**Small stories with big implications: identity, relationality and aesthetics in accounts of enigmatic communication**

**Robin Wooffitt**

**Alicia Fuentes-Calle**

**Rebecca Campbell**

**Department of Sociology**

**University of York, UK**

In this paper we examine reports of poetic confluence, in which one person’s utterances seems to connect with another; unspoken or unarticulated thoughts. We argue that analysis of these narratives can be investigated as a window onto social reality, and as a site in which social realities are produced, especially with respect to identity work. We show how this approach complements and develops from the small story paradigm in narrative inquiry. In our discussion we try to identify common principles that may underpin work on both the content of poetic confluence narratives, and the work done in the features of those narratives.

**Keywords** poetic confluence; small stories; identity work; anecdote; parallelism

**Introduction**

In this paper we report findings from an analysis of short written accounts of apparently telepathic moments that occur in everyday life. In these experiences, one person’s spoken utterance seems to allude to the others’ unarticulated thoughts about, or concerns with, a different topic. Here is an example, reported by the psychiatrist Jan Ehrenwald.[[1]](#footnote-1)

One of my patients, a man of twenty-four, repeatedly mentioned *Miss B*. whose faithlessness, he said, was the chief cause of his depression. He never gave me her full name. One day he recounted a dream which again centred on the person of the faithless *Miss B*. His account was highly emotional. I tried to summarise the dream: "There is one block of facts…" I started to say when the patient butted in with visible indignation. "Please don’t mention this word….her name is *Miss Block*, I hate to hear it."

I had never before used the phrase "block of facts" in a similar context. Indeed, its use at that moment was quite out of place and might well be attributed to a slip of the tongue - but to one occasioned by repressed content originating from the patient. (Ehrenwald, 1955, p. 89)

This example exhibits features of an experience we have identified as poetic confluence, in which an utterance playfully and symbolically reflects the phenomenal consciousness of another co-present person. In the case above, the phrase “block of facts” is conspicuous in that it is not a common phrase, and almost clumsy in context, yet it seems to capture a previously undisclosed detail of the patient’s primary concerns at that moment in the therapeutic hour. We describe in more detail the properties of this phenomenon later in the paper.

Research on poetic confluence so far has been focused on what these experiences tell us about forms of human relationality that have hitherto been left relatively unexamined in the social sciences, though which connect with work on topics such as interpersonal resonance (Miller, 2015), affect (Brennan, 2004; Blackman, 2012) and the porousness of self as explored in relational psychoanalysis (Redman, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2011; Burton, 2012: De Peyer, 2016). We have been – so far – concerned with the bigger story of human social interaction that this kind of story suggests.

But it is a story, albeit a short one, related in a book, constructed with a view to the likely or intended audience, in which discursive terms, vocabularies, genres, characters have been selected or included (or not). Like any story, then, this particular story can be analysed to identify how it reflects particular conventions, and how it is composed through communicative structures or devices that attend to the context and moment of its production for an audience. Although it is a small story, however, it has potentially big implications about the range of human communication and the reach of interpersonal relationality. The controversial nature of the ostensibly paranormal features of the experience mandate us to consider if this story, and others which exhibit the same properties, capture objective and recurrent aspects of communication. Potentially, the phenomenon of poetic confluence speaks to what we know of humans as a species. To demur from examining what these stories can tell us about ourselves would be an abnegation of scientific curiosity.

While we have an opportunity to explore foundational aspects of human experience, there is, however, a tension between analysing stories such as these as productions that *constitute* a social reality, and which, cumulatively, *provide a window* onto a feature of social reality. This tension echoes a theme in the study of stories (and accounts more generally) that has been given prominence by the recent arguments for the analysis of small stories (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006). In this paper we first describe how our work complements and develops small story research. We then outline the two analytic trajectories we have taken, and describe an attempt to identify overarching commonalities between these two very different kinds of analysis.

Small stories research developed from the writings of Georgakopoulou (2006; 2007) and Bamberg (2006; see also Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). What is significant for our analysis is that small story research focuses on underrepresented kinds of discursive acts, such as the momentary telling and reportings that are common in storytelling in conversational interaction. As such, it is offered as an alternative to the convention in narrative analysis of examining solicited and often lengthy accounts of a personal history or life experiences.

Our work on poetic confluence accounts shares many features with small story research. There is overlap with the focus on small story work on what might be called reports of ephemeral or transient events. This concern with “breaking news” is illustrated in Georgakopoulou’s (2008) analysis of classroom interactions; her analysis focuses on interactional negotiations mediated through the telling of small stories between female pupils. Watson’s examination of the discourse of student teachers also demonstrates how developing professional identities are negotiated in what she calls “ephemeral narratives” (Watson, 2007, p. 371). The experience of poetic confluence, in which a turn at talk seems to connect conspicuously and mysteriously with another’s unspoken thoughts or imagery, is itself a fleeting, transitory experience: it is of the moment, and then gone. Nor, does it seem, they can be elicited; they are spontaneous moments that emerge unbidden from the trajectory of mundane social interaction.

As Watson’s (2007) study illustrates, a core focus of empirical research is the way that small stories are vehicles for a range of identity work. Spreckels’ (2008) analysis of gender and group negotiation, Juzwick and Ives’ (2010) examination of teacher identity as a situated accomplishment, and Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s (2008) more conceptually oriented work on the discourse identity of tellership, each reflect a concern with what is called identity analysis (Georgakopoulou, 2006; 2015). Identity work is also central to small stories of the kind we examine here. Claims to have experienced what might be called anomalous or paranormal forms of communication are built to address sceptical alternative explanations. Many of these sceptical alternatives invoke aspects of identity that suggest an untrustworthy reporter: the story is a lie, the reporter is mistaken as to the true (normal) character of their own experience, or they are mentally unwell, or they are merely attention seeking, and so on. Consequently, accounts of unusual experiences such as these are woven through with numerous discursive practices to establish the authenticity, honesty and reliability of the reporter (Wooffitt, 1991; 1992; Hayward, Wooffitt & Woods, 2015; Stockbridge & Wooffitt, 2019).

While small story research examines a range of discourse types, common forms of data are non-canonical narratives that emerge in everyday social interaction (Georgakopoulou, 2008; Tovares, 2010). As such there is reference to, and use of, conversation analytic (CA) research on social interaction to inform small story analysis. Admittedly, not all studies are informed by CA; positioning analysis and more critical approaches to discourse analysis are also influential (see Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Ryan, 2008). But conversation analysis is clearly central to key arguments for the analytic relevance of the small story, particular in Georgakopoulou’s earlier work (Georgakopoulou, 2006; 2008). The phenomenon of poetic confluence is also rooted in the particulars of naturally occurring everyday interaction, and we also draw from conversation analytic research. Our empirical observations are also informed by Goffman’s studies of the morality of interpersonal conduct to frame our analysis of the aboutness of the small stories we analyse.

The tension between the way a story is designed for the moment of its telling (or in the case of non-verbalised stories, dissemination or production) and the world the story reports is made explicit in some parts of the small story literature. In her study of school girls’ conversations, Georgakopoulou (2008) notes the tension between the tale world and the telling identity; Juzwick and Ives (2010) refer to the tension between small stories as a window onto experience and the situated practices of their production; and Bamberg offers his positioning analysis in small story research as a means to bridge the focus on narrative production and the extra-narrative macro contexts in which those stories are more broadly framed. This acknowledgement that a story can be analytically treated as both about something, and doing something in the moment of telling, is a feature that we think makes small story research distinctive in social sciences that uses reported or narrated accounts as data (though we acknowledge that, historically, it is a characteristic of a traditional sense of poetics). It licenses our attempt to make connections between the production of an account and the events being reported. In this paper, then, we outline how our research has pursued both analytic trajectories, and developed preliminary arguments about potential empirical principles that may constitute common ground for both analytic objectives, specifically, parallelism in poetics, and the value of anecdote as empirical data.

Therefore, we offer four contributions to the development of small story research: (1) analysis of accounts of ostensibly paranormal experiences as a form of small story, (2) further exploration of the ways in which identity can be formulated so as to manage possible sceptical reinterpretations of claimed events, (3) an illustration of the analysis of data as constructions and representations, and (4) some tentative remarks concerning discourse poetics that underpin both kinds of analytic endeavour.

**Data and method**

Since 2007 (the year in which the first author first experienced the phenomenon), he has been building and analysing his own corpus of examples. Over time, other colleagues have contributed to this corpus, submitting examples of their own experience of poetic confluence. At the time of writing, our collection consists of 52 cases. Nearly 50 people are represented in the corpus. The relationships between the people involved vary. Some cases come from close friends and relatives, others occurred between strangers. There is no common topic in the conversations into which the poetic turn intrudes.

The corpus was built opportunistically. It is simply not possible to seek out these experiences; we have to wait for candidate instances to happen and hope that people who have them will remember to write an account and send it to the first author. Consequently, the corpus was assembled in the same way that Freud collected instances of slips of the tongue (Freud, 1901/1975), psychologists collect moments of inadvertent behavioural transgression (Norman, 1981), and linguists collect speech errors (MacKay, 1980).

We analyse our data in two ways. First, we describe how the stories are vehicles for the presentation of particular kinds of identities. This contributes to a core feature of small story research, and reflects a longstanding, broadly ethnomethodological orientation to the way that identity (and other ostensibly internal or psychological characteristics) are constituted through discursive actions (Augoustinos & Tileaga, 2012; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995; Wooffitt & Gilbert, 2008; Edwards & Potter, 2005; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Smith, 1978; Torn, 2011).

In the second part of the paper, we examine data to reconstruct the socially organised properties of the experiences they report. This *post hoc* reconstructive work is a staple for formal analytic sociology, but is problematic for intellectual traditions which emphasise the situated and constitutive nature of discourse. Nonetheless, the robust patterns in the data, and the unusual forms of interpersonal communication they suggest, mandate an attempt to explore the generic properties of the experiences so described. To avoid unwarranted interpretation, we draw from the extensive and cumulative knowledge base from conversation analytic studies of social interaction, and findings from related investigation of interpersonal conduct. The objective has been to identify robust patterns across the corpus that point to the way that poetic confluence is enmeshed in routine conduct of social action.

**Identity work in poetic confluence stories**

The first case was sent by email to the first author by a student, in response to an email reminding him to send the account of the experience he had discussed in class earlier that day. (Any typographical, grammatical and spelling errors have been retained in all data presented in the paper.)

(1) Guns/Gunning

No problem. Okay, essentially, I had a meeting with the Yorker yesterday - a campus magazine I've written for since first year - as usual. One of the other writers started speaking to me about the new first-person shooter on the XBox Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3. We discussed the television advert, and despite not having a huge interest, humoured him and asked 'so are there new weapons or anything like that?' - He launched into some history channel spiel about the uses of different guns and I pretended to be interest. After this, our section editor entered and the formal meeting began. As we moved through the agenda, she said 'the new exhibition at the Norman Rea gallery starts this week...J, I know you've been gunning for this...'

I certainly found that strange, it's not the usual turn of phrase people use and I've certainly never heard her use it before. Since she was not in the room during my initial discussion, it did make me think 'ESP pun' right away.

There are three characters in this story: the author (who is reporting the experience), the co-writer and the editor, and it is structured around the author’s interactions with the co-writer, and then his interactions with the editor. Each interaction is formulated to constitute incrementally a particular version of the author’s identity.

It is the co-writer who is presented as initiating a conversation with the author, about a new computer game, a topic of interest to him, but not to the author. The phrase “started speaking to me” establishes that the author had no agency in initiating this interaction. The author makes it explicit that the topic of this conversation held no interest for him, but out of courtesy tries to participate, asking about a specific feature of the game, the simulated weaponry available to the game character, and, thereby, its players. Note that this is not a question that focuses on specific features of the game; “weaponry” is a generic term. As such, this question positions the author as an “outsider” to that group of more committed gamers who would have a more detailed knowledge of the specific types of weapons being simulated. This implied “outsider” categorisation is subsequently affirmed by contrast to the co-writer, who is reported to provide precisely an “insider’s” level of detailed interest in and knowledge of the game weaponry and its relevance to the history of actual armoury. The author provides an account for the co-writer’s source of his knowledge: he is described as “launching” into “some history channel spiel”. This does considerable inferential work. “Launching” implies a topic in which the co-writer has some stake prior to this conversation. The author depicts the co-writer’s “launched” turn as characteristic of material broadcast on the History Channel; this is a US based cable television channel, well known for airing a range of programmes with dubious intellectual content, covering in sensationalist style topics such as alien intervention in human history, conspiracy theories, and apocalyptic religious predictions. It caters to those who are already invested in, say, the idea that ancient astronauts helped build the pyramids, and so on. The reference to the History Channel portrays the pseudo-intellectual and possibly obsessive character of the co-writer’s investment in weaponry and gaming in general, in turn reinforcing the lack of alignment between the author and the co-worker.

As in reported speech in conversational interaction (Holt, 1996; Holt & Clift, 2006), the reported interaction with the editor has a pragmatic and inferential orientation. It constitutes the enigmatic element of the experience. The mystery is explicit: the editor was not in the room during the prior conversation, and so she could not have heard what they were talking about. There is the poetic or playful element, in that “gunning” seems to be a pun on the author’s prior involvement in a discussion about weapons/guns in a computer game (albeit an involvement that was pressed upon him by another). The idiom, “gunning for” has the misplaced quality common to instances of poetic confluence, in that it is usually used to capture someone’s hostile intent towards another.[[2]](#footnote-2) Here it is used in precisely the opposite way, to reference the author’s positive interest to cover a particular event. The editor’s reported turn, however, does not merely make this a story about an ostensibly telepathic event. It further elaborates the (positive) character of the author through an implied contrast between his interests with those of the co-writer. She is reported as explicitly referring to a new exhibition at the Norman Rea (a student run gallery based at the University of York, hosting exhibitions of national and international artists). She thereby sets up a contrast between a (now established to be) pseudo intellectual investment in computer games and weapons, and loftier, culturally-valued artistic endeavours. Moreover, the author does not have to make this contrast plain, as it the editor’s utterance that does this contrastive work, thereby conferring epistemic certainty (Heritage, 2014) associated with the use of direct reported speech in talk-in-interaction (Holt, 1996; Wooffitt, 2001.

It is clear that in building this account, there is considerable identity work being done through the way that the unusual event is described: the reported interactions between the author/co-writer, and the author/editor, out of which the mysterious event arises, are the foundations for implied claims about the author’s personality, tolerance of other’s concerns and intellectual interests. This two-act structure also informs the following account, which actually reports two unusual experiences.

(2) Ghost/Séance

I was waiting for my terrorism seminar to begin the other day and I was telling my classmate about how the night before I had felt a ghost pressing on my chest shouting my name. After I had finished telling her the story my seminar tutor walks in and says 'are you having a seance in here, trying to contact ghosts? Its so dark!'. I burst out laughing and so did my classmate. It was incredibly freaky.

Some context: at the time of this experience, the narrator was taking a university module on sociological perspectives on paranormal claims. During that module, the class considers the work of the folklorist, David Hufford, who wrote an influential book, *The Terror that Comes in the Night*, on experiences of sleep paralysis associated with malevolent spiritual encounters (Hufford, 1982). The author’s experience of a force pushing down on her chest is characteristic of the experience. However, conventionally, the experience is known as an Old Hag experience. This is the term that was used to introduce the phenomenon in class. The term “ghost” is not associated with this experience. In that sense, the use of the word “ghost” is a noticeable departure. The two-part structure here revolves around interactions between author and classmate, and then the seminar tutor and the author (as part of the seminar group that had already arrived).

The experience of the previous evening is by any standards extremely traumatic: ostensibly a physical attack by a non-human entity made intensely personal by the entity’s *shouting the student’s name*. The author’s report to her classmate, however, seems remarkably everyday: she makes no reference to her response or emotional state at the time, responses that are equally absent from her description of the telling of this event to the friend. It is as if she was merely a passive observer of her own experience, with no emotional investment or consequences. From this the inference is available that, for the author, this experience was somehow not exceptional. It is an account that normalizes the experience, or at least strips it of its traumatic character (Wooffitt, 1992; Sacks, 1984).

The seminar tutor’s reported utterance does constitute something exceptional in that s/he seems to know what they had been talking about prior to his entering the room. The reference to holding a séance and “trying to contact ghosts” is not a literal description but a figurative one, and it resonates powerfully with the experience the author had just recounted to the classmate, in particular the use of the word “ghost”. In the use of ghost, the teacher seems to mirror the slightly odd word selection used to describe the supernatural attack: conventionally, séances are held to contact members of spirit world. The story provides evidence that the teacher’s observation in general was quite unusual: the phrase “its so dark in here” offers a warrant for the analogy to the stereotypical image of the séance held in dimly lit Victorian living rooms.

The identity work being done by the author is exquisitely fitted to the audience, and the context of its production. The audience is the first author, who had described the phenomenon of poetic confluence in class, and in which students were invited to submit examples of their own experiences, should they have them, to add to the corpus he was collecting for research purposes. We had also discussed Old Hag/sleep paralysis experiences in that module; but these were not the focus of on-going research. This accounts for the relative ordering and prioritizing of the two experiences. The (ostensibly more evocative and memorable) sense of being physically restrained by a spiritual entity who knows your name is presented without adornment, elaboration or any sense of the (potentially) extreme emotional responses such an encounter might generate. The relatively innocuous apparently telepathic experience, by contrast, is characterized as “incredibly freaky”. The entire account is premised on the author’s identity not just as a student, but as a student on this particular module, reporting two experiences of which only one was of direct relevance to the recipient.

In this account we begin to see an aesthetic dimension of the phenomenon. The nature of the enigmatic connection emerges from playful, or poetic features of language use. The unusual relationality depicted between the author and the other key character emerges from the use of figurative language, and the way that the teacher’s slightly unusual choice of “ghost" in relation to séance mirrors the author’s use of ghost to refer to the disturbing imagery often associated with incidents of sleep paralysis. We return to this aesthetic element below.

The two examples we have considered so far were both submitted to the first author after hearing about poetic confluence in a university module. There may be a concern, then, that similarities in their structure may reflect either the way the phenomenon was introduced to them, or is somehow shaped by expectations tacitly communicated in class. However, there is evidence that these story characteristics are more generic, and not linked to particular individuals or classroom contexts.

The conversation analyst Emanuel Schegloff (2003) reported a form of this phenomenon in a chapter exploring puns in social interaction. He had collected cases after an experience he had had while analysing data with Gail Jefferson. His collection was built over the years as he had further experiences, and included accounts submitted by friends, students and colleagues. The contexts were varied, and the relationships between the principal characters varied, but they all pivoted on a moment of intense and surprising relationality. However, while Schegloff’s discussion of his cases was the first English language description of the phenomenon, many of the key properties were originally described in an article in German, published in 1933 in the journal *Imago* by István Hollós, an Hungarian psychoanalyst.

Over many years as a practising psychoanalyst, Hollós had observed, and produced written accounts of, several hundred cases in which he experienced a telepathic like communication with clients. His first assumption was that these moments were simply coincidences, but he was persuaded to reject this interpretation because of robust similarities in the manner of their occurrence. They tended to occur when he was internally preoccupied with a matter of emotional significance for him personally. Here is an example of the phenomenon from Hollós’ paper, and relates to an episode that happened during a therapy session with a patient.

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, p. 534)[[3]](#footnote-3)

In this account, the analyst is focused not on his current client, but his next one, and reports his anxiety that there might be a shooting. The patient in the therapy room is described as talking about her relationship with her mother, and uses a phrase to convey her behaviour that seems to be a punning reference to the analyst’s concerns. The phrase “shoots around” seems particularly apt, in that it can be used to point to the indiscriminate or unprincipled character of an action or event, which echoes and supports his Hollós’ assessment of the patient as being a “hot-headed” young man.

A feature of poetic confluence reports is the reproduction of utterances that seem to have a malformed or ill-fitted design given the context in which they were used and the kinds of actions they were designed to perform in their context. This is clearly evidenced in the Hollós example. He notes that the patient incorporates a clear linguistic error into her description of her mother’s pacing around her flat. Hollós observed this is “butchered Hungarian” in which (presumably unexpected or inappropriate) elements of German contaminated a conventional Hungarian figure of speech.

There are some key parallels between this case, in Hungarian, from a psychoanalysis session some point before 1933, and the “ghost/séance” case, in English, that occurred in a university seminar room in 2011. They both begin with conspicuously flat or emotionally etiolated accounts of frankly astonishing events that in other circumstances would be the main story. In both cases, these are not the mysterious or noticeable events that motivate the story: that is, the mysterious form of communication that emerges from the interactions between the author and another character. In the “ghost” case, the author’s account occasions the relevance of her identity as a university student taking a particular module. In the Hollós example, his identity as a psychoanalyst is occasioned by use of “patient”, “waiting room” and the reference to weekly sessions.

There is, then, even in stories as short as these, a structure which is the vehicle for identity work; but this is not surprising. Prior research on reports of accounts of paranormal experiences has identified a range of descriptive practices through which a reporter’s identity as a normal, rational observer of objective events is accomplished (Wooffitt, 1992, Wooffitt et al, 2013). However, our objective is not merely to explore the kind of identity work that occurs in the design of poetic confluence stories, but to think about how we can extend the analysis so as to make empirical claims about the events described.

**Poetic confluence as social interaction**

Are these accounts describing a form of social interaction that is mediated by non-normal forms of communication? For many this may seem a preposterous question; yet this conclusion was entertained by Hollós and Schegloff. The translated title of Hollós’ paper is *The Psychopathology of Everyday Telepathic Appearances*. In that paper he recognised the controversial nature of the phenomenon he describes, but is persuaded by the sheer consistency in the form and circumstances of their occurrence. Schegloff was also circumspect about the parapsychological character of the experiences he presented in his 2003 chapter. Despite this, he coined the term “ESP pun” to capture the experience, where ESP stands for extra sensory perception. He went on to write:

If there is a real phenomenon here, and if the exemplars [the candidate instances described in his paper] are apt and well chosen, it is their cumulative effect which will render the phenomenon visible, and by no means unthinkable. (Schegloff, 2003, p. 539).

Schegloff was not aware of it at the time of writing, but the cumulative effect was already established. Many of the instances in the Hollós paper exhibit the properties noted by Schegloff. Moreover, since first reading of the phenomenon, the first author has collected over 50 candidate cases. The collection continues to grow.

There are, then, two possibilities. Poetic confluence arises from previously uninvestigated intersections of known communicative practices, tacit reasoning procedures and inferential processes. In short: that known communication mechanisms, in a manner not yet understood, produce moments of *apparently* mysterious interpersonal alignment. Alternatively, it may be that poetic confluence represents some form of interpersonal relationship (or intersubjectivity) that involves telepathy. Either position mandates analysis not just of how the stories were told, but of the events being described.

What are the properties of the phenomenon? Hollós and Schegloff converge on some core features. The phenomenon is a confluence of talk and consciousness in which an utterance not intended to reflect the private thoughts or imagery of a co-participant does precisely that (that is to say, the turn at talk is produced with respect to the on-going interactional business at hand, and is not produced as an attempt to guess or mimic what the other is thinking about). Second, the allusive turn contains a speech error, or an infelicitous or unusual phrase. Third, it is through this linguistic curiosity that the allusive orientation of the turn is achieved. So, in the Hollós case, the patient’s utterance would not have resonated with his ongoing internal experience had it not contained a particular and peculiar concatenation of Hungarian and German. Fourth, the lexical choices out of which the poetic turns are constructed are not routine figures of speech used by the participants. Fifth, Schegloff notes that the poetic turn may be mildly inappropriate or ill-fitted to the conversational action of the turn in which it occurs. Finally, the turn that appears to capture the other’s mentation has poetic, sometimes playful qualities, for example, constituting a pun.

In a recent series of publications, Wooffitt has identified three other features that suggest interpersonal or interactional functions of poetic confluence (Wooffitt, 2018, 2019). The private thoughts or imagery that are subsequently captured by another’s turn are of a personal, sensitive or emotionally charged nature. In the three cases presented so far, there are reports of feigning interest in another’s conversation, a physical (and very personal) assault by a malevolent spiritual entity, and preoccupation by a possible shooting.

Here are two further examples. In the next instance, a co-author is the partner of the person who had the experience. Extract four comes from Schegloff’s chapter on ESP puns.

(3) Rat/Ratted

Paul and Jeremy used to work together until Jeremy moved to a different job to become a manager; now they frequently meet in the pub in which Jeremy works to catch up. Paul had just been fired from his job and was in the pub telling Jeremy about how it had happened however, Jeremy was preoccupied thinking about a rat he had seen earlier in the day and how disgusting it had been. Paul then announced that the whole situation that led to him being fired had really ‘ratted’ him, going on to correct himself to ‘rattled’ which directly articulated the thoughts that Jeremy was having regarding the rat. Jeremy came home and told me about the incident since he is aware of my current internship.

(4)

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, p. 538)

Here the sensitivity of the mental imagery in extract three relates to the recollection of seeing a rat in a place serving food and drinks to the public; and in four it concerns imagery of fires being set in crowded public spaces. Hollós’ account of his experiences points to a similar feature. He notes that his patient’s apparently telepathic comments resonated powerfully with his thoughts or imagery that were ego-centric, sometimes unpleasant and of a personal nature, and which had little to do with what the patient was actually talking about in the session at that moment (Hollós, 1933).

There is evidence that the turn that establishes the enigmatic connection between the participants works to detoxify elements of the sensitive or emotional imagery or thoughts. In the last two cases, for example, the claim to have been “ratted” by losing one’s job addresses the evocative character of the other’s image of a rat at work, while deleting precisely any element of surprise, revulsion, and so on from encountering a rat in a pub. (Incidentally, this case provides a perfect example of the word selection issue that is characteristic of the phenomenon: the word “ratted” is subsequently corrected by the speaker to “rattled”, which is a more fitting word selection for his response to losing his job.) In example four, the conspicuously clumsy claim that families have been “burnt off” attending soccer matches is a detoxified allusion to reports of fire in a sporting stadium. And consider the Hollós case: the client’s claim that her mother shoots around the flat resonates clearly with his fear of an imminent shooting, but in such a way as to frame it in terms of the entirely innocuous matter of pacing indoors.

In that the poetic articulations address emotional, personal or inferentially sensitive properties of the target imagery or private thought, poetic confluence is a mechanism for Goffmanesque face work (Goffman, 1967). It is however, not an attempt to rescue the other’s situational propriety from the inferential consequences of a public act. While it has the character of a preventative, or remedial practice (Goffman, 1971), it is oriented to sensitive private thoughts or highly personal matters relevant to the other participant in that precise moment.

There is a final interactional component that may be indexed in these reports. Mechanism of turn taking and turn transfer are fundamental to mutually intelligible social interaction. Since the publication of Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson’s (1974) foundational study of turn taking procedures for ordinary conversation, numerous empirical studies have described practices by which mutual co-orientation can be managed, or re-established, so as to facilitate smooth turn transfer and turn exchange. A core feature of accounts of poetic confluence is that the person whose thoughts are subsequently captured by another’s spoken turn has momentarily lost focus on their co-participants. The poetic turn is routinely described as restoring their attention to the on-going interaction. Here is one example:

(5) Broken Leg/Snap

I also had another paranormal pun, while I remember, my friends Meg, Gill and I were talking about a skiing holiday Meg 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 Gill 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...

The author here experiences reverie, a distraction in which an unpleasant image of broken bones comes unbidden to mind. The other’s use of the word “snap” (presumably concerning a coincidence or similarity relevant to the story being told) not only refers to and detoxifies this harrowing image, but is described as restoring the author’s attention to the interactional moment.

There are numerous references in the psychoanalytic literature to the way that apparently telepathic experiences refocus the attention of the analyst back from reflections on personal matters to the concerns of the patient (Wooffitt, 2017; 2019). Hollós notes this feature of his experiences explicitly. Here is an example from the eminent psychoanalyst, Michael Balint, in his account of his telepathic experiences in therapy. (Here Balint refers to himself as “the analyst”.) 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 part, which at the material time absorbed a greater part of his attention that was good for the progress of the analysis… 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* [emphasis added]…. (Balint, 1956, p. 32).

Balint’s sense of being “brought round” indexes the normative 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 when it has momentarily and unilaterally abated.

**Discussion: Anecdotes, aesthetics and linking the moment of narration and the narrated**

The small stories approach emerged as a critical counterpoint in narrative studies, as an antidote (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 123) to the focus on longer more developed forms of data. As such it has had impact in narrative studies, and made a broader contribution to the study of stories in interaction (Jefferson, 1978; Lerner, 1992; Mandelbaum, 1987; Sacks, 1992, p. 222-260). We see two ways in which the small stories paradigm can consolidate its position as a distinctive intellectual programme; both emerge from the willingness to acknowledge the tension between analysis of the reported about and the moment of story production. The first lies in reclamation of the value of anecdote in social science research. Anecdotes are, essentially, small stories. Despite some attempts to take them seriously in the social sciences (Michael, 2012), they are mainly regarded as having little value as data in serious academic work, a position which reflects the default assumption in the hard sciences (see for example, Tallis, 2007).

In recent years, though, scholars in a range of disciplines have begun to reconsider the value of anecdotal data, especially with respect to lines of empirical inquiry for which more conventional data sources are absent or difficult to obtain. For example, marine ecologists have found that anecdotal recollections from older fishermen have been helpful in determining fish species populations in decades prior to systematic scientific measurement (Sáenz-Arroyo, Roberts, Torre & Cariño-Olbvera, 2005). There are other examples of the use of anecdotal evidence to study real life events that are infrequent, unpredictable or simply impossible to capture through more formal methods of data collection (Norman, 1981; Heyes, 1993; Aronson, 2006). Notwithstanding the potential value of anecdotal data, with respect to poetic confluence, small stories in the form of written anecdotes are all that we have.

Small stories research emerged as a corrective to the unwillingness to engage with anecdotal materials (among other forms of data) from everyday life. This is most clearly represented in studies that focus on non-conversational data, such as emails and social media postings (Georgakopoulou, 2016; 2017; Georgalou, 2015). A more sustained examination of the relationship between the reported about and the moment of reporting – such as the kind we have advocated and explored in this paper – will only provide more compelling grounds for a renewed interest in the evidential value and structure of varieties of discourse hitherto deemed ephemeral and inconsequential, including anecdotes.

Second, we see in the small stories literature an underpinning interest in the aesthetic dimensions of small story research. Georgakopoulou refers to this in her (2006) call to arms, but she restricts herself to the aesthetics of the empirical practice of small story research. But we think there is a latent concern with the aesthetics of communication that goes beyond the aesthetics of a particular kind of empirical focus. For example, Ryan’s (2008) analysis of the way that small stories can mobilise participants’ orientations to self-evidently big issues such as understandings of justice and inequality: the empirical analysis and subsequent argument rest on a contrast structure. This poetic and rhetorical feature is so common that the aesthetic quality of the counterpoint is easy to miss – it hides in the light.

There are, however, other aesthetic features of small stories that can be brought into an explicit empirical programme. These aesthetic qualities are not only found in the comparative nature of the available data, nor a particular style of analysis, but in the tacit design processes and compositional feature of the data themselves, *both in features of the production of the data, and in the experiences reported on in those data*. For example, our materials are rich in what is known in formal linguistics and studies of rhetoric as parallelism. Described by Jakobson as a form of repetition with variation, it can be found in all levels of language: phonology, syntax, morphology and semantics; and it informs adverts, ritual language, proverbs, songs, and political slogans (Jakobson, 1960; Menninghaus et al., 2017).

This suggests that parallelism is a generic organising property of communication. While there is a strong tradition in psycholinguistic research to try to identify the neurological consequences of aesthetically framed communication, we are more concerned with the kind of approach to parallelism that can be found in CA studies of conversational poetics. Here, the focus is not on the way that poetic forms impact on brain circuitry, but how they shape social interaction, and inform participants’ orientations and understandings as they are displayed in their conduct. Not all CA work on poetics touches on parallelistic features, but many do (for example Beach, 1993; Jefferson, 1996; Person, 2015; Sacks, 1992, pp. 291, 308; Wooffitt & Holt, 2011, pp. 144-145).

The small stories paradigm is well placed to develop work on the broadly aesthetic features of communication because some of its proponents have been open to exploring the relationship between the moment of a story’s production and what the story is about. This opens up the possibility of exploring how a parallelistic aesthetic furnishes an intellectual framework that may underpin ostensibly these apparently diverse (and to some, incommensurate) empirical goals. Our analysis of stories about ostensibly enigmatic communication illustrates how such a programme may proceed. We have examined how the phenomenon of poetic confluence is constituted by a form of fractured repetition, which at the same time leveraging the discursive framework through which a compelling story can be produced, in which a range of inferentially oriented identity work can be managed. So, for example, in the early part of this paper we showed how the fractured or variable repetition of words and phrases stands as a vehicle for a range of forms of self-presentation; and in the second part of the paper we observed that the recurrent parallelistic properties suggest a form of experience that is not merely coincidence, but is an admittedly puzzling form of human relationality through which everyday interpersonal concerns are managed. That is, the principles of parallelism – of repetition with variation – might inform not only our reports of our experiences, but, in some measure, may be implicated in the very nature of the experiences in the first instance. The interest in exploring the relationship between the reported about and the moment of reporting in some parts of the small stories literature liberates a more sustained examination of communicative principles that underpin both aspects of the human experience.

**References**

Aronson, J. K. (2006). Anecdotes that provide definite evidence. *British Medical Journal*, *333*, 1267-1269.

Augoustinos, M., & Tileagã, C. (2012). [Twenty five years of discursive psychology](http://hdl.handle.net/2440/81048). *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *51*(3), 405-412. DOI:[10.1111/j.2044-8309.2012.02096.x](http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.2012.02096.x)

Balint, M. (1956). Notes on parapsychology and parapsychological healing. *International Journal of Psycho-analysis, 36*(1), 31-35.

Bamberg, M. (2006). Stories: Big or small: Why do we care? *Narrative Inquiry, 16*(1), 139-147.

Bamberg, M., & Georgakopoulou, A. (2008). Small stories as a new perspective in narrative and identity analysis. *Text and Talk, 28*(3), 377-396.

Beach, W. A. (1993). The delicacy of preoccupation. *Text and Performance Quarterly, 13*(4), 299-312.

Blackman, L. (2012). *Immaterial bodies: Affect, embodiment, mediation*. London: Sage.

Brennan, T. (2004). *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press.

Burton, N. (2012). Getting personal: Thoughts on therapeutic action through the interplay of intimacy, affect and consciousness. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 22*(6), 662-678. DOI:10.1080/10481885.2012.735588

De Peyer, J. (2016). Uncanny communication and the porous mind. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 26*(2), 156-174. DOI:10.1080/10481885.2016.1144978

Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (2005). Discursive psychology, mental states and descriptions. In H. te Molder & J. Potter (Eds.), *Conversation and cognition* (pp. 241-259). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ehrenwald, J. (1951). *New dimensions of deep analysis: A study of telepathy in interpersonal relationships*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Freud, S. (1975). *The psychopathology of everyday life*. (A. Tyson, Trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin. (original work published 1901).

Georgakopoulou, A. (2006). Thinking big with small stories in narrative and identity analysis. *Narrative Inquiry, 16*(1), 122-130.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2007). *Small stories, interaction and identities.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2008). On MSN with buff boys’ Self- and other-identity claims in the context of small stories. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. 12: 597-626

Georgakopoulou, A. (2015). Small stories research: Methods-analysis-outreach. In A. De Fina & A. Georgakopoulou (Eds.), *The handbook of narrative analysis* (pp. 255-271).John Wiley and Sons.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2016). From narrating the self to posting self(ies): A small stories approach to selfies. *Open Linguistics, 2*, 300-317.

Georgakopoulou, A.(2017). Sharing the moment as small stories. The interplay between practices and affordances in the social media-curation of lives. *Narrative Inquiry*, *27*(2), 311-333.

Georgalou, M. (2015). Small stories of the Greek crisis on facebook. *Social Media + Society*, *1*, 1-15.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior*. New York: Pantheon.

Goffman, E. (1971). *Relations in public: Micro studies of the public order*. New York: Basic Books.

Hayward, R., Wooffitt, R. & Woods, C. (2015). The transgressive *that*: Making the world uncanny. *Discourse Studies*, *17*(6), 703-72. doi:10.1177/1461445615611784

Heritage, J. (2014). Epistemics in conversation. In J. Sidnell & T. Stivers, (Eds.), *The handbook of conversation analysis* (pp. 370-394). Oxford: Wiley, Blackwell.

Hester, S., & P. Eglin. (1997). *Culture in action: Studies in membership categorization analysis.* Washington, D.C.: University Press of America.

Heyes, C. M. (1993). Anecdotes, training, trapping and triangulating: do animals attribute mental states? *Animal Behaviour, 46*, 177-188.

Hollós, I. (1933). The psychopathology of everyday telepathic appearances. (Orig. Psychopathologie alltaglicher telepathischer Erscheinungen). *Imago, 19*, 539-546.

Holt, E. (1996). Reporting on talk: the use of direct reported speech in conversation. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 29*(3), 219-245.

Holt, E., & Clift, R. (2006). *Reporting talk: Reported speech in interaction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hufford, D. (1982). *The terror that comes in the night: An experience-centred study of supernatural assault traditions*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Jakobson, R. (1960). Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics. In T.A. Sebeok (Ed.), *Style in language* (pp. 350-377). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jefferson, G. (1978). Sequential aspects of storytelling in conversation. In J. Schenkein (Ed.); *Studies in the organization of conversational interaction* (pp. 219-248). New York: Academic Press.

Jefferson, G. (1996). On the poetics of ordinary talk. *Text and Performance Quarterly,* *16*(1), 1-61.

Juzwik, M., & Ives, D. (2010). Small stories as a resource for positioning teller identity: Identity-in-interaction in an urban language classroom. *Narrative Inquiry*, *20*, 37-61.

Lerner, G. (1992). Assisted storytelling: Deploying shared knowledge as a practical matter. *Qualitative Sociology, 15*(3), 247-271.

MacKay, D. G. (1980). Speech errors: Retrospect and prospect. In V.A. Fromkin (Ed.), *Errors in linguistic performance: Slips of the tongue, ear, pen, and hand* (pp. 319-332)*,* New York: Academic Press.

Mandelbaum, J. (1987). Couples sharing stories. *Communication Quarterly, 35*(2), 144-170.

Menninghaus, W., Wagner, V., Wassiliwizky, E., Jacobsen, T., & Knoop. C. A. (2017). The emotional and aesthetic powers of parallelistic diction. *Poetics, 63*, 47-59. DOI:10.1016/j.poetic.2016.12.001

Michael, M. (2012). Anecdote. In C. Lury & N. Wakeford (Eds.), *Inventive methods: The happening of the social* (pp 35-46). London: Routledge.

Miller, V. (2015). Resonance as a social phenomenon. *Sociological Research Online, 20*(2), 9. DOI:10.5153/sro.3557

Norman, D. A. (1981). Categorization of action slips. *Psychological Review, 88*(1), 1-15.

Person, R. F. (2015). *From conversation to oral tradition: A simplest systematics for oral traditions*. London: Taylor Francis.

Redman, P. (2009). Affect revisited: Transference-countertransference and the unconscious dimensions of affective, felt and emotional experience. S*ubjectivity,* *26,* 51-68.

Rosenbaum, R. (2011). Exploring the other dark continent: Parallels between psi phenomena and the psychotherapeutic process. *The Psychoanalytic Review, 98*(1), 57-90.

Ryan, M. (2008). Small stories, big issues: Tracing complex subjectivities of high school students in interactional talk. *Critical Discourse Analysis, 5*, 217-229.

Sacks, H. (1984). On doing "Being Ordinary". In J.M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 413-429). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Edited by G. Jefferson from unpublished lectures: Spring 1970: lecture 1.)

Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation* (Vol. 1) (G. Jefferson & E.A. Schegloff, Eds.). Oxford/Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organisation of turn-taking for conversation. *Language,* *50*, 696-735.

Sáenz-Arroyo, A., Roberts, C. M., Torre, J., & Cariño-Olbvera, M. (2005). Using fishers’ anecdotes, Naturalists’ observations and grey literature to reassess marine species art risk: the case of the Gulf grouper in the Gulf of Mexico. *Fish and Fisheries, 6*, 121-133.

Schegloff, E. A. (2003). On ESP puns. In P. Glenn, C.D. LeBaron & J. Mandelbaum (Eds.), *Studies in language and social interaction: In honour of Robert Hopper* (pp. 452-460). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Smith, D. E. (1978). 'K is mentally ill’: the anatomy of a factual account. *Sociology, 12*, 23-53.

Spreckels, J. (2008). Identity negotiation in small stories among German adolescent girls. *Narrative Inquiry, 18*, 393-413.

Stockbridge, G. & Wooffitt, R. (2019). Coincidence by design. *Qualitative Research*,

19(4), 437-454. doi.org/10.1177/1468794118773238

Tallis, R. (2007). Anecdotes, data and the curse of the media case study. *Medico-Legal Journal*, *75*(4), 139-142.

Torn, A. (2011). Chronotopes of madness and recovery. *Narrative Inquiry*, *21*(1), 130-150. DOI:10.1075/ni.21.2.07tor

Tovares, A. (2010). All in the family: Small stories and narrative construction of a shared family identity that includes pets. *Narrative Inquiry, 20*(1), 1-19. DOI:10.1075/ni.20.1.01tov

Watson, C. (2007). ‘Small stories’ and the doing of professional identities in learning to teach. *Narrative Inquiry*, *17*(2), 371-389. DOI:10.1075/ni.17.2.11wat

Widdicombe, S. & Wooffitt, R. (1995). *The language of youth subcultures: Social identity in action*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Wooffitt, R. (1991). ‘I was just doing X ... when Y’: some inferential properties of a device in accounts of paranormal experiences. *Text,* *11*(2), 267-288.

Wooffitt, R. (1992)*. Telling tales of the unexpected: The organisation of factual discourse*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Wooffitt, R. (2001). Raising the dead: reported speech in medium-sitter interaction. *Discourse Studies*, *3*(3), 351-374.

Wooffitt, R. (2017). Relational psychoanalysis and anomalous communication: Continuities and discontinuities in psychoanalysis and telepathy. *History of the Human Sciences*,

*31*(1), 118-137.

Wooffitt, R. (2018). Shared subjectivities: Enigmatic moments and mundane intimacies. *Subjectivity*, *11*(1): 40-56.

Wooffitt, R. (2019) Poetic confluence: A sociological analysis of an enigmatic moment. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives, 29*(3),328-345. DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2019.1614838

Wooffitt, R. & Gilbert, H. (2008). Discourse, rhetoric and the accomplishment of mediumship in stage demonstrations. *Mortality*, *13*(3), 222-240.

Wooffitt, R. & Holt, N. (2011).Introspective discourse and the poetics of subjective experience. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 44*(2), 135–156.

Wooffitt, R., Jackson, C, Reed, D. Ohashi, Y. & Hughes, I. (2013). Self-identity, authenticity and the Other: The spirits and audience management in stage mediumship. *Language and Communication*, *33*(2), 93-105. DOI: 10.1016/j.langcom.2013.01.003

**Acknowledgements**

The research reported in this paper was supported by a Bial Foundation Bursary for Scientific Research, no 51/12.

**Professor Robin Wooffitt**

**Department of Sociology**

**University of York**

**Heslington York YO1 5DD, UK**

[**robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk**](mailto:robin.wooffitt@york.ac.uk)

**Dr Alicia Fuentes-Calle**

**Department of Sociology**

**University of York**

**Heslington York YO1 5DD, UK**

[**alicia.fuentes-calle@york.ac.uk**](mailto:alicia.fuentes-calle@york.ac.uk)

**Rebecca Campbell**

**Department of Sociology**

**University of York**

**Heslington York YO1 5DD, UK**

**rc1387@york.ac.uk**

1. We are grateful to Alan Murdie for bringing this example to the attention of the first author. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We recognise that “gunning for” can also be used to depict a positive orientation or attitude. However, our sense is that it is mainly used to portray a negative position. As a totally unscientific test, we typed “Trump gunning for” into a search engine. The stories that this delivered were all about people or political parties showing a negative attitude towards others. The only exception was a clip from a satirical puppet television show (which we think is shown only in the US), which poked fun at President Trump’s position on guns. Here its positive use was directly related to the topic of guns, in the context of making fun of the President’s position. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The paper by Hollós was translated by Dr Germaine Stockbridge, a German national who has been living in the UK since 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)