PERSONAL CONCEPTIONS OF DEATH
IN YOUNG CZECH ADULTS

CYRIL KAPLAN

Abstract: There is a significant lack of psychological research on death-as-a-state thinking and expectations. This study aimed to map that unexplored terrain, using qualitative methodology to provide information about what people picture and feel when they think about what comes after death. We investigated conceptions of death, initial associations with the word death and polarity of feeling in death thoughts in 52 young Czech adults. We identified three main types of belief about what happens once we die: conceptions of a specific form of transcendence that comes in multiple shapes, mostly based on an eclectic combination of motifs from various eschatologies; conceptions of non-specific forms of transcendence based on a belief in continued existence in forms that are hard to imagine; conceptions of nothingness after life and for all eternity.

Key words: personal conceptions of death; belief in afterlife; spirituality; psychology of death.

Introduction

Throughout the history of mankind, images of what happens after we die have been an integral part of all religious and philosophical systems. Just think a few hundred years ago you would not have had to ask your neighbour what he thought followed the death of our body. He would have had access to the same set of information and beliefs as you and your grandparents, and even their great-great-grandparents, so he would supposedly have thought much like you. We analysed conceptions of death in a group of young Czech adults and discovered that we cannot predict a priori if they will have any or what they will be like. Easy access to information and a mixture of aspects taken from different cultures create the context and the imagery.

Aim of research

Our research aimed to map the content of personal conceptions of death and obtain an insight into whether and how people picture the state that follows life. As this theoretical terrain has not yet been mapped out in detail, the best method for undertaking this particular study seemed to be a survey that would investigate the dimensions of these conceptions. For
the same reason we decided to apply qualitative methodology and an inductive approach to thematically analysing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and gaining some understanding of what contemporary young Czech adults think about death-as-a-state.

During the preparation phase of our research, particularly the literature search on death-related topics, several questions arose: Does the nature of our conceptions relate to how we feel when we think about death? We were curious as to whether people with different mental pictures of the hereafter would have a specific reaction to their own thoughts of death, which we supposed would be triggered by their participation in the research (that our questions about death would make them think about death). Or rather, would people with similar conceptions feel similar about their reactions as well?

When we performed this research we were already under the impression that there was no guarantee that the respondents would have a specific idea about what comes after death (Nešporová, 2009). We did not expect everyone to have images of the afterlife in his or her mind. But who would we expect to have such images? At hand there is a link between images of the afterlife (or lack of them) and personal religiosity, spirituality or a system of beliefs about life (and death). We decided to examine that more closely and asked the participants if they considered themselves to be spiritual or religious to test if there was any support for this seemingly logical assumption about the participants’ responses. The third topic related to the personal conceptions of death we decided to explore further was about how these were formed and what influences affected their development significantly. Do people whose conceptions are similar think they were intellectually and philosophically created in a similar way? Would respondents with similar image content of what comes after death identify similar sources of influence on formation of these?

Two meanings of the word death

When we utter the word death it may mean at least two different things¹: the moment of death and the state that follows that moment. The first meaning involves completion. It represents death as a point, as a moment (which we may fear, or welcome, or which can be painful or quick etc.). The second meaning of the word death is open-ended—it refers to an uncertain period of time, not just a single point. It refers to death as to something that endures. In our research we were interested solely in this latter meaning.

Our preliminary question was how to collect information about what people envisage when they think of death. We first mapped the terrain by perusing books and papers on death from various fields of the humanities.

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¹ We can of course mean many other things when we utter the word “death”. For example, we can talk about death meaning the process of dying or we can use the adjective dead as a synonym for non-functional or missing. Or, taking another perspective, there is an ongoing discussion about how death can be defined from the medical point of view (Black, 1977). For the purposes of this paper we will use the word death as defined here.
**Death as a point**

Most of the existing psychological death-related research has focused on death as a moment. Kastenbaum (2000) identifies several different views of death in 20th century psychology, all of which see the role of death as a motivator of human behaviour.

**Death as a boundary**

V. E. Frankl, the founder of logotherapy (a form of psychotherapy that emphasizes the importance of searching for a purpose in life) introduced the notion of death as a boundary. The limited time span we have emphasizes what we do, our activities and our work. The notion of death as a boundary lends importance to the time we live for. It makes every day count and each thought and experience valid. The fact that we all eventually die brings purpose to our lives (Frankl, 1969).

**The fear of death**

I. D. Yalom, an American psychiatrist and psychotherapist who based his approach to the human soul on existential principles, considered fear of death to be a crucial human motivator. Fear of death can take many forms and manifests itself in contrasting kinds of behaviour. On one hand it may involve all kinds of risky behaviour, and living-to-the-maximum, and on the other, extreme carefulness and the tendency to avoid anything even slightly harmful. According to Yalom (2008), these are just a few of the ways in which we deal with death-related anxiety, where anxiety stems from the fact that we all have to die and that our lives will end one day.

**The death instinct**

R. Kastenbaum (2000) notes that it was partly down to S. Freud that the topic of death slowly gained importance in psychology. His concept of Thanatos, the death instinct, introduced death-related themes to what were then the young sciences of psychology and psychotherapy. Freud (1955) explains that there are two main energy sources of behaviour in each individual and he calls them instincts. The Thanatos instinct is the supposed source of evil, hostility and self-destructive tendencies. It is related to the natural tendency of matter to adopt the simplest form possible (according to the second law of thermodynamics). For living organic matter, this means transforming into inorganic matter (which is what it originally used to be), to decompose. The counterforce to this phenomenon is the instinct for life and the tendency of matter to increase its structural complexity under specific physical conditions.

**Being close to death**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s two books written by psychiatrists and near-death studies pioneers were published: *On Death and Dying* by E. Kübler-Ross (1969) and *Life after Life* by R. Moody (1975). According to Kastenbaum (2000) these two books had an enormous
impact on the popularization of the topic of death in social sciences. They became widely known and part of public discourse for decades to come.

Moody (1975) presents testimonies of people who had experienced clinical death and were able to recall memories from the moment their body was considered dead. We believe that some of the motifs that Moody introduced to the public became widespread and continue to influence our conceptions of death, hence the emblematic motif of the light at the end of the tunnel. Parnia et al. (2014) recently published some quite extensive research on people who had near-death experiences when in cardiac arrest. Several hospitals participated in a rigorously designed study which sought to explore the previously suggested (Van Lommel et al., 2001) objectivity of some descriptions of near-death-experiences (NDE). Having interviewed 140 patients (survivors of over 2,000 cases of cardiac arrest where the precise time of arrest had been monitored), the researchers obtained 9 descriptions of NDE, of which 2 contained out-of-body memories that could be verified by witnesses. One of these two statements was considered to be accurate and quite specific in describing the events that had occurred when subject’s heart stopped.

Death as a state

In order to place our research in the context of what is written above, and to clarify what knowledge could have influenced the way we handled the data collected later, we present a summary of some important factors relating to death conceptions common to multiple cultures and philosophies. We identified several basic concepts of death-as-a-state, which reappear in various cultures, emerging and disappearing over the course of time.

Belief in afterlife

It can be said that the majority of world cultures believe in an afterlife of some kind. Yet there are aspects that divide these belief systems from each other. They may differ in the number of possible fates or the number of possible scenarios of what happens to the soul when the body dies. For example, the ancient Greeks and Egyptians believed that a particular afterlife awaited each person in that society. Küng (1984) states that a belief in a single kind of underworld may have helped believers accept their terrestrial fate, position in society and the way their life was lived. It was justification for the way of life in that particular society. Ancient Egypt’s paradise closely resembled the Nile delta; the structure of society in the hereafter was the same as that on earth, except that there was no bad weather, working conditions were easy and harvests were always rich so the afterlife was easier (Grof, 2006). On the other hand, Mayans believed in seven different heavens. The uppermost was reserved for only a few souls who would be able to spend their eternity in the presence of God, in the shape of the Sun.

According to Ariès (1974), up until the 12th century Christians tended to believe that a collective fate awaited all believers. Bodies had to be buried, and all the souls in a state closely resembling deep sleep awaited Judgment Day. By the end of the Middle Ages, states Ariès (1974), that idea had started to lose importance. The notion of individual last judgments being handed down at the moment of death slowly became predominant. Ariès (1974)
theorizes that this shift from perceiving our post-mortal fate as a collective one to the belief in an individual fate is related to the shift in the perception of human life itself. The notion that life was a curriculum to be filled with our acts and which we would have to account for at the moment of death emerged at a time when private property started to become important and monetary power became independent from hereditary privileges. From then on every believer lived with the vision that during his final hour he would be subjected to an evaluation of his deeds and that a fate would be chosen for his soul—heaven, hell or purgatory.

Christopher, Drummond, Jones, Marek, & Therriault (2006) have published research findings that support Ariès’ view presented above. Materialistic people tend to fear death more. Macabre themes started to appear about the same time as material possessions gained importance (Ariès, 1974). Before the shift in perceiving the afterlife as a collective fate to different individual scenarios, death had been considered an integral part of life and there had been no additional fear relating to its image.

Another dimension of notions of the afterlife is duration—there are post-mortal fates that last for eternity and others which are just temporal. For example, Christian purgatory is a place where the soul goes to pay for its sins and after that limited amount of time it can go on to heaven for eternity. The Buddhist belief in reincarnation has a temporal aspect too: the soul spends a limited period of time in Bardo (an intermediate state, or the state of existence between two lives on earth) and then occupies a body again (Rinpoche, 2002).

Belief in nothingness

This category of conceptions contains beliefs that do not rely on the continuity of existence after bodily death as well as beliefs that imagine this hypothetical continuity as an eternal emptiness, resembling an endless sleep.

I. D. Yalom emphasizes the importance of the human world of interpersonal relations. But death, where no such relations exist, has no relevance to him (Yalom, 2008). Although his attitude quite clearly suggests that he does not consider thoughts on the afterlife to be crucially important, he admits that a particular vision of death comforts him:

I am in accordance with Epicurus’s conclusion: ‘Wherever death is, I am not.’ There won’t be any I to feel terror, sadness, grief or deprivation. My consciousness will be extinguished, the switch turned off, lights out. I also find comfort in Epicurus’s symmetry argument: I will be in the same state of non-being after death as I used to be before I was born (Yalom, 2008, pp. 177-178).

Belief in transcendence of unpredictable form

V. E. Frankl thinks that man cannot have a specific idea of what actually comes after death. “A domestic animal does not understand the purposes for which man employs it. How then could man know what ‘final’ purpose his life has, what ‘super-meaning’ the universe has” (Frankl, 1969, p. 39)? We can just believe, Frankl thinks, and that belief does not necessarily have to take any specific form. Death is a boundary; our lives end, but what comes next transcends man.
Belief in validity of the mode of death

Many cultures share a belief that the moment of death plays a decisive role in the fates of our afterlife (Ariès, 1974). For example, old Christians believed that dying in a fight was a sure way for the soul to reach heaven. But on the contrary a dishonest and especially a sudden death could mean eternal damnation.

Belief in symbolic immortality

Drolet (1990) performed an interesting survey. He compiled a questionnaire consisting of statements such as: “I feel that I do what I want in my life” and “I feel that, in spite of my inevitable death, I will always be part of this world.” The purpose of his Sense of Symbolic Immortality Scale was to determine if his probands believed in immortality and what shape their beliefs took. In accordance with R. J. Lifton’s theory, Drolet tried to identify various perspectives on immortality in his probands: biological (we remain in the DNA we manage to pass on), creative (we remain through the results of our work) or transcendental (we are part of something bigger and we will remain part of it even after we die). The Purpose in Life Test (Braun & Dolmino, 1978) formed the second part of his test battery. Drolet (1990) collected statistical evidence that images of death as a state that follows life are inseparable from the way in which we perceive our life and its purpose. He found support for his second hypothesis that the concept of symbolic immortality evolves during the course of life—both purpose in life score and the sense of symbolic immortality score correlated positively with the age of the subjects in his sample (N=139).

Methods and research sample

The literature reviewed above provides us with a knowledge base for the creation of our data collection instrument which will be described in this section. Although not exhaustive, the literature review was performed to identify the specific angles from which the phenomenon of death is presented in the psychological, philosophical and historical literature. We stopped the literature analysis once the rate of incidence of completely new views on death slowed down significantly.

Sample and data gathering process

We gathered data from 52 respondents (24 of whom were female) aged between 20 and 30 (mean = 26.82; SD = 2.89). The majority (84%) were university students and graduates. All of them were living in the city of Prague and were of Czech nationality.

We used snowball sampling to obtain the respondents. An email with a link to an online questionnaire created in Google documents was sent to individuals known to the author that fitted into the age category. The respondents were asked to forward the email to people they thought might be interested in participating in the research.

The online questionnaire was accessible for a one month period. New respondents accessed it gradually throughout the period. Generally there was one small group of
respondents at a time, always bringing new qualitative motifs into the research which were more or less homogeneous in their conceptions.

**Questionnaire items construction**

The core part of our questionnaire consisted of three open questions. This format was chosen to enable us to assess personal conceptions of death in their fullest possible extent—without offering respondents any motifs on which to base their responses. We were afraid that a set of closed questions could influence the responses of participants and therefore distort our research results.

The first question aimed to gather the associations related to the word death. Research on an equivalent Slovak population, asking a similar question, was performed by Démuthová (2011a). In our research the question served partly as a trigger for death-related images in the respondent. The aim was partly to establish where the respondents understanding of the word death lay in relation to their personal vocabulary.

Next, our core question was: “What do you think comes after death?” This sought directly to gather death-as-state related imagery and descriptions of personal post-mortal fate visions.

The third open question asked about respondents’ perceptions of the influences affecting how their conceptions of death had evolved.

The questionnaire had a number of Likert scales to complement the open questions and enable us to assess the polarity of emotion tied to the personal conceptions of death, spirituality, previous experience of deaths of others and personal experience of mortal danger. These concepts and the wording of the statements were based on a number of previous studies that approached afterlife from a psychological point of view using quantitative methodology (Berman & Hays, 1974; Dezutter et al., 2009; Spilka, Stout, Minton, & Sizemore, 1977; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994).

**Data analysis process**

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify distinct motifs in the research participants’ descriptions of personal conceptions of death. The data analysis was divided into two phases. The first phase started when first questionnaires were filled and submitted. It had mainly inductive character (Yin, 2011)—each motif that we managed to identify in the then still growing data corpus established the basis for a new category or was incorporated into an existing one.

The second phase took place after the data collection was finished. The first level categories that had been created previously were intercompared and those that were similar in certain specific aspects were joined together and given one name. Three of these newly created clusters were identified as our key categories, as they were closely tied to the descriptions of the participants’ conceptions of death. Each conception then fell into one of the three categories.
Ensuring validity

Bearing in mind the credibility of our research—the term used for the internal validity of qualitative research tools established by Guba (1981)—all the open questions we used were formulated as straightforwardly as possible. Our statements about participants’ conceptions in what comes below are illustrated using examples from their responses, where this did not seem redundant. To ensure dependability, or in other words, to ensure that we were getting answers to the questions we had asked (Ravitch & Carl, 2014), we triangulated the themes emerging from the descriptions of the conceptions of death with the death-as-a-state literature. The literature analysis conducted prior to the research served as a knowledge base for assessing data dependability and then creating and adjusting the categories identified in the participants’ responses.

Transferability, according to Ravitch and Carl (2014), refers to the applicability of research findings to broader contexts; it is a term used alongside external validity in quantitative research. A detailed description of the data and research circumstances is needed before the findings can be transferred. In this article we provide information about sampling, data gathering and processing, as we believe that our research methodology could be successfully modified and used with other research populations. Our research findings are of course limited to our research sample—young Czech adults.

Results

We managed to gather 53 completed questionnaires, although only 52 of them were included in the data analysis. One was excluded because it was irrelevant to the research topic—instead of containing responses its aim was to ridicule the questionnaire items and the research topic. It contained statements like: “Once I got stoned and I got to thinking and then I understood everything and I felt very happy with myself as the author of this depressing questionnaire surely does …” We considered it a valuable source of feedback on the questionnaire content, but not a source of information directly related to our research questions. Analysing it as we did the remaining questionnaires submitted seemed pointless and potentially damaging to the study’s integrity.

Personal conceptions of death content

In this section we present the brief characteristics of the three main categories of conceptions alongside example statements.3

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2 We have not excluded any part of the responses collected and the data analysis was inductive, so we have not excluded data that did not correspond to the motifs identified during the literature analysis. We provide more details on the data set creation in the results section. Further information on the relationships between the motifs gathered from the analysis of the literature and the motifs identified during the thematic analysis of the responses can be found in the discussion.

3 The statements were in Czech. The translations are by the author of this article. For a complete data set in Czech see: http://www.rezidencnipecze.cz/dokumenty_ke_stazeni/dokumenty/Predstavy_o_smrti.doc
Images of nothingness

Respondents (12 female and 14 male) whose descriptions were allocated to this category tended to use just a few words to describe their conceptions of death: “Nothing.”; “Nothing-end.”

Several participants from this group answered the question about how they imagined the afterlife in longer fragments or whole sentences: “Absolute annihilation, no form of consciousness at all.”; “There won’t be anything, and you can’t imagine that.”; “There is no continuation, there is nothing after death. Because it is uncomfortable and frightening to even try to think about this, I avoid such contemplations.” and “I see death as a definitive endpoint in life, there is nothing after death.”

One of the respondents compared the state we will experience after death to the state we found ourselves in before being born: “There will be nothing. Great emptiness. No time. Somehow I imagine that it will be the same as before I was born. Then there is a short period of existence and then nothingness again. There is no present, no personality, just emptiness.”

Images of a decomposing body occurred frequently: “We can say that our brain stops working.”; “I expect nothing more than the slow decomposition of the body.”

There were no references to any religious themes, nor to any near-death experience stories in the statements describing death as nothingness.

The notions of death as a state resembling the state of sleep were exclusive to this group: “(I imagine) nothing, a dreamless sleep” and “What comes after death is the same thing that happens when we are asleep—unconsciousness, nothingness.”

Participants from this group associated the word death most frequently with the motifs of end and emptiness—words end, nothing, emptiness or nothingness appeared as the most frequent associations of the word death. Macabre symbols such as the grim reaper, skulls or graveyards appeared in the associations as well as symbols of darkness, such as night or the colour black. Motifs of a fear of death were also found in the first associations of the word death: “anxiety”; “hopelessness”; “fear” and “panic”. Motifs of fear and death were not exclusive to this group; three other participants that described a vision of transcendence of life in some form mentioned the motifs of “dread” and “anxiety” too. In terms of evolving ideas, the respondents that imagined nothingness as a state frequently saw the roots of their conceptions as narrow and simple—they did not usually state that they had studied death-related literature nor had conversations with their friends on the topic. They often mentioned one root of inspiration—family culture.

Two types of family culture influence were described. On the one hand there were atheistic tales that encouraged a belief in nothingness in our participants: “I think it was the way my mother raised me, I do not mean it was wrong, but she raised me in a very atheistic fashion, as a little girl I never heard that people go to a promised land after they die or that they change into an animal; instead I was told that we live only once, that we have one chance to get the most out of life, and that we simply won’t exist after we die, that there will be nothing...”

On the other hand there was a description of a family culture that emphasized religious faith that contributed to the formation of quite different conceptions: “Of course there were things like being resigned to faith in God (Christian in my case) and on conceptions of
paradise/purgatory/hell that were clearly based on evident confabulations about the creation of the world. …”

Two participants mentioned logical thinking as a source of their conceptions: “logical thinking, there can’t be anything, man is no more than a mass of cells.”

One participant mentioned personally experiencing an altered state of mind: “experience of passing out and general anaesthetic during an operation.”

**Specific images of transcendence**

The participants’ conceptions (9 female and 7 male) that fall into this category are presented as descriptions of varying detail of what comes after we die. These images vary in the extent to which they resemble different eschatologies—most are mixtures of versions of Christian (“Heaven.” “…what God prepared for us.”) or Buddhist (“…nirvana.”) visions—and the varying aspects of motifs of near-death experiences.

The depictions categorized here contain the motif of the afterlife. An interesting aspect concerning the data set is that some respondents described heaven as a place where souls rest, but no one mentioned any visions of hell. In all cases the afterlife was associated with something positive and pleasant: “I imagine a merry place, airless, no gravity, lightness, white… I will meet members of my family there.”

We could identify motifs of higher being and intelligent light, frequently described in near-death experience reports. For example: “(I imagine) deliverance of all the thoughts and identifying with some form of higher being.”; “Light, blare, everything, unity with cosmic consciousness.” and “Becoming more distant from mundane sounds and lights. Through the tunnel to the world of my soul. Contemplation of our most intensive memories and feelings.”

Thoughts about reincarnation were mentioned frequently: “An endless cycle of reincarnation and the transformation of energy and mass.” and “I imagine that, according to the laws of physics, the energy does not disappear, it transforms, so I think that could be some form of reincarnation.”

Typically the depictions of specific images of transcendence are not accompanied by any expressions of doubt, are rich in words and regularly use religious and spiritual terms to describe the state of death.

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4 The fact that our research sample (N=52) does not contain respondents who pictured the afterlife as being especially dreadful or unpleasant (e.g. images of hell or eternal torture, common to various eschatologies) can be attributed to sample size. Neusar (2014, p. 185) explains “the law of small numbers” in his article about the credibility of qualitative research: “…many experts, do not expect to reach extreme observations from small samples (e.g., that all eight people in one building have the same illness) which is reinforced by the common misconception that random events, numbers, or other phenomena, do not generate patterns or form clusters. In reality they often do, but qualitative researchers may think that the patterns are a sign of a real effect (e.g., in my previous job, all the researchers apart from the departmental head had only daughters and the typical conclusion was that social scientists cannot have boys).”

Another possible explanation could lie in the fact that we used a self-sampling method to recruit the participants. People with unpleasant or dreadful conceptions of death may have preferred not to participate in our research.
Approximately one half of the respondents from this group expressed a belief in continued life after death in the form of a new terrestrial life: “I will be born again as a human in another time.” and “…my soul will choose a new form of life.”

The other half described images of other forms of existence: “…continuing consciousness as part of something bigger.” and “I imagine some pleasant place, airless, lot of light, huge airy space – it probably could be called heaven…”

Generally, respondents from this group concentrated less on the fate of the body and more on the fate of the soul. They see the roots of their afterlife ideas in all their complexity more often than is the case with the respondents from the group described above. Participants from this group (11 times out of 16) generally mentioned multiple sources that have supposedly influenced the way in which their afterlife image evolved: “Personal development, different groups of people, religion, friends studying philosophy or similar areas in the humanities, my own education in the humanities. Books like Conversations with God, The Celestine Prophecy, Women Who Run with the Wolves etc.”

All but four of the participants in this group mentioned literature as a source of influence: “…spiritual literature…”; “…books about Buddhism.”; “the book Life after Life.” and “I read a book about Buddhism when I was 12.”

Two participants considered their experiences with psychedelic drugs to have had an influence on their views of what comes after we die: “…a mushroom trip when I was 14…”

Several participants expressed the belief that their deeds would have consequences for their after-death fate: “In average cases, our terrestrial life is evaluated after death – if we manage to develop in the way we planned to before reincarnation…” and “…the soul returns to the place it came from. The soul will assess what was gained during life in this world, what wounds helped her grow…”

With this group, the words they first associated with death contained references to death as a kind of new beginning: “transformation”; “entering a new world” and “a new direction.”

It was not uncommon for participants across the whole research sample to associate death with motifs of darkness or macabre themes, and associations of this nature were also found within this subgroup. Two of the participants listed the words “grief” and “sorrow” among their other associations.

Non-specific images of transcendence

The images categorized in this block are based on the idea that our existence will continue in some non-specific or difficult to imagine way once we cease to live. Volitional modality is frequently found in the responses categorized here.

The best characteristic of this group (formed of 4 female and 6 male respondents) lies in the common uncertainty and doubt about what is going to happen, and in the lack of clarity in the death-related imagery: “I think something has to happen, I cannot imagine that my consciousness would disappear completely after death, but the question is what would it look like?” and “The physical parts of me will cease to exist, the spiritual part will outlive death and take on a new form, in some other place and time. I do not know what that will look like then, and to be honest, I do not really care because I do not possess the power to influence this.”
We could not find any references to religious motifs, near-death experience themes, nor of death being compared to sleep. Neither are there any references to some form of final judgment—expressing a belief that our deeds and behaviour have consequences for what happens once life ends.

Approximately one third of respondents mentioned motifs relating to the decomposition of the body: “The body dies, the cells decompose…”

Despite the gravity of the depictions categorized here, there are generally also expressions of hope: “I heartily hope there will be something after death.”; “…thinking about the ultimate end is dreadful. So there must be something after physical death.”

The respondents in this group tended to hope that there would be some continuing existence, but they generally did not forget to mention that life is closely connected to the body. The images of incorporeal life provided here generally lack detail: “A new life as another self or as a part of something bigger – it is hard to tell.” and “The human ear has not heard of it, the human eye has not seen it – I am sure the afterlife exists, I do not have any specific images relating to its absolute transcendence.”

Four participants mentioned the word “end” as one of their first associations with the word death. One participant associated “freedom” and “silence” with the word death. One wrote down the words “expectation” and “new beginning”. Another associated death solely with the word “anxiety”.

All but one of the respondents from this group listed several influences that they perceived had shaped their conceptions of death, including conversations with friends, family, different books and films or ways of thinking about and observing the world. One participant mentioned the influence of drugs: “marijuana.” One participant said only: “The instinct of self-preservation.”

**Spirituality**

We assessed spirituality according to the methodology used by Van Laarhoven, Schilderman, Verhagen, Vissers, & Prins (2011) by asking participants a single question—whether they believed in god or other supernatural forces—and providing them with an 8-point Likert scale on which to express the strength of their belief.

Nineteen participants identified their level of belief in a higher form of power than ourselves as being somewhere between 8 and 6 points. All of them provided us with descriptions of some form of afterlife, though 6 of them were not specific about what form the continued existence would take.

At the other end of the scale, the 19 participants who had indicated the strength of their belief in god or in a higher power as being between 1 and 3 did not necessarily describe death as the end of existence. One respondent (who placed the strength of his spirituality at number 2) expressed a belief in continuing existence in what we might call symbolic form: “Nothingness comes after death … subjectively. Objectively it will not mean the end, the energy, the atomic and subatomic parts will just take on a different shape … The other thing that counts is the continuing existence of my DNA footprint in the family line and as part of the whole human genotype.”
There were four other participants who had low levels of spirituality but described visions of transcendence in some form or another, both featuring specific and unspecific content.

**Experiences of death**

The majority of our respondents declared that they had experienced the death of someone close (e.g. a family member or friend). Most commonly this was the experience of the death of a member of the extended family (a grandparent, uncle or aunt).

Four participants stated that they had no experiences of the death of someone close, and neither had they experienced the death of someone they knew striking them unexpectedly hard. This group was formed of three female and one male respondent, two of whom described their conceptions of death only very briefly: “nothing-end”; “return to the cocoon.”

The other two provided a more elaborate description; one of them was the only one in the whole research sample to focus on the double post-mortal fate of the body and the soul: “My self will split into two parts after death. My physical body will return to the ground … my soul will choose the circumstances of its next birth …”

Eleven of our respondents had experienced the death of someone really close to them (e.g. a parent, sibling, partner or close friend). None of them responded by saying that they would be unsure as to how to picture the state that follows life. All of them provided us with descriptions of a specific post-mortal fate, describing either nothingness or images of specific transcendence.

**Polarity of feeling**

Ten participants who had the highest stated negative polarity of feeling of 7 or 8 on the 8-point Likert scale, triggered when contemplating their own notions of what comes after death, had similar conceptions. All but one imagined that the state that follows life resembles nothingness. One expressed the hope that existence would continue and that she tended to imagine an unspecified form of transcendence: “I try to find comfort in the idea that ‘something’ must follow death (but do not know the specific shape of this ‘something’), but I rather doubt it.”

Two participants used words such as “dread” or “afraid” in their descriptions of their personal conceptions of death. One of them did so repeatedly.

One of the two participants that compared death to a dreamless sleep (see Images of Nothingness) expressed highly negative feelings in relation to that conception. One participant described this nothingness as resembling the state preceding life.

Thirteen participants from the other end of this scale, who perceived their feelings associated with their death-as-a-state images as positive (1 or 2 on the 8-point scale), provided us with descriptions of the afterlife in some form.

**Summary**

Death related imagery was collected from 52 participants. In spite of the great variety in content, their personal conceptions of death could be divided into three main categories described above—images of nothingness, specific images of transcendence and unspecified
images of transcendence. Two dimensions that emerged during the thematic analysis of the conceptions helped us to discover the following approach to dividing them: the presence/absence of a plot or process in the descriptions of the personal conceptions and the clarity/non-clarity or level of certainty in the descriptions.

This research was conducted with the expectation that there would be a link between the content and the emotions tied to the personal conceptions of death. We were able to observe that participants who stated that they did not have disturbing thoughts about what comes after death pictured a continued existence in one form or another. However, not every respondent whose conceptions of death-as-a-state involved continuity had positive feelings triggered by contemplation of his or her own mental pictures of existence after death. The relationship between the conception and the associated feeling becomes clear only in the extreme cases described above. A very negative feeling is associated with images of nothingness or deep-sleep like state conceptions, while a particularly positive feeling was expressed only in descriptions of a belief in the transcendence of existence. This relationship did not seem to have any value in the opposite direction within our sample—not everyone who imagined that nothingness would follow the death of the body was disturbed by that thought and nor did those who believe in transcendence necessarily express positive feelings about their conceptions.

All participants who stated that they had a strong spirituality provided us with descriptions of some form of transcendence when asked what they imagine comes after death. Respondents who indicated that they were not spiritual at all tended to describe nothingness as the state that follows life. Our expectation that the people who feel spiritual will have images about what comes after death proved to be correct for this research sample.

The relationship between the conceptions and the perceived influences on them appears not to be so straightforward. There was a slight tendency among participants who had conceptions of contented images of transcendence to write down more different roots for the influences, but several of them referred only to one specific source of influence, e.g.: “contemplating the processes in nature, season changes”. There was one specific root that was identified especially frequently by those who believe in a specific form of transcendence—Buddhist literature. The group of respondents who imagine nothingness to be the state that follows life tended to mention that their family upbringing had exerted the greatest influence in shaping their conceptions.

Discussion

Conceptions of death

Our research started by looking at what had previously been written about death. It is possible that unknowingly conducting this review of how death is presented in the psychological, philosophical and historical literature may have in some way encouraged us to identify similar themes and motifs in the thematic analysis of the research participants’ responses. After performing the data analysis, we returned to the motifs we had identified as being relevant to our topic during the literature review and compared them with the motifs we identified during the thematic analysis of the responses.
Approximately one half of our respondents imagined that death is followed by nothingness. This vision of post-mortal fate can frequently be found in the death-as-a-state literature, and its origins are attributed to Epicurus and his philosophy (Epikuros, 1970). We took a closer look at that theme in the section on ‘belief in nothingness’. In two cases there were analogies between death and a deep dreamless sleep and one participant compared death to the state we were in before being born. These views of death can be traced back to Greek philosophy and still survive in contemporary literature (Yalom, 2008).

One third of our participants described conceptions of some form of transcendence that take on specific shapes. The motifs which form these conceptions are diverse and contain multiple references to the motifs we were able to identify in the literature (see ‘belief in afterlife’). We found visions of heaven in our participants’ responses but no visions of hell or purgatory. Interestingly Nešporová (2009) found a similar lack of visions of hell when she interviewed 37 Czech adults (30-50 years old). In a recent qualitative study on beliefs in an afterlife among an Australian population, Singleton (2016) came to a similar finding. No one expressed a belief in hell in the data set he collected when interviewing 52 adults.

Themes resembling Buddhist or Hindi conceptions of the afterlife were more frequent than references to Christian eschatology. A belief in continued existence in the shape of a new terrestrial life was expressed more frequently than the belief that the soul remains eternally in one place. Both Nešporová (2009) and Singleton (2016) found that even among people who consider themselves to be Christians there is a significant number of people who believe in reincarnation.

We identified two alternative visions of post-mortal fate regarding its duration both in the literature and in our data set—the belief in an eternal fate, where the soul stays in one place forever (e.g. Christian heaven) and the belief in a temporal fate, where the soul stays in one place for a moment (e.g. Bardo) and then moves elsewhere (e.g. to a new body).

None of the participants expressed a belief in a collective fate—the idea that all of us will share a specific post-mortal fate (e.g. believing in Judgment day). Our participants’ conceptions relied exclusively on the fact that fate was specific to each individual.

In one response there were motifs of a belief in symbolic immortality (continued existence through what we have managed to achieve during our lives, or through our descendants’ DNA).

The remaining respondents (one fifth) described their belief in transcendence but had no clear conception of the details. A belief in the transcendence of non-specific forms is characterized by trusting or having the confidence that something will appear but given that it is complete transcendence any continuity is by its very nature unimaginable.

Our research findings in the context of previous studies

We took a look at the rather limited previous research on death-related imagery so we could discuss our findings and deduce possible directions for future research in this area.

Démuthová (2011a) performed research that mapped initial associations with the word death in young Slovak adults. She found that the words most frequently associated with death were grief, tears/crying, the end, funeral, loss, pain, fear. She considers them to carry negative meanings—thus she states that the most frequent associations with the word death
had negative meanings. Our participants associated the word death most frequently with the word “end”, with macabre themes (words like skull, graveyard, bone), motifs of night and darkness (black, night) and with words that express grief (grief, loss, sorrow). Associations with fear were as common as associations of death with the word beginning. We can agree that words that were clearly positive were not the most common associations with the word death. Nevertheless, to be sure of the true connotation of the word being associated, we would have to ask the person doing the associating.

There was one variable that we assessed but decided not to include in our analysis since it was not significant given the comparatively small research sample: past experiences of the death of someone close. A question about experience of the death of someone close was included in our questionnaire since this featured in experimental results that Hohman and Hogg (2011) collected. They suggest that an elevated frequency of death-related thoughts is usually caused by the closer presence of death in our surroundings; people with less developed personal conceptions of death tend to seek institutionally-based explanations (e.g. religions, cults, political movements). We expected that experiences of being close to one’s own death could trigger thoughts of death and therefore have an influence on death conceptions and the related emotions. We would recommend monitoring this variable in similar research on a substantially bigger research sample, especially one involving a mixed or quantitative methodology.

For the purposes of future research on death conceptions we would emphasize the importance of the clarity-non-clarity dimension or the explicitness of personal imagery. Nešporová (2009) considers that non-clarity or unsureness about what comes after we die to be the most characteristic feature of a belief in an afterlife in Czech adults.

Monitoring how personal conceptions of death evolve over time, during the course of life, could be very interesting, as there is a strong possibility that conceptions change with age, even during adulthood (Drolet, 1990; Démuthová, 2011b). There was a significant drop in the percentage of people from the same cohort who state that they believed in an afterlife; from in 1999 when they were young adults to 2008 when they were nine years older (Nešporová, 2009). We wonder if the unsureness or non-clarity of conceptions of death plays a key role in that phenomenon, or whether it is down to other personality factors or factors influencing Czech society as a whole.

Singleton (2016) noted that contemporary Australians tend to create their own specific personal beliefs by putting together motifs present in distinct eschatologies rather than accepting a single established system of belief. Even people who state that they believe in a particular religion (most of his sample comprised religious people) tend to form their own personal conceptions. We were able to note a similarly eclectic approach in our participants’ conceptions of death. Mixing features from various sources (European religions, Asian religions, reports of NDE, etc.) was characteristic among our research participants who had specific images of what comes after death.

Methodological suggestions for future research

We should always keep in mind that all our statements are based on a comparatively small data set recruited from a specific population of young adults, most of them university
students or graduates. However, a considerable amount of psychological research was performed on samples of university students.

We are aware of the fact that the sample size constitutes one of the major limitations of our research. Some questionnaire items could have provided much deeper insight into our research problem, and there would have been more motifs in the set of responses if the research had been conducted using a bigger and more diverse sample. With such a limited sample, the value of our study is mainly that it constitutes one of the first surveys into this research area.

On the other hand there is an advantage in choosing a sample of young adults and that is the variety of experience in losing someone close.

The combination of open questions and statements accompanied by Likert scales proved useful in performing a survey into personal conceptions of death. The choice of questionnaire as a research instrument was determined by our aspiration to obtain the participants’ conceptions since this method involves collecting them in a way that minimizes our influence. We are aware of the fact that many motifs relevant to our topic may have remained hidden because of the brief nature of the questionnaire. Collecting the data via thorough semi-structured interviews as performed by Nešporová (2009) or Singleton (2016) could probably have led to us collecting a data set that had more motifs.

We would recommend that methodology for future research on this topic. Quota sampling based on conceptions of death (our questionnaire could be used for screening) could be used to obtain a sample of participants representing a complex set of the different visions of what happens after we die. This could be followed up by thorough interviews. The research could be completed by constructing a list of statements significant for each type of conception. This could be used later on for the purposes of quantitative or mixed design research to further explore the role played by our death conceptions during our lives and how they relate to the way we are and the way we live.

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References


**Personal conceptions of death questionnaire**

1. **What springs to mind first when you hear the word “death”?**
   Please write down the first words that come into your mind, even if they not appear to be relevant.

2. **What do you think comes after death?**
   Describe your images accurately. The length of your statement is completely up to you, the only condition is that it should capture your images of what comes after death.

3. **How does thinking about what comes after death make you feel?**
   Positive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  Negative

4. **Has someone very close to you ever died? (family, partner, close friends…)**
   If so, please write down how long ago and what your relationship to her/him was.

5. **Has the death of someone you knew or had only heard of ever affected your feelings unexpectedly strongly?**
   If so, please write down how long ago it happened and explain your relationship to the deceased.

6. **Have you ever experienced a life-threatening situation?**
   No, not really 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  Yes, I have been very close to death

7. **What do you think has influenced your conceptions of what comes after death the most?**

8. **Do you believe in god or some other form of higher power?**
   No, I do not 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  My belief is strong with no doubts

Department of Psychology,
Faculty of Arts
Charles University,
Náměstí Jana Palacha 2
116 38 Prague
Czech Republic
E-mail: pankaplan@email.cz