

Synchroners, High Emotion, and Coincidence Interpretation

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CME EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

1. Express the characteristics of high frequency coincidence detectors.
2. Recognize that people who are high in vitality or high in self-referential tendencies tend to detect more coincidences.
3. Recall that intense emotional states tend to drive coincidence detection.

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Coincidences may be characterized by three primary variables: their frequency, the emotional intensity they generate, and the usefulness derived from their interpretation. The frequency of coincidence detection is related to certain personality characteristics as well as to situations that generate intense emotions. In this article, we describe characteristics of people who detect high frequencies of coincidences, the highly charged situations in which people are more likely to notice coincidences, and some of the benefits and problems with coincidence interpretations.

Coincidences are generally interpreted on two different planes: the personal and transpersonal. They can highlight some implications of current problems and decisions as well as indicate the possible existence of a “greater mind.” To many, they seem to provide evidence of beneficence: a collective unconscious geared toward individuation, or a superordinate caring intelligence (or God) intervening in



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our lives. Less often addressed is the fact that some coincidence interpretations lead to destructive outcomes, as several of our cases will illustrate.

Individual rates of coincidence detection are likely to be normally distributed; in one tail of the bell-shaped curve lie those who frequently detect coincidences, while in the other tail are those who rarely if ever notice one. We use the term “synchroner” to denote the high-frequency detectors.¹ Synchroners regularly use coincidences to help guide and support decision making in both positive and negative ways.

Jung exemplified the traits of a synchroner. One day in the 1950s, Henry Fierz visited Jung at 5 PM, the appointed hour, to ask Jung whether or not a certain manuscript should be published. Fierz reported the following interchange:²

“Jung had read the book and he thought it should not be published, but I disagreed and was for publication. Our discussion finally got rather sharp and Jung looked at his wristwatch, obviously thinking that he had spent enough time on the matter and

that he could send me home. Looking at his watch, he said: ‘When did you come?’ I: ‘At five, as agreed.’ Jung: ‘But that’s queer. My watch came back from the watch maker this morning after a complete revision, and now I have 5:05. But you must have been here much longer. What time do you have?’ I: ‘It’s 5:35.’ Whereon Jung said: ‘So you have the right time, and I have the wrong one. Let us discuss the thing again.’ This time I could convince Jung that the book should be published.”³

To Jung, the unexpected stopping of his watch paralleled the possible error he was making in stopping publication. Apparently, he decided that since the watch needed to be restarted, the steps toward publication also needed to be reconsidered and restarted.

According to Tarnas:²

“Jung saw nature and one’s surrounding environment as a living matrix of potential synchronistic meaning that could illuminate the human sphere. He attended to sudden or unusual movements or the appearance of animals,

flocks of birds, the wind, storms, the suddenly louder lapping of the lake outside the window of his consulting room, and similar phenomena as possessing symbolic relevance for the parallel unfolding of interior psychological realities.”²

Coincidence detection seems to increase during periods of high emotional intensity as Jung noted.² This observation has been substantiated in a survey by Meyer.⁴ Birth, dying and death, marriage, sickness, travel, job shifts, and other life transitions heighten affective charges and the motivation to search for meaning in coincidences. Psychotherapy patients who are in affectively charged states would also be more likely to detect coincidences.

The proper interpretation of coincidences, however, raises many problems. The meaning of coincidences is created in the mind of the beholder. Like nonverbal communication, coincidences offer ambiguous symbols, which can be interpreted in many different ways. From a clinical (and pragmatic) standpoint, the “rightness” or

“wrongness” of an interpretation may be judged by its outcome. Did it help, hurt or have a neutral effect?

We will illustrate the process of interpretation with, first, examples from several types of synchroners and, then, from people in heightened emotional states that include being arrested, recovering from a suicide attempt, and being in love. We conclude with coincidence accounts from people who are perplexed by some highly charged coincidences that they are unable to interpret.

SYNCHRONERS

As suggested by the Weird Coincidence Surveys,⁵ synchroners may score high in “vitality” or in being “self-referential.” Clinically, we observe that a subset of manic patients also look, sometimes desperately, for meaning in the coincidences they see.

HIGH-VITALITY SCORERS

People who feel energized, vital, alive, and ready to burst into each day seem to be more likely to find connections between what they are thinking and the events around them. A positive correlation between a measure of vitality and frequency of coincidence reports in the WCS surveys support this assertion.⁵ High-vitality people may be more apt to see opportunity smiling upon them, to find affirmations in their surroundings, and to believe events are somehow arranged to help them. The hippies who frequented the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco in the late 1960s were once described as having “positive paranoia” because they saw the swirl of events in which they were embedded as helpful agents of their destiny.⁶ The following vignette comes from a vital, enthusiastic, joyful person:

“Not too long ago, I was up early, around 7 AM and went to my computer to check my e-mail. I had two new messages. I skipped the first (from a researcher at the University of Texas) and opened the one from my friend, Robynne. She wrote

that she read my first draft of the chapter on Soul Parenting from this book and loved it but was bothered by one sentence. As she spelled out her objection and used her 17-year-old daughter, Frankie, as an example, I copied the few paragraphs she wrote and pasted them into the text. Next, I opened the letter from the researcher at the University of Texas. She gave me several codes for the several steps I would need to execute in order to access the research over the internet. For the final step, I would need to use my own exclusive password, which was none other than ‘Frankie17!’

“My heart jumped. My soul sang. It didn’t change my world. It didn’t change anything. It just tugged at me in a way that little miracles do. There’s no logical explanation. The odds of this happening may be a billion to one. But these little miracles only qualify as miracles because they can’t be explained. There has to be something higher going on.”⁷

Reading the work of Barbara Whitfield from whose book this quote is taken will familiarize you with this engaging, enthusiastic, vital person. She thinks of coincidences as cosmic post cards.

HIGH SELF-REFERENTIAL SCORERS

Self-referential thinkers are more likely to connect songs on the radio with thoughts in their minds, or words in a newspaper with their own ideas.⁵ They tend to see the actions around them as directly related to their own psyches. Anxiety aroused at the prospect of being the recipient of social judgments, for example, can drive the association machinery of the brain into high gear, connecting intonations and facial expressions to various forms of self-criticism. They are more likely to interpret the yawn of a listener as a sign of boredom rather than an indication of sleep deprivation. The coincidence lies in the fact that their negative self-opinion finds apparent confirmation in the behavior of others.

When feeling vulnerable, people can interpret coincidences in malevolent ways:

“I was considering shifting my non-retirement investments from a large financial corporation in another state to either a local financial advisor or to another national firm which held my retirement funds. During the slow decision-making process, I received a telephone call requesting my input about the financial advisor of the retirement fund company. Among the many questions was, ‘What is the probability of your shifting other investments to our company within the next 2 years?’ I answered ‘Unlikely’ and then later wondered if they were setting me up to invest the non-retirement money with the retirement fund company. Were they testing out my intentions in this indirect way? Or was this “just” a coincidence — meaning that the company’s cycle for getting feedback from clients about this advisor had just happened to occur during my transition period?”

Self-referential thinking drove this person to see a causal connection in the temporal connection between the phone call and the question of where he should put his money; the coincidence was interpreted as part of a scheme to discover his investment intentions. A careful look at the situation would easily suggest that the company would not benefit if it learned of this investor’s intentions that particular week or a few weeks later. It was his decision to make, and the survey would not influence his decision in either direction. The surprise of the coincidence generated emotion that drove the association machinery of his brain down this self-referential course.

*“Kurt Vonnegut coined the phrase, “grand falloon” in his book, *Cat’s Cradle*,⁸ and never did it have a more devastating application than in the scheme of Bernard Madoff who cheated investors out of perhaps \$50 billion. In Vonnegut’s world, a grand falloon was a false association mistaken for friendship: Two people from the same town, same university, same company meet somewhere and believe that the coincidental connection has significant mean-*

ing. It doesn't, no more so than belonging to the Palm Beach Country Club or the Fifth Avenue Synagogue did for those who used their proximity to Mr. Madoff to let him coax them into taking their money."⁹

Paranoid thinking can take modest self-referential ideas even further:

"The license plate, the TV commentary, that glance are each saying something to me about what I must do, how I must be careful, that there is danger ahead. My mind is being read. Other people know my thoughts; what is inside of me is obvious to people around me."

This predisposition to expect that the outer world is continuously relating, interested, focused, and intending harm to the self encourages many people to make strong connections between inner and outer worlds. Paranoids find what they are seeking: in other words, they receive evidence to support their beliefs that people are out to hurt them — a meaningful connection between their inner and outer worlds.

"Bureaucracies work with remarkable slowness. A young man who easily saw malevolence behind other people's behavior; was confronted with a delay in the paperwork necessary for him to finalize a crucial employment possibility. He reviewed all he had done and all the various personnel had done. His review yielded a few small behaviors upon which the company could have decided not to employ him. He anxiously expected rejection with every subsequent email and phone call. The rejection came. The reason had only to do with a hiring freeze just initiated by corporate headquarters but he "knew" they were out to get him and rejection did come."

Coincidences can also be used to justify horrific decisions. Mark David Chapman had long planned the vicious assassination of John Lennon, and used coincidences to support many decisions along the way. He first justified his intent by referring to personally relevant coincidences in passages from J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.¹⁰ Then:

*"Standing outside the Dakota apartment building in New York City on December 8, 1980, Chapman made the following connections: John Lennon lives here with Yoko Ono. In this building, Rosemary's Baby (where the devil inseminates a young woman) was filmed. The film's director was Roman Polanski. Roman Polanski was the father of Sharon Tate's baby that she was carrying when she was killed by the Charles Manson gang in Los Angeles. Charles Manson's favorite song was Helter Skelter; his gang wrote these words on many walls to mark their presence. Helter Skelter was written by John Lennon. As he stood outside the Dakota thinking these things, Mia Farrow, the actress who played 'Rosemary,' walked by. For Chapman, the coincidence of all these connected events meant that he should kill John Lennon today."*¹¹

Thus, coincidences can also be interpreted in malevolent ways. Their ambiguity, in fact, can lead to the projection of not only good intentions but also destructive ones.

HIGH EMOTIONAL STATES

Unlikely occurrences generate intense emotion, which can drive the search for meaning. The following story illustrates how being arrested again by the same policeman drove the search for a new path through life:

"I was on my way to Las Vegas to bet a 10-team football parlay. I was a fairly good football handicapper in those days. However, at the time I owed about \$50,000 in bad checks. If I won I would receive \$75,000 and would pay them off. An officer turned the corner. He was the same one who arrested me 5 years earlier! The cop called out, 'Mark, Mark,' and I said, 'Hello.' He had seen a wanted poster on me from Santa Barbara County about 3 weeks prior and, when he saw me at that corner, it all clicked for him in a matter of seconds. It was the most bizarre happening in the world to be running into the same cop so many years later."

"I called my wife at the time, and said, 'Come pick up the money,' because I had about \$2,000 on me. She said, 'Do you want me to bail you out?' and I said, 'No, the man upstairs is trying to tell me something, and I have to sit here to figure it out.'

"I was taken to the Van Nuys Jail on a Thursday, and on Monday I was taken to Santa Barbara County Jail. I got the newspapers, the sports section; all 10 of my teams had won. I realized God has a sense of humor."

He was sent to prison, where he came under the influence of a rabbi who helped him use his ability as a con man to help other criminals become more spiritual and ethical.¹²

This gambler may sound unemotional but it is easy to see that below the tough-guy surface was a surprised man who needed to find an explanation for the strange coincidence.

During recovery from severe distress, strong emotions can generate the search for meaningful coincidences. After a suicide attempt the person in the next story began looking for and then found more goodness in the world than she had seen before.

"I made a suicide attempt using painkiller pills (ie, Vicodin), and after I overdosed my body became really numb and I felt really sleepy. My senses were fading and I could barely hear anything. So I started freaking out, regretting what I have done and I tried throwing up the pills but only one came out. So I called the ambulance and a friend, and I lay on my couch waiting. Time seemed to be going by very slowly."

"My synchronicity began after I went to the hospital, puked up charcoal and was admitted to a psychiatric ward. I was supposed to be inpatient for 7 days but I got out early, on my third day. After I returned home, my most positive/happy/good/influential friend (out of all my friends!) called me. And I thought that was weird because I had been just thinking about her."

So I decided to go to the movies with her and my parents. In the movie there was a line, 'Yesterday was history, tomorrow is a mystery and the present is a gift.' I was blown away by that line, thinking 'How weird!' So afterward my parents and I decided to go to Pizza Hut for dinner. Even though it was a weekend day around 5:00, we were the only customers in there. What made this even more bizarre was that our waiter was the bubbliest person ever, portraying good self-esteem, and reciting poems to us. Her behavior made the three of us smile and lifted our spirits. And what stunned me the most was that the poem that she recited last was about her sister who had died 6 months ago; the poem was about how she missed her dearly. But the woman over all, she was amazing! She was the happiest person I've ever seen in my life. I considered all those moments as odd coincidences because there were a lot of positive messages being sent to me in different forms ... on the day I get out of in-patient. I was really blown away by this ... I never thought that I had someone watching over me and willing to help me out and guide me."¹³

Both the arrested gambler and the suicide-attempter entered into an emotional-filled yet uncertain state where the web of their usual views of reality had been torn. In the midst of such uncertainty, coincidences can become symbols from which meaning may be extracted.

The state of being in love is also highly charged. Romance drives many thoughts in the minds of lovers. In the following example, a lover sought a sign, and in seeking, she found it. She was looking very hard to find one. The reader cannot know precisely what the connection was, but for her, the significant message emerged from her desire to find one.

"Seven years after the death of this man I was still yearning for his love ... One day, his birthday, I sat down to write him a letter to tell him how much he was still part of me, and how much alive he still was for me ... I ended my letter asking

for a present. I asked him to let me know that I was not delusional, that love does not die and that I was still as much a part of him as he was of me. I also wrote that I thought I had received a tangible sign from him once before, and I was asking for another one ...

"A week later I went to the movies with a girlfriend to see *Fantasma D'Amore* (*Ghost of Love*) with Marcello Mastroianni. It was the greatest gift I could have received from the other side! It was more than just an answer to my letter ... but you won't understand, unless you go see that movie."¹³

Lovers may seek confirmation in coincidences. Uncertain lovers are likely to look for signs to convince themselves and their beloved that their love is "meant to be." People who believe in divine intervention may interpret coincidences of numbers and names, for example, to suggest that God is arranging their betrothal. "We are being told to marry, it is His will." The following story illustrates the self-serving way that such lovers can interpret coincidences:

"I really loved him, like no one else. We seemed to be able to communicate telepathically without being in the same room. When he was in the same building I could feel his presence. I melted into his arms. His mother's name was the same as my sister's. His father's name was the same as my brother's. I could tell how he was feeling when we were apart. I told him these things because they seemed like evidence that our love was meant to be, that we should last for all time. After about 2 years our relationship was over. As it turns out, the coincidences were meaningful only for the time we were together. They did not mean forever."

Although heavily imbued with positive emotion, such self-referential meaningful coincidences can be mistaken. Love involves two people. The coincidences encouraged her to believe that their love stretched into eternity. Her lover felt differently.

Robert Perry¹⁴ is attempting to systematize the interpretation of coincidences by establishing strict criteria for possible interpretation. The minimum requirement is the co-occurrence of two independent events within hours of each other that share a long list of parallels. Perhaps the easiest way to outline his interpretive process is to first recognize absurd interpretations. For example:

"A 48-year-old married businessman was reeling from the out-of-wedlock pregnancy of his daughter. He had become friends with the instructor at his yoga class. They often had coffee together after class. He gradually told the instructor about his anxiety and sadness. She gently asked him questions about the situation. Eventually she told him that, at age 19, she had a child out of wedlock and was now married with another child by her first and only husband who is not the father of her first child. She asked him the name of his new grandchild. It was 'Mariah.' That was the yoga instructor's first child's name! The coincidence suggested to the businessman that he should consider having an affair with the instructor. Such coincidences must mean that they were closely connected."

This interpretation makes too many assumptions, is too great a leap. A proper response would be to hesitatingly interpret the coincidence as suggesting that things will work out well for his daughter and granddaughter and that he could continue talking to the instructor about their common situation. In this way the instructor's story acts as a commentary, or a parable, about the businessman's current situation.

HYPOMANIA

Few emotional states drive associations as fast and as intensely as mania. The following case report concerns a hypomanic patient driven to find coincidences and to make meaning out of them:

"I first saw SG, a 40-year-old single woman in a rural community clinic. She did not take many breaks when speaking.

She was very energetic in an unthreatening, yet nonetheless unsettling way. She stated that she was very anxious due to 'weird things happening around me.'

"She had received a diagnosis of bipolar disorder more than 10 years ago and had been hypomanic for years. She was preoccupied with 'weird' coincidences that happened around her. They involved the appearance of numbers that were personally relevant to her.

"SG spontaneously explained two tattoos of ribbons on her arms. She had received cornea transplants in each eye. She could not get much information on the donors, but had found their birth dates, which she had tattooed under the ribbons. She believed in cellular memory and had derived the rest of the information about the donors from her dreams and coincidences. She showed me advertisements for merchandise with prices that were also dates of important events in her life. SG found a jacket bearing 'her' number at the thrift store where she worked part-time. After describing each coincidence from her life, she would ask me what I thought it meant. I tried to tell her it was 'just a coincidence' and challenged her inappropriately intense feelings and search for meanings in these random events. This effort wore me out.

"I spent 40 minutes defending my understanding of the world against that of a manic woman with a thought disorder that I couldn't quite categorize. I tried to fit her way of thinking into my understanding of 'flight of ideas,' 'delusions of reference,' 'magical thinking,' and 'narcissism,' but none seemed to satisfactorily describe her process. This experience of listening to her and attempting to rationalize with her was exhausting and frustrating. I felt that we had no rapport at all, and I was wishing I hadn't set up a follow-up appointment in a month.

"Later that month, in a seminar, we discussed weird coincidences where we used the term 'synchron' to designate emotionally laden coincidences. I stated

that many random yet seemingly related things do happen around the same time, but that a coincidence is not meaningful until investigated logically. I experienced the same fatigue and exasperation after that seminar conversation as I had with SG. I eventually agreed that people sometimes have the feeling that a coincidence may have a particular meaning. I thought that people are more likely to find coincidences when they have a conflict and are looking for meaning. This fit much better with my understanding of the existential literature. Then I wondered why SG was so frantically looking for meaning.

"SG brought a digital camera for the next appointment, and I brought a different tactic. I asked her what 'weird things' had happened since last time. She said that she had been using the camera to catch some of the 'weird things.' For example, dates and names on the TV could be assembled into her dad's name and birthday. She had collections of objects in her house that could be read as pictographs. (For example, she had arranged a sock, a picture of a cheerleader saying 'rah' and a box of tea together to signify 'Socrates'). She was cleaning a Wilson Pickett CD when one of his songs coincidentally came on the TV. The bulk of our conversation was again about these coincidences, but I could tell her that coincidences commonly occur. I suggested the term 'synchron' from the weird coincidence seminar.

"Having a label for the barrage of information made things go smoother. SG relaxed after I was able to validate her experiences by naming them. I think that naming involved a left-hemisphere mediated system, and that left-hemisphere activation restored SG's hemispheric imbalance. There is much evidence from neuropsychological work that the urge to impose meaning onto random configurations — whether in space or time — originates in an overly active 'meaning attribution system' of the right cerebral hemisphere.¹⁵ By performing the naming procedure, I was able to step back a little

and take interest in the things she finds important. After that, we were able to move past the coincidences themselves to find the more symbolic meaning she was seeking. For example, SG missed her dad, and felt that seeing his name and birth date on TV meant his spirit was ok somewhere.

"During our next appointment, we talked more about her history. She downplayed the treatments she received for bipolar disorder, saying that she liked the way she thinks. 'Thinking that way makes Moberly (her home town) the Magic City (which is its slogan).' Her insight appears at least partial; she has personalized license plates that say "3-polar." She works a few hours a week at the thrift store, but she is a full-time coincidence seeker. In some ways she finds meaning by trying to find meaning in coincidences."

PERPLEXING COINCIDENCES

As the hypomanic patient illustrated, the meaning of emotionally charged coincidences interpretation can be elusive. As the next case suggests, some people suddenly start finding coincidences and then have trouble understanding their meanings.

"I met a girl at my workplace, and since the very first day I talked to her I have been experiencing a lot of coincidences. When I think about her the phone rings; it's her calling me. If I'm going to say something, she says it before I start talking, or if she is going to say something, I say it before she does. This happens a lot. She went to my same grammar school, junior high, same orchestra class, and then ended up working at the same place. But I just met her 4 years ago. I didn't think of our meeting as that important until she told me that she believes in reincarnation and that we had loved each other in a past life, love each other in this life, and will love each other in a future life. She says that explains why I know what she is thinking and she knows what I'm thinking. My

relationship with her is not going anywhere. She is engaged and planning to get married in 6 months. More and more, this relationship is becoming more mysterious. The last coincidence is that her boyfriend's sister is very good friends with my best friend's brother. I'm starting to freak out, but I don't know why."

This perplexed person was trying to understand a series of coincidences involving a woman he had met. Her explanation was that they had met in a previous life and were destined to be together forever. But she was marrying someone else. The evidence was there, but no life together was to emerge. The coincidences did not compute at this time; some people do re-meet years later and marry. How is meaning optimally extracted from an emotionally charged and unlikely co-occurrence? For example, how should the psychiatric nurse in the following case optimally interpret the coincidence between what she was thinking and her patient's delusion?

"A patient on a psychiatric ward confides that sparrows nesting on a neighbor's roof had urged him to destroy the neighbor's satellite dish because it was intruding on nature; the nurse who hears this revelation has spent the morning hiking in the woods and meditating on the importance of 'communing' with the natural world."⁹

A probabilistic interpretation might suggest that environmental activism has received increasing cultural attention. In the course of this narrative, both patient and nurse showed their psychological involvement in this movement — an involvement that is similar to that of many other people around the world. They are

simply thinking what many other people are thinking each in their own ways.

For those who wish to go past probability-based explanations, however, meaning tends to be drawn from two different levels: the personal and the transpersonal. At the personal level, coincidences can seem to provide suggestions and support. They also can be interpreted as indicators for the existence of fate, a guiding intelligence, the interconnection of mind with environment and the collective unconscious.

The nurse could interpret the coincidence as suggesting that she should become more active in her local environmental movement. It could also serve to suggest that her mind is more closely connected to her environment than she had thought, impelling her even more to act.

CONCLUSIONS

We have described the experiences of enthusiastic and self-referential coincidence-finders as well as those of people who perceive more coincidences in heightened emotional states. There is another, less-visible group alluded to in the paper by Robert Hopcke¹⁶ (see page 287). These are apparently people who, in a variety of ways, believe that coincidences are natural occurrences in their daily lives. They consider these random intersections of events as possible instructions, advice, and symbolic communications about the nature of their current realities. Like conversations with friends and strangers, inspiring books, movies, and sermons in houses of worship, coincidences seems to provide relatively normal people with useful commentary

on their psychological, spiritual, relationship and vocational lives.

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