theory of self and/or positioning bringing further conceptual and possible theoretical problems. However, it is the spirit of her critical insights, about the possible limitations of this kind of analysis, that are drawn on later to evaluate the effectiveness of this analytical approach.

At this stage, it is worth briefly outlining the final influential discipline – feminism – that has informed the design and conduction of this research project particularly in terms of the practical ethics, sensitivity and respect towards respondents (the relevance of which was

³⁵ The issue, definition and status of naturally occurring data in CA and DP research will be considered in more detail later in this chapter.

³⁶ However, this is by no means definitively decided amongst discourse researchers and some argue that there is room for a critical realist approach, which is less epistemologically motivated and more methodologically driven – presumably in a pragmatic sense (see for instance recent debates between Sims-Schouten, Riley & Willig, 2007; Speer, 2007, and Riley, Sims-Schouten & Willig, 2007).

established in Chapter Two). It has therefore also been influential in developing the methodological principles employed throughout.

3.4 Feminism

One of the initial issues with feminist research is that it is not something which is easy to define, although researchers tend to be confident that it is distinctly and essentially different from other forms of research (Nash 1994). Nonetheless, these differences are somewhat elusive. It has been suggested that doing feminist research is more about upholding certain principles and observing parameters that inform and guide the inquiry rather than religiously obeying stringent protocols (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). However, these guidelines are not fixed, which introduces an element of impossibility to feminist research (Reinharz, 1992). Yet one encouraging suggestion is that feminist research incorporates a diversity of possible routes (Schacht & Ewing, 1997).

One of the central tenets of any feminist project is a concern with gender (Luff, 1999). However, this concern is not at the heart of a study of TEHEs. Consequently, it is more applicable in this context, to speak of the *influence of feminism* in this project. As DeVault has suggested, it is possible to

“Draw a distinction ... between ‘feminist research’ and ‘feminist methodology’ [where] ... ‘feminist research’ [can be seen] as a broader category including any empirical study that incorporates or develops the insights of feminism. Feminist studies may use standard research methods, or they may involve explicit attention to methodological critique and innovation.”
(DeVault, 1996: 31)

In this sense, this project ‘incorporates and develops’ the distinct ethical and reflexive critique that feminism has levelled at mainstream and traditional methods. In part this is directed towards the historic suppression and devaluation of lived experience in research (Rowbotham, 1973). However, this research is not specifically about women – therefore it is not straightforwardly a feminist project. Instead, this study includes features that characterise a *feminist ethos* in the research process. These include placing the researcher (and their interests or agenda) in the research process, employing techniques of reflexivity throughout the research process and prioritising ethical considerations (Hawkesworth,

1989). This ethos specifically informed the approach taken towards research participants, the conflicted sentiments in interviews (between passivity and involvement – discussed later), the subject matter and its treatment but also the way in which the entire research process was reflected upon. Whilst these are not all solely feminist concerns, many of them originated in feminism and are central to feminist principles.

Methodological issues such as these are informed by a feminist critique of knowledge production. Within this critique, feminist research reconsidered the status of objectivity, whilst consistently aiming to highlight the relationship between research and epistemology, i.e. concerning engagement with the political, the theoretical and the practical (e.g. Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987, 1991; Stanley, 1990). As some of these issues are central to a feminist ethos and therefore this project, it is worth discussing them in brief here. Feminists argue that the production of knowledge, since the Enlightenment, was being portrayed as neutral; concerned with factuality, objectivity, rationality, and logic (Lennon & Whitford, 1994). Valid and reliable knowledge was produced only when the ‘male’ author detaches ‘himself’ from his biases and bodily experience (Assiter, 2000). In other words, dominant forms of knowledge were being presented as (allegedly) impartial creations, where the authors remained concealed.

Feminists subsequently argued that there is power in this anonymity: where an invisible and hidden ‘knower’ makes claims about and classifies the ‘known’ (Maynard, 1998). As a result, feminists argued that any claims rooted in research are not neutral; they are informed by the individual(s) doing the researching. Knowledge is constructed and not merely ‘a disinterested reflection of reality’ (Nash 1994: 68). For some feminists (e.g. Haraway, 1988) true or complete objectivity is a myth as all knowledge is produced and created by partial and socially located agents. Indeed, Harding (1987) claims that researchers are not anonymous, invisible, voices of authority, but subjective, located individuals with interests, biases, and motivations. For these reasons it is important that the inevitable partiality of a researcher is in some way acknowledged and explored. In this research, this issue is discussed more extensively in the concluding chapter.

Issues regarding ethics and exploitation are often cited as archetypal feminist concerns. But any research can have real effects upon both the researcher and the researched that may not arise until after the research has finished (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). To combat any adverse effects some feminists suggest that research should be directed towards the

interests of those being researched (e.g. Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Mies, 1983; Skeggs, 1994). However, these interests might be difficult to discern, different according to different individuals and impossible to represent. Nonetheless, it is seen as important to promote a more equitable research process that informs emancipation and social change. In this respect, reciprocity and (where possible) the levelling of relations between the researcher and respondents are emphasised (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). In an ideal research situation an inclusive process is encouraged whereby the respondents play an active role and epistemic authority is shared. However, the practicalities of conducting research may mean that implementing these strategies is neither possible nor desirable. Nonetheless, there are more modest aims which can be pertinent to this project, which is influenced by feminism. For instance, meaningful interpretation can only arise when the methodology are sensitive to and retain ethical values towards the participants and their experiences, according to a feminist approach³⁷ (Deem, 1999).

Given that there is evidence suggesting people are reluctant to disclose their TEHEs (e.g. Davis et al, 1991; Hay & Morisy, 1987; Hay, 2003) it is important to be aware of and sensitive to these issues. Considering that the most direct source of data for these experiences is the first-hand reports or accounts of TEHEs and not the actual experiences themselves, a reflexive and respectful approach is important.

3.5 Methodologies and Limitations

As noted previously, all methodologies have limitations, and some of the relevant limitations to the methodologies discussed previously are outlined below. These influential approaches to research have conflicting and contradictory elements between them. Some researchers (e.g. Coalter, 1998; Hammersley, 1992) argue that there are problems with feminist approaches to research. The political feminist agenda concerning emancipation and social change is seen as incompatible with the 'neutral' or impartial approach towards data collection and analysis advocated by CA (e.g. Schegloff, 1997, 1998; Wetherell, 1998). Indeed, these are often the issues upon which feminists and CA researchers are seen to differ most: how respondents are 'treated' in the research process and analysis (this refers to both the issue of impartiality versus politicization and to that of ethics).

³⁷ These issues are not solely the preserve of feminism. However, they are at the heart of debates about feminist methodology and research and feminism has been at the forefront of critiques, often pushing the agenda in social science research.

Most feminists would support the promotion of non-hierarchical research relationships and insist that respondents should be the driving force behind the research as far as is possible (Campbell & Salem, 1999; Speer, 2002a). Alternatively, CA and DP advocate an approach towards data which seeks to minimise, if not completely avoid, any ‘contamination’ of the data by researcher intervention³⁸ (Potter, 2003c). However, recent work has argued for, convincingly defended and set precedents for the practice of feminist CA (see Kitzinger, 2000, 2003, 2007; Speer, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a; and Stokoe, 2000). Yet feminist CA is specifically concerned with how gender is oriented to and constructed by speakers, it is often politically motivated (towards women’s emancipation) and is strictly and formally aligned with a ‘purer’ form of CA than adopted here. Furthermore, there is no evidence of feminist CA being open to alternative, creative and ‘looser’ methodologies such as transpersonal psychology. It is clear then, that although feminist CA sets a precedent in terms of the blending of approaches; it is not a suitable method for this particular project.

Nonetheless, within feminist CA there is at least one example of how methodological conflicts between the principles of CA and feminism were experienced and dealt with in practice (e.g. Guimaraes, 2007, who provides an insightful discussion into coping with methodological ‘incompatibilities’ in research). Guimaraes (2007) reported feeling a moral imperative to intervene on behalf of her participants when she felt it would benefit them in her study of recorded police interviews with Brazilian women reporting violence. This was despite the role her presence initially had – to seek consent for the interview to be taped – and awareness of the professional role of invisible presence she ‘should’ inhabit in terms of not ‘contaminating’ her data.

One of the many limitations with any methodology is the tension between academic credibility on the one hand and personal integrity on the other. There is no denying the recognition of profundity for those who report these experiences (and possibly the researcher themselves, see for instance, Young & Goulet, 1994; McClenon & Nooney, 2002). However, the place of this potential subjectivity and reflection is difficult to gauge in an academic project. A need to be ‘honest’ and open about research practices on the one hand and yet analytically ‘scientific’ on the other presents a lived tension and one that is written into the very fabric of this thesis. Nonetheless, there are other limitations that can be identified from the various influential methodologies that it is necessary to review and

³⁸ This is often done via the use of so-called ‘naturalistic’ data, used to refer to recordings where the researcher did not direct the interaction.

consider here. Following this, the common methodological principles will be outlined in order to strengthen the overall approach.

3.5.1 The limitations of transpersonal methods

It is possible that some transpersonal research could be criticised for a lack of internal validity, by the standards of traditional methodologies. Indeed, this has been noted by researchers themselves. ‘Obviously, exploring and envisioning these “farther reaches of human nature” require loosening up on some of the conventional uses of experimental control, especially what has been known as internal validity’ (Anderson, 1998: xxviii). Transpersonal research methods propose additional, more fluid indicators of validity than traditional methodologies would propound including, bodily wisdom and emotional validation.

“Being attuned to the emotional and feeling states of researchers, research participants, and even the readers or audience for the research reports can give immediate feedback about the success of a research endeavour.”
(Braud, 1998: 219)

According to Braud (1998: 219), when feelings tantamount to ‘excitement, surprise and delight are supplemented by feelings of awe and gratitude then researchers can be assured that they are being true to the experiences that are being explored and that their approach and findings are valid’. This perspective upholds that alongside ‘*empirical adequacy*’ or demonstrability, there should also be ‘*experiential adequacy*’. That is, not only should methods be rigorous and explicit, and findings reliable and valid, any conclusions should resonate with the research population.

Additionally, whilst transpersonal methods do claim to be open to combined approaches and are not specifically aligned with particular methodological foundations, there is often an implicit claim throughout that these methods can ‘get at’, describe and document the actual experience they seek to study. In other words, there does not appear to be consideration of the potential issue faced by researchers in studying experience: that there is no way of *directly* accessing experience.

3.5.2 The limitations of Feminist research

Aside from any perceived limitations with the difficulty of defining feminist research, there are various criticisms that have been directed at an approach informed by feminism. However, whether these are seen as strengths or limitations is likely to depend on individual researchers. For instance, one of the most common criticisms of feminist research is that it has an inherent political bias and built-in subjectivity which is problematic for the validity of any research outcomes. Indeed, there has been some quite vociferous disagreement between feminists and non-feminists regarding the place of the 'political' in research (Hammersley, 1992, Hammersley & Gomm, 1997; Ramazanoglu, 1992; Temple, 1997). Whilst some non-feminists suggest that political ideals have no place in research (e.g. Hammersley, 1992) – despite their potentially 'laudable' aims – others suggest that the presumed politicization of gender in every project can pre-empt or skew any analysis, allegedly resulting in merely ideological analyses (Schegloff, 1997).

Feminist researchers (and other qualitative researchers since) however, have argued that *any analysis* will be imbued with individual researchers' theoretical, personal and political penchants.

“Data analysis is inseparable from theory and theorising... [and involves] explicitly or implicitly applying a way of seeing, a particular analytical vocabulary and related insights.”
(Marvasti, 2004: 84)

Indeed, CA's attempts to align itself with a more positivistic approach may well be problematic for reasons that many feminists' identified over ten years ago, namely the social respectability of and weightier epistemic authority of positivistic science, based on claims of alleged political neutrality and value-free analysis (Dachler, 1997). And whilst some methods (e.g. CA and DP) claim to have explicit analytic accountability, it is difficult to maintain that any research is completely value-free.

Instead, feminist researchers advocate an openness and reflexivity about their subjectivity. Many welcome and celebrate it as an inevitable part of any research process, advocating being reflexive and as upfront and open as possible. This reflexivity is centred upon explicitly acknowledging the researcher's presence and impact on the research and analytical processes (Hawkesworth 1989). Furthermore, this feminist influence on the approach encourages analytical accountability and the explicit demonstration of findings

being open to dispute and for verification by others. However, there is no feminist (or other) ‘manual’ on reflexivity and discerning what constitutes effective reflexivity or establishing an academically acceptable level of reflection appears to be quite difficult. According to England (1994: 82), ‘reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher’ (original emphasis). But reflexivity is a contested concept with no easy route to resolution (see for instance, Lynch, 2000, who is highly critical of the concept and practice). The challenge here is how to coalesce these radically divergent impulses: the academic sphere and the personal (and moral?) dimension in research. Other criticisms regarding feminist research include the prioritisation of gender as a subject or element for analysis regardless of subject matter. However, this particular criticism is side-stepped in this project as it is informed more by feminist characteristics or a feminist research ethos than it is a ‘purely’ feminist project.

3.5.3 The limitations of CA & DP

Numerous criticisms have been levied at CA, DP and their distinctive approaches to research and analysis. Common criticisms include, that they sacrifice wider or broader analytic concerns for a focus on the minutiae of social interaction and take extremely limited units or fragments of conversation as their data (e.g. Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1997, 1999; Wetherell, 1998, 2003a, 2003b). This includes the suggestion that they lack the ability to analyse traditional sociological concepts, such as gender, power, inequality, or class. Additionally, claims to political neutrality and value-free analysis have been criticised. The main criticism considered claims that neither takes into account the wider context of talk.

Edley and Wetherell (1997) suggest that CA is limited by its sacrifice of any broader historical and cultural context in its analysis of social interaction. CA is often dismissively referred to as preoccupied with the micro-features of interactions and unable to address broader issues. However, Wooffitt (2005a) suggests that this is a misunderstanding of what CA is.

“To identify CA as a tool for the analysis of micro-interactions obscures its primary focus on generic properties of intelligibility, structure and order, and constitutes a serious misunderstanding of its objectives.”
(Wooffitt, 2005a: 166)

But is everything that is relevant to an interaction identifiable in the conversation? CA considers any focus on broader ideologies as a sacrifice of sensitivity to interactional context (Wooffitt, 2005a). But Edley and Wetherell (1997) argue that there are other aspects of interest to interaction besides demonstrable activities and orientations and this should not be denied by analysts.³⁹ They suggest that what is uttered in interaction also makes reference to wider contextual factors (in a reflexive or constitutive capacity). Further, Wetherell (2003b: 24) argues that CA has constructed ‘an unsustainable distinction between ‘talk’ and ‘society beyond the talk’, which is mistaken. She claims this distinction implies that we can effortlessly differentiate the discursive from the extra-discursive in discrete conversational instances. However, Wetherell argues that this artificially constructed distinction is misplaced. In discussing the research interview as a site of cultural or normative articulation, she argues:

“The interview is a highly specific discursive genre, but it also often rehearses routine, repetitive, and highly consensual (cultural/normative) resources that carry beyond the immediate local context, connecting talk with discursive history. Speakers do not invent these resources each time.”
(Wetherell, 2003b: 25)

There is no question of adopting an exclusively broad focus for data analysis as this would clearly sacrifice methodological rigour and robustness.⁴⁰ But in addition to an individual’s tacit orientation to the interactional context demonstrable in their utterances, ‘as best we can establish it, to be sure’ (Schegloff, 1999b: 579), are other things that can be said about an interaction. Wetherell (1998) claims that it is necessary to analyse the wider discourses or resources that people use to interpret and make sense of their lives, as well as attempt to reveal the organisation and structure of interaction.⁴¹ It is argued that there are identifiable elements of people’s talk which indicate the broader context in which they operate, for instance, cultural, social, religious, or specialised group (Edley & Wetherell, 1997). These

³⁹ In addition to the wider context, CA has been accused of neglecting non-verbal interaction and communication in interaction. However, body movement, facial expression and gestures are studied where possible (video-data) in conjunction with speech (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). Furthermore, it has been suggested that too much emphasis has been placed on non-verbal interaction in the past (Wood & Kroger, 2000) without any discernible method with which to ‘read’ or interpret it accurately. More recently, Heath (2004) has done some work on using video-data to analyse interactions and Lerner (2008) has embarked upon a programme (with Geoff Raymond, though there are no publications to date) to formalise the way in which non-verbal interaction and body movement can be studied.

⁴⁰ If by robust we mean analytically strong and persuasive, and by rigour we mean thorough (and not inflexible).

⁴¹ However, it is difficult to know how we might go about doing this in practice, as the aims of micro and macro approaches are often in tension.

are factors which may be important aspects to consider and draw upon within an analysis. The pertinent methodological dimension relevant is a researcher's 'attention to the social context in which information about a culture or a people is gathered' (Marvasti, 2004: 36). CA's reluctance to characterise the context or setting of an interaction is because there are numerous ways in which this can be done (Schegloff, 1987, 1997). Conversation analysts have argued that deciding which contextual details are pertinent for a particular interaction is very difficult. Consequently, every analytic 'version' of the interaction (with varying contextual features) could be considered in some sense, to be true. Schegloff (1997) argues that this is problematic because it means that discriminating between and evaluating the strength of particular claims is impossible. When all claims are possible versions of possible truths then all claims are relative. But any analysis is to some degree about interpretation and the 'truth' of an interpretation will depend on subjective understanding (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Furthermore, as Wetherell (2003b: 25) suggests, analysis is effectively communicated by demonstration *and* argumentation: 'there is more to the knowledge game of scholarship than argument *by* demonstration, however' (my emphasis). That is, researchers must convince their readership and audiences of their empirical claims with demonstrative reference to the analytic materials firstly, and then with reference to other resources such as historical arguments, similar or contrasting examples, other works or theories and personal and cultural knowledge. These resources are always employed and deployed in idiosyncratic ways, reflecting the impact of particular researchers on particular projects. Indeed, this point is well demonstrated by the nuanced and varied approaches to the study of discourse and CA; even researchers from the same 'discipline' do not always agree methodologically or analytically and the boundaries around such disciplines are regularly contested⁴² (Wetherell, 2001a, 2001b).

For many researchers to omit any reference to a wider context may be considered insufficient; just as utterances do not take place within an 'interactional vacuum' (Wooffitt, 2005a), neither does interaction occur within a cultural vacuum. Interactional features, considered 'extra-discursive' by some analysts may well be of interest to others and feed into theory and methodology. Schegloff (1997) however, argues that people endow situations with meanings; take up certain identities and not others, and orient to an interpretation of context, which therefore means that:

⁴² Discursive psychology in particular is often selected as a methodology for scrutiny, criticism or discussion. One recent example is the exchange between Housley and Fitzgerald (2008, 2009) and Edwards, Hepburn and Potter (2009).

“It is *those* characterisations which are privileged in the constitution of socio-interactive reality, and therefore have a prima facie claim to being privileged in efforts to *understand* it.”

(Schegloff, 1997: 167, original emphasis)

This argument upholds that the only context that can be reliably identified analytically and therefore the only one that is relevant, is that to which the speakers display an orientation in their talk.⁴³ Schegloff (1999b) deems reference to other aspects of context as self-indulgent. That is, the wider features of an interaction can only be understood through the speaker’s utterances, constructions and categorisations: by the design of their talk and by their explications of relevance.

This is a powerful argument. But it does not by definition dismiss references to a wider context and it is excessively reproachful to suggest that some analysts are ‘unrestrained’ (or worse). Whilst Schegloff argues that contextual references should be securely anchored in the analytic locale first and foremost, he does not instate a blanket condemnation of wider claims. Extracting precisely what defines the wider context and how this is enacted in analysis is, in some senses, an issue of semantics or method – and it is perhaps this that has perpetuated the quandary regarding context for discursive work. Clearly any references to wider features need to be justified, but should not necessarily be dismissed outright because they are tricky issues. Indeed Schegloff (1997) himself posits that any identification of broader concerns needs to be more precise and more accountable. Furthermore, as Wetherell (2003b) has argued, making this distinction between contexts may be somewhat artificial in the sense that all society is constructed. Additionally, contexts cannot be decided prior to an analysis and require demonstration of relevance. But there is legitimacy, in addition to paying close attention, to want to ‘step back’ and make justifiable broader assertions or arguments (as recent work attests, e.g. Sims-Schouten et al, 2007; Wetherell, 2003b).

One study that goes some way towards balancing these aspects is a study conducted by Hutchby (1996). Hutchby’s study analysed radio talk show phone-ins using CA. Subsequently, findings were placed in a wider context, relevant to the data and analysis, referring to Foucault’s theory of power. This analysis did not impose theory upon

⁴³ Comments such as Schegloff’s, (but see also, Speer, 2007) often draw criticism for appearing to advocate methodological monotheism instead of a broader methodological church in the social sciences (e.g. by Riley et al, 2007).

empirical observations but aimed to merge the micro and macro. Hutchby argued that CA should not shy away from considering social asymmetry and power relations in interaction, but claims that the mistake is in assuming that power exists before analysing the data, which results in looking for examples of it. Wooffitt (2005a) goes on to point out how Hutchby's (1996) work is illustrative of a broader position, which remains true to CA's methodological principles, whilst considering how this analysis is also more broadly socially located.

3.6 Methodological principles

The most effective way of proceeding is to construct some common methodological principles based on the strengths of these approaches, which neither dilutes, nor betrays their core assumptions. There is a precedent set already in CA, with the introduction of a feminist 'agenda' to analyses (e.g. Kitzinger, 2000, 2003, 2007). Additionally, transpersonal methods are often conventional methods combined with a transpersonal ethos. Examples of conventional methods that can be used and imbued with the transpersonal approach include discourse analysis (and discursive psychology), narrative analysis, feminist approaches, phenomenological approaches, and experiential methods (Braud & Anderson, 1998b: 256-283). Furthermore, a recent paper by Davis (2009) explicitly argues for methodological pluralism in 'humanistic and transpersonal psychology'. Other combination approaches include Sims-Schouten, Riley and Willig's (2007: 119) recent attempt to perform a 'systematic empirical critical realist discourse analysis'. However, this research has been criticised for failing 'to consider the impact of the interview context on their participants' accounts, and 'how their participants orient in their responses towards that context and its associated interactional constraints'⁴⁴ (Speer, 2007: 132). Furthermore, Edwards and Stokoe (2004: 505) express concern about the practice of '*analytical* eclecticism' (my emphasis) as it may dilute the consistency and rigour of principles found in CA for instance. However, it is possible that there is a case to be made for a degree of *methodological* eclecticism, so long as its analytic principles are rigorous, systematic and explicit (see Wetherell, 2003b). This is what I have attempted to do here, with a focus on uniting methodological principles, whilst retaining a core analytic focus.

⁴⁴ The issues concerning interviews will be briefly discussed later in the chapter and returned to in the conclusion.

These methodologies have many strengths which are pertinent for particular kinds of projects with particular kinds of data. It is also worth considering precisely what they can bring to an analysis of accounts of TEHEs.

3.6.1 Principle I – Strong analytical and empirically grounded claims

It is claimed that CA offers ‘the best way’ of analysing talk (Wooffitt, 2005a: 2). One of the reasons for this claim is that CA asserts itself as a data-driven analysis, not led by theory. This assertion has the benefit of positioning analytic findings as visible in the data (Schegloff 1996), and distances the researcher from accusations of imposed analyses. That is, a frequent criticism of qualitative research concerns the perception that researchers have a preconceived agenda to promote or that their analysis arises closely informed by existing theory. In this respect, CA (and DP) encourage the active resistance of so-called ‘premature theorising’ (Wooffitt, 2005a: 72) and advocate grounding any empirical observations with close reference to respondents’ talk. This is considered a key strength of CA (and DP) in that it liberates the researcher from attributing their own interpretations of what is relevant to the speakers, instead providing a tool to reveal what is actually relevant to participants within any given interaction (Potter, 2003a; Schegloff, 1997). This kind of strength is a desirable and often elusive one in *any* qualitative project. Therefore, in trying to discern how people understand and make sense of their transcendent exceptional human experiences, this principle is of considerable appeal.

3.6.2 Principle II – Accountability, rigour, reliability

CA has also provided various insightful analyses to social phenomena, shedding light on interaction in a directly accountable way, whilst DP has provided similar insightful analyses to psychological contexts and topics (and increasingly other interactional settings also). CA and DP analyses are open to analytical scrutiny by other researchers so that accuracy can be tested, checked and data re-analysed if requested, hence providing methodological rigour (Sacks, 1992). This in turn facilitates the emergence of a formal, reliable and consistent method, a goal of social research to which many disciplines aspire (Marvasti, 2004). Additionally, this can be seen to directly address issues of validity and responsibility in analysis: the findings are laid bare for others’ assessment. Encouragement of analytic scrutiny can also be seen as characteristic of feminist research – presenting findings in a way that can be considered and (re)interpreted by others (Blau, 1981). Again, these key

aspects are notions that would be pertinent to any qualitative research project, and can thus increase the accountability of the analysis and findings in this study of TEHEs.

3.6.3 Principle III – Social constructivist approach to language and interaction

CA and DP have constructed a cogent critique of traditional social and psychological research. In considering people's discourse as providing unproblematic access to a particular subject of study without considering 'the properties and significance of the discourse itself' (Wooffitt, 2005a: 72) traditional social and psychological research has overlooked the way language actually operates in interaction. Indeed, one of the central tenets of discourse research is that, 'in a profound sense, accounts 'construct' reality' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 34). What this means is that the versions of CA and DP, which inform the methodological principles in this research, do not see language as a direct representation of an individual's mental state, or as a literal account of 'what is really going on' (Edwards, 1997). Instead they assert that social interaction is a constitutive context and argue that language should be centralised as the key constitutive component. In other words, language produces and creates meanings, identities, and a sense of the social reality for the individuals involved, whilst the interaction takes place.

It is this that CA seeks to get at and which, it is suggested, should be of concern to all researchers studying interaction of any description. Thus language becomes a central focus of any CA and DP informed study. Through recognising that a study of TEHEs is firstly about language and communication, any analysis is potentially able to offer fruitful insights about how people understand and make sense of their experiences. For, in their talk about these experiences is their own understanding of this telling, of their reported experience, in a particular context, at a particular time.

3.6.4 Principle IV: Ethics, Reflexivity and Responsibility

As there is evidence to suggest that people sometimes find it difficult to report TEHEs and related experiences (Davis et al, 1991; Hay & Morisy, 1987; Hay, 2003), it is important to consider the way in which the research process is approached, particularly considering that reports of this kind may be judged negatively. This makes these accounts potentially sensitive and affords considerable responsibility to the researcher in handling and representing data. Awareness that the researcher plays a significant, influential and

constitutive part in the entire research process – from design and data collection, through analysis and presentation of findings is thoroughly discussed within both feminist (e.g. Blau, 1981; Borland, 1991; Kirsch, 1999; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Stanley & Wise, 1990) and transpersonal approaches (e.g. Anderson, 1998; Braud, 1998; Davis, 2009: 17). Many feminists argue that researchers should contemplate the ethics of interpretation and the responsibility for representing the voices and lives of the respondents (e.g. Maynard, 1998; Maynard & Purvis, 1994). This endorses a sensitive, non-judgemental approach to the disclosure of their experiences (Braud & Palmer, 2002). Equally, drawing on the ethos of feminist and transpersonal approaches this means acknowledging the humanity of the research population, and treating them with respect and consideration.

However, this does not mean that analysis should merely reflect the views of the respondents. Indeed, respondents may not agree with our analytic interpretations, so a respectful and cautious approach may be required, though this does not mean betraying the integrity of our research findings (Sangster, 1998). Clearly, it is desirable to forge a balance between the fair representation of respondents and academic credibility, but this is not easy. Throughout the research and the analytic process, judgements are inevitably being made, alongside selection and omission. This process of selection and omission puts the researcher in a powerful position of responsibility as their depiction of the research population is somewhat final.

Sensitivity to this responsibility, it has been argued, requires the researcher to be reflexive. That is, the researcher should make an explicit attempt to be aware of the individual interpretations (biases and prejudices) that they bring to bear on the research process and analysis (Olesen, 1994). Therefore it is fundamental that the impact of the self on the research process including the analysis, is acknowledged,

“We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field any more than we can disown the eyes, ears and skin through which we take our intuitive perceptions about the new and strange world we have entered.”

(Scheper-Hughes, 1992: 28)

It has been argued that absolute objectivity, complete impartiality or researcher neutrality are simply not possible (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) – which might lead to questions about the practical reality of ‘unmotivated observations’ (Schegloff, 1999b: 577) in primary

research with non-naturalistic data. Therefore, maybe the best we can hope for is a ‘least partial’ standpoint that is as critically reflexive as possible (Haraway, 1988).

However, whilst some degree of awareness is requisite for an ethical project, the extent to which this takes centre stage is not agreed upon. It would seem that for some, too much ‘navel-gazing’⁴⁵ may be counter productive to a research project.

“In the last resort, I wonder how much soul searching is useful: is endless debate self-indulgent, sometimes an *ex post facto* justification of our work...”
(Sangster, 1998: 94)

In this sense, deciding the boundaries for reflexivity is difficult (something I will return to in the conclusion), but it is also vitally important that ethics and responsibility are considered, especially considering the inherent inequality in the research relationship (Kirsch, 1999).

Having outlined the four main methodological principles which steer the research process, it would be useful to provide an outline of how the research was conducted. Prior to this, there are some pertinent issues concerning the type of data being used in this project – interviews – which require acknowledgement, as there has been some cogent criticism recently about the status of interview data for discursive analyses (e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2005). This will be discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter, but it is important to identify this issue here.

3.7 Data and analysis

3.7.1 Naturally occurring data

CA and increasingly, DP, advocate the use of ‘naturally occurring’ data. This originated from Harvey Sacks’ analytical attention which seemed to focus on mundane instances of interaction. In DP there has been a gradual move towards naturally occurring talk also, and recognition of its alleged advantages over more traditional forms of data such as interviews (Wooffitt, 2005a). But what do we mean by naturally occurring talk and what counts as naturally occurring? What implications does this have for conducting research?

⁴⁵ Reflecting on and ‘introspecting’ about one’s own role in the research process.

Potter describes naturally occurring talk as,

“Spoken language produced entirely independently of the actions of the researcher, whether it is everyday conversation over the telephone, the records of a company board meeting, or the interaction between doctor and patient in the surgery. It is natural in the specific sense that it is not ‘got up’ by the researcher using an interview schedule, a questionnaire, an experimental protocol or some such social research technology.”
(Potter, 2004: 205)

This description emphasises and ultimately prioritises the study of real-life interaction, and seemingly rejects ‘artificially produced’ talk. However, the term natural has been considered problematic in that participants in these settings are often aware that their conversations are being tape-recorded. This issue has been discussed in some detail (see Speer & Hutchby, 2003a, 2003b; Hammersley, 2003a). To take this into account – that interactions are not straightforwardly ‘naturally occurring’ – the label ‘naturalistic’ has been adopted for these data sources (see for example, Potter & Hepburn, 2007).

Potter (2004) has noted that this description also results in the construction of a hierarchy about what constitutes good and bad data. Therefore he has suggested that discursive analysts can instead position their *approach* towards their data (whether naturalistic or not) as being analytically and theoretically distinct (from other qualitative approaches). By considering their *approach* as distinctive,⁴⁶ those using DP (and CA) can position themselves differently to traditional qualitative researchers. Nonetheless, naturalistic recordings are still recommended as the least problematic source of data for conducting a CA or DP analysis. But what if obtaining naturalistic recordings is virtually impossible?

With respect to some kinds of data it can be difficult to obtain naturalistic recordings. In some cases it may be possible to hold a focus group, which, with a ‘neutral’ facilitator, may offer the next best thing (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). However, in researching TEHEs, these options were not feasible. For instance, Palmer and Braud (2002) have suggested that people are more likely to feel comfortable sharing their TEHE in a supportive environment. It became immediately clear that obtaining naturalistic conversations or accounts of these experiences in talk would be near impossible. It is evident that these

⁴⁶ Rather than reifying naturalistic talk, when it may be tricky to ascertain ‘natural’ versus ‘contrived’ talk - see Lynch (2002), ten Have (2002), Potter (2002) and Speer (2002) for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

types of experiences *may* be discussed with close others, but they are not commonly verbally reported or articulated in the public domain despite the widespread public fascination with such experiences. Furthermore, it has been suggested that people are reluctant to divulge these experiences for fear of ridicule; especially when they are considered personally profound or significant and there may be considerable personal cost (Palmer & Braud, 2002; Tart, 1999). Considering these potential sensitivities around collecting accounts of this kind, it was necessary to approach potential respondents thoughtfully and cultivate a conducive and supportive context in which they could talk about their experiences. It was thus decided that face-to-face interviews would be conducted.

As there was a specific interest in the construction of these accounts and how people talked about and made sense of their TEHEs in this project, then it seemed vital not to merely rely on existing written accounts (which were collected with different purposes, definitions, allusions and categorisations⁴⁷) but instead look for people willing to tell me about their experiences: essentially to be interviewed. However, the unavailability and impossibility of obtaining naturalistic data for this study does not sidestep some of the perceived inherent problems that qualitative interviews may have for a study informed by CA and DP principles (e.g. as cited by Potter & Hepburn, 2005), and this will be further discussed and reflected on in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

3.7.2 Data Collection

Thirty interviewees were recruited in a variety of ways:

- A poster advert was physically placed on several notice boards on campus at the University of York (see appendix 1). Five participants were recruited this way.
- The same advert was placed in several 'esoteric' or 'mind, body, spirit' shops in York at that time (e.g. Cosmic Trader, Odds Bodkins) and The Healing Clinic (then in Fulford, York) – one participant was obtained via this route.
- An advert (containing the same text) was 'virtually' placed online on YorkExtra (an intranet news service at the University of York, updated daily, which automatically pops

⁴⁷ For instance, the large collection started by Alister Hardy at the Religious Experiences Research Centre, published this invitation to submit a written account. 'All those who feel that they have been conscious of, and perhaps influenced by, some Power, whether they call it God or not, which may either appear to be beyond their individual selves or partly, or even entirely, within their being' (Hardy, 1979: 20). Additionally, written accounts of spontaneous 'unexplained' or 'unusual' phenomena can be found in publications, such as *The Fortean Times*, though these are not always transcendent, profound or 'mystical' experiences.

up on networked computers when the user logs on) intermittently throughout 2005-2006. Twelve participants were recruited via this channel.

- Some respondents were obtained via a kind of ‘snowballing’ technique or word of mouth – for instance, one respondent invited me to talk about my research to a Healing & Spirituality group and an Interfaith Group. Snowballing resulted in obtaining eight more respondents.
- Adverts were placed in The Fortean Times (<http://www.forteanimes.com/>) and Kindred Spirit (<http://www.kindredspirit.co.uk/>) magazines, which yielded three respondents.
- Finally, an article about the research appeared in ‘Nouse’ (see appendix 2), a student newspaper at the University of York, in November 2006 (one participant obtained).

Upon contact with respondents a mutually agreeable time and venue was arranged for interview. All respondents were interviewed using a face-to-face unstructured format. Interviews were conducted in a variety of places including cafes in Bristol and London, respondents’ homes in and around London and York and also in Wentworth College, at the University of York. Interviews lasted between twenty minutes and two and a half hours, but most were approximately one hour. Respondents were given an information sheet about their participation in the project (see appendix 3). This was designed in line with BSA (2002) guidelines on issues regarding informed consent and general social research ethics. However, there are always shortcomings with the process of informed consent. This is mainly because the information relayed to potential participants will always and necessarily be limited e.g. lacking any underlying philosophical assumptions, missing an articulation of theoretical context with no explication of how the project relates to broader disciplinary concerns (see Weatherall et al, 2002: 534-5). Whilst there are often pragmatic rationales for such omissions, this cannot negate the potential effect on those taking part. As a recent paper exploring the challenges that qualitative researchers face attests (particularly those researching sensitive topics),

“It [informed consent] is so much more than just signing a form to say that they are willing to offer you information, they are actually allowing you into their lives, they are telling you personal information that might be quite hard, so you need to demonstrate a certain degree of discretion, of respect, of appreciation for what they are doing ’cause the reality is that it is more than just words, it’s more than just

what you are going to analyse, it's their life, their experience and you need to make sure that you are aware of that.”
(Anonymised researchers in Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2007: 330)

This consideration, not just that it might be difficult for people to talk about their personal experiences, but also that their participation may have unanticipated effects upon them, informed the way in which the research was conducted.

Confidentiality and anonymity were re-emphasised at this point and a pseudonym was selected by the respondent for use in any written materials. The use of a name, rather than a number or code as is often used in CA or DP, was informed by the ethos of transpersonal and feminist research approaches, and done in a way to emphasise the humanity of the respondent (as opposed to viewing them as data collection resources). As England (1994: 82) suggests, ‘[the] point is that those who are researched should be treated like people and not as mere mines of information to be exploited by the researcher’. This practice humanises contributions, brings narratives to life and has also been used in feminist CA (e.g. Speer, 2001a, 2001b). At this point respondents were asked if they still wanted to participate and whether they consented to be taped (interviews were recorded on two different types of devices – a digital Dictaphone: an Olympus VN 5500, and/or an audio-cassette Dictaphone: Sony TCM 200DV). Undoubtedly the issue of negotiating consent is not necessarily as simple or straightforward as indicated above. Indeed, it may be difficult for participants to withdraw from taking part at this stage of the process and some respondents may retrospectively report feeling their comments were too revealing (Dickson-Swift et al, 2007). However, some respondents were contacted after the interviews had taken place and consent was again verified with those respondents at that stage.

Prior to consenting to begin recording a few of the respondents asked questions about the research process and about my particular stance, interest or position on the ‘truth’ of these experiences. Others had expressed similar queries in the initial contact stages (prior to interview). Some of these questions were also concerned with how the interview material would be used and how it would be represented. In particular some respondents expressed concerns about the potential refutation of the reality of these experiences and subsequent discrediting of the individuals and their experiences (similarly reflective of the reported findings by Davis et al, 1991; Hay & Morisy, 1987; and Hay, 2003). My response was, in

exact detail, different on each occasion. However, I did maintain an overall position, the sense of which I tried to communicate for each respondent (if asked). That is, that my interest was in exploring the kind of extraordinary experiences people have and what meanings people attribute to them; and that I was not concerned with establishing the ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ of these experiences, but instead was interested in their subjective impressions. Predominantly these questions seemed to be concerned with seeking reassurance that the material they shared with me (a stranger) would not be misused or misrepresented. These questions and my responses to these concerns were not taped.

The interviews consisted of an invitation to tell me what happened (such as ‘so if you’d like to tell me what happened’) and then I listened to their account.⁴⁸ Wooffitt and Widdicombe (2006) suggest that unstructured interviews can be deliberately ‘more passive’ (in order to obtain an account less tied to researcher-led agendas). Wooffitt (1992) has proposed that the interviewer can minimally invite the respondent to tell them about their experience. This invitation is designed to be as ‘impartial’ as possible in order not to influence the subsequent account. Furthermore, it is advised that the interviewer remains silent until the respondent has completed their account. Indeed, this is a technique employed in previous research (e.g. Wooffitt, 1992) on the basis of which substantial and substantiated analytic claims have been made. These story narratives lasted between ten minutes and two hours. Interviewees’ accounts were largely uninterrupted, in that no questions were asked during this time, but I was an active participant in that I was nodding, and offering minimal continuers, such as ‘mmhm’, smiling, and laughing on occasion. I was also present and engaged in an emotional and embodied sense, as were the interviewees. Clearly there are difficulties with noting non-verbal behaviours without video data and those listed above are recalled retrospectively. Whilst many discursive researchers might have concerns with this retrospective recall, it is included to convey those aspects of interaction not effectively captured by textual representation. Additionally, it is important to note that video data was not collected due to the highly sensitive nature of the subject under discussion (though it may be possible to negotiate this as a data collection method with future participants).

So, although I did not make active verbal contributions (unless necessary), during the initial experiential description in terms of actual linguistic or lexical utterances, I was physically

⁴⁸ This is covered in more detail in the Chapter Four regarding the tour of a typical account.

present. It is likely that non-verbal gestures (such as facial expressions, eye movements and hand gestures) contributed to the interaction. However, it has been claimed that these features are easily overemphasised, tricky to identify in taped, rather than filmed, data, and difficult to analyse; as what counts as non-verbal interaction is not agreed upon⁴⁹ (Wood & Kroger, 2000: 62). Nonetheless, it is difficult to define my involvement in the process as truly passive. Furthermore, it is difficult to remain ‘passive’ in the face of people disclosing sensitive personal experience (setting aside that it might also be ethically undesirable). This issue has been raised by other researchers grappling with this incompatibility (e.g. Guimaraes, 2007) and arguments have also been articulated regarding how the engagement of a ‘researcher... as an active and reflexive participant’ (Griffin, 2007a: 265) *can* be desirable.

Consequently, I consistently experienced a tension, between trying to maintain (impossible) ‘impartiality’ and the practicalities of being located and situated in the social world. Any participation in a face-to-face interaction requires some degree of active engagement and some form of personal influence, a factor that some CA and DP researchers have aimed to avoid by using more naturalistic data. However, researchers must still engage and ‘interact’ with their materials or data (such as the substantive content of naturalistic recordings), through listening, transcribing and analysing and some have suggested that any impact of these ‘interactions’ are silent and absent from the process. As Griffin (2007a) points out,

“If (some) CA and DP researchers appear determined to avoid ‘contaminating the field’ with their messy presences, they also pay minimal attention to the ways in which ‘the field’ might affect their analytic work or the rest of their everyday lives.”
(Griffin, 2007a: 253)

As recent work attests, researchers exploring disturbing, sensitive or highly personal experiences are likely to be affected in some way by the material they are analysing (see Dickson-Swift et al, 2009).

3.7.3 Transcription

Following data collection, via the interviewing process described above, the formal analysis process began. The first practical action this requires is transcription. In conventional CA

⁴⁹ For these reasons, an analysis of non-verbal communication is not performed here.

and DP studies excerpts are transcribed in detail, whereas the transcription system found in this thesis is more in line with 'Jefferson-lite' (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) as it is not really necessary to produce the level of detail found in CA inspired work.⁵⁰ Transcription is not a straightforward neutral process of representing data and there are potential problems with the way in which interaction is represented by transcription. In transforming talk into something that can be worked with, it should be acknowledged that 'there is always some sort of intervention, interpretation or transformation of the discourse' by the researcher before analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000: 56). And in some sense this will affect or guide any subsequent analysis.

Once taped, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, initially in a standard way (without the inclusion of pauses, intonations, and prosody). Subsequent analysis commenced via listening to the tapes alongside the basic transcripts until particular aspects began to emerge as interesting. Also at this time, the first parts of the interviews were transcribed in some detail, informed by CA transcription conventions (see Jefferson, 2004b). These sequences provided rich material for analysis as they consisted of what might be called the experiential accounts including the core element of the extraordinary experience (that which Wooffitt, 1992, identified as 'I was just doing x...when y'). The transcription conventions included the use of keyboard symbols in order to indicate stress and intonation, volume and pitch, speed, stutters and self-repairs. Pauses longer than 0.2 seconds in length were detailed in tenths of a second, whilst shorter pauses were indicated by the symbol (.).⁵¹ Additionally, single symbols such as '<' were used to mark the onset of changes in the speed of utterance delivery (compared to surrounding speech). The return to normal speech was either so rapid, or difficult to discern that it was considered misrepresentative to include an arbitrary corresponding closing symbol (e.g. '>'). Furthermore, a decision was made to reproduce regional accents as they were delivered, only where the accent was very pronounced.

CA has often been misunderstood as the study of transcripts because it provides a fine level of detail depicting intricate interactional features. However,

⁵⁰ However, compared to some self-professed 'Jefferson-lite' transcriptions (e.g. Griffin, 2007a) my extracts are transcribed in a more detailed fashion and are somewhere in between 'Jefferson-lite' and pure CA – see for example, Norrick and Spitz (2008) or Coates (2007) for similar transcription styles.

⁵¹ See appendix 4 for a more detailed breakdown of the symbols used or those included in quoted data extracts.

“The transcript is seen as a ‘representation’ of the data: while the tape itself is viewed as a ‘reproduction’ of a determinate social event.”
(Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998: 74)

The detailed transcription techniques should not be considered as the data, and are not analysed in isolation, but alongside the tape-recording. In this sense the transcripts can be viewed as an aid to the analytic process. Furthermore, the inclusion of detailed transcription allows for increased analytic accountability and the more closely grounded illumination of analytic claims.

3.7.4 Analysing data

Turning any data from seemingly ‘raw’ interaction into analytic story is a lengthy process. It is a process that involves differing levels of focus at different moments (from close up to wide angle throughout the expedition). In practical terms this requires moving back and forth from account to account, sometimes slowly, at other times quite rapidly; intensive periods of listening following the transcripts; noting observations; and subsequent revisions and re-revisions of provisional analytic ideas. Most advice on developing CA skills suggests selecting a particular sequence to consider in detail (e.g. ten Have, 1999). A sequence is defined as starting when an action or topic is initiated in talk and responded to. Its ending occurs when the speakers are no longer referring to this prior action or topic. Analysts are then advised to explore the turns in a sequence, consider what selections made by the speaker are doing, pay attention to the timing and taking of turns and think about the invocation of roles or identities for the speaker, and the organisation and design or construction of turns (ten Have, 1999).

However, what is immediately clear with interview data is that there are specific challenges involved in analysis. Unstructured interviews do not proceed as mundane or ordinary conversation and instead may be characterised by lengthy or seemingly monologic elements, where the respondent is engaged in extended segments of talk (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998). In these segments the interviewer may be fairly silent and thus the narrative appears predominantly uninterrupted. The challenges that this brings to a data analysis informed by CA principles is that there is no discernible and established analytic unit - the turn of each speaker - to couch and refer descriptions to. It is these turn

construction units that would usually offer a conversation analyst a way in which to check and ground their analytic claims.

Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) have specifically addressed and explicated this issue. In the initial stages of analysis the suggestion is to follow conversation analytic procedures. So, in analysing the data for this research I considered each experiential account individually at first and formulated some general observations about the structural organisation of the account and any interesting features, closely following Hutchby and Wooffitt's advice.

“Then with these initial observations in mind, return to the original data corpus to find any other sequences which appear to have similar properties, thereby building a collection of possible or candidate cases of a specific conversational phenomena.”

(Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998: 186)

Consequently the identification of any potentially interesting structural or organisational features was then considered in light of the other accounts, to establish whether particular phenomena could be demonstrated in different instances. However, these processes of identifying features require skill and practice. They are also the ingredients which are most difficult to impart or explain to others and may remain implicit when attempting to describe analytic journeys, as how they were noticed may be difficult to make explicit. Analysis was informed by Schegloff and Sacks' (1973: 299) analytic question of 'why that now?', and trying to understand how the talk in these accounts was constructed of those particular utterances. It has been argued that it is important, however, that an analysis does not just become an opportunity to spot commonly known features identified by discursive research, such as three-part lists, but instead should look to see what kind of work is being achieved with these features (Antaki, Billig, Edwards & Potter, 2003). Schegloff (1996) recommends potentially beginning an analysis with tentative noticings. This may be noticing what action is being done in the talk and then proceeding to highlight how certain talk is being used to achieve this action or noticing a certain feature of talk and questioning what the outcome of such a feature is.

In order to aid the analytic process and develop my analytic skills, I conducted a fairly in-depth analysis of each account, considering at first the structural features and organisation - the beginnings, middles and ends of the narrative (the focus of the next chapter). Firstly, this involved describing in detail what was happening with the talk. Merely describing an

unfolding account was quite a difficult task as it was time consuming and did not feel particularly analytical. However, this activity provided me with a meticulous route into the data. At times, stating what appeared superficially to be ‘the obvious’, granted me access to insights that would otherwise have remained hidden. Indeed, at this stage of the analysis I began to identify certain common features and properties of the accounts whilst also considering what kind of interactional work was being performed. Pragmatically, this involved listening to the interviews whilst simultaneously inspecting the transcripts in fine detail. Secondly, ideas and notes gleaned from this first trawl of the data were revisited for concepts that stood out or appeared to be potentially common instances. Armed with these potential features I went back to the transcripts and the recordings to check these embryonic ideas against the various accounts. Subsequently, any potentially common features were checked and tested against the data and different instances were compared to establish whether the same or subtly different actions were being performed and how the phenomena were being deployed as discursive resources. This enabled refinement of the analysis and identification of salient features (those most notable and most common).⁵²

The analytic story was developed and eventually finalised through persistent revision and refinement, from repeatedly shifting from the raw data (transcripts and recordings) to the story (analytic concepts and features) and working with both alongside each other and tweaked as new instances of particular phenomena were included and increasing in technical sophistication as my analytic skills improved. The analytic chapters thus explicate this process more coherently and begin to demonstrate how considering the nature of language and communication in these accounts of TEHEs can offer insights regarding their foundations and what was relevant to respondents. It is worth noting that the accounts that I collected are clearly different from many existing written accounts of mystical experiences for instance, in that all are spoken and none are relayed by alleged ‘saints’ or ‘mystics’ (however, there is not the space to discuss this any further here). Additionally, studying these profound constructions in such fine-grained detail has stirred me to reflect upon the limits of a discursive analysis and the tensions associated with this for these experiential accounts.

⁵² It is worth noting at this point that ineffability was a common and notable feature of many of the interviews but that it was not selected for inclusion in the analysis because the findings concerning reported thought were considered more timely and topical (there is a dearth of work independently analysing reported thought). However, ineffability is certainly an issue of considerable analytic interest also and could be taken up in future research.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that an analysis of these accounts can be informed by CA and DP, but that a methodological approach can be more widely informed by additional approaches. Drawing upon the ethos of both feminist and transpersonal approaches has meant the prioritisation of a notably respectful, sensitive and ethical way in which to treat both respondents and their experiential accounts. Recognising that all methodologies have limitations and tensions, it is also pertinent to note that there are numerous strengths with an analytical approach informed by CA and DP, such as rigour, explicit accountability and increased validity. In this sense, the methodological principles derived from these approaches have guided the entire research process and analysis and argued for a consideration of the socially produced nature of language in a study of TEHE accounts. However, this is not to suggest that a close consideration of the contextual nature of language will be every researcher's concern or that this can tell us everything we can know about these experiences. Certainly, I would align myself with other researchers (e.g. Braud, 2002; Cardeña, 2004, Wilber, 1997; Williams, 1996) in their call for more integrated and methodologically pluralistic approaches to studying these kinds of experiences and consciousness, more generally.

3.8.1 Representing and capturing profundity

Language cannot be ignored in studying these experiences, at least in part because such a vital aspect has rarely been considered adequately before. But is this satisfactory? In a study of *transcendent exceptional human* experiences, is this enough? Intuitively, I feel that there may be something qualitatively lacking from the resources that academia or the social sciences can offer me with which to research these kinds of experiences. Employing a methodology that has prioritised language, communication and a certain kind of analytic gaze has at times felt frustratingly limited and stifled my intuition and creativity. I am left wondering whether in exploring the language of the accounts of people's experiences I have done justice to some of the reportedly most profound, life-changing, deep and moving experiences and those that report them. In other words, are these experiences represented fairly by this kind of analytic account? Would the experiencers recognise or align themselves with these findings? Indeed, can any methodology deliver on this? Given that these experiences are often reported as the 'ultimate' human experience, how can or should

we go about studying them? These are not easy questions to answer as Wulff's comments on studying mystical experiences illustrates when he says that:

“Mysticism [and thus these kinds of experiences] not only eludes empirical study but by its very nature also calls into question the assumptions, methods, and modes of thought of modern Western scientific investigation.”
(Wulff, 2000: 427)

Additionally, conducting this kind of research has persistently flagged tensions and incompatibilities for me as researcher, between adopting an ‘impartial stance’ and an empathic one, between myself as ‘consummate professional’ and myself as human, subjective and socially situated (as ultimately flawed). There are also some pragmatic methodological, analytical and conceptual issues that this chapter has raised regarding the status of interview data (seemingly versus naturalistic recordings) for discursive work and the role and definition of the wider context in which interactions reside. Both these and the reflexive issues flagged above will be returned to in the concluding chapter (7).

The three empirical chapters that follow are concerned with detailing the analyses and develop the methodological principles articulated earlier in the chapter. The next chapter (4) begins with a tour of the more structural features of a typical account.

Chapter 4

Touring TEHE accounts: beginnings, middles, and endings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an introduction to the data. Focused predominantly on an overview of the accounts, their organisation and structural features, the aim is not to offer an in-depth analysis of any specific devices that appear in the excerpts included here. Instead, this chapter is more concerned with identifying similarities and differences in the way respondents presented the accounts of their TEHEs. Included are the ways in which the narratives were elicited and how respondents embarked upon and concluded them. Invariably the accounts are told as stories and therefore where relevant, literature concerning storytelling and story organisation (e.g. Goodwin, 1984; Jefferson, 1978; Sacks, 1974, 1986) is drawn upon. Essentially, this chapter provides a tour of a typical account, stopping along the way to point out aspects of interest and notable features, particularly concerning the beginnings, middles and endings of these accounts.

4.2 Invitations and initial responses

All of the interviews begin with an invitation or request (from me as interviewer) for the respondent to tell me about their experience. This is phrased in terms of an event or occurrence having taken place and establishes, in a broad sense, the expectations of what should follow. The exact phrase used varies, in terms of lexical selection, but the meaning is fairly similar across interviews, as demonstrated in the five examples below taken from the start of different interviews.⁵³

- 1 I: so (.) if you (.) just want to describe your experience
- 1 I: if you'd just like to tell me about your experience
- 1 I: so if you wanna (0.5) if you want to tell me ab[out °your experiences°
- 1 I: so if we sta::rt em by you talking about (0.6) your experience really
- 1 I: so if you just wanna tell me (0.3) what happened

⁵³ In excerpts from the interviews I am 'Interviewer' referred to as 'I' from here onwards, and the respondents are referred to by initials from their pseudonyms – which is mostly used in full when discussing their account in the text.

Clearly these invitations do have some differences (which will be noted where relevant later) but they all convey the orientation to my role as listener (at least in the first instance) where the respondent is expected to relay their experience. There is also an implication that this is the first activity of the interview via phrases such as, 'first of all' (see extract 6, p126) and 'start', suggesting that there are likely to be other requirements or topics raised for discussion later on. Secondly, there is common use of the term 'just' which invites a minimal and directed response from the interviewee, downplaying their contribution or its potential formality. Both these phrases can work to imply there may be further requests for narrative contributions later. However, at this stage these topics or issues are not expounded. Whilst this invitation necessarily limits the range of responses that can follow, the boundaries of limitation cluster around prior understandings of what is expected in this context.

Atkinson and Drew (1979) demonstrated how awareness of these expectations ensured due process in Court. They noted for instance, that whilst the content of talk could vary enormously, the structure of a question and answer format was ubiquitous. Questions were deployed strategically by legal teams with varying end goals (e.g. to elicit information, admission, contradiction and inconsistency). Atkinson and Drew's explication of the way in which Court interaction proceeds, with roots in both ethnomethodological and CA traditions, effectively demonstrated these institutional interactional processes in some detail. These expectations, conventions and thus routine formulations were also observed in ordinary telephone interaction by Schegloff (1968, 1986). Schegloff (1968, 1986) focused his analyses on the first few seconds of telephone calls and identified common normative sequencing to this introductory talk that consisted of various elements. These elements included an initial summons/answer sequence (originally identified and detailed in Schegloff, 1968), an identification sequence, a greetings sequence, and 'howareyou's sequence exchanges, before then moving on to the topics of talk (for more detail see Schegloff, 1986: 117). Furthermore, despite the research interview not strictly being seen as an institutional context, there are still considerable expectations and conventions to the structure and format of the interaction.

In this project, respondents have replied to an advertisement requesting participation from those who consider themselves to have had certain kinds of experiences (see appendix 1) and they have been provided with an information sheet about the research interview (see

appendix 3). Although these introductory utterances do not include any of these details that have taken place prior to the interview they do implicitly suggest that there is some shared understanding between the respondent and the interviewer regarding what is subsequently expected. For example, although the specific details of the event(s) about to be relayed by the respondent are unknown, there is a shared awareness that it is considered to be 'extraordinary' in some way by the respondent.

The initial invitation also serves to offer the role of speaker to the respondent. At this point the speaker is orienting to what they understand to constitute this 'telling' and their role in relation to it. In being invited to speak about 'what happened' the expected response is an account of the respondent's experience. This is the moment where the respondent is offered the role of storyteller, in addition to that of speaker. Gubrium and Holstein (2009: xix) define a 'storyteller as one who provides an account of experience or event of his or her own' and it is commonly argued that any events offered in this story form are 'presented as true' (Polletta & Lee, 2006: 702). What constitutes a story or narrative within the social sciences can vary, but there are various elements that are seen as fairly important. Narratives are invariably seen as a (series of) past event(s), which are temporally or chronologically ordered, 'with a beginning, a middle, and an end', where story 'events and characters... [are] related' and set in a structure or 'emplotment' (Ewick & Silbey, 1995: 20). However, there has been some criticism of this formulation as too narrow and exclusive of 'smaller stories' found in ordinary talk and interaction (see for example, Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Nonetheless, stories at the very least must be about events or characters and relational and ordered somewhat for them to be recognisable as stories.

As Houtkoop and Mazeland (1985) have noted there may be a temporary suspension of turn-taking conventions when a story, event, occurrence or joke is being told. In this sense, usual expectations about the dialogical nature of conversation or the typical question and answer format of interviews is postponed or deferred, as the 'storyteller' becomes the primary speaker. However, it is worth noting that in ordinary conversation there is more scope for direct co-construction from other speakers, especially at the onset or emergence of a story. Stories are, in the first instance, produced via collaboration with other speakers – 'this collaboration being established through a preface/request sequence' (Goodwin, 1984: 229). In other words, in ordinary talk the way in which a story emerges is locally

occasioned and managed by all the interacting parties. The interview setting provides a slightly different context in which stories are directly solicited.

Some recent work considering narrative and storytelling (e.g. Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006a, 2006b; Schegloff, 1997b; Stokoe & Edwards, 2006) has been critical of the overly privileged status of researcher-elicited narratives through qualitative interviews in social science research. This is partly because many analysts have considered such narratives as fairly unproblematic routes to author's or narrator's identities (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). But equally the suggestion has been that ordinary interactional processes are obfuscated by the research interview context. As Stokoe and Edwards (2006: 57) have argued, 'studies of interviewer-prompted narratives make it difficult to see what, in their daily lives, people are *doing* when they tell stories and, therefore, what stories are *designed* to do' (original emphasis). In many respects, such criticisms are certainly warranted. However, it may be problematic if the result of this criticism is the rejection of certain types of data. Instead, it may be more productive to suggest that analysts with interviewer-elicited stories consider the actions being performed or accomplished in those stories and recognise that there is a distinction between 'stories-in-interviews' (my term) and 'narratives-in-interaction' (Stokoe & Edwards, 2006: 57). However, this does not preclude the discovery of similar designs, features, functions and actions being located in both.

Indeed, in the set of interviews collected and analysed for this project similarities were identified across the data some of which can be found in mundane interaction. Following the opening request in the interviews, respondents (invariably) construct a narrative about what happened. These narratives vary in length and content but many of them seem to begin in similar ways with similar phrases and similar actions performed.

Firstly, the phrases used that occur in response to a request for 'what happened' are prefaced by utterances such as:

Richard – (see extract 1)

- 1 I: if you want to tell me what happened
- 2 R: right .hh (1.0) erm:: (0.6) in nine::t:een: (0.8) eight::y one when I wuz
- 3 finishing off my degree

Anna (see extract 2)

- 1 I: if you just wanna tell me what happened
2 A: okay well erm (0.8) I s'ppose (1.0) t-the main one really for me happened
3 (1.5)
4 er about just over a year ago (1.0) .hh and it was in connection with er a
5 telephone call (0.5) that I had (1.2) and basically erm

Kerry (see extract 14)

- 1 I: so if you wanna start just by telling me what happened
2 K: okay .hhhh erm
3 (1.3)
4 it's just one of those things where you look back and you think
5 now I wonder what was going on there (.) really

These excerpts demonstrate that the initial utterance tends to contain an affirmative response to the interviewer's request, such as 'yeah' or 'okay'. The onset of a turn here is directly addressed to the request made by the interviewer and is only made up of one or two words. It would seem that these turn onsets are acknowledging the request to tell what happened, giving consent and taking up the invitation. The possibility of launching straight into the telling of the story or event is open to the interviewees, but none of them do this. This would suggest that there is something important or routine about the need to acknowledge the request being made of them. In this way, utterances such as 'okay', 'right' and 'yeah' act as an acknowledgement in response to a request.

Some of the interviews bypass this explicit acknowledgement, but do not immediately embark upon the substance of the story either. Instead, fillers such as 'erm', 'well' or a short pause are included. Furthermore, accounts that begin with an acknowledgement also go on to include fillers. Fillers have been seen as discourse or response markers which can perform several functions in talk (Schiffrin, 1987). One suggestion has been that fillers such as 'well' act as a delay device, buying the speaker time before the narrative proper begins. Additionally, they are also found in ordinary conversation as responses to requests, refusals or compliments, which have been interpreted as postponing tactics and devices to avert any potential face-threatening (see Brown & Levinson 1987, Levinson 1983). However, it is difficult to empirically ground claims of 'averting face-threatening' in these instances. Nonetheless, there may be a case for seeing fillers as hesitation devices.

Indeed, all these expressions serve to indicate to the listener that a turn is about to start or that the beginning of the account is unfolding and can therefore be seen as having some

transitional function (Schiffrin, 1987), in this case from pre-interview talk to interview. Furthermore, fillers such as these are not always found in Transition Relevant Places (TRPs – small pauses in talk where it is possible for another speaker to initiate a turn at talk) in storytelling talk in ordinary interaction. Fillers can act as a means of holding the floor, and when particularly prolonged they decrease the speaker's chances of the story being interrupted. Additionally, in ordinary talk there are identifiable shifts which indicate a story is about to be told e.g. verb tense or orientation to the temporal and spatial story details (Jefferson, 1978; Labov, 1972; Linde, 1993; Polanyi, 1985). But in the interview context these indications are not as necessary. Instead, deployment of these markers here portrays an awareness of ordinary interview expectations and the requirement of taking up the role of interviewee. This contrasts with naturally occurring stories in talk where the emergence of a story is locally occasioned and managed (see Sacks, 1974, 1986; Jefferson, 1978; Goodwin, 1984) and may be recipient or speaker initiated (Fuji, 2007). In this way, these hesitation markers display the respondent taking up their turn and thus accepting their role as both interviewee and storyteller.

It is possible that 'well', 'erm', or a pause, signal a 'change of state token' much like the use of 'oh' in naturally occurring talk (see Heritage, 1984). 'Oh' is often used to display a change of mental state in conversation. The change of state in these instances is the shift that is required of the respondent to interviewee and storyteller. In other words, the respondent's participatory status is open to change with the onset of this request if they accept the invitation. This displayed change may also be recognition of the degree of formality that is afforded by the interview setting in contrast with any pre-interview interaction, for instance. Hesitation markers also imply that there is cognitive activity taking place. Indeed, they have been conceived as fillers or hesitation devices that allow the speaker time to plan ahead what is going to come next (Brown & Yule, 1983a, 1983b; Wardhaugh, 1985). Additionally, a 'change of state' token (Heritage, 1984) is viewed as displaying a mental state shift. But to attribute actual cognitive activity requires a commitment to a certain kind of cognitivism, which suggests that thoughts are occurring when speech indicates thus. Instead, it may be more analytically precise to see these hesitation devices as giving the impression that the speaker is planning the trajectory of the story, and 'displaying' a shift in mental state and see them doing discursive work rather than betraying actual mental processes (Edwards & Potter, 1992a) – as this is not something we can definitively know. Therefore, it may be more verifiable to see these

hesitation markers as a way of managing participatory status. Such a premise would propose that these devices are deployed by the respondent in order to show doing story planning and to mark a shift – a change of status – to one of interviewee or storyteller. In summary: following a request for ‘what happened’, responses have a distinct and identifiable structure or pattern. Virtually all the accounts begin with an acknowledgement, then a hesitation marker before then embarking upon the story preface. This is significant as there are no instances that do not have at least one or two elements of this structure – demonstrating quite a convincing finding. More formally this can be laid out thus (where A and B are the interviewer and interviewee respectively):

A – Request

B – Acknowledgement + Hesitation Marker + Story Preface

As noted, it would appear that the hesitation marker acts as a way of managing participatory status in this kind of talk for the respondents. This means that it serves to enable a shift in state and role, and the transition from ordinary speaker to interviewee and storyteller.

Following this, respondents launch into the beginning of the story – the story preface – a tour of which comes in the next section. Indeed, in considering the structure of these accounts it is important to examine the sequential unfolding of the story and how it is produced with a beginning, middle and an end. However, it can appear somewhat arbitrary to definitively decide where beginnings end, where middles start and stop and where endings begin. Particularly in lengthier extended narratives, there is interpretation involved in determining where an experiential account commences and ceases. Simultaneously however, there is a structure that seems common to these narratives, even if pinpointing the individual start and finish points of sections or segments is more intricate.

4.3 Beginnings as story prefaces

Following the initial responses as set out above, the substantive beginnings of these accounts commence with story prefaces. Sacks (1974) identified preface sequences at the beginnings of stories in ordinary conversation. He noted that these usually included an introduction of the story topic or some form of story characterisation and details such as the time and/or place in which the story was set. In the accounts collected for this study

however, there is limited story characterisation offered at the start of the accounts. This is perhaps because the relevance of the story's telling does not need to be established in the interview setting in the same way that it does in ordinary conversational contexts. Nonetheless, respondents do provide details concerning the scene, context or background in which the story took place.

This is achieved in various different ways. One of the ways this is done is by establishing a number of ostensible 'facts' or details about the story. Such detail includes information such as, the time it took place (usually a calendrical formulation including any combination of date, month and year, though more often the latter two); the location (sometimes geographical: towns, countries, or specific and general places, e.g. a friend's living room or in hospital); and those involved (if additional persons were present). Clearly the exact detail varies but the general function is seemingly the same – the contextualisation and grounding of the experience in the respondent's terms – i.e. their identification and selection of details considered important, relevant or pertinent to the account in this interactional setting. The following extract (1) is taken from the beginning of the Richard's interview where he is beginning to talk about his first TEHE.

Extract 1 – Richard

1 I: if you want to tell me what happened
 2 R: right .hh (1.0) erm:: (0.6) in nine::teen: (0.8) eight::y one when I wuz
 3 finishing off my degree
 4 (1.2)
 5 an::d (1.4) in:: (.) I s'ppose (1.4) something started happening in about
 6 (2.1)
 7 february march time (0.6) when I -s- when I was asleep (0.7) and I'd wake

Following a hesitation device and a lengthy pause, there is an orientation to when these events reportedly started, in a calendrical formulation – 'in nine::teen: (0.8) eight::y one' (line 2). This is followed by an explication of what Richard was doing (in a broad sense) at the time – 'I wuz finishing off my degree' (lines 2-3). On line 5, Richard effectively illustrates the relationship between question and response by mirroring my use of 'happened' (line 1) with 'happening'. Subsequently, Richard reorients to when the events began by way of reference to a more specific calendrical formulation – 'about (2.1) February March time' (lines 5-7) – the long pause helps to convey Richard 'doing' recollection. This level of detail is inserted before orientation to the 'what happened' request, and before divulging what we might consider to be the story detail itself. Again

the story preface is designed in such a way as to introduce the listener to irrefutable details that ground the subsequent experience in ordinary reality. There is also a sense in which the extraordinariness of the subsequent experience is demonstrated via this display of detailed recall of mundane aspects (Edwards & Potter, 1992a). It is notable that this is a commonly identifiable aspect of narratives more generally.

“Narrative thrives on the contrast between the ordinary, what is ‘normal’, usual, and expected, and the ‘abnormal’, unusual, and unexpected. It has effective means at its disposal for rendering the unexpected intelligible.”
(Czarniawska, 2004: 9)

Furthermore, the establishment of certain contextual details at the outset convey the ‘facts’ of the story: both important features of constructing a plausible account. Stokoe and Edwards (2006: 62) have shown how people orient to the notion of stories having ‘proper’ beginnings, in ordinary interactions. An orientation to this notion is designed to serve particular justificatory purposes e.g. ‘doing mitigation’. What this also demonstrates is that beginnings are selected and constituted as deemed relevant for the telling. So, in this context it is relevant and important to establish these background facts at the beginning of the story proper.

Establishing the ‘facts’ of the story are an important and almost universal feature of the accounts. The next extract (2) follows a similar pattern, including some comparable details in the initial description.

Extract 2 – Anna

1 I: if you just wanna tell me what happened
2 A: okay well erm (0.8) I s’ppose (1.0) t-the main one really for me happened
3 (1.5)
4 er about just over a year ago (1.0) .hh and it was in connection with er a
5 telephone call (0.5) that I had (1.2) and basically erm
6 (1.9)
7 er about a year previous to that I had (0.7) ha- suffered er quite an upsetting
8 experience I’d had a heterotopic pregnancy (1.4) and you probably think

At the outset, Anna includes an acknowledgement + hesitation markers combined with a short pause – ‘okay well erm (0.8)’ (line 2). Then she indicates that this is not the only TEHE she has had, but that it is the one she considers most significant – ‘t-the main one really’ (line 2). Frequency of experiences only tends to be mentioned when there is more

that one experience to be relayed. Following this, Anna’s account contains references to approximately when the event occurred – ‘er about just over a year ago’ (line 4) – and she identifies a mundane, real-world event that pertains to her experience – ‘in connection with er a telephone call’ (lines 4-5). Subsequently, she is concerned with embarking upon the story proper. The references to seemingly objective facts about the story help display how the experience was so extraordinary (and made such an impression) that seemingly mundane detail could be recalled (see Wooffitt, 2005b, for more on the discursive function of flashbulb memories). Indeed, features of the reported environment in which the experience took place are often reported, invariably with some fine detail conveying the sense of a deep impression left on the respondent.

4.3.1 Variations on a pattern

However, there are differences in the focus of this scene-setting activity and even if the differences are only slight they are nonetheless important to mention (see Antaki et al, 2003, about the importance of genuinely and honestly representing data). There are six respondents’ beginnings that appear to differ slightly. The majority of respondents immediately begin by talking about a specific event or occurrence (their experience) as the topic (after acknowledgement + hesitation marker). However, three respondents (Eva, Tina and Celeste) interrupt the initial expected sequence with a ‘checker’ – a statement or question which allows the speaker to confirm what is expected from the request (Brown & Yule, 1983a). Nonetheless, despite this interruption, the sequences then commence with the expected A + B structure referred to earlier. The remaining respondents (Kitty, George and Fred) differ in that there is no specific contextual detail provided, however, elements of the expected sequence are still identifiable.

The next extract (3) is the first of those to contain a slight variation on the pattern identified previously. Here Eva describes her first out of body experience.

Extract 3 – Eva

- 1 I: ((*tape starts abruptly*)) experiences
 2 (1.2)
 3 E: ok th-these are the out of body experiences I I think? (0.5)
 4 I: ((*nodding*)
 5 E: yep .hhh er:m (0.6) the first one when I was er about nine (1.2) a- it might
 6 have been eight or ten but anyway (0.6) an::d
 7 (1.7)

8 I was (0.7) erm (0.3) lying on some buttercups (.) the very rich (1.3) I think
 9 they're rhizome ones (.) er::m (0.6) short yellow ones (0.5) >and the sun
 10 was shining and it was a beautiful day and I was just lying there (0.6) .hh (.
 11 and >whether it's significant or not I don't know but there was a little stone
 12 trough with water there (0.7) and (.) er (1.0) I was watching the clouds
 13 (1.5)
 14 in the blue sky (0.7) and erm

Eva begins, somewhat unusually, after a pause then a brief acknowledgement but no hesitation marker and categorises her experiences with descriptive labels – ‘ok th-these are the out of body experiences I-I think?’ (line 3). Furthermore, lines 3 and 4 show a repair sequence, where Eva seeks clarification and this *postpones* the expected sequence. Additionally, my non-verbal ‘nodding’ response provides a second invitation for Eva to proceed with her story. This has a perceptible ‘checking’ function and indicates that the respondent has previously divulged something about these experiences to the interviewer prior to the interview – as in *these are the out of body experiences that I mentioned to you earlier⁵⁴ is that what I should be talking about now?* Additionally, it suggests that there might be various other TEHEs that the respondent could talk about. Then on line 5, Eva continues with an acknowledgment, hesitation and filler - ‘yep .hhh er:m’ (line 5), which shows the receipt of my nodding and ‘permission’ to continue. Additionally, it demonstrates that despite the existence of an interactional obstacle (repair), the A + B structure resumes immediately afterwards, just prior to the storytelling detail. This works to provide further evidence for this sequence as routine.

Again Eva orients to the multiplicity of her experiences by stating ‘the first one’ (line 5) and then includes a couple of references to her reported age at the time of the event – ‘I was er about nine (1.2) a-it might have been eight or ten but anyway’ (lines 5-6). She begins with an approximation of her age – ‘about nine’ – then goes on to formulate this further with explicit references to possibly being ‘eight or ten’. The pause of just over a second in the middle of this serves to communicate cognitive activity taking place in the consideration of this. Stating these possible ages allows for a margin of error in the accuracy of the detail. Furthermore, she goes on to state ‘but anyway’ as if to dismiss the ultimate importance of these finer details. It would seem that across all the accounts there are consistently references to notions of when the event occurred – whether in the form of a year, date or the experient’s age often coupled with pauses to ‘show’ remembering and recall ostensibly

⁵⁴ Indeed, the respondent had informed me that she had experienced several TEHEs and the ones she was going to talk about were out of body experiences.

taking place. Additionally, these factual details are often presented in tandem with other possibilities such as being ‘about nine... eight or ten’ (this extract) or ‘february march time’ (extract 2, line 7) Establishing the spatial and temporal anchors for the experience sure up the account’s factuality, as the event is then located in the ‘real’ world, at a semi-specific point in time.

Subsequently, Eva goes on to seemingly display recall of the detail of the environment in which the experience occurred (lines 8-14). The specificity of this detail helps to convey that there were ordinary features that are recalled efficiently from the context in which the experience happened. This works to portray how memorable and significant the event was. The detail provided as scene setting contextualisation for these stories does appear to be directed towards a display of accuracy and therefore truth or plausibility. By offering up considerable specific detail, respondents are working to show that despite being extraordinary, their stories are both believable and credible.

However, the overwhelming matter of interest in these extracts is their seeming deviation from the A + B structure identified earlier at the beginnings of accounts. This is particularly interesting because upon closer inspection it is clear that the expected sequential structure is merely postponed for repair/clarification. Extract 4 is another instance of this. Here Tina is describing her near death experience in the ocean.

Extract 4 – Tina

1 I: so if you just wanna tell me (0.3) what happened
 2 T: ah now I have this written down and I just wrote it down recently
 3 I: mm
 4 T: but I suppose you still want it for the ((*indicating to tape recorder*))
 5 I: ((*smiling and nodding*))
 6 T: °ok alright° (0.6) well it was about nineteen eighty one or nineteen eighty
 7 two
 8 I: mm
 9 T: and I worked on a ship (0.6) erm (1.2) which went up and down the pacific
 10 coast (0.4) an::d we were (1.3) a group of us went to the beach?
 11 I: mm
 12 T: this was in ((*place*)) ((*clears throat*)) and I got caught in a rip tide we all got
 13 caught in a rip tide (0.9) a:hm
 14 (2.3)
 15 I was in the water for a long time jst struggling for a long time (0.3) erm
 16 (0.4) I (.) in terrible pain and (1.2) <couldn’t swim anymore and I had all
 17 seized up an’ .hhh (1.2) I absolutely knew I was going to die I knew there
 18 wasn’t any h:ope that I would get out of there or anything and (0.4) I was
 19 only twenty one or twenty two or three (0.6) just terrible

After my initial request (line 1), the beginning is prefaced with a checker – ‘ah now I have this written down and I just wrote it down recently [mm] but I suppose you still want it for the ((*indicating to tape recorder*))’ (lines 2-4). This utterance is interesting for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it is clearly and uniquely demonstrative of the respondent’s explicit orientation to the recording device present at the time of the interview (for more on this see Speer & Hutchby, 2003a, 2003b; Hammersley, 2003a). Secondly, it is another repair sequence for clarification, which again postpones the routine A + B structure.

However, immediately following the ‘checker’ Tina orients to similar detail found in the majority of other accounts (suggesting that the acknowledgement + hesitation marker are routine formulations in these stories-in-interviews). Only after my second indication to proceed via non-verbal gestures ((*smiling and nodding*)) does she then embark upon the story. On lines 6-13 she does scene-setting activity, provides an approximation of the year the event took place (line 6), some detail concerning what she had been doing at the time the event occurred (lines 9-10) and where it took place (lines 10-13). These details again seem to function in a way which institutes the story’s factuality and grounds it in ordinary reality. Additionally though, once the middle or core of the story is begun, this does not preclude additional contextual detail from being included but that there are often alternative functions to the inclusion of these details later in the story. Tina offers an approximation of her age ‘I was only twenty one or twenty two or three’ (lines 18-19). This is inserted at this point in the narrative to highlight her relative youth and the earlier suggestion of a possible and tragic, premature death – ‘I absolutely knew I was going to die’ (line 17). This contrast is effectively managed through the introduction of her approximate age and reinforced by her negative evaluation of the situation – ‘just terrible’ (line 19).

These ‘checker’ questions do not occur very often at the beginning of the interviews (though they do occur in other places, some of which will be referred to later) but there is one other interview (Celeste) which contains an early checker question. This sequence also shows a postponement of the expected structure akin to extracts 3 and 4. Additionally, this and the next few extracts (5-8) also display slight differences in the substantive content of the story narrative. In extract 5, Celeste is talking about her experiences and interests.

Extract 5 – Celeste

- 1 I: so if we sta::rt em by you talking about (0.6) your experience really [in
2 C: [okay (.)
3 okay erm well you had three different items I mean obviously they go
4 together quite a lot as well (0.7) but does it matter to you (1.0) no?
5 I: just you talk about it[in your own word[s
6 C: [okay [erm just well the reason I
7 responded to the advert was becaus:e (1.1) it- things like that always catch
8 my attention (.) erm moments of being (0.3) non-being (0.9) erm (1.3)
9 contemplation meditation and and and obv- I mean (0.4) it overlaps with
10 sort of my academic interests that have come from my personal interests
11 (0.3) where I look into mysticism in quite (.) you know thorough detail as
12 well (0.6) reading things but (.) equally participating in different (0.6) erm
13 (0.7) what I would call spiritual (0.3) erm ents:: (0.5) activities or or tut (0.4)
14 erm >but these are things that you seek out whereas I think what you were
15 asking for is more about experiences that (0.5) you maybe you cultivate but
16 they also (0.4) sometimes find you or that's how it feels
17 (0.3)
18 OR or actually feels more like (0.4) you start reaching a level where you're
19 (0.5) seeing things that were always there (0.4) and it so it's not as if you're
20 ~~£~~some privileged person who's reached a certain level ↑no you're just (0.4)
21 your eyes open more(0.4) and you see these things (0.3) and and that's
22 maybe why (.) suddenly it feels like their perception has expanded
23 (0.7)
24 but (0.7) it to me it feels more (0.3) >~~£~~I'll be more specific soon but
25 EHEH it feels more like (0.8) as if you're just starting to be aware of a
26 certain (0.6) undercurrent

Celeste begins her account with the same features identified previously (acknowledgement + hesitation marker) – ‘okay (.) okay erm well’ (lines 2-3) – but then proceeds to insert a checker oriented to the advert that was placed in order to obtain respondents (lines 3-4). This again is a repair sequence seeking clarification, which postpones the story narrative aspect of the A + B structure. In orienting to the advert (see appendix 1) Celeste is working to establish what is required of her, interactionally speaking, in this setting. Such an insertion emphasises that it is the interviewer who sets the agenda and scope of the topic for discussion, regardless of the ‘opportunities’ for interviewee – led discussions. Also of interest here is the way in which, akin to institutional settings (see for instance, Stokoe & Edwards, 2006: 61-2), what is deemed appropriate for the setting is topicalised. Additionally, what is appropriate may be more easily identifiable or more overtly managed in an institutional setting, for example legal. In citing Derber’s (1979) work, Ewick & Silbey (1995) state,

“Content rules, as they operate within different cultural and institutional settings, define *what* constitutes an appropriate or successful narrative. They define intelligibility, relevance, and believability, while specifying what serves as validating responses or critical rejection”. (Ewick & Silbey, 1995: 207)

My response (line 5) represents an attempt to return to the telling of experience and serves to appear concerned with the interviewee’s point of view (“in your own words”). This is also a second invitation to proceed with the telling and is a topic initiating utterance. It has a similar function to the nodding and smiling illustrated in extracts 3 and 4.

Celeste then continues by invoking or describing aspects of her self and identifying herself as a person with certain interests and proclivities. She mentions contemplation and, meditation (line 9), mysticism (line 11) and ‘spiritual...activities’ (line 13) which work to position her in a certain way and align her with certain interests and potential identities. In this extract her referents to self are clearly owned by the way she uses expressions of agency – using ‘I’ and ‘my’ and citing her ‘academic interests’ and ‘personal interests’ (line 10) to make claims about her identity. She also refers directly to the *expectations* of the interview – ‘whereas I think what you were asking for is’ (lines 14-15). Celeste is here engaged in identity work, but is also providing an unsolicited rationale for responding to the advert. It is possible that this occurs because of the way in which the initial invitation is phrased. For instance, instead of being requested to provide ‘what happened’, Celeste is asked in a looser formulation to talk about her experience (line 1). Celeste’s ‘checker’ question on lines 3-4 could thus be understood as a request for clarification about the interactional requirements. Furthermore, Celeste’s response to the invitation is general in the same way in which the request for information about her experience is more general. Interestingly, Celeste does show an awareness of the expectation to be specific – ‘I’ll be more specific soon but EHEH’ (lines 24-25) – and laughs, which shows her engaged in the activity of doing possible troubles resistance (Jefferson, 1984). That is, Celeste explicitly demonstrates her understanding that there is an expectation for her response to be more specific and that she is in some way contravening this expectation.

So, Celeste orients initially to the general rather than the specific and her talk concerns her ‘self’ and her interests as the contextual detail. This generality is also found in Kitty’s narrative (extract 6) beginning where her immediate orientation is to her creative writing and her self in general terms.

Extract 6 – Kitty

- 1 I: so (.) if you (.) just want to describe your experience
2 K: o[kay (.) erm I guess er::
3 I: [°first of all°
4 K: the best thing is: (.) to talk about first (.) is er::m my writing (.) cos I write
5 very creatively (0.8) and um (0.6) as well as academically and it's always
6 been a really important part (0.8) of (1.0) my life and keeping myself sane
7 (0.6) but when I write (0.3) erm (.) creatively it's a very strange experience

Kitty begins her response with an acknowledgement + hesitation marker – ‘okay (.) erm’ (line 2), which in part runs concurrently with me uttering ‘°first of all°’ (line 3) rather quietly. However, what she does next contravenes the expected sequence. Firstly, she deploys a tentative expression – ‘I guess’ – followed by an evaluative one – ‘the best thing’ (lines 2 & 4) – in introducing what she is going to ‘talk about first’ – ‘her writing’ (line 4). These introductory expressions offer an evaluative rationale for the subsequent talk in positive and tentative terms so as not to convey absolute dismissal of what might be expected. A design of this kind comes across as a careful attempt to orient to that which is important and relevant to her. So, instead of talking about a specific experience, Kitty talks in more general terms about her experiences - she proposes that she is someone who regularly experiences TEHEs whilst engaged in writing creatively. Any scene-setting activity is focused around portraying a particular kind of person and identity – ‘I write very creatively (0.8) and um (0.6) as well as academically and it's always been a very important part (0.8) of (1.0) my life’ (lines 4-6). This rationale provision and identity work is similar to that found in extract 6. Both respondents go on to provide specific descriptions of individual experiences, although whilst Celeste’s are unsolicited, Kitty’s are explicitly requested.

George similarly begins (after the insertion of a hesitation marker) by orienting to the proposed frequency of experiences and identity work. In the next extract (7) George’s initial talk concerns aspects of his identity that are in some senses at odds with his later experiences.

Extract 7 – George

- 1 I: okay ((*beep beep*)) (just use that one⁵⁵) so if you wanna tell me erm (.) about
2 your experiences

⁵⁵ This is a guess at what was said as it is mumbled, but is a reference to the tape recorder, as there were two running and one stopped working.

3 (0.9)
 4 G: er:m (0.7) I think what prompted me really I'd had a number of experiences
 5 during my life (0.4) e::r
 6 (2.0)
 7 and I'd always been (0.8) very much (0.6) a a c-cynic I mean I'm an er
 8 (0.6) atheist er (1.2) I- I've always been somebody who wanted to
 9 (1.6)
 10 have a go at new age (0.9) people of religion [in general
 11 I: [mm
 12 G: >I don't know why [I know it's wrong I shouldn't do that but [
 13 I: [mm [heh
 14 G: c's I'm very very cynical n:n (0.8) and I want everything proved to me I
 15 want to experience it before I can believe it [
 16 I: [mm
 17 (0.4)
 18 G: then about er (1.6) gaw twenty five years ago now (1.0) I:: (0.7) I had an
 19 experience in my bathroom I was just standing there waiting for the bath to
 20 fill and we have one of these h-heat lamps a really bright one [
 21 I: [mm
 22 G: (1.9)
 23 and I'm gonna have to go back to a previous experience (.) sorry

In response to the request to talk about his experiences, George begins immediately to offer a rationale for his participation in the research concerning the frequency of his experiences – ‘erm (0.7) I think what prompted me really I'd had a number of experiences during my life’ (lines 4-5). Akin to the other extracts above, this is not something that is explicitly sought by the initial request but is voluntarily offered. Following this, George orients to aspects of his identity such as being a ‘cynic’ and an ‘atheist’ (lines 7-8) – and the kind of person he is or was – ‘I've I've always been somebody who wanted to (1.6) have a go at new age (0.9) people of religion [in general’ (lines 8-10). This is the detail that George provides as a backdrop prior to talking about his experiences specifically. It is interesting that George orients to this identity work upfront in his interview as he later returns to this detail after relaying his experiences to explicitly demonstrate how he is changed (see Chapter Six for more concerning this notion of transformation).

Only later does George begin to talk about his experiences referring to expected contextual details, including orienting to the timing of the event – ‘twenty five years ago now’ (line 18) – and the whereabouts and location – ‘I had an experience in my bathroom’ (lines 18-19). It would seem therefore that there is something quite important about establishing a particular kind of identity for George at the outset, before he embarks upon his story. George does another interesting thing relating to the notion of story chronology later by suddenly making reference to a ‘previous experience’ (line 23). Here George intimates that

it is necessary to run through events in a chronological sequence – a common feature of stories or narratives generally (Ewick & Silbey, 1995) – in order to accurately represent his experiences. This orientation to the relevance of sequential order is interesting as it is both a reference to normative story expectations and a device concerning the ostensibly accurate presentation of self and events in this context.

Finally, Fred does something quite different from any of the other respondents at the beginning of his interview, which is demonstrated in extract 8 below.

Extract 8 – Fred

- 1 I: so if you wanna (0.5) if you want to tell me ab[out °your experiences°
2 F: [okay well I'll (0.5)
3 let me start firstly wiv wiv erm (0.5) some fings my farver (.) mention'd
4 I: >mm↑hm?
5 F: er:m (.) he was in the second world war (.) er abroad (.) erm he was a sniper
6 and he was wiv a friend of 'is a colleague I suppose

Fred embarks upon his account with an acknowledgement + hesitation marker – ‘okay well’ (line 2) – and then goes on to seek permission to talk about something different from that requested – ‘let me start firstly wiv wiv erm (0.5) some things my farver (.) mentioned’ (lines 2-3). He indicates awareness of his talk’s contravention of expectations by this permission-seeking activity (‘let me’) and shows the temporary nature of this diversion from the request to talk about his own experiences (‘start firstly’). Subsequently his request is acknowledged with ‘>mm↑hm?’ (line 4), though the intonation and prosody conveys mild surprise as these details were not requested or expected. Fred goes on to report his father’s experiences in a similar form to the other beginnings, with details of what his father was doing at the time, where he was and who he was with (lines 5-6). This is perhaps provided to show that others have reported these experiences (subsequently Fred talks about his wife’s experiences also) as a way of deflecting their unusual or unconventional status.

The variation in these extracts actually serves to bolster the case for the routine A + B structure (acknowledgement, hesitation device and story preface). Extracts 3-5 demonstrate that despite obstacles (repair sequences seeking clarification) the structure is merely postponed and resumed after the repair sequence. The remaining extracts (6-8, but also extract 5) still contain sufficient elements of the structure for it to be identifiable as routine. Indeed, they mostly differ only in the way the contextual detail is provided. That

is, they do not refer to time, place or specific experience in the beginning section. However, a number of them are clearly doing identity work in these openings. The orientation to identity work prior to any account detail demonstrates the importance to the experiential narrative of aligning themselves with particular categorisations to ensure that the story is interpreted correctly. It is possible that in providing this alignment at the beginning, particular presentations of self, help augment credibility and believability, via the concept of perceived authenticity.

4.3.2 Summary

The focus in this section has been upon the beginning of accounts. It is notable that the majority of accounts include some scene-setting activity or story preface whether located immediately after the acknowledgement + hesitation marker or deferred slightly in the narrative (as with the deviant cases). These scene-setting details are important and are included to serve several functions. The first is directly concerned with displaying cognitive competence. In relaying some of the finer detail associated with where and when the experience took place, including other contextual details such as what the experient was doing at the time, or the inclusion of broader social events such as current affairs, enables the experient to exhibit their memory for the event. Effectively, 'showing' that their recall for the detail surrounding their experience is intact (by reference to details such as their age, the year and what they were doing at the time) works to establish the credibility or factuality of their account. Secondly, this seeming display of cognitive prowess, equally allows for the extraordinary experience to remain absolutely rooted in and strongly connected to the 'real' lives and tangible existence of these individuals. So, whilst the experience might be considered unusual or 'out of this world' even, it is utterly inextricable from mundane reality. The implication is that it really happened to cognitively competent and grounded, cognisant beings.

Any deviant cases display these elements also, but equally include checkers, references to experiential generalities and identity work. The checkers seem to be included to verify interactional expectations, whilst the reference to multiple experiences points to their normal status for the respondents in question. The concern with self-presentation upfront indicates the importance of how the story is received and interpreted and thus how an individual is judged or categorised as a result. The one-off inclusion of third party

experiences may be further working to emphasise the ‘normality’ of these experiences as opposed to their perceived irregularity.

4.4 Middles – Story Peaks

The middle section of these narratives contains the ‘what happened’ detail of the experience being articulated. At this point utterances concerning what occurred are imparted. The exact detail and content of this material varies as does the length and amount of time devoted to it, but there appears to be at least one pivotal ‘swing’ moment in each story (there are sometimes more than one in an entire narrative). This pivotal moment, sometimes also called a ‘narrative peak’ (Li, 1986), might be considered as a climactic moment in the telling of a story. In many of these accounts there are several such peaks as more than one experience is being relayed. Additionally, some respondents seem to be reporting their thoughts at, or in close proximity to, these peak moments.

4.4.1 *I was just doing x... when y*

Sometimes, this moment is delivered via a device identified by Wooffitt (1991, 1992) as ‘I was just doing x when y’. This device is considered to be a method of establishing ordinariness whilst revealing an extraordinary event and can be found in various extracts. In the next extract (9), taken from the core ‘story’ of the narrative, Helen is talking about sensing the presence of a dead person or spirit in a house that she and her husband viewed.

Extract 9 – Helen

- 1 H: Bob said you know there’s someone here ‘cos Bob’s sensitive as
2 well (0.5) and erm
3 (0.9)
4 and we both sort of sat in and tu[tuned in and and erm (0.3)
5 I: [mm
6 H: didn’t really get all that much at the time but (0.4) er then we went home we
7 really liked the place and then this chap (1.0) must have followed us:: becos
8 x/y I was peeling potatoes at the kitchen sink and there was this (0.4) person I
9 could feel him (.) >standing behind my right shoulder and he ses (.) I’m Alf
10 you know he said (1.2) and so we referred to him as Alf after that

Helen is talking about not having been able to effectively communicate with the person whilst they were in the house – ‘tu[tuned in and and erm (0.3) didn’t really get all that much at the time’ (lines 4-6). She suggests that this person followed them home – ‘this chap

must have followed us becos' (line 7). At this point, however, it is only really the use of 'tu[tuned in' (line 4) that would indicate that this person is not physically present in an ordinary capacity. This individual's status as not tangibly physically present is confirmed via the device identified by Wooffitt (1991, 1992). This device relies upon the expression of a mundane activity (I was just doing x...) followed by the disclosure of an extraordinary event (...when y).

Helen delivers this by reference to the mundane activity of 'peeling potatoes at the kitchen sink' (line 8), a normal, ordinary chore, which achieves several things. Firstly, as Wooffitt has pointed out these mundane activities (in this case peeling potatoes) are ones that most people can identify with – allowing Helen to identify herself as *just like anybody else* i.e. normal and ordinary. Secondly, it also has the effect of constituting her (at this 'pivotal' point) as a passive recipient of events beyond her control. In other words, it conveys this: that the experience happened when she was engaged in a normal, mundane activity – she was not expecting it, nor did she imagine it, as it 'interrupted' this activity in the physical realm – and it could have happened to any other regular person. This idea – that interacting parties work to align themselves with the category of 'ordinary' – was originally discovered by Harvey Sacks (1984) and has been seen to be fairly ubiquitous in everyday interaction since. Thirdly, it also gives the impression that in the face of extraordinary events the details of mundane activities, such as 'peeling potatoes', can be precisely recalled (Wooffitt, 2005b).

Following this, Helen goes on to report the extraordinary event – 'and there was this (0.4) person I could feel him standing by my right shoulder' (lines 8-9) – via a sensing expression ('I could feel him') with a positional statement ('standing by my right shoulder'). These two aspects of the y component of Helen's narrative help to communicate how extraordinary the event was. That is, Helen could reportedly sense the presence of someone who was not tangibly physically present and yet could locate him spatially – in other words Helen claims the sense of presence was extraordinarily powerful. Finally, Helen includes the reported speech of this 'person' – 'and he ses (.) I'm Alf you know he said' (lines 9-10) – which can be seen to add a level of drama and involvement to the story (Holt, 1996, 2000), particularly as this 'person' is not physically there. This is the first 'peak' within the story that can be found in Helen's narrative and it hinges on this normalising device – as a way of demonstrating ordinariness despite the onset of extraordinary events. Additionally it is

representative of the social organisation of storytelling which ‘regulates not only when and what kinds of stories can be told, it also governs...*how* stories are told’ (Ewick & Silbey, 1995: 208).

Examples of the x/y device regularly appear in the accounts and contribute towards credibility despite detailing extraordinary incidences. JM’s account illustrates this effectively in extract 10 where he is talking about recovering from a serious operation in hospital.

Extract 10 – John More

1 JM: and so often when you’re in hospital (0.5) you’re kind of asleep and then
2 you wake up then you go back to sleep you know you have periods of sleep
3 an’ then .hhh and erm
4 (1.4)
5 there was one particular night (.) when I was sort of in that in between stage
6 between sleep (0.6) and consciousness you know that (.) kind of (.) that grey
7 x area between the two .hh and erm (0.9) I was just laid there with me eyes
8 y closed (.) and then I had this vision
9 (0.8)
10 there was this (.) female face (.) with er golden hair (0.5) like that you see (.)
11 j-just just there looking straight at me

Again the peak in this extract is in the form of an x/y device. JM talks about being ‘just laid there with my eyes closed’ (lines 7-8). This common activity can easily be identified with by anyone. Additionally, it is a likely and expected activity connoting ‘rest’ for someone recuperating from a serious operation. There is also a degree of innocence and passivity construed by this activity thus pointing to the spontaneity of the subsequent experience. JM then includes the extraordinary element – ‘and then I had this vision (0.8) there was this (.) female face with (.) er golden hair’ (lines 8-10). It is evident that the experient must strike a balance between factuality and normality - that is, the storyteller needs to appear as a credible witness to extraordinary events, whilst also convincing the listeners of their ordinariness and normality. It is important that they not be categorised as ‘crank’ and that their testimony is taken seriously (Potter, 1996). The x/y device seems to assist in enabling this balance.

4.4.2 Reporting thoughts

There are other accounts that also contain this x/y element as part of the peak or middle of the narrative. However, there are also other common identifiable features that can be found in this location also. The next three extracts (11,12, and 13) show the use of these features effectively. It is known that reported speech often appears in crucial moments within storytelling (e.g. Buttny, 1998; Chafe, 1982; Holt, 1996, 2000; Labov, 1972; Li, 1986; Mayes, 1990; Tannen, 1989) and this is demonstrated by its inclusion in extract 9 (line 17), but in many of the accounts, respondents also seem inclined to include their ostensible ‘thoughts’ at the time of the event.⁵⁶ In extract 11 Rose is talking about having had a ‘trapped spirit’ in her house, someone coming to resolve this and her subsequent extraordinary revelation or realisation.

Extract 11 - Rose

1 R: SO er::m (0.6) right this is >with-the with-the trapped spirit (.) this bloke
2 had to come out to the house and a::w you know (0.4) all sorts of
3 shenanigans went on and e:r (0.7) e::r I learnt the expression (1.1) taking
4 somebody to the light and (0.3) being you know having an inquisitive mind
5 always want to understand more so I started (0.5) doing a lot of research
6 into (0.4) erm (0.5) er people who could rescue trapped spirits and just just
7 just understanding >trying to understand how mediums work erm
8 (0.6)
9 but the thing about this bloke that really (0.5) er pressed all my buttons was
10 that (.) he was a very good healer erm and had a lot of success with people
11 with cancer and conditions like that but .hhh the >most exciting thing for
12 me was that he could heal animals and telepathically communicate with
13 animals which (0.6) .hh might’ve s-s- could’ve sounded like nonsense to a
14 lot of people but to me I just thought (.) ↑E::::hhuuuuu::h oo::h you know
15 this a::hhh my god I know why I’m here you know I’m love animals I’m
16 absolutely besotted with animals (.) and the idea of being able to (0.4) do
17 something more for them than just (0.5) taking them to the bet-vet

Here, the extraordinary moment is communicated via the reporting of Rose’s thought at the time – ‘but to me I just thought (.) ↑E::::hhuuuuu::h oo::h you know this a::hhh my god I know why I’m here’ (lines 14-15). Her thought conveys the onset of a sudden realisation and absolute revelation, further achieved by the exaggerated prosody in her utterance. The appearance of reported thought at crucial points in the narratives can be found elsewhere also. In the next extract (12) there are several reported thoughts that

⁵⁶ These devices are covered in extensive detail in Chapter 5, so are merely observed and referred to here as a common feature, rather than analysed as a discursive device.

reportedly occur prior to one of George's experiences that happened in his bathroom. Consecutively this extract follows on from extract 8 though there is some talk in between the two excerpts when George reports nearly dying in a car crash, experiencing a life review, being convinced that he was to die and then being angry when he didn't. Sequentially, this is followed by an incredibly vivid dream just afterwards (extract 4, Chapter 5).

Extract 12 – George

1 G: I suppose it was maybe a month later (0.8) and I-I was standing in the
 2 x bathroom and I was looking up at this light and I thought (0.9) this is well I
 3 was looking at the back of my eyelids I thought (0.4) ↑o↓h >the b-colours I
 4 can see are pretty much the colours I can see when I was having the dream
 5 it was this golden colour (0.7) I thought what would happen if I just sort of
 6 (.) allowed myself to think about the dream at the same time (0.4) and the
 7 second I did
 8 (1.9)
 9 y I was comp- (.) white light everywhere it was just like bang ((*clicks fingers*))
 10 (0.8) and
 11 (2.4)
 12 th-no presence there wasn't I didn't get the sense of a person there it was
 13 just (0.5) light (0.6) everywhere and I felt (0.4) I've never had cocaine but
 14 I'm sure it was quite like this it was unbelievably (0.9) just right (.) I felt (0.5)
 15 amazing I felt wonderful I just stayed
 16 (0.3)
 17 now this-is this-is the spooky part I know this is this is I'm really gonna be
 18 shooting myself in the foot here (0.4) by telling you this part but
 19 (3.7)
 20 was that there was a voice

There are three reported thoughts (lines 2, 3, & 5) all of which come in between the delivery of a mundane x and an extraordinary y. The x component – 'I-I was standing in the bathroom and I was looking up at this light' (lines 1-2) – establishes George engaged in ordinary activities (looking up at the ordinary light in the bathroom). From lines 2-6 George then includes three reported thoughts. They all concern a previous experience George has talked about concerning a significant dream he had which contained some vivid colours and was reported in itself as an extraordinary experience also. The first thought – 'and I thought (0.9) this is well' (line 2) is self repaired to include a statement of what he was doing at the time – 'looking at the back of my eyelids' (line 3). The second thought concerns the colours from the dream – 'pretty much the colours I can see when I was having the dream it was this golden colour' (lines 4-5). The final thought George reports concerns him considering 'what would happen if I just sort of (.) allowed myself to

think about the dream at the same time’ (lines 5-6). Effectively then, the reported thoughts would seem to ‘set up’ the extraordinary experience (or y element), which is then delivered – ‘the second I did (1.9) I was comp- (.) white light everywhere it was just like bang’ (lines 7-9).

There are further thoughts reported elsewhere. In extract 13, Richard is talking about the onset of his out of body experiences. Prior to this extract Richard was talking about several experiences of ‘sleep paralysis’ where he reported waking up unable to move. This phenomenon is sometimes also called ‘old hag’ as experiencers sometimes report the sensation of pressure on the chest, which has been depicted as a hag-like creature in folklore (Hufford, 1982).

Extract 13 – Richard

21 R: and then they (.) they they just stopped
 22 (1.0)
 23 ((mouth clicking noise)) an::d I suppose it would be hh about a year later
 24 (0.7) erm (0.7) I think (.) July time (0.6) e:r of eighty two (.) erm I was
 25 x staying at a (0.7) a friends house who and I was sleeping on her settee
 26 (1.8)
 27 y an::d
 28 (2.0)
 29 I woke up in that state again (1.3) absolutely paralysed (0.9) an::d I could
 30 hear myself (0.4) groaning (1.3) erm
 31 (2.8)
 32 and I heard the door open (0.9) and I remember thinking o↑h (.) she must
 33 have heard me heheh (0.9) an::d and it wasn’t her (0.6) it felt like
 34 (2.9)
 35 somebody was coming definitely (.) coming into the room (0.6) but (0.5) as
 36 they sort of came into my field of vision (0.9) it was like they were a
 37 luminous being (0.8) made of fibres of light or something like this (.) just a
 38 (1.1) a silhouette of a person (0.8) and they came (0.7) and I could hear the
 39 breathing which was very deep

Richard sets up the extraordinary event with an x element – ‘I was staying at a (0.7) a friends house who and I was sleeping on her settee’ (lines 24-25) – and then includes the y straight after (lines 27-30). The mundane activity of sleeping is contrasted with the extraordinary and unexpected activity of waking up unable to move combined with an audible groaning. Richard then also includes his alleged thinking at the time of the event – ‘and I remember thinking o↑h (.) she must have heard me heheh’ (lines 32-33). It is possible that the inclusion of these cognitive processes could contribute to the presentation

of a credible and believable witness to these events as objective and factual. Consequently, reported thoughts are explored in more detail in the next chapter (5).

4.4.3 Summary

It would seem that the middles of these accounts, whilst varied in substantive detail, share some common features. The main feature is the presence of at least one peak or pivotal moment in the story, which is more often than not marked out by the presence of Wooffitt's 'I was just doing x...when y' device and sometimes the presence of reported thoughts and/or reported speech. These features often mark out the transition from or contrast between ordinary and extraordinary elements of 'what happened' and act as indicators of these dramatic moments. It would appear that the inclusion of the x/y device is there to normalise the experient and ground them in the mundane world firstly, whilst also showing how the extraordinary was unexpected and spontaneous, and how they were invariably passive recipients. It is worth considering the purpose of storytelling as it is always strategic.

“Narrators tell tales in order to achieve some goal or advance some interest [not necessarily explicit or conscious]...we tell stories to entertain or persuade, to exonerate, or indict, to enlighten or instruct.”
(Ewick & Silbey, 1995: 208)

However, the purpose of the stories in this project may not be easily categorised for the very reason that they are elicited, rather than spontaneously occurring.

4.5 Endings – Story Closure

The endings of these narratives are not always easy to characterise upon first inspection because although there are sometimes cues in the utterances of the respondent which suggest that they are reaching the end of their experiential account, it is harder to pinpoint what those cues are without a closer, more systematic consideration of the data. Gubrium and Holstein (2009) have also noted the diverse ways in which stories can end and that they do not always have a clearly defined end point.

In investigating the data more closely it is evident that there are various 'ending' formulations. As per the length of the narratives generally, the time spent on endings

varies from respondent to respondent. But invariably, once ‘what happened’ is communicated the respondent engages in, or conveys some form of, ‘reflection’ about the experience(s). Whilst it may be problematic to label a particular section of talk as interpretive or descriptive (Wood & Kroger, 2000), it is possible that utterances could be viewed as the respondent engaged in ‘doing’ some form of sense-making activity.

4.5.1 Sense-making and knowledge

This activity enables the respondent to do the business of sharing their understanding of their experience, construed as a judgement, an interpretation or just knowledge. In the following extract (14) Kerry has just been talking about the moment one of her close relatives died in hospital.

Extract 14 – Kerry

- 1 K: and there’s j’st (0.4) I dunno >something about the fact that I wasn’t there
2 but I got there just in time? (0.5) and (0.5) and that was all just (0.7) I don’t
3 quite know how to explain it but it was (1.0) there was a physical sense of
4 (1.5)
5 er:m (0.4) °heheh° it sounds really metaphysical .hh but two worlds (0.5)
6 meeting for a moment (.)
7 I: mm
8 (0.9)
9 K: an::d (0.6) so therefore the passing from one to another (0.7) was actually
10 quite a natural thing? (0.8) and quite (0.3) er:m (1.2) quite easy (.) er:m it
11 sounds very sc(h)ience fi(h)ction to say (0.5) like some kind of portal and I
12 don’t me[an that
13 I: [mm
14 K: but that (0.6) that’s kind of the sense that they actually (.) that the physical
15 atmosphere in there was so different
16 (0.9)
17 erm (0.7) the nurses and whatever had left us on our own (.) cos I mean
18 they’d (0.3) they’d decided sometime previously that they weren’t they
19 stopped fighting [and .hhh
20 I: [mm
21 K: and erm (0.7)so they’d they’d left us so I went out to say (0.8) °y’know°
22 she’s actually gone and she said oh yeah I know
23 (1.5)
24 and you think
25 (2.1)
26 and you don’t think about these things at the time you just (.) kind of take it
27 all (.) in your stride but you just think actually that’s (0.5) that’s really (0.9)
28 there was something very definitely (.) happening
29 (1.6)
30 over a (0.3) a wider (0.5) physical area than just inside her body (0.9) as it

31 was gradually (.) failing (0.8) does that make sense? (.)
 32 I: mm
 33 K: erm (0.8) so yeah (0.4) a really intangible kind of thing (.) but it was
 34 definitely (0.9) there was definitely something going on
 35 (0.4)
 36 and (0.8) you know (.) I'm not gonna say that there were kind of (0.7) flights
 37 of angels singing her [to her rest or anything like that but it was (0.7)
 38 I: [°hmp°
 39 K: it was definitely like there was a er (1.1) some kind of presence (1.3) erm (.)
 40 in a very electrical kind of way

Here Kerry's utterances perform the function of reflecting on her experience. In a very broad sense, her talk communicates her being engaged in some form of interpretation and sense-making activity. During this part of the account the way the talk is designed presents her position with some distance from unconventional explanations of what might have happened. For instance, she refers to 'two worlds (0.5) meeting for a moment' (lines 5-6), prefacing it with a distancing device – 'it sounds really metaphysical .hh but' (line 5). 'But' is a well-known distancing device people use to establish their personal separation from potentially unpalatable (or in this case unconventional) statements (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Additionally, she mentions the utterance sounding 'very sc(h)ience fi(h)ction' (line 11) and 'like some kind of portal' (line 11) whilst laughing. Laughter has been demonstrated to be an effective troubles resistance device (Jefferson, 1984), and comfortably positions Kerry as gently mocking the content of her talk. That is, as it might be somewhat problematic to straightforwardly suggest there is a portal linking life and death, the introduction of laughter allows Kerry to use it as a comparison device whilst maintaining distance from it (via mild derision) as a definitive explanation of her experience.

She completes the narrative by making a contrast between 'flights of angels singing her [relative to her rest' (lines 36-37) and 'some kind of presence (1.3) in a very electrical kind of way' (lines 39-40). This contrast is also a comparison between an extreme and specific claim, which could be challenged or seen as controversial, and a lesser, vaguer construction with no commitment to a concrete explanation of what the ostensibly intangible phenomena was. This is the point at which her experiential account finishes, in Kerry's case this is indicated by a longish pause and an expectant look at the interviewer but the latter is not something captured by this level or type of transcription. It is also possible that the phraseology of this ending that works to sum everything up (lines 33-40) and show the final conclusion of the experient, in a fairly objective and matter of fact fashion assisted

by the term ‘but’. This final conclusion serves as an effective interpretation of the entire experience, also acting perhaps, as a concise summary and a way of marking the end of the account.

Other respondent’s accounts include references to several experiences in succession before finishing, some told as discrete experiences and some with an entire narrative woven in between. John Cooper’s (JC) narrative includes a series of individual experiences and the next extract (15) is one of these. Here he is talking about one of his out of body experiences (for the beginning of this experience see extract 6, Chapter 5).

Extract 15 – John Cooper

8 JC: and I thought ‘where the heck am I’ (.) you know (0.5) and I’ve never seen
9 red soil (1.2) alright? (0.6) that orangey red (0.3) okay?
10 (0.9)
11 and ‘ere I I’ve loved (0.3) you know (0.4) >who::a whoa:::w wo::y:
12 (0.3)
13 you know I was looking at the landscape and looking at all over the (0.4)
14 thing and it was a real (0.4) out of body (1.2) Peter Pan ((*clap*)) (0.6)
15 experience (.) beautiful
16 (0.7)
17 erm ((*sniff*)) (1.0) and enjoying that free:dom (0.9) out of body
18 (1.0)
19 an:d er (.) when I came back and we shared it
20 (0.5)
21 ↑O::h you were down the West Country (1.0) Cornwall I believe have got
22 that (0.5) somewhere down there I don’t know (.) I haven’t se(h)en it
23 mys(h)elf phys(h)ically (0.3) but erm that’s wh(h)ere I’ve been to(h)ld I
24 wa(h)s that ni(h)ght

After talking about the detail of his experience with some very positive and slightly magical evaluation (with the inclusion of a fantasy character) – ‘and it was a real (0.4) out of body (1.2) Peter Pan ((*clap*)) (0.6) experience (.) beautiful’ (lines 14-15) – JC mentions disclosing the details to other people (a meditation group – line 19) and being told ‘↑O::h you were down the West Country’ (line 21). In doing so, JC achieves the provision of an interpretation of this experience without taking personal responsibility for this explanation. Additionally, at the end of this experiential account, JC includes a summing up phrase – ‘but erm that’s wh(h)ere I’ve been to(h)ld I wa(h)s that ni(h)ght’ (line 24). This phrase completes the account effectively and also works to show the final interpretation and the way in which it was provided by someone else. The bubbles of laughter deflect the bulk of the responsibility for this interpretation as does the intimation that someone else is

responsible and informed JC (he was ‘told’ that was where he was). However, this explanation is also presented by JC as *the* correct interpretation of the events relayed. The insertion of the term ‘but’ at the beginning of these utterances works to convey some objective certainty about unexpected and extraordinary events – as if to say, *despite any possible counter suggestions this is what happened*.

In these endings there also seems to be a pattern in the presentation of knowledge as opposed to belief in relation to these experiences. This seemingly subtle distinction positions the speaker with a degree of conviction about their experience. Unlike the business of giving views and thus mitigating attributions of overconfidence (arrogance) by use of phrases such as ‘I think’ or ‘I believe’ (Antaki et al, 2003), many of the respondents present things in more certain terms using ‘I know’ or ‘I knew’. Indeed, one respondent explicitly made this distinction. In extract 16, Lyn ends her experiential narrative about various extraordinary experiences centred on the death of her friend Alex and engaged in sense-making activity.

Extract 16 – Lyn

41 L: so to me it’s been
42 (1.9)
43 to me it it’s (.) erm it’s like (0.5) I’ve been told it’s not a question of belief
44 it’s a question of (0.5) knowing that there is life after death and I mean that
45 might sound really sort of arrogant but I just feel .hhh because of the way
46 it’s come from (1.0) I mean it came from Alex (0.9) that it’s real

Lyn talks about her knowledge of life after death (line 44) and orients to the potential accusation of overconfidence that such a statement might elicit by observing ‘I mean that might sound really sort of arrogant’ (lines 52-53). Subsequently, her account ends with a summing up phrase akin to the ones seen in the previous extracts (15 and 16) – ‘but I just feel .hhh because of the way it’s come from (1.0) I mean it came from Alex (0.9) that it’s real’ (lines 45-46). The insertion of ‘but’ allows deflection from any potential accusation of arrogance and also works to attribute the reason for this certainty to someone else, thus working to establish its objective status.

A similar ending, after similar referents to belief and knowledge, though with less clarity, can be found in extract 17 taken from John More’s (JM) account.

Extract 17 – John More

39 JM: and erm (0.7) that's it basically (0.4) so what it (0.4) what a- I think what I
40 think (0.5) is really nice about the whole thing (0.4) is it it proved to me
41 (0.8) that erm (1.1) we do people often talk about spirit guides and guardian
42 angels (0.4) but (0.3) I just feel now that erm (.) I've had the kind of (0.4)
43 proof that you need (.) to kind of believe in it and er (.) when it's a personal
44 experience (0.7) erm (0.4) erm (0.9)it's really con- it's really quite convincing
45 (0.6)
46 and so: I feel as if I know now (0.8) that there is a a guardian angel (0.5) and
47 I don't know to what extent they can intervene in your life (0.6) to prevent
48 you following certain course of action (0.4) or to guide you in a particular
49 way but what I do know is that (.) they can reassure at different times when
50 they feel you need to be reassured
51 (1.0)
52 so it's a kind of a passive (0.7) presence rather than ss- (0.9) er like a
53 proactive kind of a presence you [know
54 I: [mm
55 JM: (.) but it is there when you need it

JM talks about his experience providing him with 'the kind of (0.4) proof that you need to believe' (lines 42-43) in 'spirit guides or guardian angels' (line 41) and he reports feeling 'as if I know now (0.8) that there is a guardian angel' (line 46). This formulation enables JM to sidestep claims of arrogance as it deftly presents his knowledge as cautiously certain. Such knowledge is also presented as resulting from personal experience rather than merely an opinion or belief which is evaluated as carrying more weight – 'and er (.) when it's a personal experience...it's really quite convincing' (lines 43-44) – and not as easy to challenge. The closing utterances show JM offering a final interpretation and conclusion in similar phrasing to the other accounts. Firstly, on line 49, 'but what I do know is', and then on line 55, 'but it is there when you need it'. These effective demonstrations of how the experience has been made sense of are offered as the concluding part of the experiential account. Providing the listener with a final summary statement demonstrating the way in which the experience should be understood or interpreted is certainly a common endings characterisation in these accounts. Interestingly in these sense-making endings, there is often the insertion of a 'but' which identifies the final summary statement of a particular experience. Exploring whether this is more common across accounts is unfortunately not something that there is the space for here. Nonetheless, there are other features that appear in these locations also.

4.5.2 Orientation ‘back’ to the interview

Another feature, which characterises some of the ‘endings’ of ‘what happened’, is a question posed directly to me by the respondent which can be seen as a sort of ‘checker’ (Brown & Yule, 1983a). In these interviews the checking concerns whether it is alright to continue, whether the account or answer given is acceptable to me, or whether the respondent is talking too much. This is demonstrated firstly, in an earlier extract (15), where towards the end of her account Kerry asks, ‘does that make sense?’ (line 31). Another example is found in Kitty’s account. Here (extract 18) she is towards the end of talking about her experience of writing creatively. This extract comes after extract 7 in Kitty’s interview, though there is some talk in between these excerpts about the content and meaning of her writing only being evident to her after she has written it and it being emotionally but not experientially biographical.

Extract 18 – Kitty

35 K: ...erm but I
36 find it very therapeutic
37 (1.0)
38 er (0.4) so that would be one one example (1.0) of having an extraordinary
39 experience and feeling very kind of in touch with the universe (0.4) but (1.4)
40 f-feeling that I c-can control (0.9) °things as well
41 (1.2)
42 I guess° (0.8) is that ok (0.4) d’you (.) °er I° (.) do you want me to talk about
43 other things? I mean that’s all I can say about that it’s it’s kind of hard to (.)
44 describe

Coming to the end of a segment of talk about her experiences, Kitty includes two questions directed at me, the interviewer. Firstly, ‘is that ok’ (line 42) and then ‘d’you (.) °er I° (.) do you want me to talk about other things?’ (lines 42-43). There is a sense in which this phrase shows an orientation back to the interview context. Up until this point little guidance has been given from the interviewer about what is required and these questions might be indicating Kitty’s recognition of the normative expectations of a two-way interaction, particularly one that is usually led or guided by the interviewer. These questions also convey Kitty’s consideration of the requirements of the research interview – whether she is providing me with the correct information – and possible awareness and sensitivity about ‘holding the floor’. That is, to be expected to talk for extended periods in a two-way interaction affords a degree of formality to the setting, which might present issues of social discomfort as a divergence from ordinary familiar interaction.

Furthermore, if stories are usually co-constructed (Goodwin, 1984) then embarking upon an almost monologic construction is at the very least an irregular interactional expectation.⁵⁷

There is a similar sentiment underlying the ending of George's experiential trajectory. In extract 19, George is talking about how he cannot tell his friends about his experiences, which comes right at the end of a series of TEHEs.

Extract 19 – George

1 G: and you find out really that you can't talk about them with your friends
2 either (0.5) and so that you'll end up (0.4) not talking about them at all and
3 when I do speak about them (0.6) like this (0.5) you feel nuts (.) you feel
4 really just (0.3) silly because you suddenly realise how incapable of talking
5 about them you are
6 (1.0)
7 you know I'm trying to put in all kinda (.) chronological order >to make
8 some kind of sense to you and I've just realised it sounds like a load of
9 nonsense (0.7) it's it's (0.4) ask me something before I keep babbling

George talks about his inability to convey his experiences effectively (lines 4-9), ending with, 'and I've just realised it sounds like a load of nonsense' (lines 8-9). Finally, he states 'it's it's (0.4) ask me something before I keep babbling' (line 9). In this way George orients back to the interview context and directly requests to be asked something. This shows firstly, the normativity of the expected interview format, but it also demonstrates a cultural phenomenon mentioned above (extract 18). Including checking questions or orienting, in an explicit manner back to the interview, the speaker is able to 'do' being polite and acquiescent – to a great extent, culturally and interactionally desirable characteristics. Furthermore, speaking for extended periods in ordinary interaction (and in most formal interviews) without interjection, questions or prompts from others (or the interviewer) may be quite unusual and therefore these orientations display an acute awareness of this cultural convention.

There is also a sense in which the checking activity is designed to ensure relevance and the correct understanding or interpretation of the interview expectations. For example this extract (20) from James' interview at the end of the first experience he recounts does just this.

⁵⁷ There may be other analytically interesting aspects in this extract, such as her references to ineffability but unfortunately, there is no room to expand on this here.

Extract 20 – James

- 1 J: I just found myself reading (1.0) more and then synchronicities occurred
2 where I'd suddenly (0.5) looked up at the cinema and >then there was that
3 film Dead Again with Kenneth Brannagh and Emma Thompson about
4 reincarnation so I went in and watched that I was like (0.5) °aaah° and that
5 seemed to catalyse more insights and er
6 (0.7)
7 and then I (0.7) very shortly went to see a cl this was all in the space of
8 about two weeks (0.4) this [event
9 I: [mm
10 (0.4)
11 J: is this (.) what you're on about (.) [yeh?
12 I: [>yeh yeh
13 J: heheheh (0.5) erm (0.9) and I:: there was a shop in ((place)) that was like
14 this: (1.0) so this is kind of a resonance of that really for m[e you know cos
15 I: [m↑m
16 it (0.6) it had such a magic and a sort of (1.2) energy in it and erm...

After completing the account of his experience – ‘and that seemed to catalyse more insights’ (lines 4-5) – James begins to talk about another experience – ‘and then I (0.7) very shortly went to see a cl’ (line 7). Following this, he self repairs stating ‘this was all in the space of about two weeks (0.4) this event’ (lines 7-8). This self repair, we discover in later talk not included here, is the start of another experience involving James’ trip to see a clairvoyant. However, he interrupts himself here to give an assessment of the time period over which his initial experience and related activity unfolded – ‘about two weeks’ (line 8) – and then following an ‘mm’ (line 9) from me, asks a question – ‘is this (.) what you’re on about (.) yeh?’ (line 11). This is a direct reference to the advert requesting respondents (see appendix 1) and can be seen as a verification of understanding or interpretation and a check of relevance. This checking works to display a concern from the speaker that the matters relayed are of interest and in line with what is required.

It seems that there are various functions illustrated by these questions and orientations. Firstly, that the suspension of normative conversational ‘rules’ such as turn-taking is only temporary and expectations during an interaction are of a two-way (as a minimum) exchange (Houtkoop & Mazeland, 1985). Indeed even if respondents expect to be the primary speaker it is likely that they also expect to be asked questions and have input from the interviewer. Secondly, they illustrate a potential power imbalance between respondent and interviewer. This is well illustrated by the articulated questions of whether what has been said is acceptable or relevant for the researcher’s (i.e. my) purposes. In other words, these checkers construct the speaker as trying to please and wanting to be helpful. Issues

concerning footing and stake and interest⁵⁸, it has been forcefully argued will always be problematic for analysts using interviews as data (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Indeed, the interview will always be an ‘unnatural’ interaction where the researcher is more ‘in control’ and has potentially implicit agendas, which are problematic for analysis.⁵⁹

4.5.3 *The ends of endings*

Another aspect of completing these narratives is when the ending is in some way ‘announced’ and the story is concluded. The following phrases enable a quick, clean, clear finish which demarcates the ending of the story in a distinguishable and easily identifiable way - ‘and that was it and then it just (.) faded away’ (John More) and ‘so I’ve never been able to explain it since (.) except that’s what happened’ (Margaret Scott). However, it does not necessarily indicate the end of the turn, or preclude later references to that same topic or material.

Furthermore, not all respondents do this and for others the endings are not announced in this way. For these accounts there is a sense in which the telling of one experience rolls into another. Here (extract 21), Sunset is reaching the end of her first experience, following which she begins to talk about other events.

Extract 21 – Sunset

17 S: e:::r and then of course foot and mouth broke out (0.7) and it it began to
 18 seem (0.5) less like a nightmare and more like a premonition
 19 (1.3)
 20 always been interested in esoteric type things paranormal (0.7) erm (0.7) and
 21 that prompted me to-tut-of (0.4) think I must do something about this and
 22 of course didn’t really know what to do
 23 (1.0)
 24 and
 25 (2.0)
 26 to this day I don’t know how I really knew about this place but I’d heard
 27 there was a college erm (0.9) for sort of (0.9) well it’s called £spook school
 28 (.) it’s the ((*name*)) college at ((*place*)) and (.) it it trains (.) e::r psychics and
 29 mediums

⁵⁸ Footing refers to the nature of participation of the speakers in interaction and the relationship of the speaker to the utterances made. Footing and footing shifts are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. Stake and interest also concerns the role of the speakers in the current interaction and their agenda or ‘involvement’ in the interaction at hand and the issues topicalised or raised.

⁵⁹ This precise issue is discussed in much more depth in Chapter 7.

Sunset finishes talking about her ‘premonition’ (line 18) and then links this to subsequent events – ‘and that prompted me’ (lines 20-21) which suggests that one event was triggered by the other. The way in which the end of the first experience and subsequent events are linked thereby promotes continuity in the story. Indeed, it affords an extended narrative format to the experiences that are relayed, rather than deploying them as discrete events.

This is something that is displayed consistently throughout James’ interview; every time he comes to the end of one experience there are subsequent events that unfold in a way that give a life-story ‘feel’ to the overall narrative. In extract 22 James is talking about his visit to a clairvoyant reader who was recommended to him. This extract picks up where James is talking about an esoteric shop in his home town he used to visit.

Extract 22 – James

16 J: (0.6) it had such a magic and a sort of (1.2) energy in it and erm I met
 17 somebody there who became a friend and sshe guided me to a (0.3) ((*clap*))
 18 (.) clairvoyant reader who said she’s really good and you know so I had a
 19 reading and was like this little ((*clap/tap*)) kid
 20 (0.6)
 21 you know thinking o↑h you know will she be able to read me and will I be
 22 you know and it was just that sort of (0.5) Hu:::u↑r (0.5) and she reeled
 23 off all this stuff (.)
 24 I: mm
 25 J: about my life that I I P’d took one word and it was s::o (0.5) specific (1.2)
 26 about work colleagues about mys- P’d then split up with my girl friend
 27 because ((*clap/tap*))
 28 (1.8)
 29 a sort of this (0.6) energetic chasm see(h)med to op(h)en up and we
 30 couldn’t relate (.) really (.) it was (0.5) fast (0.5) diverging (.) you know (0.4)
 31 after that point (0.7) er::m
 32 (1.1)
 33 and she told me that (.) she said oh you’ve just split up with your girlfriend
 34 (1.0) °>derderderder° and she said erm (1.2) you’ll she said beware of the
 35 month of March for change >this was about ss oh September August
 36 September
 37 (1.0)
 38 an::d that was that was very kind of erm (0.3) portentous (.)
 39 I: m::m
 40 J: hmf hmf hmf (0.5) e::r that was kind of another one of these but on a diff
 41 in a different way you know? (0.6) and the::n what happened
 42 (1.4)
 43 that kind of intensity waned and then I started connecting with people like
 44 my affinity group suddenly popped up (.) and I was sort of meeting people

James is talking about his visit to the clairvoyant and reports various things that were said (lines 22-36). James does explicitly mark the end of this experiential account with 'e::r that was kind of another one of these but on a diff in a different way you know' (lines 40-41). However, this is then followed by a continuing phrase – 'and the::n what happened?' (line 42) – where he posits a question about subsequent events. The question is not directed at me, the interviewer, but is instead a way of linking the events that precede and follow it.

These linking actions characterise some of the narratives and they are difficult to 'chunk' into experiential units. These narratives may have several 'peak moments' and more of a trajectory 'feel' to the narrative and often communicate more incremental experiences (realisation) over time. This is especially true of those respondents who talk very explicitly of life-changing events: as these are portrayed as dramatically transformational – with complete reversals reported. In these accounts the endings are less easy to pinpoint and endings often run into beginnings.

4.5.4 Summary

Endings vary across the accounts but there are some notable and consistent features. More specifically, there are three main ways in which the experiences are drawn to a close (or continued as the life story style narrative shows). Firstly, when endings are defined or marked there are various features that appear often characterised by a final summary and interpretation. This final summary statement is often offered as the definitive interpretation of the experience and thus how the experience should be understood. Sometimes this is achieved via the use of other voices; that is there is a third party's reported speech invoked in order to provide the final interpretation. The use of other voices at this point enables the respondent to deflect ultimate responsibility for this version and surrender to the reported authority of another's opinion. It equally serves to bolster their account with third party endorsement of the factual status of their experience.

Secondly, in some ending instances, there is an orientation back to the interview as the contextual setting for this interaction. Here the ending of an experience is marked with a checker question which demonstrates the respondent's sensitivity to holding the floor for extended periods as potentially undesirable or even impolite during interaction that ordinarily follows a turn-taking process (Sacks et al, 1978) – even in interviews. These

questions also topicalise the substantive content of the respondent's talk for checking in reference to the (implicit) interviewer's agenda as the directive for this type of interaction.

Finally, there are accounts where experiences run in a continuous stream, with small 'joins' in between, perhaps marked by a brief identification of the end of one experience and then followed by how that gave rise to another. In these accounts the endings are not as distinct. The impression conveyed is that these are a collection of experiences which are (or were) part of the respondent's life, and that they transformed or changed the respondent as an individual.⁶⁰

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned predominantly with the structure and organisation of these accounts and what substantive and design features appear. Some of the functions and devices that appear across the data have also been tentatively explored. This tour in particular has focused on the form of these experiential accounts as stories and the construction of beginnings, middles and endings. As is evident from this exploration, the beginnings, middles and endings are 'tailored to the current, specific business of the interaction' (Stokoe & Edwards, 2006: 61) despite being stories that are elicited in an interview interaction.

Beginnings are characterised initially by discourse markers or prefacing devices which are *suggestive* of preparation, planning and thought. They could also be seen as an indication of acceptance of the interviewee role and a change of state token (Heritage, 1984). Indeed, these hesitation devices seem to be a way of managing participatory status and the transition from ordinary speaker to interviewee. This is then followed by scene-setting activity; the provision of background details and contextualisation of the story in terms relevant to the respondent. These contextual details can include, when the event took place, where it happened, what the experient was doing at the time (either in a broad or specific sense) and who else was involved or present.

⁶⁰ We return to the theme of transformation in Chapter 6.

Provision of this level of specific and mundane details grounds the subsequent experience in ‘ordinary reality’: it shows the experience occurring in close proximity and closely linked to this reality. Additionally it enables two functions:

- Firstly, it establishes the factual and objective status of the experience by reference to this level of detail (the facts).
- Secondly, it establishes the extraordinariness of the experience by virtue of the experient’s ability to accurately recall mundane detail from the event.

These two functions serve the overall purpose of securing credibility and plausibility for the narrative.

Middles contain the ‘what happened’ part of the story and centres around the pivotal ‘I was just doing x when y’ (Wooffitt 1991, 1992); establishing ordinariness in order to reveal extraordinariness and walking a tightrope between categorisation as ‘normal’ or ‘crank’ (Potter, 1996). Additionally, the display of cognitive competence on the experient’s part – in terms of displaying precise memory recall for seemingly mundane events – also bolsters their case for categorisation as ‘ordinary’. It is possible that reported thought may also aid this process.

Endings vary from a clean break to a meandering roll into another account promoting continuity; a tailing off heralding the end of the account; or a listing of several experiences independently presented. The stories are mostly concluded by the respondent’s engagement in sense-making activities where spontaneous understanding and final interpretations about the experience are construed. Occasionally, respondents also include questions that orient back to the interview setting which are possibly indicative of the unusual monologic nature of an expected dialogic interaction. Alternatively, these ‘checker questions’ are potentially reflective of respondents ‘performing’ culturally desirable traits such as being polite and compliant.

Nevertheless, many of the accounts display similar phrasing at their endings with a summing up utterance (exhibiting a final conclusion) prefaced by the term ‘but’. What this does is:

- Firstly, it shows that this is the final conclusion and thus how the experience should be correctly interpreted.
- Secondly, it helps to establish a sense of objectivity to this conclusion, which can also involve demonstrating that this interpretation was endorsed by a third party.

4.6.1 Implications and broader issues

This chapter considers the way in which these accounts are narratives or stories and explores how the respondents construct these stories-in-interview. This analysis raises two main broader issues, in addition to its findings, concerning methodology and ethics. Firstly, regarding the status of interview data and secondly, regarding the role or inclusion of the researcher in research. Firstly, as the analytic stance draws considerably upon DP and CA it is important to be aware that there are differences between the data considered here and that usually analysed by these approaches. Indeed, one of the broader issues raised by this chapter concerns the status of different data or interaction ‘types’ and how they can or should be approached analytically. One of the recent issues under debate within discursive methodologies has been the status of interview data. Scholars such as Potter and Hepburn (2005; but also others including Stokoe & Edwards, 2006) have forcefully argued that there should be a preference for more ‘naturalistic’ interactions as data and that interviews are inherently problematic. This criticism has arisen due to the alleged over-reliance on ‘unnatural’ interactions such as interviews in much social science research. So, for instance, whilst narratives in everyday interaction are invariably ‘accomplished with collaboration’ between speaker(s) and recipient(s) (Goodwin, 1984: 229; but see also Sacks, 1974, on preface and request formulations), in interview contexts this collaboration is quite different.

Nonetheless, akin to mundane talk and interaction and the stories found there, stories-in-interviews are told in routine but not ‘homogenous’ (Goodwin, 1984: 227) forms with the inclusion of revisions, repairs, reformulations and checking, all designed in a locally-occasioned fashion, to perform social action. This notion, that there are routine and normative discursive observations to be made about interview talk (that may indeed be more widely applicable) demonstrates the importance of grounded analyses across all data types. Thus, what this chapter tentatively suggests is that a more nuanced approach could exist towards different data types, where necessary. This analysis begins to show that it is

possible to conduct a detailed, rigorous and thorough analysis on interview data with some sensitivity and awareness to some of the potential difficulties and problems provided by this medium.

Secondly, a closely related additional issue is that of the dual role of 'interviewer-as-analyst'. Potter and Hepburn (2005) have suggested that there are various aspects of this which are difficult to discern, analyse or resolve. Firstly, establishing the level of an interviewer's participation and in what capacity the interviewer is speaking at different times during the interview (footing) and secondly, what involvement and agendas the interviewer has (stake and interest). They argue that these are often implicit and it is difficult for the same individual to assess objectively. This is certainly an issue that remains unresolved in this thesis. That is, how is it possible to include myself in the analysis? From a discursive perspective this inclusion would be predominantly limited to the comments and utterances made in the analysis, yet as Potter and Hepburn (2005) have argued, it is near impossible to 'self-analyse' in this way.

However, in work influenced by feminist perspectives there is considerable weight given to the inclusion and explication of the researcher's role in a broader sense (see for instance, England, 1994; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1987, 1991; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Pini, 2004; Stanley & Wise, 1983). This emphasis extends also to the way in which the person conducting and writing up the research process has an effect on how this is done. This consideration of the research process in full must also take into account the wider implication of this work in an academic, but also an ethical, sense. Transpersonal research has something to offer here in terms of reconstituting the dominant perceptions of these experiences, so that it is possible to see them defined as meaningful in experient's terms (see for example, Palmer & Braud, 2002).

But these broader implications issues will be revisited in more detail in the concluding chapter (7). In terms of redirection towards the empirical issues at hand; an initial exploration of the data has allowed us to identify some potential interesting devices and functions which require further explication: the common appearance of reported thought and the spontaneous stories of transformation found in the narratives. Therefore, the subsequent empirical chapters explore the instances of reported thought (Chapter 5) and the notion of transformation (Chapter 6) across the accounts in more detail.

Chapter 5

Reported thoughts in TEHE accounts

5.1 Introduction

It was observed in the previous chapter that utterances concerned with reporting thought appear regularly throughout the accounts. Below is one such instance (taken from extract 5, later in the chapter).

Extract 1 – Lynn

1 L: and it was one of these sort of clear autumn days it was a lovely day (0.5)
2 and (0.2) my son had actually gone with me as well (.) and we were standing
3 round the grave and suddenly it just started to pour with rain it was like
4 stair rods coming down (.) you know just completely quiet but just
5 >sschhhhe::w .hhh and we were all thinking oh good heavens and £you
6 know nobody had brought an umbrella or anything cos it had been such a
7 lovely day

Here, Lyn is talking about attending a funeral and on line 5 she reports the thoughts of a group of people. This is an interesting feature of the extract as it is immediately evident that the accuracy of reported thought is impossible to verify. That is, there is no way for us to know definitively what anyone is or was thinking. It is reported in an ‘as if spoken’ manner and in a collective form – ‘we were all thinking oh good heavens’. The thought formulation is also identifiable as both an ‘oh prefaced response’ (Heritage, 1998) and a reaction token indicative of surprise (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006). Devices such as these can be deployed to display a ‘change of state’ proposal with a ‘marked shift of attention’ (Heritage, p294) or a reaction to a surprise or contravention of expectation (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, p161). Both these devices, however, are designed in response to preceding turns in talk, whilst Lyn’s reported thought is a response to reported circumstances.

Many of these reported thoughts are located in similar places in the narratives. The invocation of reported thought demonstrates the speaker somehow ‘making public’ a previously private thought. It shows the relevance or importance of a cognition (as opposed to an observation or other activity) which is to be interpreted as located when the event occurred (rather than at the present time). These properties are suggestive of possible functional mechanisms for the construction of an account. Given that reported thought is difficult to verify and may have an interactional function it is certainly worthy of further exploration.

This chapter is concerned with the use of reported thought in the accounts of TEHEs. However, in order to explore reported thought more thoroughly we will firstly explore recent work analysing reported thought and reported speech. The properties demonstrated above are similarly found in instances of reported speech and the two devices seem closely related, both devices exhibiting shared features.

Additionally, this chapter is addressed to two distinct disciplinary areas. One is a linguistic analysis of reported speech and the other is a constructivist analysis of mental state formulations in DP. It is therefore also important to contextualise this analysis within these disciplines and outline the key features relevant to this work. Following a brief outline of how this analysis is connected to DP we will consider how reported speech and reported thought can be understood.

5.2 Discursive Psychology (DP) and cognitions in talk

The analytic observation made earlier parallels one part of DP's focus. That is, the aim to re-cast mental state expressions in terms of their functions in talk and show how mental states 'feature as talk's *business*' (Edwards & Potter, 2005: 242) (original emphasis). The possible invocations of these mental processes are quite varied across interactional settings. In doing remembering or recalling, individuals are creating 'versions of past events' (Edwards & Potter, 1992a: 3) that are relevant for the interaction at hand. In all cases, the speaker is displaying ostensibly private cognitions for public inspection. Rather than seeing talk as the '*expression* of thoughts, intentions and cognitive structures' (2005: 255) (original emphasis), DP sees their inclusion in talk as performative (e.g. used for handling, managing, negotiating, or producing). Indeed, Edwards and Potter suggest that 'the status of reference to internal mental states is not something to be refuted, even though it is conceptually refutable, but rather, studied as a practice within public forms of life' (2005: 256). This perspective on cognition in talk is a growing one, influenced by the field of DP, and research and analysis in these disciplines has been effectively demonstrating the interactive functions and locally occasioned features of mental invocations (see for example, Heritage, 2005 and Potter & Edwards, 2003, amongst others⁶¹). It is to this part of DP that this analysis of reported thought is addressed.

⁶¹ For other perspectives regarding the perceived relationship between cognition and conversation see the remaining chapters of te Molder and Potter (2005), and for further discussion about moving beyond this debate, entitled 'after post-cognitivism', see Kitzinger (2006).

5.3 Reported speech and reported thought

Reported speech is very often seen as related to reported thought in linguistic analyses and refers to a means used by the speaker, whilst relaying an incidence or occurrence, to include what people present said at that time (Holt, 1996, 2000). Speakers appear to ‘quote’ (either themselves or others) from previous interactions, transporting something that was uttered in a different context into a new interaction (Buttny & Williams, 2000; Tannen, 1989).

Reported speech can take different forms, but is often conceptualised in terms of directly or indirectly reported speech (Holt, 2000). Direct reported speech is where the utterances are reported verbatim as if they were spoken like this at the time. This is often indicated by a speech marker verb, such as ‘*I said*’ or ‘*she says*’. Indirect reported speech, on the other hand, tends to present the ‘gist’ of a previous utterance, e.g. ‘*she said she wouldn’t*’ or ‘*I said something like...*’. Below is an example taken from Holt (2000) to demonstrate one of the functions of direct reported speech (see appendix 4 for a key of symbols).

[Holt: 088:1:8:10]

1	Lesley:	...↑So I <u>said</u> um • <u>hhhh</u> W’I’m sorr[y I’m teaching
2	Joyce:	[()]
3	Lesley:	→ she said •hh ↑↑ <u>Oh</u> : (.) ↑oh my dear, well <u>how</u>
4		→ <u>lovely</u> that you’re involved in ↑↑ <u>tea</u> ↓ching.
5		<u>Δ</u> [n’ ↓I: thought •hhh ↑W <u>ell</u> al↑right then
6	Joyce:	[<u>Oh</u>].
7	Lesley:	p’haps I’d like to suggest you ↑↑f’the
8		nex’ supply pe(h)ers[(h)oh
9	Joyce:	[<u>UH</u> :::h

(Holt, 2000: 429)

In this extract Holt notes how the use of direct reported speech (and in this case exaggerated prosody) ‘is used to convey the reported speaker’s inappropriate positive and consequently, condescending reaction to the news that Lesley is currently supply teaching’ (p429). So, in other words, Lesley is using reported speech to comment on and offer her own evaluation of the reported actions of another (absent) speaker.

Reported thought, in spoken language, can be understood as a device employed by a speaker in order to refer to their own (or others’) alleged mental processes during talk. Specifically, this might employ the verb ‘think’ - e.g. ‘*I thought*’ - or other verbs indicative of cognitive activity (Haakana, 2007), for instance, ‘*I recognised, imagined, considered, supposed* or

assumed.⁶² These cognitions can take different forms such as collective (e.g. ‘*we were all thinking*’), individual (e.g. ‘*I thought*’) or shared/generic (e.g. ‘*you just think*’). Additionally, whilst these are mostly past tense formulations, there are some utterances with a degree of ambiguity. For instance, whilst it is clear that ‘*we were all thinking*’ and ‘*I thought*’ are firmly located in the past, ‘*you just think*’ is temporally ambiguous. Reported thought tends to be considered and analysed as, or alongside, reported speech and has rarely been singled out for a distinct analysis. Indeed, whilst reported speech has been afforded some degree of distinct analytic attention by discourse researchers, reported thought has received relatively little. Haakana (2007: 151) notes that ‘within linguistics, the construction and use of reported thought has been studied especially in literary texts, in narration of fictional texts’ (for instance, Leech & Short, 1981: chapter 10). And whilst she acknowledges Jefferson’s (2004c) work on ‘at first I thought’,⁶³ she simultaneously points out that there is no systematic or ‘thorough interactional study which focuses on both... [reported thought’s] construction and the activities it is used to perform and its sequential environments’ (Haakana, 2007: 151).

It would seem that reported thought has, for the most part, been effectively subsumed under the rubric of reported speech. Take for example, a quote from Holt’s work, one of the main researchers in this field: ‘reported speech is simultaneously a report of a previous *thought* or locution and part of a new sequence used for a different purpose’ (2000: 433) (my emphasis). In providing a definition of reported speech, Holt (2000) explicitly includes reported thoughts. Perhaps this is because they can be seen to perform similar functions at similar moments, are used to represent footing shifts, and are sometimes difficult to distinguish. Whilst there may be a close relationship between reported thought and reported speech, and they may often be found in close proximity appearing to perform similar functions, there may be features that are particular to reported thought that would remain hidden if it was always considered alongside reported speech (Haakana, 2007).

⁶² It is possible that all these reported cognitive processes are performing (perhaps subtly) different interactional functions in talk. However, this chapter remains primarily concerned with reported thought, marked by the verb ‘think’ as there is no space for more detailed exploration.

⁶³ Jefferson (2004c) draws on some of Sacks’ (1992) observations concerning the use of ‘at first I thought’ to show how first thoughts are worked up as mistaken presuppositions in talk. She also demonstrates this device as a discursive tool, selected to show the search for an ordinary explanation to extraordinary events, rather than a display of actual cognitive processes. Wooffitt (1992) has also explored this device in relation to paranormal accounts.

5.3.1 Recent findings regarding reported thought

Two recent exceptions contributing towards redressing this imbalance, and distinguishing reported thought from reported speech where applicable, are Markku Haakana's recent work on 'I thought that...' constructions in complaint stories (Haakana, 2007), and research by Rebecca Barnes and Duncan Moss (2007) concerned with reported private thought (RPT) in everyday and institutional talk. Both are concerned with the constructions and functions of reported thought in talk.

One of the most significant immediate differences between reported speech and reported thought is that it is only the internal or 'mental' behaviour or response that is considered relevant for the current interaction when cognition is reported (Haakana, 2007). This elicits questions about why the speakers include in their talk something that was "only in their mind" (p153) and highlights a distinction (between publicly available reported speech and concealed reported thought). Furthermore, reported thought cannot be contested by the recipient as there is no way of checking or verifying someone's thoughts.⁶⁴ In order to have a clearer sense of reported thought in interaction let us examine an extract from one of the complaint stories in Haakana's work, in which the speaker includes both her own reported speech and reported thought responses in narrating the story to a recipient.

[6 Advance payment/telephone]

- 01 M: and then that woman wanted uhmm .mhh advance
02 what is it now some advance payment. =
03 K: =ai jaa. ((oh I see/oh really))
04 M: well I didn't y'know have money. I had ninety
05 marks then she wanted .hh two hundred, .mh and I was then just<
06 well I didn't really have that much with me, .hh then she
07 terribly deliberated about whether she can now then .hh send
08 them there to be dyed since I don't have money then I th-
09 thought that I'm not going to start begging here for anything.
10 =I said I can come then to order them some other time.
11 K: joo ((yeah))
(Haakana, 2007: 168).

What this extract works to show is how reported thought can be used to highlight an alternative version of events to the publicly available one. On the surface it would seem from the narrator's reported speech (on line 10) that the interaction has gone smoothly and

⁶⁴ This is not to say that it is necessarily easy to 'verify' someone's words but in principle at least it is considered possible - e.g. people's versions of events in court or recorded speech (e.g. cassettes, video, and DVD or digital media).

the speaker acceded to the shop assistant's request. However, the reported thought works up a 'more critical and affective' response, suggesting that the shop assistant put 'the narrator in the position of 'begging' and [it also] expresses the narrator's strong refusal of such a position' (p17). Employing the term 'begging' enables an exaggerated and anticipatory quality to the reported interaction, as it is an extreme characterisation of what the speaker would have to do in response to being unable to provide the requested money in advance. The reported thought therefore not only presents a particular interpretation of events and thus an evaluation for the recipient, but also provides access to (in this case) a more unsettled or stormier underlying version of the story, through its unspoken undercurrent. In this sense, Haakana argues that reported thought enables an evaluation to be more explicit, via its location at the time of the event being reported (and not, by contrast, a retrospective evaluation, complaint or criticism from the current interaction).

In this sense, reported thought can be seen to be similar to reported speech in that it is used by speakers to provide an evaluation of what is being reported (Haakana, 2007).

'Reported speech is speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time *speech about speech, utterance about utterance*' (Volosinov, 1973: 115) (original emphasis), which highlights the way in which reported speech can provide a comment on or assessment of the original utterance or its author. However, reported thought provides an evaluation in a different way, even when used in conjunction with reported speech. In complaint narratives it suggests a

"Multi-layered picture of the interaction: on the one hand portraying what was said in the interaction, and on the other hand giving the current recipient access to what went on in the narrator's mind at the specific point of the narrated interaction."

(Haakana, 2007: 153)

Furthermore, in these contexts reported thought is used to construct the narrative as a complaint story, to offer critical evaluation by drawing attention to a silent response and how something 'was *not* said' (my emphasis). This helps to direct the recipient towards the same interpretation of events. Furthermore, this display of deliberate omission provides a speaker with further resources for essential face work (Jefferson, 1984).

"By portraying their criticisms as 'only thoughts' the narrators can also give a certain kind of picture of the narrated situation: the antagonist behaved 'badly'

(unprofessionally, stupidly, etc.) but the narrators did not start criticising the antagonist. Thereby they can also depict themselves in a certain light, for instance, as reasonable persons who did not want to get into an argument.”
(Haakana, 2007: 167)

This is reiterated by Barnes and Moss’ (2007) work, where RPT seems to be inserted into an account to show sensitivity or mindfulness instead of anger, for instance. Barnes and Moss’ (2007) analytic focus was on what Sacks (1992) originally termed ‘private thought’ or reported thought which remained ‘hidden’ in an earlier interaction and is then made relevant and displayed by the speaker in the reporting context.

Mindfulness Int 05:1b:18:26

- 1 IE: U↑uhhh I=think=it’s kept me ca:lm.
 2 IR: Ri:ght.
 3 (1.2)
 4 IE: Whereas before I used to get really up (0.3) tight
 5 IR: M:mm=
 6 IE: =Y’know especially (0.5) ‘round with my husband.
 7 =['cos] some of the things he’s (1.2) come out with.
 8 IR: [M:mm]
 9 IE: an said ↑y’know,=
 10 IR: =↑Mm↑hm.
 11 IE: An I’ve got >d’fensive with him?<
 12 (1.3)
 13 IE: B’t ↑now I (.) I do keep calm
 14 IR: M:m
 15 (1.0)
 16 IE: Y’know [(as opposed to)]
 17: IR: [>So you say you’ve (been a bit)<]
 18 (1.0)
 19 IE: answer back and argue,
 20 IR: [Ye:ah.]
 21 IE: → [Now I] think well (0.4) ↑he can’t help >what it< what’s
 22 goin’ on in his ◦mi:nd wi’ the drugs he’s ta:king, yeh-◦
 23 (0.8)
 24 IE: So I just keep calm and it (0.5) passes on throu:gh
 25 IR: M:mm
 (Barnes & Moss, 2007: 127)

In this extract, the speaker shows how ‘practising mindfulness’ – a technique used to aid stress reduction through clinical treatment often including meditative awareness practices – has enabled her to keep calm in a situation she would have previously got angry.

Additionally demonstrated is how this position of mindfulness can be achieved in both the ‘*now*’ (in the current moment) and the ‘*then*’ (in the reported previous one). It is this

seeming relocation of an alleged original and previously concealed thought that begins to provoke questions about why the speaker opts to reveal thoughts for recipient scrutiny during interaction.

As noted earlier, reported thought and reported speech often turn up in close proximity or in similar sequences during talk, though this does not automatically imply that they are performing precisely the same interactional function. Indeed, some of the potential differences between reported thought and reported speech have already been explored. Reported thought and reported speech both regularly appear in storytelling speech and narratives. However, in complaint stories, Haakana (2007) observed that the reported thought of the current speaker was being inserted after ‘quotation’ of another speaker’s words. In this sense, ‘the narrator ... presents the reported thought as a silent reaction to a co-conversationalist’s reported turn-at-talk’ (p151). This ‘silent reaction’ allows the speaker to clearly indicate to any recipient how the story should be interpreted and received.

Reported speech is considered to help dramatise, create recipient involvement and often construct the climax, peak or crucial moments of a story (e.g. Buttny, 1998; Chafe, 1982; Holt, 1996, 2000; Labov, 1972; Li, 1986; Mayes, 1990; Tannen, 1989). This is achieved via the inclusion of voices and the locutions of others (particularly direct reported speech). The form of storytelling ranges from naturally occurring stories in talk (occasioned in a local fashion through ‘turn-by-turn’ talk – Jefferson, 1978), to more semi-formal situations where people are in some sense invited to tell a story (the interviews that make up this corpus, for instance, or the accounts found in the work of Wooffitt, 1992).

Whilst it is sometimes clear that there are analytic and functional differences between reported thought and reported speech, there are instances where identification is more ambiguous. Indeed, in not choosing to report a locution as either thought or speech, speakers have another tool at their disposal. Sometimes these ambiguous utterances evade distinction as either speech or thought because, as Haakana (2007) points out, they lack an explicit marker (verb or contextualising cue, such as ‘say’ or ‘think’). Haakana (2007: 175) proposes that this ambiguity is deliberate and is another dimension of the evaluation device, offering the speaker an opportunity to convey criticism of the antagonist and ‘ambivalent pictures of the reported situation’ (see Haakana, 2005, for more on this distinction). Instead, such utterances might be pre-marked by the verb ‘be’, as in ‘*I was like*’

(see Romaine & Lange, 1991). Alternatively, however, the identification of an utterance as reported thought or speech may rely heavily upon the preceding talk. This may be reliant on prosody, pitch, tone, volume and tense shifts (Barnes & Moss, 2007), which indicate the thought via what has been termed ‘vocal framing’ (Coupler-Kuhlen, 1999).

These kinds of non-lexical cues may be linked to other design features of reported thought concerned with a speaker’s footing. Footing, as a concept, was originally developed by Goffman (1981) and refers to the nature of a speaker’s participation in talk. Footing is directly linked to the identity and role of the speaker and their relationship to an utterance. So, a person can speak as the *author* of what is being said, as the *animator* of another’s words or as the *principal*, taking responsibility for the perceived underlying sentiments of the words (Goffman, p128). During talk various linguistic cues can indicate which footing position the speaker inhabits towards a particular utterance. Indeed, reported speech is illustrative of ‘footing shifts’ (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) and may denote a switch from author to animator. However, determining footing can be a complex issue and footing shifts are not always a straightforward swap from one stance to another. As Goffman has noted, ‘we are not so much terminating the prior alignment [when we switch footing] as holding it in abeyance with the understanding that it will almost immediately be reengaged’ (p155). Plus, speakers may speak from a combination of footing positions; ‘in truth, in talk it seems routine that, while firmly standing on two feet, we jump up and down on another’ (p155).

But the use of reported thought appears to be slightly different. Reported thought will often be preceded by response particles (Heritage, 2005) or reaction tokens (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006) such as ‘*oh*’, ‘*goodness*’, and ‘*oh no*’. According to Barnes and Moss (2007: 130), these particles and other design features of reported thought enable the speaker to shift footing, as they position the speaker ‘as an unmotivated witness to the event’ rather than an active constituent of events. It is included in talk to ‘bring off’ how something came across to the speaker at the time of the cognition. In this sense, it is ‘designed first to say how it appeared to me then’ (Sacks, 1992: 405). Reported thought thus seems to be a flexible conversational resource affording the speaker a variety of different footing positions.

“It provides the speaker-feeler with ways of saying *how it appeared to me then*, *how it always appears to me* and *how it might*

appear to me in that situation. It also provides the speaker with ways of projecting how it appears to others, how it generally appears to everyone and how it might properly appear to anyone." (Barnes & Moss, 2007: 141) (original emphasis)

At this point, it is worth considering the relationship between talk about thought and actual thought itself in more detail because it is commonly considered possible to discern levels of accuracy in everyday life. Furthermore, it illustrates the performative and rhetorical purpose of including reported thought and/or speech in talk. Haakana (2007) emphasises the impossibility of establishing whether reported thoughts and original thoughts actually correspond. Reported thought often takes the form of dialogue (Tannen, 1989) and is sometimes reported as if the speaker (or thinker) was thinking out loud. However, it is unlikely that when speakers report thoughts (as if they were spoken at the time of the event) they are 'claiming they actually said these words to themselves'. Instead it is more likely that 'the speakers ... [are] depicting only selected aspects of their thoughts - e.g., their plans, excuses, and a sense of surprise' (Clark & Gerrig, 1990: 794). Indeed, we cannot know whether speakers report their 'actual' thoughts at all, as there is no way of verifying it.

It is also unlikely that reported speech is a straightforward representation of an original utterance or interaction. Indeed, there is research (e.g. Authier-Revuz, 1994; Baynham, 1996; Clark & Gerrig, 1990; Mayes, 1990) which suggests that it is incredibly difficult to reproduce utterances verbatim and therefore highly unlikely that reported speech is the accurate report of an original utterance. Others, such as Edwards and Potter (1992b), suggest work on conversational remembering ought to see recall accounts as performing practical and rhetorical functions. In this sense, reproduced discourse will be variable and context-dependent and not merely reflective of one, 'true' version of events. Reported speech is rarely spoken as it was originally and is often edited, revised or changed. The *exact* reproduction of a spoken phrase would include the stutters, pauses, hesitations and repairs regularly found in naturally occurring conversation; yet these are notoriously difficult for people to perform accurately (Martin, 1971). Indeed, Haakana (2007: 159) states that 'the teller chooses what he or she presents and the manner, and through these choices constructs a certain kind of picture of the situation and seeks a certain kind of response from the recipient'. That is, reported speech (and reported thought) are included by the speaker in their accounts for specific purposes, to achieve actions and construct events in particular ways.

Haakana (2007) and Barnes and Moss (2007) provide valuable, but preliminary contributions to our understanding of the phenomenon of reported thought. However, Haakana notes that her findings are limited to complaint stories. That is not to say that such observations cannot or will not be extended to other instances of reported thought, but they will require demonstration and explication. She recognises that there are other contexts in which reported thought can be found and notes it can have ‘different functions in other types of interactional contexts, and it can also be constructed in different ways’ (p176). Indeed, there appear to be good reasons for sometimes considering reported thought as a distinct discursive activity, as this work begins to demonstrate. Nonetheless, the exact detail of this remains to be seen and requires a more substantial and systematic body of work than is currently available.

In the corpus of TEHE narratives reported thought is a fairly common device, which the majority of experiencers use - some of them several times during their account. By the end of this chapter I will demonstrate how this work adds to the emerging evidence that reported thought deserves distinct analytic attention from discourse and interaction researchers.

In order to focus our attention I want to briefly summarise the themes in this body of work which will inform the subsequent analysis. Both reported speech and thought have been considered as:

- An interactional device - not a straightforward report of mental processes
- Representative of footing shifts in interaction - displaying different participatory levels
- Having an evaluative function - used to reveal a speaker’s implicit assessments

Furthermore, reported thought has been shown to:

- Act as a silent response to reported utterances
- To make private, internal process public for the purposes of interaction
- To show ‘*how it appeared to me then*’
- To construct the speaker as a sensible, reasonable and thoughtful person

In the following analysis, many of these functions listed above are evident. Additionally, there are further actions being achieved via these reported thoughts in this data and these are also developed further in this chapter.

5.4 Unexpected events: Reported thought and the construction of surprise

Many of the reported thought utterances seem to appear in similar locations within the accounts. Upon initial inspection it seems that a consistent reported thought formulation is located just after the ‘extraordinary’ aspect of the experient’s narratives (although there may be more than one such moment depending on individual accounts). In order to investigate these features in more depth and consider what is being achieved by the location and design of these formulations I will firstly consider one extract in detail. Just prior to extract 1 James was talking about walking into a bookshop, selecting a ‘spiritual book’ and becoming absorbed in it. This extract picks up just as he mentions getting through three chapters of the book without noticing.

Extract 1 – James

- 1 J: >I suddenly realised I was three chapters through befo-- you know I’d read
 2 three chapters ((sniff of laughter)) and I I seemed to be agreeing with
 3 everything I’d heard heheheh (.) which was a bit odd becos (0.5) I’d never
 4 really indulged in [anything
 5 I: [mmm
 6 J: like that before and I was I was going yeah yeah I know this I know this
 7 (0.4)
 8 and I just recognised (1.2) what felt to be true (.)
 9 I: mmm
 10 J: without any (.) previous ((soft clap/tap)) kind of promptings o::r (.)
 11 guidance o::r instruction or anything .hhh and er (0.6) I suddenly had this
 12 kind of like epiphany moment where I thought >‘I’ve got to buy this book’

James’ entire account is worked up as a coherent, chronological trajectory of his spiritual life thus far. He talks about a series of experiences in succession which are linked by a ‘life-story’ form. However, it is the first experience that he repeatedly refers back to as a pivotal moment, and his account of this experience contains one such reported thought formulation⁶⁵ – which is located after the event. He begins the entire account by introducing the usual scene-setting detail (covered in chapter 4), such as an approximate calendrical formulation, where he was and what he was doing at the time of the events he then goes on to talk about.

⁶⁵ It also contains references to other cognitive or mental processes, which I will mention in the analysis also.

This extract appears to be made up of three distinguishable sections. The first section begins with the *y* element of an '*x/y*' sequence (he was reading this book and 'suddenly realised' he was 'three chapters through' – line 1), which is constructed as an extraordinary occurrence. The delivery of a sudden realisation includes a self-repair (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977) – 'I was three chapter through befo- you know I'd read three chapters' (lines 1-2). He punctuates this with what can only be described as a short exhalation (air pushed rapidly and audibly through the nostrils) indicating laughter. This laughter marks what seems to be the end of a distinct segment of talk completed by the '*y*' component; part of the extraordinary moment. The extraordinariness is conveyed by the reported rapidity at which the book is read and the implicit absorption and loss of time which is being communicated here. This trades on an intersubjective or common understanding of the ability to become absorbed by reading material (in an everyday sense) but also stakes a claim for the events' extraordinary status. It is the laughter that helps to mark this event as extraordinary for the recipient, conveying surprise, bemusement or puzzlement at an implied loss of time through absorption. This activity might otherwise be received as mundane or ordinary (although it may be considered somewhat unusual to become so absorbed by a book in a public place such as a bookshop). This is further cemented by the inclusion of how many chapters were read (lines 1 & 2): reporting that he had read three chapters establishes the unusual or extreme degree of absorption in the book.

The second section of this extract begins on line 2 with 'and I seemed to be agreeing with everything I'd heard'. James makes references here to the book's claims, though he does not elaborate on these or make them explicit. Instead he offers a comment on his position, which brings him into alignment with these claims. Perhaps somewhat unusually he positions himself in agreement with 'everything' he had '*heard*' (emphasis added). However, strictly speaking he reports previously that he was *reading* this book, not listening to or hearing it. This contributes to a construction of James as a passive recipient of the book's contents rather than as an active reader or interpreter. He follows this with laughter (line 3), which acts as a reaction of surprise to unexpected events. This is worked up further by an explicit suggestion that his agreement is unexpected or surprising at the end of line 3 with his use of the phrase, 'which was a bit odd'. James then accounts for why this is 'odd', claiming he has 'never really indulged in anything...like that before' (lines 3-6).

There is a parallel ‘mmm’ (line 5) expression uttered by me as interviewer, concurrent with James’ articulation of the word ‘anything’⁶⁶ (line 4). In this utterance James avoids naming the type of book, instead saying ‘like that’ (line 6). What this conveys is an avoidance of using specialised terminology thus distancing himself from any associations of knowledge with this book’s genre, and constructs him as having no commitment to or interest in these technical details at the time of the event. Furthermore, this is reported as an instance of indulgence: proposing immoderate or unmeasured behaviour that is enjoyable but not respectable or desirable. In some sense then, it would appear that the lexical selections made, at the very least, imply that being absorbed in a book of this nature and agreeing with its claims may not be a conventional activity. James then introduces another reference to cognitive processes in the form of reported thought – ‘and I was going yeah yeah I know this I know this’ (line 6).

Here the phrase ‘I was going’ is used in a casual or colloquial sense, which can refer to reports of thinking, speaking or gesturing processes depending on the context. There are other similar expressions that enable this ambiguity, for instance using the verb ‘be’ – as in, ‘I was like’. In this extract, it seems likely that he is reporting thought and referring to his agreement and sense of knowing as a mental process at the time (as opposed to speaking out loud by himself in a bookshop). What James claims here, is a kind of unconscious or latent knowing that was in some way ‘triggered’ by the book’s content.

He further weaves the notions of cognition and intuitive truth by his reported recognition of the ‘truth’ of the material he was reading (line 8). This goes further than merely concurring on the basis of a reasoned opinion here however, and mentions recognising ‘what felt to be true’ (line 8). The notion of ‘truth’ can be seen as located, by way of linguistic construction, outside of those mental processes invoked for agreement. Instead the talk conveys a sense of truth not arrived at by the same ‘thinking’, but derived alternatively from an invoked recognition of ‘knowing’. Despite this, he does draw upon notions of cognition (recognition and thought) which are intertwined with reference to intuitive knowledge and truth. This idea is reiterated when he suggests that this ‘knowledge’ emanated from the moment and not from pre-existing opinions, ideas or

⁶⁶ Potter and Hepburn (2005) have noted that it is very difficult to adequately analyse such interviewer contributions, as there are issues of footing, and stake and interest. However, at this stage of the interview all the recipient had been asked to do was tell me about his experience. Nonetheless, I am not completely silent or ‘passive’ during these interviews: I am listening, nodding, making facial expressions, maintaining eye contact and occasionally uttering ‘mm’s.

suggestions that he had been exposed to: it arose spontaneously (lines 10-11). A clap or tap sound (either from the experient tapping his legs with his hands, or clapping his hands, both of which he did occasionally throughout the interview) punctuates this utterance, seemingly marking it in some way (line 10).

The third and final section begins where he delivers another sudden intervention (similar to the 'y' element in line 1) which seems to pick up from where the first section in this structure leaves off. It appears to be an extension of the 'y' element; delivered via the concept of a sudden 'kind of like epiphany moment' (line 12). Here James is working up a revelation; an epiphany being a sort of awakening or access to knowledge previously unknown and generally considered to be of the life-changing variety rather than regular, mundane or routine knowledge. So, the original moment is thus constructed as a profound, ultimate, life-changing moment.

What follows is a reported thought utterance, which is delivered immediately after what might be considered a pivotal 'narrative peak' (Li, 1986) to the account. The reported thought is inextricably part of the epiphany moment enabled by the formulation, 'where I thought' (line 17). In other words, the thought is constructed *as* the epiphany moment. James builds to this point and reports that at the time of the original experience a cognitive process materialised which was outside his conscious control. His utterance thus alludes to something more powerful than his own conscious processes and instead constructs a compulsion. His talk refers to being suddenly (that is, rapidly and unexpectedly) and involuntarily (but without reluctance) aware of having to 'buy this book' (line 12).

However, he does not suggest that his mental faculties were conquered by some irrational force – an admission of this sort could have potentially damaging consequences in terms of how he is perceived and categorised by any recipient – but instead he reports an awakening, a revelation which compels him specifically to think (or to know) that buying this book will be life-changing. Whilst thought *per se* can be considered to be illustrative of a perfectly rational act, there is a possibility that the *contents* of thought can be seen as unsound or as an indicator of mental imbalance. Some characterisations of those with mental health issues draw upon the idea of delusional thoughts or irrational thought processes or patterns. One such example of this is a condition called 'passivity phenomena'. Passivity has been linked

to diagnoses of schizophrenia in which people report thoughts and actions being imposed by some external source (Green, 2007).

Still, the reported contents of James' thought are not too controversial. They perhaps indicate a common-sense orientation to trusting intuition or 'gut feeling' as a reliable source of knowledge. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) refer to this kind of intuitive knowing as 'subjective knowledge'; or an inner voice, which can form a strong sense of knowing. Nonetheless, there is an argument to suggest that the acceptance of knowledge on this basis is unconventional; though this may depend on the kind of knowledge claims being made.

“To accept a belief by yielding to a voluntary impulse, [or indeed a seemingly involuntary one] be it my own or that of others placed in a position of authority, is felt to be a surrender of reason.”
(Polanyi, 1962: 271)

It is possible then that James' demonstration of his ability to reason effectively and discern between different types of mental events or consciousness are key features regarding the use of reported thought in this extract from his account of his extraordinary experience.

5.4.1 Summary

So, we have seen the operation of reported thought (and reports of other cognitive processes) in this first extract all working up specifically localised and occasioned actions. Of most concern for the other instances in this chapter is the reported thought, and it is this that we will continue to focus on here. The reported thought, 'where I thought' (line 17, extract 1), invokes an epiphany of compulsion, revelation, extraordinariness and profundity.

There are three features of the reported thought located here that are important, including their structural location and the impression they convey.

- Firstly, it is positioned after the 'y' component (extraordinary element) of the event
- Secondly, it is constructing thought that was private and located during a past event
- And thirdly it is constructed as a surprised response to unexpected events

What these features seem to be doing here is enabling James to work up a position in which he is not responsible for these events. He is showing that these events were not consciously controlled by him, neither were they usual for him, they were uninvited and unwilled. In other words, James is constructed as a recipient of these events, of this experience and the experience is afforded agency. His position is one of ‘non agency’ where any responsibility is resisted and diffused in this account.

Furthermore, the reported thought can be seen as a silent response to reported internal (and seemingly private) events made public for the purposes of this interaction. In the same way that Haakana (2007) demonstrated that speakers use reported thought to display their reaction to reported speech (public) events and thus locate (construct or position) themselves as reasonable or sensible individuals, the same mechanism appears to be at work here. The significance of the construction of surprise and unexpectedness conveyed by the tone and content of the thoughts, works to position these reactions or responses as ‘the sort of reaction that anyone would have had’ – displaying and orienting to a normative response (Barnes & Moss, 2007). Furthermore, their construction as thoughts as opposed to speech is possibly some invocation of the rational and a demonstration of recognition, of the qualitative difference between ordinary and extraordinary mental events.

5.5 Managing responsibility and authority in TEHE accounts

5.5.1 Agency and normativity in extraordinary accounts

Reported thoughts were recurrently located in similar places with similar structures, after the extraordinary element or ‘y’ component of the experience being relayed. Furthermore, a similar construction of agency/non agency similar to extract 1 could be identified across accounts. The next extract (2) follows the previous one sequentially. In the talk between extracts 1 and 2 James tells of returning home with the book and locking himself away with it being ‘totally gripped’. Extract 2 immediately follows this part of the account where James talks about an extraordinary vision.

Extract 2 – James

- 1 J: there was one section in this book (.) where (0.4) the guy said he started
2 seeing e::yes everywhere (0.6) and he talked about the third eye [opening
3 I: [mm
4 J: the the psychic (0.7) inner vision and er

5 (0.4)
 6 x/y I closed my eyes at that point and I saw a vision of a big (.) purple violet eye
 7 (0.5) blinking (.) with these long lashes hhhh
 8 I: heh
 9 (.)
 10 J: heh (0.2) yeah and I suddenly opened my eyes and thought (0.3) did I just
 11 imagine that ((*tap/clap*))
 12 (0.6)
 13 'cause I'm- (0.4) quite a- (.) y'well- previously- (0.2) was quite a (0.3) artistic
 14 (0.3) imaginative type person in that way but (0.5) it it seemed to be (.)
 15 something that I couldn't 'ave come up with (0.8) it just seemed to be
 16 independent of my mind

James delivers the reported thought via the notion of a sudden 'mental' incident (lines 10-11). So his reported thought is located subsequent to the extraordinary moment - his vision (lines 6-7). With the reported thought James openly questions the validity, the reality and the authenticity of his 'vision', using a common dialogue form (Clark & Gerrig, 1990) to perform this action. He implies that when the 'vision' occurred he immediately considered whether he had conjured it up; in other words that his imagination was responsible for what he reported seeing. This question is pivotal to the sense of extraordinariness being conveyed here and seems to be providing a way in which James contrasts regular imaginary mental events with this experience. If his talk had answered his reported thought in the affirmative then the event could have been 'explained away' by his (vivid or powerful) imagination.

Clearly James is aware of this possibility by also providing reasons why that might have been feasible. He makes reference to an identity; an utterance that he self-repairs before completion, and re-positions as a former identity (lines 13-14), as an 'artistic imaginative type person'. This construction of the artistic identity as part of his former self allows him to show that he is able to differentiate between an experience or mental event that is the product of an artistic imagination and something which is not. Furthermore, his orientation to his former artistic identity as relevant allows him to defuse or discount the inference that his imagination was a possible cause or source of the vision. In turn this highlights the 'rational' explanation that would have normalised this vision. However, he goes on to reassert the extraordinary nature of this experience in stating that 'it seemed to be something I couldn't 'ave come up with', and that, 'it just seemed to be independent of my mind' (lines 14-16). Both utterances serve to discount, for James, any seemingly ordinary explanation for his experience. His orientation is then to a non-ordinary source

for his vision, conveying the experience as qualitatively different from something that one would imagine or voluntarily picture.

What James appears to be employing here is a device, using reported thought, to set up a contrast between agency and non-agency. By including a hypothetical cause for his vision – his own previously artistic imagination – he acknowledges awareness of his own agency in (potentially) producing imaginative visions or experiences. However, his subsequent reference to the vision as independent of his own volition (thus non agency) refutes this hypothetical explanation immediately. Furthermore, James’ orientation to a former artistic identity allows him to establish his knowledge and thus ability to discern imaginary and internally created events from externally imposed ones of extraordinary origin. This might be seen as a form of epistemic negotiation – in which there is a claim to knowing, sensing or discerning this critical difference between ordinary and non ordinary mental phenomena.

These contrasts are constructed by the introduction of a reported thought that ‘does’ surprise. Surprise can be deployed in different ways but the inclusion of reported thought to effectively convey this surprise is common. Similar ones are found in many accounts, such as extract (3). Here, JM is talking about an experience that occurred whilst he was recovering from a serious operation in hospital. Just prior to this extract he was describing his sporadic sleep processes at the time, talking about how he would often not sleep properly in the hospital and instead would be regularly in and out of sleep. At this point he described being in ‘that kind of...grey area between the two [waking and sleeping]’ (see extract 11, Chapter 4 for the full extract).

Extract 3 – John More

7 JM: ...I was just laid there with me eyes
8 closed (.) and then I had this vision
9 (0.8)
10 there was this (.) female face (.) with er golden hair (0.5) like that you see (.)
11 j-just just there looking straight at me
12 (1.0)
13 .hhh and erm (1.2) this
14 (1.6)
15 thi:::s apparition whatever it was this image (0.4) said (.) erm (.) it’s alright
16 John
17 (1.9)
18 and that was it and then it just (.) faded away (0.4) so I thought erm (.) wow

19 >at first when it was happening I didn't think anything of it because it just
20 seemed so natural

In this extract JM describes his vision. He talks about a 'female face with (.) er golden hair' (line 10), which appears in front of him (he indicates this during the narrative with his hands gesturing a face in front of his). He refers to his 'vision' (line 8) as an 'apparition' (line 15) before then delivering a disclaimer, 'whatever it was', to that as the definitive interpretation and then offering another – 'this image' (line 15). Whilst the concept of apparition has spectral connotations, the notion of an image is a much more neutral term, providing a way of positioning himself as observer, reporter or receiver of events that happened rather than as an active creator or interpreter.

JM then uses direct reported speech (lines 15-16) to relay the message that his vision delivered to him – 'it's alright John' – before fading away. Finally, on line 18 he introduces reported thought to communicate his (alleged) reaction to the event at the time it occurred. His reported thought – 'wow' – allows him to suggest that after having experienced this extraordinary vision, he was amazed, overawed and overwhelmed. This notion shows him orienting to a sense of profundity and is an expression of astonishment, bewilderment or being stunned. Notably, however, these synonymous expressions are tremendously positive and contribute to the idea that what has just been described was momentous. JM uses reported thought here to do 'giving a response' or reaction to his experience, but located immediately after the experience and not at the time of relaying the account. He further establishes this by suggesting he was incapable of 'thinking' or 'reflecting' about it whilst it was taking place (lines 19-20).

This is unusual because some of the other extracts locate the mental events during the extraordinary event itself (or immediately after it). But it does work to provide a similar contrast to the other extracts regarding the identification of ordinary or regular mental events versus non ordinary ones.⁶⁷ So the contrast here is worked up via a reported 'wow' *after* the event, which is distinct from *during* the event where he reported not thinking 'anything of it because it just seemed so natural' (lines 19-20) – it was only afterwards that he 'thought' anything. In this sense, the unnaturalness or extraordinariness of the experience and its agency emerge as relevant only after the experience. It is this realisation which is marked by the reported thought. It marks the realisation of something unusual,

⁶⁷ Indeed, akin to all of these extracts the notion of being in an altered state of consciousness, rather than a usual state of consciousness seems to be implicitly alluded to.

unexpected and uninvited in the speaker's consciousness – something that could be contrasted with ordinary mental events by an orientation to surprise. The reported thought also invokes the agentic force of the experience, which is effectively construed in the form and substance of this design. Thus it is the agency of the experience that is effectively conveyed by the display of a surprised (silent) response at the time (Barnes & Moss, 2007; Haakana, 2007).

As we can begin to see, reported thought is a fairly efficient device in working to establish the agency of the experience reported by the experient. This can be done via the use of surprise but there are other ways in which this appears. Either way the speaker facilitates a distance between themselves and the experience occurrence in terms of conscious volition or action. This is achieved via the main reported thought in the next extract (4). George is talking about a dream he had which forms the second event in a series of experiences that he reports in a life story trajectory. Just before this extract George has relayed that it is difficult to talk about these experiences.

Extract 4 – George

1 G: I had a dream I had a dream that erm (1.2) I was in a tunnel it was like a
2 nissen hut⁶⁸
3 (2.1)
4 and there were e- hhh I was grey (1.0) and there were people (.) there were
5 benches along the side of the hut
6 (1.5)
7 and there was a light (0.9) just about here above me ↑I could never w- I-I-
8 couldn't see it (.)
9 I: mm
10 G: but it was female I mean to me (.) female goddess and all the rest of it
11 >↑OOH no (0.3) no no no not going there (.) really (.) not for me (0.4) but
12 this this light was
13 (3.5)
14 a- hhhhhh
15 (1.7)
16 it gave something to me like it made me feel wanted (.) it made me feel
17 comforted and happy and (.) all the rest of it
18 (1.2)
19 and just before I'd gone into the dream there was a kind of a redness a
20 golden sort redness and all the rest of it >so anyway I woke up and I
21 thought oh interesting dream but what a load of nonsense because it was
22 kind of goddy

⁶⁸ Nissen huts were originally designed by Peter Norman Nissen and used as infantry housing in World War I. Subsequently, the huts, made out of corrugated steel, were used extensively in World War II as bomb shelters (for more information see <http://www.nissens.co.uk>).

George begins talking about the dream detail in the first eight lines which are peppered with quite lengthy pauses. He goes on to report that ‘there was a light’ (line 7) located somewhere above him. He reports not being able to see it, but somehow having knowledge of it being there. Then George begins to tell me that this light ‘was female’ (line 10). George does not talk about how he knew this, but its controversial status is waived as it occurred during a dream state, where rational explanations and logical occurrences are not requisites. Immediately after this, George inserts a sort of hypothetical and ambiguous reported thought, concerning ‘female goddess and all of the rest of it’ (line 10) – which has clear New Age associations. This hypothetical reported thought (line 11) indicates ‘*how he would usually react to such ideas*’, and is demonstrating a footing shift (Barnes & Moss, 2007) from storyteller to ‘*how I felt about it*’. Despite this seemingly negative reaction to these connotations, and an explicit expression of discomfort (an emphatic sigh on line 14) he goes on to talk about the positive attributions associated with it (lines 16-17). This contrastive set up – how George would usually relate to such things and how he reports actually relating to it, ‘it gave something to me like it made me feel wanted’ (line 16) – allows juxtaposition between the actual and the hypothetical.

Subsequently, he reports having thought ‘oh interesting dream but what a load of nonsense because it was kind of goddy’ (lines 27-28). Beginning with a response particle (Heritage, 2005) or reaction token (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006), George formulates an evaluative position (Haakana, 2007) – of the dream as ‘interesting’ but ‘nonsense’. He accounts for this evaluation through reasoning its religious connotations are, in line with references elsewhere in his account, not applicable to himself or his identity. This is effectively communicated by use of the term ‘goddy’ as equated with ‘nonsense’ and as a derogatory evaluative reference to all things religious or notions of the Divine. His refutation of any overt religious interpretation, despite the mention of potential signifiers in this regard (e.g. ‘a light’, ‘female goddess’) sets up a position of agency. That is, George is not ‘religious’ in any sense so could not have been responsible for this extraordinary dream’s contents which seems to have (negatively evaluated) religious overtones. Instead, George positions himself as having the rational reaction to this dream, and questioning its worth on this basis, despite his reported positive response to the light in his dream. The positive aspect, however, is worked up as a feeling response (that is involuntary) rather than his thinking response – sensible, rational and considered (Haakana, 2007). In this sense, the dream was

neither willed nor sought by George and constructs him as passive recipient – affording agency to his experience and a non agentic position to himself.

In the same way that reported speech can display a collective verbal response, so too can reported thought convey a collective attitudinal response. In extract 5 (the full extract – including the excerpt from the beginning of the chapter) reported thought centralises the unexpectedness of the events described. It is this element – surprise as a reaction to unexpected events – which provides the common thread between this and earlier extracts in this section. Perhaps interestingly, it is reported speech which supports or provides evidence (Holt, 1996, 2000) for the agentic nature of the experience. It concerns the day of Alex’s funeral; all of Lyn’s experiences centre on the death of her friend, Alex.

Extract 5 – Lyn

1 L: and it was one of these sort of clear autumn days it was a lovely day (0.5)
2 and (0.2) my son had actually gone with me as well (.) and we were standing
3 round the grave and suddenly it just started to pour with rain it was like
4 stair rods coming down (.) you know just completely quiet but just
5 >sschhhhe::w .hhh and we were all thinking oh good heavens and ~~£~~you
6 know nobody had brought an umbrella or anything cos it had been such a
7 lovely day
8 (0.8)
9 e::rm and >of course you know what it’s like you’re just so upset you
10 don’t really take things in it was my son that pointed out afterwards he
11 said it only rained round the grave
12 (0.8)
13 he said did you notice that the rest of the ground was absolutely dry and
14 I said well (.) n(h)o I ha(h)dn’t you know

Lyn begins by talking about the weather on the day of the funeral (line 1) implying that she has a good recollection of this day and its features, but also orienting to the ‘clearness’ of the day as an important aspect of her narrative to be attended to. Additionally, she mentions that her son accompanied her (line 2). Then she talks about all the mourners being stood ‘around the grave’ (lines 2-3), when the weather abruptly changes. She talks about the rain being ‘like stair rods coming down’ (lines 3-4) conveying a torrential downpour rather than a light shower. This is further emphasised by the non-lexical expression she includes in mimicking what the rain is like ‘sschhhhe::w’⁶⁹ (line 5). Following this, she inserts a collective reported thought, ‘and we were all thinking oh good heavens’ (line 5).

⁶⁹ This non-lexical expression I have tried to represent phonetically here.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is clearly impossible that Lyn is actually referring to every mourner's literal thought processes at the time – this is not something she could possibly know. However, in reporting what everyone was thinking Lyn is effectively conveying a significant sense of surprise; of being caught unawares with this dramatic and unexpected change in the weather. She is also positioning herself as having (and sharing) the normative and expected reaction (in this case surprise) to this kind of incident. This design feature further allows an evaluation of the events as surprising and a substantiation of this as the *proper* reaction to such an event (Barnes & Moss, 2007). Additionally, the striking change in the weather is also portrayed as slightly bemusing (as conversations about the unpredictability of the weather in the UK often are), indicated by the light-hearted 'smiling' voice that Lyn uses throughout lines 5-7. The mild amusement shows to any recipient how the unexpected event is to be treated – as a not too disastrous event. There is a sense in which Lyn reports this story as an 'unmotivated witness to the event' (Barnes & Moss, 2007: 130). This display of neutrality (Potter, 1996) allows her to normatively position herself alongside everyone else there lending a degree of objectivity to the events unfolding.

In making a case for the event's extraordinary status, Lyn uses reported speech via which the event becomes really extraordinary. All of the claims here are delivered in the form of reported speech dialogue between Lyn and her son. This begins with Lyn reporting that her son said 'it only rained round the grave' (line 11) and then, 'did you notice that the rest of the ground was absolutely dry' (line 13), followed by her response 'and I said well (.) n(h)o I ha(h)dn't you know' (line 14). By conveying the peak of the narrative in reported speech, Lyn is employing a commonly used resource for creating involvement and drama through such a process (e.g. Li, 1986). Also, using the reported speech of her son to construct the extraordinary nature of the event allows her to distance herself somewhat from making such a claim (it may seem somewhat controversial, unusual or illogical to suggest that it rained only in a very localised area).

Clark and Gerrig (1990) have suggested that the current speaker only takes responsibility for the presentation of the words from the original speaker. In this way, the ultimate responsibility for the quote lies with the original speaker. The current speaker can thus distance or detach themselves somewhat from the material they present. Indeed, Lyn expressly abdicates any responsibility for this interpretation as she suggests that she did not

even notice it. The authority for this interpretation is passed on despite it being presented in such a way as to offer supporting evidence for a non-ordinary explanation.

There are two aspects to the notion of agency in this extract. The first is that the experience is again displayed as the force with agency – the extraordinary events occurred outside the mourners' control. And secondly, that the authority and responsibility regarding the detail of the story was also attributed to another source – in this case another person. This third party endorsement is one of a number of devices (connected to reported speech and thought) available to a speaker when dealing with the negotiation and management of epistemic authority (see for instance, Clift, 2006; Edwards & Potter, 1992a, 2005; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Pomerantz, 1980, 1984, 1986; Potter, 1996; Potter & Hepburn, 2003; Raymond, 2000; Raymond & Heritage, 2006; Sacks, 1979, 1984, 1992; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005; Wiggins & Potter, 2003; Wooffitt, 2008). As Wooffitt suggests,

“These studies show how epistemic authority is the outcome of discursive activities embedded in routine communicative procedures, such as turn-taking and turn design, and an attribution that may be challenged, negotiated and warranted in various ways.”
(Wooffitt, 2008: 9)

Both these aspects (agency and authority) function to provide the speaker with a non agentic position in relation to this extraordinary event. As such the speaker is able to reinforce a point and thus aim to increase credibility or reliability (Vincent & Perrin, 1999; Wooffitt, 1992). However, Lyn does present this as an extraordinary event and an experience she trusts happened as she trusts her son's judgement and his experience.

5.5.2 Rationality and objectivity

Closely related, but not identical to the issues of agency and authority, are the issues of rationality and objectivity that are enabled by the reported thought device. That is, the experiencers appear to be reporting thought in order to substantiate their own rationality in the face of an 'irrational' experience whilst also working to establish the experience as an objective occurrence. Notably, the reported thought found in some of the following accounts (extracts 6-8) is located during the experience, rather than immediately after it. That is, the experiencers construct their thought processes as occurring during ostensibly altered states of consciousness. In this extract (6) JC is describing an out of body experience that occurred during a meditation session.

Extract 6 – John Cooper

1 JC: this is another out of body experience (0.5) where erm
2 (1.2)
3 x going in (.) and just (0.4) being quiet
4 (0.7)
5 y and I felt myself lifting out of my body (0.8) and going (.) >I was like Peter
6 Pan (0.9) flying off (1.0) and I flew over this (.) land (0.6) which was red
7 (0.4)
8 and I thought where the heck am I (.) you know (0.5) and I've never seen
9 red soil (1.2) alright? (0.6) that orangey red (0.3) okay?

The extract begins with JC labelling his experience as 'another out of body experience' (line 1), indicating his competency in identifying these kinds of experiences because he stakes a claim to having had more than one. He then goes on to talk about the detail of his experience. He describes flying 'over this (.) land (0.6) which was red' (line 6), clearly orienting to the colour as important, as opposed to any other possible detail about the scene.

The reported thought is inserted on line 8. It is positioned after the 'y' component, as a reflective process located during the experience. Its inclusion in the narrative suggests that there is something pertinent about a report of what was going through his mind in relation to his location during his experience, to the current interaction. JC reports thinking 'where the heck am I', which conveys surprise, confusion and a questioning or doubting tone about the events he had just talked about experiencing. These usually 'rational' thoughts purportedly take place during a meditative state – commonly considered to be an altered state of consciousness (from ordinary consciousness). This is immediately followed by a 'you know' (line 8) locating his reported thought as a common and expected reaction to this kind of event (something also noted by Barnes & Moss, 2007: 130). Subsequently it is the colour of the earth that he comes back to in line 9, punctuated by 'alright?' (line 9) and 'okay' (line 9) as if to emphasise and stress his confusion and his assertion of not having 'seen red soil' (lines 8-9) before. This emphasis on the colour of the earth during his experience is directly linked to the somewhat unconventional explanation provided at the end of the narrative⁷⁰ (see extract 16, chapter 4 for the full experiential account). This enables the speaker to work up a contrast and establish the objectivity of the experience.

⁷⁰ This explanation is delivered via the reported speech of a third party also at the meditation group who proposes JC's had in some way 'travelled' to the West Country and seen some red soil there. The inclusion of third party reported speech allows JC to put some distance between himself and the responsibility for this interpretation (see Holt, 1996, 2000; and Clift, 2006, for further comment on evidence and authority in relation to reported speech).

His reported thought, which questions his physical whereabouts, also allows him to introduce the reported speech explanation as *the* satisfactory resolution to the quandary.

JC is invoking rational mental processes during his TEHE. He talks about asking himself a question at a crucial moment in the narrative. This reported thought is one of the ways in which the speaker is able to indicate to the recipient that the event being relayed is extraordinary. By invoking that questioning and surprise were taking place, the recipient begins to get a sense that the events are in some way unexpected or unusual. These reported thoughts are located as silent responses in the same way that Haakana (2007) identified; only these responses are silent responses to reported exceptional experiences. These reported thoughts are also previously 'hidden' in the earlier contexts as Barnes and Moss (2007) have suggested. They work to show (rather than just tell) the recipient that the speaker experienced rational thought processes (and those of a questioning as opposed to naive nature) at the same time as something extraordinary and non-rational was occurring. Thus the reported thought helps to position this person's testimony as a sensible, reasonable, rational and normal response to extraordinary events and aims to establish the objectivity of this experience. This construction of reported events as objective helps sure up their perceived factuality (Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996).

In various instances, then, thought is reportedly occurring during 'altered states'. But it still appears to be performing the same function. That is, acting as a device by which the speaker invokes their response to unexpected events in a rational, sensible and normal manner, with critical mental abilities alert and engaged. In the next extract (7) thought is reported during the dream state and there are similar features found here as in other instances. Here Paul is describing an extraordinary lucid dreaming experience.

Extract 7 – Paul

1 PF: and I suddenly become conscious as well (0.8) of the dream state >where I
2 was actually (inaudible) and suddenly (1.0) again (0.6) I found myself
3 floating looking down from the top of a tr- (.) but I didn't know it at first
4 what I was looking at
5 (0.7)
6 and I thought uh-hum? I looked around and I realised I was at the train
7 station (1.0) looking down on the top of a train
8 (1.6)
9 and I was fully conscious (0.5) you know and er I was obviously quite
10 perplexed you know (0.8) what's happening here you know

Paul's assessment of the dream as lucid is communicated effectively by his reference to becoming 'conscious as well (0.8) of the dream state' (line 1). He talks about where he was positioned; 'floating looking down from the top of a tr-' (line 3) and then stops himself completing this word or phrase (which it seems from later talk – line 7 – was going to be 'train') to assert that he did not recognise what he was seeing at first. Subsequently the reported thought is included, 'and I thought uh-hum' (line 6). The non-lexical nature of this reported thought makes it somewhat difficult to convey its meaning in transcribed, purely textual form. Nonetheless, from its prosody, inflection and pitch, a questioning tone is invoked and so the reported thought becomes a marker of surprise and confusion.

Paul then completes the second half of this with a realisation that he was 'looking down on the top of a train' (line 7), emphasising the word train to further stress the nature of this being a realisation. He then returns to his level of awareness at this time as an important element of the story to orient to and then curiously says 'and er I was obviously quite perplexed you know (0.8) what's happening here you know' (lines 9-10). Paul talks about 'obviously' being 'quite perplexed' here conveying that he was able to draw on rational resources and faculties associated with a waking conscious state, whilst during the non-rational state of dreaming. Indeed, his reference to his confusion being evident ('obviously') is also a reference to normative knowledge about humanity's perceived physical limitations. Further, he is suggesting that he was questioning what was unfolding in the dream state and was experiencing confusion. This would imply that Paul was able to employ waking reason in the dream-world. His reported thought then allows him to convey, through exemplification, his rational prowess and ability to think critically even in the dream state. Indeed, it is this reported ability to employ (ordinarily) conscious cognitive faculties that distinguishes the lucid dream from other types of dreaming (LaBerge & Gackenbach 2000). Other reported features include heightened senses, vividness of dreamscape and 'hyper-real' contexts.

It seems that by invoking his (alleged) thoughts during the event Paul can work to manage and negotiate his identity as a normal and ordinary person. There is a sense in which this device works to display how, despite having experienced some extraordinary mental phenomena, that his rational, sensible and normal powers of thought and reasoning were intact (at the time) and he was able to critically question his experience, as any other sentient being would have. Thus he orients to the normative reaction to such an

experience and its unexpectedness (Barnes & Moss, 2007). Being perceived as capable of rational thought, one of the mainstays of sanity – might well be fundamental to being seen as a credible witness or providing a believable or reliable testimony (Wooffitt, 1992).

It is also interesting that Paul's reported thoughts are concerned with his physical location (as JC's were in extract 6) whilst in the throes of a purportedly altered state of consciousness. This appears to result in two effects. Firstly, it contributes towards the authenticity of the experience by conveying a 'life-like' quality to the 'dreamscape' or environment during which the experience is being reported, so much so the experient treats it as 'reality' and employs ordinary reason. Secondly, it provides evidence of sanity via a demonstration of critical abilities combined with a display of control over mental faculties – even in the face of such exceptional events. Being in apparent possession of these capabilities is clearly important for the communication of a reliable or convincing narrative. It appears that reported thought is working to help achieve these things.

A similar reported thought construction can be found in Richard's narrative which is additionally concerned with establishing the objectivity or facticity of the experience. Here Richard has been detailing an out of body experience whilst staying at a friend's house. Just prior to this extract he reports experiencing some form of sleep paralysis and thinking that firstly his friend and then a 'luminous being' was entering the room (see extract 14, chapter 4 – the missing talk between the two extracts concerns the way in which the being was breathing). Extract (8) picks up when he is reporting hearing this breathing.

Extract 8 – Richard

1 R: I could ↑hear this:: (.) very slow (0.7) deep breathing (1.2) and I suddenly
2 felt incredibly calm? (0.4) as if ooh- (.) you know this this is alright (.) this is
3 good
4 (0.9)
5 y a:::nd the next thing I knew I was (.) out of my body (0.5) and I was just
6 looking down and I'd- (0.5) I'd- bobbed up to the (0.4) the ceiling erm and
7 she had big bay windows with (0.6) really heavy f-felt drapes (1.0) and I sort
8 of bounced against there and I looked and I- I- could just see myself
9 (1.0)
10 I could see the room everything I couldn't see this: (0.5) this person (0.9)
11 erm (1.2) and I I was just
12 (1.6)
13 lying laying there I couldn't tell you whether I'd got me eyes open or not °I
14 was too far away° a:::nd
15 (1.8)

16 then I thought maybe I had died aheheh (.) so (.) and as soon as I felt that
17 fear I was back in my body

In this extract Richard reports leaving his body (line 5) which forms the ‘y’ component of this part of his experience. He subsequently orients to the observation and reporting of external physical features of the environment - the drapes and high ceiling in the room at his friend’s house - and what he claims to ‘see’ whilst in this state (lines 6-7). In some sense working to establish the objectivity of this state via the purported ability to accurately apprehend aspects of the physical world, whilst in an ostensibly altered state. Additionally, he reports being able to see himself (or his body) lying down but being unable to discern ‘whether I’d got me eyes open or not’ (line 13). All of these elements point to a perceived necessity to provide accurate objective, factual evidence about the physical environment in order to add weight to the case for the experience’s ‘reality’. This was advocated as a research method for studying whether something (consciousness?) did actually leave the body in the past (see Cook, Greyson & Stevenson, 1998 and Owens, 1995, but also more recently see Dreaper, 2008; Parnia, 2008, 2007 and Parnia, Waller, Yeates & Fenwick, 2001).

Richard goes on to provide an explanation for this, saying that he ‘was too far away’, which is delivered at a notably quieter volume than the surrounding speech (line 14). Following this and a longish pause he includes his reported thought - ‘then I thought maybe I had died aheheh’ (line 16). This reported thought, marked notably also by laughter, conveys a mistaken thought in some senses - in that he obviously had not died - but also a rational one. His laughter may work here to distance and do ‘face-saving’ work or possible ‘troubles resistance’ (Jefferson, 1984: 351) - as this thought was clearly mistaken, the laughter works to show Richard’s realisation of this.

Akin to the other extracts before (6 & 7), Richard’s thought is reported as having occurred during a different state of consciousness than that of the regular waking state. It is equally set up as a response to his experience. So, his reported thought provides us with an account of how he reacted to this out of body experience. In this sense, although mistaken, the inclusion of this thought is still functioning to display rational powers in operation. Apart from the existence of research which has popularised ideas that out of body experiences occur in close connection with death (Alvarado, 2000), there is a ‘common sense’ association also. This common sense notion is perhaps reliant upon

fundamental and dominant ideas about our underlying theories of materiality and the conceptual separation between mind and body. In this way, experiencing a separation from the physical body could 'logically' lead to an assumption that one is dead. This thought is also worked up as fear (lines 16-17) - again a commonly reported reaction to such experiences - which allow a position of usual and normative reactions to extraordinary circumstances.

Unusual events are constructed through and by talk. Reported thought helps indicate that the events described are unusual but factual, and may be perceived as irrational but they are experienced by rational beings. Part of Lyn's narrative (extract 9) demonstrates these aspects also, and is concerned with recounting an unusual experience (that appears sequentially after extract 4), whereby musical tracks on a tape cassette and then a cd appear to inexplicably repeat. Firstly, in the car on the way home with a friend Roger (who is reported elsewhere as being 'a bit psychic') from Alex's funeral and secondly, in the house when they got back. These events are subsequently linked directly to the death of her close friend Alex and reported as 'evidence' of Alex's transition to an afterlife.

Extract 9 – Lyn

1 L: we were coming back down the road and he'd got on this music and
2 (1.3)
3 you know I was waiting for the tracks I wanted to hear and there was one
4 particular track that kept playing over and over again and well one of the
5 things with Roger is if he likes something he just keeps playing it
6 (0.6)
7 and it's the most irritating habit if it's not something you want to listen to
8 so I (0.9) I just you know didn't say anything but I was thinking I wish he'd
9 just put that off you know
(missing talk about getting back to the house and putting a CD on there which kept playing the same track repeatedly with no intervention from those present)
10 and he said that's strange he said did you notice the tape in the car?
11 (0.5)
12 and I said you know what you talking about and he said well it kept
13 playing that one track over and over again and I said (smiling voice) I
14 thought that was you and he says no he says I never touched it honestly
15 *((claps hands softly))*

Lyn draws attention to the way in which something unexpected seemed to be happening; that is, 'one particular track kept playing over and over' (line 4). She then begins to offer an explanation and an evaluation of these incidents. She proposes that Roger could be responsible for playing the same track repeatedly and alludes to him having done just this

on other occasions. She then goes on to offer an evaluation of this as, ‘the most irritating habit if it’s not something you want to listen to’ (line 7).

Following this, Lyn reports her thinking processes at this time – ‘I just you know didn’t say anything but I was thinking I wish he’d just put that off you know’ (lines 8-9). She also explicitly suggests that her thoughts were about an evaluation of the circumstances, and that she did not express her irritation or displeasure at the repetitive music at the time verbally (or out loud). As we have seen, this form of ‘silent’ response allows the speaker to display complaint, criticism or displeasure, whilst also demonstrating how they avoided conflict thereby acting sensibly and reasonably – even in the face of ‘irritating’ or unreasonable behaviour (Haakana, 2007). In referring to this criticism as a reported thought process at the time, Lyn provides ‘access’ to an evaluation of the unfolding events. It also shows her avoiding interactional conflict. In this utterance she implies that she was irritated by what she assumed to be Roger’s action of repeatedly playing the same track on the car stereo and wanted him to stop, but she did not express this.

Then there is a break in the transcript where Lyn is talking about another ‘inexplicable’ event, back at the house, where the CD player was repeatedly playing the same track. The remainder of the extract is in reported speech. At this point she reports Roger’s speech referring back to the events that took place in the car – ‘he said did you notice the tape in the car?’ (line 10). She subsequently reports her reaction to this as ‘I said you know what you talking about’ (line 12). This allows her to hand over responsibility for an extraordinary explanation of events, to Roger by using reported speech. She further includes reported thought within this reported speech exchange, when she reports telling Roger that she had ‘thought’ it was him repeatedly playing the same track (lines 13-14).

It is here that Lyn makes the thought explicit, in response to Roger’s reported observation, in a way that is less troublesome than it could have been earlier. Roger’s reported speech response, ‘he says no he says I never touched honestly’ (line 14), works to confirm the event as an extraordinary one. Tapes do not just repeat the same track autonomously for no reason and seemingly without human intervention, so already here an alternative explanation has potentially more credence. It is this establishment of the first reported thought being that of a potentially ordinary source for the phenomena, which goes some way towards constructing Lyn as competent and astute: as rational. Also, these reported

thoughts (the silent and the expressed) provide the recipient with direction about how to interpret the experience – as an objective event that occurred outside of the agency of any human action.

There are also examples in the corpus of data which show slightly different formulations of reported thought. These are often located in different sections of the experiential account. However, despite these differences, the function of the device seems to be remarkably similar. Extract 10 is one of these. It is taken from the beginning of Kerry's interview before she embarks upon the 'what happened' core element of the account.

Extract 10 - Kerry

1 I: so if you wanna start just by telling me what happened
2 K: okay .hhhh erm
3 (1.3)
4 it's just one of those things where you look back and you think
5 now I wonder what was going on there (.) really

I begin as interviewer by asking Kerry to tell me about her experience and 'what happened'. Kerry's response begins as most others do, with an A + B structure, marked by an acknowledgement and hesitation marker 'okay .hhhh erm' (line 2). Following this, Kerry precedes the actual detail of the event with a post-hoc reflection about the experience. This reflection (lines 4-5) is constructed as a form of reported thought and is not located at the time of the event but instead at an unspecified time in the present. Using the generic 'and you think' (line 4) she expresses this cognitive process in dialogue form (a common design for reported thought – Clark & Gerrig, 1990), 'now I wonder what was going on there (.) really' (line 5). This constructs Kerry as being in a position where she has spent time contemplating, thinking about or reasoning about her TEHE, and conveys her being puzzled or perplexed by it. So it manages to imply 'strangeness' *and* a rational perspective.

Indeed, there are several actions that are being achieved by the construction of reported thought on lines 4-5. Firstly, the use of 'you think' rather than 'I thought' locates whatever claim or utterance in the realm of common sense or shared knowledge. This suggests orientation to a collective, regular, normal reaction to events that any other person would have had. This kind of feature is similar to that found in Barnes & Moss' (2007) work where the reporting of ostensibly private thought affords the subsequent events that are relayed by the speaker a '*how it would appear to anyone*' quality. Secondly, the design of the

prior utterance on line 4 ‘it’s just...where you look back’, positions this as a retrospective or post-hoc thought. The placement of this thought after the event is suggestive of a rationalisation process. Thirdly, the construction of line 5 indicates the importance, recognition or orientation to the event or experience as unexplainable. In this sense, it appears that the reported thought, although located elsewhere (i.e. at the very beginning of the narrative, rather than after the extraordinary event) is still being employed in order to display rational acuity. That is, in showing her private thought about the event, Kerry is demonstrating her ability to think in a critical and inquiring manner about her experience, whilst simultaneously illustrating her cultural competence (i.e. she did not just blithely accept an ‘irrational’ explanation of the event).

Orienting to a rational or normative position does not necessarily require a speaker to align themselves with it. Often by invoking this response they can still perform discursive manoeuvres in order to warrant their interpretation as the preferred one (Edwards, 1997). Reported thought can be used to heighten the impact of such an orientation. In extract 11, the speaker demonstrates their awareness of the normative cultural response by orienting to it, but ultimately rejecting it as an option. Rose’s narrative is characterised by its series of experiences as a form of transformational life-story narrative. This extract is preceded by talk where Rose has been talking about working in a job she didn’t enjoy, about an ectopic pregnancy (and a subsequent operation where she nearly died) and about her chronic sleeplessness. Following her boss’s recommendation to see a psychic medium and healer (who Rose reports being initially sceptic of) who diagnoses a ‘haunting’ of Rose’s bedroom as the cause of her insomnia, the medium later returns to help ‘rescue the trapped spirit’.

Extract 11 – Rose

5 always want to understand more so I started (0.5) doing a lot of research
6 into (0.4) erm (0.5) er people who could rescue trapped spirits and just just
7 just understanding >trying to understand how mediums work erm
8 (0.6)
9 but the thing about this bloke that really (0.5) er pressed all my buttons was
10 that (.) he was a very good healer erm and had a lot of success with people
11 with cancer and conditions like that but .hhh the >most exciting thing for
12 me was that he could heal animals and telepathically communicate with
13 animals which (0.6) .hh might’ve s-s- could’ve sounded like nonsense to a
14 lot of people but to me I just thought (.) ↑E:::hhuuuuu:::h oo:::h you know
15 this a:::hhh my god I know why I’m here you know I’m love animals I’m
16 absolutely besotted with animals (.) and the idea of being able to (0.4) do
17 something more for them than just (0.5) taking them to the bet-vet

Rose begins by talking about what she did in reaction to the medium's visit (lines 5-7), which involved finding out about 'people who could rescue trapped spirits' (line 6) and, 'trying to understand how mediums work' (line 7). This utterance is a repair of the phrase which began 'just just just understanding' (lines 6-7). It is possible that this repair is done in order to dilute the claim being made. That is, instead of claiming to have subsequently understood how mediums 'work' and what they do, Rose reformulates it into an attempt to make sense of medium's activity, which given the potentially controversial nature of the claim (understanding how it is that mediums 'rescue trapped spirits') is a safer position.

Lines 24-25 show Rose reporting on this man's abilities as a healer. She indicates his competencies firstly by alluding to his success levels. Although Rose does not elaborate upon what a healer's measure of success might be she refers to this success in close connection with 'people with cancer and conditions like that' (lines 10-11). Linking a healer's success with such a serious condition (and other, it is implied, terminal illnesses) enables an assertion of his credibility, his validity and his deserved status as healer. Having established his healing credentials Rose moves on to account for her further interest in this man and his activities. On line 12 Rose suggests that the healing capacity also extends to animals. She takes this further by claiming that this man can 'telepathically communicate with animals' (lines 12-13). This is a relatively controversial claim; on the one hand with little consensual scientific agreement on 'evidence' of telepathy's existence between humans, but on the other quite high levels of reported belief in and/or personal experience of some form of telepathy or extra-sensory perception. Communication between humans and animals is, according to some (e.g. Sheldrake, 2004), quite commonly reported. Furthermore, some claims have been tested in experiments (see for instance, Sheldrake, 1999; Sheldrake & Morgana, 2003) but the claims and the experiments remain controversial (see the special issue of *Journal of Consciousness Studies* edited by Freeman, 2005; and Henderson, 2006a, 2006b).

Rose reports these aspects as being 'the >most exciting thing' (line 11) for her about this man's healing abilities. She then goes on to orient to the possibility of this claim being quite controversial when she reports being aware that it 'might've s-s- could've sounded like nonsense to a lot of people' (lines 13-14). Rose establishes her personal positioning with distance from seeing healing and communicating telepathically as nonsense. She does, however, manage to display her cultural competency and awareness of this common

sceptical view regarding such matters. The reported thought – ‘but to me I just thought (.)
↑E:::hhuuuuu::h oo::h you know (line 14) – shows Rose rejecting the ‘rational’ but
orienting to it nonetheless, making it relevant here and showing her knowledge of a
common reaction to such claims. In doing so she deploys a mundane reasoning device to
indicate the version of events she presents as the preferred version.

“In conversation, people sometimes warrant accounts or
pursue rhetorical aims by producing a distinction between
superficial appearance and an underlying reality which
represents the true situation or a preferred version.”
(Edwards, 1997: 248)

So Rose suggests that whilst many people might assume telepathic communication with
animals is nonsense (superficial appearance), she frames it as a valuable and personally
important way of complementing existing animal medicine (the ‘underlying reality’, ‘true
situation’ or ‘preferred version’). This enables a recognition of what might appear obvious
or even normatively expected (a rational alignment) and subverting this by offering ‘a
purportedly more insightful and adequate analysis’ of the situation (Edwards, p248).

Following this, Rose includes a reported thought which begins ‘I just thought’ (line 14).
The non-lexical item which comes after this is difficult to transcribe but conveys a sudden,
emotional and embodied realisation or revelation. The prosody, pitch and tone of the
emphatically and dramatically delivered non lexical items work up and enable this to be
conveyed. Additionally, Rose reports ‘my god I know why I’m here’ (line 15). This
revelation of her life’s purpose is reported as a response to her knowledge of the healer’s
abilities with animals. It is also a revelation conveyed dramatically and as extraordinary, by
both the ‘as-if-visceral’ and embodied emotional reaction (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006,
for work on this in relation to ‘reaction tokens’ and surprise in ordinary turn-taking
conversation) in the form of non-lexical expressions and by the reporting of her life’s
purpose.

The remaining lines (15-17) are accounting for her excitement about animals, ‘I’m
absolutely besotted with animals’ (lines 15-16) and, ‘the idea of being able to (0.4) do
something more for them than just (0.5) taking them to the bet-vet’ (16-17). Here Rose is
showing that her revelation, her realisation might be extraordinary, but that it is rooted in
‘actual fact’. That is, her displayed desire to help animals, as is communicated here,

provides her with resources to account for or explain her excitement in favourable terms. In the same way that humans have access to complementary medicine and other forms of treatment possibilities in addition to the conventional doctor, so Rose proposes that this is a possibility that should be open to animals. What Rose does is couch a potentially troublesome and ‘non-rational’ reported thought reaction between competent displays of critical awareness (lines 13-14) and reasoning (lines 15-17), which work to demonstrate that an orientation to normativity and rationality is important here. It is also worth noting that the ‘non-rational’ response is constructed as knowledge which appears reportedly via an inner or unknown source with agency and authority of its own (a common feature in these accounts).

5.5.3 Summary

So far the analysis has demonstrated where the reported thought is located (often during or in response to the extraordinary moment) and what is being effectively conveyed by its inclusion. Significantly, one of the main formulations is of reported thought as a surprised (and silent) response to unexpected and unusual events. Whilst the specifics of each instance show subtle differences in the way this is done, the construction of surprise often works to demonstrate the agency of the experience and the non-agency of the experient. That is, reported thought can show that the experience was unexpected and uninvited by the experient and that it had independent agency and authority.

Another common formulation of reported thought occurs during the experience. That is, in an ostensibly altered state of consciousness. These instances show reported thought staking a claim for rational prowess, despite being in the throes of an exceptional experience. Additionally, the reported thoughts often provide a cue for how the receiving party should interpret the event – as an objective occurrence that took place beyond their control.

It is notable that the majority of the previous instances under interrogation have been preceded by the explicit use of ‘I thought’, which has allowed the deployment of this type of cognition to be specifically considered within the analysis. There are numerous instances, however, where no form of explicit identification is used. In these cases, it is

sometimes difficult to discriminate between reported thoughts and reported locutions. The next section considers some of these instances.

5.6 Ambiguity and multiple instances

Consistently the reported thought is showing and performing the speakers' responses to extraordinary events and performing subtly different functions. There are a few instances where it is ambiguous as to whether it is reported thought or reported speech that the experiencers have included in their narratives. This is more often than not located in reported *interaction* where it is easier to construct such ambiguity (rather than *experiences* when speakers report being alone). Indeed, Haakana (2007) has noted that there may be other interactional purposes being addressed by the selection of a phrase that conveys ambiguity (as to whether it was spoken out loud or remained a silent response). There are two instances of this found in Fred's account. One example concerns a tarot reading. This extract (12) covers one of a series of experiences that Fred relays in a long and uninterrupted narrative. Just prior to this extract he has been talking in a favourable manner about a tarot card reader he had met.

Extract 12 – Fred

- 1 F: I'd I've never bin one to go for (.) if you like fortune telling but I did go
2 .hh t::o him (.) erm and have a professional (.) tarot reading
3 (1.3)
4 and erm it it really quite astounded me (1.2) becos one of the things as he'd
5 sort of had all these cards down he said >yes yes yes (.) erm yes you're a
6 you're gonna be a healer (0.5) erm and and I'd sort of well (0.5) what? you
7 know what?
8 (0.7)
9 °erm and he said oh he said it's clear as anything don't worry°
10 (0.5)
11 er and a I MEAN to me (0.4)_erm to be a HEALER (.) erm was like wow
12 you know (0.6) I can't be a healer I'm you know so humbled by even
13 someone [suggesting
14 I: [mm
15 F: something becos you don't just sort of become a healer like that

This extract has a discernible four-part structure, similar to a three-part structure in paranormal accounts originally identified by Wooffitt (1992; also examples in Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998: 199-201). The first part concerns the speaker being in receipt of some extraordinary information (revelation). The second part concerns the speaker's reaction to

this information (response). The third part again has the speaker being in receipt of further information, which, as Wooffitt (p179) states, ‘provides the denouement of the mystery established by the first part...and is therefore a resolution’. In addition to these three-parts identified by Wooffitt, this extract appears to have a fourth part, which constitutes the speaker’s second response to the resolution information.

In the first part Fred starts by distancing himself from something he refers to as fortune-telling (line 1), whilst then stating that he went to see the tarot reader he had previously been talking about, for ‘a professional (.) tarot reading’ (line 2). His use of ‘professional’ offers an understated positive evaluation of his experience of tarot reading and this is contrasted with a previous, somewhat derogatory, view of other ‘psychic’ readings, which he achieves by calling them fortune telling. Fortune telling has associations with fairgrounds, crystal balls and other elements indicating they should not be taken too seriously – they are a form of entertainment and not really to be trusted as reliable sources of knowledge about one’s life or future. Then follows a longish pause, and an utterance construing his reaction to the events he has yet to reveal – ‘and erm it it really quite astounded me (1.2)’ (line 4). So, before he even delivers the experience he is talking about being ‘really quite astounded’ by it. This helps to convey the impression that something unusual or unexpected has occurred (at the very least). On line 5, Fred’s talk picks up speed as he includes the reported speech of the tarot reader, ‘>yes yes yes (.) erm yes you’re a you’re gonna be a healer’.

The second part is Fred’s response which positions him reacting with surprise and, although there is no speech (or thought) marker, lines 6-7 appear to be working to achieve the same action as the reported thought devices in previous extracts. This is indicated by ‘what? you know what?’ Here, the ‘you know’ locates this reaction as a normative or expected one. Fred clearly indicates his response to these events, but it is ambiguous as to whether this is reported thought or speech. By leaving this open, the speaker hands over responsibility to the recipient to interpret it either as a silent response or one that was uttered.

The third part containing further information and resolution is the reported speech on line 9. This is delivered in a quieter tone than the surrounding speech and forms a re-emphasis of the revelation that Fred originally reported receiving in the first part. It also allows Fred

to report the tarot reader offering reassurance to him – ‘erm and he said oh he said it’s clear as anything don’t worry’ (line 9) – and orients to Fred’s reported surprise at being told he was a healer.⁷¹ Fred reports the tarot reader as an authority who pronounces him a healer. This quieter talk is made even more noticeable by the subsequent contrasting louder volume of the capitalised talk on line 11, ‘I MEAN to me (0.4) erm to be a HEALER’.

The fourth part (11-15) occurs when Fred inserts another ‘reaction’ or response to these events. He further positions himself as surprised and overwhelmed with his use of ‘wow’ and suggests he was ‘humbled’ at the suggestion of being a healer. It is not entirely apparent whether lines 12-15 are supposed to be (past or current) reported thought or speech, but his ‘I’m you know so humbled...’ (line 12) suggests that it is meant to be located at the time of the experience. This extract concludes with Fred suggesting he is ‘humbled’ (line 12), my ‘mm’ inserted here as affirmative or encouraging in some way (line 14), and Fred further suggesting he is surprised because, ‘you don’t just sort of become a healer like that’ (line 15). This serves to establish the experience (and the account) as an objective series of events, substantiated by the evidence of the invoked reported speaker (the tarot reader) – again displaying neutrality, constructing events as objective and deploying third party endorsement to substantiate claims (Edwards, 1997, Potter, 1996).

The next extract (13) is linked directly to extract 12 and exhibits the same structural features. Here Fred is talking about an experience that took place during a meditation circle or group in which he used to participate.

Extract 13 – Fred

1 F: we used to (0.8) erm go and have like a (.) a circle where we used to
 2 meditate there were six of us
 3 (1.4)
 4 .hh and I don’t know if that was before or after but (0.6) erm (0.7) I know
 5 when we were sitting in this circle (0.8) I just had (.) this
 6 (1.4)
 7 <vision (.) of (.) this light going (1.0) to (0.8) the >person who had given
 8 the tarot reading (1.1) erm this light going to their knees
 9 (1.2)
 10 and it wa:s you know hmm?

⁷¹ It is perhaps worth noting that this need not be verbal and surprise could be indicated by a facial expression or non-lexical expression (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006).

11 (1.3)
 12 and when I mentioned that he said oh yeah well I've bin havin' some (0.6)
 13 bad knees (0.5) and obviously you were sending (.) some healing energy to
 14 me ~~£~~which I thought well that's interesting cos I you know (0.6) didn't
 15 really (.) do anything on purpose it just seemed to to happen
 16 (0.8)
 17 anyway by I mean I just tried to put that to one side you know I thought
 18 °oh (.) you know this is this is no it can't be this° cos I'd say I just thought
 19 well you know healers were (0.9) born healers

In this extract, the first part concerns the extraordinary vision as the revelatory information that Fred was in receipt of. He is talking (on line 5) about the activity of 'sitting in this circle' [for the meditation activity]. Then he reports having a 'vision (.) of (.) this light' which is directed to the 'knees' of the tarot reader that he has mentioned previously (lines 5-8). In the second part, Fred's response on line 10, he delivers an expression of ambiguous reported thought or speech, which allows him to give his reaction, located at the time of the event. In using this device to deliver his reaction, he reports that his reaction was 'hmm?' with noticeable rising intonation in a questioning tone. This expression assists in working up a surprised reaction and perhaps even confusion at the preceding events. At the very least these events are thus presented as unexpected, if not extraordinary.

In the third part, (lines 12-14) he reports the interpretation of these events, via the reported speech of the tarot reader – that this light was Fred 'sending (.) some healing energy' to the tarot reader's 'bad knees'. This information is presented as the explanation – as the resolution to the original conundrum set up in the first part. Then there is the fourth part where Fred's second response is reported. Fred includes his reported thought at the time of the event (lines 14-15), where he suggests that he was not responsible for this event, which was outside his control. Further reported thoughts are delivered in lines 17-19, which convey Fred's denial of two possibilities – a) that he was responsible for these events and b) that this meant that he was a healer. Fred's reported thoughts and the construction of this narrative work to effectively place agency into the force of the experience (rather than Fred himself) and also to establish the objectivity of the experience – his status as healer is affirmed by another (third party endorsement) – by his abilities.

The final instance has various reported thought references. It is included here as the last example because it is an analytically rich extract, displaying both the agency of the experience and the rationality of the speaker. The experience that George is talking about

took place in his bathroom. He has already told me about experiencing an amazing white light, which had similarities with the light in his dream, and being on a real high. This extract (14) picks up just after he has been describing that ecstatic feeling.

Extract 14 – George

17 now this-is this-is the spooky part I know this is this is I'm really gonna be
18 shooting myself in the foot here (0.4) by telling you this part but
19 (3.7)
20 was that there was a voice (1.0) a voice not a real voice but a voice
21 (1.7)
22 that was kind of not just a voice but images
23 (1.6)
24 and sensations at the same time
25 (1.6)
26 oh go::d I hate saying this ↑I've never told anybody this (1.3) and it said
27 °a:::h god° it said you are the diamond light (0.4) thousand petal lotus (.)
28 centre of the universe now remember (0.6) I'm a person who's s:::o (0.8)
29 anti everything [
30 I: [°mm°
31 G: and I had this sorry the experience stopped and I sorta went N::::o:: come
32 on (0.5) and I sat down on the edge of the bath and thought wo::ah hang
33 on (0.5) and I stood up again looked up at the light and it happened again
34 (.) just complete immersion
35 (1.0)
36 and I went outside and I told my wife and I said >look something really
37 spooky's just happened and she said aw >yeah yeah yeah she's just
38 watching teevee she said yeah .hhh go and have a bath (0.3) so I went back
39 into the bathroom and I tried it again and it just happened a little bit more
40 (1.8)
40 and (.) because I was a journalist at the time I thought well (0.5) if someone
41 who was exc-ceptionally religious had an experience like this they'd have
42 thought they'd met god or something like that I thought well (0.7)
43 obviously it's just (.) because I'm an atheist and I don't believe in any of this
44 kind of nonsense it's c:::ertainly some kind of a neurological (0.7) a glitch of
45 some kind something's gone weird

There are many analytically interesting features of this extract but I want to focus on the reported thought. The first reported thought expresses, in a colloquial fashion using the verb 'go' – 'and I sorta went N::::o:: come on' (line 23) – a radical sense of disbelief and questioning. This is further achieved by the prosody, pitch and tone of the reported thought. The sentiment of this reported thought is reiterated on line 26, and the prosody, pitch and tone match that of the utterance before. This manages to 'double up' the doubt and disbelieving tone. The other reported thoughts in this extract appear on lines 38 and 41. The first of these (line 38) seems to be working to establish George's credentials and

reliability as a witness for the provision of a believable testimony (Wooffitt, 1992) – he describes himself as a ‘journalist’. The final reported thought (41) is linked to this and provides an explanation of his experience as, ‘some kind of a neurological (0.7) a glitch’ (lines 44-46). By showing his critical abilities and awareness of materialist science’s view of such an experience George asserts his sense of balance regarding these events. These reported thoughts are working to display the devices that we have witnessed in earlier extracts - firstly, that the experience was not in any way willed or invited, it possessed agency and the speaker did not; secondly, in response to the experience the speaker questioned and doubted the experience, constructing both a sense of speaker rationality and objectivity to the experience itself.

5.7 Summary and conclusion

At this point it is useful to return to some of the themes that were identified earlier from the literature reviewed and consider them in light of this analysis. It is clear that in these accounts, reported thought is not merely a report of mental or cognitive processes that took place at the time of a particular event but instead that it can be considered an interactional device working to do particular things at particular times.

In all of these accounts there is a common construction of reported thought as a response to the experiences they are conveying. The reported thought becomes a device which allows the speaker to report confusion, surprise, and doubt or the ability to question events. In other work reported thought was shown to be silent responses to reported utterances (Haakana, 2007) or previously ‘hidden’ thoughts in a past interaction (Barnes & Moss, 2007). However, in this analysis this is two-pronged. The reported thought is used to convey silent and private responses to hidden and private individual experiences in the past, at another time. In other words, *every* aspect that is being reported was concealed and is being made public for the purposes of the interaction. So these reported thoughts are included in the interview interaction to perform different functions. These functions can be seen in terms of those directed towards the *receipt of the experiential account* and those directed towards the *presentation of the speaker*. However, these are not distinct aspects and can be seen as intertwined. The majority of accounts show this design in one of two ways (whilst the remaining accounts show elements of both):

a) Experience agency, speaker non agency

In these instances the reported thought works to show the agency of the experience and the passive or involuntary participation of the speaker. That is, the speaker is able to demonstrate their ability to distinguish between ordinary mental events and exceptional (often externally imposed) ones. In suggesting that these experiences are unexpected, the inclusion of reported thought also works to demonstrate that the speakers have not invited such experiences or consciously willed them (i.e. imagined them). Their reported thought as a response of surprise is working to demonstrate that the appropriate evaluation is to attribute agency to the experience and not to the speaker. That is, this experience happened to the speaker, it was externally imposed and not internally created - and the speaker neither invited nor willed it.

b) Experience objectivity, speaker rationality

In these cases, the reported thought works to 'show' the speakers rational thought processes and establish the experience as an objective occurrence. By invoking critical thought, the speaker demonstrates that their mental capacities are (and were) intact, despite their exceptional experience. It is used to construct the speaker as a sensible and reasonable individual (Haakana, 2007) capable of rational thought. In some sense, this display of rational proficiency may help mitigate against claims of delusion. In terms of the experience, reported thought is often deployed as a support function – to provide evidence for, establish the objectivity of and substantiate the experience construed in the narrative. Furthermore, in these accounts the reported thought may appear in conjunction with 'objective' features of a reported environment or the reported speech of another. These additional features work alongside the reported thought to construct the speaker as a neutral reporter on factual events - thus establishing the objectivity of the experience.

5.7.1 Authority, Normativity and Credibility

The concepts of neutrality, epistemic authority and responsibility would appear to be invoked in distinct ways by reported thought in these accounts, similar to the deployment of mundane reason and devices such as 'at first I thought' (Jefferson, 2004c) in ordinary talk. As Edwards (1997: 247) has pointed out, 'categories of perceptual experience may be deployed to construct an effect of objective reality independent of talk'. These functions, it

is argued, are often found in personal testimony and eye-witness accounts; that is, ‘in reports of disputable events generally (Wooffitt, 1992)’ (p248). Leaving aside (for now) the issue of why such events might be considered disputable, what this demonstrates on a discursive level is the use of reported thought in handling knowledge claims and negotiating epistemic authority. It would also seem that these devices are deployed in interview interaction in addition to being achieved through designs in turns at talk in ordinary interaction.

In terms of neutrality, reported thought in these accounts is also often used to present a position of ‘*how it appeared to me*’ and other footing positions, particularly concerning the normative or expected response (Barnes & Moss, 2007). Indeed, Potter (1996) has noted that footing shifts are often ‘a display of neutrality’ and they can be considered ‘an indication that the subject/matter is being treated as something controversial or sensitive’ (p144). In this sense, speakers show that it is important to be considered normal, just like anyone else, categorised as ordinary (Sacks, 1992; Wooffitt, 1992) and therefore displaying the kind of reaction or response to exceptional events that anyone else would have reasonably had.

Finally, there are issues of stake and interest within the accounts that require management. Ultimately, there is the requirement to come across as a credible witness with a credible story. However, the story concerns a private, prior experience that no one else was party to. Whilst the experient is perceived as having privileged and direct access to their own experience, subjective and perceptual experience is often viewed as flawed and unreliable. It is possible that levels of credibility and competence increase via the resources deployed through the use of reported thought:

- a) the experient demonstrates awareness of a possible rational explanation for their experience
- b) the experient shows their ability to think critically or rationally at the point of or in reaction to the exceptional events
- c) the experient is not mentally responsible for this independent agentic and spontaneous event

Seemingly privileged access to the detail however, does not guarantee epistemic authority. Appeals to epistemic authority are worked up via third party endorsements, third party

responsibility for unconventional explanation or interpretation, and objective statements, assessments or evaluations. Indeed, these accounts are geared up for a sceptical response rather than constructed by a perceived privileged witness or outsider (see Pomerantz, 1980).

5.7.2 Broader Relevance

This analysis, as detailed above, contributes to a linguistic analysis of reported speech and reported thought; it reinforces Haakana's (2007) call for independent analyses of reported thought where appropriate; and contributes to work on mental state formulations in discursive psychology by continuing to consider what reported thought in interaction is doing rather than merely considering what 'underlies' it. Overall, this chapter offers further, demonstrable and accountable empirical support to a perspective which sees the performative, discursive and pragmatic remit of cognitions invoked in talk. However, there is a sense in which this analysis feels limited. Indeed, what else can be said about these accounts? Does this analysis miss something (the extra or non-discursive)? What, if anything, can we meaningfully say about the cultural or wider social context in relation to these accounts? Therefore, it is informative to contemplate how the analysis also begs some broader questions, which include:

➤ **The relationship between cognition and the extra-discursive**

In addition to considering that the inclusion of reported thought is 'doing' particular things in these accounts, there are further issues that we can consider concerning the relationship between concepts of subjectivity and talk. More specifically, there are debates amongst researchers concerned with constructions of identity and self about how the self is constructed in talk (see Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, for a discussion of much of this work). Indeed, there have been attempts by some researchers to rectify what is seen to be a missing element from purely discursive work. Some of these have tried to reclaim the notion of the inner self or 'interiority' (see Craib, 2000; Day Sclater, 2003; Frosh, 1999; Hollway & Jefferson, 2001). These researchers have employed psychoanalysis as a way of addressing this perceived gap. However, the results are mixed and have been criticised for regressing into notions of individualised pathology (Hepburn, 2003) or construing the researcher as expert and the participant as ignorant (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006: 50, commenting on Hollway & Jefferson, 2001). Other approaches have aimed to include

broader concepts of wider society in their analyses (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 2007). Both these aspects are further explored in the conclusion.

➤ Consciousness and communication

One interesting substantive element in some accounts is the reference to everyday or ordinary cognitive abilities taking place during reportedly altered states of consciousness. What implications does this have for how we understand consciousness? What implications does this have for notions of self and consciousness? Given that consciousness studies is still grappling with the so-called 'hard problem', what can this work offer to an understanding of the experiential aspects of consciousness?

These are matters that will be returned to and discussed in the concluding chapter. The next chapter explores the concept of transformation in TEHE accounts.

Chapter 6

Communicating transformation and identity change in TEHE accounts

6.1 Introduction

The last chapter explored how reported thought operated in the experiential accounts. This chapter considers the concept of change which is one of the most prominent aspects in the TEHE accounts. Almost all the respondents⁷² report some form of change occurring in themselves, often a type of self-transformation, and they seem mostly to orient to this change immediately after their experiences. These transformations are conveyed by the respondents as being either triggered by or as a result of the exceptional experience(s) that they report. Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, all the reported transformations are portrayed as positive occurrences – some of them could be interpreted as more ‘neutral’ or ambivalent than positive – but certainly none of the accounts suggest any of the changes are negative. This mirrors findings in the literature which portrays transformations as overwhelmingly positive and commonly associated with exceptional human experiences generally (e.g. Palmer & Braud, 2002; Williams & Harvey, 2001). Indeed, it has been suggested that EHEs generally, have this aspect in common – their ‘transformative aspect’ – that they provide many experients with the impetus to change their lives and themselves for the better (White, 1999b).

This chapter investigates these change narratives aiming to understand what is being communicated when the respondents talk about self transformation. Before this, the analytic approach is outlined and the literature concerning transformation is reviewed.

6.1.1 Transformations in the literature

Aside from the reported effects of TEHEs during and in the immediate aftermath of an experience (e.g. sensory phenomena or emotional arousal), there are many reports of striking, enduring changes on experients (Wulff, 2000). These dramatic transformations are regularly centred on people’s beliefs and attitudes or their outlook on life. In the literature various substantive changes are mentioned, ranging from improvements in coping with life problems, to religious conversions (James, [1901-2] 1982). Other reported

⁷² There are a few experients who do not discuss change as such whose accounts are not included in this chapter.

changes include: increased psychological and/or physical well-being; better health; renewed or completely new meaning and purpose in life; heightened spirituality; feeling more positively towards others; a more positive outlook on life generally; reduced negative behaviours; and being closer to God (examples taken from Palmer & Braud, 2002; Smith, 2006; and Wulff, 2000).

These changes often imply transformation to an individual's identity, personality or psychology. Indeed, reporting that one's outlook on life has dramatically altered would suggest that a major psychological shift has occurred. The notion that these experiences are somehow psychologically transformative (Underhill, 1911) is an interesting one, not least because it is possibly a controversial claim. This controversy might arise from the difficulty in substantiating dramatic personality or identity change per se. Prevailing western conceptions regarding the self and change maintain a persistent and fixed 'core' which is not considered amenable to change (Gergen, 1999). So, there may be inferential sensitivities regarding these experiences because they lead to the kind of change which tends to be regarded suspiciously in western culture. Furthermore, changes to one's person or identity are likely to be perceived as more credible and authentic when incremental and inspired by 'real life' events rather than private, intangible and unusual experiences.

There is also contention about whether these transformations are (or even can be) immediate (Eugene Thomas, 1997) or permanent (Smith, 2006). It has been argued that dedicated time and reflection is required in order for any benefits to be fully realised (James, [1901-2] 1982) and some have even suggested that change is only possible through the development of a spiritual discipline (Collins, 1991). From this perspective, only some experients can expect to harness the effects of their experience for long-term self-transformation. Indeed, Palmer and Braud (2002) emphasise that these experiences provide a *potential* opportunity for positive outcomes and transformative effects. The idea that other 'anomalous' experiences *may* produce profound changes in an individual has been recognised by others also (e.g. Mack, 1994; Ring, 1984, 1992; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers & Elfferich, 2001; and Waldron, 1998).

In this literature, reported changes are often extrapolated into real changes in behaviour, even if only employed anecdotally as opposed to empirically (Wulff, 2000). These conceptions remain concerned with the substantive elements of change whether they

concern the experients (e.g. Palmer & Braud, 2002) or the researchers investigating exceptional experiences (see the recent call for anthropologist's accounts of 'transpersonal phenomena' in Devereux, 2007; an article by McClenon & Nooney, 2002, and the edited collection by Young & Goulet, 1998). The work concerning 'lay experients' has emphasised the need to document and describe the reported changes and how they occur whilst ascertaining the most common transformative elements (e.g. Smith, 2006). These are all valuable and interesting contributions to the study of extraordinary experiences, in a broad sense. However, there are interesting developments in the social sciences regarding identity that might provide novel insights for a different kind of focus. Before we look at these it is worth considering how the concept of 'change' and 'identity change' are currently being understood by research in the social sciences more generally.

6.1.2 Current research on change

Perhaps surprisingly, the concept of individual change or transformation per se is rarely the focus of social science research concerned with notions of change or transition. Instead, work appears to be centred on how the self is constituted within a broader changing context. A few examples⁷³ include, individuals making sense of self and identity in the face of social change (e.g. Burkitt, 2005; O'Connor, 2006); individuals becoming fathers and the issues around this transition (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006); individuals experiencing organizational change (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004) or those having been diagnosed with major psychiatric disorders (Estroff, William, Lachicotte & Illingworth, 1991). In these examples the focus is not upon the account of change in and of itself, but instead upon the anticipated effects of social and cultural change upon an individual's presentation of self or identity. In some of the research where change is referred to by respondents, it tends to be incremental or gradual change and/or the primary analytic concern is not with this inclusion or formulation of change (e.g. Auburn, 2007; Burke, 2006; Burkitt, 2005; Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004; Estroff et al, 1991; Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis & Sharpe, 2002). There are also instances where the concept of change is implicit or not directly referred to in a respondent's narrative and instead is identified as relevant by the researcher or analyst (e.g. Auburn, 2007; Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; O'Connor, 2006). Some have noted this lack of focus on individual change in particular fields.

⁷³ The examples on change are a selection of fairly recent social scientific papers concerning change or transition in some way.

“In youth research...the focus has often been on particular transitions such as leaving home, starting a family, or the movement from education into employment. While these transitions are likely to have biographical resonance, researchers have tended to privilege social categories over the subjective experience of personal change.”
(Thomson et al, 2002: 337)

However, Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis and Sharpe do not provide a detailed data analysis focusing on individual change either, despite their recognition of its lack, and their analysis relies upon traditional conceptions of social class and related opportunities.

The majority of the remaining analyses in this selection of papers (with the exception of Auburn, 2007) are also integrated with pre-established theoretical perspectives or concepts from social theory. These include Bauman’s (2000) ‘liquid modernity’ and Giddens’s (1991) ‘fateful moments’ (e.g. Burkitt, 2005; O’Connor, 2006); psychological theories of personality development – whose central theme appears to be the gradual maturation and stabilisation (Caspi, Roberts & Shiner, 2005) of inherent traits over time rather than sudden or dramatic change (e.g. McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006; van Aken, Denissen, Branje, Dubas & Goossens, 2006); or theories concerning identity, such as identity control theory or ICT (e.g. Burke, 2006). ICT suggests that ‘an identity is viewed as a set of self-relevant meanings held as standards for the identity in question’ (Burke, 2006: 81). However, there are varying views about conceptualising identity as mentioned earlier, with recent developments in the social sciences informing traditional conceptions. It is these that are reviewed below.

6.1.3 Approaches to identity

Within the social sciences there are various different ways of understanding how identities are formed, invoked and managed (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995), and how the self is constituted (Burkitt, 1991). There is no space here to trace the differing strands of this work in detail (see, Burkitt, 1991, Benwell & Stokoe, 2006 and Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995, for further discussion concerning this) but it is worth giving a brief outline of the most major developments.

Traditionally, approaches to identity within sociology concerned social or political identities with particular descriptions focusing on demographic variables such as gender, social class, ethnicity, age or sexuality (Woodward, 2004). Conventionally, identity was viewed as an essentialist phenomenon. That is, identity was conceived of as a part of a real or pre-given (pre-social) self to which traits, features, behaviours and attributes could be attached. However, in fairly recent years, the essentialism debate has been somewhat sidelined by a series of conceptual and theoretical developments in the social and human sciences regarding how the self could and should be understood. The recognition of the ubiquity of verbal data in the social sciences more often than not in the form of stories or accounts (e.g. interviews, focus groups, diaries, recorded talk) and the adoption of various post-positivist or language-centred methodologies (e.g. narrative analysis, discourse analysis, conversation analysis) has heralded what has been termed the subsequent 'narrative turn' or discursive focus in these disciplines (Speer, 2005). Many theorists began to argue that individuals did not possess a pre-given self as such, but instead proposed that the traits, behaviours and characteristics thought to be located 'inside' the self were actually fluid concepts, constituted in some way by discourse, language and interaction. In this sense, language and discourse have become central to identity and the self (for continuity and change) as both constructive and (re)productive. However, the ways in which identities can be understood to be constituted varies across different approaches (e.g. see Cote & Levine, 2002; Leary & Tangney, 2003; and Stryker & Burke 2000 for some examples of traditional and non-discursive approaches to identity).

Discursive approaches to identity, personality and change include the narrative approach, which sees the self as a constitution employing available cultural narratives or stories (e.g. Burkitt, 2005; Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004; Thomson et al, 2002). Additionally, there are projects informed by discourse analysis, interested in the broad repertoires employed in the construction of identity, the self and their practical manifestation (e.g. Auburn, 2007; Wetherell, Lafleche & Berkeley, 2007). Other projects still draw on developments within discourse analysis, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis concerning identity and change (e.g. Coupland, 2001; Widdicombe, 1993; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995).

6.1.4 The influence of ethnomethodology and CA on identity and change research

These developments have led researchers to understand identity less as an explanation for, or caused by, particular circumstances (e.g. social or psychological), actions or events, and more as a topic itself for investigation, or as a resource used by interacting parties during talk (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). The concept of identity is closely allied to Sacks' (1992) conception of categories, as it is one example of a category. Categories are descriptive terms that have particular features associated with them any of which can be invoked, ascribed, and resisted by interactants with reference to themselves or others during interaction (Sacks, 1992). Sacks (1979) noted that categories are identifiers; for instance, 'women', 'men', 'old people', 'teenagers', are all categories rather than groups as they do not necessarily describe individuals with common interests but individuals *identified* by *common features*. Investigating the category 'hotrodder'⁷⁴ Sacks (1979) observed that it was a revolutionary category as it was self-enforced by young people, rather than imposed by adults, unlike the category 'teenager'. This self enforcement meant that hotrodders were dependent upon others for recognition and any subsequent drag race, but that they could equally defend their 'culture' against non-members. Membership to a category carries with it certain connotations and responsibilities. Indeed, Sacks (1979) suggested that members of categories are often seen as representatives of those categories and any misdemeanours can become something the whole category is marred with (e.g. reports of criminality often focus on categories such as age, ethnicity, sex etc.). As such, the use of a category has implications both in a broad sense and for the way in which interaction is then understood, by participants (Sacks, 1992).

In this sense, identity is seen as a tool that enables a speaker to present themselves in particular ways, at particular times and achieve particular things. Thus the invocation of or alignment and resistance to identities at particular times in talk can be seen to aid the way in which the speaker is understood and how they are situated by their 'audience'. There is evidence that identity 'is a practical accomplishment achieved and maintained through the detail of language use' (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995: 133). This is well demonstrated by Sacks' (1979) discussion of hotrodders but is equally apparent in other work. For example, Watson and Weinberg's (1982) study looked at how homosexual identity was produced and

⁷⁴ 'Hotrodders' were invariably young males (although Sacks does not draw any attention to this gender distinction) who had their cars radically modified ('souped up') and would 'drag race' on the urban streets of the USA (Sacks, 1979).

sustained during talk. They studied how culturally available resources were deployed by individuals to produce a homosexual identity – showing ‘procedural’ knowledge – rather than solely focusing on a substantive analytic dimension. Additionally, Widdicombe and Wooffitt’s (1995: 76) study of subculture and ‘youth’ identities investigated ‘the ways in which displays of identity are embedded in talk-in-interaction’. One pertinent finding from this research is that people seem to work hard in interaction to present themselves as consistent, continuous beings with a stable identity (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). It seems to be important to portray oneself as a coherent entity with certain established features, which may have some interesting analytic implications for a study of transformation and change.

This analytical stance towards identity is therefore concerned with the ways in which categorical negotiation is achieved in talk by speakers, with ‘no commitment to any position on whether someone truly ‘had’ this or that identity category, or what ‘having’ that identity made them do or feel’ (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998: 2). This approach endorses a form of discerning analysis towards identities in talk. That is, only when identities are invoked, attended to or resisted and are thus having noticeable effects on the actions being ‘done’ in that very talk (Schegloff, 1992) should they be attended to by the analyst. This is part of a broader methodological debate about the extent to which any extra-discursive phenomena can be pertinent for an analysis of discourse (from contentions over context – see Billig, 1999a, 1999b; Schegloff, 1997, 1999a, 1999b; van Dijk, 1999a, 1999b; Wetherell, 1998 – to debates about non-verbal communication e.g. Hammersley, 2003b). These extra-discursive elements include ideologies, concepts of gender and power, poststructuralist theories and broader rhetorical resources (e.g. Billig, 1999a, 1999b; Edley, 2001; Kiesling, 2006; Weatherall, 2000; Wetherell, 1998, 2007). However, the extent to which these elements are included in any analysis varies from researcher to researcher.

6.1.5 The approach

In aiming to better understand the respondents’ accounts of change, an approach informed by some of the developments in ethnomethodology and CA is employed which considers how change is communicated and what is being done during talk about change. This is also set within broader cultural and contextual boundaries – but the shape and detail of these features will be dictated by the data. Only Widdicombe (1993: 96) – of the previous

work concerning change – has a similar concern in considering ‘how change is constituted within accounts, and with what effects’. Her focus on formulations of change, where it appears in accounts and the functions that this talk performs is similar to the aims for analysis here. However, one notable difference is that the change which Widdicombe (1993: 104) discusses in her analysis is solicited: that is, she *requests* ‘an autobiographical account of change’ from the respondents. Conversely, the changes and transformations referred to in the respondents narratives located here are *spontaneous*, which adds another dimension to the analysis.

Whilst the form and detail of the respondent’s stated changes might appear, at least superficially, to be radically different and highly individualised – connected to the specificity of the reported experiences themselves – there are in fact, some substantive and analytic features that can be identified repeatedly. Shared substantive features include the reported profound, dramatic and life-changing ‘nature’ of these experiences. Many respondents do not convey a transient or notionally fleeting kind of change (for example, an emotion, feeling or physiological response associated with the moment as or after the experience happened), though an account may include references to these shorter and peripheral incidentals. Instead, the ‘big’ transformational moments are concerned with identity, personality and worldviews or *Weltanschauung*.⁷⁵ These types of changes are also common across accounts. The analytic focus is how these substantive changes are communicated. As there are identifiable similarities in the resources deployed by these respondents to convey change it is possible to consider one extract in detail in order to highlight the common properties and features for further explication.

6.2 Talking of transformation

Extract 1 is taken from Alice’s interview and is sequentially placed directly after she talks about her extraordinary experience. Alice reports a TEHE that occurred when she was in Africa. She reports that time appeared to stand still and everything about life and the things around her suddenly made sense. This is the sole experience that Alice reports and in her account it is portrayed as a huge, life-changing instant. In the extract below (1) Alice is talking about the changes she perceives have occurred in light of her experience.

⁷⁵ Taken from the German, this expression means the way in which an individual understands or sees the world around them; their framework for making sense of life and events (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/weltanschauung>).

Extract 1 – Alice

1 A: and ever since then I (0.5) I dunno (.) I've been able (.) I've found that I'm
2 a different person
3 (0.6)
4 I found that I've always been (.) had problems coping with situations and
5 I've always had a lot of (0.6) emotional issues but ever since that's
6 happened to me I've found that (0.3) I can cope with pretty much anythink
7 (0.5) that life throws at me I'm a much calmer much more organised person
8 and (0.4) I've found that things that I never thought I 'ould achieve (0.7)
9 I'm (.) I've actually been able to achieve and I don't know if that makes any
10 sense but it was just like this pivotal moment in my life when I realised
11 (0.8)
12 I suppose it is quite a spiritual experience I realised just how small and (0.8)
13 and (0.6) insignificant I was but at the same time I realised how I was part
14 of something (0.4) that was (0.7) incomprehensible but amazing and
15 (0.5)
16 I don't know it's changed the way I think about my subject as well (0.3)
17 being a scientist and (0.5) there was a time when everything was evolution
18 nothing really had a point except to pass on its (0.7) its genetic (0.4) genetic
19 (0.3) programming and material but now that I've realised that
20 (1.1)
21 you know (.) >the more I think about it the more I realise that obviously
22 evolution it couldn't just be some grand accident but it is part of something
23 and I don't know what that is (0.8) but its just wonderful

Alice uses her experience as a point of departure, to draw upon and highlight a pivotal moment, whereby events that occurred prior to this are conveyed as 'before'. Likewise, with the introduction of 'ever since then' (line 1), she works up a sense in which events occurring subsequently are notably 'post-experiential': in a way that is highlighted as discursively relevant for this particular part of the story. Following this, she utters, 'I dunno', which, at one level, is simply a claim to a lack of knowledge. However, there is research which suggests that this phrase acts as a way of putting distance between the speaker and particular claims or enables the speaker to convey indifference about those very claims (Potter, 1996, 2004). Furthermore, Potter (2004) has suggested that this perceived nonchalance works to ensure that any subsequent claims are not negatively received.

Use of 'I dunno' can help to manage the impression of the self that is communicated in interaction (see Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995; Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). Therefore, stating 'I dunno' before going on to talk about being a different and changed person appears to be doing two things. Firstly, it is orienting to the potential difficulties with announcing dramatic change and allowing Alice to deflect any potentially critical

evaluation of these claims. As noted earlier, claiming dramatic changes to one's self or personality might be viewed suspiciously in Western contexts. Claims to this type of change could be interpreted as threats to a speaker's credibility or authenticity and may need to be 'handled' carefully in talk. Secondly, it works to inoculate against any dispute of her claim that a private and highly unusual experience was dramatically life-changing. A self-repair is then inserted, where Alice begins on the trajectory 'I've been able' and then switches to 'I've found that I'm a different person' (lines 1-2). So, from the likely trajectory of 'I've been able to...cope with pretty much anythink that life throws at me' (lines 1, 6-7) – a formulation of concrete abilities regarding handling potentially difficult situations managing the ups-and-downs of life – it is a more fundamental shake-up that Alice invokes when she claims finding that since the experience she is (not just changed superficially but) 'a different person' (line 2). Additionally, this repair shifts from the originally *concrete* to the subsequently *vague* (i.e. the non-specific notion of becoming 'a different person'). Whilst this phrase does connote profound change it also does not commit Alice to a specific or named kind of change and instead allows a more generic, less easily challenged notion of change.

Nevertheless, claims to be a changed person work to establish at the outset that the reported change should be read as dramatic, profound or radical. Claiming to be a different person on the back of a somewhat intangible experience is possibly problematic. This radical change is reported via claims associated with the self or personhood and is somewhat tempered by the construction of a passive discovery (she '*found* that' she was 'a different person'). This passive stance construes change as something that happened to her and not something that she consciously directed – in other words she did not knowingly make an effort to change her person or her 'self'. The use of 'I found' also enables Alice to position herself as an observer of self and has the added effect of her appearing to merely point out, seemingly 'objectively', the consequences of her experiences. Negotiating the agentic force for the change could be an important part of how the report of transformation is received. In this sense a successful account with the presentation of a transformed self may be reliant on a non-agentic position, where the impetus for change is located elsewhere (in this case with an uninvited, unwilling, and 'spontaneous' experience).

The way in which this change is presented as profound and extraordinary is heavily reliant upon the ways in which we understand the self. In this sense, the self (in Western

societies) is understood as a fairly consistent entity with a central core that is fixed (Gergen, 1999), despite the fact that the way the self is theorised is vastly varied (Robins, Tracy & Trzesniewski, 2008). Thus, personality and associated characteristics are usually thought to be reasonably static and not normally subject to rapid change or flux. Whilst change is not perceived as impossible, it is usually associated with personality problems or shortcomings, the need for psychological or therapeutic intervention, and a process of gradual change or change directed by conscious practices (e.g. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or CBT). CBT is a therapeutic intervention that has seen increased popularity in contemporary clinical settings. Billed as a way of changing negative or destructive behaviours and thinking processes, proponents of this method teach clients how to recognize and address habitual and negative thinking patterns (Williams & Garland, 2002).

Alternatively, changes in a person are associated with more conscious and incremental or developmental ‘spiritual’ transformations signalling changes in self and awareness, such as individuation (Jung, 1989) self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943) or non-dual awareness⁷⁶ (Wilber, 1999). There are also further debates within the sociology of religion and related fields concerning secularisation and sacralisation (e.g. Flanagan & Jupp, 2007) and the state of the spiritual in society⁷⁷ (e.g. Bruce, 2002; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Lynch, 2007; Tacey, 2004) – within which, references to contemporary spirituality are located. Indeed, the literature on transformation also suggests that change requires cultivation and spiritual discipline (e.g. Collins, 1991). Therefore, from this perspective, it would be considered at the very least somewhat unusual for an individual to transform aspects of this self or personality instantaneously. It is possible, then, that such a dramatic change of self or identity requires careful management in talk. Indeed, Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) revealed that individuals worked hard during interaction to present a level of continuity in their identities and ‘selves’. Therefore, narratives which refer to dramatic changes potentially embody challenges for the respondents.

After introducing the profound change at stake, Alice returns to her ability to cope with life and its difficulties. On lines 4-5 she constitutes a former self via personality traits and

⁷⁶ The idea of nondual awareness has been around (at least in the East) for centuries, referring to the belief that all dualisms or dichotomies are an illusion and that pure or unitive consciousness – a state where this illusion is experienced (and not just intellectually known, for instance) – and a transcendence of the self-ego can be attained and sustained by adhering to forms of meditative spiritual discipline over extended periods (Wilber, 1999).

⁷⁷ These issues will be returned to in the concluding chapter (7) of this thesis.

characteristics, including extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986). Extreme case formulations – terms such as ‘always’ and ‘never’ – can be used in everyday talk to legitimise particular claims. Pomerantz noted three main uses, predominantly in complaint sequences, firstly, to defend the speaker’s claims against (or from) counter claims; secondly, to establish a particular phenomenon as objective, as opposed to produced by the circumstances or interaction; and thirdly, to establish any given behaviour as normatively appropriate due to its commonality or frequency.

By using the formulations, ‘I’ve always been (.) had problems...’ and, ‘I’ve always had a lot of emotional issues’ (lines 4-5), Alice manages to achieve three things. Firstly, using extreme case formulations enables a deflection of any challenges (Pomerantz, 1986) to Alice having problems and emotional issues prior to her experience. Secondly, such problems and issues are established as fairly serious, regularly occurring and something worth noting (of importance and relevance). Thirdly, it works up to and allows for a subsequent contrasting structure through insertion of the term ‘but’ (line 5). Additionally talking in terms of generic ‘issues’ and ‘problems’ omits the detail or specificity and therefore makes them more difficult to refute.

This former identity is contrasted with a transformed personality, which is described as being evident since the experience in a three-part formulation; ‘I’ve found that (0.3) I can cope with pretty much anythink (0.5) that life throws at me’; ‘I’m a much calmer much more organised person’; and ‘I’ve found that things that I never thought I ‘ould achieve (0.7) I’m (.) I’ve actually been able to achieve’ (lines 5-9). This is presented as the transformed and current version of Alice: a changed person who is better able to cope with life’s challenges (as contrasted with finding coping difficult), calmer and more organised (compared with having ‘a lot of emotional issues’) and also exceeds her expectations. It also includes what Edwards (2000) has termed ‘softeners’, such as ‘mostly’ or ‘few’, which are expressions that lessen the extremity of extreme case formulations. The qualifiers used (in this case ‘*pretty much anythink*’ – line 6 – emphasis added) seem to weaken the universality of the extreme case formulation. However, Edwards (2000: 354) has shown that these utterances can be ‘rhetorically and interactionally stronger’ as they allude to the possibility of ‘one or two counterexamples’ (p 352). Thus Alice presents herself as reasonable in her assessment of the change, ‘taking account of empirical realities’ and ‘not making excessive claims’ (p359).

In mystical literature or religious texts (particularly some forms of Buddhism) transcendent experiences move an individual towards profound changes in awareness, such as the beginnings of realisations concerning the ‘illusion’ of reality and the material world (Suzuki, 1938). James ([1901-2] 1982) and Bucke (1905) also note how religious experiences can reveal deep levels of knowledge and insight to an experient. However, whilst Alice has made reference to a fundamental change, in suggesting that she is a different person, the changes that she claims are absolutely rooted in the domain of the ‘real’ world. Alice talks about coping with life’s troubles, being more organised and achieving things – all of which are concerned with mundane, ‘daily’ or ordinary life, as opposed to transcendent, mystical or more unusual ‘spiritual’ changes. This integration of the ‘ethereal’ and the ‘real’ in Alice’s account, points to the manifestation of the transcendent in the everyday, the social. Because the changes are centred on ordinary and recognisable aspects of human lives and ‘selves’, the previously intangible is afforded tangibility and these changes trade on a common shared awareness of everyday struggles and troubles.

However, there are other changes in Alice’s account, which are substantively concerned with more transcendent aspects. Via a qualification, or orientation to her claim of identity change as potentially controversial – ‘and I don’t know if that makes any sense’ (line 16) – Alice again returns to the changes that she claims happened as a result of this experience. Referring to the experience itself as a ‘pivotal moment’ (line 10) she starts to say ‘when I realised’ but then self repairs to insert, ‘I suppose it is quite a spiritual experience’ (line 12). This displays the experience being considered in spiritual terms as a novel idea, and it is presented as a cognitive consideration.⁷⁸ These two references (‘pivotal’ and ‘spiritual’) relocate the experience in the profound and the transcendent whilst the somewhat reluctant categorisation of her experience as spiritual helps to inoculate against claims of either religious fanaticism or sudden spiritual conversion (potentially troublesome descriptions).

Alice goes on to include reported cognitive and conscious changes about her *Weltanschauung* via a contrast. She reports a realisation of her position or place in the greater scheme of things. Alice talks about being both ‘small’ and ‘insignificant’ (lines 12 & 13) and simultaneously ‘part of something (0.4) that was (0.7) incomprehensible but amazing’ (lines 13-14). Again on line 16, Alice states ‘I don’t know’, which deals with the

⁷⁸ It is entirely possible that this is a reference to our pre-interview conversation, where Alice asked about how other respondents defined their experiences.

extent to which she has any stake and interest in a particular point of view or position (Potter, 1996, 2004). This indicates that there may be something potentially troublesome about allegiance to a concrete definition of this new world view and that there is less difficulty with a vaguer formulation.

Following this, she reports another change regarding 'her [academic] subject' and then orients to a self-categorisation as a scientist (line 17). This identity invocation is followed by some further explication of possible features for category membership (Sacks, 1992) and a contrastive structure. Alice reports her former understanding of evolution (and by implication the whole purpose of life itself) as a way of genetic perpetuation (lines 18-19). This alignment with a 'scientific' viewpoint is then contrasted with a reported subsequent realisation beginning, 'but now that I've realised that (1.1) you know (.) the more I think about it the more I realise that obviously...' (lines 19-21). This contains three references to conscious cognitive processes (realisation and thought) depicting a gradual realisation process – triggered by her TEHE – which thus led her to question and ruminate over, (subtextually: *'quite reasonably and rationally, as anyone else would have done in the face of such an experience'*) whether life could be adequately explained via evolution and genetics.

There are two things being done in this part of the extract:

- One is the presentation of a rational and thinking self who is intelligent, learned and well-versed in scientific knowledge (i.e. not readily duped);
- Two is the claim that her experience was so profound and deeply affecting that it changed (or instigated change in) fairly well-established views about the fundamentals of human existence, life's purpose and her *Weltanschauung* (i.e. significant phenomena).

Alice thus presents herself as a rational actor, even in the wake of an extraordinary experience, and preserves a balance between these two aspects – the rational self and the significance of her experience.

This reported thought preamble is also designed to be more difficult to challenge: not only has Alice spent considerable time contemplating this but also the position she now holds is fairly indisputable, established by inclusion of the term 'obviously' (line 13). Presenting something as obvious is an appeal to such a perspective being sanctioned by normative and general knowledge (and therefore not just subjective conjecture). Alice then goes on to

state the substance of her realisation – ‘evolution it couldn’t just be some grand accident but it is part of something’ (lines 44-45). This utterance is designed to convey a marked contrast and change in viewpoint but also a level of conviction about this new understanding – ‘it *couldn’t just be* some grand accident’ (emphasis added) – without sounding arrogant. Her former understanding is now reported as a limited way of seeing life which neglects any deeper meaning or purpose. This is illustrated by her proposal that seeing life as a ‘grand accident’ and solely in evolutionary terms is ill-considered and reductive - ‘it [life] couldn’t just be’ - not *it might not be* but *it doesn’t make sense for it to be* (only about evolution). This appeal to reason has a more credible character than a bald statement of belief or complete change of position such as, ‘life *is not* some grand accident’ (emphasis added), and hints at the need for some continuity between current and former selves.

Further to this, evolution is not entirely dismissed as irrelevant, but is incorporated into a ‘transformed’ understanding, where it is ‘part of’ a broader explanation. However, there is no explicit alternative explanation proposed. Instead, the new understanding is offered as vague and uncertain – ‘part of something and I don’t know what it is’ – coupled with a positive evaluation that was not applied to the former evolutionary perspective – ‘but it’s just wonderful’ (line 23). This positive evaluation could be a rhetorical device which establishes distance from challenges, counter-claims or alternative positions (Billig, 1989). Indeed, work is being done to manage a presentation of self which concerns change *and* continuity or consistency. Alice does not reject evolution and replace it with an alternative theory. Evolution remains part of her ‘new’ viewpoint, which allows her to institute continuity with her scientific, pre-experiential self. This element of continuity seems important for any negotiation and presentation of change.

To demonstrate an outright shift from adherence to a scientific explanation of the world to an alternative could be problematic. If Alice had talked of complete abandonment of her previous scientific viewpoint and former scientific self, this would have been troublesome for consistency and continuity in her identity and worldview. Instead, she manages to incorporate evolution into a new looser, vaguer worldview and thus negotiates a level of consistency in the presentation of her current self. It would appear then that work is being done to manage transformation, communicate profound change and present a credible self with continuity and thus authenticity. Indeed, ‘consistency is a strongly sanctioned

normative requirement for being a sensible, accountable, rational, reliable human being' (Edwards & Stokoe, 2004: 502).

6.2.1 Summary

We have explored the way in which change is communicated, the important features of which are summarised below so as to inform the subsequent analysis. Via a series of contrastive structures Alice conveys a picture of profound change. However, her account reveals there are various more nuanced features at work. The preliminary analytic observations show that there are four predominant analytical issues:

1. *Sequentiality* – the talk of change is located immediately after the description of a TEHE, which suggests that there might be a pattern to this ordering in other accounts.
2. *Credibility and change* – though changes are conveyed as profound or dramatic, they are simultaneously tempered by references to aspects of continuity in the experient's identity. This consistency seems to be important when considering any possible difficulty arising from the announcement of dramatic change. Transformation of a meaningful kind might be problematically interpreted as an instantaneous 'conversion' or as an 'anomalous' disruption to the dominant view of self – as fairly fixed individuals with a stable, continuous core (Gergen, 1999).
3. *'Before and after' construction* – there seems to be a narrative pattern in the account whereby a former self and set of circumstances are contrasted with a current self and circumstances. These aspects are constituted as 'changed by' the experience and communicate a 'before and after' transition.
4. *Stance/agency* – some of the changes are purportedly discovered by the experient, almost as if accidentally stumbled across and convey a lack of any conscious action on the part of the individual. Change is attributed to the force of the experience. This contrasts with the suggestion that full transformation can only occur with consciously directed action (e.g. Collins, 1991).

These four issues inform the rest of this chapter and we will go on to examine these in more detail through an exploration of other instances in the data.

6.3 Sequentiality

The first feature of the experiential accounts concerns the location of the talk of change. In Alice's account it was revealed that talk of transformation was located sequentially after the description of her TEHE. The identification of this sequentiality is evident in many of the other accounts. In the next extract (2) Lyn is talking about the last in a series of TEHEs connected with the death of her friend Alex when she goes on to talk about personal change.

Extract 2 – Lyn

1 L: you know how I was saying they'd brought Alex's body back to the house
2 (.) for the wake
3 (0.9)
4 well apparently her mum had been in the house making up sandwiches and
5 things and her dad (0.4) .hhh erm had phoned up about something and they
6 had taken off the the voice message on the (0.4) answer machine (.) or
7 removed the answer machine (.) and she had the office phone as well and
8 they'd (0.7) you know done whatever you do don't know whether they'd
9 unplugged it or taken off the taken out the tape but anyway there was no
10 (0.3) voice message on either phone
11 (0.6)
12 .hh and he had phoned up her house phone and got Alex saying (.) I'm
13 sorry I can't take your call just now I'll speak to you later (1.0) an:d he
14 came round and he was upset and he said (.) I thought (0.3) we had taken
15 this off you know these people'll be coming an:d what if anybody phones
16 (0.7)
17 so Mary [her mum] says we did take it off (0.3) you know .hhh an:d (0.5)
18 other people arrived and they were saying (0.4) we thought you might have
19 got rid of that message you know (.) and they were saying but we ha(h)ve
20 you know (.) .hh so then we got Alex's sister to bring round the phone
21 from her house (0.7) and plug it in to the (.) socket and it was even doing it
22 on hers
23 (0.6)
24 but the next day it had gone (0.6) you know it was only that night while
25 (0.3) the body was in the (0.3) house
26 (0.7)
27 so to me it's been
28 (1.9)
29 to me it's (.) erm it's like (0.5) I've been told it's not a question of belief
30 it's a question of (0.5) knowing that there is life after death and I mean that
31 might sound really sort of arrogant but I just feel .hhh because of the way
32 it's come from (1.0) I mean it came from Alex (0.9) that it's real
33 (0.8)
34 and it's (.) sent me off on this (.) sort of spiritual quest for the last five years
35 you know (0.7) .hh erm sort of exploring different religions and (0.7) erm
36 (0.8) trying to find out what it is:: (0.8) that (0.7) that I would feel
37 comfortable with (.) you know and erm

38 (0.5)
 39 I mean at the present time I feel (0.5) it's Buddhism (.) that I'm comfortable
 40 with
 41 (0.5)
 42 erm but I do- haven't really sort of (1.0) signed up to anything I'm still sort
 43 of (.) you know finding my way through (.)
 44 I: m↑m
 45 L: but that's the big impact that it's had on my life and it's made me see
 46 everything differently (.)
 47 I: mm
 48 (0.7)
 49 L: and erm
 50 (2.8)
 51 it makes me see life differently and I mean I'm not saying that (0.4) this is a
 52 hundred percent of the time (.) HUHUHhehehehuh you know I'm afraid
 53 it's (.) er it's not that effective

Whilst there is no overt marker for the end of the experience description, the shift in focus and content is easily identifiable. On lines 24-25 Lyn completes the description of what happened with 'but the next day it had gone (0.6) you know it was only that night while (0.3) the body was in the (0.3) house'. Following this is the beginning of the next part of the account where Lyn begins to talk about the resulting changes from her experiences - 'so to me it's been (1.9) to me it's it's (.) erm it's like (0.5) I've been told' (lines 27-29). The lengthy pause works to show Lyn doing the business of reflecting upon the effects of her experience(s). This sequential transition from experiential description to reflection about changes reportedly due to these experiences is not solicited. In other words, there is no request for Lyn to provide this kind of information, she just does. The unsolicited nature of this ordering suggests it is normative. That is, in providing an account of an exceptional experience, the conventional design sequence appears to be prescriptive: experiential description followed by post hoc reflections about changes and effects of the experiences.

This ordering can be seen in many of the other accounts, which help to establish that this sequentiality has a normative component in this context. The next three extracts (3, 4 and 5) also contain very similar illustrations of this normative sequencing at work. In all of these accounts there is a clearly identifiable shift moment, where the talk changes from 'describing what happened' to focusing on the 'effects of what happened'. In extract 3 Sunset is talking about her dream-related TEHE before she then goes on to talk about change and transformation.

Extract 3 – Sunset

- 1 I: if you'd just like to tell me about your experience
2 S: erm the experience was
3 (2.1)
4 j::ust before (0.7) erm foot and mouth broke out which I think was about
5 two thousand and one (1.2) and .hhh throughout my life I've had (.) various
6 experiences and some of them have involved (0.7) er:: very vivid [dreams
7 I: [°mm::°
8 S: and (1.2) for (0.8) several weeks I'd h- I was having a recurring and very
9 very unpleasant nightmare .hh that my bed was full of dead animals
10 (0.5)
11 and because it was leaving me so distressed I told my mother > ab[out it
12 I: [°mm°
13 in the morning and I'm I'm glad I did that because obviously it means now
14 that .hh someone else knew about it before (0.7) anything came of it .hh
15 e:::r and then of course foot and mouth broke out (0.7) and it it began to
16 seem (0.5) less like a nightmare and more like a premonition
17 (1.3)
18 always been interested in esoteric type things paranormal (0.7) erm (0.7) and
19 that prompted me to-tut-of (0.4) think I must do something about this and
20 of course didn't really know what to do
21 (1.0)
22 and
23 (2.0)
24 to this day I don't know how I really knew about this place but I'd heard
25 there was a college erm (0.9) for sort of (0.9) well it's called £spook school
26 it's the [name] college in [place] and (.) it it trains e::r psychics and mediums
27 (1.3) erm (1.2) °sort of° (.) say paranormal experiences .hhh and I went
28 there (.) for a week and did a course and it was quite a shock >because
29 there were some very able people there and I was a total beginner .hhhh
30 erm
31 (1.3)
32 but I enjo::yed it and it was good to meet other as I say like-minded people
33 ↑some bits of it were too extreme for me some of the (.) old (0.6) erm
34 (2.4)
35 photos and things that are held up as evidence in the light ((chair squeaks))
36 of more advanced technology I'd be extremely sceptical of .hh but er
37 (1.2)
38 y-I think you have to trust your own experiences .hhh and then after that I
39 came back and
40 (1.5)
41 joined in a sort of a loose way a local Spiritualist church to continue a
42 mediumship development

Whilst Sunset's account is concerned with enduring aspects of her identity – 'always been interested in esoteric type things paranormal' (line 18) – this is directly connected to issues of continuity, negotiating change and transformation (as discussed later). Furthermore, immediately after this utterance her talk becomes explicitly connected to the reported after

effects and subsequent transformation – ‘and that prompted me to-tut-of (0.4) think I must do something about this’ (lines 18-19). This orientation to change is also evident in extract 4. In this extract JM talks about the last in the series of several TEHEs centred upon the manifestation of a female voice in various different contexts. He then goes on to talk about the effects of these experiences.

Extract 4 – John Moore (JM)

27 and then (0.7) but (0.4) since then on two occasions I think I’ve heard her
 28 voice (0.5)
 29 I: m:m
 30 JM: once I was crossing [name] street in [place] (0.6) and I just crossing the road
 31 and just this voice said John (1.2) and erm
 32 (2.2)
 33 and I knew it was he:r (0.3) and that was all that was said
 34 (0.8)
 35 and then (0.4) I think it was t- a couple o- t- one or two weeks ago I was
 36 just I was thinking about something I was going upstairs (.) and I just heard
 37 the same (0.4) the same voice saying the same thing again
 38 (1.0)
 39 and erm (0.7) that’s it basically (0.4) so what it (0.4) what a- I think what I
 40 think (0.5) is really nice about the whole thing (0.4) is it it proved to me
 41 (0.8) that erm (1.1) we do people often talk about spirit guides and guardian
 42 angels (0.4) but (0.3) I just feel now that err (.) I’ve had the kind of (0.4)
 43 proof that you need (.) to kind of believe in it and er (.) when it’s a personal
 44 experience (0.7) erm (0.4) erm (0.9)it’s really con- it’s really quite convincing
 45 (0.6)
 46 and so: I feel as if I know now (0.8) that there is a a guardian angel (0.5) and
 47 I don’t know to what extent they can intervene in your life (0.6) to prevent
 48 you following certain course of action (0.4) or to guide you in a particular
 49 way but what I do know is that (.) they can reassure at different times when
 50 they feel you need to be reassured
 51 (1.0)
 52 so it’s a kind of a passive (0.7) presence rather than ss- (0.9) er like a
 53 proactive kind of a presence you [know
 54 I: [mm
 55 JM: (.) but it is there when you need it

JM provides an explicit end to his experiential description – ‘and erm (0.7) that’s it basically’ (line 39). Following this, his next concern is how that affected him – ‘so what it (0.4) what a-I think what I think is really nice about the whole thing (0.4) is it it proved to me...’ (lines 39-40). This shift in talk activity is also apparent in extract 5. Here, Maria is talking about one of her TEHEs where she found herself out of her body and the subsequent impact this had upon her.

Extract 5 – Maria

1 M: I found myself in a completely different place (0.9) and erm (1.4) I didn't
2 (1.4) it wasn't it was like it wasn't this dimension it was somewhere different
3 and (0.8) I didn't have a body but I was (0.4) did have a consciousness (0.8)
4 er:m
5 (1.5)
6 and (0.7) I can remember (.) feeling
7 (1.5)
8 very safe and absolutely fine and not at all frightened or worried (1.0) and I
9 remember having the thought (0.6) something like oh this is what happens
10 this is where you go when you die this is what happens when you die (0.8)
11 and it was completely fine (0.4) it just felt completely fine
12 (0.6)
13 couldn't really see very much it was all sort of (0.9) erm (1.6) opalescent °or
14 I don't know if that's quite right word
15 (1.6)
16 er erm°
17 (2.1)
18 an' I wouldn't know how long that lasted for but then (0.7) I returned (0.4)
19 to the room I returned and returned to my body and (.) erm (1.3) er
20 (2.0)
21 and (0.9) not long after that I went to hospital and went (0.3) got drips and
22 all sorts of things and got better and (1.4) things continued but (0.6) but
23 (0.7) there was some (1.3) there was some part of that that made me re- y-
24 y- y- you know that a learning that came well something that came from ss:
25 from that which was not (0.5) there was no nee- to need to fear death and
26 dying

Maria's immediate talk, post-experientially, is about practicalities regarding her recovery – 'and not long after that I went to hospital and went (0.3) got drips and all sorts of things and got better and (1.4) things continued' (lines 21-22). However, she then goes on to talk about how the experience affected her – 'but (0.6) but there was some (1.3) there was some part of that that made me re- y- y- y- you know a learning that came well something that came from ss: from that which was not (0.5) there was no nee- to need to fear death and dying' (lines 22-26). It would appear then, that in many of the accounts there is a common organisational feature. The shift from descriptive experiential accounts to reflections regarding after effects demonstrates identifiably similar sequencing, pointing again to the likely normativity of this design. This finding is further substantiated by the final extract (6) in this section.

Immediately prior to this section of the account, Duck has been talking about a TEHE she shared with her family. She reports that the entire sky turned pink and the atmosphere

noticeably changed engendering complete engagement with their environment. The extract picks up at the tail-end of her account of this experience.

Extract 6 – Duck

- 1 D: and then aft after a few minutes (0.9) then (0.7) the (.) pink colour went
2 away (0.8) and (.) a rainbow (.) appeared (.) which was (0.9) odd (.) becos: (.)
3 it wasn't (.) raining (0.7) at the time I mean we we were quite close to the
4 sea and I could probably come up with a couple of (0.6) rational
5 explanations for it (.) but it (.) it did seem quite (0.5) quite strange
6 (1.0)
7 and then (0.3) that lasted a few more minutes so the whole thing probably
8 was:: no more than ten minutes (0.9) an::d we were just all sitting together
9 on a big rock watching this (1.1) erm (0.7) an::d (0.3) then the rainbow went
10 away and we walked back home and that was it
11 (2.0)
12 I: and you've had other (0.4) what you might call similar experiences
13 (1.4)
14 D: erm (0.6) yeah quite quite quite a few times
15 (1.6)
16 I: do you want to tell me a bit about those
17 (2.4)
18 D: H:::.....h ((*long sigh*)) (0.9) right (0.8) well
19 (1.6)
20 after the first one (0.9) a-aft-a-after I saw everything go pink
21 (1.7)
22 I-I can remember thinking why is this (0.8) so amazing (.) I mean i- it's just
23 (0.6) some sort of optical phenomena and (0.4) there shouldn't be (.)
24 anything particularly (0.8) special about it but there was:: (.) and (0.7) I
25 started (0.9) thinking about quite why this: was: (1.0) so (0.5) beautiful (.)
26 wonderful (.) amazing (.) etcetera (0.4) an:d why it wasn't just some (0.6)
27 other random thing like (0.5) the grass happens to be green and that's
28]just what it is and it's not
29 I: [°mm°
30 D: very interesting (1.1) erm but
31 (2.0)
32 and eventually after a lot of thinking I ended up deciding it was because
33 God had made things that way
34 I: °mm°
35 (0.8)
36 D: a:n:d (1.3) probably about a year and a half (.) later (1.3) I would have been
37 about fourteen erm (.) I got (.) confirmed (0.8) er as an Anglican (.) I'd been
38 going to Sunday school (.) on and off since I was very small most (0.5)
39 mostly so I'd be kept out of the way while my mum was making Sunday
40 lunch my parents aren't particular religious (0.6)
41 I: °mm°
42 D: but I'd decided I wanted to get confirmed

Duck's experiential account ends fairly abruptly immediately after the description of the experience with 'and that was it' (line 10). Following Duck's overt ending to the

experience, there is a long pause and Duck is not immediately forthcoming with further talk, so, I ask in a tentative fashion, if there are other experiences similar to the one that has just been described (line 12). After a pause, Duck provides a positive response - 'erm (0.6) yeah quite quite quite a few times' (line 14), suggesting these experiences have occurred several times. There is another longish pause and then I go on to invite her to tell me about them (line 16). On line 42, Duck sighs audibly and emphatically, which communicates a sense of discomfort or displeasure at my question (perhaps perceived as an interruption to an unfinished story?) Then she begins to talk about what happened after the initial TEHE, which she labels her 'first one' (line 20). She registers a cognitive process, happening at the time, concerning her reflections about this experience (line 22). This is communicated as a series of reflections and contemplations about her experience presenting herself as thinking and reasoning about her TEHE (lines 22-30). Subsequently, Duck goes on to report a significant change in identity - being 'confirmed (0.8) er as an Anglican' (line 37) - as a result of her contemplation which reportedly led her to conclude that her TEHE occurred 'because God had made things that way' (lines 32-33).

The sequencing of this account is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it might be considered somewhat unusual to respond to a request for further information about other experiences by doing something else. Duck provides an unexpected response to my request by reporting various contemplations coupled with an introduction of her identity transformation, instead of talking about her other experiences. In this sense, Duck contravenes the expected sequence. This unexpected response suggests that the sequence Duck favours is a normative one. Despite the invitation to talk about other experiences, the pull of normativity is so strong that an account which does not conform to the conventional sequence might seem incomplete (it should be noted that these processes are not regarded as operating on a conscious level). This orientation to transformation and the way in which the individual has been affected or changed by their experience also highlights the significance and profundity of the experience and its perceived consequences. Overall, the prevalence of respondent's (unsolicited) orientation to this sequencing illustrates the normative formulation of this ordering.

6.3.1 Summary

What these accounts initially appear to show is the idiosyncrasy of individual experiences in substantive content and design. What they also demonstrate however, is a clear normative pull to a certain structural organisation and design. The normative sequence emerging from these accounts appears to be thus: Description → Reflection. The *description* of the experience can vary in length and detail, with the end not always overtly or explicitly demarcated in talk. The *reflection* focuses on the way in which the experience has impacted upon the individual. Again the detail may differ from individual to individual but often makes reference to profound or meaningful change of some sort, and also may contain interpretive ideas about the experience.

6.4 Credibility and change

In her account (extract 1) Alice demonstrates some ‘defensiveness’ towards wholesale personality change. Her talk negotiates and tempers any profound change with invocations of consistency and continuity. To abandon any notion of continuity could be seen as a sacrifice of credibility because in Western contexts the rational social actor has, at the very least, a core self or personality which is seen as fairly fixed and certainly resistant to radical change (e.g. Caspi et al, 2005; Gergen, 1999). This orientation to rational social actor and credibility seems to be present in other accounts. Duck’s account shows this type of contemplation and reasoning process (see extract 6).⁷⁹

Duck refers to changes of a religious nature. Whilst she does not explicitly state that her beliefs changed, this shift is indicated by the talk concerning a process of contemplation and reasoning (line 32). Duck proposes that after this process she ‘ended up deciding it [the explanation for her TEHE] was because God had made things that way’ (lines 32-33). This implies that this view is something that changed in light of her TEHE. There are also references here to a change in identity (from an unspoken and implicit non-religious one to an explicit and named Anglican one – line 37).

It is possible that a change of religious beliefs and identity seemingly triggered by a TEHE could be interpreted as a conversion experience. Instantaneous religious conversions are fairly controversial in the UK and predominantly viewed fairly dubiously in the popular,

⁷⁹ As many of these extracts are long they will not always be re-presented. Where this is the case, subsequent issues for analysis will refer back to the original extract and line numbers.

secular imagination. At the extreme end, this perspective sees conversions and religion *per se* as irrational, delusional or reflective of gullibility⁸⁰ (see for instance the contemporary view of religion that Dawkins, 2006a, 2006b, expounds). Given that this interpretation might be problematic in terms of how an individual is subsequently viewed, it is notable that Duck's approach towards this change highlights aspects of continuity. For instance, immediately after stating the dramatic change – 'I got (.) confirmed (0.8) er as an Anglican' (line 37) – she orients to the continuity of the situation – 'I'd been going to Sunday school on and off since I was very small' (lines 37-38). Duck shows how the dramatic new identity in fact connects with her former life and former self. By offering the information that she occasionally went to Sunday school during her childhood she is able to temper the degree to which the change is read as overly radical. Her choice of religion (Anglicanism) is revealed as having a level of familiarity for her. The effects of this choice are more readily appreciated when Anglicanism is replaced with a religion likely to be completely new and unfamiliar (e.g. Zoroastrianism).

Following this, she provides a non-religious rationale for why she went to Sunday school – 'mostly so I'd be kept out of the way while my mum was making Sunday lunch my parents aren't particularly religious' (lines 39-40). With this latter utterance, Duck is working to ensure that the cause of her experience is not attributed to any former religious belief or upbringing. In other words the change should be seen as triggered by her TEHE. This delicate process is one of negotiation and balance, between radical, dramatic and significant change on the one hand, and 'irrational' conversion or ordinary reasoning (such as the childhood Sunday school experiences being seen as responsible for her confirmation) on the other. This works to achieve the communication of a profound and meaningful change, whilst maintaining a continuous core of, and thus credible, self.

This can also be found at the end of Sunset's experiential description (see extract 3) before she goes on to talk about psychic and medium training. Sunset states 'always been interested in esoteric type things paranormal' (line 18). This is a notable utterance for two reasons. Firstly, its location and secondly its content. Firstly, it is located directly before

⁸⁰ Of course there are various views of religious and spiritual conversion evident in the UK, perhaps the most likely to celebrate conversions are religious and spiritual individuals, but a dearth of research on the perceptions of conversion make it hard to generalise. Hay's (2003) research highlighting the reported embarrassment associated with religion for many people in the UK perhaps affords us the most accurate current indicator of public opinion. It is perhaps fair to say that public expressions of religion, faith or spirituality are less acceptable than any evidence of these in a 'private' form.

Sunset talks about any after effects or changes. Secondly, it is concerned with an enduring identification. The formulation of this identification contains an extreme case formulation with – ‘always been’ – which works to inoculate Sunset against potential challenges to interest in the paranormal as a long-standing phenomenon. That this claim to interest in paranormal phenomena is included here works to establish continuity before any changes are referred to. Going on to talk about the ensuing changes such as, ‘I must do something about this’ (line 19) and ‘I went there [training facility for psychics and mediums] (.) for a week and did a course’ (lines 27-28), Sunset has already established links with her former self that work to temper the subsequent identity changes. Indeed, later in the narrative Sunset talks about continuing a mediumship development. It would certainly seem that inclusion of this kind of continuity assertion is balancing out later changes that could be perceived as otherwise quite radical and a threat to credibility.

The next two extracts show a similar orientation to change that is concerned with preserving credibility and maintaining authenticity, but not via an invocation of identity continuity. Instead, another similar mechanism is at work via a slightly different formulation. Extract 7 is where Lyn is talking about the effects of her set of experiences.

Extract 7 – Lyn

34 L: and it's (.) sent me off on this (.) sort of spiritual quest for the last five years
 35 you know (0.7) .hh erm sort of exploring different religions and (0.7) erm
 36 (0.8) trying to find out what it is:: (0.8) that (0.7) that I would feel
 37 comfortable with (.) you know and erm
 38 (0.5)
 39 I mean at the present time I feel (0.5) it's Buddhism (.) that I'm comfortable
 40 with
 41 (0.5)
 42 erm but I do- haven't really sort of (1.0) signed up to anything I'm still sort
 43 of (.) you know finding my way through (.)
 44 I: m↑m
 45 L: but that's the big impact that it's had on my life and it's made me see
 46 everything differently (.)
 47 I: mm
 48 (0.7)
 49 L: and erm
 50 (2.8)
 51 it makes me see life differently and I mean I'm not saying that (0.4) this is a
 52 hundred percent of the time (.) HUHUHhehehehuh you know I'm afraid
 53 it's (.) er it's not that effective

Lyn's talk concerning the after effects of her experience centres on the concept of a self-directed exploration of religion and spirituality – 'it's (.) sent me off on this (.) sort of spiritual quest for the last five years you know (0.7) .hh erm sort of exploring different religions' (lines 34-35). She goes on to talk about this exploration in a fairly casual manner and as needing to suit her and her requirements – 'trying to find out what it is: (0.8) that (0.7) that I would feel comfortable with (.) you know' (lines 36-37). The notion of finding a religion that one is 'comfortable with' conveys that a belief system must align with some aspects of a current identity or current beliefs. It does not suggest too radical a departure from an already established sense of self, and, at this point, does not commit to any particular religion. However, following this, Lyn goes on to mention her current religion of choice – 'I mean at the present time I feel (0.5) it's Buddhism (.) that I'm comfortable with' (lines 39-40).

There are two notable observations to be made concerning this choice. Firstly, Buddhism and various Eastern religions are currently enjoying identifiable popularity and interest in Western societies (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) and therefore have both social acceptability and a cultural kudos in their favour. Secondly, this commitment is far from fervent or concrete – 'but I do- haven't really sort of (1.0) signed up to anything I'm still sort of (.) finding my way through' (lines 42-43) – displaying an orientation to a loose, gradual and considered association with any religion. In many senses, this works to negotiate the introduction of any religious phenomena and any potential association with the irrational whilst preserving credibility. It is also reflective of a contemporary cultural inclination for some members of society to identify as spiritual but not religious (Flanagan, 2007).

Following this, Lyn explicitly identifies how the experiences should be seen – as having a 'big impact' upon her 'life' (line 45) – noting the profundity of any change. But this is then tempered by subsequent talk. Lyn talks about seeing 'life differently' (line 51) and 'everything differently' (line 46) but immediately afterwards she relents that her change appears to be somewhat intermittent – 'I mean I'm not saying that (0.4) this is a hundred percent of the time (.) HUHUHhehehehuh you know I'm afraid it's (.) er it's not that effective' (lines 51-53). This intermittency helps to temper and balance the overall effect of any dramatic change by not making claims to somehow being 'superhuman' as a result of her experience, and in doing so makes the change more realistic or authentic.

So, in this extract the orientation is not specifically to continuity but there is work being done both to manage and present profound change balanced with maintaining rationality and sanity. Orientation to these aspects can also be found in Anna's account. Overall, Anna tells a lengthy story concerning a traumatic experience involving an ectopic pregnancy and a miscarriage. Later in Anna's narrative she talks about an epiphany moment where she realises the purpose of her difficult experiences. In extract 8 Anna is talking about the moment of realisation.

Extract 8 – Anna

1 A: and at the end of the conversation when we finally (0.5) *£*finally stopped
 2 talking (1.1) I had this massive (0.8) beam on my face and there was this
 3 (1.4) burning inside it was the heat it was this sensation it was (0.8) it's really
 4 really hard to describe (.) it was
 5 (1.7)
 6 er like a light (0.7) er it f- it fel- it was what I've said before like my- a light
 7 bulb going on and it was (1.3) ↑O:::H so that's why I lost (.) those babies
 8 (0.4) that is why I suffered (1.1) so that I could help (0.9) this person (0.6)
 9 this other woman who has suffered (0.9) and is in so much pain (1.1) and
 10 I can talk to her and I and and and help her
 [Missing talk about needing to understand why it had happened to her]
 11 but in that moment in that moment that I put the phone down
 12 (1.5)
 13 I just I was just filled with (0.7) understanding? (1.2) with love? (0.9) with
 14 happiness? (0.7) with warmth? (0.9) with compassion?
 15 (2.0)
 16 just it just made sense clarity (0.8) absolute clarity (0.8) just total (1.3)
 17 ↑O:::H (1.2) that's why (.) >and I just had to tell somebody so of course
 18 who did I tell I had to tell *£*GAYLE didn't I had to go I just had to share it
 19 with somebody (1.3) and er (0.7) you know I called round er to see Gayle
 20 and Gayle knows me phuh >inside out back to front *£*good god she saw
 21 me give birth heh t(h)at woman she's se(h)en it all (0.4) >and she just knew
 22 something was up straight away and she said what's:: so go on what's
 23 happened what-what you (0.7) why you beaming from ear to ear ↑I said
 24 I've just got to tell you this:: amazing thing ((*sniff*))
 25 (1.8)
 26 and er (0.9) and it was and it was amazing and she understood and she got
 27 it and she (0.7) didn't think I was a complete lunatic and (1.1) didn't think I
 28 was mad and (.) just totally (.) got it (0.9) which was great

This extract begins with Anna's TEHE (lines 1-7). Then there is the first report of a revelation or realisation of the purpose of her previous suffering and difficult experiences (lines 7-10). This is in the form of a surprise response token (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006) and change of state indicator (Heritage, 1998), which helps afford it a dramatic and sudden quality. She then goes on to talk about needing to understand why it happened to her

(missing talk, not transcribed) before moving on to retell the crucial part of the story (lines 11-17). It is clear why she does this from the talk that follows when she reports a subsequent urge to share this experience with close friend Gayle (lines 17-19). Following this, there is a reported speech sequence during which Anna reports what happened when she told Gayle (lines 22-24). Within this sequence, Anna conveys Gayle sensing that Anna had something important to share – ‘she said what’s:: so go on what’s happened what-what you (0.7) why you beaming from ear to ear’ (lines 22-23) – and Anna sharing the experience – ‘↑I said I’ve just got to tell you this:: amazing thing ((*sniff*))’ (lines 23-24).

After the reported speech sequence, Anna reports Gayle’s reaction to her experience via a series of reported cognitions. She does not state how she came to know that these were Gayle’s thoughts on her experience, she just asserts them – ‘and she [Gayle] understood and she got it and she (0.7) didn’t think I was a complete lunatic and (1.1) didn’t think I was mad and (.) just totally (.) got it (0.90 which was great’ (lines 26-28). By stating, ‘she didn’t think I was a complete lunatic and didn’t think I was mad’ Anna includes some possible interpretations of her claims. That is, having claimed she had an intangible *moment* of realisation where she realised that her purpose in life was to set up a support group for women with ectopic pregnancies might be seen as somewhat unusual. In asserting her own sanity via a reported speech and thought sequence in which this is explicitly oriented to, she shows a) that a trusted source knew she was of sound mind and b) that categorisation as ‘mad’ is at the very least a possibility in reaction to this kind of change.

6.4.1 Summary

Overall, via marginally different formulations these accounts display an orientation to the importance of credibility. Presenting a rational, sane self of sound mind is prioritised, whilst simultaneously conveying profound changes that could be perceived as destabilising. In these accounts, the design of the talk works to achieve a balance between these two aspects via orientation to either:

- a continuity between ‘new’ and former selves so as not to entirely abandon a rational or core self
- rationality and sanity as important and identifiable features of ‘new’ and former selves

In this way the speakers are working to maintain a reasonable balance between change and consistency achieved via their constitutions of self.

6.5 'Before and after' narratives

It has been suggested that the way in which these transformational stories are told, and some of their constituent features or themes, help to paint a particular picture. In addition to Alice's account (extract 1), one element that appears regularly in many of the other accounts is a 'before and after' construction. This describes a narrative pattern that trades on the contrast between a particular state of affairs before the experience occurred and a changed state afterwards. Wilson (1996) noted that the construction of a 'before-and-after' narrative is often used as a rhetorical and linguistic device that enables a transformation story from dark to light. The context 'before' commonly consists of aspects of negativity, suffering and trauma which are then contrasted with an 'after', characterised by positive, dramatic change and the development of meaningful purpose. As we might expect, these types of narrative construction are often found in conversion stories (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004). However, in the current corpus of accounts the 'before and after' narrative does not often appear in this guise. Instead, there are limited *explicit* references to contexts before the TEHE with greater emphasis on reporting the after effects. Most common are invocations displaying some orientation to this pattern, with an *implicit* prior context, and an *explicit* 'glorious hereafter' (Wilson, 1996: 7). In this section, we will explore these 'before and after' formulations in more detail to try and understand their organisation and function.

There are two *explicit* references to a before and after transformation that bear some resemblance to the style considered above. JM's extract (9) shows him talking about one of a series of experiences connected to the manifestation of a female face and voice that he reports having seen or heard on a number of occasions. Prior to describing the experience, JM orients to the preceding context concerning what was happening at the time and his feelings about it.

Extract 9 - John Moore

1 JM: and then (0.5) erm I had a really difficult time in ninety nine into two
2 thousand >when a relationship broke down I was really upset about it
3 because I thought I was treated really badly .hhh and I was upset for quite a
4 while
5 (0.9)
6 and then (0.7) one morning I er- just before I woke up the same face
7 appeared (0.7) and I saw that same face
8 (0.6)
9 and it was at the end of a really peaceful dream (0.5) you know it was just

10 after a night of complete peace (0.4) whe:re (0.3) I seemed to be taken away
 11 (0.6)
 12 you know and all the problems that I had seemed to dissolve you know and
 13 then at the end of this before I woke up this same face appeared (0.5)
 14 exactly the same face
 15 (0.8)
 16 and then (.) it was shortly after that (.) that I met my wife (0.3) that I'm
 17 married to now and we've been really really happy

JM begins this extract by talking about a relationship breakdown (lines 1-2). Whilst he does not explicitly state what kind of relationship or whom it was with, it is clear from later talk (lines 16-17) that this was a personal and romantic relationship. He goes on to talk about his feelings in relation to this event – ‘I was really upset about it because I thought I was treated badly .hhh and I was upset for quite a while’ (lines 2-4). JM’s talk conveys a negative set of feelings in relation to a negative situation. This effectively sets up the context for the subsequent experience.

JM talks about his experience which involved the appearance of ‘that same face...at the end of a really peaceful dream’ (lines 7 & 9). There is an emphasis on the ‘peaceful’ nature of this current experience – ‘it was just after a night of complete peace’ (lines 9-10). The experience is constituted as positive and welcome as well as spontaneous and involuntary. Subsequently, JM claims that some immediate benefits transpired because of this experience – ‘and all the problems I had seemed to dissolve’ (line 12). As if to emphasise that the alleviation of his problems were due to the experience, JM repeats the detail of the experience (lines 13-14). Finally, he talks about a dramatic and more long-term effect on his life – ‘and then (.) it was shortly after that (.) that I met my wife (0.3) that I’m married to now we’ve been really really happy’ (lines 16-17). This final change implies that the story has a positive resolution emphasised and bolstered by repetition – ‘really really happy’.

Depicting negative or highly undesirable circumstances as the backdrop to one’s personal life before an experience, provides the discursive context for a glowing and positively transformed post-experiential life (or self or set of circumstances, for instance). This kind of contrast configuration is a powerful rhetorical resource, which effectively enables the concept of change to be conveyed, as highlighted by Wilson (1996). It is also a form rarely used in a conventional sense by the experients. However, the second example can be seen over extracts 10 and 11. Extract 10 comes from the very beginning of Anna’s interview (it follows on sequentially from extract 3, Chapter 4) and is concerned with Anna’s traumatic

pregnancy-related experiences which form the prior context that Anna orients to. Extract 11 comes sequentially after Anna relays her epiphany experience and then reports sharing it with her friend Gayle (see extract 8) and concerns the subsequent change that she reports.

Extract 10 – Anna

13 A: (0.8) and I was only about six and half weeks pregnant when (0.8) I erm
14 suffered from really bad abdominal pains didn't know what was happening
15 very very (.) scared
16 (1.6)
17 er: called the emergency doctor (0.4) came out to see me (1.1) er called an
18 ambulance (.) ended up in hospital and they weren't sure (0.3) what it was it
19 was a Friday evening the twenty seventh of December so between
20 Christmas and New Year (0.7) not a great time (.) to be in hospital and
21 (0.7) THEY weren't sure if it was either an ectopic pregnancy an
22 appendicitis or an ovarian cyst (0.7) one of those three things they couldn't
23 be sure
[Missing talk: lengthy details of an ectopic pregnancy and miscarriage of another baby also in the womb]
24 it just tu:rned my world upside down
25 (1.6)
26 it was the w- it was absolutely the worst time of my life and that (1.1) it just
27 carried on for that r-year really two thousand an' three was a h:::hideous
28 hideous year it was just awful

This extract emphasises the traumatic and difficult nature of the experiences that Anna reports. There is the context (lines 13-23) about suffering bad pains in early pregnancy and going to hospital. Subsequently, there is missing talk about an ectopic pregnancy and miscarriage of another baby also in the womb. Anna goes on to provide an explicit evaluation of suffering (lines 24-28) and effectively conveys the negative circumstances which form the 'before' context to Anna's transformation. As mentioned above, extract 11 shows Anna's references to her transformation. These appear later on in her story narrative and are included below.

Extract 11 – Anna

20 A: and Gayle knows me phuh >inside out back to front ~~£~~good god she saw
21 me give birth heh t(h)at woman she's se(h)en it all (0.4) >and she just knew
22 something was up straight away and she said what's:: so go on what's
23 happened what-what you (0.7) why you beaming from ear to ear ↑I said
24 I've just got to tell you this:: amazing thing ((sniff))
25 (1.8)
26 and er (0.9) and it was and it was amazing and she understood and she got
27 it and she (0.7) didn't think I was a complete lunatic and (1.1) didn't think I
28 was mad and (.) just totally (.) got it (0.9) which was great
29 (0.8)

30 and erm (1.0) I'm really and since then (0.9) Martha and I have gone on to
31 become great friends (0.8) and we have now set up a support group? (1.0)
32 for women who have ectopic pregnancies?

Here Anna talks about how she and Martha have 'become great friends (0.8) and...set up a support group? (1.0) for women who have ectopic pregnancies?' (lines 30-32). Martha is a woman who Anna reports having had a similar experience to her and someone to whom Anna offers support. It is whilst on the phone to Martha that Anna's realisation materialises (see extract 8). In many senses, Anna's transformation narrative is a classic example of a before and after narrative construction. She constitutes the prior circumstances (extract 10), which are characterised by trauma and difficulty; this is followed by her epiphany realisation of purpose and meaning (extract 8) and finally there is a manifestation of tangible change and transformation (extract 11) in the form of the support group that is established.

In both JM's and Anna's narratives the 'before and after' narrative construction is easily identifiable, whereby the individual reports (in this order):

- a negative 'before' the experience status/identity/context
- a positive TEHE
- a positive 'after' the experience status/identity/context – that is presented either as a direct result of the TEHE or as triggered by it

This formulation works to convey the experience as a significant, transformative influence that is (positively) life-changing. Furthermore, the positive evaluation offered, of both the experience and its after effects are presented as the correct way in which to interpret the account.

6.5.1 Implicit 'befores' and identifiable 'afters'

This positive construction of the state of affairs post-experientially can be found in other accounts of transformation. What is perhaps notable about these other accounts is that the explicit orientation to a prior context is absent from their talk. However, it would seem that there may be a common display of this 'before and after' pattern (albeit with an implicit 'before'). Extract 12 shows Fred talking about how he sees death which he reports has changed since his experiences.

Extract 12 – Fred

- 1 F: and you know (0.7) different things just seemed to slot in (.) one of those
2 that that slotted in (0.4) er::m and now I I don't even (0.9) erm have any
3 concerns that it's not true is that (.) we are all spiritual beings there is no
4 doubt in my mind we are all spiritual beings firstly
[Missing talk: about immortality bringing relief in the face of others' deaths]
5 I can't tell you exactly (1.1) the reasons why I know that everyone has their
6 own journey and they they have to follow (.) wherever that leads but I know
7 (1.0) as sure as anything (.) that that [spirits] is what we are and I don't fear
8 death I don't (1.1) I I try not to be selfish
9 (2.6)
10 when (0.8) I mean when my parents die:d yes it's always hard and (0.6) it
11 was a release because they weren't (0.7) particularly well hh but I I d:o
12 (1.6)
13 live wiv the feeling that (0.8) you know (.) they've just passed to a different
14 (.) dimension a different (.) area (.) they haven't °gone°
15 (1.0)
16 er::r an' an' I don't need to go to a grave to to you know look at (0.6) them
17 'cause they're if- they're there if I want 'em (0.5) °they're there° >SO that
18 was one of these things that [that actually just
19 I: [mm
20 F: changed (0.8) erm and I can't (.) exactly as I said before tell you why

Until Fred explicitly identifies that a change occurred – ‘>SO that was one of these things that [that actually just changed’ (lines 17-20) – there is only an implicit sense of this in his talk. Before this utterance, Fred is talking about not fearing death (lines 7-8), and earlier on about humans being spirits (line 4), though there is no sense of these events as particularly radical. Nonetheless, once Fred identifies them as changes – though they are constituted as additions to his beliefs rather than wholesale replacements – they form the ‘after’ context of the experience. It is notable that Fred does not specifically construct a ‘before’ context anywhere in his narrative for there to be an explicit contrast. Instead, there is a silent and ‘unspoken’ before (a time when he feared death and did not believe humans were spirits), which is an implicit part of any after-effects mentioned. Here, the absence of a prior contrasting context contributes to a picture of gradual, incremental change, where unfolding realisations are effectively integrated into Fred’s outlook on life and his sense of self.

This same narrative construction can be found later in Fred’s talk about his healing. Earlier in the narrative Fred has reported two TEHEs relating directly to discovering his healing abilities. Prior to this extract Fred reports meeting a Reiki healer at one of the conferences he and his wife attended. Extract 13 picks up where Fred is talking about having a Reiki attunement.

Extract 13 – Fred

- 1 F: so:: we decided that (0.5) erm (.) I'd go across and erm (0.6) have this (0.8)
2 Reiki attunement (0.6) which (0.4) £°who knows what that is° erm so ↑off I
3 went and (0.4) and wow (0.4) you know this is (.) was interesting and I came
4 back and I said (0.8) and my wife said well you know how's you go and I
5 ses yeah I think it was was great
[Missing talk: Fred's talk about the different levels of Reiki up to Mastership]
6 ((*sniff*)) and s::o from from that point I've I've bin (.) sort of really into into
7 healing
8 (0.8)
9 erm but that wasn't enough either (0.5) ((*sniff*)) erm because I then went
10 down an NFSH route
11 (1.0)
12 I: mm-
13 F: national federation of spiritual healers as I said before (0.8) erm (.) and to to
14 become a healer there (0.9) er- (.) is more of a lengthy process (0.8) erm
15 (1.2) if you actually read or see how people sell Reiki and I use that word
16 (1.2) erm you can go on a on a (.) er Reiki healing cour[se
17 I: [mm
18 F: and go from zero to mastership in a weekend (0.7) which is wrong (1.1)
19 erm:: unfortunately like all things (0.6) commercialism (1.2) has got into to
20 areas (.) and to me healing is not about (0.7) erm making money
21 (1.0)
22 healing is about helping people (0.8) erm and to become (.) an a-an NFSH
23 healer firstly you have to be sponsored by (0.7) erm some other NFSH (0.4)
24 healers you then have to go (0.6) on a number of courses
25 (0.6)
26 and it does take two years before you can actually come out >as (0.9) a
27 healer

Fred begins this extract talking in positive terms about his Reiki attunement (lines 1-5).

After some missing talk, where Fred gives some detail about the different levels of Reiki training up to Mastership, he explicitly identifies a pivotal moment in his transformation – ‘and s::o from from that point I've I've bin (.) sort of really into into healing’ (lines 6-7).

What this implicitly suggests is that before his healing-related TEHEs and his Reiki attunement he was neither particularly interested nor knowledgeable about healing. It was not part of his former identity. An unspoken prior context is notably absent from his talk but identifiable via the reported after effects of his experiences. By stating that he is now ‘into healing’ and later that he has become ‘a healer’ (lines 6-7), is to imply that he was not a healer before: so a change is communicated as being as a result of (triggered by) his experiences.

These implicit ‘before’ contexts and explicit ‘afters’ is the most common construction of transformation to be found across the narratives. It would appear that its inclusion offers a

subtly different formulation of change from one where the prior context is explicitly mentioned. In other words, it is notable that in many of the accounts of change, negative, traumatic or anguished circumstances preceding the reported experience are absent from the talk. Not deploying an explicit contrastive structure however, does not eliminate the opportunity to convey dramatic transformation.

We saw in extract 3, Sunset talking about her attendance at a training facility for mediums and psychics and subsequently continuing a mediumship development. Indeed, Sunset reports being ‘prompted’ to do something about this’ (line 19) – referring to a combination of her reported long-standing interest in the paranormal and a premonition (her TEHE). Her transformation concerns attendance at a training facility for psychics and mediums – ‘I went there (.) for a week and did a course’ (lines 53-54) – and joining ‘in a sort of a loose way a local Spiritualist church to continue a mediumship development’ (lines 68-69). So, in Sunset’s account her experience is a trigger for change. The change is still dramatic and profound – she becomes a Spiritualist medium – but it is handled in a way that does not rely upon a contrast and instead shows seeds of stability in its construction.

This silent prior context enables the speaker to handle change and transformation in quite a sophisticated and nuanced way. As discussing identity transformation appears to be a potentially delicate issue to manage in interaction, it may be discursively advantageous to provide a more subtle context in which a radical transformation can sit. In Duck’s account (extract 6) she reports her confirmation to Anglicanism as a result of her TEHE. The change that Duck reports is getting ‘confirmed (0.8) er as an Anglican’ (line 37). With no reference to any prior disreputable or traumatic circumstances that the archetypal ‘conversion’ experience might demand (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004), the change to identity is still fairly dramatic (becoming an Anglican). However, the exclusion of an explicit contrastive prior context contributes to the effective circumnavigation of the potentially troublesome diagnosis of conversion.

6.5.2 Summary

In many examples, respondents present their TEHEs as pivotal ‘identity transformers’ (Garfinkel, 1956: 420). This pivot is integral to the ‘before and after’ narrative contrast whether the ‘before’ is silent or explicit. Generally, these instances have:

- no explicit prior context: this might mean it is mentioned earlier in the narrative but it is not highlighted as a direct contrast, which conveys a silent or unspoken 'before'
- a positive or neutrally-presented TEHE
- an explicitly constituted 'after' where change is prioritised and evaluation of the circumstances is overwhelmingly positive

The proposal of a positive interpretation of these changes offers the speaker a tool with which to present their new improved self or better circumstances resulting from their TEHE. This is further bolstered by an explicit or implicit contrast with a lesser self or negative circumstances to showcase the significance of this transformation. Additionally, in offering an unspoken prior context speakers can sometimes invoke a more incremental (and therefore credible) change especially if the identity shift is outright and could be interpreted as an instantaneous transformation (somewhat more problematic).

6.6 Stance, positioning and agency

6.6.1 Stance and positioning

One common notion that surfaced in many of the transformation accounts was that of positioning, first covered in Alice's account (extract 1). It is important to note that the concept of positioning has a varied and fairly complex theoretical heritage (see Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, for a review of the latest developments), which there is no space to review here. The usage here tends towards a practical discursive orientation as opposed to a more theoretically-informed notion. In this way, the idea of positioning or stance refers to the way in which the respondents situate themselves in relation to their reported experience and subsequent change(s). The perceived active involvement of the individual in relation to any claimed changes or after effects could be crucial in the way in which the account is generally received, and interpreted.

This is well demonstrated by an extract from Lyn's transformation narrative below. Lyn's TEHEs are focused around the death of a close friend, Alex. The following extract (14) picks up when Lyn begins talking about the effects of her experiences.

Extract 14 – Lyn

27 L: so to me it's been
28 (1.9)
29 to me it's (.) erm it's like (0.5) I've been told it's not a question of belief
30 it's a question of (0.5) knowing that there is life after death and I mean that
31 might sound really sort of arrogant but I just feel .hhh because of the way
32 it's come from (1.0) I mean it came from Alex (0.9) that it's real
33 (0.8)
34 and it's (.) sent me off on this (.) sort of spiritual quest for the last five years
35 you know (0.7) .hh erm sort of exploring different religions and (0.7) erm
36 (0.8) trying to find out what it is:: (0.8) that (0.7) that I would feel
37 comfortable with (.) you know and erm
38 (0.5)
39 I mean at the present time I feel (0.5) it's Buddhism (.) that I'm comfortable
40 with
41 (0.5)
42 erm but I do- haven't really sort of (1.0) signed up to anything I'm still sort
43 of (.) you know finding my way through (.)

There are two aspects concerning positioning in this extract. The first is covered on lines 29-32 and the second is from lines 34-43. Firstly, Lyn is talking about the effect of her experiences, stating 'it's like (0.5) I've been told' (line 29) - comparing the way she received some 'information' with being explicitly informed it was the case, through which a level of certainty is afforded to this information. She asserts that the information she has received is the knowledge 'that there is life after death' (line 30). In doing this she draws attention to the distinction between 'belief' and 'knowledge' about life after death. Setting up a controversial phenomenon as something one knows, rather than merely believes, does make it more difficult to challenge.

Recognising this potential controversy, Lyn goes on to acknowledge this and qualify her assertion. She starts, 'I mean that might sound really sort of arrogant' (lines 30-31) and then after inserting a 'but' goes on to cite a personal and experiential source for her claim; 'I just feel because of the way it's come from (1.0) I mean it came from Alex (0.9) that it's real' (lines 31-32). The casual beginning of this utterance, 'I just feel' suggests a highly subjective and possibly interpretive approach towards her experiences. However, in subsequently asserting that this feeling is real because it was communicated by Alex (who is no longer living) – which is repaired mid-utterance to convey a greater sense of certainty about how these experiences should be seen – devolves responsibility to Alex. It is implied that Alex had an intention from beyond the grave (indeed this is explicitly established

earlier in the narrative⁸¹ – not included here) to communicate the existence of life after death – and did so – to Lyn, via a series of unusual experiences immediately after her death. By placing the authority for this change elsewhere, Lyn positions herself without responsibility for either her newfound knowledge or the experiences, which further substantiates her case for these events as beyond her control. So, in the first part of the extract, Lyn positions herself as a recipient of this change rather than as an active creator or seeker.

This is in direct contrast with the second part of this extract where Lyn talks about the experiences acting as a trigger for seemingly conscious action – ‘it’s (.) sent me off on this (.) sort of spiritual quest’ (line 34). Here she talks about ‘exploring different religions’ (line 35) and ‘trying to find out what it is:: (0.8) that (0.7) that I would feel comfortable with’ (lines 36-37). It is a casual approach towards her newly acquired spirituality that Lyn invokes, ‘but I do- haven’t really sort of (1.0) signed up to anything I’m still sort of (.) finding my way through’ (lines 42-43). This weak identification works to present a tentative transformation. Indeed her ‘changed’ self is a vague construction that does not portray strong identification with a particular religion but instead some loose affiliation with spirituality. It may be that there is something more socially acceptable about this form of spiritual identification, especially in the current climate where most traditional and formal religion is in decline (Davie, 1994; Avis, 2003) and often seen as embarrassing (Hay, 2003).

There are increasing numbers of people who are reporting a sense of spirituality not so keenly tied to a particular religion and it is possible that allegiance to a looser form of spirituality is a more tenable position in this climate. It is highly reflective of a kind of ‘pick-n-mix’ approach⁸² to contemporary religion and spirituality, associated with what has been termed ‘New Age’ (Norlander, Gard, Lindholm & Archer, 2003) but also more alternative forms of spirituality, ‘personal’ forms of religion (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005)

⁸¹ Lyn mentions that she and Alex discussed the possibility of Alex coming back to tell her about life after death (in a hypothetical and light-hearted sense) if Alex was to die, early on in Alex’s illness when the possibility of death seemed a long way off.

⁸² The pick-n-mix approach denotes the way in which people select ideas/beliefs/spiritual principles from various different places – including formal religions and ancient traditions – and that allegiance to any one tradition is not necessary. Furthermore, any loose allegiance can be transient, fitting with the idea of a personal journey which is exemplified in Lyn’s construction of Buddhism as something she is currently ‘comfortable with’ (line 40).

and ‘progressive spirituality’⁸³ (Lynch, 2007). These ideas often draw upon Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, which Lyn mentions in her talk – ‘I mean at the present time I feel (0.5) it’s Buddhism (.) that I’m comfortable with’ (lines 39-40). However, she does not present any specific or concrete commitment to any one particular framework, religion or ‘named’ spiritual path. This works simultaneously to present a significant transformation via a ‘new’ association with spirituality but equally retains a sense of her agency and conscious decision-making, which are centralised, ensuring there is no misinterpretation of this as a conversion experience. Regardless of its accuracy there is a popular view of conversion as somewhat dubious. The allusion instead to a process of conscious exploration evokes a consumerist conception of self-directed choice: of the rational agent selecting a self-developmental route or spiritual path (see Carette & King, 2005).

Overall, the link between these two parts of the extract is that the ‘spiritual quest’ (line 34) parallels her search for understanding regarding life after death (lines 42-43). This positions Lyn as both actively seeking to make sense of her experiences and as deeply and profoundly changed by them. Lyn’s account contains elements of passive and agentic change, but they are different kinds of changes associated with each. Those attributed directly to the experience (knowledge of life after death) trade on passivity and those that are reportedly triggered by the experience trade on agentic action (spiritual quest).

These different constructions appear in other accounts but usually references to one or the other are located separately. Fred’s account shows this. Fred’s interview is an extended ‘life-story’ narrative that tells a seemingly chronological story during which he refers to two TEHEs that concern the identification and manifestation of his healing abilities. His overall narrative presents a story of gradually unfolding interest in extraordinary phenomena, attending conferences and meetings on subjects such as crop circles and UFOs and meeting various individuals (e.g. psychometrists, healers). Prior to extract 12, Fred has just been talking about the seemingly involuntary manifestation of his healing abilities – his second TEHE. He then goes on to talk about his subsequent lack of fear in death, though he does not explicitly link these events.

⁸³ The concept of ‘progressive spirituality’ does not align with the idea of a ‘pick n mix’ approach to contemporary spirituality. Instead, Lynch (2007) argues that there is a form of spirituality that is a *coherent* ideological development informed by historical, cultural and religious roots in the west.

At the beginning of the extract Fred states, ‘things just seemed to slot in’ (line 1). This refers to all the activity (e.g. conferences) he mentions previously as well as his TEHEs. Fred is suggesting that the ideas or information he was experiencing or coming across were starting to make sense - it ‘slotted in’ (line 2). The concept of things ‘slotting in’ conjures a metaphorical picture of shapes neatly cohering or of ideas coalescing in a smooth and even fashion. Fred presents these ‘new’ aspects as effectively integrating with a pre-established sense of self. He reports his conviction that, ‘we are all spiritual beings’ (line 4), emphasising his certainty about this twice with ‘I don’t even (0.9) erm have any concerns that it’s not true’ and ‘there is no doubt in my mind’ (lines 2-4).

Unusually, he goes on to say ‘I can’t tell you exactly (1.1) the reasons why’ (line 5) punctuated by a long pause and thus sets up the possibility that the source of the ensuing disclosure is unknown. He goes on to talk about having knowledge ‘that everyone has their own journey’ (lines 5-6) and that humans are spirits and he now does not ‘fear death’ (lines 7-8). The certainty of this is emphasised again - ‘I know (1.0) as sure as anything (.) that that [spirits] is what we are’ (lines 6-7). The certainty Fred presents works to establish this claim as unchallengeable. Earlier Fred appears to attribute his new knowledge to his experiences but now he suggests that their source is unknown. This might appear contradictory. However, Fred instead is actually suggesting that his new sense of conviction about the spirituality of humanity and his loss of the fear of death *somehow* arose from his experiences but that he cannot explain exactly how or why this happened – it just happened.

Thus the agency for any change is not with Fred - ‘>SO that was one of these things that [th]at actually just changed (0.8) erm and I can’t (.) exactly as I say before tell you why’ (lines 18-20). Here Fred communicates that something else was responsible for these changes: they are something he was not responsible for nor is able to explain. By placing the agency for his change with his experiences, Fred invokes a popular idea that one should trust one’s own experiences and equally positions his ‘self’ as innocent bystander – the fundamental change in how he understands human life and spirituality *happened* to him.

Alice, Lyn and Fred’s narratives all constitute, to a greater or lesser extent, a passive self, who, in the face of forceful circumstances, either discovered they had changed as a person (Alice), or encountered a certainty about their fundamental understanding of or knowledge

about life, life after death and spirituality that they had not had previously (Lyn and Fred). These narrative devices allow the individuals to position themselves as not responsible for any change that has occurred to them or their views, thus negotiating any potential difficulties with authenticity and credence. In other words, if they had claimed responsibility for making conscious changes to their views or their personality because of their experiences they might appear inconsistent or false. This is because dominant ideas of the self tend to centre upon a consistent and continuous being with only minor and incremental ‘natural’ changes occurring, such as the stabilisation of personality traits (e.g. Caspi et al, 2005) and a fairly constant worldview over time.

6.6.2 Agency and positioning

In the next group of extracts, there is a slightly different formulation of positioning in relation to changes and transformations. Whilst the latter instances depicted a passive self that was affected by an agentic experience, these instances reveal some conscious intervention on the experient’s behalf in their transformation. In constructing a more active role for the self in terms of change, there are different emphases including displays of conscious choice and reasoning processes in order to convey authenticity.

One account displaying these features is Sunset’s (see extract 3). Sunset displays an explicit reaction to her experience – ‘and that prompted me to-tut-of (0.4) think I must do something about this’ (lines 18-19). This utterance conveys a situation in which she was propelled by the force of her experience; that the experience triggered a compulsion to act. Subsequently stating ‘and of course didn’t really know what to do’ (lines 19-20), works to manage how the experience and reported compulsion to act are viewed. The use of ‘of course’ allows Sunset to position herself with a standard ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’ population, who, in the face of an extraordinary experience would not know what to do or be equipped with any insider or specialist knowledge in this regard. Sunset thus displays her alignment and identification with an average and normal self that is *just like anybody else*.

This is an important association given that she reports attending a training facility for psychics and mediums. However, this potentially controversial admission is tempered by a variety of devices designed to distance herself from any in-depth or specialist knowledge associated with the facility. This is achieved via; ‘I don’t know how I really knew about this

place but I'd heard' (lines 24-25), which implies a distant and vague knowledge about the place, rather than anything more committed or technical. Additionally, use of the label '£spook school' (line 25) with a smiling voice, has a light-hearted trivialising effect. It is a non-serious formulation of the training facility's name which does have a formal name and which she then goes on to divulge. This light-hearted label evokes a fondness for the place as well as working to diffuse an interest in the paranormal that could be read as too serious or unconventional and potentially problematic.

She positions herself as a 'total beginner' (line 29) which allows her to put some distance between potentially controversial claims of being able to communicate with spirits for instance - at least initially. Whilst talking positively about meeting 'like-minded people' (line 32), connoting some unconventional beliefs and ideas (about mediumship and the paranormal), she also works to display herself as a rational and critical agent, not amenable to duping or gullibility. References to being 'sceptical' (line 36) towards some forms of 'evidence' (line 35) establish her orientation to an intelligent, questioning and rational approach. Sunset justifies any belief in the paranormal (and related abilities) by privileging personal experience as a trustworthy defence over third party claims, 'but er (1.2) y- I think you have to trust your own experiences' (line 36-38). Here, Sunset invokes a commonly held wisdom about trusting your own experiences as opposed to just accepting information from others. This is something that many of the respondents make reference to – trusting in one's own experiences over believing third party information – and seems a powerful form of lay knowledge about life. The prioritisation of experiential wisdom also serves to militate against any challenge: questioning belief or opinion is possible and might be expected, questioning someone's experience is not.

Finally, Sunset talks about identity change directly. She mentions joining 'in a sort of a loose way a local Spiritualist church' (line 41) and continuing 'a mediumship development' (lines 41-42). Her casual references to these identities imply an informal commitment to Spiritualism and fall short of full identification with mediumship. This would appear to demonstrate a certain level of resistance to and weak affiliation with these identities, which allows Sunset to establish some distance from wholesale commitment or membership. Nevertheless, her references to training and development do portray commitment to the professional status of mediumship and the need to hone one's abilities through the proper channels (Skultans, 1974), via a process of accreditation and qualifications.

Overall, Sunset refers to ‘taking action’ triggered by her experience which promoted change rather than change being reported as ‘passively’ occurring via the experiences. The experience is thus treated as an instigator for the *action to* change as opposed to the *force of* change. In doing this, Sunset claims her transformation was, at least in part, a result of her own agency – ‘and then after that I came back and (1.5) joined in a sort of a loose way a local Spiritualist church to continue a mediumship development’ (lines 38-42). This claim to agentic transformation is tempered somewhat by a display of casual association with both Spiritualism and mediumship – i.e. an interest not to be misconstrued as a conversion experience or a fanatical and obsessive one. The references to taking action are invoked in a careful, considered and rational manner, where any mention of profound changes (in her life) prioritises gradual and ongoing development with proper training and accreditation.

These references to agentic transformation are ways of managing what is quite dramatic and wholesale change. By placing it alongside an active decision-making process and self involvement, respondents are able to invoke the rational (considered, incremental change with accreditation) rather than the irrational (conversion or perceived mental instability). As Sunset showed, this is in part negotiated by the display of an incremental professional developmental process, one that prioritises accreditation and credentials. This aims to demonstrate authenticity – showing the individual as having taken the recognised and accepted route to their new identity, whilst also having changed gradually.

References to accreditation and professional status can also be found in Fred’s narrative in relation to an agentic account of identity transformation. In extract 13 Fred is talking about taking part in a ‘Reiki attunement’ (line 2), which is a form of ‘training’ for Reiki healing. This comes after talk about a set of gradual changes triggered by his TEHEs and other phenomena for example, conferences they attended and people they met at the time. Immediately Fred positions himself as steering this process, albeit with his wife (lines 1-5). He describes a process of choice and decision-making that was rationally and deliberately enacted. There is also an indication that this initial action led to his further interest in and commitment to his healing development ‘and s::o from from that point I’ve I’ve bin (.) sort of really into into healing’ (lines 6-7). Then he talks about the ‘National Federation of Spiritual Healers’ (line 13) and emphasises the rigour and length of the training process - ‘more of a lengthy process’ (line 14), ‘you have to be sponsored’ (line 23), ‘you then have to go (0.6) on a number of courses (0.6) and it does take two years’ (lines 24-26).

Fred emphasises the importance of proper accreditation, training and certification. The implicit message is an appeal for ‘healer’ authenticity and thus, authentic change. His assertion of the rigour of the process is followed by an explication of the correct motivation for healing training – ‘and to me healing is not about (0.7) erm making money (1.0) healing is about helping people’ (lines 20-22) – and embedded within talk about the requirement for proper training.

One aspect evident in all these instances is the requirement of balance, between on the one hand profound change and on the other, credibility or authenticity. None more so than Duck’s account of religious transformation, which positions her ‘self’ as an active participant in the changing process. In extract 6 this agentic positioning is evident after having talked about her first TEHE, when she is asked if she has had any other similar experiences. In response to this request, Duck goes on to mention her reflections and reactions to the first experience.

In the first part of this extract (lines 44-76) Duck ‘shows’ the process of contemplation and reasoning that she embarked upon in reaction to the experience – e.g. ‘I-I can remember thinking why is this (0.8) so amazing’ (line 22) and, ‘I started thinking (0.9) about quite why this: was: (1.0) so (0.5) beautiful (.) wonderful (.) amazing’ (lines 24-26). This process displays an awareness of the possible rational explanations for her experience – ‘just (0.6) some sort of optical phenomena’ (lines 22-23) – and exhibits her cognitive competence and reasoned consideration of her experience. This is designed to convey the logical outcome at the end of a lengthy reasoning process – ‘and eventually after a lot of thinking I ended up deciding it was because God had made things that way’ (lines 32-33). This interpretation is thus legitimised by a period of reasoned contemplation, rather than by an immediate and ‘unthinking’ conversion or default to religious explanations without consideration.

Duck’s subsequent reported confirmation as an Anglican, invokes a particular kind of religious and Christian identification. The possible source for this denomination is then explored (lines 37-40). Duck asserts that her attendance at Sunday School should not indicate any particular religious fervour or even interest in the family home – ‘my parents aren’t particularly religious’ (line 40) – which contributes to her confirmation being seen as an agentic decision and not as a result of influence from anyone else. Additionally, this is

designed to show that change did occur (as triggered by her experience) and that she did not just re-invigorate a lapsed identity, for instance.

Furthermore, her transformation to Anglican is constituted as traceable to her TEHE, but is conveyed more in terms of a consciously managed, agentic process rather than an instantaneous conversion. Thus Duck is able to maintain that no coercive force compelled her. Instead, an active, conscious and rational process occurred throughout which she was in control: there is no passivity here. Simultaneously, the talk works to ensure that this event is still interpreted as a profound change, illustrating a balancing act inherent in the narrative. Finally, there is notable alliance with and invocation of a rational self which is considered vital to the account. It appears that this construction of rationality is common throughout accounts (particularly when agentic action on the back of an experience is reported) and can be found bolstering the case for credibility and warding off delusional attributions.

6.6.3 Summary

Whilst some respondents positioned themselves as active agents – as making conscious choices and decisions regarding their transformations – others constituted themselves as passive recipients of undirected and unsolicited change. The way in which the experient's transformation is relayed appears to be connected to the kind of transformation reported. When reporting major life change, taking on a new identity (medium or healer, for instance), agentic control and conscious decision making are integral to the talk.

Experients constitute themselves as having agency, as consciously *acting on* their experience rather than being instantaneously *changed by* their experience. In direct contrast, isolated changes such as a distinct emotional transformation, a change in behaviours or worldview are communicated via the overwhelming nature of an involuntary (agentic) experience. These differences between change formulations demonstrate how authenticity and credibility is an important impression that requires careful handling in talk and show how different substantive types of change demand different constructions and negotiations in talk.

6.7 Conclusion

Analytically and empirically, this chapter has offered something towards addressing the dearth of social scientific work focusing on personal or individual change (Thomson et al, 2002). In foregrounding the importance of a grounded discursive analysis, drawing on work concerning identity and discourse (e.g. Ataki & Widdicombe, 1998; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995), this work has been distinct from much of the work concerning change that has previously been conducted in social scientific spheres. Additionally, there are various analytic findings concerning accounts of transformation, which are worth highlighting here.

The first concerns the ordering and structural make up of the accounts, whilst the second concerns positioning and how change is handled by the respondents. Thirdly, there are various issues that this (and the preceding) chapter(s) raise which invite further discussion and consideration in the final chapter of this thesis. Firstly, the majority of experients mention change in unsolicited ways. The prevalence of this orientation and its sequencing (post-experientially) suggests that there is a normative predilection towards narratives of positive transformation in relation to TEHEs. These narratives are mostly enabled by an incomplete 'before and after' construction, where a new self or circumstances is (implicitly) contrasted with an often absent prior self or circumstances. Secondly, it would seem that transformations require negotiation in talk and a balance between the communication of profound change and the presentation of a consistent and continuous self. Furthermore, there is a general orientation to be categorised as rational, sane actors who are either in control of their behaviour (agentic) or a passive recipient of something beyond their control and uninvited (non-agentic). Thirdly, it is clear that these issues of transformation resonate with broader concepts.

6.7.1 The self, society and transformation: how to understand TEHEs?

These broader concepts include, the construction of identity and the self; society, religion, spirituality and the self; the reported profundity of TEHEs and a suitable approach; sensitivity, respect and ethics.

Firstly, transformation can be seen as connected to the construction of identity and the self. More specifically, there are subtle complexities in the ways in which people constitute

their 'selves' in relation to these kinds of experiences. As transformation is not merely relayed in a 'matter of fact' fashion it calls for sensitive construction in talk. As we have established, there are issues then concerning the discursive positioning of self and the construction of identity (perhaps differently within interviews than 'naturalistic' talk) in the midst of reports of dramatic transformation. So do existing ideas regarding the discursive warranting of positioning and identity comprehensively cater for this nuanced phenomenon? Can self and subjectivity be entirely bound by and therefore *only* found in talk? These are questions that are unlikely to be easily resolved and therefore are exploratory openers for discussion regarding the self and subjectivity that will be returned to in the conclusion and no doubt, beyond this project.

Secondly, transformation has broader connotations concerning society, religion, spirituality in relation to the individual or self. For instance, why *do* respondents communicate stories of positive change and transformation? How can we begin to understand the ways in which these experiences are talked about (in terms of the broader social context)? We have noted that (at least in Western societies) the prevailing concept of self is an ongoing 'story', which requires presenting in a fairly continuous and consistent manner in order to preserve credibility and maintain integrity. The concept of wholesale transformation appears at odds with this and to report instantaneous change courts potential categorisation of the experience as a religious 'conversion' and the speaker as a 'convert'. To achieve experiential authenticity the speaker must aim to avoid any negative categorisation. However, these categories (convert and conversion) remain problematic for most non-religious audiences in the UK. It is feasible to argue that there is an increasingly visible public space (e.g. television, internet, and popular literature) for a fairly intolerant perspective of experiences and beliefs associated with the spiritual, religious or paranormal (e.g. Dawkins, 2006b) alongside what might be generously termed an apathy towards organised religion per se (Hay, 2003), combined with a simultaneous interest in the spiritual (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) and sometimes also the paranormal. What does this mean for experiencers and their reported experiences?

Thirdly, it is clear that the notion of transformation effectively illustrates the TEHEs as important and significant (pivotal) moments in the experient's lives because they reportedly have real and tangible effects. Additionally, we observed that the literature concerning TEHEs identifies transformation as a possible and common aspect of these experiences

(e.g. Palmer & Braud, 2002; White, 1999b; Wulff, 2000). Wilde and Murray's (2008; 2009; see also Murray, Wilde & Murray, 2009a; 2009b) recent research into OBE and NDE accounts also highlights the potential importance of these experiences for those that report them, in terms of mental well-being and meaningfulness. This profundity, however, has often felt lost or sidelined by the process of 'rigorous analysis' and the type of analysis conducted. So the conclusion opens up a reflexive exploration of this lack and how future work might continue to interrogate this tension.

And fourthly, the need to try and balance professional credibility with personal integrity runs deeply throughout this thesis and closely tied to it is how experiencers and their reported experiences are approached, interacted with, responded to, analysed and written into research. Those reporting these experiences have in the past all too often been categorised, if not diagnosed as, suffering with mental health issues or considered delusional. I have begun to argue that for the social sciences at the very least, there are other ways of considering these reported experiences that does not involve making judgements about the veridical nature of them as 'experiences' and instead, is sensitive to and respectful of (via a certain kind of approach) the concurrent reported importance and meaning for experiencers.

It is useful at this point to briefly summarise the issues which are pertinent for discussion in the concluding chapter. Consequently the next chapter works to effectively bring together, how people talk about and make sense of their TEHES; what their stories and these empirical chapters can contribute to notions of subjectivity, consciousness, the self; about how these reports can be understood in relation to the wider cultural milieu; how these experiences can or should be studied and where I, as researcher fit into this process. All of these issues are tackled next.

Chapter 7

The end? Reflections on researching TEHEs and future paths

7.1 Introduction

A concluding chapter usually signals completion, as its purpose is a drawing together of the key findings and detailing possible trajectories for future research. Yet, this conclusion feels more like the beginning of new paths than merely the end of a journey. In many ways, this process has raised bigger questions to ponder than it has provided definitive answers and there is much to reflect upon. This alone hints that there might be a different stylistic tone here from the rest of the thesis, emanating in part from the inevitable shifts I have made as ‘author’ of this work, but also from the nature of this conclusion. In constructing a retrospective conclusion it seems apt to return initially to the original aims of the project. The research began with a relatively modest aim in seeking to explore how people talked about and made sense of their extraordinary experiences. Other areas of exploration became clearer as the research progressed and as a result there are three main strands to this chapter.

The first section is concerned with detailing the empirical findings and the particular implications these have for discursive psychology (and related discursive work), consciousness studies and the concepts of identity and change in the social sciences. The second section is tentative in beginning to outline how my research offers a distinct kind of approach to very recent work concerning the sociology of spirituality. The third section focuses upon the tensions that have arisen from the very practical nature of doing research. These tensions can be characterised overall by an ongoing struggle between the personal and the intellectual, which cannot simply be resolved here. Instead, I articulate these tensions via various methodological conflicts that emerged during the research. The first concerns my experience of interviewing discussed with reference to Potter and Hepburn’s (2005) critique of interviews as data collection resources in the social sciences more generally. The second concerns issues of representation and how we can both fairly depict respondents (and their utterances) and maintain both personal and professional integrity. The third issue concerns the possible limitations of a discursive and academic approach to these experiences and discusses some of the possible ways in which the *extra-discursive*⁸⁴ can

⁸⁴ I recognise not every scholar would term this the ‘extra-discursive’, but I need a short-hand referent for the perceived gap some researcher’s have identified in certain discursive approaches.

be addressed (e.g. the approach of Edley & Wetherell, 1997 or the use of psychoanalysis in tandem with discursive methods, such as Frosh et al, 2003). There is also some contemplation about the project generally, how it was conducted and how it might have been different.

7.2 Empirical findings and implications

People talk about and make sense of their TEHEs in substantively distinctive ways but what is perhaps surprising is that there is considerable consistency to the ways in which the experiential accounts are constructed. There are regular, identifiable features deployed by the speakers which facilitate particular social actions and invoke, manage and negotiate certain issues. This section considers how some of these findings relate to specific issues and existing areas within the fields of discursive psychology, consciousness studies and the social sciences. The positive implications and contributions of a discursive analysis (informed by CA and DP) are also emphasised here.

7.2.1 Reported thought and agency in Discursive Psychology

Having identified the common appearance of reported thought as a response to the reported experience, quite often after the experiential 'peak', my analysis also shows how reported thoughts are deployed as a discursive resource. These findings concerning reported thought build on existing linguistic analyses of reported thought (e.g. Barnes & Moss, 2007; Haakana, 2007) and reported speech (e.g. Holt, 1996, 2000). As established earlier, there is a relative dearth of work on reported thought (compared to reported speech, for instance) and it is an understudied area of linguistic analysis. In light of this and my findings, Haakana's (2007) request to analytically distinguish between reported thought and speech where appropriate is wholeheartedly supported.

Instead of treating reported thought as an avenue to mental phenomena, my CA/DP analysis shows how thoughts can be reported as a discursive strategy in TEHE accounts. This is significant in several ways. Firstly, reported thought operationalises notions of agency and passivity in relation to responsibility for and control over the TEHE dependent upon the claims being made. Secondly, it is clear that speakers' reported thoughts stake a claim for mental acuity and intellectual rationality in the face of seemingly extraordinary

experiences. Thirdly, therefore, these reported thoughts invoke epistemic authority and negotiate categorisations of credibility and responses of scepticism.

These findings are not just theoretically useful for discursive methodologies but also illustrate how CA and DP can positively contribute to participants' own understandings of their experiences. For instance, by normalising experiences, both through awareness of their more widely reported occurrence and by demonstrating that there are common ways of talking about them. Further, the way in which issues of rationality and credibility are identified and dealt with by this kind of analysis, demonstrates sensitivity towards these issues and the way in which these stories are crafted and designed. This kind of analysis prioritises what is being 'done' or 'achieved' with the reporting of thought in interaction rather than treating it as the reporting of an 'actual thought'. But the agnosticism towards the reality of these experiences does not prevent them being treated respectfully.

In addition to extending and developing ongoing work concerning reported thought as a linguistic focus of study, these findings also speak to another absence within discursive psychology more generally.

In detailing some of the key concerns of discursive psychology and how such phenomena should be approached for study, Edwards (1997) lists various kinds of issues requiring attention.

“Attributions of agency, intelligence, mental states and their attendant problems are *in the first place* participants' categories and concerns (manifested in descriptions, accusations, claims, error accounts, membership disputes, etc.), just as much as reality, imitation and authenticity are. The first analytic task in the study of discourse and cognition is to *study* those attributions, before disputing them.”
(Edwards, 1997: 319, original emphasis)

However, the concept of agency has rarely received sustained analytic focus in discursive work and as such is a neglected concern. My work begins to address this as the deployment of reported thought in TEHE accounts demonstrates the discursive negotiation of agency in talk. Speakers' deployment of reported thought as a response to their reported experience provides them with a positioning tool. They are able to locate themselves with or without agency in relation to the perceived force of their experience. In

doing so, their talk is able to reveal their own attribution of agency in these particular contexts.

The notion of agency is also foregrounded through respondents' stories of transformation, though this time speakers work to be categorised as rational, sane actors who are either in control of their behaviour (an agentic transformation) or a passive recipient of something beyond their control and uninvited (non-agentic change). These findings also show how these issues of agency are closely related to concepts of rationality and how an individual works to have their account received in a certain way (as a credible telling, with them as credible narrator). In this way, it contributes to work in discursive psychology on how reported cognitive phenomena in talk are, in the first instance, discursive and social, performative and pragmatic. Noting that concepts of agency are operationalised by individuals' talk of change and reported thought is also important because, like other work has claimed, it offers us a way to conceptualise human agency on the back of demonstrable empirical evidence (Nikander, 2009).

The work on reported thought and agency is a beginning. It is the start of a more comprehensive and broader documentation, explication and (likely) further refinement of an empirical argument regarding the discursive deployment of thought in TEHE (and EHE) accounts. Additionally, space in this thesis did not allow for a detailed exploration of alternative lexical expressions of cognition or cognitive activity (e.g. realisations, considerations, rememberings), or their relation with reported speech where relevant and a more systematic consideration of both these aspects would provide a fuller picture. Research into reported thought per se is in its infancy and further work will be required across different types of reported experiences or accounts in general in order to establish how widespread different deployments are and how they work in different contexts. We have already seen that particular expressions using thought (in these cases 'at first I thought...') are deployed in testimonial witness accounts of dramatic incidents, for instance (Jefferson, 2004c) or 'disputed incidents' generally (Wooffitt, 1992). So the presence of other common formulations of cognition and attributions of agency would build on and extend this work. There are also ways in which these findings offer something to the field of consciousness studies.

7.2.2 *The experiential in Consciousness Studies*

This work makes a distinct offering to consciousness studies. Recent attempts to characterize what is meant by ‘consciousness’ in the field of consciousness studies emphasise the importance of lived experience. ‘Consciousness’ refers to *reportable content experienced by living individuals*. This is the identified *referential nucleus* of the term.’ (Pereira & Ricke, 2009: 33, original emphasis). But one of the key debates in consciousness studies concerns how to account for, talk about or explain conscious subjective experience. ‘There are hopes that scientific research will bridge the explanatory gap. ‘Future research may clarify how far an objective scientific description of subjective experience will be possible.’ (Pereira & Ricke, 2009: 42). However, consciousness studies continue to struggle with this perceived hurdle. Additionally, introspection is consistently viewed as a method that can be ‘tightened up’ to produce more accurate accounts of conscious experience (see Cardena, 2004; but also more recently Beaton, 2009).

What these perspectives neglect to consider however, is the way in which any events or experiences are made available to us via the reports of individuals. These reports are made up of language and this language is designed for the occasions in which these experiences are reported. That is, as my work shows, a TEHE account is not simply communicating the phenomenology of an experience; it is achieving social things via the deployment of particular utterances in particular ways. These particular utterance designs do things in interaction (rather than show us something substantive about the nature of conscious experience). In TEHE accounts they are connected to a series of purposes such as managing and negotiating identity and change; negotiating, attributing and resisting personal agency; staking a claim for conscious control and rationality; and managing self-presentation. Therefore my work demonstrates that a study of conscious experience or consciousness is, in the first instance, a study of language and communication.

As social scientists we find consciousness instantiated through interaction in the public domain. The ‘hard problem’ of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995) and the ‘explanatory gap’ (Levine, 1983) between objective brain processes and subjective experience are thus side-stepped as consciousness can be conceptualised as a social phenomena. In viewing consciousness as something that is played out in the social realm of interaction, it becomes unnecessary to conceptually distinguish between the objective and subjective as these are imposed categories upon neural activity and constructions of the mind. Given that

scientists have yet to ‘locate’ the mind in the brain or ‘find’ where consciousness is placed (and may never achieve this) then this provides an alternative approach to this impasse.

In TEHE accounts, speakers allude to being in conscious control of one’s mental faculties, emphasising the need to be seen to be the master of one’s consciousness and conscious processes. Speakers additionally draw upon contrastive resources to convey the sense in which TEHEs form a state of consciousness beyond the ordinary: an altered state. These constructions show profundity and spontaneity, whilst negotiating a passive role for the conscious self. There is scope for further work in this area, which might better explore how consciousness is operationalised throughout these accounts – how exactly do experiencers invoke consciousness, where and when? How can these constructions of consciousness help us to understand conceptions of consciousness? What conceptions of consciousness are most commonly oriented to in communicating profound TEHEs? How do reported cognition and constructions of consciousness operate together in narratives of extraordinary experiences?

Whilst this kind of discursive methodology is not often found in this field there are precedents (e.g. Allistone & Wooffitt, 2007; Wooffitt & Allistone, 2005, 2008) indicating that this type of approach has much to offer. Indeed, in considering the way in which people talk about ostensibly altered states of consciousness, we can begin to see how consciousness is constructed in interaction and how speakers delineate differences between ‘normal’ and ‘altered’ states. A discursive consideration of consciousness offers insights into how we communicate and operationalise concepts of consciousness in conversation, and may be the only ‘place’ we can currently locate it at all: in the social. This kind of discursive focus has also helped produce contributions that this work makes to the social sciences more generally.

7.2.4 Identity and change in the social sciences

This research contributes to the lack of existing social scientific work focusing on personal or individual change identified by Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis and Sharpe (2002).⁸⁵ In documenting the ways in which people spontaneously report dramatic

⁸⁵ They specifically made this assertion in relation to youth research, but my use of their observation is intended much more widely across the social sciences.

self-transformation in TEHE accounts, and what these reports are ‘doing’, this work contributes to discursive work on identity (e.g. Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). This discursive work on identity sees identity as oriented towards the fixed, stable, consistent self whilst simultaneously appearing in locally occasioned fashions per interactional requirements (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). There are some recent examples of work on *age* identity and change (e.g. Coupland, 2009; Nikander, 2009), which show how change is discursively interpreted and negotiated in relation to mid and later life identities. This kind of work is emblematic of how a discursive approach can more systematically address the issues of identity and change.

The theme of transformation and change is a common and spontaneous one in TEHE accounts, which works to convey profundity and helps to negotiate issues of identity and the self. Its prevalence and (post-experiential) location in the narratives indicate that notions of positive transformation may have a normative or routine status in TEHE accounts. These change stories are worked up via a ‘before and after’ framework that is incomplete, where a new self or set of circumstances are referred to in contrast with an (often implicit) prior self or circumstances. Additionally, the analysis shows how speakers must carefully negotiate a sense of balance between communicating profound transformation and the presentation of a consistent and continuous self. Transformation narratives are concerned also with agency (as mentioned earlier) and speakers indicate one of two things when talking about change. These are both ways in which speakers negotiate authenticity.

- An agentic transformation where speakers allude to active, rational involvement in their change by reporting considered decision-making processes by which these changes came about.
- A non-agentic change process whereby the speaker is positioned as a receiver of powerful change from an external source that they were not responsible for.

These accounts demonstrate how the self and identity are constructed and positioned in TEHE accounts.

This is significant as agency and identity have not comprehensively been theorised within discursive approaches, but also, they are sociological (or socially scientific) concepts that have not been afforded much attention in previous work on TEHEs and related experiences. Beginning to understand how people invoke, resist, self-categorise and manage issues of change and identity in terms of their extraordinary experiences is another

way in which these experiences are granted a degree of normality. That is, there is a novel way of theorising these experiences using CA and DP, by locating them in the ordinary practices of interaction. This approach allows us to consider how extraordinariness is conveyed, how rationality is interactionally important, how identity transformation is handled and a sensitive matter and how agency is invoked and resisted in talk. This work exemplifies the benefits of applying ‘more systematic empirical analyses’ to talk (Wetherell, 2007: 673) and shows how notions of transformation and change are formulated in relation to identity and discourse. This is particularly topical at the moment given that there are a wide range of recently funded contemporary projects on identities currently underway or just completed in the social sciences (see <http://www.identities.org.uk/> for example).

Future work might explore the concept of self-transformation or change across various contexts, in particular identifying the emergence of agentic and passive constructions. Alternatively, there is more work to be done on spontaneous instances of transformation invoked (or otherwise – e.g. actively and explicitly resisted) in interactive contexts. It is also possible that the interview provides a forum for talk about change which differs from more naturalistic data – these differences have yet to be explicated with any systematic consideration.

This section has considered how my work contributes to and connects with existing areas and disciplines. The next section reviews a very recent development within the sociology of religion and considers how my work might link with this area, substantively and methodologically.

7.3 A discursive Sociology of Spirituality?

There is a burgeoning literature, with its roots in the sociology of religion that may be termed the sociology of spirituality (this is the title of a recent collection by Flanagan and Jupp, 2007, including versions of papers given at a conference with the same title in 2004 – see <http://www.socrel.org.uk/conferences/Bristol2004/index.html>). There are contesting voices within this area, but the common purpose has been to identify, explore and critique the state, place, form and character of the spiritual, sacred, religious and/or divine in contemporary society. My work offers a way of studying spiritual experience which is distinct from existing approaches and this section both briefly reviews the work already in

this field and notes the potential for a discursive sociology of the spiritual. However, these are tentative connections which will require further effort to develop and establish. Within recent works (e.g. Aune, Sharma & Vincett, 2008; Barker, 2008; Flanagan & Jupp, 2007) conceptions of the state of the sacred are discussed in different ways. Whilst there are those who maintain that current notions of spirituality will not replace traditional notions of religion, for we are embedded in a period of intense secularisation (e.g. Voas & Bruce, 2007), there are others who suggest that it is too early to definitively assess the impact of new forms of spirituality and sacred practice in the West (e.g. Heelas, 2007). Others still have sought to understand and theorise how the relationship between spirituality and religion will continue to be articulated in the social (e.g. Barker, 2008). Furthermore, there is broader argumentation that these spiritual forms have emerged in tandem with and are connected to, in particular, the monumental changes that women's lives have undergone in the last fifty years (Houtman & Aupers, 2008; Marler, 2008; Woodhead, 2008). The way in which transcendent experiences fit within these conceptions of the 'spiritual' might not be clear at first because not all TEHEs could be (or are) described in a way that deems them 'spiritual'.

Indeed, Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 5) indicate that 'transcendence' and transcendent experiences are, 'intense experiences...focused on something which is and remains external to and higher than the self'. Therefore, they argue that the concept of transcendence should remain within an externally focused religion. However, transcendent experiences do not inevitably belong to either 'religion' or 'spirituality'. Whilst transcendence is concerned with something 'higher' than the conscious self, this is not exclusively perceived as an intrusion by an external source. Many experients (especially those influenced by sacred notions more dominant in the East – for instance, Buddhism) prize transcendence as an ultimate goal but see this as an extension of the inner and not as an external imposition. Additionally, this idea of transcendent could be seen as limited or restricted as experients may report connections to aspects not necessarily considered religious (see Tart's, 1999, expansive definition of transcendent for instance <http://www.issc-taste.org/main/introduction.shtml>). In this sense, it will depend on individual interpretation as to how transcendent experiences are understood. Furthermore, the very notion of transcendence and the identification of new forms of spirituality as possibly aesthetic, humanist and/or secular (Varga, 2007) – in as much as they don't require a 'religious' element – points to a recasting of spiritual as 'the search for meaning' (Holmes,

2007: 27) in all its guises. Given that these experiential accounts are characterised by transcendence and deep affect and meaning, there is a sense in which they can clearly be aligned with this work. In noting that the transcendent is (potentially) spiritual, this work also extends the range of issues that are of concern in this field.

Within these collections it has been recognised that contemporary forms of spirituality often focus on and prioritise personal experience and extol the value of trusting one's own experiences or inner self over external authorities (Droogers, 2007). However, it has also been argued that considered research with analytic precision into these personal and potentially transformative practices is sorely lacking (McGuire, 2008).

“I propose that our field needs to give attention – much more carefully researched and analytically precise attention – to the personal beliefs and practices by which individual spiritual lives are shaped and transformed, expressed and experienced, over time.”
(McGuire, 2008: 215)

In showing how people talk about and make sense of their TEHEs my work is an (discursive ethnomethodological) extension to and contribution to the existing field, currently dominated by theoretical and traditional qualitative approaches (with some of these deploying quantitative techniques also). It is also novel in terms of expanding the discursive contexts in which formal and meticulous observations are able to be made. Furthermore, the inclusion of the concept of spirituality is a very recent adaptation of the sociology of religion and therefore my contribution is timely. Further development and exploitation of these connections can only bring further scope and insights to an emerging field. There are also other areas that my work contributes to but these differ slightly in that they are informed by practical and methodological considerations faced during the research process. Thus the next section explores some personal reflections concerning conducting research and details the methodological issues arising from this.

7.4 Methodological and personal reflections

Whilst I was conducting the research for this project various tensions and conflicts emerged. However, before I explore these it is worth noting that the documenting and inclusion of these kinds of reflections is not universally practiced in social science research and therefore requires introducing.

The place of the personal in research is something that feminists have noted since the nineteen eighties/early nineties (e.g. Krieger, 1991) in relation to identifying problems with claims to 'objective' scientific knowledge (Harding, 1987, 1991; Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b; Spelman, 1988; Westkott, 1979) and the need to therefore acknowledge the place of and write the researcher into the production of knowledge (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1983, 1991; Blau, 1981; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Hawkesworth, 1989; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Stanley, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1983).

“Whether we like it or not, researchers remain human beings complete with all the usual assembly of feelings, failings and moods. And all of those things influence how we feel and understand what is going on. Our consciousness is always the medium through which the research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher.”
(Stanley & Wise, 1983: 157)

The main way of including the researcher in the process has been to adopt some semblance of reflexivity in the process. This is not to attest that reflexive practices automatically give rise to superior or privileged forms of knowledge (Lynch, 2000), but that researchers are intrinsically part of the process and that this should be acknowledged. But what is reflexivity and how can it be articulated?

Reflexivity is a contested notion that does not have one straightforward, accepted definition for researchers to work from (see Lynch, 2000, for a detailed discussion and critique of differing definitions of reflexivity). For some it is a self-critical kind of self-analysis or scrutiny that lays (previously) unspoken processes to bare for others to see (England, 1994) in order to make for truly accountable forms of knowledge (Blau, 1981). But quite what is, or should be, laid bare, or how this should be scrutinised is not self-evident. Burawoy (1991) talks of the messy practices of research, the false starts and abandoned theories; the processes of production, others talk about locating the 'self' of the researcher, unpacking one's own identity in some way (e.g. Stanley & Wise, 1983). Examples of explicitly reflexive projects focus on the productive nature of reflexivity: how critically examining previous assumptions can create new and fruitful avenues for research (e.g. Allan, 1997; du Preez, 2008; Le Gallais, 2008, O'Connell Davidson, 2008; Pini, 2004) and how reflexivity as a practice can be a way to investigate the researcher's experience of research (e.g. McIlveen, 2008). The practice of reflexivity is explored here via the

examination of various methodological issues that emerged in the process of doing research (with the proviso that any reflection will provide a reconstituted version of my 'self' and the research process for the benefit of authorship now).

7.4.1 The interview as an interaction and 'emotionality'

As noted in Chapter 3, interview data differs from the kind of data usually analysed by CA and DP researchers. Furthermore, interview data has recently come under scrutiny and has subsequently been the subject of critical methodological debate, mainly within psychology, but the debate is applicable to the whole of the social sciences more generally. This consideration of qualitative interviews focuses predominantly on a recent article by Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn (2005) concerning the use of qualitative interviews in psychology. Their cogent critique of interviews was the catalyst for the ongoing debate in the social sciences where they argue that there are many intractable problems with interviews and therefore where possible researchers should use naturalistic data sources (see for instance, Griffin, 2007a, 2007b; Henwood, 2007; Potter & Hepburn, 2007). It is worth reviewing the most pressing of these concerns and reflecting upon how my research attempted to address some of these issues. Ultimately, the authors are keen to question the centrality of the interview as a research method; challenge the dominance of what they argue is a default method; and champion the merits of more naturalistic data. This challenge, they suggest, is founded on the basis that there are numerous features and issues researchers tend to overlook when choosing interviews and collecting data (Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

7.4.1.1 The interview as interaction

One of the main criticisms concerns the way in which social science research has employed the interview method as a straightforward way of obtaining information about a particular substantive topic (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Many other researchers, albeit with different interests, have also argued that this traditional approach fails to consider the interview as an interaction (e.g. Borland, 1991; Seale, 1998; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). Wooffitt (2005a) points out that whilst the interview is a different sort of interaction from ordinary conversation - it has a formal structure and a unidirectional flow - it remains an interaction. In this sense, it has been argued that the interactional nature of the interview must be

attended to in making analytic claims. Furthermore, interviews are thus seen, not as a resource for information about a particular topic in a straightforward fashion, but instead are a topic for study themselves; an interaction, a 'natural-interaction-in-interview' (Potter, 2004: 205).

Potter and Hepburn (2005) thus argue that the nature of interviews as interactional events has consequences for any analysis and research that employs them as methods should attend to this. They argue that interview findings can, at worst, be a direct result of interview questions and agendas because of the way in which speakers' utterances are informed by the interview context. In these cases, analytic categories and themes can be a 'refined...filtered or inverted form' of the agendas and interests (part explicit and part implicit) of the research question and design (Potter & Hepburn, 2005: 293). More problematically then, if research findings are seen to be influenced or produced by the interviewer's questions and the 'interactional practices of the interviewer and respondent' (Wooffitt, 2005a: 172) then there are perceived problems with the validity of analytic claims.

My research aimed to address this at the design stage of the process. Awareness that the interview is an interaction and utterances are tied to the setting in which they occur meant adopting a particular kind of interviewing style which proposed minimal intervention and interaction from the interviewer, at least in the first instance. This consisted of a more 'passive' interviewing style, which invited the respondent to talk about what had happened and then remained fairly silent until they had completed their account (Wooffitt, 1992). This form of interviewing is in line with a more neutral approach to interviewing, which Potter and Hepburn (2005: 300) propose should be reconsidered (instead of the more popular, 'active interviewing'). This approach aimed to ensure that the account provided by the respondent required limited involvement from the interviewer. As a result analytic claims could be grounded in the account provided by the respondent rather than in the specific questions that I had asked as interviewer (because other than inviting the respondent to speak about their experience no questions were posed until after the account was complete). This was also directed towards increasing the validity of these analytic claims. However, there were conceptual and practical issues arising from this approach in my research, which have implications for 'passivity' and 'neutral' interviewing in a project such as this.

Firstly, aligning uncritically with a more positivistic approach (as ‘neutral’ researchers, careful not to contaminate data) underestimates the impact of the researcher and vice versa on the entire research process (Acker et al, 1991). As many feminists identified over ten years ago, a positivistic approach has greater social respectability and weightier epistemic authority, and tends to be valued more highly by the establishment (Harding, 1987). Additionally, claiming that conducting research concerned with subjective experience can or should be a value-free process might be considered somewhat problematic (Dachler, 1997). Secondly, there are practical issues I experienced that created a real tension and some discrepancy between research guidance and the realities of research practice. It is these practical issues that form the basis of the discussion across the rest of this section. There are two ways in which these practical issues manifested as methodological concerns: a) questions asked by the respondents prior to interviews and b) conducting ‘passive’ interviewing clashed with my experience of the individuals I interviewed. Methodological conflicts between the ideal and the actual have recently been discussed by Guimaraes (2007). She identifies the tension in her own work between following guidelines to be an ‘impartial’ researcher, and the reality of confronting involvement in interaction and human emotions in any research relationship.

This kind of involvement can raise dilemmas in research; and the questions that many of my respondents posed before interviews began, constituted one such dilemma. This issue has been noted as problematic by Potter and Hepburn (2005). They argue that in much social scientific work employing interviews it is unclear on what basis respondents have been recruited (for perceived membership or association with a particular category?), what they have been asked to do, what they have been told it is for and what interaction takes place prior to the start of recording. They also suggest that one of the ways in which this issue can be addressed is to start recording interview interaction as soon as possible in order to capture it for subsequent analysis. However, they also note the potential difficulties there might be in practice concerning ethics and informed consent. Indeed, this occurred in my research, where many of the respondents asked questions prior to consenting to be audio-taped. Questions were asked about the research process and about the nature of my personal interest in these kinds of experiences, and what I understood them to be, or mean. Common questions included, *‘Why are you interested in these experiences? Have you ever had one yourself? What are you trying to prove? What are your own thoughts and beliefs*

about these experiences? Do you believe these experiences can happen? What are you going to 'do' with my experience? I've never told anyone this before, can I trust you? You probably think I'm crazy don't you?

There were three main aspects to these questions:

- The first was regarding the potential refutation of the reality of these experiences and subsequent discrediting of the individuals and their experiences.
- The second was concerning how their experiences would be used and represented.
- The third seemed directed towards connecting with me on a personal level

These questions reflect the common finding that TEHEs may be deeply personal and meaningful for those who report them and reflect some of the reported reluctance to disclose these experiences (Davis et al, 1991; Palmer & Braud, 2002). They pointed to potential obstacles regarding trust, perceived vulnerability and exposure, therefore I felt what was required was a sensitive and reflexive response, aimed towards building rapport and offering reassurances. I aimed to convey that my interest was in exploring the kind of extraordinary experiences people have and what meanings people attribute to them; that there was no concern with establishing the 'truth' or 'reality' of these experiences; but instead the interest was in their subjective impressions; and that I was treating the experiences as real for those who reported them. During these discussions prior to the interviews, I was working to reassure the respondents that any material they shared would not be misused or misrepresented and that their experiences would be treated respectfully and non-judgmentally. Equally, however, I was working to manage the (sometimes hazy) boundaries between professional researcher and routine member of society.

Potter and Hepburn (2005) argue that at the very least, researchers should aim to include some 'gloss' of the pre-interview interaction and begin recording as early as possible. To not do this is seen to omit important details about the way in which the interaction then ensues. However, Hollway (2005) suggests that there is a catalogue of omissions from the entire history of the research encounter.

“The responses of the interviewee at a particular juncture do not just relate back to the last few utterances of the interviewer and not just to the last question that was asked. They are built up out of the whole history of the research encounter: how they were recruited, what they were told the interview was about, what happened before the tape recorder was switched on, the continuous dynamics (not just conscious) between interviewee and interviewer. This

cannot all be represented in the text and so it becomes part of the researcher's responsibility to reflect on these effects and trace them in the context of the whole, providing evidence from the record.”
(Hollway, 2005: 312)

What my research suggests is that audio-recording these details may not always be practically possible, especially those of a sensitive or controversial leaning (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2007, 2009). In the very logistics of negotiating consent and establishing trust, it may be more important to attend to the perceived immediate requirements of the pre-interview interaction (e.g. sensitively responding to interviewees questions and concerns) than to try and record it. As Hollway (2005) suggests, the next best route for explicit and accountable research is to include some form of the researcher's reflections of these aspects of the research encounter. This is not to suggest that attempts to begin recording as early as possible in a research interview should be abandoned but instead highlights the way in which ethics are integral and persistent considerations throughout and this specifically may be a delicate part of the research process to manage. It is also supportive of the issue identified to more coherently and explicitly explicate the practices of interviews (and pre-interview activity) for scrutiny and reflection. However, I still have some reservations about the desirability of a more neutral or passive approach to interviews.

7.4.1.2 Passivity and neutrality in interviews

The recommended passivity required to be a more neutral interviewer presented some problems in the actual process of interviewing. In pragmatic terms this meant requesting the respondents tell me what happened regarding their TEHEs and remaining fairly passive until they finished their account. Reflecting on this now it seems insensitive to view these stories as data that could be contaminated, because these words did and do affect me, as did the 'person' present and this was as much a part of the process as the data that was collected. There are two possible ways in which to understand and deal with this participation. One is to consider and reflect upon how I felt at the time, during the interviews. However, the process of reflection in itself could be seen as problematic for it is a reconstituted version of 'feelings' from interactions then, for specific purposes in this writing now. The second is to consider what potential interactional work the (mostly) non-

lexical 'noises' were performing. However, this seems a somewhat clinical approach to an emotional aspect of research as these noises do not constitute the experience. Also, this has been identified as difficult to achieve pragmatically by Potter and Hepburn (2005) for reasons of stake and interest. That is, it is difficult to become a neutral observer of your own previous utterances, as they carry resonances and 'memories' not perceived as 'relevant' to a discursive analysis. Additionally, Potter and Hepburn suggest that there are issues to do with implicit agendas that are impossible to discern when considering subject matters of personal interest. Furthermore, it is potentially too personally revealing and/or embarrassing being so close to the data, to subject it and myself to this kind of scrutiny. Therefore, whilst I have been able to include some discursive analysis of my contributions to the interviews (e.g. my invitations and minimal continuers located in the initial experiential accounts), there has not been the space to analyse any lengthier and more involved interaction between myself and the interviewee that occurred afterwards. This is certainly something that future analyses may more directly attempt to do, as it is clearly a potential challenge for any researcher, particularly those researching sensitive and emotional research topics.

There were various individuals I interviewed that had a powerful affect upon me. I was emotionally affected by their telling of their experiences, their 'presence' and the often highly personal nature of the material being relayed (I still think about and recall these interactions, I am also sporadically in touch with five of my participants – none of whom I knew prior to the research project). In this sense, I found it difficult and undesirable to remain passive and neutral. Furthermore, there was a personal interest in the experiences that people were describing. I was humbled by these stories, I felt privileged to be granted access to them and they were often awe-inspiring. Many of them were fascinating and interesting, which prompted (involuntary and unconscious) 'mm's' and other potential signs of agreement (Potter & Hepburn, 2005), or encouragement (or perhaps they are indicative of other social actions?). This meant that I felt conflicted between acting in a more passive manner from an empathic, ethical, sensitive and personal perspective but also was aware that seemingly ordinary levels of interacting (or active interviewing) might be in danger of 'contaminating' my data (Guimaraes, 2007; Potter, 2003c) or compromising professionalism. Despite the fact that this project was informed by feminist and transpersonal principles, it was also driven by a desire for analytic rigour and robust findings (can these principles comfortably coexist?).

During various interviews (though not all of them) at different moments, I was intermittently overcome with quite intense physical, seemingly physiological and emotional feelings (comparable to waves and rushes of ecstatic feelings, goose bumps, feelings of elation, of calm, of being warm and absorbed, of being contented) all concerned with being deeply moved in some way. The degree of intensity varied from interview to interview, but all enhanced my own personal experience of these people and the relaying of their experiences. These sensations were entirely involuntary and unexpected and in two cases affected my ability to continue the interviews (one of these is discussed in more detail later). These kinds of feelings re-emerged whenever I listened to the recordings of the interviews (which was countless times during analysis) or when reading the textual transcriptions of the TEHE accounts. During analysis I would also often drift into reverie about the encounters, thinking about the individuals I had met and how such brief encounters had left such dramatic impressions and reflecting on the strength of emotion still lingering as a result. Often now when I talk about the encounters and the experiences I relive these intense emotions in a deeply embodied way.

This is quite staggering. I cannot recall many other times in my life being so powerfully affected by, in some cases, very minimal encounters with complete strangers. This enduring emotion forms a key part of the process and the development of ongoing personal relationships has had a significant affect on me. The level of personal involvement from potential interviewees was also interesting. Several potential respondents declined to take part in the project as they reported the irrelevance of studying such a subject academically or intellectually. One respondent invited me to take part in a course that was specifically directed towards cultivating these kinds of experiences and another shared her experience by email for my own 'personal and spiritual benefit' but did not wish to be part of an academic analysis. Several others contacted me to encourage me to seek out my own personal experience, advising me that rational and intellectual study could not 'grasp' these experiences – that I really had to experience it to understand it. Some of the other respondents who did tell me about their experiences also offered words of wisdom about meditation, spiritual growth, my personal life and troubles and developing my 'inherent psychic abilities', whilst also directly expressing an interest in and care for my 'spiritual well-being'.

My involvement in the interviews therefore cannot accurately be described as passive or neutral as I felt a deep form of engagement with many of my interviewees. What is perhaps interesting here in terms of analytical or methodological issues is that this 'lack of passivity' is not really captured by the textual representation of the interview encounter (though it may be found in the interactions that ensued once the initial account was completed). So, whilst there are minimal lexical and non-lexical utterances, the strong sense of emotional affect and engagement with the individuals and their stories is tangibly absent. Additionally, whilst I have reservations about the connotations of passivity and neutrality in research regarding these kinds of highly personal experiences, it is notable that there was potentially something beneficial about explicitly providing a space for interviewees to talk about these experiences in their own time (in requesting a story of what happened and sitting back). However, reporting this emotionality on the back of my respondents' reported deep affect does also feel voyeuristic, perhaps even somewhat colonising of others' reported experiences. This issue resonates with some discursive feminist methodology regarding representing other's' voices (e.g. Weatherall et al, 2002). The next issue I reflect on flags these kinds of concerns about representing research populations who report sensitive and significant experiences.

7.4.2 Representation, roles and integrity

This issue concerning representation is also connected to a personal experience that occurred during one of the interviews and remained obscured until relatively recently. Initially, in struggling to write this conclusion I felt stuck. Then I was reviewing the research materials and I discovered that I had excluded one of the accounts as a candidate for representation in the thesis. However, this had not been a conscious decision or deliberate strategy. I surmised that this encounter had become an 'elephant in the room' for my research and that without writing it in I could not 'move on'. Indeed, once I had decided to incorporate my reflections about this experience, I was finally able to complete the conclusion.

The entire encounter with this individual was atypical; when I was first contacted by email she left a telephone number and a name and little else. When I telephoned her I was fairly quiet and she spent most of the call telling me about various personal events that were taking place in my life at that time and what kind of person I was. The telephone call left me feeling exhilarated and intrigued, but simultaneously a bit wary; nervously anticipating

our face-to-face encounter. When we met, the interview was unlike the other research encounters because of the ways in which she talked about her experiences and the experience that occurred during the interview.

Firstly, she talked about her experiences in a way that conveyed the regularity and ordinariness of them for her coupled with an assumed level of knowledge about matters such as energies, quantum phenomena and galactic astrology.⁸⁶ This meant that the account was imbued with unconventionality and eccentricity. Throughout this interaction I felt simultaneously fascinated and frustrated. Fascinated by the sheer number, scale and content of the reported experiences, but frustrated by the meandering nature of the telling and the high level of assumed knowledge in the interaction. It meant that the interview became quite quickly much more of an ordinary interview interaction as it felt necessary to regularly ask questions to clarify meaning and this meant that many aspects remained untouched (in particular, I felt the personal experiences she relayed were lacking in detail and there was an abundance of experiences).

Secondly, this encounter had a huge and unanticipated effect on me. I had to stop interviewing at one point because I suddenly felt overwhelmed by a very powerful nauseous sort of feeling (that I have never experienced before or since) combined with a powerful sort of electricity or buzzing sensation around my whole body and within my torso (mainly the chest and stomach area), interspersed with the sense of something or someone standing behind me. I also felt slightly distant as if I wasn't in my ordinary state of consciousness. These very strong and embodied feelings made it impossible for me to continue the interview and I stopped the tape. The interviewee subsequently informed me that she was providing emotional healing which she told me I needed and that there was an 'energy' standing behind me (I had told her I felt weird and needed a glass of water, but hadn't described the feelings). I'm still not sure what to make of it, but I often think about this experience and the encounter. It felt and still feels hugely dramatic and the retelling of it evokes both feelings of vulnerability and relief.

It became clear that there were various reasons why I had excluded this interview. Firstly, I was acutely aware of how it might be unfavourably received because of the potential sensitivities around representation of populations reporting these experiences and its

⁸⁶ See <http://www.theastrologicalsociety.co.uk/G-Introduction.htm> for a description.

unconventionality. There is clearly power and responsibility inherent in representing the words of others, but professionally speaking, ‘what are our responsibilities to representing ‘the Other’? (Weatherall et al, 2002: 532). I felt quite protective of the respondent and the way in which her account might be perceived by others. This fits with feminist work highlighting potential issues of representation for researchers (e.g. Blakely, 2007; Kirsch, 1999; Letherby, 2002, Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Stanley & Wise, 1990). Furthermore, feminist work positively encourages these kinds of reflections and acknowledgements. Indeed, Kirsch (1999) suggests that researchers should include accounts of why data is omitted from research because it impacts upon the research as a whole. These issues concerning conflicting loyalties and confusion about boundaries of the personal and the professional have been documented in other work (e.g. O’Connell Davidson, 2008) and it has been argued that sociological knowledge is enhanced by addressing these tensions and conflicts directly (O’Brien, 2009).

Secondly, I was concerned at the level of personal involvement I had displayed in this interview and concerned about sharing a notable experience that affected me quite deeply, quite how this fitted into my academic project and how it might be perceived as affecting my critical abilities. However, it has been asserted that as researchers the academic and the personal are inextricably entwined.

“As qualitative researchers, our goal is to see the world through someone else’s eyes, using ourselves as a research instrument; it thus follows that we must experience our research both ‘intellectually and emotionally’.”
(Dickson-Swift et al, 2009: 62)

Yet, although researchers might experience research in both these forms, quite how to cope with, acknowledge and do justice to the emotionality (without compromising the intellectuality) can be a relentless source of tension. It was difficult to know how to write the intimacies of research into the research itself and I feel some wariness about how this will be received. A few researchers have noted that all the aspects associated with the personal in research, whether they are relational or experiential, are often rendered invisible by academic work.

“[T]he intimacies afforded by research materials and activities, those materials and activities that inform the making of knowledge, that shape power relations and that enable or constrain the practical negotiation of ethical

problems, are not often foregrounded in debates on methods and methodology.”
(Fraser & Puwar, 2008: 2)

In part this editing out process is attributable to academic convention, but also perhaps because often researchers do not know how to include such material in a way that retains personal and professional integrity, credibility or consistency. Dickson-Swift et al (2009) point out that emotions are judged to be ‘anathema to academic research’ (p63) by Western philosophical traditions and that this has contributed to the lack of inclusion of researchers’ reported emotions in their work.

Fraser and Puwar (2008: 4) acknowledge that communicating ‘what it is ‘really like’ in the field of collection and production, as an embodied being’ is not a simple or straightforward task. ‘The smells, the sounds, the spatial confines, the tensions and the emotional demands are not readily laid out on the academic table’ (Fraser & Puwar, 2008: 4). They note that communicating the nuts and bolts of any research process might risk ‘revealing, perhaps even ‘exposing’ the so-called unscholarly, anecdotal, irrational and unscientific dimensions of the research process’ (p4). Indeed, anything spontaneously emotional is certainly categorised as such. This is re-iterated by Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputtong (2009: 66) who state that a lack of emotional disclosure by researchers may be due to perceptions about rigour and concerns about vulnerability and potential judgement and criticism from colleagues or peers. Indeed, including my emotionality has left me feeling exposed and vulnerable in many ways, but I felt compelled to include an event so significant in the story of my work.

Furthermore, there may be additional risks associated with talking about strength of feeling for researchers of these kinds of intangible experiences. Adopting an empathic persuasion towards these kinds of experiences could be viewed as an indication of acceptance of certain metaphysical beliefs and perhaps even the belief system propounded by experiencers. McRoberts (2004) notes this in relation to studying religion ethnographically, but the point is equally applicable here.

“Few sociological ethnographers of religion [for instance] claim any level of empathy with the people they study. When they do, remarks on the matter resemble apology more than justification since the implication is that the

ethnographer has experienced the spiritual truth of the religion.”
(McRoberts, 2004: 193)

In this sense I had reservations about being accused of ‘going native’ or displaying a lack of critical insight. This is perhaps because of the status of religious or metaphysical claims, but this status should be as equally subject to critique as other forms of knowledge. Especially, as anthropologists have shown, researchers are commonly affected by the contexts, people and experiences under study, cross-culturally (McClenon & Nooney, 2002; Young & Goulet, 1994). The dearth of honest reflection about such matters leaves any sociology of experience bereft and fosters the continuing stigmatisation of extraordinary experiences per se.

I also had considerable reservations about the way in which the audio-recording of the interview did not correspond with my personal feelings about it. In other words, I felt that the text of the interview was not representative of my actual experience of the interview itself. This general notion – that personal encounters in research are more than the sum of their textual or discursive representation – has been identified elsewhere (e.g. Bolas, 1995; Frosh & Emerson, 2005; Steiner, 1995). It has been suggested that, ‘a person is not a text’ (Steiner, 1995: 442) and, ‘reading a text and being with an actual person...are quite different engagements’ (Bolas, 1995: 23). This relates to the idea discussed next regarding how there was something left wanting by a discursive approach to TEHEs.

Thirdly, I felt that this was an unsuccessful interview when compared to the others because I had failed to obtain a ‘proper’ account of any one TEHE from the interviewee. Given the radically different nature of this interview from the others, it originally felt like an ‘anomaly’. I’d wanted to be sensitive to the interviewees and their experiences and I certainly did not want to appear critical (Sangster, 1998) but I also wanted to portray myself in a good light, as a professional researcher (and not, for example, as an individual who’d had an intangible experience herself) and not betray the integrity of my findings. I remain undecided as how to fairly represent this interaction and its exclusion appears to be the only option at this time.

These perceived difficulties might be part and parcel of a dilemma for researchers of seemingly controversial phenomena. Wulff (2000) suggests that this dilemma leaves only

two possible approaches for a researcher to take: 'insider' or 'outsider'. An insider would be a researcher that actively participates in the phenomena or experiences they set out to study and uses this experience as the basis for their examination. An outsider does not partake of the experience, but studies, researches, and observes experiences in order to gain understanding. The first has credibility with experiences, but not necessarily with (social) scientists and the latter may have scientific integrity, whilst lacking experiential authenticity (Wulff 2000). However, in practice these boundaries may not be so clearly marked. In this research, I have inhabited both roles at differing times across the process and there may be something of an intermediate position for researchers. Others suggest the same. Le Gallais (2008: 151-153) proposes that the distinction does not have to be so clearly delineated for research generally and could be more fluid as one may begin as outsider and subsequently gain insider insights. My research demonstrates that the categories of insider and outsider lack the nuanced complexity required to adequately capture the differing roles and identities we inhabit as we do research activity. I was neither outsider nor insider but instead experienced multiple and intricate differing positions to the interviews, the interviewees and their TEHE stories.

It is this that Potter and Hepburn (2005) capture in noting the impossibility of explicating issues of footing, stake and interest in interview-based research. They see a footing issue arising particularly from the fact that many PhD researchers are also the interviewers for their project, which is clearly the case in this research also. They further suggest that distance (between interviewer and interest) is rarely present in qualitative social science research, thus an emphasis on disinterest is not really feasible "whether desirable or not" (Potter & Hepburn, 2005: 296). Throughout an interview, with the interviewer taking up several different footing positions at different times, this leaves an important and significant challenge for researchers hoping to analyse interview data. "The general point, then, is that footing for both interviewer and interviewee is potentially convoluted and variable" (Potter & Hepburn, 2005: 295). This was indeed the case in my research: but is the way in which I have tackled this intractable issue regarding the use of interviews, satisfactory? How as researchers can we cut a path to converge the intellectual and the intuitive? Does detailing and reflecting upon the process alleviate this issue to an extent because some of the personal conflicts, interests and 'messiness' of research is explicitly laid out for others to see?

Future research might more comprehensively engage with Mauthner & Doucet's (2008: 405) listening guide for 'doing reflexivity', whereby researchers analysing data include a column for their 'reactions', interpretations and comments. It is advised that this is one practical way in which embedded assumptions can be reviewed and examined. However, there is recognition that reflexivity is not a straightforward process.

“We cannot know everything that influences our knowledge construction processes, and there are ‘degrees of reflexivity’, with some influences being easier to identify and articulate during the research, while others may only come to us many years after completing our projects.”
(Mauthner & Doucet, 2008: 405)

Nonetheless, including a process of reflexivity has allowed me to consider the role of the personal in the research process and how this impacts upon issues of representation. An additional issue encountered during the research was how to account for the sense in which there was something ‘missing’ from a purely discursive analysis.

7.4.3 Gaps and limits with a linguistic focus

The idea that there is a gap left by some discursive pursuits is aligned to debates about context in methodological fields (for instance see Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Schegloff, 1987, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Wetherell, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2003b, and 2007). Out of these debates a critical perspective has emerged which suggests that versions of DP too closely informed by CA (and CA itself) lack any reference to broader sociohistorical and cultural conversations. This perspective argues that these broader aspects impact upon all interactions and shape the ways in which cognitive phenomena, personal selves, subjectivities and experiences are constructed in talk.

“Thinking is suffused with dialogue, with the words of others, and those words bear the marks of their social context of use and historical struggles over meaning. Thought, emotion and motivation are, thus, not ineffable nor invisible but built from public practices, and minds and selves are constructed from cultural, social and communal resources.”
(Wetherell, 2007: 664)

In conducting the analysis, my approach was initially driven by CA and the version of DP articulated by Edwards and Potter (1992a). However, whilst the analysis was underway I

developed a degree of frustration with what appeared to be the limits of a linguistic analysis. Firstly, there was an intuitive sense that this kind of analysis was unable to characterize the sense of ‘depth’ (profundity, meaningfulness) associated with these experiences. Secondly, it became clear that this kind of analysis was limited in terms of its ability to connect to and locate the interaction in the broader social context it occurred within. Upon further reflection it became evident that both these issues could be effectively subsumed under one consideration. That is, my analysis seemed unable to capture anything *extra* or *non-discursive* and this felt problematic. But did a linguistic analysis leave me at a loss in terms of making coherent broader connections? Should social (wider) theory be ignored or engaged with? If it is to be engaged with, at which point in the process is it articulating or directing the analysis and at which point is it merely facilitating the conclusions? And how can an analysis informed by CA and DP incorporate the ‘non-discursive’?

There are two examples of more recent work that embody the spirit of this perceived limitation. One of these is a recent paper by Wetherell (2007) which raises some valid criticisms about the restrictive boundaries established around discursive empirical study. The second is the work of those combining discursive approaches with psychoanalysis (e.g. Frosh, 1999; Frosh et al, 2003; Frosh & Emerson, 2005) which has emerged for various reasons but is largely about dissatisfaction with the way in which subjectivity has been conceptualised. However, the inclusion of these two examples is not to align my work with their interests in developing what might be seen as a theory of self/positioning, but is instead illustrative of the possibilities of doing discursive analysis in a thorough and rigorous manner whilst also attempting to forge new methodological boundaries – that cater for concepts of the extra-discursive.

In this vein, Wetherell (2007: 665) notes a number of researchers who have ‘not been so persuaded by the apparent limits and boundaries placed by conversation analysis around the object of study’. This approach – sometimes termed critical discursive psychology – binds micro and macro approaches sometimes drawing on narrative analysis, psychoanalysis or social identity theory. Wetherell’s (2007) more recent approach develops her earlier work (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) and argues that the organisation of the psychological in discourse is important in terms of constructing subjectivities and ‘of the possibilities for being human and for being a social actor’ (p665). She suggests that the ‘psychological aspects’ of identity can be recast in a ‘psycho-

discursive' (Wetherell & Edley, 1999) manner whereby 'the sum of social practices constitute a psychology, formulate a mental life and have consequences for the formation and representation of the person' (Wetherell, 2007: 668). Wetherell thus argues for a kind of discursive psychology that widens its scope and regards the "long conversation" of community and institutional life (Maybin, 2006)' (p671) as important to interactions more generally. Furthermore,

"This kind of discursive psychology attempts to describe the configurations of identity and subjectivity which result at particular moments which might be maintained for shorter or longer durations. It also attempts to describe the cultural resources, struggles, interactions and relations that the person is working with and how these have been mobilised, temporarily stabilised and turned into their own personal order."
(Wetherell, 2007: 672)

Her approach indicates one of the ways in which discursive psychology can be applied critically and reflexively, both recognising the value of a grounded empirical analysis, whilst also engaging with difficult debates about how the extra-discursive can be analytically considered.

Another example of this kind of methodological innovation concerns the way in which some researchers have recently employed psychoanalysis alongside discursive methods in order to include subjectivity in their analyses. These approaches attempt to 'locate the subject' in discourse without returning to or reinstating the divide between the individual and social (e.g. Craib, 2000; Day Sclater, 2003; Frosh, 1999; Frosh et al, 2003; Frosh & Emerson, 2005; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, 2001, 2005). The rationale for this inclusion comes from a sense in which there is a 'gap in the explanatory power of much discursive social psychology' (Frosh et al, 2003: 39). These attempts argue that there is a realm of personal subjectivity that is not accommodated by discursive approaches and it is here where psychoanalysis, it is claimed, can help to 'account for the complexity of specific subject positions as they emerge and are negotiated in interactive contexts' (Frosh & Emerson, 2005: 308). This placing extends to both the researcher and the researched in discursive data.

The proposed union aims to include how the unconscious manifests in accounts and is both produced by and productive of interaction and interactive consequences (Frosh et al, 2003).

“While culture makes available the subject positions we can inhabit, the ‘investment’ that people have in these subject positions is not necessarily captured by the articulation of the discourses themselves; rather, it may hinge on unspoken and at times unspeakable events, experiences and processes, all of them ‘cultural’, but also deeply embedded in subjectivity.”

(Frosh et al, 2003: 42)

However, there are various issues with the use of psychoanalysis in this regard that have been identified by various researchers. It has been noted that psychoanalysis has an intense pre-existing cultural presence as a narrative in its own right, which complicates its use as a tool in this regard (Parker, 2003). Parker suggests that it might be useful to analysts where it is not treated as a replacement route to truth and where its cultural presence is critically inspected before it can be a useful way of accounting for personal subjectivity in discourse. Frosh & Emerson (2005) recognise the limits of psychoanalysis and even note that the search for ‘depth’ may be aligned with a sense of analyst (or researcher) dissatisfaction.

“To what extent may the search for ‘depth’ be a response to dissatisfaction with textual undecideability in the context of ‘narrative truth’ – a version of the defence against ambivalence with which psychoanalysts are all too familiar?”

(Frosh & Emerson, 2005: 322)

Nonetheless, they also acknowledge and recognise the existence of other plausible analyses and interpretations of data. From this they argue that psychoanalysis offers ‘potential insights that are hard to garner elsewhere’ (p322).

More sustained criticism has suggested that psychoanalytic concepts such as repression can be seen as a discursive activity and therefore something that can be studied as a social practice (Billig, 2006). As Billig states,

“The unconscious is to be understood in terms of the discursive activity of repressing. Accordingly, repression is not primarily a property of the individual personality. It is

a fundamental feature by which orders of power and inequality are routinely reproduced.”
(Billig, 2006: 23)

Analysing the ‘unspoken’ is certainly an ambitious task and whilst there is scope for much more here, psychoanalysis feels too restricted, too imposing and too deeply embedded culturally prior to its use as an analytic tool in this regard (Parker, 2003). There is something left wanting in terms of subjectivity by a discursive approach, but I have similar reservations to Wetherell (2007) about psychoanalysis as a useful, or appropriate, tool for investigating this. For her, the main problem is the separation of the personal from the cultural.

“Psycho-discursive practices are not necessarily mysterious or necessarily expressive outpourings of a deep inner psyche. They are frequently procedures or routines that people know how to do in talk, making meaning as they go.”
(Wetherell, 2007: 676)

However, it is here that the intellectual again collides with the personal and there is a tension between my academic and my intuitive self. Academically, I am resigned to the idea that even if there is something that exists ‘outside’ of the discursive then this kind of approach does not allow it to be ‘seen’.

“As for the issue of whether there is a subject *outside* of narrative, we suggest that there are ‘knowing because experiencing subject(s)’ and that subjects act with intentionality and agency. Nevertheless, even if we do hold that there are subjects *beneath, behind* or *beyond* narrated subjects, we also contend that, as researchers, we cannot come to fully know them.”
(Mauthner & Doucet, 2008: 407)

However, intuitively, this extra-discursive subjectivity feels important and impossible to ignore (even if it cannot be fully known). Studying what is reportedly a profound, sensitive and meaningful subject for experiences will inevitably present challenges. Attempting to apply systematic methods to the analysis of talk about reportedly ineffable TEHEs clearly provokes dilemmas about how to study these experiences and what we can say about human subjectivity, even human spirituality. As for how we might begin to understand this ‘subjectivity’ intellectually, this is a task for future intellectual trajectories. It is possible that this is something which will remain in tension for the time being. It is clear then, that there

are persistent tensions articulated in this section concerning methodological and personal reflections: between producing a competent piece of academic research, the practicalities of doing research with ‘real’ people and a strong sense that there is more to be conveyed about these experiences than this approach has allowed.

“All we can know is what is narrated by subjects, as well as our interpretation of their stories within the wider web of social and structural relations from which narrated subjects speak.”

(Mauthner & Doucet, 2008: 404)

But if I could do it all again what would I do differently? I think there are a few different issues I would address if I were to conduct this project again.

7.4.3.1 What would I have done differently?

Firstly, those associated with the conceptual and analytical process discussed above. I would be more likely to spend less time on a purely discursive analysis and more time making stronger connections with existing ideas about the wider context. This is an aspect I feel my PhD has not effectively articulated. Part of addressing this concern might come from more concerted engagement with particular literatures (e.g. sociology of religion) rather than such a wide range. Secondly, in practical methodological terms I would conduct more involved interviews or participant observation (ethnographic and/or auto ethnographic work?) to be more immersed in the field myself (e.g. attending one of the courses offered to me). It would also have been insightful to have engaged in a more collaborative analytic process with my respondents (as feminist and transpersonal approaches attest). Furthermore, an eclectic approach including some comparative work in terms of different types of interviews/data collection procedures and differing types of analysis now seems quite appealing.

Thirdly, if carried out again now the project would more comprehensively involve the personal – in the entire process. This would include more time spent writing myself into the entire thesis and therefore more of the personal and ‘spiritual’ (the transpersonal) would be evident throughout. This would also extend to a greater trust in my own ability to discern what was important in my work. I think this would mean the advent of a more committed feminist and transpersonal project, which might have allowed me to more readily accept the contradictory nature of conducting research and the tensions between

the personal and the academic as a necessary inherent tension without the ability to resolve it. As it was I think that I lived some of these tensions discordantly, without any suitable means to incorporate them.

However, I am still left with some dilemmas about how this project was carried out and the suggested ways in which I would carry it out differently next time. These are centred on: how best to interrogate meaning and the personal whilst retaining methodological credibility and authority? And whether I should have ‘silenced’ the feminist/transpersonal and produced a ‘straight’ discursive analysis or would this have compromised my personal integrity a step too far?

7.5 Conclusion

My work demonstrates that these TEHEs are important in terms of personal significance (which was previously ignored or neglected by social sciences). This is corroborated by recent statistical survey work in the UK which found that almost 40% of the UK population report at least one ‘paranormal’ experience,⁸⁷ 12% of these are made up of those who report mystical or transcendent experience. Empirically, this thesis identified how various findings contribute to existing issues in discursive psychology, consciousness studies and the social sciences, whilst also forging new connections with an emerging sociology of spirituality. Methodologically, I considered how interviews and their pragmatic manifestation fit with discursive analyses informed by CA and DP, in discussion with Potter and Hepburn (2005). And how there appear to be gaps some discursive approaches too closely aligned with CA (for some researchers e.g. Wetherell, 1998, 2007). However, there are still tensions that remain unresolved that will carry forward to future work including, balancing the demands of the intellectual and the emotional in academic work and considering how TEHEs (and related experiences) can, or indeed should, be studied?

Personally, this may involve refining and honing what might be termed a feminist transpersonal discursive approach. Yet my approach is not advocated as the only approach to studying these experiences and I would endorse a pluralistic and integrated range of methodologies along with others (e.g. Braud, 2002; Cardeña, 2004; Davis, 2009; Wilber,

⁸⁷ This is based on a project carried out by myself and Burrows (full results yet to be published).

1997; Williams, 1996). For instance, there is some recent work that recognises the potential importance and meaning of these kinds of experiences for those who report them (see Wilde & Murray, 2008, 2009). It is the ethos of respectful and sensitive work, which recognises their potentially transformative nature as important (Palmer & Braud, 2002). In prioritising what was important about the experiences for those reporting them, I have aimed to provide a picture of how people make sense of their TEHEs and balance a robust discursive analytic approach with an empathic, reflexive and respectful concern for their stories.

Appendix 1 – Advert recruiting respondents

Extraordinary Experiences...

Have you ever had an experience where you

- lost a sense of space and time?
- felt at one with the universe, nature or something 'higher'?
- felt profoundly moved or deeply affected?

If so, I would like to hear from you. I'm a university researcher investigating experiences such as these. To take part (in confidence) please contact mc512@york.ac.uk

Tuesday 7th November, 2006.

Paranormal research at York

By Raf Sanchez
NEWS CORRESPONDENT

A UNIVERSITY OF York researcher has launched a potentially groundbreaking study into ‘mystical’ experiences and their effects on the lives of those who have them.

Madeleine Castro, a postgraduate researcher attached to the Sociology Department, is investigating ‘extraordinary experiences’ and their interpretation by her respondents.

The research focuses not on whether or not these experiences “happened”, a judgement Castro claims is “not relevant to this project”, but instead frames them in a sociological context, asking



‘A ghostly apparition’

what they meant to her respondents.

Respondents have reported a wide range of experiences. Those who have had near-death experiences often claim to have seen

blindingly bright lights, tunnels, or a review of their lives and to have felt the presence of passed on loved ones or a separation from their physical self.

Others have reported visions or apparitions that have appeared to them. Castro tells of one male respondent who, having recently come out of hospital, was visited by what he later described as ‘an angel’. Despite his lack of traditional religious belief, the man felt certain the angel had come to confirm that he was going to live. For many participants this is the first time they have spoken about their experiences.

Castro is reluctant to

apply labels to her research. The aim is not to “categorise experiences in a way that respondents wouldn’t categorise it themselves”.

She believes her research could help further knowledge in the field of human consciousness, something “we know so little, relatively speaking, about”. As well as the academic value of the research, Castro also hopes it will make a “very small contribution to helping people see these experiences as normal and without stigma”. Castro’s research is ongoing and those interested in contributing should get in touch at mcs12@york.ac.uk or log on to www.theperiphery.co.uk.

Appendix 3 – Respondent Information Sheet

First of all, thank you for agreeing to participate in my research project. Your participation will involve talking to me about your extraordinary experience(s), which (with your consent) will be tape-recorded. All the information you discuss with me will be held in the strictest confidence and anonymised (your real name will not be referred to under any circumstances).

The experience(s) you talk about will contribute to a PhD research project and extracts may be quoted anonymously in any reports in relation to this research. I am happy to send you a copy of the tape-recording if you wish.

Please be aware that you are free to decline to answer questions or withdraw from this project at any time.

Should you wish to you can contact my supervisor, Dr Robin Wooffitt on rw21@york.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you need to contact me you can email me, Madeleine Castro, on mc512@york.ac.uk or telephone (01904) 433579.

Once again thank you for your participation it is greatly appreciated.

Appendix 4 – Transcription symbols (taken from Jefferson, 2004)

[indicates point of overlap
(0.0)	elapsed time by tenths of a second
(.)	a brief interval (less than 0.2 tenths of a second)
<u>word</u>	underlining indicates speaker emphasis via pitch and/or amplitude
:::	indicates prolonged sound (of the preceding letter)
-	a single dash indicates an abrupt cut-off
?	rising intonation, not necessarily a question
,	a comma indicates low-rising intonation, suggesting continuation
.	a full stop (period) indicates falling (final) intonation
CAPITALS	especially loud volume relative to surrounding talk
°word°	utterance noticeably quieter than surrounding talk
↑ ↓	indicate marked shifts into higher or lower pitch following the arrow
<>	indicate the utterance produced more quickly/slowly than neighbouring talk
()	a stretch of unclear or unintelligible speech
(guess)	indicates transcriber doubt about a word
.hh	speaker in-breath
hh	speaker out-breath
→	arrows in the left margin pick out features of special interest
(h)	indicate explosive particles in the middle of words (laughter, crying)
(())	transcriber's descriptions
£	utterance delivered with 'smiling' voice

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