**Poetic confluence: A sociological analysis of an enigmatic moment**

Forthcoming: *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives*

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**Abstract**

This paper examines a form of interpersonal relationality that takes the form of a speech event in which one participant produces a spoken turn that exhibits a poetic relationship to a co-participant's *unspoken* thoughts or *unarticulated* mental imagery. This is examined in relation to de Peyer’s (2016a) analysis of a speech error during therapy which appeared to reflect some form of telepathic communication between patient and analyst. Drawing from sociological studies of the organisation of everyday social interaction, I sketch some ways in which a sociological approach can contribute to psychoanalytic reflections on telepathic experiences between patient and analysts.

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**Introduction**

In a recent paper in this journal, de Peyer has drawn attention to uncanny or ostensibly telepathic communication between patient and analyst in psychoanalysis: instances of knowing, empathy and interpersonal attunement that seem to be unmediated by known communicative channels, and which therefore seem to violate known laws of physics (de Peyer, 2016a). Her discussion of telepathy is framed in relation to an unusual experience that she had with one of her patients, a woman called Jordan. A theme of the sessions was Jordan’s anxieties arising from conflict between a strong desire to attend a photographic retreat out of town in Santa Fe, and her reluctance to leave her husband, who had just recovered from chronic illness. This conflict was connected to issues from Jordan’s childhood (in a town not mentioned during the sessions), during which she was the victim of physical attacks from her violent older brother.

‘In the spring of 2009, an unbidden word popped out of my mouth during a session with Jordan….Never feeling safe in her own home, after school Jordan would escape to the safety of her friend’s Alicia’s house in the next town, where she would ‘hang out’ until it was safe enough to venture back into how own house.

Jordan was insisting that she could not go on the trip to Santa Fe: She would not leave George for a week, despite the fact that he was encouraging her to go. I felt my frustration mounting. She had coveted this photographic retreat for many months, had worked on themes of self-differentiation, yet was now about to succumb to old, self-destructive, relational patterns. She bemoaned that she just couldn’t do it! Santa Fe was just too far away.

“It’s not about the *geography*!” I finally declared. “You could always Skype or text with him from there….You could be in … ***Tuckahoe*** for that matter, and still talk it through with him!” (“Tuckahoe?” I asked myself. “Where did *that* name come from? I meant to say ‘Timbuktu.’”)

She turned away, and with a curl of her lip she said, “How did you know that’s where Alicia lived? Tuckahoe’s the name of the town I’ve been talking about here for the past half hour….” (De Peyer, 2016a:157-158; original emphasis.)

There is here a slip of the tongue: an intention to say one word, but the production of another; and it is through this slip that an apparently telepathic connection is expressed. De Peyer recognises the various rational explanations for this experience, but is swayed towards a paranormal interpretation by subsequent uncanny experiences with Jordan. Reflecting on her original experience with Jordan, she writes “Sceptical as I was about my Tuckahoe slip, I became increasingly convinced that it served a relational function between us – as an action of an unconscious communication” (2016a:158).

In the rest of her paper, de Peyer traces psychoanalytic interest in apparently anomalous forms of communication between patient and therapist, and reviews research and ideas from quantum mechanics, neuroscience and parapsychology. Her concern is to establish a *prima facie* case for the existence of what in parapsychology are known as psi phenomena, and to sketch the ways that recognition of the operation of psi may impact on therapeutic practice (see also, de Peyer, 2014).

In this paper, I present some observations on a phenomenon that has some overlaps with the word slip example that de Peyer describes. However, my perspective is not psychoanalytic, but social scientific, in that I draw from a long standing tradition of research on the social organisation of interpersonal interaction, in particular, the use of language in face to face conduct or in telephone conversations. There are some significant conceptual and empirical differences between the tradition I work in, and psychoanalytically informed interpretations of communication. For one, psychoanalysis is concerned with the mind and healing, sociology with collective action and its socially organised features. Another major difference is that psychoanalysts have acknowledged and tried to investigate puzzling communication in patient-analyst interaction (for example, Eisenbud, 1946; Fodor, 1947; Devereux, 1953; Balint, 1956; Dieckman, 1975; Silverman, 1988; Altman, 2007; Rosenbaum 2011; Burton, 2012). Psychoanalytic inquiry into telepathy may have been sporadic rather than sustained (Totton, 2003; Eshel, 2016), perhaps reflecting Freud’s own ambiguous position on the topic (Thurschwell, 1999; Campbell and Pile, 2010; Massicotte, 2014), but it is considerably more extensive than sociological research into the social implications of ostensibly telepathic communication. Yet sociology may have a contribution to make to psychoanalytic thinking on telepathy. It seems to me – albeit as an outsider to the psychoanalytic community – that the specific phenomenon de Peyer has reported, and the broader range of anomalous communications of which it is one type, require an interdisciplinary approach that takes account of cumulative findings from the sociological study of ordinary communication, or what has come to be known (in my field of research) as talk-in-interaction (Schegloff, 2007).

The primary objective of this paper is to sketch some common ground on which a collaborative dialogue may begin, focusing specifically on the word selection phenomenon examined by de Peyer. By describing the sociological approach to the phenomenon, I hope to illuminate some socially organised communicative competences that underpin therapeutic interaction, competences which are usually tacit and therefore not easily articulated. By identifying some generic properties of communication I hope to contribute to the broader psychoanalytic reflections in the relational community on the importance of understanding more enigmatic interactions in therapy (Aron, 2000; Mitchell, 2000). To anticipate my position in summary: I will argue that the phenomenon de Peyer identifies from her clinical experience is an example of a phenomenon of everyday talk-in interaction, which I term poetic confluence, which preserves mutual coordination between participants, normalises sensitive thoughts or imagery, and facilitates interpersonal alignment. First, though, it is necessary to outline the approach to interaction that informs the subsequent empirical remarks.

**Conversation analysis, turn design and word selection**

Since the 1960s, a growing number of scholars across the globe have begun to use a technique which has come to be known as conversation analysis, or CA. Empirical work is a qualitative but highly formal, detailed analysis of audio or tape recordings of interaction in conjunction with transcripts that capture the detail of talk often omitted from standard orthographic transcripts, such as emphasis, volume, speed of delivery, non verbal sounds (such as audible breathing) and periods of overlapping talk. There are a number of distinctive assumptions that inform empirical work in this tradition, but four are pertinent to this discussion. First, utterances in talk are taken to be a form of socially organised action, and not merely a medium for exchange of information (or indeed, unconscious processes) between discrete cognitive agents. That is, following speech act theory (Austin, 1962), the later Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953), utterances are examined as activities designed with respect to the sequence of activities to which they respond and in relation to the range of subsequent activities they make relevant (Schegloff, 2007). Second, empirical work proceeds on the assumption that talk displays an order that is independent of psychological variables (personality, intention, etc.), and does not merely reflect macro sociological variables (such as class). This means that analysis proceeds with no *a priori* assumptions or theoretical expectations (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984). Third: talk-in-interaction is inferentially rich, and turns may be built to circumscribe, advance or resist others’ tacit interpretations of us. Through the design of utterances, then, we manage a moral and normative order (Sacks, 1979). Finally, it is important to note that the reference to the design of utterances does not imply deliberation on the part of interactants; it merely points to technical features of turns at talk that reveal tacit, taken for granted communicative competences (Sacks, 1992: 11). Despite its name, CA is a technique that can be applied to any form of naturally occurring verbal interaction, both in mundane settings, such as every day conversation, and in more institutional or work related settings, such as courtrooms (Drew, 1992), doctors’ surgeries (Heritage and Robinson, 2006), news interviews (Clayman 1988), talk radio (Hutchby 1993) and indeed, various forms of psychotherapy (Forrester and Reason, 2006; Peräkylä, Antaki, Vehviläinin and Leudar, 2008; Weiste and Peräkylä, 2014). There are now a number of introductory texts on the approach and method of CA (for example, Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008; Sidnell, 2010), as well as a number of key collections of empirical papers (for example, Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Stivers, Mondada and Streensig, 2011).

A key focus for CA research is the way that utterances are produced to perform social actions. Consequently, empirical work examines turn design and word selection. To illustrate this aspect of CA research consider the following transcript, which is taken from a lecture by Harvey Sacks, the founder of CA (Sacks, 1992). It comes from a recording of a naturally occurring conversation between two teenage boys.

A: Corliss, the g-this chick I’m hanging around with now she’s real nice she’s got a

real good personality, she’s not - y’know she’s just a real cute kid

B: mm hm

A: And last night we went to the Mardi Gras together and we were both well we were both pooped because I- I ran in the track meet yesterday. And she- she’s in the girl’s tumbling team. I mean she doesn’t like it she’s just on it for the credits.

(From Sacks, 1992: 44)

A describes how his new girlfriend is in a tumbling team. However, he extends that utterance to offer an instrumental reason for her participation in the tumbling team: it is not an expression of her personality, but something she does to gain school credits. By offering an instrumental motivation for her participation in tumbling, the speaker displays his orientation to the possibility that being a member of the tumbling team may be interpreted by his co interactant as somehow ‘uncool’ (and in this context note that he does not offer a similarly instrumental reason for his participation in track athletics). His utterance thereby addresses and seeks to circumscribe the kinds of inferences about this person that his co-interactant might make. But there is a more subtle aspect to this little sequence. At the start of his first turn A says ‘Corliss, the g-this chick….’. I take it that the word beginning with ‘g’, but which is then abandoned, was in fact ‘girl’. So here we see word selection in operation: ‘girl’ is initiated, and then replaced with ‘chick’. There are clear inferential consequences. ‘Chick’ establishes a sexually desirable or ‘cool’ quality to his friend that ‘girl’ does not (and similar issues are relevant to the substitution of ‘*the* girl’ to ‘*this* chick’). This apparently minor moment of word selection performs delicate interpersonal work, in that he is portraying that he is the kind of person who goes out with ‘chicks’, and perhaps more important, that he is the kind of person ‘chicks’ go out with.

Space limitations prevent a lengthier illustration; the point is that there is substantial empirical documentation that delicate interpersonal work hinges on the way in which turns are built in social interaction. It is this feature of talk that provides the basis for a link to the phenomenon described by de Peyer. Before proceeding, however, it is important to note that the empirical observations that follow are not the product of a technical conversation analytic study. This is because the phenomenon has an introspective component that can only be recovered retrospectively. As CA works only with the details of talk that can be audio or tape recorded, it is used here only to inform some general observations.

**Poetics, speech errors and telepathy**

In the incident described by de Peyer, telepathic connection between patient and analyst is revealed through a word selection oddity: she meant to say Timbuktu but instead, said Tuckahoe. This echoes many features of a telepathic phenomenon described by the Hungarian psychoanalyst, István Hollós in 1933. Hollós’ work on telepathy in psychoanalysis is not as well known, probably because there is no published English translation of his work (although Devereux, 1953, did provide a detailed summary of the paper).

Hollós reports that he had been noticing telepathy-like events in his clinical practice for a period of 20 years, and had been taking detailed notes for over a decade. As a result he had a corpus of approximately 500 cases (some of which had been provided by colleagues aware of his interest in this topic). He acknowledges that he first interpreted these events as coincidences; but it was the regularity in circumstances of their appearance and their form that led him to reject the coincidental explanation. He argues that they tend to occur when he was thinking about something that affected him emotionally. Here is an example from his paper that illustrates overlaps with the case reported by de Peyer.

I was agitated because the next patient, who had pointed a revolver at me during the last session, was already in the waiting room. He was a hot-headed young man. Worried, I thought that he could shoot his gun in the other room in this very moment; in my imagination I already heard the shot. The female patient talked about her mother who does not leave her in peace and who walks around the flat furiously:  
 “Then she shoots around in the flat”, she says in Hungarian. However she uses the German word but in a butchered Hungarian phrase - “schiesszol ide - oda”. In correct Hungarian one can only say: she ran back and forth. (Hollós, 1933: 534)1

Hollós describes that he became distracted about the possibility that the next patient might discharge a firearm while waiting for his appointment; at that precise moment, the current patient uses the phrase ‘shoots around’ to describe how her mother behaves in her home. This seems to chime conspicuously with Hollós’ preoccupation with the possibility of gun related violence. However, he notes that the patient’s phrase is oddly constructed, in that it contains a linguistic error. It is, in his words, ‘butchered Hungarian’, in that there are elements of German contaminating a conventional Hungarian figure of speech. Although it is the patient’s phrase that seems to chime with the analysts’ thoughts, the parallels with the Tuckahoe/Timbuctu case seem clear: through a speech error, a phrase seems to display telepathic knowledge of a co- participants’ private and unstated concerns. This expression of ostensibly telepathically acquired knowledge through a speech error or conspicuously clumsy formulation is a common feature to many of the cases Hollós described.

Verbal interaction in psychoanalysis has an institutional goal: the identification and amelioration of psychological difficulties by reference to theories about mind, personality and the origins of mental disorder. In this, it is unlike ordinary conversation, in which co-participants are not motivated by work related tasks or agenda. However, like all forms of institutional talk, communication in psychoanalysis rests on communicative practices that have their home environment in everyday talk-in-interaction, such as the management of turn taking, the identification and correction of misunderstandings, the production of assessments and subsequent responses, and so on. The communicative competences of ordinary conversation therefore have a foundational status with respect to more constrained and task related practices in institutional settings (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Consequently, it is no surprise that the telepathic speech error phenomenon described by Hollós and de Peyer also occurs in mundane conversation.

In 2003 the eminent conversation analyst Emanuel Schegloff published a paper in which he described a phenomenon he called the ESP pun (Schegloff, 2003). This is a speech event in ordinary conversation in which one participant produces a spoken turn that inadvertently exhibits a poetic relationship to a co-participant's unspokenthoughts or unarticulated mental imagery. A key feature of this phenomenon is that the turns that seems to embody telepathic insight to a co-participant’s mental world are in various ways conspicuous, in that they are clumsily formulated, or contain a speech error, or ill fitted to the context. Here is an example that happened to Schegloff during a conversation with a friend.

I am visiting with friends in England, talking about the behavior of fans at sporting events. He is comparing cricket and football (soccer) in England. I am thinking of telling, when the turn is mine, about the soccer game my wife and I attended in Campinas, Brazil, after which the fans set fire to newspapers in the stands. My friend is telling me that families go together to cricket matches but not to football, and says "They've burnt off families going." Subsequently he says that he "flashed on" the phrase "burnt off" a few moments before using it, which would be just as I was forming up my next tellable. And, it turns out, this is not an ordinary usage of his, and is unidiomatic in context. (Schegloff, 2003: 538)

‘Burnt off’ is not a phrase conventionally used to describe how people might be deterred from participating in social activities; it does, however, plainly echo the topic of the utterance that Schegloff was planning on his next turn.

In Schegloff’s report on the ESP pun there is no indication that he was aware of Hollós’ paper, nor, indeed, any of the many other papers in the psychoanalytic literature on ostensibly telepathic moments in therapeutic interaction. It is, then, an independent verification of the robustness of the way that, on occasions, speech peculiarities may be the vehicle for the expression of telepathically acquired information. His examination of his instances of ESP puns is not concerned with underlying psychological dynamics; rather his preliminary observations of the features of the phenomenon reflect his interest in the sociological analysis of talk as social action. This is a line of inquiry that I have been developing since becoming aware of the phenomenon (and experiencing it myself). I prefer the term poetic confluence rather than ESP pun (Wooffitt, 2018). This is because the reference to puns is unnecessarily limiting, and it is problematic for many reasons to brand a phenomenon with such a controversial term as ‘ESP’. The use of the term poetic confluence is not intended to avoid the apparently anomalous features of the phenomenon, but to emphasise the socially organised features of the interpersonal relationality which it expresses.

**Poetic confluence and mutual coordination**

A recurrent characteristic of poetic confluence is that the participant whose thoughts are subsequently captured in another’s turn reports being distracted from their co participant by their inner preoccupations. So, Hollós was distracted by anxieties about his next patient, not the patient he was with. And in Schegloff’s case, he was focussing in what he would say next. Here are some more example from my corpus (all names have been anonymised).

I also had another paranormal pun, while I remember, my friends B, K and I were talking about a skiing holiday B had been on in Easter, while talking about what a nice time she had, I got an image of me skiing down the hill and breaking my leg in some horrible way, which made me do a bit of a shudder, at which point my friend K said, 'SNAP' really loudly, about another part of the story I had missed, which brought me out of my day dream! I'm not sure if that's a very good one though...

Here the reporter describes how images of a skiing accident led her to disattend momentarily, to her friend’s ongoing story, and thus miss out on some substantive detail.

In my corpus there are other examples of arresting mental imagery or sudden thoughts:

- 'At this point, I had an image of a sheep in my head, as his hair used to be curly and soft, like sheep's wool'

- 'At that moment, prompted by the discussion of the cost of our renovation, the thought/notion/sense flashed that I had no money to buy furniture let alone speakers…'

- 'At that point in time I had a vivid mental image of a close up of a collie's black and white fur…'

- '…the thought flashed in my mind 'entertainment' …'.

There are other reports of daydreaming, minds wondering, and the onset of inwardly focused reverie. What is key here is that reporters describe how the phenomenon of poetic confluence jolted them from their inwardly focused preoccupations and back to the here-and-now world of their on-going interaction with others, often with a degree of shock occasionally likened to a jolt. The relevance of these reports, and this re-orientation to the moment, will be discussed later.

**Poetic confluence and the normative moral order**

The sociologist Erving Goffman was perhaps the first systematically to focus on the subtle interpersonal dynamics of everyday talk. His empirical work outlined the web of norms, expectation and obligations on which social interaction rests, and on the basis of which we draw inferences about the propriety or impropriety of other’s utterances and action, and on the basis of which others may draw inferences about our own conduct. In his essay on face work, he refers to the kinds of interpersonal sensitivities that can destabilise an encounter, and in response to which we have to maintain various forms of avoidance, resistance or management (Goffman, 1967). He writes of the 'judgemental contingencies of the situation' (1967: 31) and notes how the smallest, almost unnoticeable features of interaction 'can drench…talk with judgemental significance' (1967: 33). The management of judgemental contingencies is a feature of many instances of poetic confluence. This is because the imagery or thoughts that are subsequently the target of a poetic turn seem to have some personal significance for the speaker, or would constitute an inferentially sensitive disclosure were it expressed verbally. The subsequent poetic turn seems to offer a formulation or version of that imagery that, in various ways, modulates, neutralises or detoxifies those personal relevancies, or the extreme or evocative manner in which they are realised in thought or imagery. The Hollós example is a case in point: the imagery of a patient discharging a firearm is both striking and troubling. However, the patient’s report that her mother ‘shoots around’ her home captures the ‘shooting’ element of the imagery while using it to convey minor annoyance. The referent of ‘shooting’ is transposed from ‘gun/shooting’ to ‘mode of walking’ and thereby its more personally troubling associations are neutralised. Here is a further example that occurred during a talk by a visiting academic to a small group of graduate students and researchers.

The experience happened in today's informal discussion with a visiting scholar - Beth Gordon. Beth was talking about the professional/personal dilemma of being a Reiki practitioner in her personal life whilst working in a post-structuralist cultural studies department in her professional life. At some point during the talk, I started to think about the one time I had had Reiki treatment. The therapist had picked up some problem in my...uhm...middle area (?!). This was 'correct' in that during my fourth pregnancy I had suffered with Symphysis Pubic Dysfunction (SPD). This is a condition in which the connective tissue that holds the two pubic bones together over-softens, making movement difficult. During Beth's talk, I had a very strong visual image of two bones being separated by a large gap - the image was very vivid and an exaggerated version of SPD. The image was accompanied by a strange sensation of my head being open - almost that my thoughts were visible to others. At the moment I had this image, I heard Beth say '...you know, I make no bones about that'. The coincidence struck me immediately. Unfortunately, I had been too lost in my own thoughts to hear what had led up to Beth using this phrase. It is worth noting, though, that later, on hearing the story, she spontaneously said that it was not a phrase that she uses.

Here the reporter is recalling a medical condition following the birth of one of her children. The author’s reference to ‘my...uhm...middle area (?!)’ explicitly acknowledges the intimate and sensitive nature of the condition. The phrase 'make no bones' is a literal allusion to the reporter's evocative and exaggerated imagery of her experience of Symphysis Pubis Dysfunction. It is a phrase conventionally used to point to a person's honesty or principles, and as such, it glosses over the more evocative features of the reporter's imagery, and its associated physiology and medical implications

There are numerous studies of conversational interaction that show how turns at talk can be designed to address extreme, traumatic or exaggerated claims in such a way as to ‘scale down’ the implied seriousness or import (Heritage and Watson, 1979; Drew, 1987; Jefferson, 2005; Antaki, 2007). Often, reformulations of another’s talk can have a preventative or remedial function (Goffman, 1971), in that they work to preserve the other’s situational propriety. Poetically allusive turns can serve a similar function: although they do not address normative slips in public behaviour, they seem to target sensitive private thoughts or highly personal matters.

This echoes a very consistent set of arguments from the psychoanalytic literature, that memories or thoughts about emotionally charged or affective events are susceptible to telepathic communication (for example, Ehrenwald, 1956; Eshel, 2006; Rosenbaum, 2011; Burton, 2012). And this in turn reflect Freud’s observation from his own clinical experience that it is 'emotionally coloured recollections' that are most susceptible to unconscious communication and transference (Campbell and Pile 2010: 419).

**Poetic confluence, affiliation and alignment**

In everyday interpersonal interaction, participants will in various ways strive to develop and maintain broadly positive stances towards co participants (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks, 1977). Establishing alignment and affiliation is a key task in the achievement of interpersonal harmony (Stivers, 2008). Many instances of poetic confluence seem to act as displays of interpersonal affiliation or alignment. Here are two examples, both of which relate to a stressful property conversion project with which the reporter was involved.

Following a clear out of old equipment from the old social psychology lab, I had acquired three audio speakers and had them stacked in my office. Some days after acquiring them, X - who had helped me check if they still worked when I first acquired them - came to see if they were still in my room. I told him they would be there until August, until the hall was complete. X queried 'hall', and I explained that my partner and I were renovating a church hall. He immediately assumed that this was for some musical or entertainment purpose because he began to tell me about a sound mixing desk he had stored in his garage. (Before his academic career, X was a professional singer, possibly explaining why his first assumption was to hear the report of a hall conversion as relating to conversion to a venue, rather than a home). It sounded like it was a prelude to an offer of the desk. I inferred his error in assuming it was a renovation towards a venue, I told him that it was a renovation for domestic use. And he said 'ah' and had clearly now 'got it' (and realised that he had previously got it wrong). We then got onto the topic of building renovations, and from there we got to the topic of why I had reclaimed these speakers for my new home, and I said that we we're saving money, at which point he told his own renovation costs story, reporting that he was 'maxxed out' on all his cards after some work on his own house. I brought the stream of conversation to a close by returning to and declining his offer of a mixing desk by making a joke of it, saying something like 'I don't think [my partner] would take too kindly to a mixing desk in the living room'. At that moment, prompted by the discussion of the cost of our renovation, and sensitive to the possibility that others might assume that, just because we were renovating a large building, we were somehow wealthy, the thought/notion/sense flashed in my mind that I had no money to buy furniture for our new home, let alone speakers, At just that moment X said "I could furnish you with a mixing desk" now explicitly making the offer of the desk (but in a way that exhibited that it would not be taken up - it was more of a 'well, it's there if you want it' kind of way). I picked up on the oddness of the word 'furnish' as a way of formulating an offer, and asked X why he had used that word, but he didn't know.

Here the first syllable of 'furniture' is incorporated into the now-explicit donation of the sound equipment, articulated conspicuously as an offer to 'furnish' it to the reporter. The following case is also articulated in talk but suggests that the verbal poetic convergence may be supplemented by an embodied component.

My partner and I had arranged to meet Francois, the wood craftsman, at the hall at 8 am to discuss our ideas and requirements for a staircase which he was to design and build. He did not turn up. While we were waiting, becoming increasingly annoyed, my partner and I made some fairly ripe stereotypical remarks: that he will turn up on a bicycle, with a bag of onions, that kind of thing. After an hour of waiting around, Francois had still not arrived, or called, and we had to leave for work, now entertaining the idea of contacting someone else to do the stairs. We were both very frustrated by Francois' no show: apart from wasting our time, we knew that finding a new craftsman would be difficult so close to the end of the project, and his estimated fee had been very reasonable, and managing the cost of the project was a constant source of stress for us both. As we were leaving I made a jokey remark to Neil, the site foreman, that eventually led to spate of interaction that centred on Francois’ nationality: I said to Neal, if a Frenchman turns up, tell him he’s just lost a big job. Neal said ‘muppet’ [*used* *in the UK vernacularly as* *a derogatory term, implying foolishness - Author*] and I said “Le muppet’ with French pronunciation, ie, not pronouncing the ‘et’, but saying ‘ay’.

I arrived at work, extremely aggravated. At about 10 am, X [a colleague] came to speak to me. My door was slightly ajar but my back was turned to it. He knocked, I turned round, he entered the room and said, theatrically, ‘Monsieur’. Before he had chance to ask me what he wanted to ask me I asked him why he had selected that term of address; he said he didn’t know why. He hadn't addressed me like this ever before [or since]; he is not French, nor had he just been to France. But it seemed perfectly fitted to my pre-occupation with Francois and the way that his nationality had become invoked in a series of banterish exchanges with Neil.

Here the other's articulation does not trade off a set of concurrent thoughts or images; however, it is clearly connected to a set of concerns with which the reporter had been preoccupied for some time that day. There is another curious feature to this case. The reporter had been focused on the possible consequences following the failure of a French craftsman to keep an important meeting. The colleague's decision to speak to the reporter, and his use of a French address term to announce himself, seems conspicuously to address that issue: the arrival of a man speaking French to see a person preoccupied with the absence of a Frenchman. In this sense, the colleague's entrance in the room and use of French is an embodied expression of poetic convergence.

In both cases, the conspicuous word selection (and in the latter case, the overtly theatrical entrance to an office) seems to relate to the other’s current anxieties, but in a wholly sympathetic and affiliative manner. This is not only achieved in the way that the word selection indexes the other’s private concerns. It is also reflected in the kinds of activities or proposals enacted through those word selections. In the first case, the co-participant offers to ‘furnish’ the reporter with a gift. Not only is it a pun on anxieties about not being able to afford furniture, but it is produced as part of an offer of help, an explicit act of generosity, seemingly in response to unstated anxieties about money problems. In the second case, ‘Monsieur’ clearly indexes concerns about a French craftsman. Moreover, in that French vocabulary is used to announce an arrival, it stands as direct compensation for the precise cause of those concerns: the failure of a French man to turn up for an important meeting.

These are affiliative actions achieved through conspicuous turn design and, in the second case, also through embodied in exaggerated movement. But their targets are another’s internal and longstanding anxieties, either fleetingly realised in unbidden mental imagery or manifest in lingering disappointing at the (in)actions of another.

There are sufficient consistencies across my corpus, and the collections presented Hollós and Schegloff to stand as a *prima facia* case that, on occasions in everyday conversation, ill formed utterances, or conspicuous word selection, or explicit speech errors, act as vehicles for the expression of telepathic awareness of a co-interactant’s unarticulated mental preoccupation. In which case, it is likely that the Timbuktu/Tuckahoe example reported by de Peyer is one example of the broader phenomenon of poetic confluence. It is clearly an error, as opposed to a clumsy or conspicuous formulation, such as the use of ‘furnish’ to offer musical equipment; however, it echoes some of the more poetic relationships between spoken utterances and private inner experience from other examples: they both begin with the same sound, and they contain the same number of syllables.

**Discussion: implications, connections and possibilities**

Poetic confluence has social functions in its home environment of everyday conversational interaction. It works to restore mutual coordination between participants in interaction; it detoxifies or normalises another’s sensitive or inappropriate thoughts or imagery, and it is a mechanism for acts of affiliation and alignment. This is not to deny its psychoanalytic significance in therapy. One of my key arguments is that this form of ostensibly telepathic communication reflects routine interpersonal concerns that are mediated through ordinary forms of talk. It is merely an extension of communicative resources that we have for managing interpersonal relationships and the social organisation of talk in interaction through which they are conducted. And in the same way that, for example, the organisation of question-answer sequences are modified in institutional contexts to allow participants to address work related tasks, so too we should expect poetic confluence to be adapted to the therapeutic context to allow the participants to address professional, psychodynamic and relational matters relevant to that context. However, I think the argument that poetic confluence emerges primarily from everyday interaction does mandate examination of the phenomenon that acknowledges its perhaps foundational social functions.

The relational approach exemplifies the claim that psychoanalysis is the 'science of the intersubjective' (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984: 41), in which the idea that the analyst is a 'blank screen or mirror, functioning to observe and interpret the contents of the patient's mind' (Aron, 1996: 189) is rejected in favour of a focus on the interplay and relationality of the patient's and analyst's subjective worlds. However, intersubjectivity is not restricted to therapy: how we know the other – how we recognise the moment by moment relevancies in our dealings with others – is fundamental to all forms of social interaction. I think relational approaches will benefit from a greater awareness of the everyday communicative competences through which we achieve and maintain intersubjectivity in everyday social interaction. There is evidence that poetic confluence is just one of those communicative competences that enable us to negotiate our self in concert with others. Knowing how it operates in everyday life provides the basis for identifying what specifically is distinctive about its emergence in the psychoanalytic hour. And this in turn may have practical benefits.

In this final section I will sketch some ways in which - to this outsider’s eye - awareness of the generic social organisation of poetic confluence (and related phenomena) may enhance psychoanalytic understanding of the emergence of enigmatic communication in therapy, and contribute to boarder theoretical debates about its nature. 3 To frame this discussion, I have selected two themes that are raised by the two commentaries of de Peyer’s (2016) paper that were published in the same volume. My objective is not to engage in an intellectual imperialism, in which one form of explanation is offered as a substitute for another, in this case, a sociological account for a psychoanalytic one. More, it is to propose possible grounds for discussion and rapprochement regarding a human experience that has both psychoanalytic and sociological properties.

*Poetic confluence and attention management*

In his response to de Peyer, Cambray (2016) frames the kind of phenomenon described by de Peyer as ‘unpredictable’, an example of ‘seemingly impulsive unconscious communication’ (Cambray, 2016: 176). However, the analytic observations reported above suggest that poetic confluence may have robust properties, especially with respect to antecedent interpersonal conditions out of which it arises, and, crucially which it is designed to address. This is because it is a device for managing one participant’s attention to the other.

Talk-in-interaction is an extraordinarily delicate activity that requires participants to be mutually oriented to one another. Participants need to ensure that co-participants are paying attention to ongoing talk such that they can anticipate forthcoming moments when turn exchange would be appropriately launched (and therefore not interruptive), identify the kinds of turn that would be appropriately produced in response to an ongoing turn, can locate the earliest moment in an ongoing turn to register misunderstanding, and so on. That is, mutual coordination is fundamental to the smooth progression of conversational interaction. Consequently there are various communicative practices involving gaze, bodily orientation and turn design, through which a co-participants’ mutual orientation can be invited and maintained (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974; Goodwin, 1981).

One of the social functions of poetic confluence may be to re engage a co-participant’s attention to the ongoing interaction at a point where their mind has wandered. Often reporters explicitly note how a turn that chimes conspicuously with their current preoccupations restored their attention back to the moment. Here is an example that comes from a business meeting.

I was sitting in on a project planning meeting for the upcoming quarter. A few other developers were in the room, and our business and tech management were on video conference from our main office. Our manager got to a point of talking about continuity of business on a global scale, and asked us to look into the possibility of planning a strategy for shifting the physical locations of where our programs run in case of disaster. He used the far east, specifically Seoul, as an example. This was about the time that North and South Korea were close to going to war, with shots being fired by both sides. At that point an image got into my head of a 'mushroom cloud'. I was snapped out of this morbid vision, when I heard my boss saying "control the fallout". The usual technical term being overflow or failover in this situation.

Here the reporter describes that an image ‘got into my head’, a formulation that ascribes an agency to the intrusive imagery, and which thereby signals momentary disattention to the external world. He uses the phrase ‘snapped out’ to describe how the poetically relevant turn initiated a shift in his attentional consciousness from his internal reveries to the interaction in the room.

Ogden argues that the analyst’s reveries can have clinical significance, in that they ‘are not simply reflections of inattentiveness... rather, this psychological activity represents symbolic and proto-symbolic (sensation-based) forms given to the unarticulated (and often not yet felt) experiences of the analysand as they are taking form in the intersubjectivity of the analytic pair’ (Ogden 1994; 12). However, in some cases, analyst themselves articulate that mind wandering is simply just that: a momentary lack of attention of the kind we experience routinely in social interaction. It is in these cases that we find support for the argument that poetic confluence can restore mutual in therapy. It is not uncommon to read how telepathic experiences seemed to occur when the analyst’s mind had wandered from what their patient had been saying. For example, Hollós observed that the patient’s ostensibly telepathic utterances seemed to allude to a thought or wish ‘which has little to do with what the patient is saying at the time' (Devereux, 1953: 201). Similarly, in describing the context in which a patient asked a question that seemed to exhibit telepathic knowledge of the analyst's preoccupation with a letter, Hitschmann wrote that

'…on this occasion… I positively yearned to wind up this letter business... I was impatient because time had been lost. I also had some guilt feelings because I had done an injustice to the patient, who had a right to the analyst's undivided attention. In addition to feeling guilty, I also harboured the hope that the patient would not notice my lack of attention. Hence, when the patient suddenly asked a question about the matter which preoccupied the analyst….the analyst had the feeling that, somehow or other, he had been 'found out' or 'caught in the act.' (Hitschmann, 1953: 129-130).

Hitschmann’s sense of being ‘caught out’ clearly indexes the underlying normative understanding that one has an obligation to attend to co-participants in social interaction. Poetic confluence both asserts this obligation and provides a mechanism by which mutual coordination can be restored. Indeed, it is possible to find instances in the psychoanalytic literature of analysts noting precisely this feature of ostensibly telepathic moments with patients. For example, in his report of personal experiences, Balint observes that

'Usually the patient was in a state of intensive positive dependent transference, which however was not fully appreciated and understood by the analyst. The cause of this lack of appreciation and understanding was without exception some transitory preoccupation on the analyst's [Balint’s] part, which at the material time absorbed a greater part of his attention that was good for the progress of the analysis. The patient in his helpless dependence reacted to this by renewed efforts to win the analyst's full attention, and in this very tense situation, bordering on despair, apparently telepathic and clairvoyant phenomena occurred… The result was always a surprise, almost a shock, to the analyst, *and had the effect of bringing him round*….' (Balint, 1956: 32; emphasis added).

The examples from the psychoanalytic literature point to a range of psychological and affective consequences from the recognition of being ‘caught out’. But there is also the interpersonal consequence. Poetic confluence seems to emerge from, and address, potentially problematic moments in the interaction between patient and analyst. Mutual co-ordination - a fundamental requirement for intelligible interaction of any kind - is restored precisely at a point when it has lapsed. There are, then, recurrent antecedent interpersonal conditions that make the encounter susceptible to poetic confluence. Further research on the phenomenon of poetic confluence may identify the gradual onset of disattention in therapeutic interaction associated with the onset of poetic confluence, providing analysts with a better understanding of the interpersonal mechanisms through which, and the moments in which, their own conscious states seem on occasion to be enigmatically interconnected to those of the patient.

*From quantum physical analogies to practices of interaction*

There may be a more pragmatic reason why relational psychoanalysts interested in telepathy should look to sociological studies of communication: as a grounded, empirical alternative to the turn to quantum physics to provide a conceptual framework to understand patient-analyst telepathy.

In a number of papers by psychoanalysts, relational and otherwise, there has been a turn to the mysteries of quantum mechanics to provide some form of intellectual framework which gives coherence to the strange communication phenomena they observe in their clinical work. (For example, Ehrenwald 1956; Weiler, 1967; Field, 1991; Altman, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2011.) This is a theme developed by de Peyer. In trying to grasp the ‘deep level of interconnectedness’ between patient and analyst implied by telepathic moments, she asks ‘If particles in the quantum world communicate instantaneously with one another, jumping from one place to another without seeming to need to travel in between, would it not follow that patients’ and therapists’ minds would be capable to doing the same thing?’ (de Peyer, 2016a:164). In her response to de Peyer’s paper, Eshel invites parallels with the phenomenon of entanglement between subatomic particles, and makes brief reference to parallels between particle connectedness described in quantum mechanics and the kind of interpersonal connectedness suggested by telepathic moments in therapy (Eshel, 2016: 189; see also, 2006, 2010). Cambray, too, situates the phenomenon of enigmatic communication in relation to the quantum mechanical accounts of synchronicity. These are themes he has developed elsewhere (for example, Cambray, 2011). And psychoanalysts are not alone: parapsychologists and scientists sympathetic to the existence of psi phenomena often seek explanations for parapsychological phenomena from quantum mechanics (Radin, 2006; Jahn and Dunne, 2011). Even quantum physicists who are sceptical of the existence of psi will occasionally acknowledge that, if it exists, it is likely to be explicable in terms of subatomic processes and relationships identified by quantum physics (Rosenblum and Kuttner, 2007: 254-5).

However promising quantum physics may appear (and it does seem to suggest one possible physical mechanism by which telepathy could occur), I think it premature to invoke it in discussions of uncanny interpersonal processes that occur in therapy (and indeed, in everyday life). This is because quantum physics is extraordinarily complex, resting on mathematical formulations and conceptual frameworks few can easily grasp. It is not clear how the idea of particle entanglement (amongst others) could possibly apply to physical systems such as human bodies that seem to operate quite happily under more Newtonian mechanical principles.

Quantum theories, therefore, are a source of provocative analogies, but, at the moment, not much else. In her classic historical account of the emergence of field theory and action at a distance in physics, Hesse (1962) writes specifically about the relevance of ideas from quantum physics with respect to parapsychological research, but her remarks apply equally well to parallel discussions in the psychoanalytic literature.

It has been pointed out that physics offers the following analogies with *ψ*-phenomena: a ‘loosening’ of causality….time reversals and action faster than light, instantaneous spread and collapse of the wave functions according to the probability interpretation, and non-localisation of particles in time and space. But….many of the suggestions in quantum theory are themselves problematic, for example, the type of causality is not agreed, and interpretation of the wave functions in terms of probability is non relativistic and is modified by relativistic field theory. In any case it is not clear how these isolated analogies would help provide a theory of *ψ*-phenomena unless there were closer analogies between the whole structure of quantum field theory and parapsychology, and…the analogies are not close enough to permit a simple, *non-ad-hoc* theory of *ψ*-phenomena in field language. (Hess, 1962: 301-2, original emphasis.)

If psychoanalysts want to find an intellectual framework to help them understand telepathic communication in their analytic practices, then I would suggest sociological studies of everyday verbal communication. In that literature, there are extensive, cumulative, detailed empirical investigations of the delicate interpersonal processes we negotiate through talk. It provides a rich empirical foundation for our understanding of the way social action is conducted at a tacit or implicit level; and it examines the ways that talk emerges as an independent, collaborative production, mirroring discussion of emergence that are to be found in the relational literature. These are empirical resources which psychoanalysts (and psychotherapists more generally) are beginning to draw from to understand non enigmatic communication between patient and analyst (for example, Avdi, 2008; Buchholtz, Spiekermann and Kächele, 2015; Peräkylä, 2011; Weiste and Peräkylä, 2014): why not see if they can help understand enigmatic communication also?

Here is a concrete example. In her commentary, Eshel provides an elegant re-analysis of the word selection error with which de Peyer started her paper. She argues that it represented the patient’s deep-rooted anxiety about the potential absence of the analyst in her life that would be entailed should she take a planned visit out of town. This ‘traumatic deep yearning for the analyst’ (Eshel, 2016: 193) found its ‘voice’ in the telepathic moment. The idea of the voice of trauma is both poetic and evocative, and captures something of clear therapeutic significance for the patient and analyst. If my analysis of poetic confluence is right, then it has clear relevance here. The phenomenon of poetic confluence is an interactional practice. As an interactional practice, it is a communicative competence that constitutes part of the 'interactional substrate’ of therapeutic interaction: the ‘basic skills for engaging meaningfully' in that context (Maynard and Shaeffer, 2002: 9). We can, then, begin to see the specific interpersonal practices through which the voice of trauma may speak, not as an analogy, but in situated practices that have consequences for the subsequent trajectory of the therapeutic interaction; consequences that, like the practices themselves, can be described and analysed. More than that: we can perhaps begin to appreciate the range and timbre of the voice of trauma. Poetic confluence performs specific social functions such as the maintenance of mutual co-ordination, the normalisation or detoxification of inferentially sensitive thoughts or imagery, and the establishment of interpersonal alignment and affiliation. We have, then, a granular and detailed understanding of the voice of trauma as it works in specific, real life moments of therapeutic interaction.

One of de Peyer’s arguments is that acknowledging uncanny moments of ostensibly telepathic communication such as the one she describes in her paper can help the therapist and patient: it can have direct therapeutic benefit (de Peyer, 2016b). This is an argument echoed by other psychoanalysts and psychotherapists who recognise that sometimes their communications with their patients exhibit transpersonal or paranormal dimensions. Their use of self as a therapeutic tool may be enhanced by deeper awareness of hitherto unexplored communicative competences and practices (Allick, 2003; Burton, 2012; Schneider and Grady, 2014). Recognition of the broader social functions of a phenomenon such as poetic confluence can only sharpen sensitivity to the subtle interpersonal modulations in the complex dynamic between analyst and patient.

**Conclusion**

Human life is complex and multi-faceted, and the disciplinary silos in which the human sciences tend to operate are as much organisational and historic conveniences as they are a reflection of sharply demarcated objective properties of the social world. We are at the same time psychological beings in a socially organised world. Interdisciplinarity is essential - unavoidable, even - if we are to fully grasp the dynamics of the human condition, especially something as profoundly puzzling as the degree of interpersonal relationality suggested by instances of poetic confluence. But this is a position that is recognised, perhaps implicitly, in the literature of relational and intersubjective psychoanalysis. As Stolorow has written

'psychological phenomena, including even unconscious conflicts and defenses, are understood as properties of an intersubjective system…taking form at the interface of interacting subjectivities. Inexorably, we are led to question the very concept of an isolated mind or psyche.' (Stolorow, 1991: 176)

Interaction, intersubjectivity, the view of the mind as a property not of the individual but of social relationships: when considered in relation to something as mysterious as ostensibly telepathic communication in therapy, Stolorow’s statement practically mandates a joint psychoanalytic and sociological project.

**Acknowledgements**

The research reported in this paper was supported by a Bial Foundation Bursary for Scientific Research, no 51/12. I would like to thank the reviewers of earlier drafts of this paper; their comments helped sharpen the argument considerably.

**Footnotes**

1 The paper by Hollós was translated by my research student, Dr Germaine Stockbridge, a German national living in the UK since 2009.

2 A curious feature of the phenomenon is that once people re aware it, they are likely to notice it happening to them. Schegloff’s corpus contains many cases from colleagues and students with whom he discussed his initial observations; most of the examples in my corpus have come to me in the same way. It is possible, then, that having read this article, readers of this journal may experience something like poetic confluence. In which case – and forgive the blatant pitch for data – I would be enormously grateful if you could send me a description of what happened via email ([robin.woofitt@york.ac.uk](mailto:robin.woofitt@york.ac.uk)). All personal and identifying details will be anonymised in any subsequent academic or public dissemination.

3 Should readers think that I am making a rather unidirectional case for the value of sociology to psychoanalysis, it is important to stress that I think that many ideas from relational psychoanalysis could be enormously influential in sociology too, particularly with respect to recent explorations of the role of interiority in social life, research on subjectivity, the study of affect and embodiment, attempts to move away from theoretical and empirical individualism found in discussions of field theories. However, space prevents a discussion here; besides, these are issues that really should be addressed to sociological audiences.

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